

Sympathy for the Unfamiliar Ghosts

Why did Polish Settlers Care for Tombs of Ancestors of Expelled Germans?

Karolina Ćwiek-Rogalska | ORCID: 000-0001-6142-5609

Associate Professor, Institute of Slavic Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences

karolina.cwiek-rogalska@ispan.edu.pl

Acknowledgement

Funded by the European Union (ERC, Spectral Recycling, 101041946). Views and opinions expressed are, however, those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Council Executive Agency. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

Abstract

Although the scholarship to date has assumed that after the Second World War in central Europe, in regions where forced displacement took place, the new, mostly Slavic settlers neglected and destroyed German cemeteries left behind by the expellees, I argue that this process did not start in the first years after the war because of the relationships that the settlers established with chosen German dead. I explain why this particular deceased individual was chosen, focusing on how the care of their tomb temporarily established a form of spectral kinship. To do so, I focus on ethnographic materials, including interviews, gathered in central Pomerania, contemporary Poland, to see how these stories have been conveyed after 1989 and what impact post-socialist conditions had on them.

Keywords

hauntology – ghosts – cemeteries – post-war Poland – recovered territories

One man's ancestor is another man's ghost.

Wolf, 1974, p. 146

Ethnography of Spectral Kinship

I finally found Anna's house in a small village in Central Pomerania, in northern Poland, after getting lost several times. The village had been cut in half after 1945, when these regions

ceased to be part of Germany, and were incorporated into Poland, and both halves kept the same name. It was a nightmare to navigate, even with her guidance. I wanted to meet her to discuss the local German cemetery – the reason for my visit – as she was renowned for her dedication to preserving the site.

She welcomed me into her dining room. As we sat down, she began to tell me how she had uncovered the cemetery. “When I dug [it] up,” she said, “I often sat there and thought ... And they said, why did you dig us up, we were sleeping so well, so peacefully.” I realised then that she was speaking about the dead as if they were alive and present. She smiled at me softly, with a sense of connection to them. “And I say, you are to make a proper cemetery here. The village is decent and you can easily make a decent cemetery here.”

Anna’s actions represent a unique cultural practice related to kinship. Major political changes usually affect not just the economy but also cultural structures, including attitudes towards the dead (Verdery, 1999, pp. 126–7). Anna’s actions reflect these broader post-1989 shifts in Polish society, which was for a long time shaped by a historical context where the official discourse after 1945 portrayed Germans and Germanness as hostile and anti-Polish, deserving only erasure (Traba, 2022). The post-1989 discourse in Poland has not fully countered earlier propaganda and still reflects it to some extent, as seen in ongoing political topics like German reparations and the perception of Germany as a threat (Skórzyńska & Wachowiak, 2017; Węglińska, 2020). To this day, the question of the image of Germany persists in the Polish language (Rodziewicz, 2009), literature (Mikołajczak, 2016) and society, including among the inhabitants of the regions incorporated into Poland post-1945 (Wylegała, 2009). Building on my ethnographic material, I analyse bottom-up cultural practices related to the German dead in the formerly German territories, acquired and resettled by Poland in and after 1945, and dubbed by the post-war Polish authorities the “Recovered Territories”. These practices can be read within the framework of post-socialism, since they address conflicting legacies of socialism, understood as a pre-1989 period (cf. Aradau, 2024). But “post-socialist” is here not a mere period label, but rather an analytic lens enabling me to specify the mechanisms that 1989 unlocked for this region.

In 1945, Poland was shifted westwards, losing its pre-war eastern territories, now to be within the borders of the USSR, and gaining formerly German provinces in the west and north. German inhabitants were to be expelled, and new settlers, mostly of Slavic origin, were coming to take their places. Resettlement activities and advocating Poland’s expansion westward, were used to frame the reclamation of former German territories as a “recovery” of lost Polish lands. The Communist government used this narrative to address settlers’

emotional needs, portraying their efforts as reclaiming lands from Germans, who were collectively blamed for war-time atrocities. This in turn justified removing German cultural traces, including cemeteries, reinforcing the view of Germans as eternal adversaries and suggesting that German culture was a superficial layer easily replaced by an earlier Polish – or Slavic – heritage. More than 3,000 German cemeteries in regions incorporated into Poland ceased to exist (Trzaskowska, 2020, p. 126): they were treated either as a source of precious stone, sites to be reused for playgrounds and parks, or were heavily neglected (Ćwiek-Rogalska, 2024, pp. 342–50). This top-down approach, often emphasised in existing research (Linek, 2014), contrasts with the bottom-up cultural practices explored in this article, which reveal more nuanced interactions with the German dead and their legacies. Therefore, I argue that ethnographic research is essential for uncovering the underlying complexities and revealing the personal and social dimensions that are often obscured by dominant negative stereotypes.

