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1 FRACTURED CENTRAL-EASTERN EUROPE: THE WAR AND THE ANTHROPOLOGIST'S FIELDWORK

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Introduction

Two years have passed since the Russian military invasion of Ukraine. During this time, those who have witnessed this tragedy have experienced the full range of (unfortunately only negative) emotions – shock, numbness, fear, frustration, outrage, anger, disgust – several times. Many of us entered yet another year, 2024, devastated by the chaos and confused by the instability of the world in which we live and in which we will have to live in the future. This is a world in which wars in Europe, the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people, and the destruction of cities are, again, possible. As the editors rightly emphasize, in this volume's Introduction, the personal experiences of the authors in this collection cannot, of course, be compared with the anguish of people in Ukraine. For most Ukrainians, the events of the last two years are an existential struggle both on a personal level – the struggle for their own physical survival – and on a collective level – the struggle to preserve their state and their political nation and to assert their national identity.

This collection brings together authors who, although not directly affected by the war, have nevertheless suffered its consequences. Anthropologists and ethnographers who have spent decades of their lives studying Russia's northern communities now find themselves cut off from their field sites, their colleagues in Russia, and their field partners and collaborators, who have become friends over the years. The new "iron curtain" that increasingly separates Russia from the West forces all of us to ask ourselves, "What will I do next? What will happen to my job? What will happen to my friends in Russia?"

I doubt that anyone has already managed to work out a painless algorithm of actions for themselves. The international community of Northern specialists that encompasses both experts in northern studies and in anthropology of Russia continues to be at a loss, making modest attempts to draw a fragile line between scientific work and the political agenda that aggressively invades all aspects of our lives. We should not forget that our colleagues in Russia, many of whom do not support the Kremlin's aggressive policies, are experiencing a similar shock. Deprived of the opportunity to influence the actions of their leaders due to the gradual dismantling of democratic institutions over the past two decades, many of our colleagues in Russia are just as horrified to see what is happening.

I believe that all this makes it necessary to create a platform where representatives of the anthropological community can share their observations and concerns, and I hope that this collection can play the role of such a platform. And even if the message of many of the papers will be more akin to lamentations,[1] the sharing of personal experiences of the effects of war on academic work can lead to a productive discussion. It may help with further strategies for in-group solidarity and interaction with colleagues from other academic fields, with the non-scientific community, political leaders, and – what seems more important today – with our colleagues on the other side of national borders. Paraphrasing the title of this volume, my contribution is a humble plea not to allow the fragmentation of either the North or the scientific community, which has done too much in recent years to build connections with each other. This chapter represents my personal memories and experiences of living through the war while in the field. Although I am not a specialist of the North, of the Indigenous cultures of Siberia or the Russian Far East, I believe that colleagues will find familiar motifs in my experience that reflect their worries about the crumbling fabric of academic ties.

My fieldwork and experience before the war

In 2018, I enrolled in a master's program in the Department of Anthropology, European University at St. Petersburg. Despite all subsequent events, I am still convinced that it was one of the most fruitful decisions of my life. Here I obtained a profession for which I have a real passion, as well as studying under such outstanding Russian anthropologists and northern specialists as Nikolai Vakhtin, Evgenii Golovko, Elena Liarskaya, and many others. From the first steps of my master's program, I chose ethnic identity and activism among two minority communities in Poland, the Kashubians and the Silesians, as my research topic. Later, I continued working on this topic for my PhD at the European University, researching language processes in Kashubia and Upper Silesia.

The broad range of issues that interest me can be reduced to the specific character of the ethnic and national identity of the members of these minority communities who have traditionally resided in a vast zone of Polish-German cultural contact, as well as the trajectory of the linguistic shift that took place among Kashubians and Silesians in the second half of the twentieth century. The interest that still excites me as a researcher is that these Slavic minority communities of the borderland have played a very important role in shaping Poland's national borders throughout history. The Slavic identity and language practices of the Kashubians and Silesians, both real

1 By "lamentations" I mean the rhetorical technique described in Nancy Ries's *Russian Conversations* (Reese 2005:159), which involves the constant reliving of traumatic experiences with a therapeutic purpose.

and imagined, were perceived as a manifestation of Polish national identity and were often exploited as an argument legitimizing the incorporation of their regions into Poland after the two world wars. At the same time, this same Slavic linguistic practice was declared "not Polish enough," so that Kashubian and Silesian were consistently the object of 're-education,' particularly in the second half of the twentieth century.

