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## Białystok and Podlasie in Reportage after 1945. Reality and Stereotypes (a Reconnaissance)\*

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Białystok i Podlasie w reportażu po 1945 r. Rzeczywistość i stereotypy (rekonesans)

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**Abstract.** The objective of this paper is to describe stereotypes in book reportages about Białystok and Podlasie and their relation to reality. The methodologies chosen for the analysis of the material included hermeneutics and analysis of literary representation. The following paper is a reconnaissance of stereotypes in Polish reportages – mainly books about Podlasie and Białystok, published after 1945. The conclusions show that many of the analysed texts contain similar passages and images, and the way of describing Podlasie has not changed since Maria Dąbrowska's reportage. The authors present the same elements and narrative variants, and their texts thus become stereotypical and biased.

**Keywords:** reportage, Podlasie, stereotype, Białystok, reality, Maria Dąbrowska

**Abstrakt.** Celem artykułu jest opis stereotypów w reportażach książkowych o Białymstoku i Podlasiu oraz ich związków z rzeczywistością. Do analizy materiału wybrano hermeneutykę i analizę reprezentacji literackiej. Niniejszy artykuł jest rekonesansowym rozpoznaniem stereotypów w polskich reportażach o Podlasiu i Białymstoku, głównie książkowych, wydanych po 1945 r. We wnioskach

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pokazano, iż wiele z analizowanych tekstów zawiera podobne sformułowania i obrazowanie, a sposób opisu Podlasia nie zmienił się od reportażu Marii Dąbrowskiej. Autorzy przedstawiają te same elementy i warianty fabularne, a ich teksty nabierają wtedy cech stereotypowych i tendencyjnych.

**Słowa kluczowe:** reportaż, Podlasie, stereotyp, Białystok, rzeczywistość, Maria Dąbrowska

In 1924, Maria Dąbrowska and her husband came to Białystok. She would publish her reportage from her visit to the capital of Podlasie in the same year in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> issue of *Bluszcz* magazine, under the very telling title *Brzydkie miasto* [*An Ugly City*]. The article was critical in nature, the rather scathing nature of the descriptions was somehow mitigated by the word *a novella* appearing next to the first part, but in the issue, the editorial staff left no illusions, printing an apology for mistakenly printing of this word alongside the title. No wonder – the whole text is undoubtedly a reportage.

Let us briefly recall this expedition. After leaving Mazovia by train, the writer perceives reality in an almost infernal manner, especially when she enters the space that fills her with pessimism and melancholy:

Not far from Warsaw, I could still see shy stains of greenery in the rust-coloured meadows, but the closer I got towards Podlasie, under the grey, cold sky, the ground also got grey. The black branches swung like countless bows on a giant cello of clouds, and when the train stops, I could hear the wind playing its minor scales. From Małkinia, the train enters infinite plains of water. (Dąbrowska, 1924, p. 279)<sup>1</sup>

The writer sees flooded areas, taken over by an element that got out of control. The water she sees would later appear in the description of the city, full of mould and streaks. Presenting the interiors of Białystok houses, she uses the terms “fountain of dirt” spewing “dense liquid flowing into the gutters,” “disgusting town,” “dirty hole,” “a dump with an undefined chameleon face.”

Walking around Białystok fills her with grim, even suicidal thoughts. She sees the ugliness of the buildings, in her eyes the city is rotting, full of pushy colours and run-down shops. She is scared of the crowd in the streets, whom she refers to as “dirty and sticky.” As time goes by, the author’s views start to change. In the omnipresent rot, she sees a remedy to heal the city: “Sloppiness, ugliness and neglect start urging us to dream the most beautiful dreams of the future of this big city” [“Niechlujstwo, brzydota i zaniedbanie zaczynają nas podniecać do najpiękniejszych marzeń o przyszłości tego dużego miasta”] (Dąbrowska, 1924, p. 279). Dąbrowska

<sup>1</sup> “Niedaleko Warszawy jeszcze się widziało zacieki nieśmiałej zieleni w rdzawych łąkach, ale tam dalej ku Podlasiu pod płowem zimnem niebem, jest płowo i na ziemi. Czarne gałęzie bują się jak niezliczone smyczki na olbrzymiej wiolonczeli chmur, a gdy pociąg staje, słychać, jak wiatr gra niemi swe minorowe gamy. Od Małkini pociąg wkracza w nieskończone obszary wody.”

is already so disgusted with the visit that she starts looking for its positive aspects. She chooses the simplest solution – demolish and rebuild everything that is ugly. It was not only Żeromski who dreamt of houses of glass at the time.

The writer proposes a return to the hetman tradition of Stefan Czarniecki and the Branicki family, whose symbol is the palace and buildings they left behind, which at the time performed social and cultural functions. It is only under the influence of these observations that she notes the positive sides of the town hall, Warszawska Street, the wooden buildings of the Bojary district and the Branicki Palace. In Bojary, the artist sees the combination of the charm of English suburbs with the colonial patterns, characteristic of a garden-city, where everything, including the shape of the streets and individual gardens, has its purpose.

