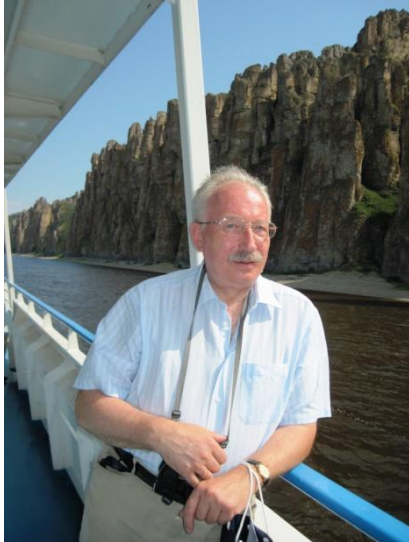


Jan Kieniewicz

FROM THE VISTULA TO THE LENA*

March 27, 2010

I've decided to write to you about identity. And yet I don't really know how to approach the question of its wont to drift. So I'll start with myself. From my own experience with identity. As you all know, I am convinced that building relations with Others requires awareness of one's own distinctiveness. Especially when what separates us is civilizational belonging. And even more so when what joins us are bonds of friendship. In a word, we need self-confidence for *encounters* with the Other. I use the concept of *encounter* in accordance with the terminology elaborated in "An introduction to the history of civilizations, East and West". Confidence in one's identity allows us to discern the Other and to reduce our fears of otherness.



The meaning here ascribed to identity is not tantamount to egocentrism, nor to focusing attention on oneself and making things revolve about oneself. I am not Gombrowicz. However, I perfectly well understand the problem he faced. The 'I' permits the environment to be identified, and to define the circumstances accompanying relations with Others. 'I' humanizes the world, so long as it doesn't spawn arrogance. This can cause trouble, as my own world is very small, and so I'm just a part. But our task is to build a research program, and that's something more modest than creating the world.

I'm from the Vistula basin, although my imagined world exists along the Pripyat long ago. But I'm writing from the Lena River in Siberia, although my visit there lasted less than a wink of an eye. We are gazing upon the towering stone pillars known as 'Lenskiye Stolby', upon a world completely foreign to the newcomer from the lowlands of Eastern Europe. Here on the banks of the Lena I am uprooted from my own surroundings. Hence, identity is all the more important for me – it's my capacity to exist.

I look out upon this world while aboard the *Demian the Poor*, carrying the international conference "Circumpolar Civilization in the World Museums: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow". It's the hot, Yakutsk summer of 2009. Thursday, July 30th, to be exact. These are the circumstances that are important for my reflections. In line with the



convention of a scholarly conference the issue of identity is left on the back burner. We are all participating in a conventional event with well-established rules. Essentially, this spells isolation from the surrounding reality. The chance to pose questions about identity arises only once we break with convention.

March 28, 2010

The chance to break out of the conference convention appears the moment we arrive at the Lenskiye Stolby preserve. Our program includes an excursion to the steeply rising stone cliffs. The route is laid out and comfortable. I panted a little and gave myself quite the workout during the hour's climb, but that's got nothing to do with the point. It's the reflection that accompanied the climb that does. Looking out from the viewing terrace to the Lena I saw a ship tugging a barge downriver. If I had been on a ship heading that way seventy years ago, I would not have been admiring this wonder of nature. With hundreds of others being sent to the gulags I'd be packed tight below deck on the barge, totally unaware of the surroundings and utterly unmoved by them. My status would level cultural differences and at the same time deprive me of my identity. I would be part of a system isolating me from reality. My identity would revolve around the struggle to survive, and in fact I don't believe I'd stand much chance. The thought of that countless throng of slaves who made their way along this route (and others) to the hinterland of Siberia gives me no peace. This is the case, because as a member of the conference I didn't have to pay any concern to identity. As with everyone else, I wore a nametag around my neck that gave my identity. Not until I was on the cliffs, gazing out on this extraordinary world that knows millions of years, did the question recur of "who am I?".

I was in Yakutsk at my own free will and was mingling with friends and considerate people.



We were to grapple with the important issue of the identities of the human communities inhabiting the tundra. We were to address this within the framework of the convention binding during scholarly conferences. However, it seemed to me that, with regard to the past which fate had spared me, as well as out of respect for the people who had invited me, I had to step out of the convention's confines. That was my intention, but I realized I might not manage to carry it out

because of the natural barriers in communication. Our task required dialogue. We were eager and full of good will. But I was afraid that we didn't have much better chance than our unfortunate predecessors in their trip down the Lena.

