



Living with Echoes of the Past: Exploring “Former Germanness” in Wrocław and Szczecin

Anna Kurpiel, Katarzyna Maniak, *Porządek rzeczy: Relacje z przedwojennymi przedmiotami na Ziemiach Zachodnich (przypadek Wrocławia i Szczecina)*, photographs by Łukasz Skąpski, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Wydawnictwo Akademii Sztuki w Szczecinie, 2023, 304 pp.

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Abstract

This article is a review of the book *Porządek rzeczy: Relacje z przedwojennymi przedmiotami na Ziemiach Zachodnich (przypadek Wrocławia i Szczecina)* [The Order of Things: Relationships with Prewar Objects in the Western Territories of Poland: The Case Studies of Wrocław and Szczecin] by Anna Kurpiel and Katarzyna Maniak, photographs by Łukasz Skąpski, published in 2023 by Jagiellonian University Press and the Academy of Art in Szczecin; ISBN: 978-83-233-5257-0, 978-83-63072-98-8.

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Living with the "formerly German", i.e. with what exactly? This is not the only question that may come to mind when we think of "former Germanness". There are others, for example: How to do it? Is "formerly German" genetically related to "German"? Anna Kurpiel and Katarzyna Maniak have devoted their book to such questions. Entitled *Porządek rzeczy: Relacje z przedwojennymi przedmiotami na Ziemiach Zachodnich (przypadek Wrocławia i Szczecina)* [The Order of Things: Relationships with Prewar Objects in the Western Territories of Poland: The Case Studies of Wrocław and Szczecin], it is an innovative study: very few authors have addressed such a sensitive topic as the use of "prewar, 'German' heritage and the prolonged acts of its acquisition and possession" (Kurpiel & Maniak, 2023, p. 13) from an ethnographic perspective.¹ The authors of *Porządek rzeczy* argue that if we want to study material heritage and especially its use, ethnographic research is the most sensible and, in my opinion as well, also the most effective method. The appreciation of such research is also evidenced by the fact that the book received the 2024 Antoni Kalina Award from the Polish Folklore Society in the category of books of particular importance to ethnology and socio-cultural anthropology.

Kurpiel and Maniak inquired about the objects in question during interviews with their owners, which were held in 2019–2020,² mainly in the prewar districts of Wrocław and Szczecin, in the homes of pre-arranged interviewees or just knocking on doors. The research was also conducted on the basis of existing materials (press, literature, artworks, advertisements on marketplace platforms and social media).

The authors did not intend simply to create a list of objects associated with the postwar changes and population resettlement. As they point out, they sought to ask "questions about what things do and what people do with them, what imaginings accompany these connections, and what emotions they generate" (Kurpiel & Maniak, 2023, p. 24). From this starting point, they primarily focused on the relationships between people and objects. However, they chose to present only relationships with objects that "have survived, are owned, in use, and in complex ways belong to the order of everyday life" (Kurpiel & Maniak, 2023, p. 30). The authors thus aim to focus on the way objects are used and appropriated, deliberately excluding from their research those that were destroyed or eliminated due to their association with "Germanness". They outline the relationship that may exist between humans and vegetation (calling it "the past inscribed in plants") only very briefly because "humans are not the dominant figure in the described relationships" (Kurpiel & Maniak, 2023, pp. 25–26). Still, they share Małgorzata Praczyk's view on "the interdependence between people and other elements of the natural environment" (Praczyk, 2018, p. 23), according to which vegetation fulfills various functions in human life. The authors do not put the human being at the center of their research but move

1 Unless otherwise indicated, quotations have been translated by the author of this article.

2 The authors write that they conducted their research mostly during the winter, as their research plans for the spring and summer were interrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic (Kurpiel & Maniak, 2023, p. 16).

them to the background, treating them as one of many elements of the world. Human beings are placed on a par with objects or vegetation, allowing relationships to be established between them. In the authors' view, objects are not passive: they have agency and the ability to interact with people.

