



Ethnologia Europaea

Journal of European Ethnology

37:1-2 2007

Museum Tusulanum Press

Ethnologia Europaea

Journal of European Ethnology

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For prices and subscription details	please see www.mtp.dk
Subscription address	Museum Tusulanum Press University of Copenhagen Njalsgade 126 DK-2300 Copenhagen S Phone +45 35 32 91 09 Fax +45 35 32 91 13 E-mail order@mtp.dk Internet www.mtp.dk
Bank	IBAN: DK10 5202 0001 5151 08 BIC: AMBKDKKK

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Paradise Lost and Regained
German Second Home Owners in Mazury, Poland

By
Ulrich Mai

E-article

In

Ethnologia Europaea
Journal of European Ethnology
Volume 37:1–2

2008

Museum Tusulanum Press
University of Copenhagen

Paradise Lost and Regained.
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E-article
Copyright © 2008 Museum Tusulanum Press
ISBN 978 87 635 1000 4
ISSN 1604 3030

IN
Ethnologia Europaea
Journal of European Ethnology 37: 1-2
E-journal
Copyright © 2008 Museum Tusulanum Press
ISBN 978 87 635 0981 7
ISSN 1604 3030

Unaltered version in pdf-format of:

Copyright © 2007 Ethnologia Europaea, Copenhagen
Printed in Sweden by Grahns Tryckeri AB, Lund 2007
Cover and layout Pernille Sys Hansen
Cover photos Pernille Sys Hansen and Robert Lau
Photos Susanne Ewert, page 6
Richard Wilk, pages 16, 34, 44, 50, 70
ISBN 978 87 635 0885 8
ISSN 0425 4597

This journal is published with the support of the Nordic board
for periodicals in the humanities and social sciences.

Museum Tusulanum Press
University of Copenhagen
Njalsgade 126
DK-2300 Copenhagen S
www.mtp.dk

PARADISE LOST AND REGAINED

German Second Home Owners in Mazury, Poland

Ulrich Mai

As an outcome of the Second World War, Mazury, formerly a part of the German province of East Prussia, was incorporated into Poland. Most of the German population fled before the Soviet Army moved in, or were later evicted to make room for the Polish population who themselves had been evicted from the former East Polish territories that became part of White Russia or the Ukraine as part of the peace settlements.

Today, Mazury is one of the most attractive tourist regions in Eastern Central Europe, a region where people from the large Polish cities spend their holidays. More and more foreign tourists from Western Europe are found among them, including many senior citizens from Germany who return for a brief, nostalgic visit to their home villages, take photos of what used to be their parents' houses and gardens, and may even contact the Polish inhabitants. And then there are the new settlers and second home owners¹ in Mazury who came after the overthrow of the Communist regime in 1989–90, to settle, preferably around the beautiful Mazurian lakes if they could afford the real estate prices, but also in lonesome villages and farm houses, as they provide a richness of nature close at hand that has become extremely rare in the rest of Europe. In fact, Mazury, a peripheral region within Poland with hardly any employment prospects except for a few seasonal jobs in the tourist industry, abounds in ecological assets that not only include large woods, bogs, and lakes but also still contain a variety of species, including eagle, moose, wolf, lynx, and beaver. Its attractive-

ness rests also upon the unique aesthetic impression of the Mazurian landscape that integrates rolling hills, fields, woods, alleys, lakes, and the rare settlement, all fused into an overall atmosphere of solitude, peace, and calmness.

This article² attempts to shed light on the question why, or with what kind of expectation and biographic background, second home and a few permanent dwellers from Germany decided to come to Mazury, how they settled down, how they organized their lives, and how they perceive their natural and social environment. All data was collected in qualitative interviews; quotes in this article were taken from those interviews.³

Enjoying “Simple Life”⁴ as Pioneers

For foreigners to acquire real estate in Poland is still, and even after the country joined the EU, extremely complicated. There are heavy restrictions pertaining to location, the type of real estate (apartment, house, farm, etc.) and its legal status (ownership or rent), not to speak of the type of visa or visiting permit a foreigner has. This is just to indicate that foreign second home dwellers do put up with a considerable amount of legal and administrative trouble before they can settle down in Mazury, but the fact that they are willing to do so reflects their expectation that life in Mazury will more than compensate for all the difficulties they experience.

