

GERMANY – A NEW HOME? ON A NEW FORM OF MIGRATION IN A BORDER AREA

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Abstract

The Polish accession to the European Union has created favorable opportunities for Poles to settle in many West-European countries. Though the possibilities for settling in Germany were rather limited until 2011, more and more Polish citizens became interested in living on the German side of the Oder-Neisse border already shortly after 2004 (upon Polish accession to the EU). Particularly attractive were areas relatively close to Szczecin. The analysis of interviews with inhabitants there – Germans citizens, Polish newcomers and local politicians – enables the article to discuss the current situation in the district Uckermark in Brandenburg. The author focuses her attention on three administrative units: the town of Gartz and the villages Tantow and Mescherin.

She presents elements in the social infrastructure redirected to the needs of newly arrived Polish families (for example kindergartens and schools), and subsequent efforts to ease their integration into German society. “I have one foot in Poland, and the other one in Germany, but I have to admit I’m quite satisfied that way.” – a phrase which expresses the pragmatic feelings of the many Poles who participated in the research conducted by the author in the years 2011–2013. The author’s presentation on this new form of coexistence and integration between Poles and Germans will be completed by an account of the opinions of native German residents about the current situation.

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Przystąpienie Polski do Unii Europejskiej stworzyło dla Polaków korzystne możliwości osiedlenia się w wielu krajach Europy Zachodniej. Wprawdzie na terenie RFN-u były one do 2011 roku dość ograniczone, to jednak już po 2004 r. (i akcesie Polski do UE) coraz więcej polskich obywateli było zainteresowanych zamieszkaniem po lewej stronie granicy na Odrze i Nysie.

Szczególnie atrakcyjne stały się tereny znajdujące się relatywnie blisko Szczecina. W wyniku analizy wywiadów terenowych, przeprowadzonych z mieszkującymi tu od lat Niemcami, nowymi przybyszami z Polski oraz lokalnymi politykami, w artykule zostaje naświetlona aktualna sytuacja na terenie powiatu Uckermark w Brandenburgii. Autorka skupia szczególną uwagę na trzech jednostkach administracyjnych: miasto Gartz, gminie Mescherin i gminie Tantow.

Przedstawia istniejące w nich elementy infrastruktury społecznej ukierunkowane na zaspokojenie potrzeb nowo przybyłych polskich rodzin (na przykład przedszkola i szkoły), jak i kolejne starania o ich integrację ze społeczeństwem niemieckim. „Jedną nogą jestem w Polsce, jedną w Niemczech i przyznam się, że mi to bardzo odpowiada” – to zdanie oddaje szczególnie trafnie odczucia wielu Polaków, którzy

brali udział w badaniach prowadzonych przez autorkę w latach 2011–2013. Rozważania autorki o tej nowej formie koegzystencji i integracji między Polską a Niemcami uzupełnia ocena zaistniałej sytuacji przez rodowitych Niemców.

Key words: Polish migration to Germany, the new homeland, integration, Uckermark, common interests.

In recent years there have been some remarkable initiatives focusing on the lives of Poles and Germans in each other's countries. Particularly, the expositions "We Berliners! – Berlin and its Poles" (March-June 2009 in Berlin¹), and, "Poles by free choice – German families in Warsaw in the 19th and 20th Centuries" (January-April 2010 in Warsaw). Even if the motives behind the migration of Poles to Berlin in the rule differed distinctly from those of the Germans who settled in Warsaw, the expositions showed impressively how Germans have long been present in Warsaw as well as how Polish immigrants have had an enormous influence on the social and cultural life of Berlin. Both projects emphasized the mainly positive experiences and consequences of the migration into each of the countries and made it comprehensible that, in the past, it was in many instances fully "normal" as Germans to live in Poland, or as Poles to live in Germany.

