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Szaber Frenzy

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Szaber Frenzy

In the summer of 1945 Poles were totally absorbed by *szaber*.¹ They were either talking about it or actively participating in it. Such a state of collective emotions evoked by the prospect of swift enrichment is usually called a “frenzy.” “I dare say,” reads the column of *Dziennik Powszechny* (published in the Kielce–Radom region) of July 1945, “that . . . a huge majority of our society either was looting, is looting, or is about to. Those who are afraid envy those who have already made up their minds.”² This post-war excitement is inversely proportional to what we can find out on the topic of *szaber* today.³ The phenomenon has been mentally repressed, although the purloined objects decorate apartments until this day. This absence from the historical discourse is connected with a perceptible feeling of shame and embarrassment on account of the fact that so many Polish citizens participated in *szaber*. The cognitive dissonance which emerges – between real behaviors and the idealized image of the Pole – is sought to be reduced by explanations in terms of which *szaber* was a form of taking revenge on the Germans for their crimes and plunder. Admittedly, the anti-German sentiment and the desire for taking revenge on the occupiers was one of the forces that drove the looting masses onto the “Recovered Territories,” but it was not necessarily the most important one. What drove Poles to *szaber*, how it was conducted, and finally what mental consequences it has left – these are the most important questions worth answering.

Szaber Theory and the Peasant Vision of the World

At the turn of the 19th and 20th century the word *szaber* (looting) had two basic meanings, let us say – a day one and a night one. In the daytime, in the vocabulary of masons it denoted pieces of stones, debris, while *szabrować* (to loot) meant

¹ This text is a shortened version of a chapter from the dissertation entitled *Wielka trwoga w Polsce 1944–1947. Ludowa reakcja na kryzys*. It was created within the framework of KBN grant no. 1 H01G031 27 “Strach w Polsce Ludowej (1944–1989).”

² “Jadę na szaber,” *Dziennik Powszechny*, 18 July 1945.

³ It was discussed by, among others: M. Urbanek, “Wielki szaber,” *Polityka* 17 (1995); M. Cichy, “1945 – koniec i początek,” *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 26 May 1995; J. Kowalska-Leder, “Szaber,” in *Obyczaje polskie. Wiek XX w krótkich hasłach*, ed. M. Szpakowska (Warsaw, 2008), 334–341.

szpachlować (to putty).⁴ At night the word assumed a different meaning. According to the linguist Henryk Ułaszyn, as early as around 1840, *szabrować* denoted burglarizing in thieves' slang.⁵ The *Dictionary of Thieves' Jargon*, edited by Antoni Kurka, Austro-Hungarian adjunct of the Lvov police headquarters, says that *szabajrem* and *szabry* were thieves' tools used for breaking in, which today we would call picklocks or files.⁶ Linguists are not sure of the word's origin. Some try to prove its German etymology (supposedly, it was derived from the verb *schaben* (to scrape)).⁷ Others, e.g. Maria Brzezina, the author of *Polszczyzna Żydów* [The Polish Language of Jews], agree with Ułaszyn that *szaber* came from Hebrew, in which *szâbar* means *to break*.⁸ Hebrew or Yiddish words were very often incorporated into criminals' jargon (e.g. *melina* [den]). But we should not conclude that Jews constituted a majority among criminals in any of the partitions. Dictionaries say nothing about the interwar history of the word. It is also uncertain when it began to be popular in the general Polish language. It is difficult to say whether it happened during the looting of Jewish ghettos in 1942, which seems less probable, or during the Warsaw Uprising, which is more likely.⁹ The verb *szabrować* (to loot) appeared for the first time in the press in January 1945 in the context of the looting of the property of the residents of the destroyed Warsaw.¹⁰ Only in April did *szaber* begin to be identified with trips to the Recovered Territories. According to all modern dictionaries of the Polish language *szaber* denotes: "appropriation of unsupervised property abandoned or deserted by its owner, usually in the course of warfare or a natural disaster."¹¹ Despite the relatively short history of the word, its referent has a very long history.

Peasants' attacks on mansions at times of unrest, and servants stealing their deceased master's property, occurred all over modern Europe. A moment of suspension, chaos, temporary dissolution of government structures – usually as a result of a natural disaster, rebellion or war – has always been their common denominator. Consequently, social control was weakened and fear of punishment disappeared. At that particular moment the looted property was ownerless in the looter's opinion. It did not, however, exclude the possibility of the existence of a distant owner, e.g.

⁴ *Słownik języka polskiego*, ed. J. Karłowicz, A. Kryński, W. Niedźwiedzki, vol. 6 (Warsaw, 1915).

⁵ H. Ułaszyn, *Przyczynki leksykalne. Gwara złodziejska z około roku 1840* (Cracow, 1913).

⁶ *Słownik mowy złodziejskiej*, compiled by A. Kurka (Lwów, 1907).

⁷ *Słownik języka polskiego*, ed. M. Szymczak (Warsaw, 1995).

⁸ H. Ułaszyn, *Język złodziejski* (Łódź, 1951), 50; M. Brzezina, *Polszczyzna Żydów* (Warsaw-Cracow, 1986).

