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Haunted Vegetation: Formerly German Orchards in Polish Pomerania

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This essay employs a hauntological approach to explore the effects of post-1945 mass migrations in Central Europe, particularly Poland, on the former German vegetation by focusing on the case of the Pomeranian orchards and fruit trees near the town of Wałcz (formerly German Deutsch Krone) in present-day north-western Poland. The data for this study was collected through fieldwork in two abandoned orchards that were established by German-speaking inhabitants near their *Vorwerks*, i.e. lone farms scattered around the region. The sites are named Bobrowo (Baberow in German) and Porosty (Rieselei in German). After the Second World War, the original inhabitants were expelled, and the farms were briefly inhabited by Polish settlers before being deserted. The background for this was that, in and after 1945, the German inhabitants of the regions incorporated into Poland who had not fled before the Red Army's advance were forcibly relocated to German lands to the west, and new settlers, mostly Poles from Central and Eastern Poland, were relocated to replace them. My fieldwork consisted of two main research methods. The first involved interviewing current visitors to these places or people who may remember them from the past, some of the new settlers or their children and grandchildren, on-site and on-line. The second method entailed gathering information about the vegetation itself, primarily observing the vegetation cycle from autumn 2022 to autumn 2023.

In what follows, I address the orchards as the non-human. The term non-human has gained prominence in anthropology as a way of challenging the anthropocentric view that places humans above and apart from other forms of life and matter. Following the insights of new materialism, some anthropologists have argued that non-human entities, such as trees, have their own vitality, agency and modes of existence that cannot be reduced to human meanings or purposes. Jane Bennett proposed the concept of vibrant matter to describe the forces that animate both human and non-human bodies.¹ We may also study how literature narrates the encounters and transformations between humans and non-humans, and how these narratives reveal the ecological, ethical and

1. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

political implications of the non-human turn.² This essay also contributes to ‘a willingness to theorize events ... as encounters between ontologically diverse actants, some human, some not, though all thoroughly material’.³ In this case, the events in question are expulsion and resettlement in post-1945 Poland.

In 1945, as a result of decisions taken by the wartime allies at the Yalta and Potsdam conferences, Poland’s borders were shifted to the west. The country lost its eastern Borderland provinces and gained some parts of the former German provinces in the west, including the region of Central Pomerania where the two *Vorwerks* under scrutiny were situated. *Vorwerk* is a lone farm – interestingly, the Polish term, *folwark*, is a Germanism. The newly annexed regions were presented as ‘recovered’, based on the historical argument that they were once briefly under Polish rule.⁴ Wałcz and its surroundings were distinctive in being a borderland between Poland and Germany – in their various forms – so some traces of Polishness could be found there, albeit scarce. For the main, then, the new settlers encountered a material culture that was unmistakably German. In other words, the Polishness being located in the distant past meant that the new inhabitants, predominantly of Polish origin, began their new lives amid material traces of German presence.

The Pomeranian landscape was marked by the presence of isolated farms and fruit tree alleys. The former were the outcome of a specific economic strategy of the Prussian state: as early as the beginning of the nineteenth century, the region faced the problem of depopulation, and thus the state issued regulations regarding the *Vorwerks*, which were attached to larger administrative units.⁵ This resulted in several places in the area sharing the same name. For example, Sagemühl was the former German name of Ostrowiec, a village near Wałcz, but it also referred to several abandoned and often forgotten *Vorwerks* in the vicinity. The interlocutor who showed me one of them was surprised that the Sagemühl she identified from an old German map, in the proximity of her village, was such a dependent *Vorwerk* of Ostrowiec. The fruit tree lanes were planted to enhance the aesthetic appeal of the landscape, which was also appreciated by the new settlers. Another of my interlocutors recalled this feature from her childhood, and added that it was a place where they used to pick fruit, since it was ‘formerly German and did not belong really to anyone’.⁶ This connects the neglected *Vorwerks* with orchards and fruit tree alleys. The new

2. Laura Colombino and Peter Childs, ‘Narrating the (non)human: Ecologies, consciousness and myth’, *Textual Practice* 36 (3) (2022): 355–64, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2022.2030097>.
3. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, pp. xiii–xiv.
4. Marta Grzechnik, ‘“Recovering” territories: The use of history in the integration of the new Polish western borderland after World War II’, *Europe-Asia Studies* 69 (4) (2017): 668–92.
5. Gerhard Wurzbacher, ‘Studien über den Wandel der Sozialen und Völkischen Struktur eines Landkreises im Pommerschen-Westpreußischen Grenzraum zwischen 1773 und 1937’, *Zeitschrift Für Ostforschung* 2 (2) (1953): 190–207.
6. Interview 19 Sept. 2023.

settlers, who came either from the Eastern Borderlands, or densely populated regions of Central Poland, were possibly not familiar with these formations from their previous places of residence. Some *Vorwerks* where orchards grew, were, however, used later on as a source of fruit.