Participants no doubt wrestled with this problem in sundry ways. For me, however, it seemed that right then and there I had to define myself – and very unequivocally. All the more

so, as in line with the wishes of Ulyana Vinokurova I was to undergo a three-day process of transforming myself into a Yakut. I understood this as an invitation to immerse myself in the local world, an immersion that of course would be superficial and sentimental. I wish to understand this invitation with the utmost seriousness, albeit in such a way that I obtain an invitation to an encounter. There is no question of transgressing borders. In breaking with convention, in returning to my own identity I shall not even try to approach the border separating me from the world of the Saha people.

The process of identification and making oneself aware of what was permitted and what restricted took place simultaneously during the excursion I have mentioned. It was a tourist event, completely conventionalized. Even the shamanic rite meant to win the favor of the spirits of the stone cliffs seemed to belong to the standard fare for tourists. I did not join in the circle, viewing it as inappropriate. Shamanism is an essential part of Saha heritage, and more generally of the traditions of the peoples of Siberia – but it was hard for me to discern whether I was witness to serious matters, or whether it was all just folklore. However, I didn't duck from receiving on my forehead a spot of ash from a shamanic fire rite. That would have amounted to severing myself. And so, I ask, where lies the boundary between the realm of the sacred and the realm of politeness?

On the banks of the Lena Ulyana and I make a small circle of flour pancakes meant to assure me the favor of the river's spirits. I feel I have been invited to this ceremony as a friend being asked to help with housework, and so I respect the custom. Nonetheless, I do not agree to enter the river. The fearsome young Yakutsk women bravely jump into the freezing cold water. In the setting sun this sight gave an entirely natural impression. I didn't follow them into the river not only out of good sense, but perhaps also for fear of transgressing some border.



From the Vistula I had gone to the Lena. No big deal, really. However, the cliffs of Lenskiye Stolby have made me aware that an accepted invitation obliges one – above all, as I began, it obliges one to clearly define their own identity.

March 29, 2010

I'm pondering what I wrote yesterday. It must be strongly emphasized that the search for one's own identity is something I treat as a necessary condition for establishing relations with one's environment. With one's own, with people of the same culture who, together with me, create that very social system. Thanks to that awareness, I may participate in the formation of a community. Thanks to this I may, while within that community, adopt the position of outsider. I may even isolate myself from it, thanks to the fact that I exist and feel that community with me. My identity, the awareness of my roots, allows me to have relations with

Others, with people from differing cultures. I understand this as the capacity both to convey them a message about myself and my community, and to receive such a message. This creates the possibility for dialogue. However, the occurrence of dialogic relations between people is not decided by such capacities – much more is needed. But self-definition and awareness of the repository one may convey is a necessary condition for the existence of relations that involve giving oneself to others in words. This is an important matter for me, but I'll stop here, referring you to the authors who continue to inspire me – namely, Grygiel, Tischner, Panikkar, Morin, and Ellul. From here I shall maintain that this capacity to define oneself vis-à-vis people and the world has fundamental meaning for our topic. For where civilizational borders appear, certainty in one's identity is conditioned by encounter. But is this conviction enough?

In our project we intend to pose ourselves difficult questions about identity, and especially about the possibility of creating communities. This task conceals serious difficulty,



difficulty we typically skip over in our intellectual debates. We move about in a shared realm of experiences, in a single, well-understood narrative. We are aware of the limitations that arise as a result, but the alternative seems to be the collapse of communication. We want to converse, which also means to remain in dispute with one another, but this signifies acceptance of the language that has taken shape in academia. That world of concepts restricts us; nonetheless, it seems to offer the only chance for conveying to each other what

we deem essential.

The stress laid to one's own identity is grounded in the conviction that reflection on our own attitudes plays an essential role in the project we are undertaking –on our attitudes vis-à-vis Our Own, Others, and Strangers. I always emphasize the meaning of self-reflection, but I ascribe it a particularly special role when we are weighing issues of communication. Reflections on one's own attitudes, behaviors, and feelings play a significant role when we choose to undertake the issue of transferring experiences. And this will be a centrally important field of our manifold search.

