

INTRODUCTION

A decade ago, a collection of scientific texts on people's self-perception in the region of Prussian Lithuania appeared in German¹. At that time, attempts were made to disclose the impact on the identity transformations in Prussian Lithuania at the turn of the 20th c. by, on the one hand, the process of modernization perceived as a totality of a number of crises typical of the 19th c. and the ways of their overcoming, and, on the other hand, a new form of the community getting together into cultural societies and the dissemination of knowledge via the said societies. The return to the issue of identity analyzed at the time in different aspects was encouraged by the intensified research into the subject over the last decade and a striving to supplement the studies on the subject of identity by new insights formed primarily by the application of new interdisciplinary theories and methodologies. From the questions about the factors that made an impact on the identity formation and the definitions of that identity (which, true, also remain topical in the present collection of articles) we move to the issues of people's self-perception, the systems of meanings that defined them, and the changes and challenges that predetermined the transformation of the perceptions and the systems of meanings.

The principal idea of the publication *Ambiguous Identities in the Interspaces: the Case of East Prussia in the 19th and 20th centuries* is revealed by the title which strove to disclose the interrelationships between the totality, the context, and a specific case. The region focused on in the publication has consciously been not identified precisely. East Prussia, Lithuania (Prussian Lithuania, or Lithuania Minor), Klaipėda Region, Kaliningrad Oblast; all of them are names that used to propose, and keep proposing, different ways of self awareness and interpretation in the framework of the regions defined by those names. These regions are perceived as *interspaces*² – interjacent regions where an opportunity to choose *what I am* and *what I identify myself with* in the 19th and 20th c. regularly fluctuated between the systems of meanings implying different content: the etatism and the nationalism; different interpretations of the same nationalism; German nationalism and Lithuanian nationalism; and between what defines one's belonging to the citizenry and what defines one's belonging to the nation. Therefore, in such a space, a number of different identities could exist simultaneously, and one person could simultaneously relate himself to several systems of meanings and to perceive himself in different referential frameworks. That was a consequence of the multicultural character of the region, its existence *between*, and its unusual history which objectively could not yield to being appropriated in the framework of exclusively one of the nationalistic system of meanings. Simultaneously, in the publication, the case of East Prussia is introduced with the understanding that there were many more of similar cases in Central

¹ *Selbstbewusstsein und Modernisierung. Soziokultureller Wandel in Preußisch-Litauen vor und nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg.* Hrsg. von R. TRABA. Osnabrück, 2000.

² The concept of "interspace" is used here as proposed by historian Philipp Ther presently working at Vienna University: the concept (German: *Zwischenraum*) is understood "not merely in the geographical sense, as a position between central territories, but rather as a position in the periphery of respective nations and states." Interspaces, or interjacent regions, are "transitional territories from the linguistic, cultural, and ethnic viewpoints, where different influences, frequently also mixed, intercross. A vivid example of such a region [...] is Upper Silesia whose belonging to Bohemia, Austria, Prussia, Germany, and Poland formed not only its history, but also its language." See: THER, Ph. Einleitung: Sprachliche, kulturelle und ethnische „Zwischenräume“ als Zugang zu einer transnationalen Geschichte Europas. In *Regionale Bewegungen und Regionalismen in europäischen Zwischenräumen seit der Mitte des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Tagungen zur Ostmitteleuropa-Forschung, Bd. 18). Hrsg. von Ph. THER, H. SUNDHAUSSEN. Marburg, 2003, s. xi.

and East Europe in the 19th to the 20th c. Thus, in the definition of the research object, we propose to see our case of East Prussia just as “one out of many” similar cases.

In the present publication, the focussing on the level of the way of thinking, perceptions, imagination, and meanings of the people who used to live in East Prussia is by no means accidental. It is the analysis of the meanings that were, and still are, used for the definition of oneself in that space or relating oneself to it, of the effort to understand the context in which the meanings appeared, of the ways they were maintained, and of the types of self-perception collisions they provoked which provides a road that the contemporary theories of identity research propose to take. The disclosure of the formation processes of the systems of meanings; the identification of different political and sociocultural factors that made an impact on the appearance of those systems of meanings; the differentiation of social networks that supported different meanings; the definition of communication milieus in which the meanings used to function; and ultimately the studies of sites of memory as the forms of concentration of certain meanings – all of that are the ways used by the authors of the publication to disclose the existence of ambiguous identities in interspaces by the example of East Prussia.

Just as a decade ago, the collection of articles starts with an introductory text by Robert Traba who offers a different view of professional research into regional history: instead of a closed emphasis on what was “ours” in a nationalist sense in East Prussia, to try and to “read” anew the meanings encoded in the past of the region and surviving in the landscape of its present; the meanings that relate the local micro-level with more universal macro-levels. In the professional historiography of the region, the steps in that direction have been made for more than one year, and one can say that the present collection of publications expresses a continuous approach towards it. The uniting idea of the collection is to demonstrate and simultaneously critically assess what defined self-perceptions of people who lived in East Prussia in the past, what remained from the meanings that defined the self-perceptions in the present, how the meanings functioned, and what role they played. The identification and critical assessment should be understood as an invitation to re-think – that is just what Traba proposes to do.