Most German second home owners have some sort of biographic link to Mazury, or in a few cases to East Prussia, as when a parent or they themselves

were born there. In virtually all cases, Mazury played a central role in family history kept alive through old, reiterated, romantic stories and anecdotes of modest and simple family life in the village, of reciprocal neighbourhoods, and, of course, of an intact nature with its climate of hot summers and severe winters. Now that most of the settlers have reached (early) retirement age, they have started a new biographic project. By “coming home”, they engage in a nostalgic attempt to materialize the old memories by returning to the authentic places of youth and childhood. As nostalgia basically ignores individual and historic changes, the Polish population that now occupies the old homes and villages of childhood hardly seems to play a role in the decision to settle down in Mazury. However, we will see how they are perceived in the settlers’ daily lives.

Most settlers emphasize the considerable difficulties at the outset, the problems of renovating a house that might have been uninhabited for years, the problem of finding reliable craftsmen and construction material, and, of course, of getting along in a foreign culture and language. Quite a few of them had to temporarily put up with material living conditions that were far below the standards they were used to. Here, however, they experienced the friendly support from their new Polish neighbours, who lent them a hand when urgent help was needed, and who later on invited them to family feasts and introduced them to other villagers.

Despite social contacts, settlers, in talking about their start, convey the idea of having been on their own, except for a few reliable friends, of having to do hard manual work they were unused to, and of being reduced to basic needs. This concept of a pioneer situation suggests a deliberate renunciation of luxury, and is complemented by the frequent reference to the unique enjoyment derived from a simple meal or the occasional bonfire enjoyed with close friends. Quite a few settlers are proud of being able to “rough it”, and of having overcome the initial problems. Some, in view of the ongoing political and moral issue of Germans returning to former Eastern provinces, consider this an appropriate individual price for regaining a place that is now part of Poland.

On the whole, the typical settler narrative of pioneer conditions, appropriate as it may have been in a few cases, and particularly during the phase of renovating a house, generally does not reflect reality. Most settlers are eager to consolidate their networks of reciprocity by integrating themselves into the community of other German settlers. Housing standards later on are hardly below those they were used to in Germany. Nevertheless, it has to be noted that pioneer narratives as a variety of the simple life concept persists as some sort of dream space rhetoric among settlers in Mazury.

Re-Appropriation of Nature

Within the topos of simple life, nature is of central relevance. Most settlers are enthusiastic about nature in Mazury and characterize it by using adjectives such as “untouched”, “intact”, or “unique in Europe”. However, beyond the stork as an omnipresent species, very few settlers seem to have a command of the ecologically precious rarities in the area. Rather, it seems that the Mazurian landscape represents or mirrors dissatisfaction with modern life, sometimes with an escapist undercurrent among settlers. Permanent settlers, in particular, refer to the virtues of “letting go”,⁵ that is of leaving behind luxury and social networks in favour of the “real life” enjoyed in harmony with nature. As an empirical proof, settlers often tell stories about the delicious “true” taste and the amazing quantities of the first vegetables and fruits harvested in their own gardens, free of any chemical additives, or about the strong taste of parsley and anet, the latter of which grows wild in Mazury along roadsides. Reference is also often made to the many varieties of mushrooms to be found in the Mazurian woods. Here, however, it seems that mushrooms, at least among settlers from the West, again form part of common narratives about nature than they reflect reality. Westerners rarely have sufficient knowledge of the edible varieties and would rather avoid the risk of poisoning themselves; the contamination of mushrooms after Chernobyl encourages this.

Beyond the romantic connotation of the fire as a place of harmonious social interaction, fire also plays

a role as a metaphor of alienation from nature. Settlers often emphasize the fact that in Poland one does not need a special permit for lighting a private fire (as in Germany), indicating that in Mazury legal restrictions are not only more generous but also that alienation from natural elements such as fire has not proceeded as far as in the West. Similarly, settlers are often enthusiastic about the many “wild” bathing sites around the lakes, where you can swim without being prosecuted or fined by any guard or landowner. Obviously, the total lack of restrictions or their liberal enforcement in conjunction with the use of nature reminds the average German settler of his or her youth in the Mazurian village and hence reconfirms the nostalgic element in the man–nature relationship.

