

Polish-speaking Germans and the Ethnic Cleansing of Germany East of Oder-Neisse

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This essay deals with an admittedly secondary aspect of the ethnic cleansing of East Central Europe after 1945; one that receives hardly a passing reference in most of the historical literature, although its significance should be readily apparent: the role played by people of indeterminate nationality in this epic undertaking. After all, if one proposed to remove all the Germans from east of Oder-Neisse, that did beg the question: who or what would determine who counted *as* German? Was Germanness to be a function of objective characteristics such as language and ancestry, of formal citizenship, or of individual sentiment, as manifested either currently or in the recent past?

Judging from the wartime discussions of the ethnic-cleansing project in Western government circles, few seemed aware that such a problem even existed. Representatives of the Eastern European states that were going to take over from the expelled Germans knew better, of course, but they had their own reasons for not raising the issue, in order that they might deal with it as they chose. In any case, the German-Polish borderlands included as many as one million people who might qualify as either German or Polish, depending upon the criteria employed. They were mainly Polish by language, or the descendants of recent Polish speakers, but with a more or less developed German political consciousness. One large group lived in German Upper Silesia (and are discussed in this volume by Tomasz Kamusella). This paper focuses on the other major group of "Polish-speaking Germans:" the nearly half-million Masurians who inhabited the southeastern third of the German province of East Prussia.

Although they are hardly a household term, even in professional circles, the Masurians present the clearest and best-

documented example anywhere in Eastern Europe of national consciousness developing counter to native language. Although most Masurians spoke Polish and lived adjacent to Poland, they gave every indication over quite a long time period of voluntary and virtually unanimous identification with (first) the Prussian state and (then) with the German nation. Perhaps this was because they had adopted Lutheranism while other Poles remained Catholic; perhaps it was simply because they had never known anything but Prusso-German rule. In any case, they never showed much interest in being part of the Polish national community.

Polish nationalists did make a perhaps belated, but not inconsiderable effort to win the Masurians over to their cause, especially after 1880. But they had little to show for their effort as of 1919, when Poland laid claim to Masuria, on strategic as well as ethno-linguistic grounds, at the Paris Peace Conference. Whereupon the Peace Conference, in an effort to determine the Masurians' own sentiments, arranged for a plebiscite (held July 11, 1920), the result of which must rank as the most lopsided such contest ever held: 99.3 percent of the vote in the eight Masurian counties (*Landkreise*) went to Germany.¹ Nor did the following twenty-five years offer any more indications that Poland's interest in the Masurians was in any way requited. On the contrary, Masurians increasingly neglected their mother tongue in favor of German; to the point where many of them (and the young, especially) no longer qualified as even Polish-speaking. Their desire to be full-fledged members of the German national community found particularly bizarre expression in their exceptionally high levels of support for National Socialism: in the Reichstag elections of July 1932, which saw the vote for Hitler jump to 37% nationwide, it reached 58 percent, 66 percent, and 71

¹The vote for Germany in the Allenstein Plebiscite District as a whole, which included parts of Warmia (Ermland), was 97.8 percent.

percent respectively in the three Masurian districts, *i.e.*, the largest Nazi majorities in the entire country.

But such was the prevalence among Polish nationalists of the ethnic-objective notion of nationality, as a matter of inheritance rather than individual choice (and thus unlikely to change from one generation to the next), that they remained convinced that some essential Polishness must still inhere in even the most Germanized Masurians. However deluded or repressed these lost Polish souls might currently be, their national consciousness was bound, sooner or later, to realign itself with their essentially Polish ethnicity. And so, as it became clear during the closing stages of the Second World War that Poland would acquire most of East Prussia, Polish leaders were unanimous in insisting that the Masurians not be expelled along with the "real" Germans. Of course, they also had every reason to take this position, for the Masurians and the other "ethnically Polish autochthons" resident in eastern Germany provided at least some demographic justification for Poland's acquisition of these otherwise German lands.