The new Polish authorities devised various strategies to convince the settlers of the Polishness of the land. To reconcile the past and to demonstrate Slavic presence in the regions in question, scientific efforts were undertaken. The Ministry for the Recovered Territories, established in the autumn of 1945, had its own scientific council, and researchers from various disciplines started to work on the Slavic past of the ‘recovered’ regions.⁷ Among them were archaeologists who aimed to prove that the earliest cultural layer, excavated there, was not German, but Slavic.⁸ Another aspect of the scientific efforts to re-Slavicise the region was the linguistic research into the Slavic origins of local names. However, the biological studies did not participate in this task: the significance of trees was only later interrogated by ethnobotanists.⁹ This was related to nineteenth century attempts to nationalise trees: for instance, oak was associated with German identity, while linden was linked to Slavic identity. Fruit trees, however, were not considered in this context.

Literary production in the aftermath of World War II was also a part of the effort to persuade the settlers that they were arriving in lands of proto-Polish or proto-Slavic origin.¹⁰ Authors created and collected folk tales from Pomerania in the attempt to construct a Slavic identity for the region and re-interpret the traces of German presence accordingly. One of the literary works that participated in the re-Slavicisation of the region was a volume of folk tales from Pomerania, published in 1948, but written between 1946 and 1947, by Tymoteusz Karpowicz. Karpowicz claimed that Pomerania was rich in legends that needed to be rescued, at least partially, from oblivion.¹¹ Therefore, he

7. Karolina Ćwiek-Rogalska and Izabela Mrzygłód, ‘Futuryści z MZO. Organizowanie się Ministerstwa Ziem Odzyskanych w czasie i przestrzeni’, *Acta Baltico-Slavica* 46 (2022).
8. Zbigniew Kobyliński and Grażyna Rutkowska, ‘Propagandist use of history and archaeology in justification of Polish rights to the “recovered territories” after World War II’, *Archaeologia Polona* 43 (2005): 51–124; Karin Reichenbach, ‘The research program on the beginnings of the Polish State between Polish Western thought and historical materialism: Structural developments and political reorientation’, *Przegląd Archeologiczny* 65 (2017): 19–34; Adrianna Szczerba, ‘From the history of Polish archaeology. Studies of the beginning of the Polish State 1948–1966 (“Millennium Program”)’, *Acta Universitatis Lodzensis. Folia Archaeologica* no. 33 (2018): 247–54.
9. Przemysław Piotr Tomczyk, Paulina Pruszkowska-Przybylska, and Alicja Klejps, ‘Symbole państwowe jako obiekt zainteresowania etnobotaniki–występowanie motywów drzew w symbolach państwowych krajów słowiańskich i ich znaczenie’, *Etnobiologia Polska* 6 (2016): 117–28.
10. Kamila Gieba, *Lubuska literatura osadnicza jako narracja założycielska regionu* (Kraków: Universitas, 2018).
11. I would like to thank Joanna Roszak for clarifying Karpowicz’s creative process to me. See also Joanna Roszak, *W cztery strony naraz. Portrety Karpowicza* (Wrocław: Biuro Literackie, 2010).

created a separate volume entitled *Pomeranian Legends*¹² among whose tales is one called 'Seven Willows'.

Paradoxically, this tale captures perfectly the complex matter of human–non-human relations in the region. It narrates the story of seven sisters, daughters of a local wizard, who want to express their fondness to the knights they used to love and inform them that they are waiting for them. But they have no language to communicate their feelings, except by using birds as messengers. To do so, they must be transformed into trees, since only trees can communicate with birds. Their father promises them that, as soon as the message is delivered by the birds and the knights decide to return, he will transform them back. Unfortunately, he is killed by the jealous rivals of the knights, so, when they return, they see only seven trees. 'A kind of emptiness blows from here', they say upon their return, 'as if they were extinct ... there is no one here'. Thus, Karpowicz's tale, itself intertwined in the interplay of presence and absence of Slavic traces in Pomerania, seen as ready to be rescued from oblivion, becomes a perfect illustration of the inability, and yet the longing, to communicate between humans and non-humans. The sisters, who are now unable to speak to humans, cannot tell the knights what happened, and the knights, who do not recognise the trees as the sisters, cannot understand their message. The cases of the two *Vorwerks* under scrutiny resonate with this: where sources are too scarce, we are unable to tell the exact fate of the people who cared for the trees.

