

THE REFUGEE CENTRE AS A FIELD OF RESEARCH

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Abstract

Even though refugee centres are often located in geographic proximity to us, they are, in many respects, a demanding and inaccessible field for ethnographic research. Such field is difficult not only methodologically, or due to social and cultural relations it produces, but also because of the ethical and psychological challenges that the ethnographer is faced with if s/he intends to understand certain aspects of the life of the residents of such a centre. The dilemmas involved in this situation resemble the ones experienced by those working in the most socially sensitive professions.

In this article I present selected difficulties I have encountered in the last years carrying out fieldwork in some of the refugee centres in Poland. Those difficulties had their sources in cultural differences and in social conditions. In the paper I describe briefly the conditions of living in these centres and the peculiar relations between the residents, which impact the effectiveness of the works carried out there. Moreover, I discuss the relationship between the cultural relativism and the ethical principles the researcher abides by. Each of these issues is illustrated with actual fieldwork situations.

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Ośrodki uchodźcze choć często bywają nieodległe geograficznie, to pod wieloma względami stanowią teren badawczy równie problematyczny i niedostępny, co przysłowiowa „amazońska dżungla”. Jest on trudny nie tylko jeśli chodzi o metodologię badań i relacje społeczno-kulturowe tam panujące, ale również z powodu wyzwań etycznych i psychologicznych wobec, których staje badacz pragnący poznać określone aspekty życia jego lokatorów. Dylematy stojące przed nim przypominają w znacznym stopniu te, jakich doświadczają przedstawiciele zawodów „zaufania publicznego”.

W tekście tym zwracam uwagę, na wybrane aspekty trudności, których sama doświadczyłam prowadząc od kilku lat badania w różnych ośrodkach dla uchodźców w Polsce. Swoje główne źródło miały one w różnicach kulturowych i społecznych uwarunkowaniach funkcjonowania człowieka. W artykule pokrótce omawiam warunki panujące w ośrodkach oraz specyficzne relacje między ich mieszkańcami mające wpływ na efektywność prowadzonych badań, a także zależność między relatywizmem kulturowym a zasadami etycznymi wyznawanymi przez badacza. Poszczególne zagadnienia egzemplifikuję przykładami z własnej praktyki terenowej.

Key words: Ethnopsychology, refugee centre, asylum seekers, fieldwork, ethics, emotion.

INTRODUCTION

Ethnology as an academic discipline is often primarily associated with exotic lands and distant travels, with a researcher figure resembling Bronisław Malinowski (2005) as one of the mythical “Argonauts” setting off in search of the Golden Fleece of undiscovered knowledge. However, the contemporary anthropologists concerned with methodology claim that “the distant lands” are in fact right around the corner, and the category such as “otherness” or “a savage” are merely a matter of sensibility and certain characteristics making one suited for the job, which can be summarised as having “eyes wide open” (Hammersley, Atkinson 2000, pp. 63–65). Regardless of whether one concurs with such a view or not, it is certainly true that something that is “familiar” (spatially, culturally, etc.) is not necessarily “well known” to us. It is by no means not the only paradox encountered if the research is carried out almost next-door from our own house, in a group that we believe we know a lot about, because we have thoroughly investigated it theoretically in advance. Personally, I experienced it when I first visited a refugee centre located in proximity of downtown Warsaw. My initial impressions were confirmed when a few years later I began working on a project about foreigners applying for a refugee status and I started to visit a few of such institutions all over Poland.¹ It turned out that even though such a field may not be geographically distant, it produces numerous kinds of other forms of distancing which render it almost as inaccessible as “the Amazon jungle”. It is also “difficult”, and not only in terms of methodology and the social-cultural relations present there, but also because of the ethical and psychological challenges faced by the ethnographer who intends to understand certain aspects of the life of the residents of such a centre.

