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THEMATIC SECTION: ARTICULATIONS OF THE POLISH IDENTITY

GIVE IT BACK TO US, O LORD...

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1. FIRST STORY

'Before your altars we bring a supplication, our free homeland, bless it, O Lord…'. This is the official text of that verse, as I remember it from my childhood, from the Warsaw church on Zbawiciela Square, where at the end of the solemn masses the hymn *Boże, coś Polskę* was sung. Yes, it was always a special moment, all the more so because it established the moment of trial – the mass turned into a patriotic manifestation, into a spectacle lasting several minutes, during which one could show who one was. So I sang clearly and as loudly as possible: 'our free homeland, give it back to us, O Lord'. And I listened to what other people around me were singing. It was a bit like taking communion, an act that had taken place a few minutes earlier. Technically you weren't supposed to, technically people bowed their heads in piety, and yet they watched who was taking communion and who was not. Not much could be deduced from this fact – after all, it was not just the sinners who remained in the pews, far from the altar. On the other hand, who sang what was very significant. We already understood these signs well as children. 'Bless it, O Lord' pointed out that whoever sang it like that was a coward, choosing the version allowed by censorship or – perhaps even worse – really considered the Polish People's Republic to be our free homeland, which needed only a blessing for further development. But 'give it back to us' – that was something sublime and beautiful. Singing like that, I felt like a patriot of a great cause, a defender of the barricade, because 'we have Vis guns against Tigers', we, the liaison officers from Parasol[1].

[1] The Umbrella – codename of the one of Grey Ranks' unity, the underground Polish scouts paramilitary organization during the World War II.

The refrain of the sacred song was almost a delight: the thrill of emotions (breaking the ban) was accompanied by sweet certainty of being right, safety of participation in the community, in the fraternity of courageous and righteous people.

The People's Poland singing of *Boże, coś Polskę* was a ritual that brought recognition. A small and fundamental difference in the texts of the two versions became – like a *shibboleth* – a test of identity. The word *shibboleth* appears in the Book of Judges (12,5-6):

> The Gileadites captured the fords of the Jordan leading to Ephraim, and whenever a survivor of Ephraim said, 'Let me cross over', the men of Gilead asked him, 'Are you an Ephraimite?' If he replied, 'No', they said, 'All right, say »Shibboleth«'. If he said: 'Sibboleth', because he could not pronounce the word correctly, they seized him and killed him at the fords of the Jordan. Forty-two thousand Ephraimites were killed at that time.

According to Jacques Derrida, who wove a famous lecture on Paul Celan's poetry around the word *shibboleth*, its particular nature lies in the fact that the meaning of the word here 'matters less than, let us say, its signifying form once it becomes a password, a mark of belonging, the manifestation of an alliance' (Derrida 1994: 21). A similar function was performed by our singing. For the ritual, it was less important whether the participant really wanted to ask God for 'blessing' or for the 'restoration' of the homeland (the difference between the meaning of the first and the second of these words is by no means infinite). The importance of the singing consisted in showing who they were and who they were with, in speaking a secret (because it was not written anywhere) covenant slogan that everyone could understand. It was also recognizable to enemies, to whom one would betray one's own affiliation in this, sometimes risky, way.

The *shibboleth*, said Derrida à propos of Celan's poem *In Eins* [*In One*], constitutes a 'border, a barred passage' like another word – *no pasarán*: 'Rallying cry and sign, clamor and banderoles during the siege of Madrid, three years later, *no pasarán* was a *shibboleth* for the Republican people, for their allies, for the International Brigades' (ibid.: 25). This 'no' said to the fascists – as any 'no' said to a person – reveals the other side of the *shibboleth* – the potency of marking an enemy, and thus also the exclusion, selection. That is why Derrida emphasises that the *shibboleth* can tragically, contrary to intentions and human will, reverse. It can destroy the sanctity of an alliance formed in the name of the highest values by introducing discriminatory borders or police technology. Perhaps that is the danger lurking in wait for all oppositionists.

Later, during the Solidarity movement, more and more people were singing 'give it back to us'. Perhaps some of us remember well the struggle between the two versions of the chorus, which caused its ending to be blurred for an outside listener. The 'give it back to us' was mixed with the 'bless it', but – especially during martial law – it began to gain advantage, so that it became commonplace. There were more and more people who wanted to mark their presence and mark themselves in this way, cross the barricade, stand behind it, not in front of it and sing their 'no' to the reality of the Polish People's Republic.