April 2, 2010

It's vital to me not only to grasp the process whereby the ties that create a national community between people rise and are maintained – for I also wonder about the possibilities for and consequences of conveying experiences between such communities. In my view, the conveying of experiences between communities is a process of crossing borders. This occurs in sundry circumstances of contact, conquest, exploitation, and encounter. But only then? I

stress that relations include the conveying of experiences accumulated in the form of culture. At issue, however, is the nature of the consequences of those transfers. I ascribe special significance to the phenomenon labeled ‘civilizational oppression’, which I describe at length in my book *The Silent Intelligentsia*. What I mean to say is that we should examine not only the phases connected with the deliberate push to convey to Others our experience, but also undesired and unforeseeable consequences. In this aim we need to distinguish the type of conveying that has as its objective the subordination of all possible other forms of exchange. In the convention proper to research into expansion, it is forced transfer that draws attention; in postcolonial categories, in turn, we examine the reaction of subordinated communities. In our own research we focus attention on the unique form of transfer that results from the search for models beyond the sphere of domination/dependency. Thus, I try to indicate that reaching for an experience and adopting models from outside the system of direct domination offers no guarantee of success – in the sense that it does not rule out colonialism. And indeed, this is what Polish experience in the 19th and 20th centuries shows.

What’s to be made of this? First, we need discern that our own behavior, research practice, cognitive efforts, and toil in overcoming barriers are an essential part of the data depository we should subject to analysis. Next, we need to conscientiously look within to our own identity and recognize the resources of our own culture. Only then can we take up the question of the possibility of conveying and receiving, in respect of usefulness and limitations, the resources recognized as essential for the formation and maintenance of social bonds. On the basis of these reservations it is possible to extract premises for defining the transfer conditions taking place outside the sphere of expansion and domination – insofar as such spheres truly exist.

April 12, 2010

I had intended to continue writing during the Easter holidays, but that time proved to be less than amenable. The Resurrection holds one attention, and one needs to personally measure off with that fact. This has a connection with my own identity. This is connected with the heritage of my culture. Indeed, it’s hard for me to grasp the civilizational dimension of my identity in isolation from that basic fact that Christ died, Christ rose from the dead, and Christ will return. It can’t be pretended that this dimension does not exist, or to forget that it directly influences my understanding of the question of identity. Nor should it be concealed that this personal conviction also influences how I comprehend and express the issue we have undertaken. The attempt to seal off that sphere from the language of science, the attempt to articulate one’s thoughts in categories of the intellectual code – none of this facilitates the task at all. That code is also a part of European civilization and a tool of domination. But after all, we’re interested in seeking out a sphere for dialogue.

Over thirty years ago words were spoken in Warsaw with the force of thunder. In his famous homily delivered on Victory Square, June 2, 1979, Pope John Paul II said: “There is no way to understand this nation – which had a past so marvelous, but at the same time one so terribly hard – without Christ”. I quoted that sentence in the introduction to *A History of Poland*, published in Paris in 1986, and thus outside the reach of communist censors (p. 12). I

well recall the controversy that erupted! While preparing a Russian edition in 2003 I deemed it necessary to write the introduction anew. There was no need in that instance for such emotional declarations. Nonetheless, I believe the views expressed back then in 1979 remain valid today, as well – and certainly in connection with the tasks we are currently setting for ourselves. We must at least make an attempt to remain mindful of the influence of that dimension on shaping the circumstances of dialogue. The text I've mentioned (annotated *from the authors*, but from my hand alone) is available on the IBI's website – for now only in the original Polish version.

April 13, 2010

These doubts arose of course because of the strong emotions elicited by the catastrophe in Smoleńsk.

It seems necessary also to indicate how emotions shape my thinking about our task – meaning we need to ask: to what degree does Polish patriotism exert an influence on heritage?, and particularly on the capacity to convey it? Are we to treat emotions as an encumbrance, or to discern in them a useful stimulator for the processes of conveying? How am I to write about Polish identity in the context of President Lech Kaczyński's death?

It seems to me that the most important premise will be to turn attention to the possibility of emotions to influence social communication and the capacity to convey experience. In the past I laid stress on the weakening national bond, and in consequence on how that hinders the process of defining Poles' civilizational membership (this is manifest in the texts gathered in the collective volume *Expansion, colonialism, civilization* 2008). Today I am inclined to make a correction, in the sense that emotional charge may prove to be creative in building ties between a nation and the state. This would be an important circumstance in trying to solve the colonial aspects of our heritage, and thus, the capacity to "offer" our own experiences in dialogue.