The "Recovered Territories" and "Formerly German"

Before going on to discuss further issues from the book, it is important to highlight two terms which are central to the entire narrative. Although the "Recovered Territories" is a term firmly rooted in people's minds, it is nevertheless fragile, subject to censorship and much debate. Kurpiel and Maniak point out that narratives surrounding the "Recovered Territories" (e.g. Browarny, 2019; Ćwiek-Rogalska, 2018; Czapliński, 2016; Mikołajczak, 2012; Praczyk, 2018; Siewior, 2018b; Zybura, 2007) reveal a "meta-reflection on the fragmentary nature of knowledge, the emptiness that still needs to be filled" (Kurpiel & Maniak, 2023, p. 41).

Terms used with reference to the German territories incorporated into Poland in 1945 (based on the Potsdam Agreement) are complicated. Throughout this review, I decided to use the term "Recovered Territories" (written in quotation marks), although I am aware of all its limitations and the ongoing debate surrounding it (Praczyk, 2018; Siewior, 2018a; Traba, 2017). Following Praczyk, I also value the "conglomerate of symbolic meanings" embedded in this term, "from propagandistic, through identity-forming and foundational, to those often ideologically neutralized today, functioning as a mental shortcut" (Praczyk, 2018, pp. 21–22). The authors of the book under review chose to use the same term, interchangeably with the "territories annexed to Poland after World War II", "Western and Northern Territories", and "Western Territories".

Considering that the book is devoted to using and establishing a relationship with "formerly German", it is also necessary to write a few words about what this actually is. The subject of "formerly German" is often colloquially associated with material remnants of what has passed or what was left behind by the Germans, without much clarity on what to do with it or what it exactly means. For example, Dagmara Chylińska, researcher in regional and tourism geography at the University of Wrocław, discusses formerly German cemeteries as a type of difficult heritage (Chylińska, 2007); Grzegorz Szturo, librarian at the Nicolaus Copernicus University Library in Toruń, writes about how formerly German archival resources were disrespected by the new inhabitants and exposed to destruction (Szturo, 2013); Arkadiusz Kalin, literary studies scholar and professor at the Jacob of Paradies University in Gorzów Wielkopolski, reflects on the term "formerly German" itself,³ claiming that its cultural history has had several phases, and that it can now even be seen as a component

3 The same question was raised, albeit from a sociological perspective, by Kamilla Biskupska (2024).

of the culture of the "Recovered Territories" (Kalin, 2023). Last but not least, Rafał Żytyniec, cultural studies scholar and director of the Historical Museum in Ełk, in a conversation with the author of the book *Poniemieckie* [Post-German], Karolina Kuszyk (2019), herself a translator, journalist, and reporter, discusses what is included in the "post-German"⁴ imaginary, which Kuszyk calls "ours" (Żytyniec, 2023). Kuszyk talks about how she collected various pieces of information and imagery (including funny stories, memes, and forum posts) which, according to her, create the various faces of the above-mentioned "post-German" imaginary. However, few works focus on "formerly German" objects that are still used, owned, valued, and even form relationships with their owners (e.g. Zborowska, 2019, who focuses on the history of formerly German objects).

Before moving on, I want to explain how the authors of the book understand the concept of "Germanness". For them, it is a "socio-cultural construct and a figure of collective imagination which, in relation to the western and northern territories after the end of World War II, took the form of 'former Germanness'" (Kurpiel & Maniak, 2023, p. 27), referencing a statement by Andrzej Zawada (2015). In other words, it is the collective understanding of any legacy left by the German population in the "Recovered Territories" after 1945 which was taken over by the new inhabitants and referred to as "formerly German" on a daily basis.

During their research, the authors observed that this characteristic, i.e. being "formerly German", could be associated both with something positive and of high quality, as well as something foreign or old (Kurpiel & Maniak, 2023, pp. 81–82). The appropriation of "formerly German" objects by subsequent owners is sometimes understood as "compensation and reparation for the losses suffered, and the deserved punishment suffered by the Germans" (Kurpiel & Maniak, 2023, p. 85). There is thus a noticeable element of both literal and symbolic violence inscribed in those objects, as in the case of the demolition of monuments associated with Germanness or the renaming of streets. Since "formerly German" is a conventional term, the authors alternate between writing it in quotation marks or omitting them altogether, but the style of writing does not alter their interpretation of the term. Therefore, I have also chosen to write about it in the same manner.

