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## NATIONAL DIMENSIONS OF PERSONHOOD AMONG OLDER PEOPLE IN POLAND

### INTRODUCTION: UNDERSTANDING PERSONHOOD THROUGH KINSHIP AND CITIZENSHIP

In Poland, older people often experience discrimination in both the public and private spheres. During parliamentary elections in 2007, older women were portrayed in get-out-the-vote ads as a danger to the future of the country because of their support for the far-right nationalist party Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS, or Law and Justice) (Robbins-Ruszkowski 2015, p. 271).<sup>1</sup> In private conversations, younger people often dismiss the “*mentalność*” (“mentality”) of older people for being stuck in the past (Robbins-Ruszkowski 2013). Exactly which past that is can vary depending on the context. Commonly, this past *mentalność* refers to the state socialist era, associated with expectations that the state will provide certain services and opportunities. However, this past *mentalność* can also refer to partition-era Poland, associated with ideals of the long-suffering nation struggling for freedom and redemption. Although there are few people alive now who lived during the partition era, which ceased with the end of World War I, this ethos was kept alive during socialism and has been cultivated during the postsocialist era (see Porter-Szücs 2011). In all these contexts, older people (and especially older women) are linked to a *mentalność* of a distant past or problematic future, thereby denying older people coevalness (Fabian 1983) in the present. The temporality of older people, then, is ambiguous; there is a moral, political connection between the life course of the persons and the nation (Robbins 2013). This spatiotemporal link is potentially problematic for a Polish nation and state that aspires to be inclusive, and denies full personhood to older people themselves.

That age should be so caught up with politics in Poland is perhaps not surprising, given the large-scale political-economic and socio-cultural transformations that have occurred during the oldest generations’ lifetimes.<sup>2</sup> Such transformations have had

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<sup>1</sup> See Graff 2009, McClintock 1996, and Mosse 1988 for discussions of nation and gender. See Cohen 1998 for related connections between old women and the nation in India.

<sup>2</sup> See Caldwell 2007 for a related discussion of age in Russia.

profound effect on people's daily lives and ways of imagining themselves (Berdahl et al. 2000; Mandel, Humphrey 2002; Verdery 1996). Given that age often becomes important during periods of social change (Cole, Durham 2007; Edmunds, Turner 2002), it makes sense that generational differences are prominent in eastern Europe (Haukanes 2013; Haukanes, Trnka 2013; Krzyżowski 2011; Pine 2013; Pozniak 2013; Yurchak 2005).

The personhood of older Poles can be diminished not only in the popular imagination, but also in practice. Place of residence is especially important. Institutional care is highly stigmatized in Poland; people tend to prefer to grow old at home, among kin. This was made overwhelmingly clear to me during my long-term ethnographic fieldwork in residential care institutions, during which men and women would repeatedly lament the bodily illness that brought them there and the structural issues that prevented being cared for at home (e.g., their kin's financial need to work many hours, the high cost of a home care worker, the migration of their kin abroad). These bodily and social issues led most people in institutional care to feel abandoned by both kin and state, a pattern that has also been noted in surveys (CBOS 2013). Residing in institutional care can thus be seen as a process in which older people are made to feel less fully human than others, including their peers of the same age.

However, some older people struggle against this sense of abandonment and discrimination and strive for social recognition. Perhaps the best example of such striving can be found at the *Uniwersytety Trzeciego Wieku* (hereafter UTW; Universities of the Third Age), educational institutions for retirees that are increasingly popular in contemporary Poland. At these institutions, leaders encourage older people to practice various forms of self-care that are supposed to be transformative and create a new *mentalność*, in which growing old is a positive experience. At some UTWs, these changes in persons can align with those in the political-economic sphere, such that transformations in older persons are often meant to mimic Poland's transition from state socialism to a market democracy, as evident in personal qualities of being "open" (*otwarty*) and "responsible" (*odpowiedzialny*), which are contrasted to qualities of being "closed" (*zamknięty*) and "dependent" (*zależny*). Moreover, older people who attend UTWs are held up as moral exemplars for how to age well (see Robbins-Ruszkowski 2013 for a more extensive discussion of UTWs in Poland as combating stereotypes of old age; see Humphrey 1997 for a comparative perspective on moral exemplars). For example, the then-prime minister, Donald Tusk, spoke at the national congress of UTWs in 2012, as part of a group of politicians who praised attendees of the UTWs for playing a crucial role as volunteers who provide social support for all members of society, especially their peers who need care (Grundtvig 2012). Significantly, however, health – and especially mobility – is an unspoken premise for participating in UTWs and therein embodying a contemporary moral ideal of old age. That is, maintaining health is a necessary precondition for achieving this sort of culturally valued personhood.