In 1943, surviving Polish-Masurian activists from the interwar period reconstituted themselves as an underground "Union of Masurians" (*Związek Mazurów*). In November 1944, their leader, Karol Małek, met with Communist Party boss Bolesław Bierut in Lublin and informed him that East Prussia contained as many as 700,000 people, Masurians and others, "of Polish language or background," and many others could be expected to return from western Germany. While most of these people had undergone pretty thorough Germanization, they remained candidates for Repolonization, and so should be treated as Poles and encouraged to stay. Only the "truly German" population should be expelled.² Małek's memorandum on the Masurians was the

² Tadeusz Filipkowski, "Zagadnienia Prus Wschodnich w memoriałach przedłożonych Polskiemu Komitetowi Wyzwolenia Narodowego" [The Problem of East Prussia in Memoranda Submitted to the Polish Committee of National Liberation], *Komunikaty Mazursko-Warmińskie* 26 (1980): 60ff.; Edmund Wojnowski, "Warmia i Mazury w latach 1945-1989. Społeczeństwo—gospodarka—kultura"

subject of at least one meeting of the Lublin government (in December 1944) and was probably the source of its note to Stalin asking that the Red Army, poised to enter East Prussia, "not treat the Masurian population like the German."³

This request apparently failed to impress Stalin and/or Red Army commanders, however, for Masurians participated fully in the tragedy that befell East Prussia in the winter of 1944/5 (the story of which has been told elsewhere).⁴ Masuria's planned evacuation had scarcely begun before it was cut off by the rapid Soviet advance. Most of its people were overtaken by Red Army units while trying to make their way westward in horse-drawn wagons or on foot. These treks were often looted and demolished; females, regardless of age, were raped, and males (regardless of age) often shot.⁵ Other would-be refugees, realizing the futility of flight, decided to stay or return home. But that too could prove fatal, for the Red Army seems to have had a *carte blanche*

Warmia and Masuria in the Years 1945-1989. Society-Economy-Culture], *Komunikaty Mazursko-Warmińskie* 41 (1996): 30f.; Heinrich Mrowka, "Zur masurischen Frage 1944/45," *Deutsche Ostkunde* (1984), 143ff.

³ Leszek Belzyt, "Zum Verfahren der nationalen Verifikation in den Gebieten des ehemaligen Ostpreußen, 1945-1950," *Jahrbücher für die Geschichte Mittel- und Ostdeutschlands* 39 (1990): 251ff.; Andrzej Sakson, *Stosunki narodowościowe na Warmii i Mazurach 1945-1997* [National Relations in Warmia and Masuria, 1945-1997] (Poznań, 1998), 29ff.

⁴ E.g., by Alfred M. de Zayas, *Nemesis at Potsdam: The Anglo-Americans and the Expulsion of the Germans* (London, 1979); Hans von Lehndorff, *Ein Bericht aus Ost- und Westpreußen* (Düsseldorf, 1960); Edgar Lass, *Die Flucht. Ostpreußen 1944/5* (Nauheim, 1964); Hans-Ulrich Stamm, *Schicksal in 7 Jahrhunderten. Aus der leidvollen Geschichte Ostpreußens* (Hamburg, 1976); Manfred Zeidler, *Kriegsende im Osten* (Munich, 1996).