I situate my research at the intersection of memory and post-socialist studies, drawing on Heonik Kwon's work on war ghosts in post-socialist Vietnam (Kwon, 2008). Kwon's study of the Vietnamese experience of the war dead demonstrates how ghosts remain vital to post-war historical imagination, sustained through inner bonds forged in ritual practice and actions taken to emancipate them from a rootless social condition. For Kwon, ghosts are historical entities believed to persist from the past (Kwon, 2008, p. 2) and become "partners of social actions" (p. 130) that enable their social status to be transformed. My research builds on this framework but complicates it by situating ghosts within the context of Central Pomerania, where new Polish inhabitants such as Anna, themselves with migratory backgrounds, form relationships with the local German ghosts. Unlike Kwon's Vietnamese case, where ghosts are integrated into enduring social relations, the German ghosts in Poland are incorporated only provisionally: they served commemorative needs until Polish dead began to be buried in the cemeteries. In this way, my study both supports Kwon's claim that ghosts illuminate broader questions of displacement and belonging, and complicates it by showing how ghosts in the case under scrutiny are entangled with material traces – tombstones and cemeteries, in which the bodies of the deceased and memories about them are embedded. Thus, my approach blends the spectral with the material, offering new insights into memory studies.

In the region, the collapse of the socialist regime brought profound shifts in heritage policy and property relations, as restitution and reprivatisation occurred (Gelpert, 1993; Kozminski, 1997; McNaughton, 2018) and state-owned assets were privatised (Maniak,

2024). It also enabled the pluralisation of public discourse, accompanied by the reclassification of heritage sites: contested narratives, previously silenced, began to enter museums and local institutions (Maniak & Kurpiel, 2023). Yet this was not an easy process at either the national or local level, and embracing the difficult past did not always translate into social acceptance (Michlic, 2002). Thus, I approach cemeteries not as static heritage “objects” but as lived social worlds, continually shaped through inhabitants’ practices, idioms and decisions – whether cleaning, praying, reburial, joking or avoidance. In reframing what is often treated as a top-down issue of state erasure, legal regimes and expert heritage, in this study I develop an ethnography of everyday care and neglect, tracing how care emerges or fails to emerge, by whom, and with what meanings, rather than presuming whether it ought to. By grounding post-socialism in these concrete transformations, I move beyond chronology to illuminate how structural changes reconfigured memory practices, cultural landscapes and the politics of belonging across the region.

What is Ghostly in Post-Displacement and Post-Socialist Societies

Ghosts, understood as material remnants left behind by previous societies – encompassing both objects and places – embody the uncertainty captured by the notion that “what comes next is anyone’s guess” (Verdery, 1996, p. 38), a perspective also characteristic of early post-socialist studies. In turn, the framework of ghosts highlights how the past continues to haunt the present, not always through explicit remembrance but through the discomfort: of unspoken or suppressed histories, neglected spaces and laws that are no longer in force.

Jacques Derrida’s notion of hauntology foregrounded ghosts as figures that disrupt linear temporality, insisting that unresolved pasts continue to shape the present, and one has to learn to live with ghosts, “learn spirits” (Derrida, 1994, p. xvii). For the French philosopher, ghosts are figures of “clarification with a specifically ethical and political potential” (del Pilar Blanco & Peeren, 2013, p. 7) and as such they demand responsibility for past injustices in the present. Building on this theoretical turn, social studies have increasingly explored haunting as a way to understand silenced histories and the politics of absence (Gordon, 2008).

As Martin Müller argues in his five-directional critique of post-socialism as a research concept, the term was coined “from a moment of improvisation in an underdetermined situation” (2019, p. 534). This anti-owl-of-Minerva scenario bears a striking resemblance to the condition of post-displacement regions – often resettled hastily and only theoretically grounded in predefined plans. Much like post-socialist societies emerged due to the sudden

fall of the regime, post-displacement societies in Central Europe emerged from a moment of expulsion and resettlement in the second half of the 1940s, yet this moment continues to have enduring ramifications, shaping them as they are today. However, as this example demonstrates, this does not necessarily emphasise “rupture over continuity” (p. 534). Continuity and rupture co-exist, as newcomers navigate the heritage of their predecessors – sometimes by erasing it, but often by incorporating it into their own narratives. This underscores how uneven knowledge production is an intrinsic aspect of post-displacement societies, shaped by factors such as limited German language skills, the discarding or loss of cultural knowledge, and state propaganda framing Poland as a nation founded on anti-German sentiment. This complexity reveals that, particularly in the case of divided Germany, the fall of socialism did not mark a clean break from the East-West division. Contrary to Müller’s assertion that the object of study is necessarily gone, I argue that the haunted places I examine become sites where past and present co-exist – where the past is not entirely absent but lingers, both present and absent, like a Derridean ghost, even though only to some time.

Therefore, the framework of ghosts can provide a theoretical lens for understanding memory in both post-displacement and post-socialist societies, as it captures the lingering and often ambivalent relationships these societies maintain with their pasts. This perspective broadens the focus from the singular national context of Poland to a more global phenomenon. First, I draw on Kwon’s approach, which demonstrates how the Vietnamese case challenges the outdated view of the post-socialist context as exclusively European. Second, I examine how traces of the German past – with the dual status of the German states, one socialist and one capitalist – were and continue to be treated in Poland, facilitating a dialogue. Central Pomerania, as part of the formerly German territories incorporated into Poland, became a laboratory for socialism shaped by post-displacement conditions, where social ties were supposedly weaker. What transpired here after the fall of socialism was, therefore, a unique and compelling case. The contradictions and unspoken narratives persisted long after political transformations, revealing the complex legacies of displacement and socialism.