April 19, 2010

In weighing the circumstances of the formation and expression of my identity I wish to focus not only on the threat I currently perceive to the national bond. I am of course profoundly convinced that further research into the process of a nation's formation may prove useful for reflection on its continuing survival. I still subscribe to the view on the connection at work between the process of accepting national consciousness and the capacity to choose European belonging. However, I open the space for reflection to the circumstances surrounding the formation of new transformations. Our socio-cultural system (including the nation as an element of its structure) had long been onerously burdened with the incapacity to autonomously create the principles for carrying out exigent transformations. This inclines us toward reflections on the colonial aspect of the process. Now it is fitting to add to the political and economic factors the factor of emotion. This factor had its influence when on that June 2nd I mentioned the Pope called out "Let Thy spirit descend! Let Thy spirit descend!!! And make anew the face of Earth – HERE on Earth". The influence of emotions on the attempts to undertake autonomous transformations during the 1980-1981 period of Solidarity cannot be

belittled. However, I was perceiving barriers and constraints. Today we have the good fortune not to be constrained. We make our own decisions and choices, and we may take responsibility for them. I do not rule out the influence of emotion on the shaping of new transformations in Poland. And this in turn inclines us to further deepen the set of questions we need to pose before attempting to research the prospects for dialogue between people of differing civilizations.

April 26, 2010

I am writing following the funeral of Janusz Krupski, one of the victims of the catastrophe of April 10th. He was an upright and courageous person, a patriot through and through, from his youth involved in undertakings to build up Polish identity. In the 1970s he was one of the people who created the publishing house Spotkania [Encounters], where in 1986 we published *A History of Poland*. My memory has been stirred and I'm recalling the emotions associated with Martial Law from 1981 to 1983, with Pope John Paul II's second pilgrimage to Poland in 1983, and the death of Father Jerzy Popiełuszko in 1984. Those collective experiences revealed our capacities to identify with the national community. However, I also remember that those spontaneous and uplifting demonstrations prompted me to ask if we were confirming in that way the persistence of the national bond. Does the ability to empathize, does a displaying of collective identity assure our existence as Poles? After all, it's that bond which enables the community to fulfill its real-world collective projects for the future.

My deep concern over the status of our national bond was an essential motive behind publishing *A History of Poland* outside the purview of the censors. We were drafting the book in 1984 and '85 when my worries were justified by numerous events and testimonies that bespoke the weakening of that bond. That is why I deemed it fitting hereto summon the introduction to that book. Over the next years I expressed my concern in several papers made public on the fringes of what was permissible – but whatever the case, beyond the reach of the censors (e.g., *The threats to Polish identity*, within the framework of the talkshops on Polish history at the Holy Trinity Church on Solec in 1986). That concern was also the cause of a range of my involvements. I mention all this because at that time I held that emotions displayed during patriotic demonstrations (and after all, I not only participated in them, but also organized them) are not identical with testimonies to the lasting quality of the national bond.

In recalling Janusz Krupski I wish to stress the meaning of the connection at work between an emotional experience and action. In this manner I highlight the meaning of shaping the bond that is the veritable foundation of the community. Thus, I also bear in mind the collective experience of translating emotions that express identity into structural relations within the social system. Identification with that experience has fundamental meaning in weighing the issue of transferring experiences.

May 1, 2010

Such identification is not a matter as obvious as it may seem. When it becomes obvious is none other than during the time of rising waves of emotion. I'm not thinking here of doubt

over whether or not collective rapturous feelings may serve to gauge the national bond. It's obvious that without feelings (without hearts, without souls, as the poet would say) it would be hard to imagine a national community. For despite what many experts say, no nation is founded on a contract. However, nor is it possible to build a national bond through emotion alone, much less maintain it during times of trial. I believe this is what Cyprian Norwid had in mind when he fumed that we Poles are a great nation, but we are no society. Be that as it may, patient reason becomes highly necessary when emotions reveal themselves. For there is no way to conduct research in an atmosphere of excessive excitement, much less so in the tension arising in consequence of patriotic fever. I stress this with regard to the necessity of shifting our attention to the matter of the circumstances that accompany transfers between societies.