⁵ According to one estimate, one in four fleeing Masurians failed to survive the attempt; cf. Bernd Martin, *Masuren. Mythos und Geschichte* (Karlsruhe, 1998), 88. Of fourteen members of two Polish-Masurian families overtaken in Sensburg County, only one survived to tell the tale; cf. Emma Babinnek, Nov. 18, 1952, *Bundesarchiv Koblenz* (hereafter, BAK), OstDok.2, #29-30,46; cf. also Wilhelm Zakrzewski, Jan. 18, 1953, *ibid.*, OstDok.1.I, #40-1,57; Victor von Poser, "Die Räumung des Kreises Ortelsburg," *ibid.*, OstDok.8, #571; Paul Schmolski, "Die Räumung des Kreises Neidenburg 1945," March 20, 1953, *ibid.*, #564; Friedrich Skusa, "Bericht über die Flucht im Kreise Neidenburg," April 30, 1953, *ibid.*, #566; Lass, 87, 99ff.; Reinhold Weber, *Masuren: Geschichte - Land und Leute* (Leer, 1983), 154ff.

unparalleled in modern European history to do as it pleased with conquered civilians; and Nazi atrocities in the Soviet Union had given its members every incentive to do their worst. But there is also at least some circumstantial evidence to suggest that the Red Army's extraordinary brutality, *e.g.*, in the East Prussian village of Nemmersdorf, captured in October 1944 but then relinquished again to the Wehrmacht, was not just a spontaneous reaction to earlier German misdeeds, but was consciously designed to encourage flight, *i.e.*, "ethnic self-cleansing," from areas assigned to Poland or the USSR.⁶

Soviet soldiers apparently had little information about Masuria's ethnic make-up; they were rarely able or willing to distinguish between "real Germans" and others, including the numerous conscript workers from Nazi-occupied countries as well as ethnic Poles. Locals who claimed to be Polish made no impact on them; on the contrary, the sight of putative "German fascists" pleading for mercy in a Slavic tongue seemed only to increase their rage.⁷ In the wake of the Red Army came also bands of Poles from south of the pre-war border, bent upon plunder; their long-festering resentment of the Masurians' relative affluence and traditional disdain for Poles provided the necessary motivation.⁸

In May 1945, after four months of Soviet military rule, Soviet authorities transferred civilian administration of southern East

⁶ Zeidler, 15f.

⁷For example, when Soviet soldiers entered the unresisting Masurian village of Kronau (*Kreis Lötzen*), they raped most of the females and shot virtually all the men who were on hand (*i.e.*, 52 of them), including 18 French conscript laborers; cf. Katharine Goebel, *BAK, OstDok.10, #179*; Lass, 99. Among the numerous women shot resisting rape were even some conscript laborers from the Soviet Union itself.

⁸ This was not an integral part of Poland's ethnic cleansing *cum* resettlement program, for few of the looters came to Masuria to stay. Rather, they took whatever they could carry with them back to Mazovia, including "doors, windows, ovens, floors," and sometimes even "entire houses," as a result of which some villages near the border "ceased altogether to exist;" cf. Andrzej Sakson, *Mazurzy—Społeczność Pogranicza* [The Masurians—A Borderland Society] (Poznań, 1990), 76f.

Prussia to Poland. One of the first problems facing the new administration was how to distinguish between the "ethnically Polish" Masurians, who were allowed, required even, to stay, and the Germans, who were to be expelled. And this had to be done quickly if the former were to be spared the fate that commonly befell the remaining Germans: dispossession, forced labor, and (finally) expulsion. It is not easy to ascertain exactly how many Masurians remained in East Prussia at this time. In part, this was due to shifting definitions: traditionally, the term Masurian implied at least some familiarity with the Polish-Masurian language. But many, if not most Masurians no longer spoke much Polish, and so authorities declined to make language an essential criterion of Polish-Masurian nationality. Masurians were classified officially (along with most Warmians and Upper Silesians) as "autochtons," a term meaning simply people who have been born where they currently live; but applied in this case only to people of quasi-Polish descent. The criteria for autochton status were left intentionally vague in order to produce the largest possible indigenous population. Officials were doubtless aware that most of these people had identified previously with Germany, and that many had also been fervent "Hitlerites," but they chose to overlook this in the interest of reclaiming them for Poland. In June 1945, Polish authorities issued a "registration" order that proposed very lax criteria for qualifying as an autochton: a Polish language background, Polish family name, or previously expressed sympathy for Poland usually sufficed to earn one a temporary "certificate of Polishness."⁹

Based on these generous criteria, Polish authorities anticipated that they would find as many as 500,000 ethnic Poles, most of them Masurians, in their part of East Prussia.¹⁰ In fact,

⁹ Władysław Wach, "Weryfikacja ludności miejscowej—na Mazurach i Warmii" [Verification of the Local Population—in Masuria and Warmia], *Strážnica Zachodnia* 15 (1946): 221; Belzyt, 255f.