To critically address the issue, I argue that a unique kinship has developed between the German dead and the Polish living since the early post-war period, and was strengthened post-1989, when new, more pluralistic and less anti-German narratives came to the fore. This relationship involves shifting the identity of the dead: while they remain German, they also become integrated into the social contexts of my interlocutors, creating a form of social solidarity (Kwon, 2008, pp. 100–1). However, this form of solidarity diverges from Kwon’s

notion of ghosts as “partners of social actions”, as it is not based on reciprocal interaction but is instead shaped by temporally limited commemorative needs – specifically, the desire to have a deceased figure to remember.

Thus, I follow my interlocutors’ stories to explore these research questions: How do personal experiences shape perceptions of the German dead, and why do they sometimes bypass official memory that generalises war atrocities as German guilt? To what extent does the kinship between Polish living and German dead persist? What role does materiality play in these cultural practices?

This analysis stems from my fieldwork in Central Pomerania’s southern region, Wałcz county, between 2022 and 2024. This area challenges the dominant narrative of “recovery” due to its complex history: it was Polish until the first partition of 1772, remained outside post-1918 Poland, and was incorporated as part of the “Recovered Territories” in 1945. As an historical and mental borderland, it intertwines traces of Germanness with pre-1772 Polish influences. The sixty interviews I collected reveal how new inhabitants connect with cemeteries left by previous, German inhabitants. These are the narratives that were conveyed to me almost eighty years after the resettlement process has started. However, due to the age of my interlocutors – they were either children or young adults who were subjected to resettlement or they were born to settler parents—they are often framed within the context of the early post-war period. All of them were recounted in Polish, but for the sake of this article, I translated them into English, being a double interpreter, both in linguistic and ethnographical sense (Kudela-Świątek, 2013). The main topic of the conducted ethnographic fieldwork was the German things left behind remained or remembered by the new inhabitants. In what follows, I focus on three cases where care for the German dead was central to our conversations. All interviews were anonymised, which means I use pseudonyms instead of real names.

The Unfamiliar Ghosts

The end of the Cold War marked a significant shift globally, including a renewed focus on collective memory, particularly concerning tragic events that impacted a large number of people. In the case of Poland, it was not only about addressing the historical atrocities committed there as part of the Bloodlands (Snyder, 2011), that is, the regions in Central and Eastern Europe where mass murders were committed before and during the Second World War, under the control of both Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, but also about the

violence perpetrated by Poles. The most prominent example was the Jedwabne pogrom and other outbursts of antisemitic violence (Tokarska-Bakir, 2019), but the topic of the post-war fate of millions of Germans came to the fore as well (Borodziej et al., 2000; Jankowiak, 2005).

It does not mean, however, that studies on the expulsion of Germans and the resettlement of the newly incorporated regions were absent pre-1989 (for example, Burszta & Jasiewicz, 1962; Kwilecki, 1970). Although this literature did not primarily address the question of violence, it provided an analysis of the societies in the newly incorporated regions, including attitudes towards the dead. Following 1989, the condition and treatment of former German cemeteries started to be examined to find out what they meant for the new post-war societies and to what means were they reused (Brensz, 2000; Stachowiak, 2015; Trzaskowska, 2020; Zawila, 2019). What was left understudied was how the presence of German dead was addressed. The fall of communism allowed discussions about the fate of these sites to enter mainstream discourse, which in turn influenced individuals' memories and attitudes, but still it encompassed mostly the liquidation or repurposing of the aboveground parts of these cemeteries.

The pre-war forms of commemoration, focused mostly on religious rites, in the state that was shifted into new borders, and where the number of victims, including the Polish Jews, exceeded 6 million, were not enough (Mazur, 2004; Michlic, 2011; Wolff-Powęska, 2005). In the case of the expelled German inhabitants who left behind more than 3,000 cemeteries in the "Recovered Territories" alone (Trzaskowska, 2020, p. 126), it was complicated not only by the dominant image of Germans as war criminals but also by additional factors. Since most of the expellees from the region were Protestant, and the approach to commemoration of the dead differs between Protestantism and Catholicism, the newcomers often perceived the Protestant German tombs as neglected (Ćwiek-Rogalska, 2014). The appearance of these graves did not meet the standards of care they were accustomed to, particularly in the context of Polish Roman Catholicism (Straczuk, 2021). Hence, the positionality of the living influenced their attitude to the dead: since the cemeteries seemed to the new inhabitants as neglected, they did not require further care. In other words, the dominant point of view was: if the families of the dead did not care, why should someone else care. It further served as an absolution for neglecting them.

At the same time, many interlocutors expressed the conviction that having a deceased person to commemorate at the site was important. It meant that the German ghosts underwent various processes of re-remembering. Similarly to the commemorative practices surrounding

the rapid and mass death during the First World War, which were meant to re-member the mutilated bodies of the fallen (Goebel, 2004), here, seeking the connection to the foreign dead was a means to re-remembering them; that is, reconstituting their presence and significance despite not knowing their exact life stories, based instead on other factors. To this end, re-remembering took various forms, often related to kinship, which I will now analyse through three selected case studies from my ethnographic material.