In this light, it is not just the place of institutional care that contributes to the devaluation of older residents, but the very bodily conditions that require people to

live there. However, despite this doubly embodied marginalization, some people in institutional care are able to maintain personhood through creating ties of relatedness. In other words, practices of relatedness – especially practices of remembering – can shape personhood. Crucially, this remembering is both personal and national, thereby suggesting that studies of personhood should also include the political-economic imaginaries of which they are a part. Building from these observations about the role of national memory in shaping personhood, in this article I will argue that studies of personhood should incorporate ideas of kinship and citizenship in order to more fully represent the complexities of scale that affect personhood.

First, I would like to first briefly outline my understanding of personhood as I am using it here. At the most basic level, I take the fundamental anthropological premise that personhood is not given but is always created through social relations that occur within meaningful cultural frameworks (see Mauss 1985[1938] for a classic exposition of this concept; see Kaufman, Morgan 2005: 320–327 for a more recent insightful overview of ethnographies of the social production and destruction of persons). Moreover, in order to avoid conflating personhood with subjectivity, I take seriously Meyer Fortes's (1987) insights on the dual nature of personhood, in which, like Marcel Mauss's (1985[1938]) distinction between *la personne morale* and *moi*, the category includes dimensions of life that are “culturally objectified” and “subjectively apprehended” (Jackson, Karp 1990, p. 15). By trying to understand the relationship of these to each other (for as Carrithers argues, they are not only related but in fact shape each other [1985, p. 249]), we can better study the processes through which personhood is created, transformed, or dismantled. When combined with T. O. Beidelman's (1993[1986]) insights on the inherently moral nature of social relations, personhood becomes a category that can be seen to have a moral dimension. Analyzing moral personhood provides an empirical way to study the processes through which some people are made to feel socially valued and included, while others are devalued and excluded.<sup>3</sup>

Because what counts as *personne* and *moi* depends on the sociopolitical order (Carrithers et al. 1985), it is thus always the case that analyzing personhood involves analyzing political relations across scales. Recent work that critiques the scholarly division between studying kinship and studying politics shows how local practices of relatedness are caught up in broader political-economic structures and imaginaries (Carsten 2000, 2007; Franklin, McKinnon 2001; Howell 2006; McKinnon, Cannell 2013). Thus, in this article I place ethnographic descriptions of practices of relatedness within the context of sociopolitical imagination, thereby demonstrating how aging in Poland can be understood as an experience that is simultaneously embodied, relational, and political.

This article draws on 20 months of ethnographic research conducted since 2006 in medical and educational institutions in Wrocław and Poznań, two cities in western

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<sup>3</sup> See van der Geest 2000, 2002, and 2004 for comparative discussions of personhood, respect, and wisdom in old age in Ghana.

Poland. I focus on examples from Wrocław, a city that is imagined as the heir to the beloved city of Lwów, which became part of the Soviet Union after World War II and is now the Ukrainian city of L'viv. Large numbers of Poles from the *kresy*, the eastern borderlands of pre-war Poland, were moved to Wrocław and surrounding regions after the war. Thus through the *kresowianie* (former residents of the *kresy*) and transplanted cultural institutions, Wrocław has a key place Poland's romantic national imaginary. The ethnographic cases come from two institutions. The first is a University of the Third Age, as described above. The second is a small rehabilitation hospital run by Catholic nuns, through which people are supposed to pass relatively quickly, but in which people often stay for a period of years, as they fail to improve or find a suitable place for long-term care (see Read 2007, p. 208 for a description of a similar phenomenon in Prague).

I draw on ethnographic evidence to argue that in both institutions, older Poles create moral personhood through practices of remembering that involve national memory. As these practices of remembering – which are simultaneously practices of relatedness – invoke the nation, they also invoke *citizens* of that nation. Practices of relatedness therefore include forms of citizenship, suggesting that we should analyze kinship and citizenship together. Different national imaginaries offers different possibilities for personhood, such that the moral valences of different political periods can adhere to individuals. However, even in contexts that promote a transnational individualized kind of personhood, shared suffering as part of the national past remains the grounds for creating relations and maintaining personhood. This article explores everyday practices of care, memory, and relatedness, thereby elucidating the moral connections that are created between persons and nation. The lasting importance of the national has implications for thinking about the limits and possibilities of European identity in Poland.

#### SHARING TRAUMA, CREATING RELATIONS

At the University of the Third Age, participants are encouraged to learn new skills and habits to keep themselves healthy and active in old age. One popular activity is a class in “memory training,” in which participants practice cognitive exercises, like listing as many words as possible that begin with a certain prefix or imagining the taste and smell of a certain food. Attendees are enthusiastic and often competitive during such exercises.