¹⁰ Belzyt, 248.

there were nowhere near that many, for Masurians had responded to the approach of the Red Army the same as other Germans: most of them had fled westward, and in roughly the same proportion. In other words, most Masurians removed themselves from Masuria before Poland could even let them know that they should remain. There are no precise figures for the number who stayed, or who failed to make good on their escape and returned. In 1947, officials in the new Allenstein Wojewodship, which comprised most of Masuria, counted only 80,000 autochtons, not all of them Masurians.¹¹ This number rose to 111,300 by 1950, partly as a result of returnees from Western Germany and other places, partly as a result of a further relaxation of the definition of an autochton. Meanwhile, the immigrant Polish population of Masuria grew rapidly; by 1950, Poles from away outnumbered the autochtons by at least six to one.¹²

At first, Polish officials were lavish in their appreciation of the autochtons and celebrated them as the demographic foundation of the new Polish society that was to arise in the "recovered territories." The small group of interwar Polish-Masurian activists were feted as the nucleus of a native Masurian intelligentsia and appointed to official positions.¹³ The problem was that the reasoning behind this respectful attitude was often lost on the

¹¹ Belzyt estimates that no more than 65,000 Masurians, about 15 percent of the pre-war total, were on hand for the beginning of Polish rule; cf. *ibid.*, 253; Wojnowski, 54, 212; Sakson, *Mazurzy*, 69, 84, 150; Wróblewski, 65; *Odbudowa Ziemi Odzyskanych* [The Reconstruction of the Regained Territories] (1945-1955), ed. Kazimierz Piwarski *et al.* (Poznań, 1957), 433; Christian Stoll, *Die Deutschen im polnischen Herrschaftsbereich nach 1945* (Vienna, 1986), 66ff., 97; Hans Joachim von Koerber, *Die Bevölkerung der deutschen Ostgebiete unter polnischer Verwaltung* (Berlin, 1958), 38.

¹² Koerber, 84ff.; Sakson, *Mazurzy*, 72ff., 108; Belzyt, 248; Alfred Bohmann *Menschen und Grenzen* (Cologne 1969), 281; Rudolf Neumann, *Ostpreußen unter polnischer und sowjetischer Verwaltung* (Frankfurt/Main, 1955), 3.

¹³ Wojnowski, 55; Sakson, *Mazurzy*, 111f.; Neumann, 33; Paweł Sowa, *Po obu stronach kordonu* [On Both Sides of the Border] (Olsztyn, 1969), 170.

newly arrived Poles from other regions. They found it hard to accept as fellow Poles people who spoke such bad Polish, who were normally Protestant, and who had traditionally made so little effort to hide their disdain for Poland. They were more inclined to see the Masurians as just so many defeated Nazis than as prodigal sons and daughters of Poland.¹⁴ Of course, they also had an obvious interest in seeing them this way, for the more locals who could be branded as ex-Nazis and unreconstructed enemies of Poland, the better their own chances of acquiring one of the fine (by Polish standards) Masurian farms or homes.¹⁵

Thus the original idea of basing Polish rule, at least in part, on an indigenous population of ethnically Polish autochthons was soon overwhelmed by a reality in which most Masurians were treated little better than the remaining ethnic Germans. They too were stripped of civil rights, dispossessed of their farms and businesses, made to do forced labor, and subjected to periodic searches of their homes, confiscation of their possessions, and physical as well as verbal abuse by Polish newcomers. While officials did not condone this behavior, neither did they intervene very energetically to stop it.¹⁶ On the contrary, according to most of the Masurians who recorded their experiences for the West German *Ost-Dokumentation* project in the 1950s, the looting, abuse, arbitrary arrests, and other mistreatment actually