I have stated many times that in all matters related to identity (that is, wherever the existence of a social system, and especially its persistence, is at issue) the autonomy of creating and implementing New Transformations is what plays the fundamental role. More simply, what is at issue is the capacity of the social system (human community) to independently transform information from the environment (whether inflowing or actively taken) into a set of principles for deciding how to carry out changes – changes regarding regulation and adaptation. I must explain this without regard to the difficulties arising from the language used. The independent construction of a set of rules for directing the processes of change is the key to treating the system as autonomous, that is, to perceiving the community as sovereign. In both shaping and defending identity, societies make avail of their own principles, that is, fixed patterns for behavior. I call them Transformations. Thus, when communities want or have to hearken to foreign patterns, what is important is if they can and know how to behave independently. But what does 'independently' mean? I have in mind the well-known matter of adapting some other society's experience according the principles proper to one's own society, and in accord with the values upheld by one's own society. It is not a problem for a society to search for new solutions in order to meet new challenges. It is nothing strange to hearken to foreign models and experiences. For the fate of the community, the building of a New Transformation according the external principles may prove to be a fundamental matter. What's important is whether the principles were imposed by force, or whether they were only borrowed without one's will. In each such case what arises is dependence. This must always be remembered when we examine the circumstances surrounding the transfer of experiences.

May 6, 2010

Conveying a given resource between societies is connected with serious violations of structures. Nothing happens without consequences. In order to grasp this by reflection, we must note the character of the space where two systems encounter each other and examine the borders that are to be crossed by the people who create those communities. I also draw attention to 'the contents of the offered or conveyed resource' as we may call it. In speaking about identity, shouldn't we also take note of nationalism?

Nationalism does not seem to be the best product we might offer at an encounter. But we cannot neglect to keep it in mind. We Poles must confront the question of our own Polishness with the ideological expression of the Polish national community.

It is hard to enter into a given relation for a society without identity. This sounds bizarre, inasmuch as the lack of identity signifies outright non-existence. We know about the risk when one's own identity is imposed on Others. We also discern the state of identity we call 'drifting'. We must therefore accept two initial premises. First, that the societies embraced within our research truly exist and that we are indeed able to identify them. Next, let's accept that those societies do not belong to the same circle created by civilizational membership. Moreover, we should recognize that for our considerations the state of those societies' relations with their environment has meaning.

In showcasing my own identity I wish to indicate that Poland exists purely as a result of the will of people who identify themselves as Poles. Polish national identity is not the product of nationalism and does not derive from the existence of the state. Indeed, the will to exist as a national community was confirmed in times when the Polish state did not exist (i.e., the 19th century) and in conditions of threat to its existence and sovereignty (the 20th century). Experiences with Polishness belong to our (i.e., Polish) depository, but also to our non-Polish depository, as used in the formation of bonds, transformative principles, and patterns for relations with Others. For this reason Polishness is important not only for Poles (as an expression of their existence as such), but also for many Others (e.g., as an element of one's own national identity). Thus, also for this reason is Polish national identity found within Europe's civilizational depository. This is especially important in the processes of Europe's formation as a civilizational sphere across its eastern realms. For here Poles experienced their own coherence in confrontations with all forms of Others and Strangers. And it is this experiencing that belonged to the core of defining the Poles' civilizational belonging. What this means is that Poles viewed their Polishness as identical with Europeanness. In connection with an earlier reflection on transformations, it was precisely in this way that independence expressed itself.

This issue –namely, forms of national identification in relations with Others, along with civilizational choices as forms of creating Europe– carries basic meaning in our pursuits to define the prospects for intercivilizational encounter.

And so today we must turn our thoughtstoward the essence of our choices. In beginning with definition, what does my own choice of Poland mean? I'm leaving aside national idolatry, which was understandable in times of desperate hopelessness regarding the recovery of statehood. In difficult times, of which there was no dearth in the 20th century, appraising me (or anyone) in terms of their usefulness for Poland is something I deem reckless, to say the least. It's only a single step away from that proposition to nationalism, a religion that places the nation on the altar. But today my choices require more attention. Am I, through my efforts, seeking a Poland open to a community of many ethnicities, many religions, and many cultures? Or do I limit my efforts to a Poland that is closed within the frame of one ethnicity, one religion, and one culture? The former is my choice of the heritage

of the Commonwealth, which – extending from the Baltic to the Black Sea – was the Europe of its time. The second is my agreement to the reality of the People’s Republic of Poland, which was cut off from the Europe of our time. The dreams of grandeur in Jagiellonian visions?, or the rational calculation of Roman Dmowski? The 20th century was a time when Poles were accepting a modern, monochrome form of the nation. It was that form which tamed communism for Poles. The governing party bought its way into Poland under a national camouflage. The choices were not as hard 25 years ago as they are today. Poland remains a sovereign state on the same territory established by fiat in Teheran and Yalta. But it has become a state in which decisions about the future are now made by a sovereign nation. And it is not unimportant what and how it chooses from its past – nor what I choose.