It is worth quoting a fragment of the second edition of the history of *Boże, coś Polskę* by Bogdan Zakrzewski, published in 1987. It is worth it, because the twisted style of his narration indirectly – through its twists and turns – pointed to the obvious sense of this struggle, too dangerous for the communist status quo to be presented directly by the author. Zakrzewski (1978: 31) wrote:

> After World War II, the hymn, at some point in time, hid in churches. It was often sung with a peculiarly altered chorus with an enunciation that was valid for many people. The contradictions of refrain lessons, which occurred simultaneously among the participants of the masses, were like a testimony to ideological polarizations. There were also official protests in this matter, e.g. on the occasion of pilgrimages to Częstochowa or other indulgence celebrations – against such refrain transformations, which manifested themselves in the words: 'Before your altars we bring a supplication, / our free homeland, give it back to us, O Lord'. In certain years, when the song had to descend into the church 'underground', its life also emphasized the angry worldview protest against the events and orders and ideologies that discriminated against its followers or only religious-political allies. It liberated the singers from the compulsion to obey the orders, as if it eliminated their fears and aroused courage with religious opposition. It simply became – contrary to its semantic climate – almost a song of rebellion (…).

'Almost' everything has been said here, but it was not Aesopian language characteristic of 'certain years', but a narrative aspiring to scientific discourse, a distanced argument of a folklore researcher – whom Zakrzewski also considered himself to be – and therefore to objectivism that avoided any signs of any other affiliation. It was not a manifestation of community but, on the contrary, a veil, a mask of science that provided the author with security, leaving him, however, with the fame of a historian of a national song, of whom there were not many at that time.

However, the fighting time ended – after 1989, 'bless it' returned. Although it sounded the same, it was not the same word as before. It did not have a communist submissiveness, because it returned in glory, just as the 'free homeland' returned, just as we returned to Poland. It is a pity that we cannot establish the date, the exact day on which a unanimous 'bless it' rang out in all corners of the country, because that would allow us to finally establish when exactly communism ended in Poland. When we crossed the Polish border from a foreign land to manifest for the first time a community of people who agreed to what was already there. In any case, after that I never heard the 'give it back to us'. Never – until the presidential plane crashed on April 10th 2010. Since then, not only on the tenth of each month, but also during other demonstrations at the Presidential Palace on Krakowskie Przedmieście, people have been singing, 'our free homeland, give it back to us, O Lord!'. When I realized it for the first time, I was surprised – my inner child, who once sang like this in the past, in the past epoch was surprised – and I was amazed as a philologist, that this still small difference would mean something definitive again.

2. SECOND STORY

The author of the original version of *Boże, coś Polskę* was – as we know – Alojzy Feliński, who in 1816 wrote a work entitled *Hymn na rocznicę ogłoszenia Królestwa Polskiego* [*Hymn for the Anniversary of the Proclamation of the Kingdom of Poland*]. It was also called *Pieśń narodowa za pomyślność króla* [*The National Song for the Prosperity of the King*]. The hymn praised the merits of Tsar of Russia and King of Poland, Alexander I, called the 'Angel of Peace', who under his scepter 'united two fraternal peoples'. The original chorus was: 'Before your altars we bring a supplication, save our king, O Lord!'. However, adaptations appeared quickly, and the song, sung in different versions and to changing melodies, took on a life of its own. From a solemn prayer for the tsar's prosperity, it turned into an anthem to beg for the restoration of a free homeland. The collection *Pieśni ojczyste* [*Songs of the Homeland*] published at the beginning of the November Insurrection, contains different lyrics – a compilation of two verses from Feliński's work and fragments of Antoni Gorecki's *Hymn to God* from 1817. And it is to Gorecki that the work owes its version of the chorus, in which the plea is 'give us back our homeland, O Lord'. However, the song experienced the peak of its popularity during the Warsaw patriotic demonstrations of 1860-1861.