It is no coincidence that I devoted so much space to a text written nearly a hundred years ago. Dąbrowska captures her exploration of the city, creating a certain model, which can be seen in reports on Podlasie and Białystok published after 1945, as well as in contemporary pieces. If one were to list the most important parts of this model, they would include arriving in Podlasie as a wild space, clearly different from other regions of Poland, an image of the neglected Białystok region, filled with trauma, a description of the people living there far from the centre (and thus culture, relations, society) and a mystical, wondrous atmosphere.

These themes would later become key components of reportages about Białystok and Podlasie, in particular, the books by Kira Gałczyńska, Ryszard Kapuściński, Włodzimierz Pawluczuk, as well as Janusz Niczyporowicz, Marcin Kački, Bartosz Jastrzębski, Jędrzej Morawiecki, Maciej Skawiński and Piotr Nesterowicz. In all these texts, it is worth noting the turning point of 1989. In the years 1945–1989, the cultural policy of the Polish People's Republic was subordinated to the top-down regulations and policies of the Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR) stating that the work should correspond to Marxist ideology (Siekierski, 1992; Jaroński, 1999). In connection with the party's guidelines, all elements of nationalism and the lack of a positive presentation of Poles were condemned, which also explains the non-existence of subjects related to the extermination of the Jews, other than that caused by the Germans, after 1945. The year 1989 was very important for the reportage, as Zygmunt Ziątek claims:

The interest in everyday life did not decline in Polish reportage after 1989 – on the contrary, it grew further, turning reportage into the main field of observation of the effects of accelerated political, economic and moral transformation, with as yet unknown direction and sustainability. (Ziątek, 2018, p. 43)<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> “Zainteresowanie codziennością nie zmalało w reportażu polskim po 1989 roku, przeciwnie – wzrosło, czyniąc z niej główny teren obserwacji skutków przyspieszonych przemian politycznych, gospodarczych, obyczajowych, o niewiadomym jeszcze kierunku i nieznannej trwałości.”

It was only after this year that the time came to look at the region without any risk of censorship, but the deluge of reports about Podlasie, which also demonstrates the increased interest in this part of Poland, came after 2010 with *Cudowna* [Wonder] and *Ostatni obrońcy wiary* [The Last Defenders of Faith] by Nesterowicz, Białystok. *Biała siła, czarna pamięć* [Białystok. White Strength, Black Memory] by Kącki, *Jutro spadną gromy* [Thunder Will Fall Tomorrow] by Jastrzębski, Morawiecki, Skawiński and *Droga 816* [Route 816] by Książek. I would like to take a closer look at the way Podlasie is presented in the mentioned reports and whether there is any common denominator between all the reportages.

## I. PODLASIE AS A WILDLAND AND ATTEMPTS TO TAME IT

One of the first reporters who became interested in Podlasie after the war was Ryszard Kapuściński. In his book *Busz po polsku* [Bush in Polish] published in 1962, he published several reportages devoted to the region. These included *Daleko* [Far] and *Danka*, a hint of Podlasie also appears in the reportage *Drzewa przeciw nam* [Trees against Us], in the form of Hryńcia – a farmer and illiterate man from Białowieża, drafted into the army.

Leaving aside the context of the confrontation of socialist myths with reality, as this is also one of the themes of the entire collection, Kapuściński's approach to Podlasie is particularly noteworthy. The author of *Cesarz* [Emperor] not only draws attention to the parochiality of the region, but also shows its ambiguity thanks to the use of poetic description. The chapter *Daleko* is a reportage about Cisówka, a village located on the border of the Białowieża Forest. The author notices universal problems – depopulation and ageing, young people going abroad, bewilderment with progress (electrification), illiteracy, and hygiene problems (Kapuściński, 1962, p. 17). Kapuściński describes the issues related to Podlasie, which became nearly stereotypical in our present times – alcohol, backwardness, and old age. Researchers of Kapuściński's works pay attention to the literary character of his texts (Żyrek-Horodyska, 2017, p. 130). Even in the earliest texts by the writer, one can see an attempt to find a literary formula – eventually, he would turn towards irony in his subsequent books (Horodecka, 2010, p. 33). The reporter reproaches the local farmers for their rural philosophy, and when he sees one of them riding a motorbike into the field, he wonders if the pitchforks are fixed in line with the laws, but later he states: “If they are well-attached, it's not against the law” [“Jak dobrze przytroczone, to nie jest wbrew przepisom”] (Kapuściński, 1962, p. 17) He also comments on the room painted in many colours: “abstractionism turned up to eleven” [“abstrakcjonizm na cały regulator”] (Kapuściński, 1962, p. 16).