The Power of Objects: Why *Porządek rzeczy* Matters

Porządek rzeczy, authored by cultural anthropologist and ethnologist Anna Kurpiel and cultural anthropologist Katarzyna Maniak, and published in 2023 by Jagiellonian University Press, is devoted to the question of using and relating to objects. The book presents the issue of "formerly German" from a completely different perspective. On the main

4 This translation is used by Kuszyk.

title page, another co-author is listed – multimedia artist, educator, and scholar Łukasz Skąpski, affiliated with the Academy of Art in Szczecin, who took the photographs featured in the book.

The book can be divided into two parts – textual and photographic. The first, ethnographic part consists of acknowledgments, an introduction, seven chapters, and a conclusion. The list of chapters is as follows:⁵ “Western Territories – Contexts”, “Integrity of Place and Things”, “Resource and Burden”, “Formerly German”, “Co-Existence”, “Adopted Heritage”, and “The Order of Things”. In the second, photographic part, Skąpski briefly describes his artistic projects, followed by their visual presentation entitled “Things: A Green Square on a Green Background”. It should be noted that the textual part contains only a few photos. The vast majority are placed in the section on Skąpski’s projects, where, among other images, one can find several photographs of the objects described in the textual part. The book also includes a bibliography, a list of selected interviewees, the authors’ biographical notes, and an English summary.

The authors clearly outline their research methodology, which in this case is no small task. They describe, among other things, how they defined the research area, selected the group of interviewees, and conducted and analyzed the interviews. They also mention where in the homes the objects were found during their meetings with interviewees, and how these items were presented by the owners. In a separate section, the authors clearly present the operationalization of terms and explain the key concepts used in the book.

To explore the topic of formerly German objects, Kurpiel and Maniak chose to focus on two voivodship cities – Wrocław (formerly German Breslau) and Szczecin (formerly German Stettin). They explain that their choice was based on the criterion of these lands being annexed to Poland in 1945, as well as the specific character of both cities. Szczecin is a port city with working-class and shipyard traditions; it is an important urban center with social and economic ties to Berlin. In turn, Wrocław is an academic center and, most notably, “the largest city of the so-called western and northern territories” (Kurpiel & Maniak, 2023, p. 13). The authors point out that they observe both common and distinct features of the two cities – such as the complete population exchange in the postwar period or similar patterns of attitudes, practices, and imaginings highlighted in the book – but they do not plan to compare them. Unfortunately, they do not explain their reasoning for this decision. The choice of Wrocław and Szczecin is thoughtful, as the authors note many commonalities between them. However, it should be acknowledged that the cities in question also have different histories and characteristics, which is why it would be worthwhile to examine how these differences influence the treatment of formerly German objects in both cases. In my opinion, the work would greatly benefit if the objects were presented as case studies and then compared, as this would provide a more comprehensive

⁵ This translation of chapter titles is provided in the English summary of the book (Kurpiel & Maniak, 2023, pp. 174–178).

perspective on the issue. Also, comparative analysis makes it possible to discover phenomena and connections which were previously unnoticed (Hroch, 2022).

I was intrigued by the authors' reference to the theory of "in-between-ness of things" by British anthropologist Paul Basu and its confirmation through the analysis of collected material. The authors demonstrate that objects are ambiguous in description, exist within a network of relationships, and have agency: they form connections with their owners, who change over time. These objects occupy an in-between space – "between the past and the future, Germany and Poland, the real and the imagined" (Kurpiel & Maniak, 2023, pp. 98–99). They are therefore difficult to classify: they are neither only German nor only Polish because each group has left their imprint on them and no single owner can be identified. The objects hover between the past and the future, and they are elusive also because they are attributed both real and imagined characteristics.

The authors reflect on the emotions such objects generate and whether their new owners become accustomed to them, grow attached to them, and whether this process leads to the blurring of the often difficult stories carried by the objects. In their analysis of individual objects, the scholars observe that during the process of acquisition, the focus shifts "from ownership to the concepts of possession and appropriation" (Kurpiel & Maniak, 2023, p. 28). They further describe the act of appropriation – making the object one's own – a process that can be ambivalent, carrying both positive associations and ethical questions.

