



# **Karolina Ćwiek-Rogalska, *Zapamiętane w krajobrazie.* *Krajobraz kulturowy czesko- niemieckiego pogranicza w czasach przemian, Scholar,* **Warsaw 2017** **Book review****

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Karolina Ćwiek-Rogalska's book *Zapamiętane w krajobrazie. Krajobraz kulturowy czesko-niemieckiego pogranicza w czasach przemian* (*The Memory of Landscape: The Cultural Landscape of Czech-German Borderland in a Time of Change*) is the culmination of her field work conducted in 2012-2014 in Dolní Žandov, a small town in the northwest of the Czech Republic, located near the border with Germany. Ćwiek-Rogalska interpreted the data—ranging from archived information to oral histories—using concepts borrowed from various disciplines. Her intention was to describe and analyze the changes that the cultural landscape of Dolní Žandov and the surrounding area have undergone since 1918.

The reason she opted for what she terms a “microperspective” was the fact that the town is located in the Czech borderland (*pohraničí*), a region so culturally different from other border regions that one cannot compare it to them. Dolní Žandov owes its distinct character to its complex and sometimes even turbulent history, which may strike one as odd given its current “look,” typical for small, peaceful towns located a little bit off the beaten track and overshadowed by renowned nearby locations (Mariánské Lázně in this case).

*Pohraničí* is a region where deep cultural changes were triggered throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century by global political and social processes. Until 1918, that is, until the Czech Republic was born, Dolní Žandov (Unter Sandau) belonged to Prussia and hence German was still the mother tongue of the majority of its inhabitants during

the interwar period. Between 1946 and 1948, the members of the German-speaking community were expatriated and replaced by various ethnic groups arriving from the Bohemian and Slovakian hinterland.

In her book, Ćwiek-Rogalska studies how these cultural changes left their marks on the landscape. She is mainly interested in—as she states—“places where one may observe this intriguing moment of rupture thanks to which German-speaking culture, still visible in the layers of landscape, meets the relatively fresh Czech culture” (13). Dolní Žandov turns out to be an “involuntary monument” (the author borrows this term from Alois Riegl) of subsequent historical epochs that left their traces through the intentional and unintentional actions of generations of the town’s inhabitants. The ever-changing relationships between Czechs and Germans and consequent tensions between “the Czech,” “the German,” “the non-Czech,” and “the non-German” (epitomized in the still living idea of “the post-German”) form a conceptual matrix that the author uses in order to read the landscape as a part and background of the contemporary everyday life of people living in the town. Thus, Ćwiek-Rogalska offers a local perspective that nevertheless allows her to raise more general questions concerning material traces and documents of the historical politics and memory that are inscribed in the landscape.

*The Memory of Landscape* is the result of an interdisciplinary approach that is evidenced mainly by a broad spectrum of theories that are combined by the author in such a way as to offer a conceptual framework for her interpretations of the material collected during her field work: on the one hand her interpretations are based on archives, on the other—on interviews. Ćwiek-Rogalska makes a lot of effort to present her methodology (chapters 1 and 2, i.e., the first part of the book), explicitly stating her assumptions together with their limitations and describing what her field work consisted of and the factors it was conditioned by. She also pays much attention to her position as a researcher and gives an interesting account of the linguistic problems she had to face. These issues, she underlines, are of primary importance because they prevent anyone from approaching the *pohraniči* people’s experiences from a general point of view and from comparing them to the experiences of groups inhabiting borderlands elsewhere. A part of one of the initial chapters is devoted to the concept of landscape that Ćwiek-Rogalska defines in accord with the majority of contemporary approaches as a “place” where culture and nature meet. However, she is more focused on the fact that the landscape is a space where the material reality that may be experienced here and now is fused with the past—that is, with that which is gone and only remembered. In this sense, the landscape of Dolní Žandov is above all a landscape of individual and collective memory, and hence the significance of the questions she wants to answer: who remembers and when? What is remembered and why? Which places generate memories? What determines the way the landscape of *pohraniči* is experienced besides memories?

The second part of the book contains analyses of the landscape of Dolní Žandov. In chapter 3, “Dolní Žandov — Unter Sandau (1918-1938),” the author’s argument concerns a key question “what language do we use when we talk about a landscape?” (45). The linguistic conflict determining the perception of the landscape by the past and present inhabitants of the town is shown with reference to the monument honoring the soldiers who fell during the First World War and the two buildings that used to house a Czech primary school and a German kindergarten. The monument—of which only one element has been preserved (a stone lion) and which has been recently appropriated placed as an ornament in a private garden—is noteworthy as its inexistent materiality is a good illustration of the peculiarity of *pohraničí*. On the one hand it is—or rather, was—a palimpsest: initially founded as a monument to the fallen soldiers of the war between Prussia and Austria in 1866, in 1914 was turned into a monument to German soldiers killed during the First World War, then after the Second World War was demolished and its parts were reused in order to erect a monument for soldiers of the Red Army, which has not survived either. At present there is yet another monument in the town, its inscription reads “We shall remain faithful” and is dedicated to Czech soldiers. On the other hand, even though these monuments no longer exist are inexistent, they are somewhat present in the inhabitants’ memory, self-imposing one on another in a manner that has little to do with their history. The building of the Czech school and that of the German kindergarten are presented by Ćwiek-Rogalska as motives discussed in two private memoirs written by, respectively, a Czech and a German. These documents contain two different narratives on Dolní Žandov—the former shows the local development of Czech culture, and the latter proves the century-long German tradition of the city. As a result, they offer not so much two divergent perspectives on the same place as they do evidence of the fact that the same space was experienced as two totally different environments.