My identity as a Russian postgraduate researcher who chose Polish studies (or, more precisely, Kashubian and Silesian studies) as a scientific direction was complicated by the peculiarities of my personal biography. I am a citizen of Ukraine, and I firmly identify with this state. Despite successful integration into the Russian academic community and several productive years in a scientific career in Russia, I have always felt like a foreigner there, realizing the temporariness of my stay in St. Petersburg. Three basic facets of my biography – a Ukrainian, a graduate student in a Russian institution, and a scholar in Polish studies – allowed me, from the first steps in my academic career, to engage and quickly switch between three different and often conflicting national contexts of Central-Eastern Europe. It seems to me that on all three sides I was perceived by my interlocutors as somewhat closely related, but never fully as "an insider." In my fieldwork, I took full advantage of this transitional status, sometimes becoming frightened if I felt too excessively integrated into one of my three roles.

Looking back over the previous few years of work and the strategies I chose to construct my status as a researcher in the field, it seems to me that I was exploiting that very "fragmentation" of my own image. When I introduced myself to the informants and colleagues with whom I crossed paths on the topic of my research, I did not state my own identity unless my interlocutors asked me directly. It was not a matter of consciously lying; rather, I sought to avoid having my identity unambiguously and rigidly categorized by people with whom I interacted. Perhaps this was also due to a certain set of prejudices with which I had already entered the profession of anthropologist. My first attempts at fieldwork in Kashubia and Silesia took place during the first semester at university. Consequently, lacking proper theoretical training, I often had to learn from my own mistakes.

One such prejudice was my belief in the need to be as invisible as possible to the community I was studying. It seemed to me that I should not draw too much attention to myself by bothering my informants with the need to understand my background or the complexities of my identity. I came to the field with the goal of studying their identities, their behaviors, and their cultural practices. It was only a little later, when discussing the specifics of fieldwork with colleagues at seminars at the European University, that I realized the interaction between a scholar and an informant during research is always a two-way process. But initially it seemed to me, as a master's student, that a scholar-anthropologist should hover over the community under study like a spirit, without distracting the people from their daily routine and their usual concerns, while carefully recording everything the researcher sees (and does not see!).

This explained my reluctance to provide detailed descriptions of my civil, family, and academic status, as well as my religious, cultural, and political beliefs in the field.

Right from my first fieldwork in Kashubia and Upper Silesia, which took place in the fall of 2018, my informants developed a firm image of me as a "Russian scholar" who was interested in Kashubian/Silesian culture and language. In many ways, this belief arose from my academic affiliation at the time. When people heard about the European University at St. Petersburg, saw my publications in Russian academic journals, or picked up my "eastern accent," this was enough for many of them to consider me Russian. At that moment, the status of "Russian researcher" did not hinder me in any way. Only much later, when communicating with informants with whom I had a long and close relationship, did I clarify by saying, "actually, I am Ukrainian, I just study at a Russian university."

At some point, I noticed that it was my prescribed "Russian identity" that provided a much more common and familiar cultural context for many people. Russia has historically been one of the most important and challenging cultural and political antagonists for Polish society. Many of my older informants vividly remember the experience of living in a communist, politically Moscow-dependent state, having studied Russian in school, or even having visited Russia. Although some of them did not hesitate to tell me that they considered themselves Russophobes, it was noticeable that the Russian context was familiar and understandable to them. When describing the legal status of the Kashubians, my activist informants often referred to Tatars, Bashkirs, Chuvashians, or other minorities in Russia. They tried to make the comparative context more understandable to a Russian researcher, who they presumed would be familiar with the status of many other communities in Central and Western Europe. When describing the difficulties of codifying the literary variant of the modern language of Upper Silesia, my informants, local writers and activists, readily drew parallels with Russia:

