

Maciej Ząbek, Sławomir Łodziński, *Uchodźcy w Polsce. Próba spojrzenia antropologicznego* [Refugees in Poland: An Attempt at an Anthropological View]. Warszawa: Polska Akcja Humanitarna, Instytut Etnologii i Antropologii Kulturowej UW. 2008, pp. 484

The book by Maciej Ząbek and Sławomir Łodziński, entitled *Uchodźcy w Polsce. Próba spojrzenia antropologicznego* [Refugees in Poland: An Attempt at an Anthropological View], is a fruit of the authors' work conducted under a research project *Możesz uczyć się rozumieć MUR* [You can learn to understand: MUR], with Polish Humanitarian Organisation<sup>1</sup> as the lead partner, whereas the Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Warsaw was in charge of the research component. The main goal of the project was to support adaptation of individuals applying for a refugee status in Poland whereas the research component was a supplementary activity. Maciej Ząbek and Sławomir Łodziński embraced the opportunity to work with NGO activists who focused on providing assistance to refugees and used it to write a book which is more than just a research report: it is a multifaceted account of the problem of refugees in Poland and an attempt to reflect on the theoretical definition of the phenomenon from an anthropological perspective.

Within the research project described in the book, Ząbek and Łodziński applied a number of research techniques. First, they conducted a survey among residents of centres for individuals applying for a refugee status. The project covered centres located in Warsaw and its environs. Afterwards, ethnography was applied, with the main workload being undertaken by the students of two institutes at the University of Warsaw: Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology and the Institute of Sociology. In the course of their work, researchers conducted numerous unstructured interviews with foreigners and observed their daily lives in the centres. Moreover, interviews were held with staff members of the refugee centres and with people working and living in the vicinity of the centres. The most relevant excerpts from students' field reports were included in 'boxes' to illustrate specific issues. Focused group interviews were also applied in the project. Furthermore, researchers engaged in desk research and analysed documents used by the staff of the Office for Foreigners (Urząd do Spraw Cudzoziemców) to make decisions to grant/refuse a refugee status.

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<sup>1</sup> More information about the project, supported from the European Social Fund, can be found at: [www.pah.org.pl/pomoc\\_humanitarna,pomoc\\_uchodzcom,242,programy\\_program\\_pomocy\\_uchodzcom.html](http://www.pah.org.pl/pomoc_humanitarna,pomoc_uchodzcom,242,programy_program_pomocy_uchodzcom.html)

The final chapters of the book present an analysis of the press coverage concerning refugees and an analysis of nationwide surveys regarding the presence of refugees in Poland. This extensive set of research techniques allowed the authors to elucidate the studied phenomenon from so many perspectives that, frankly, anyone who has read the book may be left with the impression that hardly anything else can be added to this exhaustive account of the situation of refugees and their institutional environment in Poland.

The book points out that there have been no attempts in Poland to discuss refugee-related problems comprehensively. The existing, fairly extensive body of literature on the subject covers selected subtopics and focuses on selected narrow aspects. With this starting point, the authors' intention was to offer a comprehensive discussion of various aspects of the problem. The main advantage of the book lies not only in its sound and unbiased presentation of research (quite many publications on refugees in Poland are written with bias as many authors are personally involved in providing help to refugees) but also in an attempt to grasp the essence of the phenomenon and to define it from an anthropological perspective, escaping formulas proposed by international legislation and administrative procedures.

In the authors' opinion, anthropological studies on refugees are likely to bring (and have already brought) practical benefits, both for refugees and for receiving societies.

Firstly, anthropological research contributes to the understanding of refugees' native cultures. It is hard to help them without having some basic information about their backgrounds. Secondly, an anthropologist who understands the refugees' perspective and the perspective of the receiving society may become a mediator between the two and may help in resolving conflicts arising from a clash of these two different perspectives. Thirdly, with their efforts anthropologists are in a position to change the image of refugees, to present them as subjects rather than 'wronged and inept children,' thus making any assistance more efficient (all of this provided that anthropologists act independently of the receiving state's authorities, humanitarian organisations and their ideological visions of what help should involve).

