Kate Wilson

No Place Like Home: A Nation off the Map

The Polish national anthem begins "Poland is not yet lost"—this was their soldiers' hymn just after the partition. The Polish legions fighting in Italy in the 1790s hoped that, united in this marching song, they could liberate Poland too, and "march from the Italian land to Poland."

A hundred years later, this in itself seemed a myth of independence to many, but writers like Bolesław Prus (1847–1912) kept the idea alive. Bolesław Prus wrote descriptions of his journeys from the Russian sector into the Austrian one at the turn of the century (around 1895).

At this point Poland had been partitioned for a hundred years and still had another twenty to go before regaining independence—and the hymn as their national anthem. How could writers in a country that had lost her independence preserve the hope of self-determination and still publish openly, rather than for "their desk drawer"?

They had to write in such a way that the occupying powers would not notice it or they would be able to ignore it. The Polish journalist and novelist Bolesław Prus was a master of this art.

His sharp and witty observations on society worked because they were always amusing. He knew his own territory and described it to other Poles—using the convention of a tourist travel diary to look at his country as if from outside.

Laughing at Oneself

The writer Bolesław Prus himself was a great satirist and social commentator—he used humour not only to avoid the censor, but also to shake his compatriots out of their own self-congratulation.

He fought as a soldier in the 1863 independence uprising aged just 15, but was more than prepared to criticise his homeland from a positivist perspective, notably in his journalism and short stories.

In his *Most General Life Ideals* (1905), Bolesław Prus systematized his positivist ideals of happiness, utility and perfection. These were serialised in the Warszawa *Daily Courier* (*Kurier Codzienny*) from 1897–1899. A book edition appeared two years later, with a revised edition in 1905.

There he gave the Polish nation short shrift: "We are inclined to eruptive action, we do not like small and persistent effort, and we are entirely lacking in discipline, that societal virtue which disposes one to obey and teaches one how to command."

The recipe for this was clear to him: "In commending Utility to my compatriots, I am not recommending some contrived theory. I am merely disclosing to their eyes a universal fact and saying: 'You must be useful, because the whole world is useful, because utility is one of the most universal laws. The more useful one can be to one's intimates, to one's neighbours, to society, to civilization, the better are one's chances of existence. But one who is unable to be useful will perish helpless and unmourned.'"

Bolesław Prus' way of being useful was to describe his nation to herself—in a highly entertaining way. In his travel writing, he held a mirror up to his compatriots.

An Unremarkable Destination

Bolesław Prus sets out on his journey to a less-than-stellar destination—the spa town of Siedlice (Zedlitzfelde). He knows that convention dictates a description of more glamorous and far-flung locations, so his choice will need some justification.

"The tendency to visit more or less wild corners of the globe is a nineteenth century characteristic. This tendency is one of the most weighty reasons as to why one fine day, at the Terespol Train Station we obtained, for the determined sum of rubles and kopeks, a ticket to Siedlice.

"To Siedlice! … What for?

"Indeed I had considered the pleasures of a longer stay in Philadelphia, but the news of the speedy arrival of representatives of Warszawa industry scared me off. I dreamed of seeing the monument to Arminius in the Teutoburg Forest,[1] but I recalled

[1] In 9 CE, the Cherusci Germanic tribe, led by Arminius, liquidated three Roman legions under the command of Publius Quinctilius Varus in Teutoburg Forest. The battle established the Rhine as the boundary of the Roman Empire for the next few hundred years, until the decline of the Roman influence in the West.

that in the Warszawa Philharmonic for a relatively small fee I can, every week, see several hundred living, talking and sufficiently monumental Arminiuses. I desired to be in Miechów, where I had received a public and kind invitation by one of the church grandfathers, but I changed my destination having heard that the Miechów region had been visited by hail, locusts, and finally by the special correspondent of *Kurier codzienny* (the Daily Courier) ... What was left to me in these circumstances, if not a trip to Lublin and Siedlice? People meet with greater misfortunes in this world" (*Travels*, 49–50.).