What particularly caught my attention was the chapter "Adopted Heritage" (pp. 101–118), where the authors highlight the shared role of objects as "liaison" and their common feature of "having belonged to someone before" (Kurpiel & Maniak, 2023, p. 104). Unfortunately, the scholars do not indicate what connection and between whom they have in mind. They describe the process of objects being taken over by new owners, who often refer to it as "adoption" or "adaptation". They touch on the topic of attributing value to objects, using the example of the Orzechowski family's deep appreciation for a nut grinder, tied to their family tradition of making nut cake (Pol. *orzechownik*, which alludes to the name of the family), a cake made of layered honeyed dough, pudding, caramel, and a layer of nuts. The authors go on to describe how new owners either elevate or degrade the value of objects through the process of adoption, and they emphasize the role of generational change in this context. One example is the story of a tea set inherited from a "beloved aunt" (Kurpiel & Maniak, 2023, p. 116) that lost its sentimental value once it was discovered that it bore German stamps. For the owner, the tea set was connected to a close relative, but when she realized it had been taken from Germans by settlers in the "Recovered Territories", her emotional attachment faded. She was aware of the sometimes violent and brutal nature of those acts of appropriation.

Proceeding with the discussion of the book, what sometimes comes to the fore is the occasional lack of specifics. For example, on page 35, in footnote 17, we read about Mrs. Janina, a woman displaced from the East, who struggled with assimilation "in an unfamiliar landscape", and her husband, who was more culturally familiar with the area because he came

from Poznań. This footnote refers to the destruction of objects such as agricultural equipment due to lack of knowledge of their purpose and handling. Unfortunately, the authors do not elaborate on the specific assimilation challenges, leaving the reader with unanswered questions as to exactly what problems the eastern resettlers faced in handling agricultural equipment compared to the residents of Poznań. A similar case can be found on page 21, in footnote 10, where the authors quote Skąpski at work alongside a statement from someone named Krzysztof. However, this person is not described in any way, leaving the reader to guess whether Krzysztof is an interviewee, another researcher, or someone else entirely.

As I mentioned above, the book consists of seven chapters, each containing several sections. The graphic design of divisions is quite unusual: each section begins on a new page, and the next chapter is often pushed even further down, which means that there is a large gap between the section title and the text. This design has an artistic touch to it but, in my opinion, makes the book somewhat difficult to read. There is a considerable amount of blank space between one section and the next. At times, when I was reading, I felt that a given topic was not yet finished, but I was forced to turn the page without knowing whether it was going to continue. The resulting break in the text created a sense of incompleteness, almost as if a thought had been abruptly cut off. Therefore, this division of the text somewhat hindered my ability to follow the authors' thoughts and transition smoothly to the next topic. One example is the gap between two sections in the third chapter, "Resource and Burden", where the discussion of "formerly German" spaces as problematic areas that new tenants must navigate abruptly jumps to the valuation of objects in the section "'Formerly German' for Sale". Another such case is the gap between the second and third sections in the sixth chapter, "Adopted Heritage", where the authors describe various museum practices and, again, transition to describing the "integration [of objects] into the family" without drawing conclusions, offering a commentary, or providing interpretation.

Also, it is not entirely clear to me why the authors repeat the same conclusions in different parts of the book. For instance, in the section "The Image of the 'German' and Mutual Relations" (Kurpiel & Maniak, 2023, pp. 46–48), they discuss changes in the attitude of new owners toward Germans and "formerly German" objects, perceived as high-quality and reliable items. However, a similar passage appears a few dozen pages later in the chapter "Formerly German" (Kurpiel & Maniak, 2023, pp. 79–89). While it is clear that these issues are related, I wonder why the authors did not decide to consolidate these topics into one larger chapter and discuss them in their entirety. This would have helped organize their thoughts and avoid redundancy. The same applies to descriptions of particular objects. As I mentioned above, one way to organize the content might have been to apply the case study method, which would allow the authors to classify particular objects and analyze them thoroughly without scattering the discussion throughout the book. The book's title, *The Order of Things*, suggests and invites precisely this type of ordering.