To be reminded of this is important not only because most of the migratory currents – above all from Poland to Germany – were not labeled "normal", and for the people concerned were hardly associated with positive connotations. To be mentioned here are, for one, the movements of Polish immigrants towards the end of the 19th century in search of work, for example in the Ruhr, which led to some German cities there before Second World War I having up to one-quarter of their inhabitants of Polish origin. These were migrations that in the rule arose out of pure material necessity in the regions of origin. For another, the periods of war and post-war are to be mentioned, as again people from Poland came to Germany: first as slave-labor, then as "displaced persons". And not to omit those who in the 1980s decided to remain permanently in the Federal Republic as refugees, in part for political reasons, but also often in order to escape the material poverty of their homeland. All these examples – even if they differ from one another, and in part very much so – have one thing in common: these forms of migration were in the rule forced, and in their causes and consequences accompanied in most cases by hardship suffered by the people involved. Against this historical backdrop a new development has emerged that boldly contrasts with the experiences of the past-Polish citizens settling on the Federal Republic side

¹ The exposition "We Berliners!" (*My, berlińczycy!*) was organized by the "Center for Historic Research Berlin of the Polish Academy of Sciences" and was the result of a 2006 project "We Berliners! The Poles in the Development of the City (18th–21st Cen.)", that was the purpose for researching and presenting the multi-layered relations of the Poles and Poland to Berlin and the influence of Polish immigrants on the societal and cultural life of the German metropolis in the last 300 years.

of the German-Polish border, whom I will refer to here as a ‘new form of migration’ specifically in these countries’ border regions.

While after Poland’s EU accession the greater part of the migration from Poland towards Western Europe (above all to the UK and Ireland) dominated the attention of the media and the interest of researchers in various disciplines, also the most recent Polish migratory experiences in Germany have stimulated research interest of many academics (e.g. Ładykowska, Ładykowski 2013, Ładykowski, Kaczmarek 2012, Jarosz 2011, Ładykowski 2011), with the focus of observation on developments in the former East-German district of Uecker-Randow² (from 2011 the eastern part of the new administrative district of Vorpommern-Greifswald in the German Federal State of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern). In this contribution however attention is focused on the same phenomenon in the nearby district of Uckermark (in the state of Brandenburg). Also there many Poles are settling on the German side, though their situation has not enjoyed the same media attention as in the case of the township of Löcknitz in the Vorpommern-Greifswald district. The author’s presentation is based mainly on the interviews she carried out in recent years in three communities. Her interview partners were naturally Poles currently living there as well as Germans, including some community officials.

RECEPTIVE COMMUNITIES

The two districts Vorpommern-Greifswald and Uckermark border on each other and have a common border with Poland. From there the larger Polish city of Stettin is easily accessible. The Uckermark district thus offers geographical incentives for Polish to settle there just as Vorpommern-Greifswald does: attractive land prices, short driving distance to Stettin (Szczecin) and thus a relatively good accessibility to the city.

The Uckermark district is the largest in Germany as to territory. The northernmost and nearest to Stettin local authority of the district is Gartz on the Oder, in which are united the town of Gartz and four other communities, of which particularly Tantow, Mescherin and the town of Gartz itself have had a special appeal for Poles looking for homes because of their proximity to Poland.

The town of Gartz (Oder)

The town of Gartz (Oder) is 30 km south of Stettin and lies directly on the border to Poland: The Oder River forms here the national border to Poland, south of Gartz it branches into two arms and the western arm flows directly along the edge of the city.

² In the district territory reform in 2011 the *Landkreis* (district) Vorpommern-Greifswald was formed comprising the former *Landkreise* (districts) Uecker-Randow, Ostvorpommern as well as the *Hansestadt* (Hanseatic city) Greifswald.

The population of Gartz in 2013 was 2,475,³ of which 241 were Poles. This information however does not reflect the actual number of people of Polish nationality living in Gartz, for already in past decades there were frequent German-Polish marriages, with the partners choosing the town as their residential base. Many of the Polish persons involved have since assimilated and taken German nationality.