When discussing motivations behind refugees' decisions to flee, Łodziński and Ząbek remark that it is hardly possible to separate the motivations considered by the Geneva Conventions as sufficient from economic motivations. In this sense, any 'refugee case', as it may be termed by the officials in charge, becomes a hybrid case. This gives rise to problems arising from the incompatibility between the reality which the refugees escaped and the requirements of the Conventions. On the other hand, one may see refugees construct their official biographies in ways that fit officials' expectations.

Based on the research material collected, the book makes an important distinction between refugees from Chechnya and those from Asian and African countries. This distinction is also confirmed by other observations of refugees living in Poland. Refugees from Chechnya come to Poland with their entire families at a cost which is relatively low whereas the majority of those fleeing from Asia and Africa are young men who paid a high price for coming to Poland, which may mean that they do not

come from poor backgrounds. Both groups have one thing in common: they do not see Poland as their long-term destination. The authors emphasise the importance of education as a factor affecting refugees' situation. Better educated individuals have a different level of 'refugee awareness' (p. 141): they are more skilled at dealing with the Geneva Conventions and less likely to commit 'errors' such as giving reasons that are not mentioned in the Conventions. As such, better educated individuals stand a better chance of obtaining a refugee status.

By applying an anthropological approach, Ząbek and Łodziński view the status-granting procedures and the stay in a refugee centre as a 'rite of passage.' Refugees are placed 'inbetween' in the psychological, social and economic sense. Officials who examine status applications build 'an air of power' around them and come across as omniscient people who cannot be fooled. Analysis of the refugee status procedure conducted by the authors combines a description of the Office for Foreigners (UdSC) and its actual operations as well as a summary of the relevant legislation. This part of the book is illustrated with 9 case studies: refugees' stories told to obtain the 'Geneva protection'. (The case studies make the text very persuasive and highly readable. They also show various facets of the procedure. Comments give the reader an idea of how an UdSC official analyses refugees' stories and how those stories are 'produced', regardless of whether they are authentic or fabricated in order to obtain the much-desired residence permit in a European country.)

The chapters are written specifically from an ethnographic perspective, i.e. the ones describing life in centres for individuals waiting to obtain a refugee status. This part of the book offers ample information about refugee centres (Poland has around twenty of such facilities in total). However, the authors concentrate primarily on two centres: one located in Dębak near Warsaw and another one in Siekierki, a district of Warsaw. The two centres are not typical in the sense that they were the only ones which housed refugees from countries other than Chechnya. Most attention was given to the Siekierki centre, populated mostly by Africans and Asians. The authors were highly interested in cross-cultural communication and conflicts arising due to cultural differences.

According to Łodziński and Ząbek, refugee centres may, in many aspects, be likened with places such as student residence halls, children's shelters, old people's homes, vacation centres, workers' hotels, night shelters or hostels for the homeless (p. 196). As such, they may display some characteristics of total institutions described by Erving Goffman. This leads to the conclusion that a refugee centre certainly cannot be called 'a home.' The authors believe that refugees have a sense of being 'homeless in the society': the facilities they inhabit do provide shelter but entail discomforts such as crowdedness, staff's disciplinary functions and the overall atmosphere of uncertainty (waiting for refugee status determination).

From the anthropological perspective adopted by the authors, a refugee centre is viewed a place where the 'rite of passage' takes place. While refugees have already 'broken with their roots and previous cultural background' (p. 273), they have not yet found a new place to call 'home'. As a place of temporary separation and/or exclusion, a refugee centre is not a home. The longer one stays there, the more destructive the

'outsider status' becomes. The period spent in a refugee centre is described by the authors as a liminal phase. Hence, refugees are homeless in the social sense: they are temporarily excluded and, as such, exposed to the risk of permanent exclusion from the society.

The authors briefly describe the history of institutionalisation of integration of recognised refugees/displaced persons. One conclusion seems noteworthy: it is important for Poland to have obtained support from the European Refugee Fund, which is now used by a number of Polish NGOs. On the one hand, this support ensures stable income and security of operations for those NGOs but, on the other hand, it may prompt them to develop have a client-like attitude towards the Fund. Professionalisation of NGOs may lead to their alienation from the actual problems faced by refugees, overshadowed by the daily bureaucratic routines. Undoubtedly, the working conditions of Polish NGOs which assist refugees in Poland are an important research topic which should be tackled in a separate piece of research.