As a columnist for the very paper he lambasts, Bolesław PRUS does not take himself too seriously. Yet he does have a serious point to make—he is not so free to travel as it first appears, and even if he was, he is not so free to write about it either.

He disguises this fact by lamenting his difficulties in describing something about which everybody knows. Of course he cannot say anything about Poland, because he has expert critics all around him who know the reality.

How much easier it would be to describe places that nobody he knows had ever been to! Yet under the Russian occupation against which he fought in his youth, it is also far from easy for Bolesław PRUS to describe the Polish reality. His choice of imaginary destinations is far from accidental.

"It is indescribably difficult to write as a correspondent at home, although on the other hand it is easy to do the same abroad … The most advantageous in this regard is Berlin, because in every pub there one can find a refined diplomat and in every alley an accomplished strategist, who for a few pfennigs or tankards of ale will inform a correspondent not only on the questions which the cabinet is addressing today, but also on the future map of Europe, which the Prussian headquarters intends to publish.

"Exactly the same benefits are available to a correspondent who writes about foreign countries without leaving Warszawa; and although imagination is not one of the most reliable sources of information, it nevertheless provides one with a wealth of material which becomes more and more credible, the further abroad it reaches.

"Yet woe to the home correspondent!

"What shall, I, unhappy fellow, be able to think up about Siedlice? Absolutely nothing! The barbarism of the local

inhabitants does not extend to cannibalism or lack of knowledge of any clothing other than a modest waist covering. They live in homes equipped with all the externals of civilisation, they do not dye their teeth red, they do not scratch at tree-trunks, in a word they do not do anything worthy of particular note." (*Travels*, 60–61.).

So Siedlice is not exotic or remarkable. It is not noteworthy, because it is so familiar. It hardly seems worth writing about at all. So why does Bolesław PRUS bother? He could stay at home and dream up tales of exotic lands, even if he is unable to see them with his own eyes.

Certainly other people in Warszawa are more than capable of stretching the truth in this way. Most significantly of all, it is easy not only to make up such tales, but to redraw the whole map of Europe.

Moscow cannot be mentioned by the Varsovian author, but the other partitioning power, Prussia, can be. Bolesław PRUS on his travels shows how this map has already been redrawn, to redefine his homeland. This is why it is worth writing about.

The Other Poland

Bolesław Prus makes a point of travelling from Poland to Poland—across an international border which he believes should not exist. He describes his arrival in Kraków on the night train from Warszawa.

"As the light grew stronger, I saw that I was already in different surroundings. The Mazovian sands had been replaced by clay; and the land was no longer flat, but strongly contoured. Soon the final cry brought us to attention: Border! …

"Showing passports and drinking coffee took about two hours. Having already bought an Austrian ticket I stepped slightly sleepily into the porch, near which carriages as yellow as canaries stood … A short while after the train departed, an Old Testament trader approached me with the question whether I would like him to change money for me.

"—How much are you offering for a rouble?

"—Fifteen *flerins*…

"—In Warszawa I got one *florin* twenty for one rouble.

"The trader cast his eyes to the heavens and grimaced.

"—When did you change money in Warszawa?

"—Yesterday afternoon.

"—Yesterday afternoon is not today morning. The rouble has fallen, I just *receeved* a wire direct from Wien. Anyhow, for you I will give one *flerin* fifteen and a half.

"A few hours later I received one *florin* and twenty cents per rouble in Kraków. It seems that they did not get a "wire direct from Wien" … The first impressions are unpleasant. Aside from the snail's pace of the yellow carriages, one cannot get used to the idea that inside the second class contains narrow hard benches covered in slippery leather. The conductors are more like hospital assistants than chaplains of the new goddess Steam; their washed-out and creased uniforms have a pleasantly kitsch feel. The signalmen's boxes are indeed white, but old, roofed with tiles that display a great tendency to collapsing into the dust from which they arose. Even the telegraph poles, which at home have an I-shape, here look more like the letter A, of which the upper part is accented by three crossbars with porcelain bells and wires" (*Travels*,142–145).