⁹ "[F]amous *szaber* (looting) and less famous *lipa* (bunk) were words known in Warsaw, but it was the Uprising and what happened afterwards which made them popular" (S. Urbańczyk, "Wpływ wojny na nasz język," *Dziennik Polski*, 10 January 1946).

¹⁰ One of the first articles: "Skończyć z 'szabrowaniem'", *Życie Warszawy*, 25 January 1945.

¹¹ Among others *Praktyczny słownik współczesnej polszczyzny*, ed. H. Zgólkowa (Poznań, 2003).

an heir, who could assert his rights to the property after some time. All those events of the nature of looting had one more common denominator: their participants, i.e. servants, less well-off peasants, the urban poor, experienced deep material deprivation. Presumably, most of them shared the peasant “vision of the world of restricted goods,” a world in which there is always a lack of something, first and foremost, of food. This vision was inseparably intertwined with the fear that there would not be enough, with the fear of hunger. According to the sociologist George M. Foster, the tragic fate consisted in that in the peasants’ opinion there was no direct way to increase the amount of available goods. The only solution was to acquire them at somebody else’s expense.¹² *Szaber* was a form of folk reaction to crisis, sometimes to a permanent state of want and poverty. Other elements characteristic of peasant culture – pragmatism and utilitarianism – can also be noticed in the genesis of *szaber*. “Who knows what life will bring. It’s better to be prepared,” “It might come in handy,” “Nothing can go to waste” – probably these were the looters’ maxims, due to which, it must be stressed, *szaber* was no simple theft. While breaking the rule of universal protection of property, they did not have to reject the rule “thou shalt not steal” altogether. As Dariusz Stola points out, they probably implemented the rule in a form narrowed down to “their people,” which explains why it was easier for the looters to take masters’, Jewish, German or state property, than their neighbor’s. The “unwanted people” regarded a large part of society as “aliens” (and vice versa), which explains the former group’s participation in every act of *szaber*. The less marginalized groups (i.e. those situated closer to the social center) had perhaps greater inner restraints limiting their readiness to commit *szaber*.¹³ However, as a result of protracted moral erosion these barriers could be weakened. The Second World War demonstrated that.

History provides plenty of other examples which might prove informative in the study of *szaber*. The Galician massacre of 1846 must be mentioned in this context. Although it was inspired by the Austrian authorities and it reached, as a result of bloody killings, the level of genocide, it did, however, clearly contain elements of the situations described above. Stefan Żeromski’s *Rozdziobią nas kruki, wrony* [Ravens and Crows Will Peck Us to Pieces] provides the best, albeit literary, example of such behaviors. A peasant finds a horse carcass with a harness and a corpse of a Polish nobleman killed by the Cossacks. The latter was carrying weapons for the January Uprising insurgents. The peasant takes everything that might prove useful: the harness, the shoes. The nobleman, dead or alive, is doubly “alien” to him. Firstly, he belongs to a different social class. Secondly, he represents Polish-

¹² G.M. Foster, “Peasant Society and the Image of Limited Good,” in *Peasant Society*, ed. J.M. Potter, M.N. Diza, G.M. Foster (Boston, 1967), 304, after: E. Tarkowska and J. Tarkowski, “‘Amoralny familizm’ czyli o dezintegracji społecznej w Polsce lat osiemdziesiątych,” in J. Tarkowski, *Socjologia świata polityki. Władza i społeczeństwo w systemie autorytarnym* (Warsaw, 1994), 272.

¹³ Dariusz Stola’s remarks during the discussion in the Institute of Political Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences, 22 March 2009.

ness, which the peasant does not feel. Another example, this time not a literary one, can be found in Bolesław Prus' *Kroniki* [Chronicles]. In 1874 enormous fires broke out in a few towns, among others in Pacanów and Siedlce. The local peasants, who arrived in horse-drawn wagons at the site of the tragedy, either expected exorbitant payment for their help or appropriated and then buried the property rescued from the burning buildings (note the archetypical burial of the loot). The parish priest's appeals in which he threatened them with hell did not help. It was the police that finally managed to recover the looted objects.¹⁴

Two elements were involved in the genesis of *szaber*. Firstly, the hurly-burly and chaos occasioned by the fire – the moment when there was no social control and when nobody was watching anything. The second one was the distance between the peasants and the “townies” (who quite probably were all Jewish anyway), which ruled out any solidarity.¹⁵ The looting of shops and warehouses during street riots, when some of the rioters use their anonymity and the absence of the police, might be regarded as the urban equivalent of *szaber*. Such situations transpired e.g. at the end of January 1905 during several days of riots in Warsaw. They became an introduction to the revolution.¹⁶ The phenomenon of *szaber* appeared also during the conflagration at the Polish eastern frontier in 1918–1920, when Jews were killed in mass pogroms and abandoned mansions were burglarized on a grand scale. These events have left a deep wound in the memory of the landed gentry.