Re-Discovery of the Senses, a Different Time Concept

There is unanimous praise of the rural Mazurian landscape among German settlers, and some of them call it a “children’s landscape”, particularly in May when the yellow fields of rape mix with the blue sky, the green meadows, and the woods. One settler puts it this way:

You have to smell and feel this landscape, ... however, here the woods smell different from those at home, at least that’s what I feel, ... I do like the taste of water and I smell it, and then when they make hay and I go upstairs to lie down on my bed it smells of hay and this is simply marvellous, and then I can turn over and won’t hear anything, yes, that’s just great! (Female German, aged 55)

In fact, many settlers note that relaxation is easy in Mazury and some of them even maintain they came primarily for the quality of the sleep. Most settlers emphasize the re-discovery of the senses in Mazury, generally ascribing it to the landscape’s stillness and peace that irresistibly lays hold of the people in it, rendering them susceptible for the manifold sensual qualities in nature. In more practical terms, the effect is revealed in that settlers take up their old interest in landscape painting, may resume doing water-colors again, and go more frequently on long hiking

and bicycle tours. Others just sit in a quiet place to appropriate nature in a more meditative way.

What is more, settlers in Mazury have a time concept remarkably different from the one they were used to. This is, of course, plausible for those in retirement who have a more relaxed time management. Those staying for good state that they enjoy living with the seasons, complying with the natural rhythm by doing the necessary work in the garden and collecting firewood, then withdrawing into the shelter of the house for the long continental winter, recuperating for the year to come.

Apart from the seasons, settlers generally enjoy a type of time management that leaves more room for “the really important things” such as for longer talks with one’s partner, for social contacts in the neighbourhood, “reading a good book”, the necessary work in the garden, the occasional walk. Some of them draw attention to the fact that, as opposed to the old habits in the West, they now refrain from the time-consuming habit of regularly watching TV and reading the daily newspaper. This may well coincide with a more relaxed perception of the future, in the sense that fewer plans are made. As one settler puts it: “we’ll see what the future has in store for us”.

The various simple life narratives not only reflect the settler’s self-perception but also seem to be imputed to (rural) Mazurians in general. This concept of the ideal-type Mazurian accords well with pre-war, or in a sense even pre-industrial, conditions. They implied that man had to adjust to the natural environment, which in turn could best be accomplished through solidarity networks in the neighbourhood that were based on reciprocity. The latter does in fact reflect the old romantic idea of rural life based on social equality, and in the case of Mazury, even with reference to the various ethnic groups such as the Poles, Ukrainians and Germans, who historically “got along fine” as one settler put it, and would do so nowadays again.⁶

Shangri-La⁷ in Mazury: The Social Construction of an Image

Over time, the Mazurian image that heavily rests on the concept of a harmonious and simple village life,

and on human embeddedness in nature, has shown an amazing continuity despite modernization and an almost total exchange of the population. Thus, the question as to the historical and cultural background of the social construction of the Mazurian image has to be answered.

As a German province after the First World War, Mazury was separated from the rest of the country; later on, it became a part of Poland. But it has long been a subject of political and public interest in Germany, kept alive not only by the many refugees who found a new home in the West, and by those who represented them in the political parties, but also by well-read German novelists such as Ernst Wiechert, Siegfried Lenz and Arno Surminski. They all contributed to Mazury as a "poetic landscape" by depicting old village life.⁸ Complementing this are recently produced TV programmes that normally have a nostalgic sentimental undertone⁹ that are often broadcast around Christmas. In Germany, even today, this seems to be the most soulful season of the year, a time when families get together to revive the old memories. Here one has to be aware of the fact that the heritage of the romantic period is still alive in Germany, though it is of course modified by modern life. What seems to survive is the escapist yearning for counter-experience in nature that is meant to at least temporarily compensate for individual conflicts and shortcomings in modern civilization, a search for self-experience, and the concept of nature as a healing instructor.

Also, one has to realize that in an ironic way it was the virtual inaccessibility of Mazury due to the Iron Curtain that contributed to conserving its old image: individual memories as well as the collective image did not have to be exposed to reality. Consequently, after the fall of the communist regime, when German tourists returned to Mazury to rediscover their old biographic traces, many of them were put off by the contrast between what they had stored in their memories over the years and present-day reality. So they stayed away to foster their nostalgic image. Others, however, charmed by the overwhelming quality of nature, the kindness of their Polish neighbours, and the persistence of a seemingly simple rural

life gave in to the nostalgic message to "come back home" and follow the spirit of place and region. This particularly applied to retirees, who are more likely to have the appropriate means in terms of time and money to make an old nostalgic dream, the dream of returning to the places where life began, come true.