In Kapuściński's reportages, one can find negative option in the region's description, which can be already seen in the word "bush" included in the title. For example, in *Danka* the author omits the name of the town, claiming that it is not that different from other places in the northern part of the Białystok region and treats the history presented in the reportage as symptomatic for other such places in Podlasie. The narrator tells the story of prudish behaviour of a small town, opposed by a young and beautiful girl, causing a moral revolution in the town, for which she is beaten not only by the more devout, but also the more well-educated residents, including the local restaurant owner. In *Danka*, the community is backwards, ashamed of nudity and fearful of strangers, very closed, but if necessary – consolidated and ready to fight. This stereotype would later be further consolidated in Redliński's *Konopiłka*, a story showing the prudishness and backwardness of Podlasie.

After several dozen years, Białystok would be described by Kira Gałczyńska, daughter of Konstanty Ildefons Gałczyński, journalist, reporter, and former editor-in-chief of the Białystok-based *Kontrasty*. Gałczyńska ran the magazine during martial law in the years 1982–1984, and she described that time in a memoir-reportage *Byłam szefową [I Was a Boss]*, published in 1988, which was also a diagnosis of the mentality of the city and region, written with a clear sense of professional defeat.

Gałczyńska described what she did not like about Białystok, just as the author of *Noce i dnie [Nights and Days]*, she draws attention to the possibility of preserving the wooden heritage, which she considers the most important in this city:

The story I am trying to tell also features an attempt to observe a city of a quarter million residents, which – in spite of several universities and a large number of young people – did not stop being a distant province lying somewhere on the outskirts of Poland, at a distance of not two hundred kilometres from the centre of the country, but several decades away. This provincialism concerns on the one hand focusing on the local matters and creating a certain reserve delineated by invisible boundaries, and on the other hand, the desire to be the same at all costs. The best rule is not to stand out. Hence this forceful modernisation, demolition of old wooden buildings and placing concrete "sing's" in their place. (Gałczyńska, 1988, p. 11)<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> "W opowiadanej przeze mnie historii kryje się także próba obserwacji ówczymilionowego miasta, które pomimo kilku wyższych szkół, dużej liczby młodych mieszkańców, w swym charakterze nie przestało być odległą prowincją leżącą gdzieś na krańcach Polski, oddaloną od centrum nie o dwieście kilometrów, ale o kilka dziesięcioleci. Prowincjonalizm, o którym wspominam, to z jednej strony zamykanie się we własnych sprawach, tworzenie pewnego rezerwatu wytyczonego przez niewidoczne granice, z drugiej – chęć bycia za wszelką cenę takimi samymi. Najlepszą zasadą jest nie wyróżniać się. Stąd owo unowocześnienie na siłę, burzenie starej drewnianej zabudowy i stawianie w tym miejscu betonowych »sing singów«."

A significant part of her book is filled with editorial descriptions of conflicts and conversations with people who co-created *Kontrasty* [*Contrasts*]. Gałczyńska has not seen such extreme emotions in her interpersonal contacts before in other workplaces (hence the wild Podlasie), and even at the very beginning, she wrote that she has been working for decades at that point.

The sum of Gałczyńska's reflections is rather pessimistic – Podlasie is a place where ideas are wasted, and the most telling symbol of the region is Białystok: “What it is scares me with its lack of space, makeshift solutions and lack of comfort. Perhaps this is the source of the social climate that ignores culture?” [“To co jest, przeraża ciasnotą, prowizorką, niewygoda. Może i w tym należy upatrywać obojętnego dla kultury klimatu społecznego?”] (Gałczyńska, 1988, p. 180). She calls the reconstruction of the city centre destroyed by the Germans an imitation, pushed off the horizon by concrete, steamrollers and bulldozers. And just like Dąbrowska, who described the city filled with mould and rot, Gałczyńska sees it about the same, more than 60 years later, repeating Dąbrowska's negative observations almost word by word:

But when we take a closer look at these “bourgeois” townhouses, with lichen, streaks, fungus, plasterwork falling off the façades and dirt piling up in backyards, the illusion disappears. After all, makeshift everything is a sign of our times! (Gałczyńska, 1988, p. 183)<sup>4</sup>

The most famous reportage about Białystok, interpreted several times by scholars (Dąbrowicz, 2018; Zawadzka, 2018; Ziątek, 2018; Żyrek-Horodyska, 2019) published in recent years, is a palimpsest book by Marcin Kącki entitled *Białystok. Biała siła, czarna pamięć*. This reportage does not concern only the capital of Podlasie, the author also describes Hajnówka, Jedwabne, Bielsk, Łapy, and Sokółka. The approach of the protagonists visiting the region to the region itself is symptomatic – Katarzyna Sztop-Rutkowska came here from Łódź several years ago to work at the Institute of Sociology of the University of Białystok. Her arrival is just like Dąbrowska's: “the train passed the Mazovia and she saw the first forests of Podlasie – dense, and ubiquitous. She had the impression that she was passing the magic border of civilisation” [“pociąg minął Mazowieckie i zaczęły się podlaskie lasy, gęste, wszędobylskie, miała wrażenie, że mijają magiczną granicę cywilizacji”] (Kącki, 2015a, p. 51). Earlier, Sztop-Rutkowska's mother advised her to take a sheepskin for her trip to Białystok. The sheepskin remark is used as a stereotypical joke, constantly repeated in Poland to everybody who wants to visit Podlasie, it has also become a leitmotiv of promotional

