“The Polish Culture Promotion by Means of the Travel Literature”

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“The use of traveling is to regulate imagination by reality, and instead of thinking how things may be, to see them as they are.”

- Samuel Johnson

Abstract
The previously communistic Poland transformed in 1989 into a capitalistic country. As a result, the existing reality has undergone a series of modifications that concerned not only the social, political or economic issues, but also the mentality of the Poles and their attitudes towards various aspects of life. Nowadays Poland can be perceived as an attractive destination for foreigners aiming to discover unknown areas, different cultures, interesting people and extraordinarily difficult language. The Polish seaside or mountains are being visited by hundreds of foreigners from all over the world every year. Within the scope of this group one can also notice certain writers, novelists, or journalists describing the Polish culture experience in their books, articles or journey reports. Their very detailed as well as subjective descriptions are viewed as a significant aspect while promoting Poland as a country that is worth visiting. The above-mentioned publications have an influence on the public opinion – as a result they may encourage the citizens of other countries to visit the Vistula land. Moreover, the author of the paper is going to compare the imagological images with the chosen opinions quoted from the Experience Project (www.experienceproject.com).

Key words: Polish culture, travel literature, imagological analysis

Introduction
It is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore Poland while taking into consideration the variety of the attractive destinations nowadays¹. For many tourists bored with all inclusive holiday in Spain, Italy or Greece, Poland seems to be a very exotic and mysterious destination. The Vistula country offers a variety of different attractions: the beautiful mountains, the marvelous seaside and the fast developing cities such as the capital city Warsaw and the others: Wrocław, Kraków, Poznań or Sopot. Poland - that was previously associated mainly with communism - has undergone a transformation and is becoming more and more inviting and fascinating for foreign visitors. That is why the recent years development concerning the various fields have led to a growing interest in Poland for tourists or investors². A great number of travel guidebooks³ attempt to present the Polish landscape worth sightseeing – they give an account of the cities, mountains, seaside, etc. On the other hand, their very detailed descriptions of the Polish culture only briefly mention or seem to lack the foreign tourist feedback that can be considered as a significant issue for other people reflecting Poland as their holiday destination. This may be regarded as a serious weakness of the above-mentioned publications. This paper purpose is to review the images of Poland described within the framework of the travel literature selected texts that can be considered as an attractive way of promoting the Vistula land as a modern destination. The travel literature includes descriptions of places, traditions, habits, mentality, customs, etc. It enables a detailed exploration of individual experiences connected with examining particular landscapes, language and citizens. After the imagological analysis the author of the following

¹See e.g.: Więckowski (2010), Klonowski (2011) or Nalepka/ Ujwary-Gil (2012) concentrate on this subject.
²See. e.g. Karaszewski (2003) or Cieślak (2005).
article is going to present the chosen foreigners’ opinions by discussing the interviews led in 2012 and 2013 by the Experience Project that concentrates on carrying out studies concerning living conditions in the selected countries.