In this text I would like to point to a few “challenges” I have faced during my research in refugee centres in Poland. Those challenges are rooted in psychological conditionings of the kelter of the man. Therefore I begin by characterizing the conditions of living in these centres and the peculiar relations formed there, which impacted the effectiveness of my work. I also discuss the relationship between the cultural relativism and the ethical principles that a researcher abides by. Each of these issues is illustrated with actual fieldwork situations. I realise that the examples of “difficult” situations I have chosen are but ones among many possible cases, and that every ethnographer has his or her own repertoire of anecdotes and experiences, which could also illustrate

¹ The number of refugee centres in Poland is not constant, nor are their locations, because the Centre for Refugee Affairs puts them out to public tenders, in accordance with the Public Procurement Law of January 24th, 2004 (the full text of the bill can be found in: *Dziennik Ustaw* 2010, No. 113, item 759). Currently, there are twelve such centres, four of which are owned by the state, whereas eight are rented by the Centre for Refugee Affairs from private owners. See: http://www.udsc.gov.pl/Liste_osrodkow_dla_uchodzcow,464.html (accessed 21 February 2013). More on regulations concerning putting refugee centres out to tender, cf. Chrzanowska, Klaus, Kosowicz 2011; cf. Kościński 2011.

the problems discussed here. My principal aim was to encourage discussion about the role and impact of the human psychology (i.e. the psychology of the researcher and the researched) on the mutual contact and the relationships in the field.

REFUGEE CENTRES IN POLAND

It is not easy to describe in the general way the institutions where the foreigners entering Poland and applying under the Geneva Conventions (1951)² for help and security of the refugee status are placed. Firstly, these places are very different from one another, and secondly, their number, their location and the conditions they offer are dynamic and changeable. There are overall guidelines about the procedure of putting refugee centres out to tender, which define the formal requirements that such institutions should fulfil.³ Nevertheless, the fact of the matter is that the standards of stay they offer and real living conditions vary. These factors largely influence the atmosphere in the centres, as well as the relations between the refugees, the administrative staff and the neighbouring communities. The list of conditions that, according to the formulation used in the Centre for Refugee Affairs' guidelines, should characterise an "ideal centre" includes: proximity to certain institutions (such as schools, medical providers, social security centres, local family counselling centres), ease of access to public transportation, proximity of NGO's offering help to refugees, availability of low cost rental apartments, low unemployment in the region, local communities' positive attitude towards foreigners, employing foreigners (residents) as the centre's personnel, etc. (Kościński 2011, p. 8). Most of the centres I have visited do not fulfil these criteria, which invites the conclusion that the places where the foreigners awaiting the end of the status-granting procedure stay are far from "ideal". This influences the processes of adapting to the new reality and the attitudes towards acculturation (cf. Kość-Ryżko, Czerniejewska 2012). One could hardly expect people staying in devastated workers' hostels (e.g. the no longer existing centre in Bielany, near the Lucchini Steel Mill, or the "Budowlani" centre in Białystok), next to highways (Kolonja Horbów) or military training grounds (Łomża, Czerwony Bór, Grupa near Grudziądz), next to prisons (Czerwony Bór) or in social and geographical isolation caused by the surrounding

² The full Polish text of the bill can be found here: <http://refugee.pl/cms/site.files/File/konwencja%20genewska.pdf>, (accessed 16 January 2013). Poland ratified the Geneva Conventions, i.e. the bills and detailed orders' package concerning granting international security to foreigners in 1991 (*Dziennik Ustaw* No. 119, item 515).

³ The opinion about the issue prepared by a legal expert Krzysztof Kościński and commissioned by the Association for Legal Intervention showed that in the light of the order of the Prime Minister of January 28, 2010 (*Dziennik Ustaw* 2010, No. 12, item 68) running a refugee centre is actually a service, a variant of hotel or restaurant services.

forests (Czerwony Bór, Dębak) to express enthusiasm, eagerness to integrate with the new society and a general sense of satisfaction with their existential situation. However, empathy and understanding are not the values that are most helpful when conducting fieldwork with discriminated and marginalised groups, as many have already observed (cf. Czykwin 2007; Friske 2003; Marzec-Holka 2005).

