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### Odd-believers<sup>1</sup>

“...the sense of possible reality should be valued higher  
then the sense of real possibilities.”

Robert Musil

#### *1.*

A story of the turbulent epoch that started after the fall of the Berlin wall; a story being told from a distance of ten years, during which we were quickly growing out of the joyful “childhood” of the breakthrough time; a story of an everyday and artistic life, perceived not from the perspective of a big cultural centre, but from the perspective of a remote province; such a story can be started as follows...

In Sejny, a small town of abundant traditions, at the end of the world (as they used to say when there was a USSR border running nearby, and where was the back of beyond), halfway between a Polish and Lithuanian community centre (to have only been established recently), in the street renamed from the Red Army to Piłsudski, almost opposite the “bishop’s palace”, in the vicinity of the Town Hall on one side and the district office on the other, with the consulate of the Republic of Lithuania nearby with a sentry box to protect the flag and the emblem with Pogoń, and with currency exchange offices open round-the-clock; on the axis between the Dominican monastery and the famous basilica; in a synagogue, that is long-remembered as a fertilisers storehouse, and a slippers factory that did not survive the fall of communism, and that once was a talmudic school, and in the building of an old post office, where during the major overhaul under way a small roll of parchment was found that remembers the times of a Hebrew gymnasium that was once situated there – the Centre “Borderland of arts, cultures, nations” now exists.

This phenomenon should not be mistaken for the office of the Borderland Guard Forces, whose officers stubbornly park their cars in front of the synagogue, because it is closer for them, they say. Once, one of the officers in a TV interview explained that borderland is a strip of land separating one country’s territory from the other’s. The workers of “Borderland” from the opposite entertain just an opposite idea in this respect and they claim that borderland is a zone of mutual intermingling, co-existence and dialogue. On top of it, they even do their best there to be so. To this end they sometimes address the commanding officer and his subordinates with a proposal of collaboration and they do not usually refuse – except very exceptional cases, which confirms one of the principles of the new order that well understood competition is constructive not destroying.

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<sup>1</sup> Translator’s note: ‘świrowiercy’ from a Polish graffito.

It would be more difficult to provide similar evidence as regards other rules put into practice after the breakthrough. Indeed, there are cases of returning property to its rightful owners in Sejny and its vicinity: the Catholic Church has regained the premises of the Dominican monastery and the bishop's palace, tenement houses and land have been reprivatised, and notaries have been examining archives in search of legal owners of manors existing in the vicinity. No one has expected anyone to claim rights to the evangelic church, but since there are 'newcomers' in the synagogue and yeshiva, everything seems to be clear. Unfortunately, after several incidences in a local restaurant, where a waitress's conscious remarks that dishes ordered by the Centre's workers contain pork were not taken into account as expected, they had to reconcile to the fact that life does not always surrender to the logic of obviousness. We should not however overlook hardly concealed disappointment they feel in connection with this fact.

An open question continued to be their membership, all those strange personae have come from remote parts of Poland (only one of the founders was native). One day – when people (living next to each other but never before coming together) of various nations and religions crossed the threshold of the "Borderland", and when in the synagogue lights were lit late at night and songs were sung in many languages – somebody wrote the graffito "ODD-BELIEVERS" on the Centre's car. Although in the case of other graffiti in public places such as: "Lithuanians to gas-chambers". "Poland for Poles", or "Jude raus", the perpetrators were roughly known, they were usually juvenile punks (that was probably why the graffiti did not use to be erased instantaneously, which rightly shocked the citizens, especially those coming from the outside), thus in the case of the graffito "odd-believers" his author has remained unknown to date. The only thing we know about it is the fact that his hand writing style was all but similar to that of the aforementioned juvenile graffiti.

The occurrence of the graffito "nut-believers" came together with some letting off steam that had been building up since the mysterious institution appeared at 37 Piłsudskiego St. Everything returned to normal and started to be normal as before. The strangeness of the newcomers became more familiar. The work of the Centre started to be done by children, youth, and their parents, teachers, town councillors, clergy and volunteers. The newcomers tried to appreciate the local's permission for being strange, and on their part they respected the local's uniqueness, painful memories of the past and different points of view. They did not teach anyone, they rather listened and tried to understand and learn something from the old, they tried to respond to various needs and problems now shared together.

## 2.

The breakthrough of the years 1989-1991, which became a time of beginning for them, still seems to be a bit unreal. From the point of view of common sense, there was too much insanity, naivety, utopian thinking and

too many coincidences to hope for rational and durable structures.