The White Lady in the Forest

When I visited her in the summer of 2022, Józefina was a woman in her eighties, living in one of the smaller villages of the county. She came to the region in 1945 as a child with her parents from today's Ukraine. We were sitting in her old-fashioned kitchen as Józefina began recounting her memories, starting with the story of the forced labour her family endured during the war. She described her experiences as a child: how she was beaten by the German foreman, how they prepared their food from scraps, and how they looked. "I don't like striped clothes. Because it's going to make me ..." she started but did not finish. This was a reference to the clothing worn by the forced labourers and prisoners.

Throughout the interview, Józefina emphasised her relationship with her parents, especially her father. He was the central figure in her memory and to that, she recalled his involvement with the case of the "white lady". When I asked her about any monuments that used to be in the village but are no longer there, she told me unexpectedly: "And there was a mortuary in the forest. I mean a chapel, these tombs were left. These cadavers. Embalmed." She seemed pleased by my reaction and when I asked her if it was possible to see them, she continued:

Sure it was! When my father was working in the forest, he said, since he liked me very much because I was curious and capable of doing anything ... [He said] I will take you there, to this chapel and I will show you. There were three coffins ... Yes, dear, and there were three coffins. Two were robbed. Nothing was left there. But one coffin was wooden and tin. And behind the tin, there was glass. That you could see who laid within. And a white lady laid within. We used to call her that. The white lady who died in 1906. Because father always used to say, children, this white lady, she lies there [and] she is as old as me. Because father, he was also born in 1906.

Contrary to the official discourse, which portrayed the German burials as traces of a hostile Germanisation process intended to erase Polish identity and culture of a region now to be “recovered” post-1945 (Ślaska, 1970), this case raises a different question; namely, how the source of knowledge and the inherited stories about what one used to see shaped the decision of settlers to express one’s feelings towards the unknown German dead.

In this case, it was the father who introduced my interviewee to the chapel where local nobles were buried and explained why it mattered to him. Unlike the belief that the Germanness of the region is only a thin layer that can be easily peeled off, the visual regime of this story reveals something else: the child sees the coffins, two of them already emptied of their content, and what is inside the third one appears to be a trace of the past. It is not identified as German, at any point Józefina did not mention anything that allows us to interpret the deceased as someone German. Instead, she uses the term “white lady”, situating the figure from the past in an almost fairy-tale-like interpretative framework.

The “white lady” is something unsettling by being different and at the same time deserving of care: as a trace of the past and because of a particular similarity to her discoverer, Józefina’s father, as they would have been the same age. Józefina continued:

And these coffins were in a chapel ... There they used to stand. And people, what did people do? People. People used axes to destroy them. She had gold all over her. She wore a white dress. When I saw her for the first time, she was all white. She had pearls, and this, and that. And I asked my dad, daddy, [can I take] one pearl, please. And he said, would you wear one that belongs to the corpse? But she was embalmed. And, dear, not once the drunkards took her outside when they wanted to scare someone, and they leaned her against a birch tree ... Yes, dear, they played such pranks with this white lady. And later on, my dad ... was hired by a priest to dig graves. ... And we gathered her remains and buried them in a village cemetery.

The child in this story is overwhelmed with delight, the corpse seems to be like a treasure that should be admired and evoke pleasant feelings; instead, it is used as a kind of scarecrow. Józefina pays considerable attention to the fine clothing and jewellery of the corpse, much in contrast to the poor conditions that she endured as a child of forced labourers, which she described at the beginning of her story.

But it is not possible to keep the lady on display. Even traditional methods of preserving the deceased failed: Józefina notes that the mausoleum reminded her of a chapel – a sacred space that should be confined but is no longer so after 1945. Ultimately, the only option is to bury the “white lady” beneath the soil. It seems to contradict the purpose of this figure as expressed by the narrator – more than three times Józefina has told me the body was embalmed, which may be evidence she did not think of her as a common deceased but as something else: a reminiscence of her father’s deeds, a particular divination of fate, a miracle of nature worth preserving and showing.

In this narrative, kinship is established through similarity: the “white lady” is of an age comparable to Józefina’s father. This similarity elevates both her father, a central figure in the narrator’s memory, and herself. Additionally, the fact that her family buried the corpse, enhances their status within the village contrary to the local riffraff. The narrative does not directly address Józefina’s family’s migratory experiences or their fate as forced labourers, but rather depicts the local settler community, distinguishing between those who were caring and those who were indifferent to what was extraordinary and worth preserving. The “white lady” is thus not primarily seen as German but as a local noble, sometimes more an object than a subject. Furthermore, the corpse evokes memories of Józefina’s father rather than Germans, and the kinship serves to honour the father rather than the “white lady” herself. When she is buried, the story concludes, and although Józefina indicated where her grave could be found, it was overgrown with weeds and self-sown plants when I visited. In contrast, the first tomb one encounters on entering the cemetery through the small gate belongs to Józefina’s father.