May 7, 2010

I am trying to write down something of importance about the task before us. I see enormous difficulties. In a push to clarify my thoughts I tear myself away from specific phenomena and head for abstractions. In the meantime, Polish experience in the period when national identity was shaped, and its cruel fates over the past two centuries, is recorded in a hugely rich history. How to present it? How to extract from the narrative some systematizing logic? I cannot here summon the history of Poland during the partitions, in the epoch of rebuilding the state, in times of catastrophe, and now, in our contemporary epoch. The experience we have in mind is contained not only in history. What is important is interpreting heritage and making avail of it. History in the given case is also the past tense as reckoned by my memory. I might say it embraces the time up until I entered adulthood. Which means up until 1956. The subsequent half-century is living memory, and not history. In the meantime it was precisely in this period that processes occurred of decisive meaning. This includes the confrontation with the totalitarian system, the threat to our national bond, the sudden change that restored sovereignty and responsibility for the state. These are basic elements of experience that require description.

Contemporaneity, which embraces the past 20 years and the past 50 years is a subject of interest for many branches of science. Many works have been written about it, and I have acquainted myself with but a small part of them. The basic questions, however, are still awaiting answers. This emboldens me to seek them out in my own experience. What is it I’m looking for in history – and what am I struggling to recall from memory? These are phenomena and processes that decide about survival. And so how to describe the structure of the Polish national community? What comprises and what creates the repository of experiences that decide about the regulations and adaptations essential for its survival? How to grasp the relationship between the Polish image of social behaviors and analysis of this phenomenon in systemic categories? Of course, this all requires defining one’s own attitude toward the reality we call the nation and toward the image of its essence. I might say what is necessary is an image of Polish fate. Only the presentation of such an image can possibly allow the creation of something in the shape of an interpretation enabling a safe conveying of our national experiences. I am writing, because this is the only way I am able to think.

May 8, 2010

I now return again to the matter of the pressure resulting from rising waves of emotions. One has the impression this is accompanied by a polarization of attitudes toward the nation. Suddenly what stands before us is a vision of Poland divided between patriots of opposing signs. What begins is not only a feverishness of feelings, but an outright confrontation of attitudes. In a moment I shall hear there are two Polands. Extreme attitudes reduced to a caricature exert a type of moral blackmail. The traditional patriot I feel myself to be becomes powerless when faced with the mutually exclusive options and the escalation of charges. But the traditional patriot cannot remain indifferent. I may propose two attitudes for this. First, it's worth reminding ourselves that extreme and/or confrontational attitudes vis-à-vis Polishness are nothing new. We could even demonstrate that they belong to a universal set of emotions accompanying the revelation of national identity. And of course this inclines many to reject the concept of identity as an exclusionary attitude. And there's another reason to treat these radical opponents indulgently. In writing about the threat to Polishness a quarter century ago, I indicated the worrisome lack of dispute. For generations Polishness had prompted heated debates and quarrels. The quarrel over Poland belonged to the basic set of attitudes. For the rivalry over the shape of Poland, that is, how life in the community was to be arranged, that's simply one of the aspects of being a community. And it's a natural aspect, although it's like every conflict in that it carries threats. However, another matter is that of troubling oneself over Poland. This was always especially distinct among the creators who, from the times of statelessness, ascribed to themselves spiritual leadership over the nation. What I recognized was that the disappearance of that dispute, the lack of passion in relations with Poland, indicates a weakening of identity. Indifference toward Polishness seemed to point toward the collapse of the national bond. So, perhaps the present phase of intensifying emotions may be deemed positive? The dispute over Poland is a testament to our strength. The rivalry over Poland is part of our fate. And so it's important that these confrontations not make us lose our Poland.

May 11, 2010

The pressure of circumstances is very clear and I'd like to liberate myself from it. But that's quite hard, as emotions draw attention to the divergence in comprehending Polishness. What arises are controversies concerning the repository that entails identity. In a nutshell, we quarrel about Polishness conceived as a freely constructed set of features or properties. However, the problem lies in the question: which variables can we recognize as necessary and sufficient for the identification of Poland as a nation?