¹⁴ Stoll, 67; Neumann, 31. When schools opened in September 1945, most Masurian children were not in attendance; some because schools were not yet available for them, but most because Polish-language instruction was of little use to children who no longer learned that language at home; cf. Kazimierz Pietrzak-Pawłowski, "Repolonizacja kulturalna ziemi warmińsko-mazurskiej" [The Cultural Repolonization of the Warmian-Masurian Lands] *Przegląd Zachodni* [Western Review] 2 (1946): 694.

¹⁵ Wojnowski, 219; Stoll, 59; Sakson, *Mazurzy*, 78ff.

¹⁶ Remaining Germans males between the ages of 15 and 55 were also subject to deportation to the Soviet Union for longer or shorter periods of forced labor, and there was apparently no effort to distinguish between Masurians and other Germans. Of the c. 10,000 Masurians deported to the Soviet Union, half did not return; cf. Andrzej & Agnieszka Wróblewski, *Ausreiseerlaubnis* (Dortmund, 1996), 17; Belzyt, 250; Martin, 64; Sakson, *Mazurzy*, 80; Wojnowski, 227.

increased following the shift from Soviet to Polish rule in June 1945.¹⁷

One possible reason for the widespread mistreatment of autochthons during the first months of Polish rule was an ill-considered decree of March 2, 1945, which declared the property of German citizens in the newly acquired lands, specifically including "German citizens of Polish nationality," to be legally "forfeit." Intended presumably to clear the way legally for various state actions, it was interpreted instead by some Poles as a license to loot.¹⁸ And so, deprived of property as well as civil rights, most Masurians as well as ethnic Germans were reduced to a floating class of hired hands and forced laborers; often obliged to work as such on what had been their own farms or workshops, now in the hands of Poles. A government commission that looked into the condition of the autochthons in late 1945 found that most of them, having been robbed of "all valuables," were living "close to starvation,...unsure of their lives [and] in constant fear" of gangs of thieves who seemed to "fear no punishment."¹⁹ As the noted writer Jerzy Putrament later charged, Polish authorities basically "squandered the moment of liberation;" above all, by "allowing the looting to take place almost without punishment." Thus the "first appearance of [Polish] statehood [in Masuria] resembled the appearance of the Tatars in Sienkiewicz's *The Flood*;" and continued misrule threatened to accomplish what the Germans had not been able to

¹⁷ August Nowinski reports that Polish assumption of authority in Magdalenz (Neidenburg Country) was followed by "a thorough plundering...until the last piece of straw had disappeared from our farms;" cf. Nowinski, Jan. 12, 1953, *BAK*, OstDok.1.I, #40-1, 305. Emma Babinnek recalled how "plundering continued day and night;" cf. Babinnek, Nov. 18, 1952, *ibid.*, OstDok.2, #29-30,46; cf. also Friedrich Junga, *ibid.*,251; Friedrich Klamaschewski, *ibid.*, OstDok.1.I, #28, 221.

¹⁸ The decree was reversed in May 1946, but by then much of the indigenous population, including the "objectively" Polish Masurians, had been effectively dispossessed; cf. Stoll, 57.