The Girl of the Same Name

When I met Sabina, a woman born just after the war already in the region to settler parents who came from one of the small towns in eastern Poland, she showed me the formerly German objects she still owns. While I was taking pictures of them, my direct question about the cemetery in a village where she used to live as a child – in the vicinity of the town where she is living now – prompted an answer:

No, no, it was just a post-German [*poniemiecki*] cemetery, oh yes, that’s what people call it, post-German. And later on, it was more and more overgrown with trees, but my mum, she had a soft spot for the place and ... she went to get mushrooms and stuff, so there was a trail somewhere [and]

there was a girl [buried], born the same year as she was, a girl, so she went there often, she used to say, oh, I went there, she even knew her name, because there were plaques with names, I prayed for her ... Oh, there was maybe a date when she was born, very similar, so she went to this one specific grave. And no one from the village messed up [the cemetery], took anything, it was only later, these guys who thought there was money in it, these guys who make the tombstones ... stonemasons.

Sabina's narrative reveals other aspects of the case of establishing the kinship between a living Pole and a dead German. The figure of a parent remains important, but unlike the first case, there is no direct transfer of knowledge of why the mother decided to take care of a particular dead. Sabina tries to reconstruct her mother's motives as she speaks, hence the pauses and hesitations. The contrast between the cemeteries that need no explanations (that is, Polish settlers' cemeteries) and the other ones (formerly German cemeteries) is evident. Sabina implies that the cemetery was abandoned not only by using a common adjective "post-German", which means "formerly German", but also by the way she depicts it: there is a trail to it, but it is hidden and it requires local insight to navigate this space. Then, a moment of recognition occurs: a girl with a name and a birth date similar to her mother's attracts the attention of the latter.

Yet at the beginning, Sabina was not sure why her mother cared for this particular grave, but in her narrative, there are two recurring motifs: her mother's frequent visits and prayers for the girl, and the villagers' respect for the cemetery. She acknowledged that the place was destroyed, but blamed nature – as the forest has overgrown the cemetery – and outsiders who used the tombs as building material. It remains in sharp contrast to the described intentions of the settlers, including the prominent figure of Sabina's mother who not only refrained from destroying anything but also built a relationship with one of the deceased. The kinship is therefore not established only in the post-war period, but it is also constructed by Sabina in her contemporary narrative, with a hesitant retrospective.

The meaning of the formerly German cemetery is further developed by Sabina. She recollected how she, as a child, longed for a tomb to visit, since her family had none in the newly resettled region. Paradoxically so, she envied her aunt who had a child buried in the village and who could visit the grave:

So each year on the All Saints, she went to the town to take care of the tomb, and we envied her, that she ... For us, as children, it was, I don't know ... These celebrations ... So we also made some wreaths, some flowers and decorated these [formerly German] tombs. It was our playground, but we didn't desecrate it.

The cemetery becomes a makeshift place of remembrance: it serves this purpose somewhat by chance and mostly for children who crave such a place, lured by the festive atmosphere around the graves, characteristic for All Saints' Day, one of the most celebrated and family-orientated holidays in Poland. In Sabina's case, the chosen German dead is not only re-remembered as an individual who can be commemorated with a prayer at the local cemetery, but the burial site also becomes a material space for remembrance where acts of commemoration can occur. However, this kinship is temporary. Once the Polish deceased occupy the place of a relative to be commemorated, the commemoration of the German dead ceases, and the cemetery fulfils its role as "post-German"; that is, it lacks living visitors for commemoration. Instead, it is plundered by stonemasons who Sabina presented as outsiders to the local community. This represents the final vestige of kinship binding settlers to the German ghosts: in Sabina's description, it becomes the last remnant of respect that is gradually fading away.

Sabina's narrative presents a reversal of Kwon's argument, which posits that ghost figures fill the "absence of memory (of someone) in the domain of kinship" (Kwon, 2008, p. 18). Although the settlers initially adopted a grave to tend to, indicating a temporary space for commemoration, the presence of the German ghost is fleeting. Once Polish deceased are commemorated, the German ghost no longer occupies this space, highlighting a situation where a place is temporarily used for commemoration, and the ghost itself does not become a permanent fixture within the kinship domain.

The Phantom Ancestry

The third case corresponds to this argument but shows it from yet another angle. This is narrated by Anna, whom I mentioned in the introduction. She was born to parents who were settlers, but not in the region where she currently resides. Before 1945, they lived in one of the villages in eastern Poland, and after the war, they moved to various places in the Recovered Territories due to her father's occupational duties. During the war, both her parents

were concentration camp prisoners, which severely influenced their lives and lives of their children.

Anna spent her adulthood in the town, but for the past twenty years, she has been living in the village where she maintains the former German cemetery. She was referred to me by another interviewee, so the topic of our conversation was clear from the outset. Towards the end of our first meeting, she describes her relationship with the German dead at the cemetery she tends to in this way:

But I get along with all of them, there. I chat with kids, and they say, hey, we didn't live long enough to tell you anything. But there is a 75-year-old Ernst who often gives me tips. And when I talk to him, I figure out things in my head ... And this cemetery is amazing because of the vibe it gives ... And it's like paradise, even though it's a graveyard.