The following chapter, entitled “Dolní Žandov → Unter Sandau → Dolní Žandov (1938-1948),” is an attempt at answering the question of whom does the landscape belong to economically and emotionally. The author focuses on the changes in the population of the town that were a direct consequence of the sequestration of Jewish possessions by Nazi authorities, forced departures of Jewish inhabitants, displacements of Czech citizens, arrivals and then expulsions of German settlers, voluntary departures of Czechs in the 40s, and finally of the intense nationalization of the land. Ćwiek-Rogalska looks into the personal histories of the inhabitants of selected houses as well as the histories of the houses themselves. She also sheds light on the history of the history of a former training camp for young Germans which later served as a temporary detention site for Nazis and expelled Germans. Her research is based on historical sources as well as interviews with the inhabitants.

Chapter 5, “Dolní Žandov (Unter Sandau) 1948-2014,” is devoted to the post-war history of the town. It is in this chapter that Ćwiek-Rogalska’s argument is most

consistently based on her reading of landscape since she focuses on national farming economy therein (she claims that collectivization was a “landscaping power,” borrowing the term from Petr Hájek, a Czech cultural studies scholar) as well as on the frontier and its military infrastructure, which is so typical for borderlands. The proximity of the frontier resulted in a particular land management strategy during communism and the particular “look” of the region after the fall of the iron curtain when innumerable cheap markets targeted at Germans were established. The role and the place—both real and imaginary—of the border in *pohraničí* allow the author to discuss how the character of the area of Dolní Žandov has changed over the past one hundred years from “co-existent borderlands,” “alienated borderlands,” and “interdependent borderlands” to “integrated borderlands” (121-122). Ćwiek-Rogalska notes that in principle the frontier hardly exists these days, yet it is vividly present in personal and collective memory, where it melts with various recollections of everyday life in the second half of the 20th century.

The third part of the book contains a number of case studies of carefully selected “elements” of the landscape of Dolní Žandov. Chapter 6 is on ruins, that is—quoting its title—“on what there is not.” The idea of ruins recurs in the inhabitant’s statements and seems to be an indispensable key to understanding the landscape as particular surroundings experienced by the people living there. The author draws an interesting conclusion concerning the concept of ruin: “it turns out that a ruin does not have to be something that really exists in the landscape. An equally important role is played by all that which left a mark in the memory of the interlocutors—it also exists in a way. As one can see, the cultural landscape is to be understood here as an intersection of time (memory) and place (landscape)” (146).

In chapter 7, “Sacrum: Local Interpretations and Global Meanings,” the histories of a local chapel, of the church, and of the cemetery are presented. The cemetery, being a piece of vernacular landscape architecture, clearly proves how the subsequent “ethnic” layers of the landscape covered one another, contributing to the shape of the current palimpsest: even if the tomb stones of German inhabitants were destroyed in an act of erasure of Teutonic traces, the bodies remained intact and are still where they had been buried. One could say that they have become one with the Czech soil.

The last chapter of the book is devoted to Dolní Žandov as a health resort. The contemporary inhabitants of the city still remember that it used to have this function but treat this aspect of the history of their town dismissively (according to the opinion of many interviewees, it is Mariánské Lázně that is a spa *par excellence*). Here Ćwiek-Rogalska’s argument is based on the biographies of two doctors; both were German-speaking, lived there before the WW2, and were allowed to stay and continue their work afterwards. The memory that one of them once occupied one of the preserved buildings is still alive while his former house still serves as a landmark in the local topography.

The concluding remarks are a thought-provoking methodological *coda* closing the theoretical argument offered in the opening chapters of the book. Ćwiek-Rogalska claims that “the cultural landscape has a disturbing ontology as everything that is imagined and remembered is as real as—sometimes even more real than—that which is physically still present” (191). What, then, counts is not only what is remembered and how, but also the manner in which one talks about it. Additionally, the landscape may be said to co-create the physical presence of things to the same extent as it contributes to everything that is missing and as such present only in the inhabitant’s memories, stories, and ways of seeing.

The author offers two important and inspiring thoughts that stem from her research in Dolní Žandov but which at the same time have a much broader significance reaching beyond the topic of her book. Firstly, the local chronology of the landscape is, Ćwiek-Rogalska states, essentially different from that of politics. As a consequence, an analysis of the landscape allows one to reevaluate global political events and processes as observed from a particular “viewpoint.” Secondly, she believes that removing the material elements of a landscape is not always decisive for its identity: the past landscape is “sustained” in memory and imagination and passes from one generation to another and hence determines the way a landscape looks and feels at present.

Summing up, Ćwiek-Rogalska’s book is an excellent example of a well-done combination of field work with a theoretical perspective. As a consequence, its readers may get acquainted with the history of Dolní Žandov and its area, which otherwise would have most probably passed unnoticed as banal, peripheral, and insignificant. At the same time, they are offered enough food for thought as the book raises important questions, such as whether it is possible to offer a consistent narrative on a cultural landscape given that the landscape itself is full of cracks and tensions and is experienced as incongruous by its inhabitants. Another issue raised by Ćwiek-Rogalska is to what extent a textual approach in research on the history of cultural landscapes is inevitable. Even though the author has done a lot of field work and extensively cites her notes taken “on the spot,” declaring that the landscape is active and performative, she looks at it with the help of written or spoken texts. Consequently, she is mainly focused on the landscape as something that may be apprehended only indirectly through the experience of its past and present inhabitants. The above remark is not so much a criticism as an account of her approach, which leads me to the following questions: is her methodology not the only possible solution in research on cultural landscape as an inhabited landscape? Even if we claim that the landscape is active, are we, as researchers, not forced to experience its agency only through other people’s experiences, no matter whether past or present, that inevitably have to be communicated to us verbally? Given that the word reveals the landscape inasmuch as it conceals it, any research has as its object a representation of a landscape and not the landscape itself.