Residents of the centres

An average Pole knows only as much about residents of such centres, as he or she can hear in the media, which tend to focus on scandals, such as hunger strikes, weddings with the underage, protests against mistreatment and detention⁴ of children in guarded centres (Sieniow 2013), etc. There is no doubt that the foreigners described with the term “refugees” are a special kind of migrants. Their specificity is determined by the threat of persecution and the lack of any guarantees of personal security or of fundamental freedoms in their countries of origin, which are major reasons behind their mobility. Legally, the term “refugee” is only applicable to those who fulfil the criteria of the definition phrased in the Geneva Conventions,⁵ but it is often used in a broader sense to describe all sorts of foreigners, whose migration was caused by social and political factors (and not, as is the case with “ordinary” immigrants, by economic factors) (Grzymała-Każłowska, Stefańska 2008, p. 1). This definition is the closest to the sense in which I am writing about this group, and therefore I accept this definition for the purpose of my research. However, in the light of existing administrative decisions (both on national and international levels) many of the people applying for the refugee status do not meet the necessary criteria, but nevertheless are allowed to stay in one of the refugee centres, or outside of them, and receive the social benefits for as long as the administrative procedure is underway.⁶ The vast majority of such “refugees” who arrive in Poland have citizenships of the Russian Federation (approximately 62%), and 87% of them declare themselves to be of the Chechen, Dagestani or Ingush national-

⁴ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) defines detention as “confinement within a narrowly bounded or restricted location, including prisons, closed camps, detention facilities, or airport transit zones, where freedom of movement is substantially curtailed, and the only opportunity to leave this limited area is to leave the territory.” See: <http://idcoalition.org/portal/downloads/reports/JRS%20Europe%20report.pdf>, (accessed 12 May 2005). Cf. Survey of alternative forms of preventive measures for persons applying for a refugee status in the European Union member states, ed. N. Chmelickova, Regionalna Koalicja 2006, <http://www.hfhrpol.waw.pl/pliki/alternatives.pdf>, (accessed 12 June 2013).

⁵ The article defining the criteria for granting the refugee status states that it should be given to a person who “[...] owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for the reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country [...]”. Geneva Conventions. Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, Article 1, point 2.

⁶ See: <http://www.udsc.gov.pl/Swiadczenia,socjalne,dla,osob,ubiegajacych,sie,o,nadanie,statusu,uchodzcy,522.html>, (accessed 1 May 2013).

ity. The second most numerous group are the citizens of Georgia (approximately 25% of all refugees), and then come citizens of Armenia, Belarus, Ukraine, Kirgizstan, Afghanistan and Vietnam. In 2011 out of 3 534 submitted applications (concerning 6 887 people),⁷ the refugee status was granted to 153 foreigners, including 82 citizens of the Russian Federation, 19 of Belarus, 16 of Iraq and 12 from Eritrea.⁸

The way the refugees are perceived by the Polish society is determined by a few major and overlapping factors. The most important ones are: insufficient knowledge, the existence of numerous stereotypes about strangers, fear of competition over the limited resources available in social benefits and the existing demand for jobs for low-qualified workers.⁹ One of the results of the situation is the generally low awareness of the conditions of living of the refugees in Poland and the hostility towards them of the majority of the society.¹⁰ Instead of accurate information, the public is faced with myths and hearsay about luxurious hotel circumstances the foreigners awaiting the decision about their refugee status stay in, about gourmet food they are served and which is paid for by the state and its citizens, and about high social benefits they receive as “pocket money”.

In reality, however, moving into a refugee centre and confronting the conditions there can traumatise the refugees for the second time,¹¹ cause them a sense of humiliation, which they describe in the following manner: “we live crowded like cattle”, “you treat us like trash which can be squeezed between trash”, “this place shows who we are for you and where you would like to see us”, “it’s simply a ghetto” (these are the words of some of the residents of refugee centres). People of this group often believe that what they receive upon entering the Europe they had dreamt of and our country, that is a humble room in a centre with access to a kitchen, a small allowance, health care and canteen meals are a good start. On the basis of this and of what they had

⁷ The discrepancy is caused by the fact that the number of applications includes family applications, which can include 10 people or more.

⁸ The quoted data come from the newest published report of the Head of the Centre for Refugees Affairs for the year 2011: <http://www.udsc.gov.pl/SPRAWOZDANIA,1354.html>, (accessed 4 April 2012).