When one reads descriptions of these manifestations today, it is striking, first of all, that they took place most often in the same places as various contemporary parades, congregations and marches. From the Cathedral to Zamkowy Square, Senatorska Street, Krakowskie Przedmieście, Nowy Świat, Krasinskich Square and Saski Square (today Piłsudskiego Square), only rarely moving farther out, to special, historically marked places, such as Leszno. It is a natural stage of this city (because it is not Parade Square) and it is the people of Warsaw who choose it when they want to be visible. Secondly, the theatricalization of manifestations from 1860-1861 – the costumes, props, happenings and marches – seems diverse, creative and, of course, familiar. Most of them were funeral manifestations, accompanying the services for the souls of the dead, for those who died in the November Insurrection and for the new heroes who, in the consciousness of the crowds, died from bullets in streets and squares. These events have been reported and analyzed many times. However, it does not hurt to recall that Warsaw became a space of signs: gestures and funeral costumes, balconies adorned in black, banners with the White Eagle, standards and flags, newspapers thrown out onto the street, green branches, wreaths, flower decorations, as well as lit candles and torches (on February 25th 1861 a procession from the Pauline Fathers' Church passed with torches, scaring the gendarmes' horses with fire [see: Komar 1970: 36-37]). These signs could be listed for a long time, because – with the ban on attending the theatres, which was unwritten but still in effect – the longer the manifestations lasted, the more tightly they filled the space of a street performance, where everything – every gesture, every word, every piece of matter – became an element of the performance. Thus, a greater difficulty for the police, who were trying to recognize members of this alliance that took the power over the life of the city just by their signs. Behavioral and dress bans were issued, but the case did not end when funeral dress and patriotic jewellery were banned. It was also necessary to issue more and more detailed instructions for spies and guardians of the peace, which explained how to recognize dangerous elements. Thus, on June 4th, writes the demonstration historian Julian Komar, Chief of Police Rozwadowski reissued an announcement prohibiting the wearing of all political badges and distinctive clothing, explaining that:

> the municipal authorities consider the following to be clothing different from ordinary clothing: *rogatywka* (*konfederatka*) caps and so called Kościuszko hats, next, *kontusz* and *żupan* coats, as well as waistcoats, stock ties and ties in the color amaranth, and finally colorful shoes and other outfits, characterized by bright colors and uniqueness of the cut, announcing that they will be held responsible for non-compliance with this regulation (ibid.: 154).

It is easy to imagine the embarrassment of a policeman who reads 'and other clothes' in this logical way implies that 'distinctive' clothes are 'unusual' clothes. We can also see his harsh face when, in the middle of this carnival, he examines at the shoes of passers-by and tries to judge which are bright.

Even for the simplest 'bobby on the beat' (if you will permit the use of such an anachronism), however, the obvious sign was the singing of patriotic songs, and in this, above all, *Boże, coś Polskę*. The first time it could be heard was on the anniversary of the November Insurrection during a demonstration in front of the Carmelite Church. In Komar's work, one can read about dozens of subsequent performances in various circumstances, because – as the author writes – '*Boże, coś Polskę* was sung universally'. In April-May 1861, the collection *Śpiewy nabożne polskie* [*Polish Religious Songs*] was printed and distributed by agitators during the meetings (ibid.: 19, 88, 140, *passim*). As a result, we know which of the many versions of the song was probably the most popular at the time. The second verse of the chorus was written in the songbook: 'Homeland, freedom, give them back to us, O Lord' (*Manifestacje warszawskie…* 1916: 3-4). The penalty for singing such songs in the street was arrest. Later, on Wielopolski's order, a ban on singing in churches was also issued. It was soon observed that there were 'spies hanging out among people gathered in the temples, marking with chalk those singing the songs, so they would later know who should be arrested' (Komar 1970: 150). It can be added that for those 'exterminating angels' marking people with chalk sometimes ended badly – some were beaten mercilessly.

The scene that took place in Zamkowy Square is particularly noteworthy in the tradition: a crowd of defenseless demonstrators – among them children and women – kneeling on the pavement, singing *Boże, coś Polskę* to the heavens, and in front of the crowd, Cossacks, ready to charge. Maria Janion referred to this image when she wrote about the Polish messianism of that time, about the national mission of suffering and martyrdom, which was expressed in this song, so different in tone from the jaunty *Warszawianka*. Other commentators also agreed with Janion's opinion that the pleading-prayer hymn best reflected the atmosphere preceding the January Insurrection, that it gave a sense of power to those who put themselves in divine care (Janion 1979: 15-16). Reading the same descriptions today, I have an impression of the significance of another function of this singing – the function of the *shibboleth*. It was a ritual in which not so much the content, but participation itself became a sign – a manifestation of belonging to a community. People sing it to mark themselves, to demonstrate – I am here, with these people and at the same time against the other people who are there – outside the circle of our song. In this way, a covenant was built, a communion often confirmed by blood. And a sacred border was erected between 'us' and 'them', sometimes running between Poles and Poles, between Poles saying 'no' and those who abandoned that 'no'.