Towards the end of 1989 they went to a notary public in Poznań to register Foundation “Borderland”. The notary looked at them mercifully and said it would be enough to pay 10 thousand zlotys each for founding capital. There were seven of them. They distributed potential functions in a foundation among themselves. One day they were coming back from Sejny in a crowded regular coach when one of them, apparently much disoriented, asked: “Who are we? Secretaries?” “No. – he heard – Presidents.” They did not have much money, but much enough to start preparations for “A Trip to the East” planned for the 1990 summer. They constructed carts, one for their children, harnessed a horse and prepared an old jeep and set off for a 4-month trip with their team working on a play based on “Blood Wedding” by Federico García Lorca. On their way they were writing the programme of the Centre that they wanted to establish. They knew they wanted it somewhere in multicultural borderland, but they did not know precisely. They had made some search in Łemkowszczyzna, in Przemyśl region and in Białystok region. Now they were strolling through Kaszuby. Sejny was then becoming most real, as it was attractive with nearby “Miłoszówka” in Krasnogruda, with the White Synagogue, with the vicinity of Vilnius, with then existing friendship with Lithuanians and Old-ritualists, with the presence of artists like Andrzej Strumiłło and Wiesiek Szumiński.

Whenever they had time they visited various offices to settle their matters and brought in with them the scent of open fires and wet grass. Mr Stefan Starczewski, vice-minister of culture, was very patient with them, although his question “So, what do you actually want me to do?” he asked several times was never answered clearly. The voivod in Suwałki however avoided them as much as he can until they caught him on the back stairs of his office while he again tried to escape from an appointment made earlier by phone. In his hand there was a bag with wet fresh fish. And that was another breakthrough. They sat down at a table and fixed the minister’s visit, that took place very soon. The witnesses of the event, which for the diarists of the epoch was a symbol of the meeting of the old with the new, remember the minister – a modest man himself, who had recently been involved in Helsinki’s human rights protection movement – was becoming more and more anxious at the look of a dozens of bottles of alcohol, and of the table receiving more and more sophisticated dishes. Another anxiety was that of the hosts – the more they listened to the minister the less they could understand about the intent of his visit. Toward the end of that meeting – tiring for both the visitor and the visited, when the last desperate attempts to interest the government guest with proposals lucrative for both the parties proved to be good for nothing, it was becoming more and more obvious that the only reason for the minister’s visit was that crazy idea of those whose-names young people. On the other hand, no sane worker of the office could believe in such a crazy idea, and long after the visit they reproached one another for misunderstanding of the minister’s true intentions for coming, and for losing the chance of winning a man from Warsaw to their

cause. As far as the establishment of the Centre was concerned they assumed an attitude that can well be compared to the famous Parallel Action from “A Man without Properties” by Robert Musil, which “definitely puts off the question of material actions until later consideration in accordance with active passiveness”.

At the same time, independently of the official train of events, unusual events started to take place around that vague idea of a cultural centre in borderland, and those events were unexpected and their import was difficult to be overestimated.

For example, in an eremitic cell of the Wigry monastery surprised Czesław Miłosz, having come back to his homeland after fifty years, could not help raising his eyebrows while late at night he listened to young idealists’ tales about what they wanted to do in Sejny that he remembered – from his holiday visits coming from Vilnius or Paris – as very provincial with cobbled (but still) pavements. He sometimes interrupted them with short questions: “Well, where are you going to live?”, “How are you going to earn your living?”, “How about your children?”... “What a strange man... they thought afterwards. A poet – but that practical.” They learnt only afterwards that concreteness is not only the golden medium of poetry the art, but also it is very useful in life when Mr Czesław’s various practical moves helped them develop their own activities.

Another example: senator Andrzej Wajda giving a speech at the meeting of Sejny’s town counsellors was talking them into transferring the interiors of the old slippers factory to the “Borderland”. After it was done he would support those interiors’ overhaul with the means from his own foundation.

Another example: Andrzej Strumiłło, shaking his big hands before eagerly nodding Mr Mayor of Sejny, repeated: “You, Mr Mayor, must remember about the future of the town”, which also meant that a modest number of communal flats should contain at least one flat for the newcomers.

More or less at the same time a state-owned farm situated in an old manor was liquidated in Mała Huta, and Suwałki was considering a possibility of transferring that completely devastated object to the “Borderland”, to give them their own place.