⁹ The problem of social categorizations is also important here (Allen, Wilder 1975, pp. 971–977), as are the resulting mechanisms of labelling, which in the case of the refugees include being branded (with otherness, with statelessness, with unemployment), being socially marked (with war, suffering, and catastrophe), being stigmatised (as “parasites”, as poor, having numerous children, as excluded). All this produced a conventional language usually used for talking about the refugees.

¹⁰ It is enough to make a brief survey of internet forums and users’ commentaries on articles about immigrants and refugees to learn what is the opinion of a part of the society about their integration and about their conditions of living in Poland.

¹¹ This second wave of trauma accompanies great stress, which a person experiences when he or she is faced with lack of understanding from others after difficult experiences, that is when he or she needs empathy most. It leads to a sense of loneliness, of inadequacy of one’s own feelings, isolation and pointlessness of life itself (Zdankiewicz-Ściagała, Przybylska 2002, pp. 12–15, Lis-Turlejska 2003, p. 57).

heard from others who left and ended up in the West they believe that the subsequent stages of the status-granting procedure will only be better. This is not the case though, because even after they had been granted the refugee status no problems are automatically solved. Soon they realise how “illusory” the status is, which they have not thought about before (cf. Czerniejewska, Kość-Ryżko 2013), because until their application has been examined, they are granted two absolute rights: they cannot be discriminated against and they cannot be sent back across the border (Łotocki 2008, p. 164).

Nevertheless some of the refugees believe that, taking into consideration what they had been through (e.g. war, tortures, persecution, rape, robbery, threats, etc.), the fact they are made to stay in a refugee centre, in the conditions it offers, makes them feel humiliated and excluded from the society, which they have not necessarily chosen, because they have actually been trying to get to a different Western European country than Poland.¹² During fieldwork in the centre in Czerwony Bór, asking the residents how they felt in this place and what they thought about it, I heard more than one that they lived in a ghetto. They described their situation comparing it to the neighbouring penal institution and stating they themselves are *takije tiurmiszcziki*,¹³ *only with a bigger “prison yard”*. This sense of distance separating them from the “rest of the world” is not specific to that particular centre, which is indeed quite unique in character (cf. Kość-Ryżko, Czerniejewska 2013). I saw it in other centres too. Nevertheless in this case Erving Goffman’s concept seems to be especially accurate: it allows us to see the isolated refugee centre as a total institution (Goffman 1961, p. 1) (his examples include: prisons, old people’s homes, psychiatric hospitals, military barracks and convents). As in other institutions belonging to this category, residents of refugee centres are (which is not the only analogy between them) similarly subjected to material and social deprivation (of prerogatives such as a separate household, ability to work, self-determination, mobility, responsibility for one’s family, etc.). Moreover, they acquire habits, which partially impair their maturity and social capital (they become passive, they expect to be helped and granted benefits, not uncommonly a learned helplessness is characterizing them and their skills, unused, become obsolete). A refugee centre is a formal institution, with elaborate bureaucracy, and the social role of the residents

¹² It needs to be remembered that most of the foreigners who apply for the refugee status see Poland as a transit country, because in fact they aim to go to one of the Western countries, which offer much better living and settlement conditions. However, since 2000 the “Eurodac” system allows the European Union member states to identify those who had not received asylum yet or those who are illegal immigrants and to return them to where they initially crossed the EU border or to deport them. As a result, many foreigners end up in Poland after failed attempts to settle in France, Austria or Norway. See: EURODAC – European Dactyloscopy (Council Regulation No 2725/2000 of 11 December 2000, *Dziennik Ustaw* WE L 316, 15 December 2000). Cf.: http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/justice_freedom_security/free_movement_of_persons_asylum_immigration/l33081_pl.htm, (accessed 25 April 2012).

¹³ Russian for: “such prisoners”.

is reduced to being a passive, “incapacitated” foreigner, whose entire life has been restricted to a limited area (Goffman 1961, p. 2). This impression is only intensified by the fact that this area is fenced and marked with signs forbidding entry and informing that the area is under video surveillance.