1. The Polish Reality – Communism versus Capitalism

The existing stereotypes concerning Poland are often associated with its communistic past: “In 1989, Poland became the first country to leave communism peacefully (...). Solidarity then formed the world’s first post-communist government. Within a few months, the Polish paradigm was emulated across all of Eastern Europe” (Kemp-Welch 2008: ix). Roszkowski (2003) describes the end of the Polish communism in the following way: “New conditions for change in Poland were being created at the end of the 1980s including the growing tolerance of the Soviet leadership for systemic change, continued determination on the part of the Western powers to promote the erosion of the Soviet empire, a declining economy, and desperate attempts by the Polish leadership to avoid social unrest with its inevitable political consequences, as well as an increasingly frustrated society and disoriented democratic elites” (Roszkowski 2003: 18). According to the fact that stereotypes – defined as overgeneralisations concerning a certain society (Scollon/Wong-Scollon 2005: 168) - are considered as difficult to modify (Klin 1991: 143; Panasiuk 1998: 84-98; Fiske/Operario 2004: 134; Schneider 2005: 380), some visions of the Polish culture as a communistic nation seem unchangeable: “(...) communism in Poland had always been oppressive and lawless since it did not respect even its own laws (...). To a greater or lesser degree communism corrupted everybody. The inevitability of living in lies created a lot of moral dilemmas” (Roszkowski 2003: 25). The above-mentioned transformation regarding to the Polish culture that started in 1989 is viewed as the democratic era beginning with its capitalist power: plenty of domestic companies were established and a variety of foreign investments entered the Polish market those days: “Summarized and balanced perceptions show that the situation of Poland as a country for future foreign direct investments seems fairly positive” (Dobroczynski 1998: 5). The first Polish post-communist minister of finance, Leszek Balcerowicz, concentrated on the so called shock therapy pertaining to the Polish economic modification: “Balcerowicz and other post-Solidarity neoliberal reformers believed that once the fundamentals of capitalism such as private property were established, the Polish economy would resume its place on the path to capitalist development. They assumed that this path was the same one followed by the Western market economies, which Central Europe left in 1945 (…)” (Dunn 2004: 4). In 2004 Poland became a new member of the European Union – this fact enabled the Vistula land e.g. the participation in various EU programs by taking advantage of the EU funds (Trappmann 2013: 38): “The process of system transformation in Poland (...) has always been closely connected with the process of integration with the European Communities. The interdependence and interpenetration of these processes, characteristic of all the Central and Eastern European countries aspiring to EU membership, is considered beneficial to economic development and to achievement of stability” (Barburska 2012: 53). The Polish reality transformation has also encouraged foreigners to consider Poland as a new and modern destination connected with an intercultural experience of the unknown area offering such attractions as the beautiful landscapes, the unique traditions and people or the interesting, constantly developing post-communist cities: “Tourism has always been linked with the commodification of culture, landscape, recreation and indigenous people. There has recently been fresh concern about the role of tourism as a force for cultural commodification and socioeconomic development both in postmodern societies and in societies undergoing transformation” (Marciszewska 2006: 71). Moreover,
Poland as a destination has inspired a wide range of writers, essayists or journalists to consider the Polish culture as a subject of their investigations.

2. The Travel Literature as a Way of Promoting Poland

“To my mind, the greatest reward and luxury of travel is to be able to experience everyday things as if for the first time, to be in a position in which almost nothing is so familiar it is taken for granted”

– Bill Bryson

Worth mentioning seems to be the fact that travel writing started a few centuries ago: “During the sixteenth century, writing became an essential part of travelling; documentation an integral aspect of the activity. Political or commercial sponsors wanted reports and maps, often kept secret, but the public interest aroused by stories of faraway places was an important way of attracting investment and – once colonies started – settlers” (Hulme/Youngs 2002: 3). By consulting the relevant literature it can be stated that “the real power of travel writing lay in its independence of perspective. The claim to have been there and to have seen with one’s own eyes could defeat speculation” (ibid., 4). The purpose of travel literature is a detailed exploration of chosen cultures from the writer’s perspective that is contemplated as a subjective one: “Travellers will usually follow their instincts and opportunities (...). and it is travellers’ eccentricities and extravagances – in the literal sense of wanderings off – which have attracted many readers to the genre of travel writing” (ibid., 5).

However, according to Hulme/Youngs certain travel visions suffer from some individual writer’s limitations – from his or her way of perception and one’s own foreign reality interpretation: “(...) the experiences and impressions of travel are never easy to capture, and contemporary travellers sometimes make the phenomenology of travel an aspect of their work” (ibid., 10). This issue is also discussed e.g. by Opitz (1990: 351), Blanton (2002: 1), Hooper/Youngs (2004: 3), Biernat (2004: 79) or Pacholski (2008: 396).

More and more famous writers are visiting Poland these days aiming to discover its culture, habits, customs, landscapes and the mentality of the Polish people. The well-known novelists, essayists or journalists compensate the phenomenon of the Vistula land focusing on its modernity after the transformation from the communistic to the capitalistic country. These popular and recognized authors have a significant influence on public opinion – they are constantly present in the media, and their new publications are widely commented. For this reason their writing can be viewed as a kind of the Polish culture promotion. In recent years, there has been an increasing interest in the Poland perception from the standpoint of the German and Austrian writers. A plenty of different essays aiming to describe the Poland have been published nowadays - e.g. by Karl-Marcus Gauß, Martin Pollack, Ilse Tielsch, Steffen Möller oder Matthias Kneip. They encouraged those who are interested in discovering new areas to visit the mysterious Vistula land. The writers’ personal descriptions have shown a diversity of cultural and intercultural issues.