The difficult economic situation in the “new” (i.e. eastern, post-reunification) German federal states, the high unemployment and scarce good occupational perspectives there forced many inhabitants, above all young Germans, to leave their hometowns in the region. Many housing properties put up for sale found no buyers and slowly began to disintegrate. The region was increasingly perceived as “threatened by extinction”. This danger seems now to have been at least somewhat lessened thanks to the new Polish “settlers”.

The town of Gartz is very receptive towards this development. It is also very concerned about its relations with the people who live on the other side of the Oder River. An example of this attitude is the preschool “Regenbogen” (i.e. rainbow), which, though operated independently, is supported by the town administration, which provides not only the building. Here attend also children from Stettin and Gryfino, a city in the Stettin area about 12 km distant from Gartz.

“Our preschool has on the Polish side a very good reputation. Some parents even drive more than 120 km daily to bring their children to preschool here” – says one kindergarten teacher in Gartz. The good quality supervision of the children and the wish of the Polish parents to encourage early bilingualism – these are also some of the most important reasons for young Polish families to settle in Gartz and the area. In 2013 here a total of 128 children attended, of which 30 were of Polish origin, who for the greatest part were already living in the community.

The mayor of Gartz, Burkhard Fleischmann, emphasizes also other, so-called soft locational factors and tries, for example, to improve the educational offer by promoting the reactivation of a secondary school. On his initiative evening courses in German language for adult Poles and Polish courses for Germans were organized, which are held in the local school, and the response from the population has been great.

Also various other institutions in the town have reoriented themselves to Polish-speaking customers. In the local savings bank there is no problem taking care of bank business without speaking a word of German. Also the local supermarket has at least some staff who speak Polish. In the town administration offices reception hours are offered during which either an interpreter or Polish-speaking office worker is available to handle the concerns of the new Polish residents and interested parties from Poland. Mayor Fleischmann intervenes personally if necessary to help the newcomers without a knowledge of German to overcome the occasional bureaucratic obstacle.

³ All data in the text for numbers of inhabitants and population composition are based on information from the Inhabitants Registry Office of the Gartz Local Authority.

Overall it seems there is at administrative levels a basic welcoming stance towards the Polish settlers, and the hope is to win over further Polish people to becoming new citizens of Gartz.

The township Tantow

The township of Tantow lies advantageously on a national highway (B 113) and a super-highway (A 11). There is good access to the train system – with Tantow Station on the line Berlin-Angermünde-Stettin only one station away from Stettin – which theoretically should make possible rapid access to the Polish Stettin as well as to the German capital city. In practice however the situation is otherwise: an aging rail infrastructure allows trains to travel on this line in places sometimes only at 50 km/h, repeatedly causing passengers problems in making connections.

In 2013 this village had about 753 inhabitants, among them also 17 Polish families (101 persons in total). At least two more young families from Poland had definite plans in 2014 to move to Tantow. At the childcare facility “Abenteuerland” (i.e. Adventure Land) in Tantow 31 Polish children (from 62 children in total) had been enrolled by late 2013. The facility is at full capacity and there is still a waiting list including many Polish families.

Thanks to the coming of the Poles the village – in contrast to the general trend of residents leaving Uckermark – can demonstrate a population increase. Everything points to about every tenth Tantower soon having Polish roots in one way or another. This fact is taken quite seriously by village leaders. In 2007 the *Evangelische Salveytal-grundschule zu Tantow* (“Protestant Salvey Valley Primary School in Tantow”) was founded, which teaches on the principles of Montessorian pedagogy. The school operates under the (non-governmental) sponsorship of an association especially formed for the purpose.

“Our children shall be prepared for a future together with our Polish neighbors” – this is one of the motives behind the school’s founding, so that the pupils there could learn, from the very beginning, the Polish language in addition to the obligatory English. In the school year 2013–14 there were four age-levels with a total of 44 pupils (of which ten of Polish origin) who learn together in mixed-age groups.⁴

The school also offers – as in the town of Gartz – German and Polish language courses for adults, and three years ago the village instituted bi-yearly German-Polish town meetings. At the request of the Polish residents they prepare the spring meeting, and the Germans organize the autumn gathering. While this initiative at first arose out of the wish to promote the integration of the newcomers, it is now rather the expression of their need to actively participate in determining the conditions of life there for all.