Real and symbolic space of centre

The peculiar organisation of space around the centre and inside it is striking the moment one crosses the border between the “two worlds”. The structuring of the real space and its symbolic organisation, which mirrors the cultural patterns (Randvir 2002, pp. 140–144) typical for the nationality, which dominates among the residents are especially interesting.¹⁴ The first floor is usually reserved for administration and common rooms. Here there are porter’s lodge, the manager’s office and social worker’s office, the doctor’s and the psychologist’s offices, the room of the lawyer, a common room for children, a kindergarten, sometimes a TV room for the adults, a classroom, where Polish is taught, and sometimes there is a canteen, where the meals are distributed. The refugees occupy the upper floors – their flats are there,¹⁵ and so are common utility spaces such as a kitchen, a bathroom, toilets (separate for men and for women), the laundry room, the drying room and a prayer room, as well as the so-called “men’s clubs”.¹⁶ This is decisively the private sphere and the appearance of a “stranger” is always noticed and sometimes unwelcome. It is more widely accepted for a family to invite a guest to this family’s room than for a stranger to be in one of the common spaces. It might be caused by various factors, but most likely the reason lies in the particular division of space, the unofficial modes of coexistence and in the intimate character of the life led there, which the residents prefer to keep private. It is also partially connected with some areas being taboo spaces (marked by signs forbidding entry to, e.g., women or children, or imposing certain kinds of behaviour, e.g. silence, covering one’s head,

¹⁴ Due to frequent conflicts between refugees of different nationalities, Chechens are usually not placed with other ethnic groups, even though sometimes full separation is not possible. In such cases the staff of the centre make sure that representatives of different cultures stay on different floors of the building.

¹⁵ The standard, the size and the equipment or furniture available in these flats vary from centre to centre. Sometimes a family receives a two-room unit with its own bathroom and toilet (e.g. in Czerwony Bór). More often, however, bathrooms and kitchens are common, and five or more people occupy a small room. Usually, depending on what is available, the management of the centre tries to offer bigger flats or more rooms to large families, remembering that in some cultures (such as the Chechen one) people of opposite sex beyond certain age should not be sleeping in one room. My observation shows that even when this condition cannot be met by the centre, the families set up their own makeshift partition walls to separate “the men’s sphere” from “the women’s sphere”.

¹⁶ These are usually regular rooms serving as common rooms of sorts, in which men can meet, sit, smoke and talk, usually shielding from the hustle caused by their numerous progeny crammed in a limited space. Such rooms are not “obligatory” in refugee centres and can only be found in some of them. It usually depends on the will of the management and on the availability of space.

taking off shoes, ritual washing, etc.), or with fears that a stranger would not respect the sphere seen as sacred and would violate the order of the sacred and the profane.

Understanding the pattern of valorisation of space in the centre is not easy and requires patience, guardedness, observational skills and high resistance (e.g. to hostile looks and remarks in foreign languages). Initially, the ethnographer is seen as an intruder and is prone to blunders, which s/he does not understand, and which may for example be that s/he sits on a bench outside that is usually reserved for men, elder women or pregnant women, etc. Successful familiarisation with the new field and establishing relationships between “the natives” and “the stranger” largely depends on the general atmosphere in the centre, but also on having a guide who is respected and has a certain authority. There is no rule though, because each of these places has its own codes, and one can never be sure, whether the researcher will be expected to culturally adapt to the local norms in accordance with his or her gender, age, prestige, or whether the ethnographer’s stay will be legitimised independently of these categories – simply because s/he is a member of his or her community who is allowed its typical “extravagance” (e.g. in clothes, food or behaviour).