We should pay attention to one more fact from among this all but precise a set of the conditions accompanying the creation of the Centre, which was nebulous as it were at the beginning but started to take up concrete shape in time. We mentioned state clerks who kept up with the forms of the old system. Those forms however were relics of the past, things of the irretrievable past (as we then thought). They were replaced by something that one can call blind faith in that nothing could be what it had been, that everything was changing, and we should welcome the coming new, although we did not know the outlooks of that. It is hard to say what was then the most decisive factor that made us think like that: continual replacement of office staff, panic anxiety, chaos and disorientation, or

maybe the chameleon instinct that made people change the colour of their skin in advance of the changes in environment in order not to be surprised. And it is all about that advancing behaviour, which then meant openness to the new. Every crazy idea, every new proposal breaking free of old patterns, seemed to be obligatory. They believed that now only new centres of a new formula were going to be established, and all other things – like those state-owned farms – would completely vanish. After a while however, they understood that no one expected such innovative cultural actions from them, and no representatives of culture in the first place, who were concerned with preserving the things of the past, and all of whom (with a few exceptions) were not able to feel that in that short unrepeated period of time it was those clerks who could be partners in most unbelievable enterprises.

It now seems that the creators of the “Borderland” managed to pass through a door that only for a short while was made open in the sphere of culture.

While the authorities rather liquidated cultural institutions, in Suwałki region a new institution was about to be established. Another positive factor was a new voivod, Franciszek Wasik, who quickly understood the need for creation of such an institution. The only question was that of money, because you could not take away anything from the existing cultural institutions’ budgets. The last minute news was that there was some reserve left in the ministry. The only thing they should now do was to see to it that the decision should be transferred by the end of the calendar year. It was very dramatic when Warsaw informed that it was impossible to transmit appropriate decisions to Suwałki. It turned out that a lack of telex paper in the Suwałki office was to blame. After many nervous telephones and actions a complete set of documents was ready at 1 o’clock on 31<sup>st</sup> December 1990. On the 7<sup>th</sup> January the voivod officially established the Centre “Borderland of arts, cultures, nations” having its seat in Sejny.

### 3.

When the Centre’s existence was a fact, when all the formal problems were a thing of the past, its founders knew exactly what to do. They understood that it was the times that demanded new searches into the areas of culture and education from them. They also could not help looking for a new language of expression for their work. They put aside their own theatrical activities and got involved in the matters of borderland identity, revitalisation of small homelands, intercultural dialogue, education for tolerance, East and Central Europe, young generations’ attitude to tradition, recording the past, “silent” tourism, artistic work with children and youth. All they did was the first: the first seminar on small homelands, the first lessons on ethnic minorities at school, the first trip to Transylvania, the first discoveries of multicultural Vilnius (together with local Lithuanians, Poles, Russians, Belarussians, Jews, and Karaims), the first East and Central Europe Cultural Forum, the first Class of Cultural Heritage, the first Borderland Cultures Documentation Centre.

The events proposed by the Centre were far beyond the established practices in borderland as understood by the local people, but no one expected that "odd-believers" would become as the others were.

For example: in the basilica, where recently a fight was under way over introduction of Lithuanian services, Poles and Lithuanians prayed together in Latin and their national languages. In a synagogue during All Souls' day Poles, Lithuanians, Ukrainians, Belarussians, Jews, Gypsies and Russian Old-believers came together to sing and recollect the past. Representatives of ethnic minorities started to come to schools to talk about themselves. The mayor was to be visited by the ambassador of Romania to discuss certain "disturbing circumstances" connected with the presentation of Transylvania's multicultural heritage in Sejny. Families in Sejny welcomed several guests from former Yugoslavia taking part in ten project "To Understand Bosnia". The Sejny secondary school incorporated lessons on the history and culture of the Great Duchy of Lithuania and the local region into its curriculum. The Sejny Theatre's Klemzer Band started to be invited to the secondary school's finishing examination ball as they played "cool" klezmer music. The local parish-priest announced solemnly from his pulpit: "A great thing comes to Sejny – TELECHATA!!!" (later there were many understandings of that word in town, the most convincing of all was this: "You, brother, come to Telechata and say you've got this and that amount of ecological grain. What you said goes to the satellite, and then all over the world. Then interested purchases come to you, and you, brother, select the one from Germany or the one from Canada and you sell what you've got.")

This train of anecdotes giving you a sense of general "odd-believers" practices could be continued on and on, but no one can have so much patience and understanding as the inhabitants of Sejny exposed to those practices on an everyday basis. Let us finish this train of thought with a characteristic (to our mind) example, associated with mass media, so important a field in our modern lives. Thus, after one of the Borderland's projects entitled "Meeting a Stranger" there was a short piece of information in the regional press about the fact that at the end of the event the Łomża Bishop said the Mass in the Sejny Synagogue. That the misleading piece of information was not rectified, the readers did not want any explanations and no one protested, in our opinion means that all believed that everything was possible where 'odd-believers' carried out their activities.