One morning in late May 2009, I attended a session of a “memory training” (“*trening pamięci*”) class. All six *sluchacze* (attendees of the University of the Third Age; literally meaning “auditors”) were previously unknown to me, as I had been unable to coordinate my schedule to attend other class meetings. The young woman leading the class, a master's student in *andragogika* (andragogy, or adult education), asked the *sluchacze* to write down ten nouns beginning with the prefix “anti-” (“*anty-*”). Some began to write, some stared at the page, and others asked a few clarifying questions.

“Does the word have to begin with anti-? Can anti- be in the middle of the word?” “Nouns, right?” After a few minutes, the instructor called time, and asked “How did it go? Were there problems?”<sup>4</sup> A man confirmed that there were problems, that “there was a block”.<sup>5</sup> Others agreed, saying that they were stuck on the prefix and unable to finish the word. Others, however, eagerly shared the lists of words that they created, talking over each other in an effort to be heard. “Antiterrorist, antique shop, antisep-tic, antagonist, antipodes, antique, anticommunist, antimatter”.<sup>6</sup> At anti-communist, the class laughed; at antimatter, the teacher responded “really phenomenal”.<sup>7</sup> Moving on to another prefix, *przed-* (meaning “before,” “in front of”), the teacher asked the *śluchacze* to write down fifteen nouns beginning with this prefix. Even more eagerly than with *anty-*, after a few minutes *śluchacze* interrupted each other in reading off their lists, repeating words that others had said, as if to prove they too had thought of them: “preschool, entranceway, subject, company, preface, performance”. “Preschool, entranceway”, another voice joined in.<sup>8</sup> The teacher explained that such exercises are good not only because they “stimulate your nerve cells”, but because they “mobilize thought”.<sup>9</sup> The teacher asked if the *śluchacze* saw the words as they were writing them, stating that they probably saw *their* preschools, *their* entranceways, thus encouraging the *śluchacze* to think about these exercises as personal.

The teacher then moved to a visualization exercise in which she encouraged them to imagine their elementary schools in as much detail as possible.

Teacher:

*We're closing our eyes, we're imagining that in this moment, we are transported to our elementary school [laughter from woman in class]. And now your task, for the next minute, is to enter the corridor of your elementary school. Yes. Notice specifically what there is in the corridor [more laughter]. Maybe you see some friends, a teacher. What did they look like? What was the women's makeup like, what was their hair like... you notice the weather – is it as beautiful as today? And after a minute of this imagining a virtual stroll around our old elementary schools, you all will take a pen in your hands and write everything that you saw. Ok? We're closing our eyes... and we're opening the door of our elementary school. We're going inside and starting to look around.*<sup>10</sup>

<sup>4</sup> “Jak poszło? Były problemy?”

<sup>5</sup> “Był blok.”

<sup>6</sup> Antyterrorysta, antykwariat, antyseptyka, antagonist, antypody, antyk, antykomunista, antymateria.

<sup>7</sup> “Naprawdę fenomenalne.”

<sup>8</sup> Przedszkole, przedpokój, przedmiot, przedsiębiorstwo, przedmowa, przedstawienie... These words have different prefixes in English, but the same in Polish.

<sup>9</sup> “Nie tylko stymulują państwa komórki nerwowe... uruchamiają myśli”.

<sup>10</sup> Teacher: Zamykamy oczy, wyobrażamy sobie, że w tej chwili, jesteśmy przeniesieni (deliberately) do naszej szkoły podstawowej [laughter from woman in the class]. I teraz państwa zadaniem jest przez minutę, przejść przez korytarz państwa szkoły podstawowej. Tak. Dokładnie obejrzeć co tam jest w korytarzu [more laughter]. Może zobaczysz jakieś koleżanki, kolegów, jakąś nauczycielkę. Jak wtedy wyglądali. Jakie miały makijaże panie, jakie miały fryzury. Zobacz jaka jest pogoda, taka ładna jak dzisiaj? I po minucie takiego wyobrażania, takiego spaceru wirtualnego po naszej dawnej szkole podstawowej, wezmą państwo długopis do rączki i zapiszą wszystko co tam zobaczyli. Dobrze? Zamykamy oczy, i... otwieramy drzwi od naszej szkoły podstawowej. Wchodzimy do środka i zaczynamy patrzeć.