<sup>4</sup> “Ale kiedy przyglądamy się bliżej owym »mieszczzańskim« kamieniczkom, widocznym wszędzie liszajom, zaciekom, pełznącemu grzybowi, odpadającym tynkom i pięttrzącym się brudom na podwórkach, iluzja znika. Bylejakość jest przecież znakiem naszego czasu!”

interviews with the author. In one of them Kącki says: “I checked if I had a winter jacket before I left. I didn’t find one, but I never really needed it in Poznań. But the thought that it must be cold out there is very telling” [“Przed wyjazdem sprawdziłem, czy mam zimową kurtkę. Nie znalazłem jej, bo w Poznaniu raczej nie potrzebowałem. Ale ta myśl, że tam musi być zimno jest znamienna”] (Kącki, 2015b). The motif of the border seen from the train, apparent in nature, is only emphasised by the strangeness of the space entered by the protagonist. The negative stereotype concerning crossing the “gate of Podlasie” also appears in an interesting and ambiguous reportage by Michał Książek, *Droga 816* – an account of the author’s trek on the road running along the Polish-Belarusian and Polish-Ukrainian border, referred to as *Nadbużanka* [*The Bug Road*]. One of the key moments is the crossing of the border of the Lublin and Podlasie voivodeships:

Here, the East met with the West, as evidenced by vehicle plates started with B – standing for Belgium, as well as BY – Belarusian ones, but it definitely was not Istanbul. It was not the Gate of the East, more like a trap door. Somebody more sarcastic could even say that it is a hole in the fence to the East. (Książek, 2015, p. 141)<sup>5</sup>

Kącki describes the town of Łapy. It was here that desperate Jews taken to Treblinka threw their children through the windows, who were promptly killed by the gendarmes, and the locals buried the bodies in makeshift graves dug in the railway embankment. An activist of the Regional Association of Jews he visited in Łapy expresses her regret, but she does not believe in Jedwabne, lives in a room with numerous holy pictures hanging on the walls, goes on pilgrimages and listens to Radio Maryja, which makes the reporter suspicious, although he finds it difficult to imagine the sounds of Radio Zet in the old woman’s apartment. Perhaps if she listened to RMF Classic, she might have also seemed suspicious to the author. In Podlasie, people do not listen to such radio stations, after all. The general conclusion stemming from Kącki’s reflections is pessimistic – both Białystok and the region keep developing in a negative direction, deepening, and putting band-aids over the wounds that should be healed. Collective amnesia of the region is deliberately evoked and sustained by the church, business, and politics.

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<sup>5</sup> “Wschód spotykał się z Zachodem, o czym świadczyły też rejestracje z B, belgijskie, i z BY, białoruskie, ale nie było to miejsce takiej rangi jak Istanbuł. Nie, nie brama Wschodu, raczej furtka. A ktoś złośliwy mógł nawet powiedzieć, że taka dziura w płocie na Wschód.”

## II. MOULD AND DIRT

The reportages about Podlasie are dominated by dirt, old age, decay, rot, and wildness. The flats and blocks described by Gałczyńska in Białystok are just like townhouses seen by Dąbrowska – ugly, unkempt, and muddy. The office she rented in the House of Creative Circles in Białystok was described by her as:

The banquets are organised often and they are quite loud, the echoes of debates, chants and teasing are amplified by the concrete, and the large black cockroaches wandering around, which are abundant here thanks to the sweet trash of the “Hortex” plant located on the ground floor and the staircase, which is hardly cleaned, were quite a dubious enrichment of the daily monotony. (Gałczyńska, 1988, p. 61)<sup>6</sup>

In Edward Redliński’s early reportages everybody drinks alcohol, women included. His text *Paragrafem jak kłonicą* [*A Section Like a Stanchion*], is basically a western story about the “Wild East” – about two brothers fighting for a piece of land, using all available forms of violence, including knocking out teeth, torture and shooting at each other’s yards.

In a collection of reportages published in 1997, entitled *Kraina proroków* [*The Land of the Prophets*], Janusz Niczyporowicz describes Tykocin, one of the oldest settlements in Podlasie. In his text *Lamus* [*Granary*], the town is described as a gloomy place where in 1941 “the Nazi Holocaust began on Polish soil with the murder of nearly two thousand Jews” [“rozpoczęli hitlerowcy holocaust na polskich ziemiach, mordując blisko dwa tysiące Żydów”] (Niczyporowicz, 1997, p. 11). In Niczyporowicz’s reportage, Tykocin is one of the many cities in Podlasie which one leaves and runs away from it: “»Nothing will change here« – says Beata – »because young people do not feel any attachment to Tykocin. This is a place you have to run away from«” [“»Tutaj nic się nie zmieni« – mówi Beata – »bo młodzi ludzie nie czują jakiegoś wielkiego sentymentu do Tykocina. To jest miejsce, z którego trzeba uciec«”] (Niczyporowicz, 1997, p. 19).