#### 4.

We would not today deal with providing descriptions of the "Borderland's" activities, having our opinion that the work should reside in the sphere of practice, if it was not for a certain interest accompanying the Centre's activities from the start, which we were not able to protect ourselves from. From the very start there were also numerous misunderstandings connected with presenting the Centre's work outside.

We would like to devote some attention to this question hoping that that will

allow us to shed more light on the epoch in question. In the time of democratisation one is inclined to think that in culture only those things count that are universal and universally accessible; and there is no better means of accessibility than mass media. Thus, only those cultural events that managed to find their way to the media are worthwhile. The way to the media was most often a snapshot, a spot, a simplification, a reportage based on what is “shootable” and “sellable”. Please note that we are not talking here about so-called mass culture, which is a separate phenomenon and has its own rights, what we are talking about is culture that would like to, or should become mass culture in order not only to earn money, but also to present ideas, to be present in the process of democratisation. The accusation of elitism was feared then, as the accusation of cosmopolitanism was feared in the time of communism. In much the same vein they suspected everything that carried a scent of creative ambitions, search, experiment, independence from public opinion. “Ambitious” meant “not for people” in the epoch in question.

That kind of situation created a whole lot of ready-to-use clichés, through which they perceived the phenomena like “Borderland”. Let us imagine a reporter coming then to Sejny. From the bus station he goes to the nearest greengrocer’s and pointing to a shop-assistant with his microphone he asks about the “Borderland”. Satisfied, furnished with real knowledge of life, united with “the people”, he then goes to the “Borderland” where he can meet those “strangers”, who will never be united, because they do not convene galas, nor similar events for “the people”. They should then be isolated, misunderstood, should remain in war with neighbours, or even closed as a sect and persecuted.

Now it is time to ask what “people from the Borderland” could feel when the reporter – looking askance at the bookshelves carrying books about Central Europe – asked his sacramental question: “How were you received by the local people?” He asked a question whose answer he had known before, an answer formed in the epoch of questioned ambitions. How to explain that the strangers have also had their place among people, that they are respected if they do their job well, if they can protect their identity and do not bend down before anyone until their backbone is broken? On the other hand it is very difficult to remain a “stranger” in the face of the mass media man, created by the mass media, which show much larger dependency on stereotypes and a tendency to abuse its power as regards the disloyal.

Can the activity of the Centre Borderland be deemed elitist? Their work is often that of a laboratory that works on new forms of creating cultural events. Their work also is never addressed to a mass spectator. At the same time, however, their coming to Sejny in 1990 did not resemble a closed studio where artists work on their piece of art to be presented in the lights of big cultural centres, although prepared far away from them, in a provincial place. Unlike many other authors who after 1989 said that art can eventually

deal with art itself and be freed of various political and social burden, the activity of the “Borderland” has been “involved” from the very beginning. They not only found their seat in the centre of the town of Sejny, but also at the heart of its inhabitants’ problems that are not visible at first glance for “hectic passers-by”, who stop there only for a moment, but those problems are stuck in the subconsciousness, or in some other seclusion behind a screen of various taboos. What is more the form of activity they have chosen is a form of active culture, and in the sense done not “for people” but “with people”. We do not have to do with “prestidigitators” who show things to people, but with “animators” who create things with them (sometimes in a very subtle manner). That is why in Borderland together with children they construct a house, a nest, and a temple, they participate in uniting religious services or come together in “the song of the old age”, they co-operate in the Class of Cultural Heritage, or collaborate at the exhibition “Our good old Sejny”.

We can have a good reason for asking if participation in such a form of culture-making can incorporate all the people?

Although it is not an offer addressed to the chosen few at all, although the Centre’s activities are open for all, the aforementioned notion “with people” does not necessary mean “with them all”. We should rather say with individual personae.

We feel free to be so specific when we take into consideration both the “Borderland’s” activities themselves, and the rumour in town about ourselves. For example they say that when the mayor once asked to incorporate larger numbers of children and youth in the Centre’s activities, the Centre’s workers were to answer that sometimes they welcomed whole schools or school grades, but authentic participants were only those who truly wanted to work and to make sacrifices. Thus it is the only sense in which their work remains elitist. The most important here is their own effort, involvement, creative passion without which culture loses its identity. Active practice of culture does not allow getting anything for free. And they should not be anxious to extend the circles of their respondents, who are entertained and who pay money for that; what they should be concerned about is the presence of those whose rudimental contribution is creation and collaboration.

Now, when we are coming to an end of our story about an unexpected existence of a new cultural institution somewhere in borderland of East and Central Europe, a minor thing comes to our mind recorded in our notes from the account of eye-witnesses. ODD-BELIEVERS! They say that graffiti remained on the Centre’s car for quite a long time. We are not going to erase it either, although we do not know its author, and we are not sure of its meaning to the full...