⁴ Through having become better known in the last two years, the school has increased the percentage of its Polish pupils by about 50%. The school also employs two Polish teachers.

The arrival of new Polish inhabitants continues, and the mayor of Tantow, Andreas Meincke, puts in a lot of effort into making the village still more attractive. The support of the community council in this is unanimous.

Though the village owns hardly any building land of its own that could be offered to interested buyers from Poland, there are still some houses standing empty, e.g. in Damitzow, a quarter in Tantow. Only, the access road there and the village street through Damitzow are badly in need of repair. The inhabitants originally living there and the community council alone are not in a financial position to deal with the task. Here the financial support of the federal state would be necessary, but the matter has been adjudged “not within state competence”.

Also the enlargement of the train line Berlin-Stettin is a constant subject of discussion in the region. Actually, such a project would constitute the remediation of some of the last negative effects of the war: After this part of Germany in 1945 was also declared the Soviet zone of occupation, one set of tracks on the line Berlin-Stettin was removed and taken away to the former Soviet Union in the context of war-reparations.

Since then the line has been operated on one track, which besides a limitation of capacity, also represents a permanent danger of a train accident,⁵ especially because it is used more and more heavily (by daily commuters). The two-track expansion (between Passow and Stettin-Gumience) and the introduction of continuous, regular service between Stettin and Berlin would substantially contribute to the attractiveness of the region.

The township Mescherin

The township Mescherin was created in late 2002 out of four until then separate townships. It lies directly on the border with Poland (the western arm of the Oder R.). Also here in recent years many Poles have found a new home (of 783 inhabitants 2013 were 151 Polish). In this context a special project has played thereby an important role – though it might seem at first to have little to do with the recent migration of Poles to this region of Germany because it has an explicit relation to a particularly difficult chapter in the German-Polish past.

This is the project “The German-Polish Memorial to Flight, Expulsion and New Beginnings” (*Deutsch-Polnische Gedenkstätte für Flucht, Vertreibung und Neuanfang*) in Rosow, one of the four villages in the community Mescherin, directly on the border to Poland and 15 km distant from Stettin. It was begun in 2003 on the initiative of Mr. Karl Lau, who since the fall of East Germany has been the village administrator of Rosow. The memorial is located in the medieval stone church of Rosow which

⁵ On a one-track railway line near Hordorf/Oschersleben in the state of Sachsen-Anhalt there was on 29 January 2011 a severe train accident in which ten persons lost their lives and a further 23 were injured. A local train collided head-on with a freight train.

burned out completely in the last days of the war in 1945 and throughout the GDR period stood in ruins. It now houses a permanent exposition based essentially on the first-hand stories of people who experienced expulsion and flight on both sides of the Oder. The “Registered Association of the Memorial Church Rosow – German-Polish Memorial to Flight, Expulsion and New Beginnings” (*Gedächtniskirche Rosow Deutsch-Polnische Gedenkstätte für Flucht, Vertreibung und Neuanfang e. V.*) assumed in 2002 the task of rescuing the building from ultimate ruin as well as to collect and preserve there people’s memories of the war experience. Thus the association works to draw attention to that particular fate which was common to many people in the region.