Visualizing Everyday Life of Former Germanness, but Is It Only This?

The graphic design of the book is thoughtful, creative, and thought-provoking. One great example is the book's cover, where the title is partially obscured by a photo of a wooden eagle with outstretched wings on a wardrobe. To see the full title, the reader has to look underneath: the photo is only glued in one spot. This idea forces the reader to engage and make an effort to uncover something more. In my opinion, it is very clever and connects well to the book's theme. The authors had to uncover the stories of formerly German objects, often searching beneath the surface of other objects, both symbolically and literally. Similarly, the reader can, to an extent, step into the role of a searcher. Although such attached photos appear a number of times throughout various chapters, I did not notice a clear pattern. Perhaps the authors simply wanted to show that, just like in research, sometimes one makes discoveries, while at other times, despite expectations and assumptions, nothing is found.

Continuing with the graphic aspects of the book, it should be noted that the photos included are artistic; the photographer had a clear vision for the images. In the textual part, there are only four photos, and the rest are placed in the part devoted to Skąpski's photographic project mentioned above: "Things: A Green Square on a Green Background". While reading the book, I sometimes felt that photos would have helped me better imagine the objects being discussed. In several instances, there is a footnote referencing a specific photo in Skąpski's presentation and encouraging the reader to look at it. On the one hand, this strategy could stimulate the reader's imagination and, as the authors note, avoid imposing the illustrative function on the photos (Kurpiel & Maniak, 2023, p. 22). On the other hand, in this case, the descriptions of the objects would need to be more detailed. In my opinion, it would have been beneficial to include more photographs of the discussed objects in the first part of the book, which I refer to as the textual part. This would allow the reader to immerse themselves more deeply in the subject matter, as the content would be conveyed not only through text but also through images. The way it looks, the scholarly part and the artistic part appear almost like two separate components.

I also find it somewhat unclear why over a hundred pages are devoted to photographs from various projects by Skąpski, including earlier ones, which are not directly connected to the project carried out with Kurpiel and Maniak. The photographer, in his essay at the end of the book, points out that the visual material he presents is "a kind of montage of various components of reality" from his field research and captures "the reality of two cities, once German and now Polish" (Kurpiel & Maniak, 2023, p. 143). This, however, still fails to convince me about the idea of devoting such a large portion of the book only to photos. The authors emphasize that they aimed to combine ethnographic research

with art, which, according to them and the cited works, is becoming increasingly common in academic publications (e.g. Leavy, 2009; Sansi, 2015; Schneider, 2020). They also wanted to "give the reader an opportunity to individually discover mutual connections" between the text and the photos (Kurpiel & Maniak, 2023, p. 22). However, a major downside is that the photographs are not arranged according to the artist's projects; they are placed one after another and, unfortunately, appear without any captions. The projects are only briefly described in the introduction by Skąpski himself, and the photos follow in sequence, as if in an album. Thus, the reader is left to guess the authors' intended message and the connection between the images and the textual part of the book. Skąpski also describes how he became part of the team working on the current project. However, it seems that the researchers and Skąpski diverged slightly in their visions and assumptions, each going, to an extent, in their own direction. The authors mention in a footnote that they plan a joint exhibition, which is intended to "transcend the textual model of presenting research findings" (Kurpiel & Maniak, 2023, p. 22). It is unfortunate that this approach was not fully realized in the book and then expanded upon in the exhibition.

Curating Memories: The Exhibition

Considering that the authors reflect on the politics of emotion within heritage studies, particularly as managed by public institutions like museums, it is not surprising that, as part of the project, they also prepared an exhibition. In the book, they observe the practice of valuing and promoting certain emotions in museums, while discrediting and restricting others. They refer to an exhibition about the residents of Szczecin, which portrayed them as "ordinary people", encouraging visitors to recognize shared experiences and, through empathy, creating a sense of heritage that is also "ours" (Kurpiel & Maniak, 2023, p. 113).