The author of the following paper attempts to analyse the travel literature concerning Poland by concentrating on the Austrian travel writing. The objective of this research is to study the Poland’s experience from the imagological point of view by taking into consideration the viewpoint of Radek Knapp. The imagological research bases on the selected images.

Radek Knapp was born in 1964 in Warsaw and emigrated to Austria when he was twelve years old. After graduating from the Vienna University he decided to concentrate on writing. The author’s Polish roots seem to play an important role when it comes to the issues concerning his writing. The main aspects the writer investigates are related to Polish, Austrian and German relations. In his books the essayist focuses on cultural comparison among the above-mentioned nations. Knapp was given plenty of positive book reviews as well as has won a series of significant prizes relating to his publications. His works are perceived as an important opinion in the discussion in the matter of Poland and the German speaking countries.

3. The Imagological Analysis of the Polish Culture Chosen Aspects

A considerable amount of literature has been published on the Polish reality description: various scientists, writers, journalists, etc. take into consideration the diversity of aspects concerning the Vistula land. As already mentioned, a large volume of publications in the matter of travel literature characterizes the city images nowadays. In his essay published in 2009 under the title “The User’s Guide of Poland” Radek Knapp discusses the challenges relevant to a Poland trip. The author highlights the fact that Poland has become a modern destination these days: “The situation is delicate. It seems that Western Europe is not only interested in us, but, what is more, recently it starts to like us. After diving off the coast of the Seychelles and bungee jumping in the Grand Canyon there is the turn of our Slavic cities and landscapes. For some unexplained reasons Poland has become trendy and it seems to be in good taste to praise it” (Knapp 2009: 5). Knapp lists the reasons why it is not possible to experience the Polish culture from the travel guidebook: “After reading this you will know everything except one thing: what is Poland like and who we really are. Unfortunately, it is impossible to experience a certain country by studying a travel guide. This is only possible as a result of some unexpected experiences that will prepare us to the journey itself. Taking into consideration this fact one can say that Poland is unique” (ibid., 7). The author points out that even his writing - due to its subjectivism and the writer’s worldview - cannot be compared with a journey to Poland: “Even if it had a thousand pages, it couldn’t replace a trip to Poland itself. Its great success would be to arouse curiosity in regard to the country on the Vistula River. Because Poland has always been the right place for those interested in the world” (ibid., 8). Contrary to the well-known travel guides that give attention to the Polish habits, cuisine and traditions, Knapp attempts to examine the term that foreigners define as an incomparably mysterious one – the so called Slavic soul: “It is not possible to describe it, one can only experience it” (ibid., 111). According to Knapp the above-mentioned Slavic soul can be understood as a variety of character traits possessed by the Poles: “One can say everything about the Poles and it will be correct. Poles feel the happiest ones when they complain. On the other hand, they are born poets and enjoy to talk a lot. They look suspiciously at childless marriages, but at the same time listen to the priests, who are not allowed to have children” (ibid., 8).

As already mentioned, a large and growing body of literature has investigated the communist and the capitalistic Poland. Plenty of essayistic writings have indicated the so called Polish new reality in the era of capitalism. Knapp discusses the aforementioned transformation in the following way: “It seems that Lech Wałęsa or Solidarity did not inflict any mortal blow to the communist regime. They were only an extended arm of the Polish
nation possessing certain character traits which are deadly for each regime and dictatorship. Moreover, it is called an innate distrust of authority, and especially their own government, on the other hand - almost unbelievable ability to make chaos wherever there was peace” (ibid., 49). The transformation caused certain further modifications in the Polish society: “After the inevitable crash in 1993 the balance in the Polish society changed. After 40 years of communism, when all citizens had equally much or rather equally not enough of particular goods, the Polish population divided into two groups: the rich and the poor one” (ibid., 56). The transformation issue has been a controversial and much disputed subject within the field of various scientific disciplines – some of the Polish citizens lost all their savings from one day into another, and the others – such as e.g. policemen, office workers or taxi drivers – became wealthy, prominent and influential (ibid., 56). Plenty of observers have already drawn attention to the new social class creation – the so called nouveau riche residents of the Polish community. These inhabitants use their welfare to become different and – in their opinion – better than the rest of the society. As a result, while observing the new Polish social layer, one can notice a lot of exaggeration with reference to many diverse areas such as for example: the most expensive cars, the mansions that seem to have been designed by drunk Harry Potter, extravagant piece of clothing or exotic animals (ibid., 57). According to Knapp the sightseers visiting Poland do not have to be worried of a potential meeting with the Polish upstarts: “While staying in Poland, foreigners do not need to fear the escaped iguanas or their owners. In this case the free market economy is very helpful. All the Polish millionaires are staying in Gstaad or Malibu with their spouses and iguanas attempting to make the hotel staff’s life difficult. In their absence, we can go for a walk or sightsee a chosen Polish church” (ibid., 58).