However, as the power of a nostalgic dream fades away when it comes true, there are at least covert problems that go along with second home ownership in Mazury. Everyday life in a different culture, exotic as it may be, the insufficient command of the Polish language, the shortcomings of social networks which are primarily pragmatic in character and lack the emotional quality of close friendship and intimacy, not to speak of the worries about illnesses in old age – all may after some time lead to disenchanting the romantic view of the region. Second home owners hardly ever openly admit this, so as not to discredit their motives for "coming home". Also they still enjoy living in two different countries over the course of the year, which implies a double retreat option that, of course, renders shortcomings of a temporary life in Mazury more tolerable.

What is more, the "return of the Germans" has become a major political issue in Poland. Germans who emigrated after the war are now legally claiming old possessions or compensation for expropriation, and though small in number, they upset the political scene and media in the country. Foreign vacation home owners often are included in the whole sensitive issue, one that recently, it seems, has been kept alive to serve the domestic purpose of unifying political partisans. This process does indeed reflect the inherent conflict potential of nostalgia. Though basically individual in character, in terms of autobiographic orientation it generally neglects historical changes, and as a collective phenomenon it is this very retarded element of nostalgia that may provoke political conflicts.

Conclusion

So what makes Mazury so special as an object of yearning for an alternative life and the images corresponding to it? Undoubtedly, it is not the richness of architecture or of artifacts of European history, as

you might find them in Tuscany, nor is it the French Provence's "savoir vivre" that, apart from a life in the sun, are so attractive to the European educated middle class. Instead, the image of Mazury has preserved a type of nature and landscape that seems to materialize the concept of pre-modern rural life. This applies to the intact ecological quality of nature, the sparse population, and the type of self-sufficient life. What is more, it incorporates "empty landscapes"¹⁰ and woods¹¹ as major semantic elements in the modern mystification of place and region. But what is so special about Mazury is its nostalgic meaning that goes along well with the view of a retarded type of nature and very much appeals to the historic and particularly biographic sensitivity of the older generation. In general, the older generation is more prone to take an interest, not only in its childhood but also in ancestors' lives. In fact, quite a few settlers seem to follow a fictitious genealogical order to resettle where the ancestors came from.¹² Others who have no biographic links to Mazury nevertheless feel, apart from nature, attracted by the frequent and omnipresent traces and symbols of German history that contribute to and revitalize the nostalgic pre-modern image of the region. The nostalgic view in a way even constructs a historic continuity that not only neglects the obvious political changes but also, in an ongoing difficult moral and political discourse, seems to serve as an individual justification for settling abroad.

Notes

- 1 Second home owners from Germany are by no means a mass phenomenon in Mazury. Instead, they are fairly rare and are by far outnumbered by the nouveau riche from Warsaw and other big cities in Poland.
- 2 For an extended version see Mai 2005.
- 3 Empirical studies were conducted in 2003 and 2004.
- 4 The novel *Das einfache Leben* by Ernst Wiechert, written between the World Wars and whose plot is set in Mazury, is still widely read among the older generation of travellers to Mazury; its central message critiques modern society and praises the healing potential of nature.

- 5 "Letting go" in psychology is considered one of the basic preconditions for overcoming long-lasting emotional problems, as in unsatisfactory relationships through separation.
- 6 A more purifying effect has been ascribed to nature by a Polish settler, with reference to the many "exiled" individuals from Warsaw during the communist period who, after incurring the party's displeasure, had to start a new life in Mazury and in the solitude of nature found their way back to peace and solidarity.
- 7 Fictitious heavenly retreat in Tibet, after the 1933 novel by James Hilton.
- 8 The amazing historic continuity of Mazury as a "poetic landscape" is reflected by the many works of Polish writers especially during the 1950s and 60s when the region during the summer season attracted a particular intellectual milieu. See Lukowski 2005.
- 9 This nostalgic undertone is frequently reinforced in those films by music in which the cello dominates, the most sentimental of all musical instruments.
- 10 In the romantic period the "empty landscape" became a popular screen for the mental projection of the loneliness of a bourgeoisie increasingly detached from the old traditions and obligations (Richter 1998: 21).
- 11 On the various romantic connotations of the woods for the German soul, see Lehmann 1999.
- 12 Very likely nostalgia among German settlers was strengthened and kept alive by the enforced character of outmigration at the end of World War II and then, of course, by the political difficulties of paying a visit to the region.

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