The present publication consists of three chapters. The first one is devoted to the discussion of what quite recently used to justify (and in some cases continues justifying) our imagination, i.e. nationalist systems of meanings. The study in two parts by Vasilijus Safronovas, published in the chapter, is to be considered as an attempt at defining the interrelationships between the systems of meanings, called historical master narratives, and the roles they acquire when people start identifying themselves with them. The issue is analyzed on the basis of the examples of German and Lithuanian nationalisms by demonstrating how the systems of meanings (historical master narratives) that justified the said nationalisms were adapted in the interspaces of East Prussia and Prussian Lithuania in the late 19th and early 20th c. and how the adaptation changed the configuration of the identity levels that used to function before that.

The second chapter encourages getting a more detailed view of the latter. The presented 150-year-panorama of the changes in self-perception in the interspace under question allows understanding that the great systems of meanings that were actively inculcated in the late 19th and early 20th c and that formed the self-perception – the nationalisms that encouraged both getting together and exclusion – can not by any means be accepted as the only alternatives open to the population in East Prussia when deciding where to attach themselves and what to isolate themselves from. The research of Magdalena Niedzielska into the identity of the political elite of East Prussia

convincingly demonstrates the transformations experienced by the self-perception of that social stratum in the pre-nationalistic period: between the Napoleonic wars and 1848. Christian Pletzing's text provides a view of the spread of German nationalism in small towns of Prussian Lithuania in the period of 1848–1871; the author tries to assess how large a part of the community was embraced by the spread and how it proceeded. The research of Ruth Leiserowitz is interesting in two aspects: first, because it focuses on the subject of the Jewish identity in East Prussia, frequently paid little attention to, or totally ignored, by historiography serving the principal nations; and second, the text is interesting due to the research perspective chosen to disclose the Jewish identity: the research conducted by the author as a case study of one family shows how the possibilities of the definition of the Jewish self-perception in the region were changing over several generations. The text of Nijolė Strakauskaitė stimulates one to have a more attentive look at several aspects of academic interest in Prussian Lithuanians and their culture in East Prussia. Her research presents the discourse on Prussian Lithuanians as it was created in East Prussia at the end of the 19th c. The same subject of attached identity is looked into in the article of Arūnė Arbušauskaitė where she, from the viewpoint of a sociologist and historian, explicates complicated issues of attachment to states and nations in Klaipėda Region in the interwar period, the period when society nationalization in the region reached its peak. The article of Ralph Meindl that completes the chapter in a way continues the research of Robert Traba, published in Polish five years ago, into the meanings that defined the region of East Prussia in the interwar period. The author looked for an answer to the question in the propaganda rhetoric of the epoch of national-socialism.

The third chapter of the publication is devoted to the discussion of imagination and the mechanisms of its formation. On the basis of three specific case studies, the authors show the formation of discursive constructions, the products of imagination, frequently substituting for the reality, by means of supporting certain meanings, as well as the impact the imagination makes on specific actions in the reproduction of the discourse and the definition of what is “ours”. From that viewpoint, the article of Rafał Żytniec can be understood as the research into the micro-level. It shows the ways that a paper published in Danzig in the inter-war period construed the perception of the Curonian Spit as a landscape icon defining the specificity of “our” (German) region. The study of Hektoras Vitkus transfers us to the present and is related to the perceptions of “Lithuania Minor” existing in the imagination of Lithuanians as “our” (Lithuanian) imagined territory. H. Vitkus treats “Lithuania Minor” as a memory site of Lithuanians both by identifying the meanings used to define it and by discussing the impact made by the images of “Lithuania Minor” on specific present actions in Lithuania. In the case of Anna Karpenko research, Kaliningrad Oblast is called a memory site. On the basis of the said region, the author tries to find out how political changes effect the strategies of actualization of the “regional past” circulating in the public discourse, in other words, what impact the changes make on the transformation of the meanings defining Kaliningrad Region as a unique memory site from the predomination of the discourse of a “usual Soviet region” to the actualization of the monument protection discourse.

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Symbolically, the publication that attempts to take a fresh view of the problem of identities in East Prussia united the researchers of the nations for which the space remains topical, i.e. Germans, Poles, Russians, and Lithuanians. The starting point of the publication was a conference *Identity Breaks: East Prussia – Prussian Lithuania – Lithuanian Minor* held in Nida in 2009 by the Institute of the Baltic Sea Region History and Archaeology, Klaipėda University, in cooperation with its partners: Academia Baltica (Oeversee-Sankelmark), Thomas Mann Cultural Centre (Nida), Goethe Institute in Vilnius, and the German–Lithuanian Forum. Most of the research outcomes in the present collection are original and published for the first time, with the exception of the text of Magdalena Niedzielska, published in Polish in 1997, and, with a kind agreement of the author, translated specifically for the publication. The compilers of the publication are deeply grateful to Kristina Sprindžiūnaitė and Laimutė Servaitė whose translations contributed to the accessibility of the insights laid out in the publication to readers in different languages.

Vasilijus Safronovas