Her voice had the sing-songy modulation that one uses to speak to a child. After a few seconds, she reminded everyone to keep their eyes closed. Very quickly, the visualization exercise broke down:

- Teacher: We're closing our eyes.  
 Słuchaczka 1: This is torturous.  
 Teacher: Maybe something outside the school, you go outside to PE, that's ok too. Everyone, I see there are problems with focusing.  
 Słuchaczka 1: I don't have the strength to focus! For this, I dream.  
 Słuchaczka 2: Me too. I have a horrific image.  
 Słuchaczka 1: I have a horrific image as well.  
 Teacher: Just another moment.  
 Słuchaczka 1: I don't want to think about this topic.<sup>11</sup>

During the above interaction, the teacher reminded one woman to close her eyes. This same woman is the one who spoke up, saying that this was a torturous exercise. After this *sluchaczka* said she did not want to think about elementary school, the second *sluchaczka* volunteered to tell her story, saying "Well, I can tell about my horrors that I lived through, exactly in elementary school".<sup>12</sup> The first *sluchaczka* said that she could also speak to the horrors she experienced, but the second *sluchaczka* continued with her story. She launched forth into what sounded like a well-rehearsed story about being deported to Siberia, and on her return to Poland as a 12-year-old, being placed into a class with students much younger than her. The woman who first mentioned her "horrific image" then told her story, beginning, "I have a terrible *przeżycie*".<sup>13</sup> She saw the Gestapo enter her elementary school, round up 22 partisans hiding in the school, and beat and kill them. The whole school saw everything. Another *sluchaczka* asked her where this occurred, and she said in a village near Kielce, where she mentioned the many partisans in the forests.

The teacher interrupted this conversation, saying, "Everyone, it's very good that these women spoke about this, right? Because, um, such an experience is your life's baggage".<sup>14</sup> The two women who had told their stories agreed; the one who spoke of the Gestapo said, "This is my trauma. I awake in the night from fear", thinking "it's good that this was only a dream".<sup>15</sup> The teacher went on to praise the *sluchacze* on

<sup>11</sup> Teacher: Zamykamy oczy; Słuchaczka 1: To prawdziwa męka; Teacher: Może coś na zewnątrz. Wychodzi pani na WF. Też może być. Wszyscy, widzę że macie Państwo problemy ze skupieniem się; Słuchaczka 1: Boże, nie mam siły się skupić! Do tego są sny; Słuchaczka 2: Ja też. Ja mam obraz makabryczny; Słuchaczka 1: Ja mam obraz makabryczny też; Teacher: Jeszcze chwileczkę; Słuchaczka 1: Ja nie chcę na ten temat myśleć.

<sup>12</sup> Ja mogę akurat powiedzieć o moich makabrach, które przeżyłam właśnie w szkoły podstawowej.

<sup>13</sup> "Ja mam straszne przeżycie", See Tucker 2011 for a discussion of the use of *przeżycie* among her research participants.

<sup>14</sup> „Drodzy państwo, to bardzo dobrze, że panie o tym powiedziały, tak? Dlatego, że, eh, że, takie doświadczenia są państwa bagażem życiowym”.

<sup>15</sup> "To jest moja trauma. Ja się budzę w nocy ze strachu"; „To dobrze, że to był tylko sen”.

the quality of their memories, saying, “please look, uh, how vivid is your memory, right?” A man interrupted, saying “*very* vivid!” The teacher continued, “Such a simple exercise, which theoretically, hm, which shouldn’t build such great emotion, builds an exceeding amount of emotion. That’s why I want to calm you all down. I propose a relaxing...” The man interrupts again, saying “it won’t work”.<sup>16</sup> A few people then told stories about positive memories of elementary school. The woman who spoke of her traumatic experience after returning from Siberia read two poems that she wrote to mark the end of the academic year, one about *seniorzy* (seniors) and one about *młodzieży* (youth).

The rest of the class was taken up with the same sort of word games and exercises as the beginning. The teacher closed the class with a visualization exercise, asking the *sluchacze* to imagine holding an apple in their hands, and then to eat it. The teacher described very slowly all the qualities of the apple they were supposed to notice: the color, the weight, the smell, the taste. Throughout these instructions, she encouraged the *sluchacze* to take deep breaths. At the end, she asked them if they could taste the apple, and everyone, even the women who had shared their traumatic stories, agreed that they could – and that the apple was delicious. The teacher encouraged the *sluchacze* to take this exercise as a lesson that they can have control over their thoughts, that their thoughts do not have to control them. She said that so much depends on us, that whether we smile or not is our decision.<sup>17</sup>

Although it was unbearable to sit alone with their eyes closed and recall horrific scenes, these women very much wanted to share their own stories. Despite the teacher’s attempt to keep the class focused on cognitive exercises, it was social interaction that the attendees kept seeking. In this setting, where retirees are supposedly learning techniques of self-care to keep their memories active and healthy in old age, it is the *social* dimensions of remembering, rather than prescribed self-focused activities, which matter. The younger teacher’s admonitions that positive thinking can overcome this trauma seems to run counter to older people’s desire to share their experiences, suggesting generational differences in forms of sociality, in which negative aspects of the past are not elided in favor of an optimistic present or future, but rather create possibilities for solidarity and connection in the present. The young teacher’s insistence on moving beyond past difficulties can be interpreted as a denial of the validity of the experiences of the *sluchacze*, while the practices of the *sluchacze* that focus on social remembering allow them to create continuity between their pasts and presents. These temporal distinctions suggest a generational politics in which the new and individual are valued over the past and collective, thus mirroring conventional narratives of postsocialist transition.