¹⁹ Belzyt, 258ff.; Neumann, 27.

do in centuries: eliminate the last scintilla of Polishness among the Masurians.²⁰

Officials assumed, of course, that those Masurians who were eligible for Polish citizenship would also want to acquire it, if only to avoid being "ethnically cleansed." All too many Masurians, however, did not even seek certification as Poles, despite the singularly unattractive alternative of removal to a war-ravaged Germany that seemed to have neither work, housing, nor even very much room for them. Instead, officials reported a "massive flight by the autochthonous population" along with the Germans who had been ordered to leave.²¹ Before long, Masurians were being compelled to stay, and some who had joined the exodus westward were stopped at the border, sent home, and forced to sign a Polish loyalty oath.²² A 1946 survey by the Polish Western Association (Instytut Zachodni) estimated that two thirds of the autochthons in East Prussia, including half of those who had already received Polish citizenship, preferred to relocate to Germany.²³

As it became clear that things were not going as planned with respect to the Masurians, whose retention remained so desirable from the standpoint of legitimizing Poland's acquisition of the region, a new program was launched (April 1946) under

²⁰ In *Warmia i Mazury*, June 9, 1957. Writing from exile, Jędrzej Giertych could afford to be even blunter; he compared the Masurians' fate under People's Poland to that of the Pruzzi under the Teutonic Knights; cf. Giertych *Oblicze religijno-narodowe Warmii i Mazur* [The Religious-National Aspect of Warmia and Masuria] (Rome, 1957), 163. Cf. also Wojciech Wrzesiński, "Diskusja i polemika" [Discussion and Polemic], *Komunikaty Mazursko-Warmińskie* [Warmian-Masurian Communications] 2 (1957), 174-181.

²¹ Sakson, *Mazurzy*, 77ff. According to one departing Masurian, the government's renewed assurances that autochthons who opted for Polish citizenship would enjoy equal rights with Poles were no longer enough; "we were so tired of life amidst the robber-gangs (*Banden*) that we preferred to leave the homeland;" cf. Frł. Pellny, BAK, OstDok1.I, #28, 133.

²² Stoll, 49; Sakson, *Mazurzy*, 145.

²³ Belzyt, 268; Sakson, *Mazurzy*, 97, 147; Stoll, 71; Wrzesiński, 181.

which remaining non-citizen autochthons would undergo a formal process of "verification" of their underlying Polishness, and then have citizenship bestowed upon them.²⁴ Some 55,000 residents of Allenstein Wojewodship underwent this procedure; several hundred officials were assigned to the time-consuming task of evaluating individual cases. The results were mixed, however: fewer than half (*i.e.*, 26,979) "passed." The remainder were rejected, mainly because they continued to insist that they were German and did not want Polish citizenship.²⁵ Officials were at a loss to explain the refusal of so many Masurians to "Repolonize" themselves, despite the heavy price that came with refusal. After all, there was still no sign of any West German "economic miracle" in 1946-1947. On the contrary, Germany was threatened with widespread starvation. So the common suspicion during the following decades that Masurians were seduced by some Golden West hardly applies to this period.²⁶

²⁴ Wach, 222; Belzyt, 256; Koerber, 37, 61; Stoll, 8.

²⁵ Belzyt, 259; Wojnowski, 229; Sakson, *Mazurzy*, 129. When officials convened one group of about 350 (mostly female) Masurians and urged them to apply for recognition as Polish citizens, most declined on grounds that, having been effectively dispossessed by a combination of official measures and unofficial looting, they saw no prospect of satisfactory lives in Poland and preferred to await relocation to what was left of Germany; cf. Sakson, *Mazurzy*, 104. Another Masurian recalled how his fellow villagers were called together and "strongly pressured to opt for Poland....But not one was prepared to do so;" cf. August Nowinski, Jan. 12, 1953, BAK, OstDok1.I, #40-1, 305. A third witness related how officials, including the local schoolteacher, convened the residents of her mostly-Masurian village and "tried to convince us that we were the descendants of Poles" and should therefore become Polish citizens. But "no one from our village complied voluntarily with the summons to opt (for Poland). Never before had we felt so consciously German;" cf. Hildegard Rogalski, BAK, OstDok.2, #29-30, 485. In another Masurian village, residents were told that they would not be allowed to remain in Poland if they did not sign a paper testifying to their Polish nationality; all but ten residents refused, and were duly expelled along with the ethnic Germans; cf. Hermann Zyweck, BAK, OstDok1.I, #40-1, 197.