> I ... argue that linguists can codify a language only when there is literature in that language […] when there is some research material, it is possible to codify […] in addition, I already believe that the Silesian literary language, if it appears in literary form, will exist in the way […]. that it was created by the readers and writers. Because the Russian language was not invented by scientists, it functions as it was created by Gogol, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and so on... that is, over there is that beautiful Russian language, and this over here […] scientists think about how to create dictionaries and grammars. But Dostoevsky's contribution to the creation of language is greater than any linguist […]. (m., Silesian, 54, Katowice)

At one point I was even flattered when I was compared to Alexander Hilferding (1831–1872), a St. Petersburg-based Russian Slavist of the mid-nineteenth century. I was called "the second Hilferding," and the director of the Museum of Kashubian Writing and Music in the town of Wejherowo once jokingly remarked that I am "also

an Alexander and also from St Petersburg."[2] In a certain way, such emic classifications embedded me in a research tradition that was well known to the informants and made my presence understandable to them. But however useful the authority of the St. Petersburg Slavists of the nineteenth century might be, they firmly associated me exclusively with the Russian side.

Yet some distortion in perception also occurred on my part. Quite quickly in the course of my work, I realized that I was constantly interacting with "not quite Polish Poland," which was becoming much more familiar and understandable to me than the vast regions beyond Kashubia and Upper Silesia. By diligently recording and analyzing the narratives of my informants, conducting family interviews, learning about the problems, aspirations, and hopes of Kashubians and Silesians of different generations, I gradually adopted the perspective of the members of these minority communities. Despite internal reflection and an attempt to critically analyze the material I collected, my constant contact with members of these non-dominant groups influenced my perception of contemporary Poland, the historical specificity of its nation-building, contemporary center-periphery relations, and the freedom of cultural expression of citizens who do not consider themselves ethnic Poles.

In fact, it was as if I was looking at Poland through the "back door." As a foreigner, I found myself excluded from the Polish school system responsible for disseminating a unified cultural canon and an imagined national myth. In doing so, I increasingly collected material that represented a collective memory that had very little chance of breaking through the barriers of the country's largest ethno-cultural minorities. This distortion, as well as a certain sympathy for the communities under study, without which there can be no qualitative long-term research, led to my reflections on the threat of anthropological research shifting into the realm of activism.

I must admit that my status as a foreign researcher has been and remains extremely important in my fieldwork and traditionally occupies a prominent place in my professional self-reflection. The questions I am interested in when communicating with informants are usually considered highly sensitive topics. The ethnic identity of Kashubians or Silesians, as well as preservation and loss of native language by these communities, inevitably spilled over into the family and personal histories my informants divulged during interviews. The changes in state borders and citizenship that took place in Kashubia and Upper Silesia several times during the twentieth century, the final incorporation of these territories into independent Poland, the complex and contradictory integration of these communities into post-war Polish society, the practices of linguistic and cultural homogenization implemented by the state and public schools, the waves of migration, national declarations,[3] verification and

2 My recent publication on the research of Hilferding served as a tribute to him (Vasiukov 2023).

3 The Deutsche Volksliste or "German List of Peoples" was the practice of ethno-national categorization of the population in German-occupied territories during World War II. Many Kashubians and Silesians were assigned to category No. 3, which made them eligible for Ger-

rehabilitation,[4] ethnic deportations – these were just a few of the themes that traditionally appeared in the stories of the Kashubians and Silesians. Behind each of these words lay the personal and often tragic fate of several generations of my informants' families, illustrating the post-war fate of Central European minorities who became a bone of contention on the part of nation-states.

Quite often in interviews, I lost control over the spontaneous narratives of informants telling me about their family histories, and innocuous stories about the language of children's games in the 1950s and 1960s could quickly develop into tales of relatives forced into hiding or fleeing Poland to avoid their (often imposed) service in the Wehrmacht, or painful stories of contemptuous treatment by members of the Polish ethnic majority who migrated to the annexed territories. In one way or another, such stories painted a picture of how the rhetorical trials of ethnic, cultural, and linguistic otherness were experienced by members of minority communities:

Fig. 1 "There is no Kashubia without Poland, and Poland without Kashubia" – a placard at the Kartuzy train station.

manization and obliged them to serve in the Wehrmacht.

4 "National verification" was the practice of confirming the nationality of the population of the former German territories ceded to Poland after World War II, which was necessary for entry into Polish citizenship. "Rehabilitation," a legal procedure for those who signed German national declarations (*Deutsche Volksliste*) during the occupation, included an oath of allegiance to the Polish nation and state.

> I was born in an area where people spoke Silesian, you know? They knew German. And when '45 came – I was born in '33 – and in '45 a terrible shock started […] It was a shock […] because the Poles would grimace if they heard our language (f., 89 years old, Opole).
>
> During the commune we had a hard life […] everything was so politically directed against the Kashubians, in schools they punished us for speaking Kashubian, so that we even began to feel […] as if [our language] was something worse (m., Kashubian, 61 years old, Jastarnia).

I believe that the sensitivity of such topics explains the fundamental importance of, and role played by, my status in communicating with my informants. They were describing themselves, their families, and their community to a person who was separated from them by several overlapping boundaries: a) I was not a Kashubian/not a Silesian; b) I was not a Pole, but a foreigner; c) I was a researcher-anthropologist. All three qualities were combined in my person, which, I believe, allowed my informants to list all the historical grievances of their group more freely, without any risk of hurting their interlocutor's personal views or provoking a heated discussion.

Perhaps if I had been a Polish anthropologist who shared the common cultural and historical baggage from the school curriculum and had his own ideas about the experience of living in Poland, communist or post-communist, my informants would have been less relaxed. The Barthian ethnic boundary paradigm (Barth 2005: 15–18), which was clearly recognized by me and my informants, split us into "we, the Kashubians/Silesians" and "he, the Russian researcher." In another fieldwork situation, this boundary would have been more of an obstacle for me, but here it turned out to be an advantage, which I tried to make use of, even though the way the informants thought about this might not have coincided with my own identity. My status as a foreigner, as a "Russian" who apparently stood at a distance, could sometimes bring me closer to the informants, placing us on the same side of the "barricades" against the country's ethnic majority, the Poles. Of course, one should never overestimate the stability of such borders. In addition to Kashubian or Silesian identity proper, my informants also possessed a general Polish (in its political meaning) identity and openly demonstrated their loyalty to the Polish state. In this regard, when it came to the broader context of Polish-Russian relations, my Kashubian and Silesian informants quickly redefined social boundaries, occupying a common "barricade" alongside all Poles.

The status of foreigner also has its limitations for the researcher. In the recent research project "Kashubians and the Kashubian Language: a View from Inside and Outside," carried out in the fall of 2021, Cezary Obracht-Prondzyński, Polish sociologist and the head of the Kashubian Institute, addressed the problem of the "foreigner" among those researching Kashubians, many if not most of whom were not ethnic Kashubians or even Poles. Among the very first professional ethnographers, philologists, and folklorists studying the Kashubians there were many foreigners (Szultka

1992). These days, anthropologists and linguists from Russia, Germany, the Czech Republic, Estonia, and even Japan study the Kashubians. Based on my own experience, I can assume that we, as foreign researchers, have to initially overcome a much greater distance to get closer to the community under study.

The Russian identity prescribed to me could have created limitations, if not in access to the field, then at least in the willingness of potential and extremely interesting informants to cooperate with me. Thus, the historically uneasy Polish-Russian relations, as well as the mutually negative image of one another disseminated in the political discourse of Russia and Poland, prompted some informants to refuse to work with me. In general, there were not many such cases, and I would not be even able to specify their exact number. Each time someone refused to be interviewed, claiming it was because of how busy they were, their poor health, or their disinterest in the topics I was interested in, it may in fact have been due to other, more hidden motives and concerns. But still, several of my reluctant informants quite frankly (for which I am grateful) justified their refusal by saying they did not want to give an interview to a scientist from Russia or allow them to observe their everyday life, daily routine, and daily language practices. I will not forget how one woman in Kashubia told me calmly but quite categorically: "You know, of course, I am just a representative of a small nation, but I don't want my words to be used in any way in the interests of Putin or anyone else […]." As far as I was aware, this woman was an active member of an organization that advocated for the recognition of Kashubians as an ethnic minority in Poland and demonstrated a rather critical stance regarding the observance of the community's cultural rights. As I have experienced firsthand, possible dissatisfaction with the state's ethnic policies often leads informants to meet willingly with researchers, since it provides an opportunity "speak out" and offers some hope of bringing their community's circumstances into the public sphere.

Fig. 2 The author in the ceremonial tunic of a Silesian miner.

Non-state communities or minorities who are poorly represented in power structures and who feel constant cultural pressure from the majority are often as interested in cooperating with scientists as scientists are in talking to them. Deprived of a wide range of mechanisms for self-representation, ethnic activists often (and quite reasonably) believe that science can become a platform where they can finally voice their community's opinion, and that scientists' articles and monographs should in turn influence the future decisions of politicians or the image of the minority in the eyes of other citizens (though they do not always do so). Nevertheless, all these issues were overshadowed when the informant suggested that the interview she would give to a "Russian scientist," excerpts from which would appear in the publications of Russian journals, could shape a negative image of Poland. The pan-Polish identity of this Kashubian woman made her, for a certain moment, prefer loyalty to the Polish state over the cultural interests of her group.

The world upside down

I made my next field trip to Poland at the beginning of 2022. By this time, I had been several times to Kashubia and Upper Silesia, recorded more than a hundred interviews, published a dozen papers, and made many presentations at scientific conferences. While completing my postgraduate studies at the European University, I already had developed quite strong and extensive connections in the arena of Kashubian and Silesian activism, and had implemented several common research projects with colleagues from Poland, so that I gained a certain level of recognition in the communities. New informants with whom I established contacts increasingly reported that they had already heard about me from other people and sometimes even came to me of their own accord, prompted by recommendations from our mutual acquaintances. With some, albeit limited, recognition, I felt increasingly free to declare my background and mixed status, and gradually began to open up to my informants more often.

The tragic events of February 2022, in spite of whatever I might desire, painfully tore off my former cover and the "legends" about me as a researcher, demanding that I account for my current and previous civil, political, and academic status. Above all, it was a request from without, from the people around me demanding a clear declaration of my views in a situation of political and military conflict. The shocking events of the beginning of the war seemed to leave no room for "gray zones" and demanded a clear demonstration of one's attitude to the current events. Like many Ukrainians, up to the last moment I did not believe that a Russian military invasion was possible. The very idea of war seemed so crazy to me that the accumulation of Russian troops on the border with Ukraine was much easier to explain to myself as political manipulation and intimidation. Unfortunately, such naiveté, which was not unique to me, came at a very high price. Two years later, it is quite difficult to reconstruct the

chronology, thoughts, and experiences of the first days of the war. The effect of the first shock, as well as the shock of all the events that followed, has somewhat clouded my memory.

On the morning of 24 February 2022, I was in a meeting during my sociolinguistic fieldwork in Upper Silesia. I was in a small village in Strzelce county in the province of Opolskie, where I was working with several local families among whom the Silesian language was preserved as the main means of communication. The news of the war reached even to this Central European hinterland, with only an elementary school, a couple of stores, and a small chapel. My presence immediately aroused widespread interest, including among people with whom I had no direct contact. People who perceived me as a "Russian scientist" immediately began to treat me with suspicion, seeking to learn more about the "true motives" for my stay.

Whereas previously the "Russian origin" attributed to me might have caused mild discomfort, after 24 February it was perceived quite differently, both by my local partners and by myself. I was going through an internal drama caused by this attack on my home country and fear for my family in Ukraine. It was at this point that I realized I no longer wanted to be perceived as a "Russian scientist," even though I continued to be a PhD student at a Russian university. Of course, the informants with whom I had been working for a long time were aware of my biography and experienced these difficult times together with me. To the contrary, people whom I had met only recently, and who until 24 February had readily agreed to meet with me to talk about topics of my interest and to record interviews, immediately began canceling their scheduled meetings.

One of the most vivid impressions of this time was a letter I received a few days after the start of the war. In the first days of March, I was to visit Opole, where I intended to meet with a group of Polish dialectologists who had been working for many years on compiling a multi-volume Silesian dialectological dictionary. A colleague with whom I had begun a preliminary correspondence while I was still in St. Petersburg and who had invited me on behalf of his colleagues said: "Please do not take this personally, but in a situation where putin (Vladimir Putin – *eds.*) is behaving like Hitler and Stalin combined, we will postpone your visit indefinitely" (I retain here the style of the original). I will not hide the fact that my first reaction was indignation. At that moment I thought it was silly to see a connection between politics and a conversation between collectors of dialect utterances in Silesian villages. I remember that I even replied to this letter, urging my interlocutor to be politically neutral. In the letter, I said that I was actually a citizen of Ukraine myself, so it was difficult to suspect me of supporting the war. My interlocutor's reply was laconic and categorical: "Today we are all Ukrainians." It was probably my first painful experience of having the field closed to me because of my alleged Russian origin. It was at that moment that I felt the very "fragmentation" and the borders that were rapidly being drawn before my eyes, separating me and my informants.

What was particularly painful was the fact that, in drawing such boundaries and trying to categorize me, many of my interlocutors were guided only by their stereotypes, without taking my personal opinion into account. The identity ascribed to you becomes much more unpleasant when it goes beyond simply being a matter of you not internally conforming to it, but when it fixes you on the opposite side of the barricade, where you do not want to be. Subsequently, I thought a lot about these failed interviews, about my behavior and reactions. I understood that my colleague's refusal to cooperate with me could be explained by his patriotic stance – a demonstrative display of disagreement with Russian policy and solidarity with Ukrainians who were victims of aggression – as well as by a banal fear for his career, which could be hindered by "untimely" contacts with a Russian scientist. It was quite possible that if my research had started not in 2018, but in 2022, I would not have been able to form such a wide network of informants. Thus, changes in the public perception of Russia, and thus of Russian researchers, began to act as a barrier to entering the field.

Against this background, I was all the more struck by the reaction of the people around me, particularly those who knew about the duality of my academic and civil status. Almost immediately, I became an object of care, concern, and anxiety on the part of my interlocutors. This attitude contrasted quite sharply with the unspoken hierarchy that had often been present in our interactions before. Prior to this, our relationship was often defined in terms of the positions of "foreign researcher" and "informant": an outside observer and a minority culture bearer who expected the researcher to further carry knowledge about his or her group to the outside world.

Of course, such a description smacked of overly outdated and highly stereotypical notions of relationships in the field, and such statuses were gradually erased as my interactions with people transformed into buddy or friend relationships with each subsequent fieldtrip. However, most of the time I was the one asking the questions, the one who filled out the questionnaires and turned on the tape recorder, who took the initiative in the discussion and drew attention to specific aspects of everyday reality that I wanted to learn more about. I played the role of an external actor intruding on informants' daily routines, trying to see, record, and analyze how they and their families lived. When I did not understand something, I confidently questioned people, expecting them to provide explanations. I will never forget being teased by the Kashubians who taught me how to snuff tobacco from the palm of my hand. Many adult men in Kashubia consume it in large quantities, and it took me a long time to learn how to place my fingers correctly and where to put the pinch of tobacco. My fits of sneezing caused laughter among those watching me. But it was still a friendly laugh at a scientist who was inept at such simple things.

In the first days after the war, the informants with whom I had been working for a long time were probably seeing me confused and broken for the first time. Many people around me tried to ask me more about the war that had begun, about the public mood in Russia and Ukraine. The roles of researcher and informant changed

abruptly, and I found myself in the place of the one being "researched." Some of the informants tried to express their sympathy toward me, and some were looking for ways to help me. Overcoming the awkwardness of my new status, I realized that my post-invasion position allowed me to establish closer ties with my informants and, perhaps for the first time, I felt a sincere desire to open up to them, to tell them about myself, my family, and my home. People who I had previously seen mainly as Kashubians and Silesians representing minority Slavic regional communities (which was the purpose of my visit), finally became just people – men and women, with their own family concerns, personal experiences, and dreams.

One of the most touching moments for me was when, a few days after the invasion, one of my most engaged informants in Upper Silesia, a schoolteacher and collector of local folklore, whose family I often visited, in the midst of our discussion of the latest news casually mentioned, looking away, "Oh, by the way, my wife and I have prepared a cot in my office […] if you decide not to return, you can always stay there." Such concern, expressed in a manner that in no way embarrassed me or put me in an awkward position, touched my heart. In the days that followed, the solidarity of Polish citizens struck me more than once.

Already at the beginning of March 2022, tormented by endlessly watching the news and trying to contact my relatives in Ukraine, I realized that the productivity of my fieldwork was reduced to zero, so I switched to doing what little I could as a volunteer in this situation. Already a couple of days after the war started, the first waves of refugees from Ukraine reached Upper Silesia, and I witnessed how the Polish authorities and society were dealing with this unprecedented crisis. For the rest of my life, I will be grateful for the professionalism and coordination shown by Polish society. I saw how my Silesian informants, local families with often not the highest incomes, took the war as a personal tragedy and collected their own clothes, food, and medicines to give to the refugees crowding the country's train stations or crisis centers, or to send them directly to Ukraine via the Red Cross or some other charitable organizations. Of course, Polish people were particularly sensitive to the invasion of Ukraine, as they quite easily drew analogies to the German and Soviet attacks on their own country in 1939. Observing this universal support and feeling a great sense of gratitude, I kept asking myself the agonizing question, "If this tragedy had happened to Poland, would we Ukrainians have been able to support them in the same way?"

All I did in late February and early March 2022 was to help register and house Ukrainian refugees, who were growing in number every day. Many of them fled in panic, often without even taking their personal belongings. Among them were many residents of the eastern regions who had already fled from air raids and whose homes had been destroyed. Within a week, all the places set aside for refugees in hostels, dormitories, and local authorities' rented premises were occupied, while the flow of refugees only increased. Many people arrived with no money, no warm clothes (it was February!), and no knowledge of a foreign language, and they were in a state of shock.

Some of them had to spend the night in train stations or on the streets. To quickly find at least temporary (for a few days) accommodation for the refugees proved to be a difficult task. In social networks, I had quite a few acquaintances from my hometown in Ukraine writing to me, asking for advice on how to get to the Polish border, asking to meet them and help them find a place to stay.

The only salvation then was the hospitality of the locals, who opened their homes to the war victims. Some of the refugees were taken in by the families of my Silesian informants. Finding people willing to host refugees, bringing them together with those who needed help, coordinating all the specifics – many refugees had small children, sometimes wheelchair-bound relatives, even pets – was my work in those days, which allowed me to switch away from difficult thoughts and somehow feel useful. All those days have merged into some single indistinct chain of memories, with bright moments interspersed with displays of human solidarity and support. Somehow, in the chaos of all the terrible news and events of those days, it was the small gestures of random passersby that were most memorable.

Thus, in the first days of March, at the train station in Zabrze, I met a young woman with two small children from my hometown. We had once been classmates, so she asked me to help her find shelter. While waiting for her on the platform of the train station in Zabrze, I looked at the surrounding houses and thought about how, in just the same way almost eighty years ago, other people, local Germans, had fled from here before the Soviet army attacked. At that moment all the refugee reception places were already occupied, and it took me some time to find people willing to let them move in. Right off the train, I took them to my hotel room so that they could get at least a few hours of sleep. It had taken them almost three days to get to Zabrze, spending a day on the street, standing in line for the evacuation train from Ukraine, and then spending another day on that train, unable to even sit down, because the compartment they managed to get into had fifteen other people in addition to them. I was amazed by the resilience of the children, who did not complain at all and looked out of the cab window at the streets of the unfamiliar city with great interest. The cab driver, hearing our conversation in Ukrainian and understanding something of the story my classmate was telling, later categorically refused to take money from me for the ride, even though we had traveled a considerable distance. This small event serves as a symbol for me of how Polish society helped Ukrainians in the early days of the war.

On 11 March 2022, as the front line was approaching my hometown in southern Ukraine, I decided to end my fieldtrip early and reunite with my family, or rather with those who remained there. My last memory from Poland was an evening spent at the train station in Przemyśl, a border town that was the first to take the brunt of a colossal wave of refugees. Thousands of people were arriving from Ukraine, and it proved almost impossible to move in the opposite direction of this wave. Evacuation trains, which arrived without any schedule or announcement, having dropped people

off, immediately turned around and headed back. About thirty people like me were crowded together behind the platform of Przemyśl station, looking for a way to get to Ukraine. At the same time, on the other side of the border there were queues hundreds of kilometers long of cars trying to get out.

After spending the entire cold March night outside, we finally waited for the next evacuation train from Lviv, which seemed to be spitting out crowds of refugees. It was an endless stream of tired, battered, and lost people, many of whom, for the first time in the several days of their journey to safety, stood in complete confusion on the platform of the Polish station, not knowing where to go next. Upon reaching Lviv the following evening, my traveling companions and I found ourselves blocked at the local train station, which was the main transportation artery connecting Ukraine and the EU. Crowds of people forming endless lines for trains carrying refugees to Poland, curfews, and the sound of air raid alarms were the backdrop that accompanied the long wait for any transport to move toward the front line. The Russian troops were already approaching Kyiv at that time, and the country's transportation system was in complete collapse.

Finally, on the morning of 13 March, I fortuitously managed to jump on an empty train bound for Odessa, which was supposed to pick up the refugees who had gathered there, wanting to go to the west of Ukraine. Alone and relatively warm, I fell asleep for the first time in days. After another day, I managed to get from Odessa to my hometown, which, fortunately, the Russian troops had not reached. It was the first time I had seen my hometown so empty, silent except for the alarms, and dark because all remaining residents had been instructed to darken their windows when threatened by air raids.

Coda

Almost two years have passed since then, years that have turned the lives of all Ukrainians upside down, forcing each of them to adjust to a new reality and choose their own ways of survival. My heterogeneous status (Ukrainian graduate student at a Russian university engaged in Polish studies), which used to bring me so many bonuses, turned out to be a kind of trap, cutting me off from previously familiar opportunities. Due to martial law, I can no longer leave the borders of Ukraine and continue my field research. As a Ukrainian, I no longer consider returning to St. Petersburg, and as a PhD student at a Russian university I have no opportunity to defend my dissertation on Kashubians and Silesians in Ukraine because of the prohibitions imposed by the Ministry of Education. The war-induced fragmentation with its abrupt appearance of closed borders has impacted people with hybrid status, like me, the most painfully.

Since I discovered the world of anthropology, it has become for me a kind of protective lens that allows me to resist evil and aggression. People and events that pre-

viously might have made me angry and irritated cease to do so if I begin to look at them for a moment as an object of social research. At that moment, the scientist in me awakens, which in a way displaces my personality, with all its emotions and reactions. I believe that for all of us today, anthropology can serve as a salutary injection that can block the spread of internal anger and hostility in the face of heightened social and international relations.

Political fragmentation in Europe inevitably leads to fragmenting, and sometimes completely cutting off, contacts in the scientific sphere. The ties and platforms that had been reverently built are being destroyed for an indefinite period of time. I believe that, despite the complexity of this process under current conditions, we should all try to maintain interpersonal contacts and, whenever possible, express support for our colleagues who, often against their will, have found themselves on the other side of the border. The difficult balance between (1) our own convictions, (2) the desire and sometimes the need to demonstrate our principles, and (3) efforts to maintain our ties with (former) colleagues and informants will require each of us to work long and hard to rebuild the bridges that have been destroyed today. I am confident that in-group solidarity will allow us to avoid, or if not to avoid to at least slow down, the very fragmentation we are all so worried about.

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Figures

1 "There is no Kashubia without Poland, and Poland without Kashubia" – a placard at the Kartuzy train station. Photo: Oleksandr Vasiukov, 2019.

2 The author in the ceremonial tunic of a Silesian miner. Photo: Oleksandr Vasiukov, 2021.