Like other strategies of re-Slavicisation of the Recovered Territories, the legend allows for subversive interpretation. It unseals and allows marginalised voices to return, which makes it spectral. The sisters who are changed into willows can be seen as a metaphor for the German inhabitants, who were forced to leave their homes and lands after the war. The knights can be seen as a metaphor for the Polish settlers, who came to the region to replace the Germans, but did not necessarily have the skills and abilities to settle what was left behind. It also demonstrates how vegetation and memory are intertwined, through the cyclical time in which nature and the memories of the sisters operate, as well as the changing nature of emotions and of the natural environment.

The new inhabitants faced a challenging situation as they tried to make themselves comfortable in the newly resettled territories. The state and local institutions, responsible for the resettlement action, attempted to redistribute what the German-speaking communities left behind. This action was carried out immediately but with limited state resources, in the uncertain political situation of the transition towards the new state and political system, the construction of a new apparatus of power, the problem of the consolidation of communist power and the reconstruction of the national economy, as well as the tense international situation and the implementation of a series of social and

12. Tymoteusz Karpowicz, *Legends pomorskie* (Szczecin: Spółdzielnia Wydawnicza Polskie Pismo i Książka, 1948).

systemic reforms. Orchards and fruit trees, especially those located in remote areas, were not explicitly included in the redistribution scheme. Therefore, the two cases I discuss in this essay were perceived by my interlocutors as understandably neglected: they lacked the appeal and the value to attract potential settlers.

The first case is a former German *Vorwerk*, Baberow,¹³ which was no longer referred to by its Polish name during my fieldwork. When I inquired about it, people told me that 'generally, the name of the lake is used [to name the ruins]'.¹⁴ The nearby lake is actually called 'Bobrowo', which is a derivative from the German name Baberowsee. It was easily adapted, as it resembles 'bóbr', i.e. a beaver, in Polish. Therefore, the slightly altered variants are used by the local population. It is called Bobrowo, Babrowo or Babry. When asked explicitly, one of the interviewees remembered the name with an example: 'We used to say, where? To Babry, to the orchard'.¹⁵ Thus, the orchard became the main feature of the Baberow landscape. Although Baberow, together with several now non-existent settlements (e.g. Fiermühl / Leszczynki, deep in the woods and without an orchard, so of no interest to the settlers) was, before 1945, administratively considered part of Klausdorf (today Polish Kłębowiec), it was people from nearby Karsibór (formerly German Keßburg) who went there for fruit after the war. The reason was not only proximity, but also that the old paths used to connect Klausdorf, Baberow or nearby Lassere (Polish Omulno) were neglected and, since they were not paved and asphalted, today they are almost inaccessible by car.

Maps (Figure 1) indicate that the configuration of the buildings remained unchanged throughout its existence: both in 1904 and thirty years later there were nine buildings, some arranged in a typical farm layout, presumably with a barn opposite the road, and a residential building. However, it disappeared from the maps in the 1980s. In 1905, 52 people resided there. Until recently, the traces of buildings and foundations were visible and fruit trees blossomed on the farm itself in spring. Unfortunately, the last remnants were demolished in late autumn 2022 (Figure 2).

13. For more on the problematic nature of Polish microtoponyms in the Recovered Territories, see Paweł Swoboda, '(Nie)autentyczność mikrotoponimów ustalonych po 1945 roku na tzw. Ziemiach Zachodnich', in *Mikrotoponimy i makrotoponimy w komunikacji i literaturze* (Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 2015), pp. 41–54.