Radek Knapp considers another aspect of the Polish reality – the images of the Polish women as the Vistula Aphrodites (ibid., 71). The author highlights not only the beauty, but also the ability of the Polish women to deal with particular difficulties connected with the daily routine. Their strength, talents and intelligence were tested many times in the problematic communistic reality: “(…) It was the everyday life that strengthened the women. All over the time they had to stand many hours in queues (…) to get one kilogram of beef. Women were engaged in bringing up children, they were school principals, led trams or sold stamps at the post office. After the communism fall, the free market economy welcomed the resourceful and energetic women (…)” (ibid., 76). Therefore, a plenty of the Vistula Aphrodites are not afraid of starting their own business or being managers of the well-known national or international companies nowadays (ibid.).

In the viewpoint of Knapp another significant aspect of the Polish culture is strongly connected with hospitality: “It is a great loss for a foreigner who has no opportunity to experience the Polish hospitality. Luckily, in contradistinction to the West European habits an invitation to a Polish household is rather common. We can be quite sure that we will not leave the house hungry or thirsty” (ibid., 67). It takes a lot of effort to prepare delicious Polish national dishes – for this reason each guest is expected to eat as much as possible: “Unfortunately, the food cannot be denied. The guest who is not hungry is worse than the one who did not bring any gift. Our assurance of being full will be listened by the hosts with an anxious face expression – at the same time they will put dishes in front of us” (ibid., 68).

To sum up, it can be stated that the above-presented images of the Polish culture may encourage foreign tourists to visit the Vistula land. In his essay Radek Knapp highlights the current Polish reality that significantly differs from the communistic past. The aim of the next
chapter is to carry out an exploration concerning the foreign visitors’ opinions regarding to Poland.

4. The Images of Poland with Reference to the Foreigners’ Individual Opinions

After focusing on the imagological analysis the author of the this paper is going to concentrate on the certain examples of particular individual opinions connected with visiting Poland by foreigners. The aim of this chapter is a comparison between the imagological images with the presented perception of those visiting the country. In 2012 and 2013 the chosen tourists were interviewed by Experience Project (www.experienceproject.com) dealing with conducting research concerning various issues within the scope of living conditions in the selected countries. All the research participants were asked to answer the following question: “What do you think about Poland and Polish people?” (http://www.experienceproject.com/question-answer/What-Do-You-Think-About-Poland-And-Polish-People/3738, 09.03.2014). According to the above-mentioned interview Poland and the Poles are perceived in the particular way:

1) “Polish people are hardworking and family oriented. They love their houses clean and are proud of everything they do. They love their faith and are friendly. Sometimes they can be a bit serious but, it comes from living in the communist times. Poland is a beautiful country that one should see” (ibid.);

2) “Individually they can be really great. Warm and funny. However, collectively, by western standards I also found many Poles to be very guarded, suspicious, conservative (the church is absurdly powerful there) and complaining about, oh, everything... which is the national pastime, I'm sure. If they know you, or you're a guest, you'll be treated like royalty. But if they don't, they will not trust you and likely assume the worst about your character. Tourists are exceptions, of course. On the plus side, customer service has improved a lot over the years, the food is excellent, and there are many beautiful things to see and places to go. A fascinating and complicated country” (ibid.);

3) “It’s no surprise that people often find Poles to be a little on the insecure side. My granddad still hasn't gotten over the how many Poles does it take to change a light bulb joke. It's commonly referenced that Polish people like to ask what you think of them, and I think there's a misunderstanding behind their intentions of the question. Poles will call a spade a spade. I've never met another Pole that likes to beat around the bush. Being straight forward is particularly important to Polish people. They want to hear the unpolished truth - they're curious to know what you think of them, or what stereotypes you've heard. Which isn't strange to want to know. But I can understand how the question would make someone with an American upbringing uncomfortable - since their culture puts more stress on politeness than honesty” (ibid.);