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<sup>16</sup> Teacher: Proszę zobaczyć, mm, jak żywe jest państwa wspomnienie, prawda? Male student interrupts: Bardzo żywe! Teacher: Takie proste zadanie, które teoretycznie, hm, które nie powinno wzbudzać aż tak ogromnych emocji, buduje szalenie dużo emocji. Dlatego chciałabym państwo uspokoić. Proponuję relaksujące ... Same male student interrupts: nie da się!

<sup>17</sup> “Jak wiele zależy od naszej woli... uśmiech zależy tylko od nas”.

## EMBODYING HISTORY, RECEIVING RESPECT

At the rehabilitation center in Wrocław, two patients stand out for the ways they have overcome abandonment and find satisfaction in living at the institution. Through storytelling and exchange, they create new social relations and maintain full personhood. However, these women's differing biographies create different possibilities for social inclusion and acceptance.

*Pani* Dorota is one such example. Ninety-eight years old when I first met her, *pani* Dorota had lived in the rehabilitation hospital for over a year. She moved there after her daughter and son-in-law both passed away within a year's time, and arthritis in her knees made it increasingly difficult for her to walk on her own. She also noticed that she was beginning to get quite dizzy and worried that she would fall; the cane she was using at home was not enough to keep her on her feet. During the beginning of my fieldwork, she walked the short distance from her bed to the bathroom with a walker, but a year and a half later, found it necessary to use a wheelchair for all activity. Though a paid caregiver briefly cooked for her and her son after her daughter died, *pani* Dorota felt she could not trust her – even worrying that she might be poisoned – so decided that it would be safer to move to institutional care.<sup>18</sup> Her only grandson, who was in his mid-thirties, lived nearby in Wrocław, but his apartment was too small for both of them. He lived alone, and *pani* Dorota worried greatly about whether he would find a wife. However, he did help her find a place in the rehab center by asking his friends and colleagues where would be the best place in the city for his grandmother. He would bring medicine and various personal care items for *pani* Dorota. She needed medicine for her eyes, she said, because her eyes were ruined from reading by the moonlight as a child.

In addition to needing physical help, it was the physical reminders of her deceased daughter throughout her home that compelled *pani* Dorota to move to the center. In the time we spent together, *pani* Dorota often spoke of the tragedy of her daughter's early death at age sixty-eight. *Pani* Dorota missed her greatly, once remarking that she was not afraid of dying, for she would be reunited with her daughter, husband, and mother. Two vivid dreams, in which her deceased mother and then her deceased husband visited her, reassured her that she need not fear death and that the rehabilitation center was the best place for her to live.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, *pani* Dorota was happy to be living at the rehabilitation center, where everything was clean, the food was good (enough), and

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<sup>18</sup> „*Pani*” is the formal term of address in the Polish language for women. *Pani* Dorota mentioned that she thought this woman was Ukrainian, implying that this was a further reason not to trust her. Such negative attitudes towards Ukrainians were not uncommon among older people in Wrocław, as a result of atrocities in what is now western Ukraine during and after World War II. Older Poles often referred to the Ukrainian nationalists as *bandyci*. See Snyder 2004, p. 133–201 and Brown 2004 for more on this geographical region and period.

<sup>19</sup> See Pine 2007, p. 118–122 for an analysis of dreams about the dead as a way of maintaining relatedness after death among *Górale* in the highlands of Poland. See Bear 2007 for a fascinating exploration of ghosts, memory, kinship, and the uncanny.

the staff took good care of the patients. She emphasized that the staff were always busy and that their work was difficult, but that they made time to take care of the patients; the one nurse on her floor at night even brings tea if someone needs it. She was glad to attend chapel, which she did every day. Confident that she was receiving the best care she could, *pani* Dorota said that she felt “*u siebie*”, or “at home”, at the center. For *pani* Dorota, the clinical space of the rehabilitation center was therapeutic not only physically, but mentally, spiritually, and socially. Rather than being at home among the memories of her deceased kin, *pani* Dorota found solace in this new clinical world.