²⁶ Wojnowski, 221ff.; Sakson, *Mazurzy*, 104; Koerber, 64; Stoll, 75. According to one frustrated Polish teacher, the problem was simply that "the majority of Masurians consider themselves Germans, and dream only of departure for Germany;" cf. E. Bielawski, quoted in: Sakson, *Mazurzy*, 82. Another teacher requested a transfer out of the region on grounds that he was tired of the "Sisyphean task" of trying to make Poles out of the Masurians; "it is insane to try to convince these people that they are Poles;" cf. *Die Arbeiterstimme* (Wrocław), Nov. 29, 1956.

The years 1948 and 1949 saw the intensification of the Polish regime's Stalinist character, and this was accompanied by a hardening of official attitudes toward the autochthons. In Masuria, new Wojewode Mieczysław Moczar proceeded basically to force verification upon the remaining Masurians; some were even kept locked in their own basements until they agreed to sign declarations of Polishness. When the last 1300 remained adamant even in the face of this kind of pressure, frustrated officials simply announced that they were all Polish citizens now, regardless. In 1950, Poland declared that its verification campaign had been concluded and that 117,000 Masurians and Warmians had been successfully inducted into the Polish national community.²⁷

But Masurians continued to have problems getting along with what were supposed to be their fellow Poles. There were continued language difficulties, differences of religion and historical memory, and a residue of bitterness remaining from the behavior of some of the new arrivals in 1945.²⁸ Intermarriage between Masurians and newcomers remained uncommon; only 5 percent of marriages concluded in one representative county, 1949-1954, were "mixed."²⁹ Indeed, closer contact with "real" Poles after 1945 only seemed to reinforce the view of many Masurians that they were fundamentally different—their German national consciousness seems rather to have strengthened than weakened under Polish rule, especially as news of West Germany's phoenix-like economic recovery from the devastation of World War II began to reach them. A confidential official survey in 1952 found that half of the Masurians in Poland, though now officially verified as Poles, still considered

²⁷ Neumann, 34; Belzyt, 256ff.; Stoll, 63; Sakson, *Mazurzy*, 128; Wróblewski, 34; *Nowa Kultura*, Oct. 14, 1956; Paul Syburra, Jan. 20, 1952, *BAK*, OstDok.1.I, #28, 115.

²⁸ Jan Gisges, in *Nowa Kultura*, Aug. 12, 1956; Sakson, *Mazurzy*, 79, 121.

²⁹ Sakson, *Mazurzy*, 240; Buchhofer, 27.

themselves German and hoped to relocate to Germany. Indeed, a majority of them (*i.e.*, about 35,000 people) had applied by that time for formal reaffirmation of their German citizenship, either directly from West Germany or through the United States Embassy in Warsaw.³⁰

In 1956, an agreement between West Germany and Poland made it easier for members of families to reunite - primarily in the former country, of course - and this was followed by the departure of most Masurians from Poland during the following several years. The long history of Masurians seeking work in western Germany meant that most of them had relatives there who could now be leveraged to secure the right to emigrate. About 30,000 Masurians, *i.e.*, about half the number currently in Poland, left for Germany from 1956 to 1959.³¹ A significant amount of "quiet emigration" on other than family-reunification grounds continued during the following two decades, so that by 1980 only ten to fifteen thousand Masurians remained in Poland. Although still cited regularly as demographic justification for Poland's possession of the region, the autochthonous population was now a mere three percent of the total. And most of this remnant left during the subsequent turbulent decade, marked by Solidarity's challenge, the imposition of martial law, and the virtual collapse of the Polish economy.³²

Aside from brief outbursts of candor in 1956 and 1980-1981, the Polish public remained largely uninformed about these developments until 1989. Thus the revelation (*e.g.*, in the 1989 reportage by Agnieszka and Andrzej Wróblewski, *Zgoda na wyjazd* [Permission to Leave], and in Andrzej Sakson's more

³⁰ Belzyt, 50; Sakson, *Mazurzy*, 136, 161f.; Joachim Rogall, "Die Tragödie einer Grenzlandbevölkerung—polnische Forschungen über die Masuren," *Zeitschrift für Ostmitteleuropa-Forschung* 45 (1996): 110.