The main themes of Niczyporowicz’s texts include poverty in Podlasie, abandoned villages, children leaving their hometowns and failing state farms. Given such a vision of a region in decline, the author recalls Podlasie as a paradise, a region living a legend. In the text *Jutro, gdy mrok* [*Tomorrow When Dark*] he tells the story of a man who came there many years earlier from Włoszczowa:

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<sup>6</sup> “Bankietuje się tu często i głośno, echo dyskusji, śpiewów i przekomarzań ustokrotnia beton, a łączące wielkie czarne karaluchy (rozpanoszone przez słodkie odpadki znajdującego się na parterze »Hortexu« i sprzątaną niezmiernie rzadko klatkę) stanowiąły dość wątpliwe urozmaicenie codziennej monotonii.”



In the 1960s, this part of the Białystok region was truly the end of the world. The forests were full of wild game and moonshine breweries, the people were simple and sincere, you could catch eels with a bare finger dipped in water and cream was thick as butter. (Niczyaporowicz, 1997, p. 137)<sup>7</sup>

### III. CONFLICTS. THE GOOD AND THE BAD

Kira Gałczyńska criticised various ideas of the authorities, which in her understanding were to be used exclusively to alleviate the complexity of living in the province. For example, according to her, Białystok did not deserve a real university:

The fact that – other than exorbitant ambitions – there was nothing more, no professors, no lecturers living there, no dormitories, no lecture halls, no necessary facilities – meant nothing. The professors and all the rest could simply be brought from other centres, as it has been the case so far. (Gałczyńska, 1988, p. 173)<sup>8</sup>

She alone solely noticed the misery of the local journalists, actors, and literary circles. The city was dominated by simplicity, backwardness, and a lack of opinion-forming groups.

Kącki created the image of Białystok dominated by right-wing circles, openly referring to the ideology of the National Radical Camp by disregarding the role of local cultural animators and organisers of literary, social, and cultural life. He cherry-picks a couple among those who came to the city, Rafał Gaweł and Sztop-Rutkowska, who fit into his black-and-white narrative, thus creating a book that is biased and filled with stereotypes – the clergy is depicted as a bad priest who hates Jews, Jews are portrayed as scared and afraid to reveal their identity, a football fan needs to be an anti-Semite and every old woman is a Radio Maryja listener. All of Kącki's positive figures are outstandingly brave and empathetic – strolling through the forest, Sztop-Rutkowska thinks where she would hide her children during the war, Anna Kloza, a Polish teacher who nurtures the memory of the Białystok Jews, has a vision that she is a ghetto girl in hiding. Kącki's protagonists have good biographies, Kloza's life is almost heroic – her Orthodox grandmother from Hajnówka taught her empathy, her first important book was Szmaglewska's *Dymy nad Birkenau* [*Smoke over Birkenau*], and in the following years she experiences

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<sup>7</sup> “W sześćdziesiątych latach ten kawałek Białostoczczyzny to był najprawdziwszy koniec świata. W lasach pełno zwierzyny i bimbrowni, ludzie prości i szczerzy, węgorz brał na goły palec zanurzony w wodzie, a śmietana tu była taka, że smarowała się jak masło.”

<sup>8</sup> “A to, że poza wygórowanymi ambicjami nie ma niczego więcej – profesorów i wykładowców na miejscu, pomieszczeń, domów akademickich, niezbędnego zaplecza – to nie znaczyło nic. Profesorem i całą resztę można, jak to miało miejsce dotychczas, »importować« z innych ośrodków.”

a shock during her visit in Oświęcim. At various stages, her story falls apart – Kloza claims that she first learned about the Białystok Jews in 2005, which is very late for a teacher, who had never heard about Jan Tomasz Gross' *Sąsiedzi* [*Neighbours*] and the debate sparked by the book. On the other hand, the depicted fascists have only bad biographies – their police records are full of fights, sobering station visits, truancy, their lives are marked by addictions, not only to drugs but also to influential friends from the neighbourhood. On the walls of their rooms, they have posters with Nazi slogans, well-known even outside the nationalist circles (“White Power”), which are believed to be completely harmless by their busy parents.