She differentiates between the dead who are buried there, either because their tombstones are preserved, as in the case of Ernst, or due to the particular shape of the burial plot, such as the children who are interred in smaller plots. Without her guidance, it is difficult to understand the overall layout of the cemetery and to identify the locations of the graves. In her narrative, she acts as a guide not only for the cemetery but also for returning Germans whose family members are buried there. Hence, in this case, the transfer of knowledge is reversed. She recalled their first meeting as follows:

He [the descendant of the family to which the graveyard used to belong] was unaware of the location of the cemetery. For he came, I do not remember which year, he came here. And the situation was that when this cemetery was unearthed, in such massive, massive chaos, our forester ... calls me and says, your Germans have arrived ... And I ran there. And there he stood, this Johann, surrounded by his relatives ... And we both were speechless. He was swayed by all the enormous emotion, and so was I.

The particular kind of kinship is formed twofold. First, Johann, the German who arrives at the resting place of his family, is referred to by the locals as “Anna’s German”, akin to the deceased she tends to at the cemetery. Furthermore, in the image conveyed by Anna, it is not entirely clear whether Johann being “surrounded by his relatives” refers to living kin or the

dead buried at the cemetery. Only later does she clarify that Johann came with his family to show them the site of his childhood. Consequently, the boundary between the living and the dead becomes blurred, and the narrative takes on the quality of a ghost story, as it intertwines the physical presence of Johann with the spectral presence of the past.

Since the kinship with the German dead was established not after the war, but specifically after 1989 and continues to this day, I asked Anna directly why she came to care for this place. As she explained:

Perhaps ... I cannot fathom why I tend to this cemetery. Could it be that the Germans spared me the expense of the burials, for they burnt my kin in Auschwitz? ... Yet there is a longing deep within a person to have a family cemetery. And what does it matter, are they German or are they Polish? A cemetery is a cemetery, is it not? People are always people.

Anna's uncertainty about her motivation to care for the cemetery, embedded within a bitter joke, reflects a personal struggle to reconcile historical trauma with present actions. Despite her family being persecuted by Germans, Anna's dedication to the German dead reveals a complex emotional landscape where historical grievances co-exist with personal acts of commemoration. Her reference to the longing for a family cemetery underscores a desire for remembrance, similar to Sabina's narrative. In this context, the German dead are primarily local, as noted in Józefina's recollection of the "white lady", even though Anna, unlike Józefina, openly acknowledges that the cemetery is German. Thus, her kinship with the German dead is not static but is continuously negotiated through personal narratives that challenge and reframe traditional historical perspectives in a constant interplay between being serious and joking.

Re-Remembering the German Ghosts

The formerly German cemeteries constituted a separate feature in the post-displacement landscape of Central Pomerania. This feeling of being separate was stressed by Józefina when she gave me directions on how to find the new place where the "white lady" was buried. She finished the description by saying "and the rest, it's our cemetery"; what she meant was that the part of the place is now Polish burial ground. Similarly, when Anna was trying to explain how other inhabitants feel about her taking care of the cemetery, she replied with a story:

And once I came across such a comment, a man was coming from another village ... He looked at me weirdly and stopped: what do you do? I tell him: I have some social work to do, I have to clean up. I was drunk while I was riding a bike, and they caught me, I have social hours. I joked but he took it seriously. And he also commented that ... wow, lady, and they forced you to clean a post-German cemetery and not a Polish one? He waved his hand and went away.

Her joke highlights a prevalent view of maintaining such sites, reflecting attitudes that range from contempt to shame and disbelief. The assumption underlying the comment is that tending to a formerly German cemetery must either be a paid task or a form of forced labour. This underscores how broader societal narratives tend to overshadow the nuanced, personal motivations behind such acts of commemoration.

The ethnography of everyday care, including the spectral kinship, examined in this article challenges the generalisation that social ties in post-displacement regions were from the start weaker and that in these territories new inhabitants became especially receptive to the introduction of new ideological regimes, such as socialism. Additionally, if the weakening of social ties – including those with the dead – were indeed the case, it would suggest that not only mass population transfers and the emergence of new societies were responsible, but that this tendency developed gradually over time. The interviewees' narratives reveal that formerly German cemeteries are not seen as foreign, but rather as different, yet still local. This perception is shaped by the kinship established between the living and the dead, making the cemetery's nationality less relevant than its role as a place of commemoration or burial. The care shown by the interviewees and their acquaintances for these tombs suggests a sense of affinity with the dead and a desire to honour them as part of local history, at least for some time, until the Polish history of the region has developed or when it is blended with the German one, as proven by the post-1989 activities.

The post-1989 period opened up new mechanisms for bottom-up cultural practices. These include speaking about past experiences of the interviewees that remained unarticulated under socialism, as well as attempts to narrate the experiences of their parents and grandparents that could not be expressed under socialist conditions. Such practices disrupt linear chronology and allow memory to be reworked and translated anew. After 1989, what occurred was not simply the emergence of new memories, but a reframing of what had

happened in the post-war period. This process I term “re-remembering”. Some connections to the German dead are constructed retrospectively, under the influence of post-socialist conditions such as the absence of persecution and censorship, and the weakening of anti-German resentment.