The idea is to give people a space for relating their war experiences and to pass on to younger generations the means to be able to understand the situation of that time. This is especially important at a time when new inhabitants are appearing in the locality and want to try there a “new beginning”. For Mr. Lau, now as after the war when many refugees arrived in the village, the “new beginning” is for all – for those already here, and those still arriving. And he means also those newly arrived from Poland. Only when one shows interest in others can a new beginning for all succeed – this is his motto. Considering the background most activities organized in the village are carried out in the two languages. Out of consideration for the sensitivities of Poles (regarding war issues) who may have had a certain aversion to the term “expulsion” (*Vertreibung*), the association changed its official name to “Association Memorial Church Rosow for German-Polish Reconciliation and Cooperation” (*Förderverein Gedächtniskirche Rosow – Ort der deutsch-polnischen Versöhnung und Zusammenarbeit e. V.*). This was a conscious decision, in favor of which the presence people of Polish origin in the region was decisive. “We don’t want to divide people. The church is a place of faith, hope and forgiveness and not division. Wherever people before experienced hardship and suffering, they should finally have the possibility to come together” – remarked one member of the association to the author.

“THE BEST DECISION OF OUR LIFE TOGETHER”
– VOICES OF POLISH NEWCOMERS

Developments in the northern German-Polish border area such as the new Polish migration to Germany, cannot be treated without mentioning the situation in Poland in the last two decades, especially in the main northwest Polish city of Stettin.

Even if we except the recent period of world economic crisis – which has also not passed Poland by without effects, though the country has not been so strongly affected as other European countries – Poland has steadily improved economically over the post-war and post-transformation decades. Also Stettin profited from this progress. With the largest harbor in the Baltic area and wanting develop its position, the city

continually sought to attract more labor. Many workers looking for new occupational opportunities came willingly to Stettin, but often they found no suitable living arrangements. In this the seventh-biggest Polish city with over 400,000 inhabitants, tens of thousands of modern apartments were lacking – in part because in the years before the political transformation there was hardly any housing investment. The housing market was (and still is) correspondingly expensive. The statement “The money we had after selling our home in X, in Stettin would have only been enough for a one-room apartment”⁶ was to be heard in one form or another again and again during interviews with Polish settlers in the town of Gartz.⁷

In the eastern part of Germany on the other hand the tendency has been seen for years that people possessing their own homes have gone elsewhere in search of employment (joblessness in June 2013 in the entire Uckermark district⁸ was 14.3%; for example in November 2010 was 15.3%) – whether in the western federal states or outside of Germany. Empty houses and homesteads rapidly fall into ruin. What could be more natural than to bring together these two opposite trends and thereby bring about a corresponding (market) resolution? On the one side of the border homes are being sought; on the other, homes and apartments standing empty. And between them, relatively short driving distances of 12–16 km.

After the accession of Poland to the EU and, importantly, the implementation of the Schengen Agreement on 21 December 2007 – which meant the end to all border-crossing formalities for citizens of the signatory countries – nothing stood in the way of Poles who, in their search for a new home, wanted to consider moving to the region beyond the Oder River. Fast-thinking real-estate agents rose quickly to the task, and in a short time increasing numbers of Poles were moving their households to the Uckermark and Uecker-Randow districts.

They appreciate the (for the most part) receptive attitude of the local inhabitants, and the fact that things here are not so anonymous as in Stettin. The Polish newcomers are invited to all events in the region’s localities. A lack of fluent German may be at times an obstacle to closer contact, but the openness and willingness on the part of the locals helps many to compensate for this deficit. The example of football is mentioned by one Pole in a conversation at a local sports club: “Even if I do make myself understood in everyday life pretty well, in a fast game of football I may not be able to, but the other players always take it into account.”

⁶ All quotations in this part of the article are from interviews with Polish citizens in Gartz.

⁷ Cf. also: Bernadette Jonda, *Neue Formen des Zusammenlebens oder Rückkehr in die Normalität?* in: Karoline Gil/Christian Pletzing (Hg.), *Granica. Die deutsch-polnische Grenze vom 19. bis zum 21. Jahrhundert*, München 2010, S. 153ff.

⁸ By that the district was clearly above the Brandenburg state average of 9.5% and above the federal average of 6.6% in June 2013; thus the district covered one of the last places in a total federal comparison. Cf. <http://www.meinestadt.de/kreis-uckermark/statistik?Bereich=Arbeiten+%26+Geldverdienern>.