The author leaves no doubt<sup>9</sup> as to who is good (social activists who are empathetic, who read the same books in their youth, coming from good families), and who is bad (young, bald guys living in the blocks of flats, fanatics and devout believers). There are no shades of grey there – either you support the world of darkness, or you try to save it. Kącki deals in stereotypes, his book lacks the need for dialogue, understanding of the situation, doubts, and an in-depth diagnosis. His depiction of Białystok and Podlasie presents only conflict situations. Most of the local towns, such as Łapy, Jedwabne, Hajnówka, Bielsk, are either depicted as evil cities or places “touched by oblivion” (Tabaszewska, 2016, p. 311), former sites of pogroms or spaces, where the few good people try to explain the past and deal with local nationalisms. In Białystok itself, even bus stops remind the author of “Nazi guard’ booths, where people could wait for the final solution, if it was not for the buses” [“budkami hitlerowskich strażników, w których ludzie, gdyby nie autobusy, mogliby czekać na ostateczne rozwiązanie”] (Kącki, 2015, p. 131).

#### IV. WONDERFUL LAND

One of the regular elements in all reportages about Podlasie is the story of wonders and miracles. The first author to present the spirituality of Podlasie was Włodzimierz Pawluczuk, who described the “Wierszalin mythology.” The enigmatic nature of this text was already signalled in its title – *Reportaż o końcu świata* [*Reportage about the End of the World* – translator’s note]. Pawluczuk devoted his text not only to the description of a cult, which was built around Elias Klimowicz and similar movements within the Podlasie Orthodox Church, but also

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<sup>9</sup> Katarzyna Nizołek, Katarzyna Sawicka-Mierzyńska and Danuta Zawadzka point out the closed structure of Kącki’s reportage, which results in a selective narrative, entering the role of a psychoanalyst, therapist and coach by the author, stigmatising Białystok’s anti-intellectualism, resulting from the lack of elites and treating multiculturalism in a catalogue manner (Nizołek, Sawicka-Mierzyńska and Zawadzka, 2015).

to the twilight of the community and imagination in the areas spreading from the Białowieża Forest to Krynki, or along the eastern border of today's Podlaskie Voivodeship. The author puts forward a hypothesis that was directly lifted from his academic papers of that time (Pawluczuk, 1972): "The thoughts about the end of the world usually haunt people who witness the collapse of their own culture, which they believed to be an absolute until not so long ago" ["Myśli o końcu świata nawiedzają z reguły ludzi, którzy są świadkami upadku ich własnej kultury będącej dla nich do niedawna absolutem"] (Pawluczuk, 1974, p. 11). Like the majority of other reporters describing Podlasie, Pawluczuk uses irony, treating his characters childishly, using diminutives such as *Waleczka-znachorka* ["Waleczka the quack"] and *prostaczka* ["simpleton"].

Folk healers are frequent protagonists of reportages about Podlasie. Such a figure was described by Redliński in his text *Ja w nerwowej sprawie* [*Me on a Nervous Matter*] from the volume published under the same title (Redliński, 1969). Redliński's reportages are written in a grotesque manner, in his text the narrator takes an ironic look at the "healer's" medical practices. The writer calls her a quack, he is sceptical of folk medicine, which was hardly liked by the authorities at the time; practising it was treated as a sign of backwardness and lack of knowledge. After a visit to the healer, the author talks to residents, who suspect the woman of doing this for money and calling her clients suckers. After returning home, he comes to the conclusion that the work of the healer carries on the stereotypical practices of folk magic, mainly based on autosuggestion and parapsychological abilities of the healers.

Another example of Podlasie's mysticism is the so-called "Zabłudów miracle" – the apparition of the Mother of God in front of a fourteen-year-old girl on a meadow in Zabłudów in 1965 (if one believes the protagonist and witnesses). This event aroused the fear of the authorities at the time (Krzywosz, 2016) as they did not like the increasing number of pilgrimages of believers from all over Poland. The Zabłudów miracle was the main topic of several reportages, the most famous of which is *Cudowna* by Piotr Nesterowicz.

Redliński's reportage on the event in Zabłudów entitled *Cud* [*Quote*] (1969) depicts Jadwiga, the girl who experiences the apparition, as a person who, on the one hand, believes in demons taking her mother away from her, and on the other, as a girl manipulated by her family as an actress who can easily enter the role of a fanatic for money. Redliński describes her in pejorative terms: "You could see that playing this role brings her joy" ["Widać, że ta gra bawi ją serdecznie"] (Redliński, 1969, p. 36) He notices that the girl can manipulate the crowd:

"Look how pretty she is" – women exclaimed. Hearing this, the girl shifts her body slightly to expose her profile and looks longingly into the distance, like a saint in a picture, while donning

a TV smile. Then she slams the window and disappears behind the curtain. Then the people start throwing money through a hole in the glass, usually 20-zloty banknotes. Somebody's wrinkled old hand quickly snatches the cash from the windowsill, around two hundred zlotys in just five minutes. (Redliński, 1969, p. 36)<sup>10</sup>

After 1989, the trend of describing various folk medicine phenomena and miracles would change completely. While those who used to come to Podlasie were sceptical about these kinds of phenomena, the reportages written after that turning point in Polish history show fascination, curiosity, and mysticism. The very same miracle in Zabłudów was described by Piotr Nesterowicz in his reportage *Cudowna* (Nesterowicz, 2014). His story is reconstructed in detail from archive sources of the Institute of National Remembrance, press materials and memories of the residents. The story begins by showcasing the individual *dramatis personae*. Jadwiga, the eponymous miracle girl is no longer the most important person – now the spotlight shines on her immediate circles and important figures of every local community in Poland such as a priest, neighbours, and local authorities. Jadwiga Jakubowska, the protagonist of the book, accused by her neighbours of wanting to enrich herself, of pursuing fame, entangled in a toxic relationship with her ex-husband, turns into a tragic figure, recollecting events from the past.