This other Poland is different then. One has to cross borders and change money to get there, even if the rate is not always clearly

dictated from the Austrian capital. The people have strange accents, and will cheat you if they can.

The place is poor and old-fashioned. The reader is given the impression that urbane Warszawa is far superior to backward Kraków. Yet the cities are less than a day's travel apart, and on the other side of the border, the people speak the same language.

Still, being outside his partition, the Tsarist Polish Kingdom, Bolesław Prus is perhaps freer to comment about the Austrian partition of Galicia. Here he can take on the role of foreign traveller, not just of home correspondent, even though neither he nor his audience would draw these distinctions for this journey.

A Sight Worth Seeing

It is when Bolesław Prus plays the classic tourist that he surprises himself—and his readers—with how much there really is to see. He makes a trip to the famous salt mines at Wieliczka, outside Kraków.

He does not expect to be particularly impressed. Will this not just be another Siedlice, a rather unimposing site that is hardly worth the trouble? Bolesław Prus has always thought so, and his fellow travellers confirm this view. So it seems.

Significantly, he meets others from his partition, and greets them as compatriots, different from the Galician Poles. Yet the carriage is his too; there are links made between the Kingdom and Galicia, and all the travellers are *going home*.

"So we are travelling to Wieliczka. The day is cloudy; a light rain is falling on the earth, and on the platform of Kraków station there is a crowd of departing travellers.

"Since my watch did not agree with that of the Church of Our Lady, and the Church clock did not agree with the station one, I arrived too early and as a result I had as much fun as a deaf person at a concert. The only entertainment was the picture of a few Germans eating pork and potatoes and reflection on the subject: how did I used to imagine Wieliczka?

"Well, I used to imagine it like this:

"It is a sand dune, with a few handfuls of grass and a few stunted pine trees on it. In the moment when with all my youthful energy

I run forward to see the mine, someone calls out:

"—Stop! Stop!…

"I look down and see a hole at my feet as vast as the Theatre Square in Warszawa, and as deep as from Christmas to Easter. A miracle indeed, that I did not fall in! …

"We set off—Terespol style.

"In my compartment (why should I not call it mine?) sat four men: myself and some three other gentlemen. I thought that they would talk about the mine, but they preferred to start talking about politics, later about poverty, and then again about politics and again about poverty.

"—Are you going to Wieliczka, good sir? —I asked one.

"—Oh yes! I have some horses waiting for me there …

"—Bad! … —I thought. One of us is out already.

"—And are you going to the mine, good sir? —I asked the second.

"—No. I am going home. …

"The third was also going home! At that moment the worrying vision overcame me that all the passengers in all the compartments were going home … I began to sweat.

"One of the company (I do not even know why) won my affections from the first moment. As I live, I have never seen such a physiognomy, and he attracted me, because he smelled of ink … So I turned to him.

"—Have you lived in these parts for long?

"—For a few years.

"—I suppose you have visited the mine a few times?

"—Not once! —he cried gaily. —When I lived further away, I planned to go, but now I keep putting it off from one day to the next.

"—And have you visited the mine, good sir? —I asked the second.

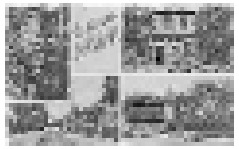
"He had not either, and the third had not either, although all of them planned to a few times a year. (…)

"Halfway to Wieliczka a friendly neighbour asked me suddenly:

"—Are you not from the Kingdom, good sir?

"—How could I be? —I asked, offended that no trace of higher culture was visible on my person.

"—I am from the Kingdom too! … —cried the other, and his eyes sparkled.



"We fell into each other's arms.

"—I am called so-and-so —said the one.

"—I am this-and-that —I told him.