Almost all newcomers could up to now expect to get special help for example with building permits and other official formalities required for the renovation of housing. Next-door neighbors can help too by suggesting solutions to unexpected problems.

Many Polish respondents reported how in the beginning they had to learn many new things: sorting household refuse, setting the refuse bins by the street on the right day; cutting the grass regularly to avoid paying a fine, not burning things without proper attention to the regulations, etc. “But the rules do make sense and there are good objective reasons to follow them, we understand that.”

“I have one foot in Poland, and the other in Germany, but I have to admit I’m quite satisfied that way.” – one young Pole describes her situation and lists the advantages of each location: In Poland she does most of her shopping – even if the prices are increasingly rising to the German level – and friends and relations are also there. In Germany the overall infrastructure necessary to modern life is excellent, even if the costs to be paid e.g. for power, heating and radio/TV fees are higher than in Poland.

Others are of the opinion: “From an economic standpoint it’s cheaper to live here. Though we work in Poland and earn zlotys and have to pay for everything here in Euro, it’s still cheaper for us here than it would be in Poland.” Also the preschool fees for example in Gartz are said to be lower than in Poland. One young Polish father emphasized that the German child benefit payment which the family receives for the child is used for this purpose.

“As far as things look now, there’s no reason for us to change our decision” relates another young man, and his wife adds that their resettlement in Germany was the best decision of their lives together. In regard to their German neighbors they say “They may not be family, but they’re more than just friends”.

Some of the interviewed Poles at first did meet with incomprehension on the part of relatives and friends at home when they announced that they wanted to settle in East Germany. A few were confronted with statements of the type “You’re rejecting Poland”. And it happens regularly in conversations that various events out of German-Polish history are referred to. The newcomers not seldom say their role in such situations is to “overthrow myths and legends”, since they experience daily that “the devil isn’t as black as we paint him”. On the other hand they do have comprehension for the irritation that their decision may cause among family or friends.

In Poland not only has been long and vividly present the memory of the tragic history of the Second World War. After the fall of the Iron Curtain the fear also arose that “the Germans” could “buy up” Poland. But now such statements as these can be heard: “Instead of them it’s us who are buying up land and properties in Germany; we’re starting here companies, but we want to be integrated, so we try hard to speak German. And it’s appreciated” – was also a comment in one of the interviews.

Such exchanges diverge greatly from the occasional reports in the media about the activities of the (extreme right-wing) NPD political party.

As in one interview the question was posed to Polish newcomers “And what about the NPD”, one Polish woman answered “What’s that?”, then added that she never felt any negativity towards her on the part of the native population, and had no idea that there were NPD supporters in the area. Another Pole to the question of the NPD responded that its members in Uckermark must have gotten used to the presence of Poles in Uckermark’s cities and villages and restrained themselves, perceiving that in the mass of the population there was no support for or acceptance of their views: “What they propose doesn’t agree with what society here generally wants.”

The Polish immigrants feel themselves accepted “with open arms” and many consider themselves in the meantime no longer to be in the category of the “newcomers” – they feel that they simply belong: “Whenever somebody asks, I just say I’m from Gartz.” A sign of their acceptance into the social life of the city could well be that for the 2011 Carnival celebrations in Gartz precisely a Polish couple were chosen as the Carnival “King and Queen”.

“You’ve got to want to live here. If somebody moves here just because it’s ‘in’ at the moment, they can end up disappointed.” It’s estimated that about 10% of Poles here in fact do go back, because they, for example, miss life in a bigger city. “Someone who wants to go out every night, they’re definitely in the wrong place here.”

The residents here enjoy the idyllic rural atmosphere of the villages, the peace and quiet. At times a certain unease is perceptible, that a greater influx of new settlers could destroy this atmosphere.