The acceptance of the ethnographer and the degree to which s/he is admitted to participate in the life of the centre depends also on the distance established between the researcher and “the hosts” right at the beginning of that relationship, as well as on the identity s/he is ascribed. It can be one or more identities (including professional, cultural, gender, ethnic or social identifications). During my research I have also often noticed another important factor that is the degree to which the ethnographer is “naturalised”.¹⁷ This can be illustrated with situations when it “pays more” to be treated as “any woman” would by the foreigners and therefore have a limited access to men’s sphere, but a better contact with women and children, with their problems and living conditions, which one can then follow almost without restrictions, accompanying the women in their everyday activities. However, sometimes it is more advisable to remain “a strange Polish and European woman”, who is allowed to talk to men, sit at a table with them, drink tea and discuss politics, or enter “the men’s club”, but hence loses the privilege of being treated as “one of ours”¹⁸ and having the trust and approval of the

¹⁷ By that I mean that there are refugee centres and refugee communities, which accept the ethnographer better and faster than others, but it is difficult to determine why. In my opinion this is “a local phenomenon”, a *spiritus loci*, which cannot be predicted in advance and which is a part of the field’s and the residents’ specificity. Encountering the researcher, they categorise him or her, according to their own notions and knowledge, and place in one of the groups known in their own culture. Because of that, I have been dressed in certain kinds of clothes, my daughter was given a name typical of the refugees’ nation, I have been isolated from my family and placed in a women’s room, while my husband was taken to men’s room, etc.

¹⁸ I realise that the researched group never treats “the stranger”, the ethnographer coming from a different culture as really “one of ours”. The question remains to what extent such distance interferes with the aims and the premises of the research.

women. Calculating the benefits and the drawbacks of either approach is never easy to predict, because the result depends on the “phenomenon” of that particular place, its “here and now”, which depends on “luck” rather on a “cool” calculation.

Ethnographer in a refugee centre

The reason why refugee centres can be an “exciting”, professionally and personally inspiring field of research for an ethnographer is that they are in a way exterritorial and, even though they might be geographically close, culturally they remain very distant. Therefore they are untypical and interesting not only for anthropological reasons, but also for social, political and cross-cultural reasons.

The fact that entering a refugee centre is forbidden without a special permission (granted by the Head of the Centre for Refugee Affairs) contributes to the general opinion that these institutions are inaccessible, and thus “exotic”. This impression is intensified by internal rules, which organise the functioning of such places and the lives of residents of various cultures and nationalities. This means that the ethnographer is obliged to learn both the state laws, which determine the rules of a refugee centre (e.g. forbidding to take photographs, forbidding visitors to stay after 10:00 p.m., or to bring in big bags, etc.),¹⁹ and the internal, unwritten rules set up by the residents (concerning behaviour in areas reserved for either men or women, in the kitchen, on the corridors, etc.). Noticing these norms quickly and adapting to them is a decisive factor in whether the researcher will be accepted and allowed to create a relationship with the refugees. Learning the local hierarchy and who is who swiftly is equally important, because otherwise it is difficult to gain approval for one’s actions from the refugee centre’s community.

The official and the unofficial rules of the place do not always coincide, which is something the residents know very well. They frequently use this discrepancy as a test for the “visitors” (such as the ethnographer) to prove their “honesty”, “loyalty”, “good intentions”, etc. This may be quite a challenge, which I have learned, pondering over an almost Shakespearean dilemma about how I can remain OK with the management of the centre, while gaining the refugees’ trust. In most cases it was extremely difficult. As I was getting closer to my interlocutors, learning about their lots, their family histories, their “modes of survival” as refugees (in the centre, in Poland, in Europe, etc.), I inevitably lost credibility in the eyes of the administrative staff, on which my freedom of movement in the centre and the atmosphere and comfort of my work largely depended. More than once, after “overstaying” till after 10:00 p.m., I was accompanied by my excited hosts all the way to the porter’s lodge. They were eager

¹⁹ For information on a relevant directive that is in works, see: <http://www.serwisprawa.pl/artykuly,37,926,pobyt-w-osrodku-dla-cudzoziemcow-ubiegajacych-sie-o-nadanie-statusu-uchodzcy> (accessed 25 April 2013).