There are several motifs common to all these narratives. First is the violent destruction of cemeteries, which was done because the remaining cemeteries started to be seen as magazines of materials. It was a twisted version of the myth of the “recovery”, since the recovery of the tombstones was often done against the law and morality. Józefina accused the local priest of coming into contact with black market stonemasons and destroying the graves without the knowledge of local inhabitants. Also, Sabina pointed to the stonemasons and lack of awareness, but describing it in passive voice, “some of them [the tombstones] were stolen, mostly”. Only Anna referred to the locals as ongoing destroyers. She mentioned that when the Germans visited and wanted to commemorate the cemetery, she told them: “do nothing because the locals will destroy it. Whatever you do. They will destroy, steal, and spoil. For fun, I don’t know why.” She was pointing to the fact that some of the local tombstones were reused for local needs: “Sometimes when we go for a walk, we take a path along the river, and on the path, you see black parts like a granite or what. So some of them [the tombstones] were used to make the path.” This contrasts with Sabina’s view that the tombstones were reused, but not by the locals. However, this is not necessarily contradictory: it may indicate that local strategies for dealing with the presence of German material culture varied.

In various cultural traditions, ghosts are typically categorised as either good or bad. However, the cases discussed here reveal that this binary can be more fluid, as unfamiliar ghosts can be cared for and even adopted in the absence of one’s own. Although the evidence I presented supports this view, this practice is not universal. While some German dead are integrated into local kinship networks, many were seen as simply occupying space, neither requiring care nor inciting fear. These ghosts are perceived as harmless, not because of the war’s desensitising effects or a decline in religiosity in Polish society – which especially in the early post-war period would be inadequate – but because cemeteries, regardless of their origin, have become normalised elements of the post-displacement landscape.

This further raises the question posed by Kwon, namely how do we align the identity of a place with its history of displacement (Kwon, 2008, p. 100). The emergence of new societies in the post-displacement regions, and the resettlement cultures, particularly in their attitudes towards German cemeteries, offers one answer. These dead became, if only for some

time, adopted, as people move beyond their genealogical roots towards a broader sense of belonging (pp. 101–2). Resettlement culture, therefore, transforms the tragic history of mass displacement into a new, often vital, narrative of dwelling. In this context, the German dead may be seen as provisional *genii locorum*, embodying the spirit of a place in transition. Finally, the act of re-remembrance in these cases highlights that the formation of kinship is ultimately more about the living than the dead. It reflects how communities adapt and recontextualise their histories, shaping a new relationship with the past and with the places they now inhabit.

Works Cited

- Aradau, C. (2024). Postsocialism in International Relations: Method and Critique. *Review of International Studies*, 50.
- Borodziej, W., Kraft, C., & Lemberg, H. (2000). *Niemcy w Polsce 1945–1950: Wybór dokumentów. T. 1, Władze i instytucje centralne. Województwo olsztyńskie*. Neriton.
- Brencz, A. (2000). Niemieckie wiejskie cmentarze jako element krajobrazu kulturowego środkowego Nadodrza. In Mazur, Z. (Ed.), *Wspólne dziedzictwo? Ze studiów nad stosunkiem do spuścizny kulturowej na Ziemiach Zachodnich i Północnych*. Instytut Zachodni, 287–305.
- Burszta, J., & Jasiewicz, Z. (1962). Zderzenie kultur na Ziemiach Zachodnich i Północnych w świetle materiałów ze wsi koszalińskich. *Polska Sztuka Ludowa*, 16(4), 197–220.
- Ćwiek-Rogalska, K. (2014). Ewangelicy i katolicy na dawnym pograniczu polsko-pruskim. *Przegląd Zachodni*, 3.
- Ćwiek-Rogalska, K. (2024). *Ziemie. Historie odzyskiwania i utraty*. Wydawnictwo Radio Naukowe.
- del Pilar Blanco, M., & Peeren, E. (Eds.). (2013). *The spectralities reader: Ghosts and haunting in contemporary cultural theory*. Bloomsbury.
- Derrida, J. (1994). *Specters of Marx* (P. Kamuf, Trans.). Routledge.
- Gelpern, A. (1993). Laws and politics of reprivatization in East-Central Europe: A comparison. *University of Pennsylvania Journal of International Law*, 14(3), 315–72.
- Goebel, S. (2004). Re-membered and re-mobilized: The “Sleeping Dead” in interwar Germany and Britain. *Journal of Contemporary History*, 39(4), 487–501.
- Gordon, A. F. (2008). *Ghostly matters: Haunting and the sociological imagination*. University of Minnesota Press.