³¹ Sakson, *Mazurzy*, 162ff., 203; Ekkehard Buchhofer *Die Bevölkerungsentwicklung in den polnisch-verwalteten deutschen Ostgebieten* (Kiel, 1967), 39.

³² Sakson, *Mazurzy*, 178ff., 204ff., 228; Korb, 113; Leszek Belzyt, "Zur Frage des nationalen Bewußtseins der Masuren im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert," *Zeitschrift für Ostmitteleuropa-Forschung* 45 (1996): 53.

scholarly study of 1990, *Mazurzy—Społeczność pogranicza* [The Masurians—A Borderland Society]) that Poland's Masurian population had shrunk by that time to about 8000, *i.e.*, less than ten percent of the 1950 figure and just two percent of what it had been a century earlier, came as quite a shock. It was suddenly clear that, while Poland had managed to gain Masuria, it had lost most of the Masurians.³³ Today, the Masurian population of (what is still called) Masuria consists of a few thousand isolated individuals who are more likely to describe themselves as Germans than as Masurians (although most of them, ironically, now speak only Polish).³⁴ Writing in 1985, Igor Newerly summarized the Masurian experience in People's Poland as follows: "The Masurians lived among us for a certain time and then left. They were Germans, and so they left for Germany; the Masurian question no longer exists."³⁵

In conclusion, the flight of most Masurians, as well as the experience of those who remained in their homeland after 1945, is significant, first of all, as evidence of the tenacity with which they stuck to their chosen national identity, however counter-intuitive that choice might seem from the perspective of ethnic-objective concepts of national identity. Although they were exempted from the expulsion decrees, promised an equal role in the Polish national community, and given every opportunity to draw a line under their Germanophile past, it turns out that Polish East Prussia has been just about as thoroughly cleansed of its "ethnically Polish autochtons" as of its "objectively German"

³³ Wróblewski, 100; Sakson, *Mazurzy*, 64ff.; cf. also Stoll, 97; Belzyt, "Frage," 54. The main reason for the survival of even this small remnant was that most of them were married to Poles, and so more inclined to remain in Poland. (The number of mixed marriages between Masurians and Poles proper increased gradually; cf. Sakson, *Mazurzy*, 243ff.)

³⁴ See, for example, the interviews with surviving Masurians in Ralph Giordano, *Ostpreußen Ade: Reise durch ein melancholisches Land* (Köln, 1994), *passim*.

³⁵ Quoted in Sakson, *Mazurzy*, 306. This sentiment was echoed in the resigned conclusion of historian Leszek Belzyt: "The Masurians have opted for the German state and for German culture, and in return have left their homeland, given up their community, and sacrificed their mother language"; cf. Belzyt, "Frage," 54.

population; except that, in contrast to other Germans, most Masurians appear to have relinquished their homeland quasi-voluntarily. This is not an altogether fair assumption, of course, but it raises the not-entirely-facetious question (suggested also by the history of the German minority in interwar Poland): What if the Grand Alliance, instead of authorizing the ethnic cleansing of the lands east of Oder-Neisse, had merely placed this region under the rule (or misrule) of Polish Communists? Might not a decade or two of that sufficed to persuade most Germans to leave in the same quasi-voluntary manner as the Masurians, thus relieving the United States of its co-responsibility for having sanctioned and facilitated history's greatest-ever ethnic-cleansing operation?