14. Interview 14 March 2023.

15. Ibid.

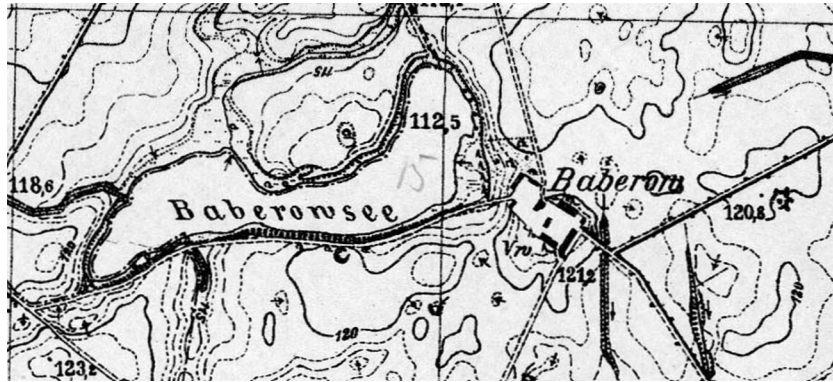


Figure 1. Fragment of a topographic map (Meßtischblatt), 1934, showing the Baberow Vorwerk. Source: Archiwum Map Zachodniej Polski.



Figure 2. What was left of Baberow. Photograph by Karolina Ćwiek-Rogalska.

A similar case of post-war resettlement and subsequent abandonment is that of Rieselei (Porosty), another *Vorwerk* in the region. This settlement was smaller than Baberow, with only seven inhabitants recorded in 1905. It has since disappeared from the official records and maps, and, although it was called Porosty after the war, today it no longer has a Polish name. A map from 1934 shows a single building, presumably a residential one (Figure 3). Local people recall it as a 'white house' that was occupied until the 1960s, a pleasant feature in the landscape where people went to pick mushrooms or walk in the woods. Today, the only remnants of the settlement are the fruit trees: two apple trees and one wild plum, whose fruits are still edible (Figure 4).

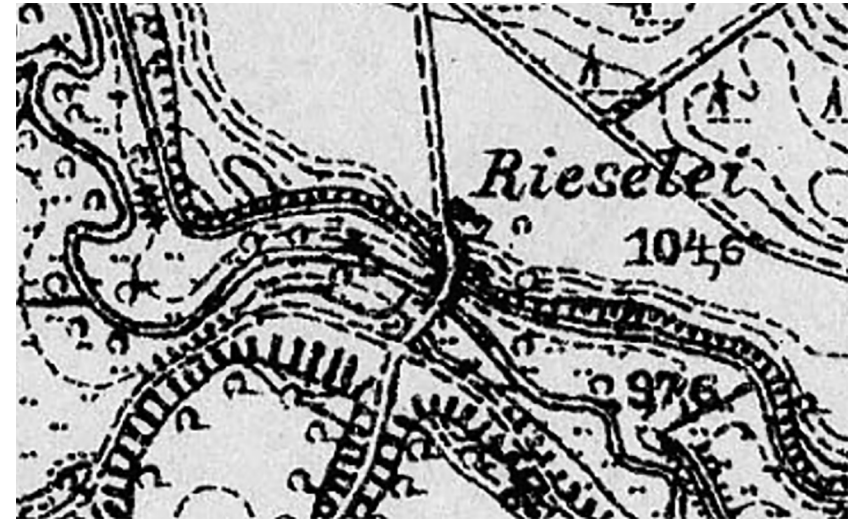


Figure 3. Fragment of a topographic map (Meßtischblatt), 1934, showing Rieselei. Source: Archiwum Map Zachodniej Polski.



Figure 4. Fruit trees, still present in the landscape of Rieselei. Photograph by Karolina Ćwiek-Rogalska.

However, the presence of glass and plastic waste indicates that the tranquil glade it has become is a convenient stop for various visitors. They probably assume that no-one cares about the place, so leave their waste behind. This cultural practice demonstrates how the place is perceived as belonging to no-one. In contrast, the site hosts some wildlife. As I picked plums, I heard an animal stirring in the bushes surrounding the trees. Another time, I observed a resting spot in the tall grass, likely a sleeping site for some other animal. These observations suggest that the place is not completely abandoned, but rather shared with other living beings, some of them non-humans.