During much of the time that we spent together, however, *pani* Dorota would tell stories reminiscing about her husband and daughter, and life in Zaleszczyki, where she was born. *Pani* Dorota was born in 1910 in a small town near Zaleszczyki on the Dniester River in what is now southwestern Ukraine; at the time of her birth, it was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Her parents and grandparents worked for the countesses as administrators of their land. Before World War I, *Pani* Dorota’s mother’s siblings left for the US, leaving only Dorota’s mother in Zaleszczyki with her parents. *Pani* Dorota’s husband was from Lwów (now Lviv, Ukraine) and spoke several languages, including Latin, Greek, German, and French. *Pani* Dorota recalled that he could speak Greek until the day he died (the doctor caring for him in the hospital was Greek). He worked as a postal clerk and *pani* Dorota worked as a merchant who sold various goods (e.g., ink, hair dye, cigarettes). Later, she maintained the grounds and gardens of a white zinc factory. More of her stories came from her time as a saleswoman; *pani* Dorota boasted of her skills, saying that she “had a knack for selling” (“miałam żyłkę handlowca”). *Pani* Dorota would not often speak of World War II, but she did tell me the same few stories, mostly centering on food (acquiring and sharing it in times of need), which demonstrated her resourcefulness, honesty, and generosity. After the war, although *pani* Dorota’s husband wanted to move to Wrocław (he preferred cities to towns), they moved to Oława, a town in Lower Silesia to the southeast of Wrocław by about fifteen miles, because it was less devastated by the war and there was more housing. Dorota’s husband, who was 25 years older than her, died when he was 85 years old, in 1972 or 1973. *Pani* Dorota lived in their house in Oława with her daughter until her death in 2006, followed by the death of her son-in-law, whom she told me she treated as a son, later that year. As she summed up her story, *pani* Dorota would often say with pride, “Well, listen [formal address] – I never had anything so wonderful, but never in my life have I been hungry”.<sup>20</sup> In these moments, *pani* Dorota seemed to be evaluating her present situation in the rehab center in the context of struggles for survival in her earlier life. For Dorota, having someone to bring her tea was indeed something remarkable and a sign of comfort.

Although *pani* Dorota could not bear to live among the physical reminders of her deceased daughter, it was to the topic of her kin that she turned again and again in her conversations – not only with me, but also with her roommates and staff. *Pani* Dorota was always melancholy at the mention of her daughter’s death, and she

<sup>20</sup> “Ja, proszę pani, nic cudnego nie miałam, ale głodna w życiu nie byłam”.

mentioned the subject during each of our conversations. She would often share with me her explanation for her death – smoking three packs of cigarettes daily – and regretted that she did not encourage her daughter to quit. If only she had not smoked, she would sigh, her daughter might be here with her today. *Pani* Dorota regretted that she did not know how dangerous cigarettes were in order to warn her to avoid them; however, she cites the fashions and habits of the times as being the main reason for her daughter's smoking.

Yet *pani* Dorota told other stories as well: about her daughter's master's thesis on the churches of Wrocław, about her family's survival and lack of hunger during the war, about the man who proposed marriage to her as she was visiting her husband's grave. How does the telling of these stories differ from living among her daughter's belongings? For these are both ways of being reminded of the past – one through narrating stories and the other through living in a certain material world. It seems that there is a level of immediacy that is removed by living in the institution. Her daughter's belongings no longer compel *pani* Dorota to remember. Or perhaps it is the fact of telling the stories to another person that makes the memories and pain bearable. For *pani* Dorota was rarely alone, as she would have been in her house; she had one or two roommates, and with one, who was also there permanently, *pani* Dorota had a close relationship. On the way to chapel, *pani* Dorota helped to move her roommate's wheelchair into the hallway by sitting behind her roommate, leaning forward with her arm on the back of her roommate's wheelchair, and pushing. The two of them sang devotional songs together every morning and evening; *pani* Dorota sang these for me when I asked.

The staff would often linger when bringing *pani* Dorota her meals and medicine, and volunteers (and the ethnographer) were often sent to her room to chat. Indeed, *pani* Dorota was one of the staff's favorite patients (see Read 2007, p. 211); they often remarked to me on her optimism, good humor, and warm demeanor, and her advanced age seemed to lend her an extra air of authority and respect. Additionally, *pani* Dorota's speech marked her as a former resident of the *kresy*, or borderlands of eastern Poland; she would pronounce 'r' (equivalent to 'w' in English) as 'l' (equivalent to English 'l'). So "*kiedy bylam mala*" ("when I was small") would become "*kiedy bylam mala*". Many Poles I know consider this sound to be a sweet and old-fashioned way to speak, calling up a nostalgic romantic Polish past.