This sense of shared singing is best illustrated by the fact that *Boże, coś Polskę* resounded in various temples of Warsaw at the time, including Evangelical-Augsburg churches (which later, for this very reason, were closed just as the Catholic ones), Calvinist churches and synagogues. Catholics used to go to synagogues to sing together with the Jews. Among many such examples, one from April 1861, on the day of the funeral of a sybirak (Polish exile to Siberia) Ksawery Stobnicki:

> at about 3 p.m., a crowd of several thousand Poles and Jews gathered (…) in front of the Franciscan church on Senatorska Street, with a group of several hundred young people standing out (…) in white, amaranth, blue and black *konfederatka* caps with feathers. The coffin, decorated with wreaths and tricolor ribbon, was carried all the way on the crowd's shoulders. The funeral ceremony [at the Powązki Cemetery] ended with the singing of *Boże, coś Polskę*. Then they went to the Jewish cemetery, where a crowd of several thousand Jews gathered, allegedly to commemorate the director

> of the Rabbinical School, Eisenbaum, who died a few years ago, and who had preached the slogan of equal rights and the unification of Jews with Poles. Rabbi Kramsztyk gave a speech to the gathered about the brotherhood of the two nations and the love of the Homeland (Komar 1979: 116).

Then 'people threw themselves into each other's arms, kissed each other, swore brotherly love and readiness for all sacrifices. Once again *Boże, coś Polskę*, was sung together and the mass was moved towards the Castle' (ibid.).

A Jew who sings a Christian song in his own cemetery together with Poles may seem mad, but the point is that at that time, *Boże, coś Polskę*, remaining a religious song, was not only Christian, nor even only national. It was a sign of fraternity, and its singing brought recognition, an indication of who belonged to the community. It was crossing the old borders and creating a new alliance, where *kontusz* coats and *rogatywka* caps could mean the same chalat coats and yarmulkes – to the concern of the subordinates of Chief of Police Rozwadowski. This is how the international career of this song began, translated into many languages: Belarusian, Ukrainian, Latvian, German and Czech, and later paraphrased in other languages, including Russian (see: Kacnelson 1979: 22-24, 82-85).

'Bless it, O Lord' appeared only after Poland regained its independence, during the Second Republic of Poland. It was then that a change was made to the text to emphasize the resurrection of the united homeland after the Partitions. But when, four days ago (it was the tenth of the month), I listened to the sounds of 'give it back to us, O Lord' at the Presidential Palace, I was thinking about *shibboleth*. I thought that the meaning of these words is less important than their signifier form. I think that the function of singing 'give it back to us' is similar to the one it has always performed, so that the most important thing in it is a separation: to distinguish people from each other and to mark new alliances. And, although sometimes it may seem so, the aim of this ritual (because it is already a ritual) is not a statement that Poland – along with the plane crash – perished or that freedom disappeared at that moment, but building and manifesting a community that can gain political strength. It is also a community with the heroes of the uprisings and victims of the Nazi or Soviet occupation – with those who used to sing the song likewise, and who, in a revolt or misery, told the reality: 'No'. The singing of 'give it back to us, O Lord', is therefore a rite of slaves, intended to separate, distinguish and unite all those who refuse to accept the Lord's blessing of the present – of what is already there.

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Summary

The article is a reconstruction of the social history (from the 19th century to modern times) of Polish patriotic-religious song *Boże, coś Polskę*, and especially one of its lines that is known and sang in two different versions: 'our free homeland, bless it, O Lord' and 'our free homeland, give it back to us, O Lord'. This small difference between the versions is interpreted by the author in a Derrida's style: as a *shibboleth* – a test of the identity of people singing this song, a password of a secret association and a sign allowing the recognition of a friend from foe. At the same time she points to the permanence of the significant function that is fulfilled in the Polish patriotic ritual by the singing of *Boże, coś Polskę*.

Keywords: song, ritual, patriotism, identity, *shibboleth*