The motives for acquiring property in border regions and to settle there are various. Not all the motives are mentioned, for among the newcomers there are also people who seem uncommunicative – and not necessarily because of insufficient language skills. In the interviews however it became clear that these are not all people whose financial situation did not allow them to acquire a more spacious home on the still-difficult Polish housing market; there are also those who seek better perspectives for themselves and above all for their children. Particularly the possibility of raising their children as bi-lingual was emphasized repeatedly by most of the Polish newcomer parents. In the command of the German language they see an important precondition contributing to their children’s later occupational success.

“WE WELCOME EVERYBODY HERE” – THE ATTITUDE OF GERMANS?

As the first Polish Families settled in Gartz, many inhabitants were astonished and sometimes also mistrustful and uneasy; this behavior seemed not to fit in a region that so many young Germans wanted to leave. It also didn’t fit the image that many Germans had of Poland, where after reunification many were afraid that their western neighbors would begin to buy up large parts of Poland’s territory. Instead, Poles came

and acquired in German properties. For some this came as an actual shock, for they were living till then apparently under the impression that in Poland people were much, much poorer than in Germany. And now suddenly they could afford to buy properties and pay high renovation costs?

But this beginning mistrust happily gave way rather fast to recognition and friendly relations: Poles have made a good impression with their industriousness and openness. Their talent for organizing and sense of esthetics are admired, as well as their efforts to learn the German language. In these small localities everyone knows who is “new” and “from Poland”, and even the slightest sign of wanting to “belong” there (just a simple “hello” on the street) is perceived positively. This means that among Germans the assessment of the Polish immigrants – on the level of certain behavioral norms, observance of rules and standards of village communities, as well as on the level of personal relations (the spirit of exchange, openness and attentiveness) – is, in the rule, positive.

Naturally there are also newcomers who live and keep themselves at a distance and seek no contact. They also probably won't accept an invitation to meet with the inhabitants, and may not even be known by name. In an interview one German admitted, “You have to take people as they are”, while still making it clear that a too stand-offish attitude wouldn't earn much respect.

For most Germans predominates a feeling of satisfaction over the positive change in their communities' image. Thanks to their new owners from Poland, this and that building threatened with ruin could be saved, and more than a few houses were returned to their previous elegance.

A few German respondents would not exclude that some Germans had begun to feel envy and disapproval: While they themselves might be unemployed and have to live on “Hartz IV” (German welfare benefits), many of the Poles go to work at their regular job in nearby Stettin and can thereby afford costly renovations of their homes.

Overall however there is assent, a well-wishing attitude towards the Poles, and the opinion that “It's good for us that they're here”. Their presence in the life of the communities is described as “an advantage that widens our perspective”. At the same time there is a consciousness that there probably are still older citizens in the communities who still harbor prejudice and hardened attitudes towards Poles – an emotional burden of the early post-war period.

But the commitment of local officials and mayors of the three localities should lead to residents' better comprehension of each other, and this helps to “reduce prejudice” – thus the coordinator of the Protestant elementary school in Tantow, Ms. John. She finds it especially positive that terrain that for years had lain overgrown was again “brought to life” and that houses were saved from certain demolition. “For the self-image of the village it's wonderful” – she says. Someone else added, the Poles had brought the ruins of many houses in the village into “tip-top condition”.

In the eyes of many Germans the Polish families bring with them various abilities and skills from which the entire village and city community can profit. They see how many Polish parents get heavily involved in various school activities and events. The already mentioned “King and Queen” of the 2011 Carnival in Gartz is a Polish couple who have lived there many years: In a certain sense this can be understood as the expression of their acceptance into the social life of the city and their recognition as its citizens.

The further one looks beyond the border region, the less is one finds a preparedness of Poles to consider living there.⁹ This is observable within the local district of Gartz alone: while in the three localities bordering directly on Poland the number of Polish residents lies between 101 (in Tantow with 753 people) and 241 (in the town of Gartz with 2,475 inhabitants), in the most distant localities of Casekow (with 1,936 people) and Hohenselchow-Groß Pinnow (with 810 inhabitants) live only 104 and 44 people from Poland who have settled there in the last few years.