In this context, Zabłudów is a special place, yet another one town filled with conflict, where the Orthodox residents already have their own miracle. A few kilometres from Zabłudów in the village of Zwierki, there is still a very strong cult of six-year-old Gabriel, an Orthodox saint, who was allegedly killed in a ritual murder by Jews, who placed her in a barrel filled with nails in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. However, Gabriel's body did not decompose, which is what people discovered in 1720 during the burial of children who died during the plague and were to be buried next to Gabriel. Nesterowicz, like other reporters, describes another small town in Podlasie through the prism of a stereotypical conflict – according to him, the Zabłudów miracle emerged in opposition to the cult of the murdered saint.

The spirituality of Podlasie is also presented in *Jutro spadną gromy [Thunder Will Fall Tomorrow]* by Bartosz Jastrzębski, Jędrzej Morawiecki and Maciej Skawiński. Apart from similar issues, which were discussed in the previously analysed reportages, the authors focus mainly on issues related to spirituality, mysticism, multiculturalism, and religiousness. They follow the same routes as their predecessors: Hajnówka,

<sup>10</sup> «»Jaka śliczna« – zachwycają się kobiety. Słyszac to, dziewczynka ustawia się lekko profilem i niczym święta z obrazka kieruje rozmarzone spojrzenie w dal, ozdabiając się przy tym telewizyjnym uśmiechem. Potem zatrzaskuje okno i znika za firanką. Wtedy przez dziurę w szybie zaczynają wrzucać pieniądze, przeważnie dwudziestozłotaki. Z parapetu zgarnia banknoty czyjaś sucha stara ręka, w ciągu pięciu minut ze dwieście złotych.»

Bielsk, Narewka, Krynki, Białystok. Their exploration of the region is primarily focused on the exploration of spirituality – the authors try not to share their own views, and we know little about them. Their approach to Podlasie in this reportage resembles the exploration of the wilderness, although the voice of the residents of various villages, towns, isolated and distant places is very important here.

The authors of *Jutro spadną gromy* create a description of the province by juxtaposing it with life in the big city, and their delight with Podlasie is devoid of any distance. After a visit to Father Gabriel, an Orthodox hermit, they experience an almost mystical transformation, night – power:

So we move on to plunge into the dead of night. No heat, no light, we are going to the dead bank. We are flowing with the current of this sewer of the world. We sniff out sensation and peculiar things like dogs searching for a carcass. We are looking for expressive characters and outstanding experiences to satisfy our own vanity and gross expectations of publishers. (Jastrzębski, Morawiecki and Skawiński, 2015, p. 73)<sup>11</sup>

The authors keep looking at Podlasie idealistically, almost like a thing from a postcard, they even use a fairy-tale tone in their descriptions:

The settlement is miniature, and its miniature character makes it look cosy in this special Podlasie fashion, which we can admire in albums and calendars. Tiny houses, symmetrically attached to the rarely frequented dead-end road, some more prosperous, others clearly less, but all neat. Sloping roofs, small windows, beautiful yards with mown grass, and above all, a robust stork nest. In the middle of the village there is a tiny blue Orthodox church, which makes the place Ruthenian, dreamy and unreal (Jastrzębski et al., 2015, p. 75)<sup>12</sup>

The diminutives added by the authors to numerous descriptions make them unrealistic, and the whole picture is more like a Hobbit village than a village in the Białystok region. For reporters, Podlasie is filled with mysticism, inhabited by people longing “for the essential things in life, for its perceived essence, which is rarely grasped, for the unchanged and transcendent Sense and Meaning of all things. Behind the Mystery, which remains just under the surface of everyday life” [“za

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<sup>11</sup> “Ruszamy zatem – zanurzyć się w martwość nocy. Bez ciepła, bez światła, ciągniemy do zdechłej ławicy. Płyniemy z prądem tego ścieku, jakim jest świat. Wietrzymy sensację i niezwykłości jak psy padlinę. Szukamy wyrazistych bohaterów i feerycznych przeżyć, by zaspokoić własną próżność i ordynarne oczekiwania wydawców.”

