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2023: again in Krakow, Poland

(25-30 October 2023)

Moment and Memory

26 October, Klezmer Hois

Kraków. The city is in transition with me. I look out of the window of the tram and recognise a street I have already passed. But it is still an uncertain feeling, a fleeting fabric, any small gust of wind could carry it away.

It's not the first time I've been here and I notice small changes in the everyday life. A new law regulates what shops can sell at night. Nine months ago it was different, I remember. Reluctantly, people in Krakow are getting used to it.

For me, the city is no longer a monolith, a uniform and alien entity devoid of history. I am already somewhat absorbed, like sun cream. I don't feel part of it yet. I don't recognise anybody. I don't get greeted by anyone. I don't understand the language. And yet a sense of belonging creeps into my consciousness.



Like a rhythm to which I have already danced. It is not possible to remember this state. It is life that cannot be grasped in retrospect. I can only write it while it is. This is the feeling that accompanies me in my travel writing. I have to capture it *now*, I can't write it down and process it later. It was during my second trip to Krakow that I became most aware of this. When Europe's history suddenly started to shift. On 23 February 2020, Russia had still widely denied that it wanted to attack Ukraine again. But on 24 February they did. I was on my way to Krakow at the time. I had the feeling that the change that had gripped the world had also thrown me off balance. That it was taking my future and my own path out of my hands. I knew I would get used to it in some way. After a short time, the whirling leaves would sink back to the ground. As if they were just a new humus layer.

But in the first moment, one world collapsed and a new one began to emerge. I felt I had to write about it *now*, because if I wrote about it later, it would only be a reflection from the newly created reality. I would be aware of many things that in the past moment had been incalculably overwhelming.



In this way, the travel texts are like islands, like logbook entries of a ship that always docks anew at the moment. The entries in the log book carry on from one another, but they are not from one state of mind. Each of these journeys changes me. And I record these changes. The transformation, the difference between how I arrive and how I depart is the thread I am looking for. I want to grasp this red thread on my journeys. I want to feel the changing dissonance between myself and the world I encounter. No, not the dissonance, but the sound.

A mission of civil society

28 October, Book Fair At the book fair in Krakow. Everything is very busy here. A lot of young people are interested in printed books in Poland. What a crowd.

Is this civil society that has just given up its passivity? In the last parliamentary elections on 15 October, 74.4% of the population voted. That is much more than anyone could have expected. 11% more than in the first free parliamentary election in 1989.

The PiS party, „Law and Justice“, has been in government in Poland for 8 years. Its opponents accuse it of comprehensively dismantling the liberal democratic system in Poland and nepotism. In its election campaign, PiS fuelled fears among the population. Its topics were migration, Russia, the EU, Germany and a demonised figure Donald Tusk, the leader of the strongest opposition party KO, „Citizens' Forum“.

Civil society braced itself against fear with a declaration of hope for the future. 500,000 people took part in the opposition „March of Freedom“ in Warsaw on 4 June 2023, and one million took part in the „March of a Million Hearts“ in Warsaw on 1 October. It was a demand to politicians. But it was also a promise that was kept on 15 October with the high voter turnout.

The interim after the election and before the formation of the government

28 October, Klezmer Hois

Will Tusk's KO, the „New Left“ and the two „Third Way“ parties be able to agree on a coalition? Do they share more than the common goal of dismissing the PiS government? If so, a new government would actually be possible now.

On 12 November, President Andrzej Duda (PiS) will propose a candidate for the office of Prime Minister to the new Sejm for election. Either Mateusz Morawiecki for the PiS or Donald Tusk for the Civic Forum. Tusk currently has the best chance of winning a majority, but the PiS will try to split the opposition by then. If the candidate proposed by Duda does not win a majority, the other candidate can try his luck two weeks later. If that also fails, there will be new elections.

That would be fatal, because time is pressing. If Donald Tusk comes to power, he wants to revise laws passed by the PiS government that contradict EU rules. This would free up large sums of EU money for Poland. I hear a figure: 54 billion euros. Donald Tusk travelled to Brussels immediately after the election. He knows the processes of the EU better than almost anyone else. The EU institutions would probably accommodate a new Polish government as far as they could. Whether President Duda wants to support or obstruct Tusk remains to be seen.

Once again: the mission of civil society

29 October, Kazimierz

Many small initiatives at local and regional level were important for the large turnout in this parliamentary election. Polish civil society mobilised itself for this election. It has forbidden itself to be resigned. The election was decided by groups of voters that previously included many non-voters: young people, women and Poles abroad. People who went to great lengths and waited for hours at polling stations because they wanted to make a difference. I hope that European civil society sees the Polish example and adopts it.

Interlude: three Poles and a German

I'm sitting on a bench in a small square in the Kazimierz neighbourhood to write this report. Three Poles with beer bottles join me, maintaining a slightly drunken politeness. One of them asks if I see any refugees when he hears that I'm German. „No,“ I say - „and? Do you like that?“

I'm then told what it's like in Germany. How scared we all have to be and how terrible we find it, all the Arabs and southern Europeans who don't want to work and live off our taxes. Here in Poland, everyone wants to work. It's clear that I like it better here! I say I really like it in Poland, but I wouldn't be so scared on the street in Germany. No, not even for my daughter. The three of them are amazed.

They then ask why we in Germany want to kick the Americans out of Europe. But they already know their answer: if the Americans were gone, we Germans would negotiate with the Russians and divide Poland up among ourselves. That's for sure. The three of them understand that, it's the laws of economics and power.

But they are trying to make me realise that it would also be advantageous for Germany if the Americans stayed. If the USA stayed in Europe, we Germans wouldn't get half of Poland, but we wouldn't have to produce heaps of weapons to end the chaos in Europe. Without the Americans, it would be like this. All Europeans would fall over each other.

I say Germany doesn't want to take over Poland, I've never heard that before. But they don't believe me. I'm just a good bloke, I wouldn't know what a brutal place the world is. I would have studied art? Oh well. Do I like women? I'll give the green light. I think I would have done the same if I was gay. I don't want to be a threat, rather the three of them start to interest me.

I tell them a bit about Polish history after they tell me I don't know anything about it. Now we are even more friendly. The three of them have studied foreign trade economics. That's why they know what Germany wants better than I do. The EU, they tell me, doesn't actually exist. Instead, it is Berlin, as the strongest economy in Europe, that invented „the EU“ and makes it dance like a hand puppet. So that the others can follow suit. This can also be seen in the fact that Germany has now ordered how the Poles must vote. You get money with Tusk, not with PiS. The three of them understand that. It's a strongman's game. They like Germany.

I say that somewhere in Germany there could be exactly this place and four guys are talking at a public bench with beer and complaining that their country (in this case Germany) is being bullied by the EU in Brussels. They look at me dumbfounded. Not because they believe me. I'm a marvellous phantast for them. I make a few more attempts to tell them that Germany does not want to incorporate Poland and that the EU has a great deal of independence from Germany. They are happy about my behaviour, they think I'm fun. They don't believe a word I say.

We talk a bit more about how important it is to maintain a critical awareness of information from the media and the Internet. We agree on that! I get the impression that the three of them would give

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themselves high marks on that point. But not me. I move on, it was kind of nice without us being able to convince each other of anything.

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