- Jankowiak, S. (2005). *Wysiedlenie i emigracja ludności niemieckiej w polityce władz polskich w latach 1945–1970*. Instytut Pamięci Narodowej.
- Kozminski, A. K. (1997). Restitution of private property: Re-privatization in Central and Eastern Europe. *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 30(1), 95–106.
- Kudela-Świątek, W. (2013). *Odpamiętane: O historii mówionej na przykładzie narracji kazachstańskich Polaków o represjach na tle narodowościowym i religijnym*. Towarzystwo Autorów i Wydawców Prac Naukowych Universitas.
- Kwilecki, A. (1970). Wstęp. In *Ziemie Zachodnie w polskiej literaturze socjologicznej*. Instytut Zachodni, 9–41.
- Kwon, H. (2008). *Ghosts of war in Vietnam*. Cambridge University Press Cambridge.
- Linek, B. (2014). *Polityka antyniemiecka na Górnym Śląsku w latach 1945–1950*. Instytut Śląski.
- Maniak, K. (2024). Wysilek, efekt i ocenianie ciał. Reprezentacje pracy w Państwowych Gospodarstwach Rolnych. *LUD*, 108(1), 115–36.
- Maniak, K., & Kurpiel, A. (2023). *Porządek rzeczy: Relacje z przedwojennymi przedmiotami na Ziemiach Zachodnich (przypadek Wrocławia i Szczecina)*. Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego; Wydawnictwo Akademii Sztuki w Szczecinie.
- Mazur, Z. (2004). Upamiętnienie w latach 1945–1948 ofiar niemieckiej okupacji. *Przegląd Zachodni*, 4, 133–57.
- McNaughton, K. J. (2018). The problem of property reprivatization in Warsaw. *Loyola of Los Angeles International and Comparative Law Review*, 41(3), 431–67.
- Michlic, J. B. (2002). Coming to terms with the “dark past”: The Polish debate about the Jedwabne Massacre. *Analysis of Current Trends in Antisemitism*, 21, 1–43.
- Michlic, J. B. (2011). Pamiętanie dla upamiętnienia”, pamiętanie dla korzyści” i “pamiętanie, żeby zapomnieć”: Różne modele pamięci o Żydach i Zagładzie w postkomunistycznej Polsce. *Kultura i Społeczeństwo*, 55(4), 225–45.
- Mikołajczak, M. (2016). Do czego literaturze regionalnej potrzebny jest Niemiec? (na przykładzie twórczości lubuskiej). *Teksty Drugie. Teoria Literatury, Krytyka, Interpretacja*, 3, 251–72.
- Müller, M. (2019). Goodbye, postsocialism! *Europe-Asia Studies*, 71(4), 533–50.
- Rodziewicz, B. (2009). Póki świat światem, nie będzie Niemiec Polakowi bratem–językowy stereotyp Niemca (model archaiczny). *Annales Neophilologiarum*, 3, 129–35.
- Skórzyńska, I. & Wachowiak, A. (2017). Deconstructing the myth of the “Wicked German” in northern and western parts of Poland: Local approaches to cultural heritage. In C.

- Ghiță, E., & Dobre, C. F. (Eds.), *Quest for a suitable past: Myth and memory in Central and Eastern Europe*. CEU Press, 51–66.
- Snyder, T. (2011). *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin*. Random House.
- Stachowiak, A. (2015). Niemieckie cmentarze na Ziemiach Zachodnich jako miejsca niepamięci. *Prace Etnograficzne*, 43(2), 123–40.
- Straczuk, J. (2021). *The graveyard and the table: The Catholic-Orthodox borderland in Poland and Belarus*. Peter Lang International Academic Publishers.
- Ślaska, K. (1970). *Wakacje z Emilem*. Ludowa Spółdzielnia Wydawnicza.
- Tokarska-Bakir, J. (2019). *Pogrom Cries: Essays on Polish-Jewish History, 1939–1946*. Peter Lang International Academic Publishers.
- Traba, R. (2022). “*Wschodniopruskość*”. *Tożsamość regionalna i narodowa w kulturze politycznej Niemiec 1914–1933*. Muzeum Historyczne w Ełku.
- Trzaskowska, G. (2020). “Uwaga! Nie przysypywać pni drzew!”. Likwidacja wrocławskich cmentarzy w latach 60. i 70. oraz jej skutki. *Śląski Kwartalnik Historyczny Sobótka*, 75(1), 123–59.
- Verdery, K. (1996). *What was socialism, and what comes next?* Princeton University Press.
- Verdery, K. (1999). *The political lives of dead bodies*. Columbia University Press.
- Węglińska, A. (2020). The image of Germany in social media: Political and social aspects of public service media in Poland. *Central European Journal of Communication*, 13(25), 41–54.
- Wolf, A. P. (1974). *Religion and ritual in Chinese society*. Stanford University Press.
- Wolff-Powęska, A. (2005). Zwycięzcy i zwyciężeni. II wojna światowa w pamięci zbiorowej narodów. *Przegląd Zachodni*, 2.
- Wylegała, A. (2009). Obraz Niemca we wspomnieniach nowych mieszkańców niemieckiego miasta. *Kultura i Społeczeństwo*, 53(3), 45–66.
- Zawiła, M. (2019). *Dziedziczenie przedwojennych cmentarzy na terenach postmigracyjnych Polski*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego.