
The Strategic Use of Heritage Representations: The Small Towns of Podlasie Province

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This article stems from a project researching good practices in the use and re-use by small towns of their cultural heritage. Heritage representations and related participative activities may contribute to urban renaissance, or completely fail if there are no favourable conditions. The selected case of Podlasie Voivodship, a Polish province on the border with Lithuania and Belorussia, represents a peripheral border region. Its settlement is to quite a large extent represented by small towns on the edge of the countryside. To test our hypothesis that towns in border regions across Europe use heritage in their development strategies and that these are comparable through the perspective of the use and reuse of the heritage, the representations of selected settlements were analysed: Tykocin, Supraśl, Hajnówka with Białowieża and Wysokie Mazowieckie. The authors are historians, and combine contextualization with observation of selected cases inspired by visual ethnography. In addition, the general public's understanding of heritage has been explored through the analysis of 248 questionnaires answered by a focus group of secondary school students from Wysokie Mazowieckie. The findings presented in the article contribute to the debate on the role of Creatives in towns from the historian's perspective.

Keywords: Small towns, Creatives in small communities, cultural heritage, development strategies, Podlasie (Poland).

Introduction

The small towns on the Eastern borderland of the European Union are changing its outlook. They are now better furnished with sidewalks, roundabouts, benches and fountains, making the public places more comfortable. Despite these innovations, their rural urbanism remains distinctive, showing regional historical traditions.¹ On the other hand, it is promising to observe and compare the ways the cultural and historical heritage is being intentionally used, re-used and presented in combination with their self-identification and in strategic development plans. Also comparable are the activities of creative people in small towns.

This article is an offspring of a larger comparative project in progress.² In the core regions of Europe such strategies are usually linked with a town's adaptation to tourism and are accompanied by the very visible involvement of various stakeholders as well as public initiatives. We expected to find strategies articulated in published official texts and participatory activities carried out by groups of creative individuals in the peripheral border regions of the EU as well. To test this hypothesis, we chose the Podlasie Voivodship. It is not only close to the state border, but also in the border zone of Orthodox and Latin Christianity. It is a region

¹ The authors appreciated the critical comments of the reviewers and the editors of *Urbanities*, which helped to develop the argument in this article.

² The research for this article was supported by the European Regional Development Fund-Project 'Creativity and Adaptability as Conditions of the Success of Europe in an Interrelated World' (No. CZ.02.1.01/0.0/0.0/16_019/0000734), by PROGRES Q09: History – A clue to the understanding of the globalized world held by the Faculty of Arts, and by the H2020 CULT-COOP-06-2017: Participatory approaches and social innovation in culture project REACH – Re-designing access to cultural heritage for a wider participation in preservation, (re)use and management of European culture (ID 769827) <http://www.reach-culture.eu/>.

where Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, Greek Catholic and Old Believers' shrines can be found, along with small Tatar settlements dating from the seventeenth century. The architecture and urbanism of the towns visibly relates closely to the rural hinterland, particularly when compared with the south-west of the country. All this indicates that Podlasie does not correspond to stereotypical ideas about the Polish regions. On the other hand, with its multi-ethnic setting it has a lot in common with other border regions in Europe, particularly those on the edge of the European Union (Klusáková 2008). We expected to identify creative strategies in the instrumental use of the heritage of small towns and related participative activities.

Visual ethnography together with sensual sociology became the primary methodological inspiration in this article. These rather young research fields which have influenced urban anthropology — itself a sub-disciplinary late-comer (Prato and Pardo 2013: 80-87) — may be useful also for historians. For the perception of space, the senses are important, in the first-place vision. While sound and smell are inescapable, taste is one's own decision. Seeing is also a matter of decision, as one can choose what to look at and how to look at it. One can look, stare, view, gaze, or just take a glimpse. John Urry has shown how important the senses are, particularly the tourist's gaze, for the construction of the image of the city (Urry 2003: 388-397). Observation is the result of consideration, of a procedure taken in time, long or short term, single or repeated. Like Jerome Krase, we can find them all useful to get in touch with the place and the people (Krase 2012, 2018). Repeated short term visual observation in small towns is a rewarding exercise in a similar manner to that of the ethnic districts in large metropolises experienced by Jerome Krase. For a historian, however, the visual does not overshadow the importance of the text or of dialogue with an actor or stakeholder. Often the written source is analysed before the visual observation. In this article we combine the contents analysis of historiography, websites and official documents with equally important visual observations made by residents and the repeated short-term visits of an external observer. The authors benefited from informal conversations and discussions running on the internet, as in small and remote communities it was not possible to carry out formal interviews.

Small towns are defined in recent geographic and sociological studies by the number of inhabitants on the threshold of 20,000 (Kwiątek-Soltys 2017; Sztando 2017; Klusáková et al. 2017: 11-23). Together with this, one may use economic criteria of income or taxes, and urbanist criteria formulated by architects. A small town is 'midway between big cities and rural regions, constitutes a secondary centre whose role is to serve a variety of minor or similar settlements, and which lacks the typical infrastructure of a metropolitan or central urban area' (Del Espino Hidalgo 2017: 118). Such towns do not offer all the urban functions, and to settle certain issues the citizens have to travel to a town higher in the hierarchy. Yet another option is the self-identification of the place, based on self-evaluation by its inhabitants and its managers: how they feel and represent the town's urban functions or rural character, its identity and status (Mainet 2011). Such typology would consider their role in the micro-region, and their supra-local relations. Hélène Mainet recognizes two principal positions of small towns: 1) They are in the vicinities of large towns, which highlight that they are bringing all the countryside

benefits to the town: greenery, silence and small society. They function mostly as a dormitory, since the population commutes to work. 2) Small towns are located deeper in the region. They emphasize their function as urban centres for their hinterland, micro region or even a larger region. They offer various urban services: administration, commerce, social and cultural activities, health care, schooling, entertainment and supralocal connections. Mainet built her arguments on French experience and related identification to the attraction of the place, while Andrzej Sztando pointed to the importance of supralocal influences and relations (Sztando 2017: 110-120; Mainet 2011: 75-89). In our article we combine these perspectives, although the town's own self-evaluation as a small town is primary.

Case Studies

In this empirical part of our article we first introduce the chosen region, Podlasie Voivodship, its capital Białystok, and then observations through visual ethnography and contents analysis of images and texts on the small towns we have selected to represent the case: Tykocin, Supraśl, Hajnówka with Białowieża in the coterminous primeval forest and Wysokie Mazowieckie. In order to protect the anonymity of our informants, we do not, in the following case studies section, include excerpts from interviews and conversations. In the case of a relatively small regional society where everybody knows everybody and where heritage is very sensitive, it is virtually impossible for the statements to be rendered anonymous.

Podlasie Province: A region of small towns and of multi-ethnic heritage

Podlasie is one of 16 voivodships established in 1999 after the administrative reform. It is situated in the north-eastern part of Poland and borders Lithuania (an internal European Union border) and Byelorussia (an external EU border). The province is organized in three 'urban' counties (Białystok, Łomża and Suwałki) and fourteen 'rural' counties, each of which has its principal urban centre. Podlasie is one of the largest provinces in Poland (with over 20,187 square kilometres) and one of the least populated (about 1,200,000 inhabitants). More than half of the population (over 700,000) live in cities and the largest urban areas, mostly in Białystok, Łomża, Suwałki and Augustów. Agnieszka Kwiatek-Soltys identified 685 small towns (reaching the threshold of 20,000 inhabitants) in the whole of Poland for the year 2012, of which thirty-one were in Podlasie, while the province's urban network creates forty towns in total (Kwiatek-Soltys 2017:25-240).

Podlasie can be perceived as offering traditional life in harmony with nature and respect for the landscape. The panorama is rather flat with an abundance of forests, rivers, ponds and lakes. There are four national parks in the province (Białowieża, Narew, Wigry and Biebrza), three landscape parks (Suwałki, the Knyszyńska Forest and the Lower Narew River Valley), eighty-eight nature reserves and fifteen protected landscape areas. It is not surprising that it is named the 'Green Lungs of Poland'. The landscape attracted photographers and filmmakers, who co-created the image of the region. Among them, the most prominent artist specializing in landscape photography was the late Wiktor Wołkow (1942-2012), who dedicated his life to the

exceptional beauty of the region. He created over 100 photography exhibitions, as well as many photo albums, of which the best known are 'Podlasie', 'Supraśl', 'Forest' and 'Stork'. His 'Magical Podlasie' exhibitions received many awards at home and abroad. Thus, he contributed to the growth of tourism.

The Podlasie Province (Voivodship) challenges the stereotype of Poland being a country only of Catholics. Numerous places of interest, both sacred and secular, mark its history and give an insight into the area's cultural and religious diversity, which reflects the many changes and territorial divisions the region has undergone. Churches, both Catholic and Orthodox, wayside shrines and crosses, wooden manors and peasant houses preserve the authentic spirit of the old eastern borderlands as a visual image. The local people cultivate its traditional folk handicrafts; for example, artistic blacksmithing, pottery, sculpture, willow-weaving, lace-making and embroidery. The region is also famous for its Easter traditions of weaving Easter palms and ornamenting eggs (*pisanki*). It has created an exceptionally vibrant cultural mosaic and characteristic climate of openness and hospitality. Visitors are always amused by the local traditional wooden architecture, particularly on the route from Białystok to Hajnówka and Białowieża with its beautiful churches and houses ornamented with sophisticated wooden carvings. The town of Hajnówka and its county — as a gate to the Białowieża forest — is distinguished by its wood products, handicrafts, herbs and forest fruits. Podlasie is nowadays well known for its cultural diversity displayed in a landscape dotted with many sacral monuments and cemeteries of all faiths: beautiful, impressive and significant Christian churches, representing various architectural styles. The amazing eighteenth century former Carmelite Monastery on Wigry Lake and a Jesuit complex in Drohiczyń, to name just two Catholic shrines, attract many visitors. Supraśl Monastery, the Holy Mountain Grabarka, and the *Trail of Orthodox Churches*, with the exceptional beauty of its wooden architecture, are unique. Poland's only historic mosques are here (Kruszyniany and Bohoniki), and a few rare well-preserved synagogues (one of the oldest in Tykocin) and — not so famous, yet quite amazing — the molenna of the Old Believers (Wodзилki, Gabowe Grądy).

The urban network of the forty towns revolves around the seat of the province, Białystok, which is a fairly young city, as its municipal history dates back to 1692. Historically, Białystok has always played an important role in this region, mostly because of its location on the borderland of the East and the West. Since the beginning of its existence, and especially after receiving its municipal charter, Białystok has been taking advantage of its peripheral location, but at the same time struggling with it. Its role has been changing — it functioned first as an important aristocratic residence, later became an industrial centre in the Russian Empire and finally the administrative, economic and scientific centre of this part of Poland.



Figure 1. The main square in Białystok is furnished with benches, flower pots, a fountain and statues, and above all an abundance of outdoor cafés and restaurants (June 2018).³

While walking through the streets of Białystok, one can perceive through plaques, street names and information signs that for centuries a multi-national and multi-linguistic community of Poles, Russians, Jews, Byelorussians, Ukrainians, Lithuanians and Germans lived here together, as in all Podlasie, in symbiosis and peace but also, depending on the time, in tension and conflict. One by one, churches and temples of different faiths were built, often side by side, and today four necropolises remain: Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant and Jewish. At the end of the nineteenth century the industrious town became a sort of Biblical Tower of Babel — mixed, colourful and vigorous, with people speaking Russian, Polish, German, Lithuanian, Byelorussian as well as Yiddish and Hebrew. Białystok was a ‘crossroads’ of these different languages, nations, religions and races. On many buildings, shops and institutions there were signboards in Russian, Yiddish and Polish. A mixture of several languages was heard on every corner as well as in the factories and various business offices. Białystok was also the cradle of the Zionist movement and became well known as a centre of Jewish culture, social activities and philanthropy. This greatly affected Ludwik Zamenhof (1859-1917) from his early youth. As a student, he had the idea of formulating a universal language and dreamt of a world in which all nations would reach better understanding and equality through this tool. It is not surprising that he constructed Esperanto in this very place (Wiśniewski 1987: 74).

The two world wars had a heavy impact on the city and the region, and destroyed most of what would be today its tangible and cultural heritage. The Jewish community was annihilated by the Germans after the Ghetto uprising and almost disappeared from the local community. Decades after the Second World War, Białystok was rebuilt and reconstructed as a modern town with a fully functioning infrastructure. Nowadays the city, with its urban area (about 300,000 inhabitants) is the largest cultural and scientific centre of the region with theatres, a Philharmonic Hall and a brand-new Opera House (by the prominent architect Marek

³ All the photographs were taken by the authors of the article.

Budzyński), museums, two universities and several academic institutions. An interesting case of the re-use of the architectural heritage is represented by the Arsenal Gallery which operates in an old power station, but whose main venue is housed in the arsenal in the palace area. Although its main task is to present contemporary Polish art, educational programmes get equal attention. The Arsenal Playground invites every generation to participate and learn about culture and art in dialogue with artists.

The towns of Podlasie have recently been described in a volume by the regional historian and journalist, Adam Czesław Dobroński, who has presented all forty towns whose urban status is now recognized officially (Dobroński 2014). Each town has its own entry, in which we learn about its history and present situation. While Dobroński looked at them historically, he provided an opportunity at the end of each chapter for the towns' mayors to share their views on the towns and their strategies. This represents a unique collection of statements of equal, although limited, value for analysis and subsequent typology. The mayors single out the strong points related to their towns. Their choice is personal, even though they are speaking officially for the town. Thanks to their position, we can take them as a representative group authorised to speak for their towns. They use different styles; some are more descriptive, some more expressive. They are generally proud of their cultural diversity and the inheritance of several religions, and appreciate the multi-ethnic society. They highlight the authentic nature, specific climate and excellent conditions for tourism. They invite investment, sponsors and new residents. Historicity, the cultural and natural heritage, local heroes and monuments are for them important values, even if several towns acknowledge that they have obtained urban status only recently. On the other hand, the mayors are proud of recent achievements in building new infrastructures to make the towns comfortable places for their citizens to live in. With the exception of Białystok, all the towns are presented as small with two types of identification: 1) the town offers a quiet environment with urban comfort close to the countryside and at the same time close to a large town (meaning Białystok); 2) the town is central to its '*mała ojczyzna*' (small homeland), offering services (schooling, healthcare, administration, business opportunities, market, cultural institutions/events) to the hinterland. This second type has two sub-types — one stresses the rural, agricultural character of the town and of the hinterland, with its impact on services offered; the second links its rural quality with very modern industries — tourism, spas, wellness and rehabilitation. There are very few mayors who do not need to highlight the historicity of their town or its hinterland; mostly they see their town as newly established and very small, focused on modernity and the development of infrastructures.

The interest in historicity, in cultural diversity or its absence, was the main motivation for the selection of the cases through which we wish to explore what types of heritage representations can be identified among the towns of Podlasie. As we have shown, Białystok has a very central function in the region. To explore and display the situation in small towns, we have chosen on purpose five very different examples at different distances from Białystok, and with variable perspectives on heritage: Tykocin, Supraśl and Wysokie Mazowieckie are more or less within commuting distance of Białystok; all three are historical towns, but with

different types of heritage. Hajnówka and Białowieża are relatively young places, located deeper in the region, linked to a natural heritage of globally recognized value. Each town has a vision about the use of the heritage in the future, and a specific way of its presentation and commodification. While Tykocin, Supraśl and Białowieża are well-known among tourists, Wysokie Mazowieckie and Hajnówka are in opposite situation.

Tykocin — Multiple heritages in one small town

Quite rural in outlook, the town welcomes us with a large rectangular square surrounded by wooden houses a maximum of two storeys high with small gardens, dominated by a Baroque church. Only an expert recognizes the inspiration of Renaissance urbanism in Tykocin. Founded in 1425, it has kept its special significance mainly due to its surviving monuments and architectural heritage of past centuries. It is situated on the Narew River, between two national forests and then parks (Narew and Biebrza), twenty-seven kilometres from Białystok. Tykocin lost its town privileges in 1950, but regained them in 1993. The town (with about 2,000 inhabitants) is best-known for its complex of historical sites.



Figure 2. Tykocin's main square is dominated by the Catholic Church, recently reconstructed. It has become a favourite location for various competitions and festivities (June 2016).



Figure 3. Not far from the opposite end of the square is the Great Synagogue in Tykocin-Kaczorowo (June 2016).

The most famous are the seventeenth-century Synagogue and the Talmudic House from the eighteenth century situated in what used to be the town's Jewish district — Kaczorowo. Visitors find it thanks to the numerous signs. Other beautiful and equally old monuments of the town are the Catholic seminary, operating continuously since 1643, and the impressive Holy Trinity Church. The great attraction of the town is the recently reconstructed (or rather built from scratch) sixteenth-century castle, destroyed in the mid-seventeenth century during the Swedish Deluge. The castle in Tykocin was erected between 1550 and 1572 and was the largest fortress (the so-called 'arsenal') in Poland at that time. Now, the impressive restored complex of the red brick castle houses a historical museum in its basement, discovering the supra-regional value of the place. The rest is used as a restaurant, ballroom and hotel facilities. (Maroszek 2012)

Out of all monuments in Tykocin, the impressive synagogue built in 1642 in place of a fifteenth-century wooden temple is a special historical treasure. This is the type of synagogue that developed at the beginning of the seventeenth century in the south-east part of the Polish and Lithuanian Commonwealth. The synagogue, featuring rich Renaissance decorations, is the second in size and the oldest after that in Kraków. It is assumed that the design of the Tykocin synagogue was based on the fortified Pińsk synagogue, built in 1640. The massive stone building in the late-Renaissance-Baroque style follows a rectangular ground plan. Initially, the synagogue had a concave roof with an attic, but it burnt down in the eighteenth century and was replaced with a mansard roof in the Baroque style (Wroczyńska and Lechowski 2004: 1-40).

Before the Second World War, nearly half the population in Tykocin was Jewish. Almost all of them were murdered by Germans in August 1941. During the occupation the Germans partially devastated the synagogue, using it as a warehouse. They also stole some of the rich and valuable furnishings. After the war, a fertilizer warehouse was located in the building. In 1965, part of the building was destroyed in a fire. Luckily, its value was recognized in 1977, when the Provincial Conservator of Monuments undertook comprehensive restoration work of the Synagogue and the Talmudic House. It was among the very first reconstructions of Jewish

sites in Poland in the post-war period. Afterwards, they were allocated to the District Museum in Tykocin, which is a branch of the Podlaskie Museum in Białystok.

The impressive architecture of the synagogue and the many restored inscriptions painted on the massive walls in the interior are the real beauty of this amazing site. It houses a permanent exhibition of Judaica and a rich collection of Jewish memorabilia and other items connected with the history of the town, and remains as a memorial to the former residents. In the low tower, an interior of a typical Jewish house has been reconstructed. The museum organizes temporary exhibitions and staged observation of Jewish holidays, as well as concerts. As there is no longer a Jewish community in Tykocin, the curators — who are not in fact Jewish — come from Białystok. Nevertheless, the town's Jewish heritage became a 'pilgrimage place' for Jewish youth and many tourists from Poland, the United States, Israel and other countries from around the world.

Tykocin's heritage is both intangible and tangible. It is the memory of Jewish citizens and their tragedy, their culture, plus a substantially reconstructed architectural heritage. This concerns not only the Grand Synagogue and Talmudic House, but also the Catholic Church, the wooden houses around the square and the Town Hall. The Castle is a new construction legitimized by arguments supported archaeologically through excavations.

The town administration has created a Project of Strategic Development 2015-2020, which is mainly focused on the improvement of infrastructures, intended among other things to enhance tourism.⁴ Tykocin is believed to have considerable potential through its natural and cultural heritage for tourism development. The main goal is a new promenade along the river Narew which should beautify the centre and link it with riverside. Architectural structures, together with the castle, are listed as heritage in the argumentation of the Project without challenging their authenticity. They are all presented as having the same potential for raising historical consciousness and stimulating identification with the town.



Figure 4. The newly built model of the 16th century castle in its imagined form. Tykocin (June 2016).

⁴ See Projekt Strategii Rozwoju Gminy Tykocin na lata 2015 - 2020, 2015: 83 -90, 98, 103. <http://bip.um.tykocin.wrotapodlasia.pl/Strategia/>. All electronic sources were accessed 11.8.2018, where the date is not indicated otherwise.

The website of Tykocin County focuses on practical issues for the comfort of citizens. Tourists have to look for information on history and sightseeing on pages devoted to the Jewish heritage. Information is almost exclusively in Polish. Although it is not easy to track it down, there is important participatory activity going on. The foundation called *Centrum badań nad historią i kulturą małych miast* [Centre for Studies on the History and Culture of Small Towns], seems to be an important factor in the heritage promotion together with the people who created TyKoCin24, an information webpage mainly for local citizens. Their main target group are the owners of historical houses, while the 'shtetlroutes' are for tourists.⁵

Supraśl — Transformation of identity

A visit to the Orthodox Monastery with the defensive Church of Annunciation, the most important cultural treasure in the town of Supraśl, provides one with a very strong visual impression. Supraśl, with over 500 years of fascinating history, is located in the vicinity of Białystok (about sixteen kilometres away). Nowadays approximately 4,500 inhabitants are settled in the town. Orthodox monks came here in 1503 and began the construction of the fortified church of unusual architecture, merging Byzantine style with Western European Gothic. The Church was famous for its frescoes, which were painted in the sixteenth century by a group of painters under the direction of 'Serbian Nectarios the painter'. Their style resembles Serbian monumental painting. The monks gathered a priceless library of prints and manuscripts (for example, the Supraśl Codex of the eleventh-twelfth century) in the monastery. In 1609 the Supraśl Monastery was forced to accept the Union of Brest and became an important Uniate cultural and religious centre as the seat of the Uniate bishopric (until 1807). In 1695 monks started a monastery print shop there, and in 1711, the first paper mill in eastern Poland. During the partition of Poland, the Russian authorities transferred the Supraśl Monastery back to Orthodox monks (Mironowicz 2012, Charkiewicz 2005).

After the First World War the abandoned monastery passed into the hands of the Roman Catholic Church and during the Second World War the complex was considerably destroyed. The church was blown up by the Germans in 1944 and only small fragments of the murals were saved, and are currently a great attraction at the Museum of Icons. One of the main sources of their acquisition is the Białystok Customs Office, which confiscates pieces from smugglers.

After the Second World War an agricultural school was established in a remaining building of the Monastery complex, while the regional museum was installed in another part. The ruins of the defensive Church of Annunciation were a visible sign of abandonment and neglect for decades. The Monastery was ultimately transferred back to the Orthodox Church in the 1990s. In following years, thanks to the generosity of private donors, believers and Poles of

⁵ <http://bip.um.tykocin.wrotapodlasia.pl/Strategia/>; <https://tykocin24-online.pl/events/category/fundacja-centrum-badan-nad-historia-i-kultura-malych-miast/>;
<http://shtetlroutes.eu/pl/tykocin-karta-dziedzictwa-kulturowego>

all confessions, as well as of foreigners, the Polish government and the European Union, the whole complex was nicely and completely reconstructed.⁶



Figure 5. The recently reconstructed Orthodox Church and Monastery also houses a Museum of Icons. The places of worship visibly document the multiconfessional — in Podlasie also meaning the multiethnic — nature of society. Supraśl (August 2012).

In the first half of the nineteenth century the monastery village in Supraśl was given the status of a town (with about 3,000 citizens) and became a flourishing textile industry centre in the Russian Empire for decades to come. Wilhelm Fryderyk Zachert, an entrepreneur from Zgierz, built a farm settlement for his workers. Nowadays there are remnants of the living quarters of the houses of weavers and the Buchholtz Palace, which was built in 1892-1903, as the seat of one of the famous manufacturing families. Currently, the building is used by the Art High School. Nearby there are two churches: Holy Trinity (Catholic, 1861) and the Evangelical-Augsburg Church (rebuilt in 1885, now also Catholic). The old cemeteries of all faiths and the well-preserved beautiful Buchholtz Chapel also testify to the multi-confessional history of Supraśl.

The community is very active in various cultural initiatives and projects promoting its history and cultural heritage. Supraśl is the seat of the Wierszalin Theater and the Cultural Association 'Collegium Suprasliense' (since 2001 publisher of the *Acta Collegii Suprasliensis* on small towns), actively promoting the culture, history and heritage of the town and its neighbourhood. The Archimandrite Palace has housed the Museum of Icons (the only one in Poland) since 2008, admired by Polish and international visitors, and since 2014 the *Muzeum Sztuki Drukarskiej i Papiernictwa* (Printing and Paper Museum).⁷

⁶ See <http://basniowysupraśl.pl/klasztor-supraslu-kartach-historii>

⁷ See the Supraśl Town Hall website: <http://www.supraśl.pl/index.php/supraśl/historia-suprasla>; <http://supraśl.pl/turystyka/index.php/pl/>; <http://supraśl.pl/index.php/strategia-rozwoju-miasta-i-gminy-supraśl-na-lata-2016-2022>.



Figure 6. Traditional wooden rural architecture used to be common in all the towns, even in Białystok, from where it is slowly disappearing. It remains typical for small towns. Supraśl has the image of a garden town, and thanks to its proximity to Białystok became a good address for those who like calm and greenery while still working in a large city (August 2012).

Although Supraśl looks like a residential garden city, its past can be read under its appearance. Until the 1990s its identity was linked strongly with the wood-processing industry, replacing the formerly dominant textile tradition. What we have observed in the last thirty years are essential changes in the town's orientation: the reconstruction of the Orthodox complex, the establishment of the Museum of Icons, together with the discovery of the charms of this place so close to the region's capital Białystok, makes it fit for commuting. Recently, Supraśl also became a popular centre for recreation and tourism. The town, situated in the middle of the Knyszyn Forest Landscape, took advantage of its location and obtained a Spa Settlement in 2001. The Lowland Climatic and Peloid Therapy Health Resort is one of the most recently established health resorts in Poland, attracting more and more patients and visitors. Thus, the successful transformation of the town's functions and its identification as a cultural centre of key importance was completed.⁸ Unlike the locally oriented Centre for Study on Small Towns based in Tykocin, the initiative started in Supraśl is carried on by scholars exploring small towns in Podlasie and elsewhere in Poland. Prof. Mariusz Zemło describes how it grew and resulted in a series of scientific volumes presenting research on small towns carried on in every type of cultural, scholarly and academic institution. These participatory activities established a network of experts interested in small towns and reached beyond the borders of Podlasie (Zemło and Czyżewski eds 2001).

⁸ See Strategia rozwoju miasta i gminy Supraśl na lata 2016–2022: 69; available at: <http://www.suprasl.pl/index.php/strategia-rozwoju-miasta-i-gminy-suprasl-na-lata-2016-2022>



Figure 7. Rivers, ponds, lakes, meadows and endless forests. That is what represents the natural heritage of Podlasie (July 2018).

The Białowieża Primeval Forest — A brand of two communities, Hajnówka and Białowieża

Some sixty kilometres south east from Białystok are the edges of the most famous place in the Podlasie Province: the Białowieża Primeval Forest, which is Europe's last ancient forest complex, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and a World Biosphere Reserve (1977).

Białowieża is also the name of a small settlement in the midst of woods, which identifies and builds its image on the global fame of the forest as natural heritage. The forest keepers settled first in Hajnówka village. Recently upgraded to a town, it looks mostly like a recreational resort, located on the forest edge on the route from Białystok. Some twenty-two kilometres further, Białowieża village was one of their settlements. It is quite an interesting and famous place with ambitions to be named a town. It builds its identity on its old history, its cultural and natural heritage, and particularly on its role as the scientific centre of the Polish Academy of Sciences, gathering some new residents and renowned scholars from the world. Its unique landscape and modern Natural History Museum attract more and more visitors every year.

The history of Białowieża Forest unwinds from the fourteenth century, when it became a part of the royal property of the Kingdom of Poland and came under the special rule of the royal forests. In 1795, after the third partition of Poland, the forest became a part of Russia and the property of the Tsars. The Orthodox Church was built by Alexander III in 1894-1897 and later Nicholas II constructed his hunting residence in the forest.

Nowadays Białowieża, mostly because of its cultural diversity and natural habitat, is one of the most important tourist attractions in eastern Poland, where some remnants of its history and monuments from the nineteenth and early twentieth century have survived. The Orthodox Church is quite interesting and a visible testimony of its past, and of its cultural and religious diversity. It is traditionally Russian in shape and has a unique ceramic altar, the only one in

Poland. Although the village looks like a 'garden city', it follows the plan of an 'ulicówka', where the main road becomes the main street with houses on either side. The nineteenth century Orthodox shrine and the Catholic Church built in the mid-1920s for the villagers and visitors of the two confessions stand in symbiosis at the end of the main street.

Białowieża Forest suffered very severely during the First World War because of extensive commercial exploitation by Germans. Białowieża National Park, the oldest national park in Poland, was established in 1921. After the Second World War the whole forest was divided by the border into an eastern part (belonging to the Soviet Union) and a western side (Polish), where in 1947 the Białowieża National Park was recreated.

While Białowieża village lies in the midst of the forest, Hajnówka is located on the main road from Białystok, on its edge, as its gatekeeper. It is a young town, its community being very much focused on tourism development, which needs to have appealing attractions. These they find mainly in the forest, and share with Białowieża village.⁹ In the context of forest management a conflict of interest becomes visible between the wood industries on the one hand and the hoteliers and tourist agencies on the other, both threatening the integrity of the natural heritage, as we often read in the news, quoting the reports of inspections by UNESCO. The noisy debates focused on nature, which undoubtedly should be protected, but do not question the locals - the inhabitants of Białowieża and Hajnówka - who are connected with both the cultural and natural heritage, nor do they take their opinion into account (Blicharska and Angelstam 2010).

Wysokie Mazowieckie — A town which prefers ecology to historical heritage

Wysokie Mazowieckie is a town reaching 9,590 inhabitants, located on the main road to Warsaw, in commuting distance from Białystok. Unlike the other towns in the selection, this town has a webpage which offers information about the town's history and cultural activities. Like all the towns in the set it has its strategic plan for development. The officials presenting Wysokie Mazowieckie are rather sceptical about the town's history. There is little to show and little to be considered as architectural heritage and, in their view, it has weak potential for the development of tourism. The town is surrounded by fields and rural countryside with excellent soil. This sets limits to other investments and tourism development.¹⁰ The city rose presumably in the thirteenth century (Kalinowski 2015: 37); however, this fact is not of paramount importance for its administrators or even for its inhabitants, as we will see later. Organized Mazovian settlement in today's territory of Wysokie Mazowieckie started on a larger scale at the beginning of the fifteenth century (Maroszek 2013: 30). The city and its surrounding region are inhabited by descendants of the impoverished nobility which in the past was involved in patriotic actions (Gloger 1878: 209, 494). The cultural heritage of this area lies in their heritage.

⁹ <https://sztetl.org.pl/pl/miejscowosci/b/665-bialowieza/96-historia-miejscowosci/67062-historia-miejscowosci> ; <http://www.gmina-hajnowka.pl/>; <http://www.gmina.bialowieza.pl/>

¹⁰ Strategia rozwoju gminy miejskiej Wysokie Mazowieckie na lata 2016–2022: 13-14; bip.um.wysmaz.wrotapodlasia.pl/resource/file/.../id.../attachment.1

However, various activities which were aimed at its popularisation were left to another town. Wysokie Mazowieckie itself is the centre of many district and communal offices. Hence, it took over the administrative role. As presented by its mayor, it is the town of future, focused on ecology and on building a new infrastructure. Moreover, he does not highlight its historicity or heritage value (Dobroński 2014: 367). This attitude towards the past of the town is quite unusual and raises many questions which deserved to be answered with the help of combined anthropological and sociological research. This consisted of a questionnaire, a focus group and observation carried by historians.

The questionnaire was conducted in spring 2018 among the pupils of the King Kazimierz Jagiellończyk Secondary School; the Stanisław Staszic Vocational School Complex; and the Centre for Vocational Training. The analysis of the 248 questionnaires indicated certain regularities concerning the subject of cultural heritage and knowledge of the particular students. Due to unclear answers, one percent of the poll was not analysed. The focus group consisted of residents not only of the city itself, but also of the neighbouring villages. Nevertheless, they come to the city on a daily basis (compare Zemło 2016: 495).

The group of people participating in the study are entering adulthood, and were told their family histories. They are familiar with the functioning of search engines and move freely in the internet environment. They have unlimited access to knowledge available online and in school and public libraries.

An interesting phenomenon is the fact that as many as 49% of the respondents have never heard of, or have not paid attention to the concept of cultural heritage. 51% of the respondents were able to list the elements of the material cultural heritage. The most recognisable and most frequently mentioned elements included: Catholic churches, monuments (as a general concept), the Jewish cemetery, roadside shrines, folk costumes, castles, old photographs and parks. The indication of very diverse elements is noteworthy, the collection including both monumental objects and those operating in the local and private sphere.

Very few of the teenagers — only 36% — have ever looked for information about the cultural heritage itself. The most frequently used source of information is the internet (44% of responses), then family (20%) and books (16%). Knowledge transmitted by teachers and museums is the least frequently used source of information. In 93% of cases, somebody interested in seeking information found it in the above-mentioned sources. It is worth noting how important the family is, especially the grandparents' generation, in relation to the other answers mentioned.

The students' responses highlighted significant issues. One of the most important is the weak scope of institutional activities in promoting knowledge about the cultural heritage. The lack of special presenters of cultural heritage in the local environment may be considered the main problem, according to the students' answers. Only 29% of the respondents could point out people working for the cultural heritage in their local sphere.

The general conclusion that emerges from the analysis of the research conducted indicates a lack of responsibility for education aimed at young people. The lack of it is the fault of the

authorities and the cultural environment in the region. Summing up, it has to be noted that small towns need professional people involved in the promotion and protection of cultural heritage. Past experience shows that one person who organises work around cultural heritage can carry out his or her activities as effectively as an institution.

An example of such an action is the Facebook page 'On a walk in Wysokie Mazowieckie'.¹¹ The social network site gathers several thousand actively participating fans. The administrator places archival photographs, sometimes unique, of the city on the website. He also organises actions related to the active care of monuments; for example, the regular cleaning of the Jewish cemetery.

The analysis of the surveys showed that young people unknowingly identify themselves with the cultural heritage. An example is a popular meeting place called in English 'the Eagle'. It was the name for the square in front of the Polish Military Organization monument. The monument was crowned with the figure of an eagle, as a symbol of the Polish state, which was typical for interwar period monuments in the region. There were no official names noted in the students' answers. Nonetheless, the Eagle was mentioned, the unofficial name used by the inhabitants.

Cultural events organised by the town can be promoted in any other place. The municipal cultural centre organised most of them: 'Summer concert at the fountain', 'Outdoor cinema' etc. Every historical or national anniversary is connected with a strongly patriotic event; for example, Independence Day (November 11) is organised near the Polish Military Organization memorial.¹²



Figure 8. Wysokie Mazowieckie – the military monument 'the Eagle' located on the main square (August 2018).

A regional historian perceives Wysokie Mazowieckie as a historical town which has a story to tell and presents it as the heritage of a small provincial town and its nobility (Dobroński

¹¹ See [web.facebook.com/Spacerkiem-Po-Wysokiem-Mazowieckiem](https://www.facebook.com/Spacerkiem-Po-Wysokiem-Mazowieckiem).

¹² See <http://www.wysokiemazowieckie.pl/>

2014: 359-367). Surprisingly enough in this set, it represents towns which are focused on ecology and building new infrastructure. Their representations do not highlight historicity or heritage values. They do not have enough tangible heritage to support a historical story, though not all the town's inhabitants share this attitude of neglect.

The analysis of the answers of the students from Wysokie Mazowieckie offers an important perspective of the heritage user. It suggests that the local citizens are not well enough informed. We can only speculate whether this town is a unique case, or whether there is a more general gap in knowledge.

Conclusion

We could identify several attitudes towards heritage: the long lasting and permanently recognized heritage of the Białowieża forest and of the foundation of Tykocin, as well as of the Orthodox tradition and of the printing workshop in Supraśl. Tykocin discovered its Jewish past relatively recently and its non-Jewish citizens identified with its cultural heritage. The history of the local Jewish community is also a dark war heritage of the Holocaust. While historians recognize Wysokie Mazowieckie as a town with its roots in the Middle Ages and the heritage of the local nobility, in official representations it looks as though the heritage was absent or ignored. We can also imagine other situations, when for example a heritage is lost for various reasons, like a natural catastrophe, or its simple translocation. This would have been the case of the monastery of Supraśl, if it had not been reconstructed. The castle in Tykocin, although there were archaeological excavations, was built in an imagined shape and is close to the type of invented heritage. Through the reconstruction of the town square yet another value was highlighted: the cultural transfer of the ideas of early modern Italian urbanism. Urban historians have known this for quite a long time, but for the general public it is a discovery. The museum in the Castle's basement links local history with regional and national and develops the identification with a master narrative. In the Tykocin Development Strategy the castle is listed as local heritage together with the Synagogue, Talmudic house, Church, etc. The reconstructed objects in both towns are appropriated as authentic without any hesitation.

With the involvement of creative people — local academics and élites in their presentation — the self-identification of the small towns follows the modes singled out by H  l  ne Mainet on the basis of research carried in France (Mainet 2011). The mayors represent a group of stakeholders: experts, who can influence the towns' heritage interpretation and presentation. They all praise the towns' natural environment, diversity and plurality of the religions, ethnicities and cultures, historical and cultural heritage, and they promote tourism.

They also have a say in the contents of strategic plans. These wish predominantly to develop essentially important infrastructures and much less funding is requested to promote and protect the cultural heritage, not to speak of its commodification. The towns need to develop the very basic infrastructure and the towns' furnishings. Even if they are aware of the value of cultural heritage in their region, there are no specific ideas in their documents about how to develop and use it.

If there is little in the official documents, we learn more about the historical and cultural heritage and revitalization projects through observation of the public discourse in public spaces. The questioning of students revealed alarming gaps in their knowledge. At the same time festivals, conferences, concerts and tourist trails are trendy in Podlasie's small towns, as they are all over Europe, and demonstrate the importance of supralocal influences and relations as suggested by Sztando (2017). The inquiry discovered traces of the work of creative people for small towns and the involvement of heritage users. This type of situation calls for further case studies and comparative perspectives. The large proportion of reconstructed and rebuilt heritage, specific for Poland as a result of Second World War destruction, and its appropriation as authentic, points to the crucial, psychological role of historical heritage allowing supralocal identification and self-presentation of local communities as important actors in national history.

Generally applicable conclusions concern first the strategic plans. They mirror the situation, the gaps in development and, consequently, the way the heritage is used. The second conclusion is about the importance of our main research question: what do the local people think about their place, what do they identify as their heritage and what do they do for its protection, use and reuse? In the cases studied, it appears that these questions are not raised, especially when it involves a conflict such as the one around the Białowieża primeval forest. The issue is sensitive as it touches the small community. It takes place in their area, but locals are kept outside the discourse, although such questioning would stimulate their participation in the search for a solution.

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