I argue that it is exactly *pani* Dorota's ability to evoke a romantic Polish past through particular linguistic markers, as well as through the content of the stories she told, that made it possible for the staff to imagine her as an archetypal Polish grandmother. *Pani* Dorota's personal past is part of the story that Wrocław likes to tell about itself as a new homeland, as the "recovered territories" ("*ziemie odzyskane*") that connect Poland to its medieval Piast past, and a rightful heir to the memories and culture of Lwów and the *kresy*. Through the stories she tells, both the voice in which they are spoken and the content of the stories themselves, *pani* Dorota embodies and encourages nostalgic relations with the staff. Through both the form and content of her stories, *pani* Dorota fosters relations in which she can see herself – and be seen as by others – as a person of respect and dignity.

The other woman who lives permanently at the rehab center, *pani* Marta, moved to this institution because her multiple sclerosis made her unable to walk, severely limited the use of her arms, and rendered her incontinent.<sup>21</sup> Sixty-seven years old and widowed at the time I met her, *pani* Marta worked as a farmer in a village near Wrocław until her multiple sclerosis prevented her from doing so. She has a large family who lives in Wrocław and visit her frequently, bringing her food, coffee, and personal care products. Especially welcome visitors are her young grandchildren. One of her brothers, a hairdresser, cuts the hair of many residents. *Pani* Marta is always up-to-date on the gossip of the institution and gladly shares information about the comings and goings of other patients and their kin. She closely follows the news on *Radio Maryja*, the very conservative nationalist Catholic radio station, and shares what she learns there with other patients, often trying to engage them and me in political discussions. Once, she gave me a *moherowy berecik* (little mohair beret) pin – that is, a miniature knit red wool beret with a safety pin on the back, with a slip of paper inside on which is written “I love God, the church, the homeland, and people”.<sup>22</sup> Her sister brought this back for her from a *Radio Maryja* pilgrimage in Częstochowa, the home of a deeply symbolic Polish shrine to the Virgin Mary. *Pani* Marta would join the voices on *Radio Maryja* in reciting the rosaries and prayers throughout the day. In chapel each afternoon, *pani* Marta would sing; in fact, the first time I met her, she was showing off her singing talent to the receptionist at the front desk.

When I asked *pani* Marta how she felt about living at the rehab center, she always asserted that she was glad to live there. For Marta, a key sign of being at home was that she made coffee for her roommates, other patients, and me. “*Polacy są gościnni*”, or “Poles are hospitable”, she would say, a refrain that I came to recognize. Indeed, it was nearly impossible for me to visit *pani* Marta *without* having a cup of Nescafé in a gray glass mug – with a lot of sugar. Occasionally, she offered me a special packet of instant cappuccino (milk and sugar already included); she kept these in the wardrobe with her clothes. Gesturing for me to bring the jar of Nescafé on her nightstand, *pani* Marta and I would go down the hallway to the small kitchen where we would make the coffee together; I filled and heated the tea kettle as she spooned the instant coffee into my mug. I always asked to carry the mugs and supplies back to the room, but Marta demonstrated how many things she could balance and hold in her lap while wheeling herself down the hallway. Still, though, I carried my own mug of hot coffee.

*Pani* Marta made one close friend at the center, who was in a room down the hall from her. Each day after *obiad*, her friend would come down to her room, they would drink coffee together, and then attend chapel together. *Pani* Marta knew in great detail about her friend’s medical conditions and life history. Unlike the rooms of other patients, *pani* Marta’s room has a rotating collection of trinkets, candles, and

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<sup>21</sup> *Pani* Marta was uncomfortable with both recording and note-taking during our conversations, so I would try to recall our conversations and my observations later that day. Because of this, I have very few direct quotations from *pani* Marta. See also Robbins 2013, p. 83–84 for a related discussion of *pani* Marta.

<sup>22</sup> “Kocham Pana boga, Kościół, Ojczyznę, ludzi”.

seasonal items; she points to these as another sign of being *u siebie*. Pani Marta returns to her former home for the holidays; her son's family now lives there. However, she always feels relief upon returning to the institution, which is more peaceful, stable, and quiet. For *pani* Marta, living at the institution is now preferable than her former home, where it is more difficult to meet her bodily and spiritual needs.