to see how I would deal with the reaction of the staff. The security guards were usually already waiting for me there with my passport (it is obligatory to leave it at the entrance to the centre) and ready to reproach me for not being “serious and responsible”, remarking that I “should be ashamed”, that I “give the wrong example”, etc., and with a warning that they would have to inform the management about this “night incident”. These situations always made me feel very uncomfortable, especially as the security guards tended to be valuable informants too and losing their approval could cause me numerous troubles. Moreover, I felt genuinely guilty. Nevertheless, I did my best facing them, not trying to give too many excuses and keeping a reasonable balance between the swagger and the humility. I knew that any subsequent invitations from the refugees depended on my attitude at that moment. However, sometimes I felt my resistance to trouble and risk that my hosts put me up for weakened.²⁰ I also had the impression that they were amused by my confusion and this was the way they expressed their peculiar “sense of freedom”. They would often try to calm me down saying: “What can they do to you? What? Will they shut us somewhere? We are shut already, we have nothing, and so we can lose nothing... All that is left to us is our *svoboda* (freedom – K. K-R.), and this cannot be taken away” (the words of an informant in Czerwony Bór). They often observed carefully how I dealt with such situations, and I felt as if I were taking some sort of a weird exam. Some would use such confrontations as a proof that they are being “mistreated” by the management of the centre. They tried to persuade me that abiding by restrictions and limitations, that in their opinion served no other purpose than to show power and domination, was humiliating to them in the light of their own culture.

Once I had managed to gain their trust and they had decided that I am “OK, after all”, they offered stories about how they had managed to outsmart the management of the centre in one way or another, for example smuggling a slaughtered ram through a window and then dressing it in the centre’s kitchen, or how they had managed to hide their relatives in a room occupied by five people already for weeks, or how they threw opulent wedding receptions, etc. Knowing that one is admitted to hearing such more or less credible stories is not always helpful during research, because, firstly, it distracts one from the actual subject, and secondly, it shifts the relationships with

²⁰ One such moment was when my husband was taken for a surprise night drive in a forest, in a rickety old car, packed full with men, listening to loud Caucasian music, while I and my baby stayed, completely unaware, at the centre with the women. When at 11:00 p.m. I was finally told that my husband was not there anymore, because he had left already and I should not worry because I can stay the night (without having previously informed the porter’s lodge), I decided to return on my own, with my daughter, to our rented flat, through a secluded area. For my own purposes I called this event “the Dzhigit test”, because I have later heard from other people (mostly volunteers) that they, too, had been subjected to it by the refugees, who thus tested their “virility and courage”. From what I hear from my husband and others the pleasure and the safety involved in such drives are rather limited.

the researched group to a risky ground, which does not make it easier to ask them to fill out a survey or give an interview. The dissonance and confusion caused by such situations can lead in a way to crises of identity for the researcher. In my case it was a source of an internal conflict, which provoked questions, such as: “Is what I am doing professional?”, “Am I not entering into somebody else’s part?”, “Am I being competent?”, “Am I still an ethnologist, or have I become a naïve idealist, changing the world, or a social activist?”. Even though for a long time I believed these last roles can be reconciled, and that it is only a matter of professional honesty, involvement and clear priorities whether they will complement each other and coexist effectively, now I am convinced that this is not necessarily the case. Confusing the roles that the researcher takes up in his contacts with the informants may cause a lot of damage, and result in disappointment, frustration and a sense of having been used. Finally, even if we do learn about the real problems and secrets of our interlocutors, our research will not necessarily benefit from it, and I assume it is the research that is the ultimate goal and motive for our presence in the field.

CONCLUSION

The factors described above explain why the dilemmas faced by the ethnographer who undertakes research in a refugee centre resemble those faced by any researcher setting off for “a difficult field”. This particular place can be generally characterised through a simple negation: it is not what some believe it to be, and it is not what others think it should strive to be. That means, that it is certainly not “a home” for the foreigners. A lot can be said, of course, about the attempts to make these places nice and friendly, and the refugees strive to let their children grow up in relatively “normal” circumstances, but the centres still resemble Goffman’s (1961) asylums – in this case created in order to protect the society from strangers (Firlit-Fesnak, Łotocki 2007, p. 13). Looking for a metaphor that describes this specific kind of field, and that still remains within the anthropological poetics of “romantic journeys to distant lands”, I would say that refugee centres in Poland are a sort of “islands peopled with unwanted exiles”.

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