"—Ah, it is you! … —cried my new friend.

"—So it is you? … —I say, remembering something in that moment.

"And again we fell into each other's arms, my friend was indeed that Kraków satirist so well known at home, whose works will be familiar to *Courier* readers.

(… in the mine …)

"—Saint Anthony's Chapel! —said the old guide.

"—Saint Anthony's Chapel! … Saint Anthony's Chapel! … — voices, who knows whose, repeat after him.

"Everything here is made out of salt. A well-formed ceiling, framed by squat columns, steps, a great altar and figures of angels. Everything of salt and everything grey black, like those great dirty heaps of ice which one sees on the streets of Warszawa. Here eight generations of miners begged God for aid and mercy, people who daily say goodbye to the rising sun, not knowing whether they will see it set! …

"Imagine a very large church, in which you find yourself during an earthquake. Its high walls and thick ceiling suddenly burst, collapsing into great shapeless pieces, which fly from above and from the sides, they compete, outstripping each other, seeking to crush you. Suddenly some force stops them … they are frozen in motion, but they look at you like a wild animal waiting to pounce. In this black and enormous body you can imagine a moment of congealed life. The mysterious bit holds back the anger of the monster, but if it is released! …

"We sail to the solemn sounds of an orchestra and colourful fireworks, which light up that great fang-lined maw from all angles. Passing a narrow door we see on the smooth wall to the right the statue of some saint who has been praying for travellers and miners for many ages. To the left again the notched and sculpted blocks of salt, arranged like stairs in such a way that instead of leading into the centre, they run forward, with each higher step hanging ever more threateningly over your head …

"When I recall these things today, I think that for those three hours I had a strange dream, whose content was subjects I had never known or felt before" (*Travels*, 219–235.).

Dreaming of a Home with No Address

This dream is Bolesław Prus' very myth of independence. There is something in Poland that is still asleep, that is waiting to wake up—something with ancient roots, a force that has been tamed.

That is both beautiful and threatening—that is located just outside the historic capital city, Kraków, out of the way where no-one is really looking, but everyone is travelling towards it; they are going home. Contemporary readers would have to be very thick-skinned indeed to miss the author's point.

Bolesław Prus covers his patriotism in layers of satire, but shows how deep and how far out of his way he has to go to find something to be proud of—even his compatriots are doubtful whether he will find anything at all, and they themselves cannot be bothered to try.

The further Bolesław Prus travels, the more opportunity he has to show that the unremarkable destinations are also noteworthy, and that there are more sights worth seeing to be found.

His style could not be more different from the Romantic poetry that Bolesław Prus grew up with, but the message has not changed much over the decades. His fellow travellers can talk of nothing but 'politics and poverty'—he cannot write about these, but his message remains clear.

The underground Poland is still there, hidden away, and has the potential to wake up. Bolesław Prus' way of waking it was not through dramatic rebellion, because his generation had seen this fail, in 1863.

He rather favoured slow effort and preserving memory, but this did not pay off in his lifetime. Bolesław Prus died just six years before his "strange dream" came true, through the explosive events of a world war.

What would he have thought of the Poland regained, with its very different borders, patched together back onto the map from the sections he had crossed? No doubt he would have continued to be wittily critical, and he would certainly have found much to criticise. But that is another story…

Suggested Reading

Prus Bolesław, *Kartki z podróży* [Pages from Travel]. Warszawa, 1950. [Translations are my own.]
Prus Bolesław, *Placówka* [*The Outpost*]. Warszawa, 1886.
Prus Bolesław, *Lalka* [*The Doll*]. Warszawa, 1889.
Prus Bolesław, *Emancpantki* [*The New Woman*]. Warszawa, 1893.
Prus Bolesław, *Faraon* [*Pharaoh*]. Warszawa, 1895.
Prus Bolesław, *Najogólniejsze ideały życiowe* [*Most General Life Ideals*. (tr. Kasparek Christoph)]. Warszawa, 1905.

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