PERSPECTIVE

“We live in a border-spanning web around the metropolis Stettin. This city has – as history would have it – a Polish and a German surrounding area and after the fall of the dividing border between the two parts, this began to represent an enormous potential that we can only use together” – this is the conviction of the Gartz local authority director, Frank Gotzmann. His official actions are marked by close consultations with officials on the Polish side as well as an open attitude towards Poles interested in settling. An awareness of the close cooperation of local officials makes it easier for new settlers to begin to feel at home. “We don’t have to justify to anybody that we live here, to say nothing of having to feel like traitors. If Germans and Poles are already friendly and work together closely, then it makes no difference whether we live in Gartz or Gryfino.” – stated one Pole in a conversation.

The inter-community cooperation across the Oder River has several motives. There is a vision of the future of the region, an idea about “how Europe could be lived in”. Everybody knows that “seen from Berlin” this region – which in the various rankings often lands on one of the lowest places – is not the center of interest, and that many important things must therefore be undertaken alone. To look for collaborators beyond the Oder River simply makes sense: to drive to the Polish Kołbaskowo (earlier Kolbitzow), ten kilometers southwest of Stettin, takes ten minutes from Gartz, but to the largest city in the district Uckermark, Schwedt on the Oder, the drive is a half-

⁹ This corresponds to the observation that the further from the border one observes, the less is the interest among Germans in having contact to Poles or Poland.

hour. Thus relations in the direction of Kolbaskowo have been intensified. Together, EU funding for example is being sought in the conviction that a good connection to the nearby superhighway, dependable train connections and functional infrastructure are the best form of economic promotion for the entire region.

Many are convinced that the border will increasingly disappear – above all the border in people’s heads. Residents want more togetherness, also in order to learn from one another. For life exists in the act of mutual giving and taking. The blockades in people’s heads can best be swept away – stresses one German woman in Tantow, “by children growing up together – then the conditions are very good to keep barriers in their heads from even arising.”

For some, the process of growing closer proceeds too slowly – even in light of the many initiatives and activities regularly proposed in this direction. But many others are also aware that it still takes time for some natives to finally move on from “45 years of GDR border mentality”. And among external observers of border-region developments there are those who see in it no relevance or significance. As the author finished her presentation (during the German-Polish Seminar at the “Academia Baltica” in Bad Malente in November 2010 entitled “Westwards – Migrants from Poland in the German Federal Republic”) on the new wave of Polish migration after Polish EU accession, she met with the retort from a Polish journalist making the statement that it wasn’t worthwhile to devote special attention to this development: it was a temporary phenomenon, its significance for certain was being “over-interpreted”.

Indeed that which is observed in the Uckermark district, is no mass phenomenon – above all when we consider that past migration movements from Poland to Germany comprised millions of people. But today’s migration still has resulted in some localities having Polish newcomers making up over 10% of the total population. In light of the historical events that have traditionally darkened mutual relations between Germans and Poles, that which has been taking place in the Uckermark and Vorpommern-Greifswald districts already for years, cannot be valued highly enough. It is a development of enormous significance and reach – an authentic movement “from below”. The people from Poland as well as those who have lived in these areas for decades are setting an example for what it means not to let oneself be held back by borders and attempts to draw them, but to dare to think and act alternatively.

This region that has become in recent times a new homeland for some Poles is now no longer a place “threatened with extinction”. It has the chance to be a new, timely model for a German-Polish neighborhood of 21st-century Europe.¹⁰

¹⁰ The author has long been of this opinion. See: Bernadette Jonda, *Neue Formen der Migration und des Austausches im grenznahen Bereich*, in: *Polen-Analysen*, NR. 49 07.04.2009, S. 6, <http://www.laender-analysen.de/polen/pdf/PolenAnalysen49.pdf> (accessed 02 October 2013).

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