The exhibition promised by the authors was held at the Ethnographic Museum in Wrocław between 17 February and 25 August 2024. Entitled *Rzeczy przysposobione* [Adopted Objects], it presented some of the objects discussed in the book, including a nut grinder, a figurine of three pigs, a paperweight, and a photograph embedded in glass. The exhibits were assigned to key concepts from the book, such as adoption, integrity, hauntology, the in-between-ness of things, and the agency of objects. The exhibition was relatively small, but the authors successfully conveyed the essence of their book in a concise manner. Interestingly, almost all the objects on display were from Wrocław. It is unclear whether this resulted from the authors' decision to include only items from the city where the exhibition was held, or there were other factors at play. The descriptions of individual exhibits were not always logically arranged, and it was sometimes difficult to match the correct plaque with the correct object. For example, there were two tables – one by the wall and the other in the center of the room – yet their corresponding

description plaques were positioned so close together that it was hard to tell which plaque described which object.

As I visited the exhibition, I found myself thinking again about what the authors write regarding the "Recovered Territories" and the need for further research. On one wall of the exhibition room there was a photograph of doors – some of them older, some newer – and the image seemed to extend the space, make the room feel larger. This evoked in me a sense of mystery and a desire to discover what was behind those doors. I am unsure if this was the authors' intention, but I see it as a symbol of the unfinished nature of the topic, an invitation for further research, and the possibility of new interpretations or conclusions.

Reflections and Implications

Personally, the key takeaway for me is the demonstration that objects can be agentive and form relationships with their owners. Such a statement about "formerly German" objects sheds a completely different light on them: they cease to be inanimate and begin interacting with their owners. This notion also shows that although these objects were left behind by their original owners and taken over by new ones, they still retain elements of their originality – they are different. They affect their new owners in unique ways and are often treated ambivalently: on the one hand, they are valued and considered personal possessions, but on the other hand, they are viewed as inferior or foreign. This reflects the "in-between-ness of things", being somewhere in between and therefore difficult to categorize or describe. Similarly, in my own research on "formerly German" Protestant objects and sacred sites, it is often difficult to define their character, as they have many intertwined layers, making it impossible to provide a straightforward description. For example, a former German Protestant church is now owned and used by the Roman Catholic Church in Poland. "Formerly German" objects, then, exist in a liminal space – neither fully German nor entirely Polish – they serve as connectors between the old and new owners, the old and new worlds, while simultaneously narrating stories of both.

As previously noted, the book stands out for its innovative ethnographic approach. However, this is only one of its significant strengths. The authors demonstrate high competence and a depth of methodological expertise, showcasing a sophisticated research toolkit that serves as a foundation for this complex analysis. What is equally important in the case of this kind of research, they think creatively and are open to listening to the field, i.e. going where it takes us as ethnographers. Investigating post-displacement cities such as Wrocław and Szczecin, which present distinct challenges in terms of accessibility and complexity, the authors succeed in uncovering critical insights into processes of adjustment, adaptation and adoption, but also into the integrity, class aspects, and

"in-between-ness" of material heritage. In my review, I have mentioned a few shortcomings and challenges that I encountered while reading this book. Sometimes these are minor details, but I feel that addressing them would have brought the book to perfection. Still, I find it inspiring, as the theme of "formerly German" remains an underexplored topic in Polish academic literature. The authors have successfully highlighted the need for further research while introducing an innovative approach to analyzing this issue and offering intriguing conclusions.

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Życie z echem przeszłości. Badanie „poniemieckości” we Wrocławiu i Szczecinie

**Anna Kurpiel, Katarzyna Maniak, *Porządek rzeczy*.
Relacje z przedwojennymi przedmiotami na Ziemiach Zachodnich
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Abstrakt

Artykuł jest recenzją książki *Porządek rzeczy. Relacje z przedwojennymi przedmiotami na Ziemiach Zachodnich (przypadek Wrocławia i Szczecina)* autorstwa Anny Kurpiel i Katarzyny Maniak, z fotografiami Łukasza Skąpskiego, wydanej przez Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego i Wydawnictwo Akademii Sztuki w Szczecinie, 2023; ISBN: 978-83-233-5257-0, 978-83-63072-98-8.

Słowa kluczowe: „Ziemie Odzyskane”; poniemieckość; materialność; Wrocław; Szczecin; tereny post-przesiedleniowe

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