<sup>12</sup> “Osada jest miniaturowa i w miniaturowości swej sprawia wrażenie przytulnej, na tę szczególną, podlaską modłę, którą podziwiać możemy w albumach i kalendarzach. Małe domki, symetrycznie przyklejone do sporadycznie uczęszczanej – bo nieprzelotowej drogi, jedne bardziej zasobne, inne wyraźnie mniej, wszystkie schludne. Dachy spadziste, okienka małe, biesiadne podwóreczka z wykoszoną trawą, a nad tym wszystkim pyszni się solidne bocianie gniazdo. Pośrodku wioski zaś mała błękitna cerkiewka, nadająca miejscu ruski, rozmarzony, nierzeczywisty charakter.”

istotną treścią życia, za jego przeczuwaną, a z rzadka tylko pochwytowaną, esencją, niezmiennym, transcendentnym Sensem i Znaczeniem wszystkich rzeczy. Za Tajemnicą polegającą tuż pod powierzchnią pospolitej codzienności”] (Jastrzębski et al., 2015, p. 184). One can get the impression, not only judging by this fragment, that the authors lack the distance to the problems and issues they describe. This can be seen particularly in their use of sentences like: “Podlasie preserves its independence and its metaphysical languor” [“Podlasie zachowuje swą niepodległość, swe metafizyczne rozmarzenie”] (Jastrzębski et al., 2015, p. 184), as well as “We are bumping into huts, we go back, we run from one folk healer to another, from an Orthodox church, through a Biedronka store and our accommodation on the Żabia Street in Białystok, then running through fields again, pushing through sand, jumping fences” [“Obijamy się o chaty, zawracamy, miotamy pomiędzy szeptuchami, prawosławną cerkwią, „Biedronką”, białostockim noclegiem na Żabiej, znów biegniemy przez pola, brniemy przez piach, forsujemy płoty”] (Jastrzębski et al., 2015, p. 186). For the authors, nearly everything makes up mystical patterns.

## V. CONCLUSIONS

In *Jutro spadną gromy*, Marta, an antiquarian from Krynki, describes Podlasie as follows:

This is a backward region. Those who come here belong to one of two categories – people who came here by accident and look at the locals as if they were wild, with understanding and fear; as well as people who also look at us as if we were wild, with understanding and delight. (Jastrzębski et al., 2015, p. 184)<sup>13</sup>

The above statement is a metaphorical summary of the content of these reportages. It can be said that their geopoetics has remained unchanged for many years – the authors describe the same towns, events, people, and beliefs, as well as ageing villages where residents live in collapsing houses. The model protagonist of the Podlasie village is Hryńcia from Kapuściński’s work – distrustful of any knowledge and authority, choosing to live in the countryside in a cottage without electricity, in one room with five children, an alcoholic.

Podlasie, apart from the above-mentioned descriptive elements is perceived in two ways – the first one goes in line with Dąbrowska’s view, as a wild land,

<sup>13</sup> “To jest region zacofany. Tych, którzy tu przyjeżdżają, dzielę na dwie kategorie: takich, którzy są tu przypadkiem i patrzą na miejscowych jak na dzikich – z wyrozumiałością i trwogą; i takich, którzy również patrzą na nas jak na dzikich – z wyrozumiałością, ale są dzikością zachwyceni.”

untamed, rotting, in need of repair. Such descriptions can be found in the reportages by Kapuściński, Gałczyńska, Niczyporowicz, and Kącki. In this variant, people are forced to live through – often of an ethnic nature – conflicts passed on from generation to generation, they never manage to reach a compromise, they constantly fight against something, and they spend part of their time in the lap of nature. The second way of describing Podlasie is connected with the mystical side of the region – the same topics are described by different authors (Pawluczuk, Redliński, Nesterowicz, Jastrzębski, Morawiecki, Skawiński) and their texts seem to constantly feature miracles, folk healers, prophets, minorities, and mysticism.

For the purpose of this paper, I chose a variety of reportages (Ziątek, 1999, 2010) that have been created over the course of decades to demonstrate that the way Podlasie has been described has not fundamentally changed since the day Dąbrowska described her views on the region. The authors present the same elements, situating them in repetitive plot variants, such as arrival in a (wild) village, city, town, space, a description of the overbearing chaos – symbolic and actual, resulting from the neglect, stemming from local conflicts and the backwardness of residents and local decision-makers. The authors investigate the traces of what happened, focusing on showing the causes of the collapse, descriptions of meetings with the last witnesses and so on, but they mainly show what they expected to see there. One can get the impression that they are less interested in the everyday life of the region, which is – according to Ziątek – “concealed under the mask of mediocrity, exceptional, surprising or unknown – because it has never been talked about to date” [“skryte pod maską przeciętności, wyjątkowe, zaskakujące albo nieznanne – dlatego, że się o tym do tej pory nie mówiło”] (Ziątek, 2018, p. 49) and thus they mainly choose the showcases of Podlasie. However, this gives rise to a kind of mannerism, which permeates their texts to varying degrees – their reportages about Podlasie present the region in a similar manner, without telling the reader more than what they already know from other texts, and thus the problems described in them become stereotypical and biased.

*Translated into English: Lingua Lab*

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