Although *pani* Marta was similar to *pani* Dorota in her permanent residence and belonging to the community of institutional life, the staff did not seem to share the same sentimental feelings about *pani* Marta. She was younger and did not represent the Polish nostalgic past; Marta was born during World War II and grew up in Kielce, in central Poland, whereas Dorota's past reached back into the days of partition in the lost, beloved *kresy*. To the staff, *pani* Marta was a gossipy old woman, while *pani* Dorota was a darling, sweet grandmother. Neither *pani* Marta's age, life history, or health – for she is often in great pain and requires much assistance – make it possible for the staff to imagine her as an archetypal Polish grandmother like *pani* Dorota. Indeed, her age and gossipy behavior seemed to allow *pani* Marta only to evoke the socialist past and a right-wing, nationalist future. That is, *pani* Marta's difficult personal characteristics serve to link her with problematic temporalities – in stark contrast to *pani* Dorota, whose health, personality, and biography allow her to be linked to a desired national past. Notably, the one staff member who felt most affectionate towards *pani* Marta was the closest to her in age, suggesting that generation as well as life histories shape possibilities for care. Moreover, *pani* Dorota's evocation of the romantic national past complicates a simple pre-post-1989 temporal distinction, as pre-socialist temporalities play a key role in personhood. The moral valence of personhood and nationhood can influence each other, working to limit citizenship and belonging.

#### CONCLUSION: THE IMPORTANCE OF THE NATIONAL

Connections between older people and the Polish nation are replicated in everyday life and public discourse. For retirees learning self-care at educational institutions and for people living in institutional care, acts of storytelling and exchange are key practices that sustain relations and persons. Retirees practicing cognitive exercises cannot bear difficult memories alone, but instead seek to share these stories with others. *Pani* Dorota reminisces about her own life, transforming her memories of the *kresy* into connections with younger Poles. *Pani* Marta shares coffee with roommates and friends, thus bringing a home-like ethos into the institution. These older Poles' life histories, then, become signifiers for particular kinds of pasts and futures – and vehicles for certain kinds of relations in the present. Bound up in these everyday practices are broader moral imaginaries of pasts and futures, and of citizenship and belonging.

However, not everyone's life history equally fosters achieving a dignified personhood in old age. Although *pani* Marta is currently satisfied with her life, and I did not witness her care negatively affected by the ill will towards her, there are others

I know whose similar histories worked to destroy kin relations, personhood, and belonging. For instance, staff at the rehab center relate differently to those whose personhood is compromised by extreme physical debility or dementia. A nurse's aide comes to know her patients through repetitive daily intimate acts of care in a way that seems to be outside the political. Is there a way that this intimate caregiving is in fact part of national imaginaries? Which kinds of pasts and futures are allowed or foreclosed through these practices of care? More broadly, for older people in Poland, which kinds of pasts and futures can personhood include, and which are foreclosed? Which kinds of people are potential kin or friends, and who can better form these connections? Who has access to what kind of care because of various elements of their personal histories?

For older people who attend the UTW, and whose personhood is not threatened by institutional care, national memory still matters. Shared suffering as part of the national past remains the grounds for creating relations and maintaining personhood. Thus across contexts that have opposed imagined forms of citizenship, the same practices of relatedness maintain moral personhood. Interestingly, this connection through shared national suffering occurs at a place where transnational citizenship and ideas are often promoted; even in contexts that focus on the transnational, the national is the meaningful social imaginary. Moral personhood for older Poles is a *national* kind of personhood. This has implications for thinking about the possibilities and limits of European identity and belonging. Given the polarized politics of contemporary Poland, understanding the everyday links between person and nation has vital importance for the continuity of persons and collectives. Holding together the analytic categories of personhood, kinship, and citizenship allows analysis to better reflect their mutual imbrication in daily life.

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NATIONAL DIMENSIONS OF PERSONHOOD AMONG OLDER PEOPLE  
IN POLAND

Key words: Poland, Aging, Memory, Morality, Personhood, Kinship, Citizenship

Older people in Poland are often discriminated against in both practice and imagination, thus threatening their very status as moral persons. Personhood is especially threatened in institutional care; however, educational institutions (e.g., Universities of the Third Age), where older Poles perform a modern, European, contemporary elder personhood in which health is an unspoken assumption,

offer the possibility of inclusion. Across these contexts, older Poles create moral personhood through practices of remembering that involve national memory. As these practices of remembering – which are simultaneously practices of relatedness – invoke the nation, they also invoke *citizens* of that nation. Practices of relatedness therefore include forms of citizenship, suggesting that we should analyze kinship and citizenship together. Ethnographic research in educational and medical institutions in Wrocław shows that different national imaginaries offers different possibilities for personhood, such that the moral valences of different political periods can adhere to individuals. However, even in contexts that promote a transnational individualized kind of personhood, shared suffering as part of the national past remains the grounds for creating relations and maintaining personhood. This article explores everyday practices of care, memory, and relatedness, thereby elucidating the moral connections that are created between persons and nation. The lasting importance of the national has implications for thinking about the limits and possibilities of European identity in Poland.

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