4) “As it has been said before, they were betrayed few times in the past, let’s not forget the partitions of Poland when the country did not exist for over 100 years, then II WW after which they were under Russian occupation. So yes, maybe they are a bit nationalistic (trying to hold on to the culture and language by attending underground schools etc.) and not trusting but please tell me, are you surprised? Just imagine not being allowed to speak your mother tongue and celebrate your own traditions. If you could imagine it, you should be able to understand it” (ibid.);

5) “My best friend and her husband are Polish and they are two of the smartest and most wonderful people I know. The stupid American jokes and stereotypes about Poles are
all wrong- I have heard them all and they really are stupid- Americans just have to show their ego and they use the Polish people to do it- it's dumb” (ibid.).

6) “I love Poland, love the food, love the country, hate the government. My great grandfather was from Poland and emigrated to Canada in the 1930s at some point...I found out about my relatives there and knew instantly I wanted to visit, so I learned Polish, saved money, and went there when I turned 16, one of the most amazing experiences of my life” (ibid.);

7) “I think they are wonderful - principled, dignified and strong, yet very private about their lives and culture (probably because of their close relationship to Russia for such a long time). They are most welcome here in the US - anytime!” (ibid.);

8) “The country of Poland has an extraordinary history of oppression and takeovers. In the U.S., there are many successful polish people. Every race has unfortunate stereotypes that are just simply not true. People are the same all throughout the world. We all desire basic needs, love, respect, and the very best for our children” (ibid.).

To sum up, the above-quoted opinions present a positive attitude towards Poland and the Poles that can be understood as a kind of encouragement to visit the country and get to know its inhabitants, customs and traditions. After the interview analysis one can come to a conclusion that the communistic times are no longer a part of the Polish reality and the existing stereotypes with regard to Poland are not always true.

Conclusions

Returning to the issue mentioned at the beginning of this study, it is now possible to state that travel literature may be perceived as a way of promoting Poland. The images presented by Radek Knapp in “The User’s Guide of Poland” (2009) concentrate on the diversity of issues connected with the current Polish reality. The author mentions Poland’s communistic past aiming to explain the background of particular behaviors and attitudes. Knapp refers to various system modifications caused by the transformation in 1989 and considers Poland as a worthy visiting, interesting and unique destination. According to the essayist the experience of the so called Slavic soul – with all its advantages and drawbacks – may be an unforgettable aspect of a Poland trip. Knapp’s writing may be considered as a significant user’s guide that offers a lot more than an average tourist guidebook published by travel agencies – it focuses on the Poles’ mentality relevant to the capitalistic reality: the diverse society concerning the rich and the poor, the Vistula Aphrodites dealing with starting their own businesses or being given manager positions, or the savoir-vivre in the matter of dinner invitations to the Polish households. On one hand, the afore-mentioned issues are a result of the author’s detailed analysis of Poland, its history, traditions, customs, habits and inhabitant’s mentality. His book gives the readers certain instructions and a kind of a background informing them how to exist in Poland as a visitor. On the other hand, Knapp is aware of the subjectivity of his writing – the book cannot be viewed as a Poland trip substitute. What is more, Knapp’s publication focuses only on some selected aspects of the Vistula land. Therefore, he recommends the individual participation to experience the diversity of the Polish landscape with its beautiful mountains, seaside, developing cities and interesting citizens. The comparison of the imagological analysis of “The User’s Guide of Poland” with the individual foreigners’ opinions taken from the Experience Project highlights the positive attitude towards Poland and Poles. The following conclusions may be drawn from the Experience Project study: the Vistula country inhabitants are friendly and tend to treat tourists as royalty. In particular situations they seem to be conservative or suspicious – this kind of behavior can be interpreted after the country’s communist past analysis. The Experience Project also mentions
the fact that the existing stereotypes concerning Poland are not always true – there is e.g. a variety of jokes attempting to illustrate the Polish society in a certain way. The most obvious finding to emerge from this article is that today’s Poland does not have a lot in common with its communist past anymore – it is a developing capitalistic country attractive for foreign visitors.

References


http://www.experienceproject.com/question-answer/What-Do-You-Think-About-Poland-And-Polish-People/3738, 09.03.2014.