Łodziński and Ząbek have identified three main reasons behind the lack of success in refugee integration efforts. Firstly, a large proportion of refugees are not interested in integration as they do not see Poland as their final destination. Secondly, such efforts focus exclusively on refugees, without any outreach attempts to contact the communities where refugees will need to fit in (this stance contradicts the definition of integration, adopted by officials and humanitarian organisations, which states that integration is necessarily bidirectional). Thirdly, there is a reason that has also been noticed by other researchers: hardly any pre-integration measures are taken in connection with individuals who are waiting for a refugee status. While staying in Poland, those people live in separated refugee centres and are not subjected to any integration measures. One example of existing pre-integration measures could be found within the MUR project, which produced the book under review.

The last two chapters of the book describe the perception of refugees by Poles. This perception is reconstructed from respondents' statements and through content analysis of press coverage. These chapters are perhaps the least interesting ones in the book, aiming primarily to complement the preceding discussion and give it 'a broader background.'

Łodziński and Ząbek finish their book with three answers to one question: 'Why do Poles need refugees?' The first argument refers to the moral debt to be repaid since Poles themselves were in the position of refugees/displaced persons over the past 200 years and received protection in their destinations. The second answer focuses on the benefits that refugees may bring to Poland, enriching its culture and acting as labour force in the country's economy. According to the third answer, Poles need to accept refugees in order to live up to the standards of Western civilisation, with Poland aspiring to be a Western state.

While the authors emphasise that these types of arguments are given in the current debate on refugees in Poland, they do not wish to accept them as their own. Łodziński and Ząbek point out refugees should be accepted, first and foremost, for ethical reasons ('thou shall help thy neighbour'). They are reluctant to view such help as repayment of a moral debt, as in the first type of argument, but, rather, as an uncon-

ditional duty towards fellow human beings. The two authors emphasise that refugee policy may be viewed as an element of a goal-oriented migration policy, expected to bring benefits to the receiving state. However, in the light of the research results presented in the book, such benefits seem very unlikely to materialise in the near future. Most refugees in Poland can hardly help the Polish economy to grow. Instead, they seem doomed to receive support from the state for most of their lives. The book ends with practical recommendations for government agencies dealing with refugees and for nongovernmental organisations.

In my view, the book by Łodziński and Ząbek brings new quality in reflection on refugees in the social sciences in Poland. I believe it will become a canonical work in the field, replacing *Goście i gospodarze* [Guests and Hosts] by Halina Grzymała-Moszczyńska and Ewa Nowicka (1998). While bias is typical of many Polish publications works on the subject, Łodziński and Ząbek present a broad range of issues in an unbiased way. In their anthropological perspective, they make an attempt to present and understand not just refugees' motivations but also the motivations driving all players involved in this social field, i.e. officials, social workers, NGO activists etc.

The focus on Warsaw in the publication may be considered a weakness. Undoubtedly, it is much easier to conduct research in refugee centres in Warsaw and its environs than in Lubelskie and Podlaskie Voivodships where such centres are also located. Moreover, the book places a much stronger emphasis on the situation of refugees from African and Asian countries compared with those from Chechnya while the latter is a dominant group (in terms of its size) among refugees who have been living in Poland in recent years. According to Łodziński and Ząbek, a scholarly sound study of the Chechen group is hardly possible at the moment, for the following reasons: the Chechen group is quite impenetrable and distrustful. Any researcher who would like to study this community in a credible way, would need to speak the Chechen language.

The nearly five hundred pages of the book cover virtually all aspects of the refugee phenomenon in Poland. On the one hand, the authors have succeeded in delivering a synthesis of the problem and providing an anthropological definition of the notion of 'refugee'. On the other hand, however, the themes covered by the authors can never be described in an exhaustive way. Nevertheless, the book points at new directions for further supplementary and focused research contributions. Except for the difficult challenge of studying the Chechens, there are some other topics which seem interesting and worth pursuing within the social field that has evolved around refugees, for instance focused studies on institutions encountered by refugees: schools, community support centres or non-governmental organisations. The authors themselves placed the strongest emphasis on the operations of refugee centres.

Finally, it must be emphasised that the book under review is a clear proof that it is feasible for researchers to write an excellent scholarly book in collaboration with practitioners, under a project primarily oriented towards purely humanitarian rather than academic goals.

**References**

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