The activity of fruit-picking was a frequent motif in case of Baberow/Bobrowo. At first, mentions of the place were mostly about its ruination. As one of the interviewees stated: 'As far as I remember, there was practically nothing there anymore. Only the ruined traces of buildings, and [they were] heavily overgrown. There were already trees growing inside'.¹⁶ After a moment of hesitation, however, he added: 'But there was plenty of fruit'.¹⁷ This feature became prominent during the interview:

Mostly fruit trees [were there], with a predominance of cherries, and apple trees in at least a few varieties. Plums, several different ones, including the ubiquitous Mirabelle plums. Blackberries, raspberries... In fact, it was a complete fruit orchard.¹⁸

'Complete' implies that it was ready to be harvested, even though there was no-one who cared about the trees. No-one could recall the previous inhabitants, either the German or Polish ones. Several people told me that they vaguely remembered the name of the last Polish family living there, but it was not seen as a place inhabited by someone, but rather as a place where families from the nearby village went to collect fruit. This proves that the place was not only physically abandoned, but also culturally and socially forgotten. The former inhabitants, both German and Polish, were erased from the collective memory of the local community. The only thing that remained was the fruit, a non-human actor that was seen as a natural and common resource, not as a legacy of human cultivation. The place was transformed from a living and meaningful space into a wild and anonymous one. The demolition of the buildings was only a final act of erasing the past, not the cause of it. Furthermore, the place was not only physically abandoned, but also symbolically rejected. The local community does not remember or acknowledge the presence of earlier inhabitants. The only thing that they valued was the fruit, which was seen as a neutral and beneficial product, not as a sign of human intervention. However,

16. Interview 14 March 2023.

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid.

the cyclical return of the fruit at the time of harvest, which tempted the current inhabitants of nearby villages to pick it, can be interpreted in frames of hauntology.

The fruit trees that remained after the expulsion, with a distinct form of non-human agency, possess the capacity to reassert their presence and role through their natural cycle of vegetation. Following Bergland's definition of the uncanny as 'the unsettled, the not-yet-colonized, the unsuccessfully colonized, or the decolonized',¹⁹ these fruit orchards, the traces of previous inhabitants that are only recognised by the current ones for their pragmatic value, become spectral. Their incessant returns, rooted in their connection with the natural cycle, enable them to haunt. As Derrida suggests in his hauntology,²⁰ an alternative ontology that reveals the senses denied existence in mainstream philosophy, the primary sign of ghostliness is the ability of a ghost to reappear and remind of its existence. In this sense, we can also conceive of material remains preserved in the physical environment after the disappearance of humans as ghosts.²¹ Therefore, the actions performed by them, namely haunting, are a persistent repetition that draws attention to something, a manifestation.²² It is intertwined with the cyclical nature of vegetation. Such fruit orchards are thus also haunted places, i.e. places that emerge from rapid economic and social changes over a short time: the abandonment of the *Vorwerks* was the result of such a swift development and change in farming strategies, related to collectivisation in post-1945 Poland. However, the ghosts were not culturally constructed. On the contrary, their ghostly status is only perceived at specific moments, either when they produce fruits that can be harvested, or when they are bare during winter and clearly visible in the landscape.

By examining these two case studies, I elucidated the process by which vegetation was excluded from cultural signs of German presence and how the interplay of presence and absence of previous inhabitants is today reflected in the cultural landscape of post-displacement Central Pomerania. The vegetation left behind outlived the people who planted the seeds to become trees, and in some cases became a visible sign of the absence of these people, as perceived by the new inhabitants. It is especially visible in designating the *Vorwerks* and fruit alleys as belonging to no-one now, in contrast to the past. Hence, their 'former Germanness' is evoked.

The fruit orchard can be regarded as a sign of the former presence of a given community that is tangible in the environment. The fruit orchard is not

19. Renée L. Bergland, *The National Uncanny: Indian Ghosts and American Subjects* (UPNE, 2000), p. ii.

20. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2012).

21. Yael Navaro, *The Make-Believe Space: Affective Geography in a Postwar Polity* (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2012).

22. Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis - London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), p. xvi.

a natural phenomenon, but a product of human intervention and cultivation. It reflects the choices, preferences, knowledge and skills of the people who planted and maintained it. It also reveals the interactions and relationships between human and natural worlds, such as adaptation to climate, soil and water conditions, the use of natural resources for food and other purposes, and the impact of human activities on the environment. The fruit orchard is therefore a cultural landscape that embodies the values, beliefs and traditions of a community. In sum, the analysis of orchards left behind is a valuable source for studying mass transfers of people. By applying hauntology, we can see how the present is haunted by the past, but also by the future, in a multitemporal entanglement in post-displacement regions of Slavic Central Europe and beyond.

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