September of 1939 and the “Broken Windows” Theory

The next “great chaos” which occasioned “great *szaber*” occurred during the Polish-German War of 1939. It did not happen at once, during the first days after the outbreak of the war. Only after some time, after the dissolution of the state structures had become obvious and the elite's escape had become a fact, did the unsupervised apartments, houses, private stores and warehouses begin to be burglarized. The same fate awaited army storehouses and barracks, e.g. in Pionki at Radom, where an arms plant and the apartments of the engineers employed there were located. Somebody remembered that: “At first the better-off were robbed, and then the others, usually at night.”¹⁷ After the Soviet Union's invasion of the Polish eastern frontier, Belarusian peasant bands often launched attacks on mansions and ranger's stations inhabited by Poles. However, according to Marek Wierzbicki's research, the action was at least partly organized, with the owners often being murdered. Consequently, these acts were not always examples of *szaber*, which has a chaotic, accidental character and

¹⁴ B. Prus, *Kroniki*, vol. 1, part 2 (Warsaw, 1956), 24, 330.

¹⁵ As Eric J. Hobsbawm points out, most peasants did not trust city dwellers if not simply hating them (idem, *Bandits* [New York, 1981], 17).

¹⁶ B. Prus, *Kroniki*, vol. 18 (Warsaw, 1968), 460–463.

¹⁷ A. Misuna, “Pionki w latach II wojny światowej – wspomnienia,” in *Szkice z dziejów Pionek*, ed. M. Wierzbicki (Pionki, 2000), 184.

does not involve attacking people, let alone murdering them.¹⁸ Nevertheless, during the few days of the “interregnum” instances of classic *szaber* occurred there too, which is illustrated in Zygmunt Klukowski’s diaries. The author wrote about Polish peasants arriving in horse-drawn wagons at the Zamoyskis’ palace in Klemensów. “Bolsheviks” were called to prevent *szaber*.¹⁹ Not only “masters” but also Jews fell victims to *szaber*. Incidents of that kind took place in the beginning of October 1939. By virtue of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact provisions, the Red Army had to retreat from most of the Lublin region, which it had seized. Most of the communizing Jews and all those who did not want to find themselves under the German occupation followed its example. Between the Soviets’ departure and the Germans’ arrival there was a moment of an authority vacuum – a perfect occasion for *szaber*. *Szaber* and acts of violence toward the remaining Jewish population took place in about a dozen towns and villages (e.g. Wysokie, Turobin, Biłgoraj, Frampol, Piaski, Izbica, Żółkiewka).²⁰

Szaber was not a domain of the provinces only. Instances of it occurred also in September 1939 in the besieged Warsaw. The lack of policemen, who had either escaped or had been evacuated, was an important element of the reality of the bombarded city. Warsaw was left without law enforcement officers, whom the home guard could not fully substitute. Living on Brzeska Street in the Warsaw district of Praga, Sabina Sebyłowa witnessed the robberies on 18 September. She wrote about the looting of burning storehouses and private houses, and even of corpses. “I saw my neighbor wearing shoes torn off from a killed passer-by. The neighbor talked about it openly himself.” She did not, however, sociologically categorize the perpetrators, and she only remarked that they had become “scoundrels, blackguards and animals.”²¹ We can only suspect who these “blackguards” were, since during the interwar period Brzeska Street was inhabited by many railroaders, factory workers and hackies.²² Moreover, euphemistically speaking, the district was not one of the most elegant. Sebyłowa’s notes reveal the extraordinary determination of the looters active during the bombardment and the shelling. Robberies also happened in other districts of the city, e.g. in Powiśle, inhabited, particularly at the level of the basements, by the “unwanted people.”²³ “Fellows” from Czerniaków, Stanisław Grzesiuk’s friends, admitted in October 1939 that: “We are living on what we have

¹⁸ M. Wierzbiński, *Polacy i Białorusini w zaborze sowieckim. Stosunki polsko-białoruskie na ziemiach północno-wschodnich II Rzeczypospolitej pod okupacją sowiecką 1939–1941* (Warsaw, 2000); idem, *Polacy i Żydzi w zaborze sowieckim* (Warsaw, 2001).

¹⁹ Z. Klukowski, *Zamojszczyzna 1918–1943* (Warsaw, 2007), 98.

²⁰ D. Libionka, “Polska ludność chrześcijańska wobec eksterminacji Żydów – dystrykt lubelski,” in *Akcja Reinhardt. Zagłada Żydów w Generalnym Gubernatorstwie*, ed. D. Libionka (Warsaw, 2004), 307.

²¹ S. Sebyłowa, *Notatki z prawobrzeżnej Warszawy* (Warsaw, 1985); 46.

²² J. Urbanek, *Lęk i strach warszawiaków wobec zagrożeń Września 1939 r.*, 94. M.A. thesis written in 2008 in Warsaw University, Institute of History, under Prof. Włodzimierz Borodziej’s guidance.

²³ *Ibidem*, 95.

removed from the burning warehouses and the factories during the siege. We are selling some things and for the money we get we buy what we need.”²⁴ According to Ludwik Landau, *szaber* was a common phenomenon in the bombarded Warsaw.²⁵

As for the social reactions after the passing of the frontline in 1944 and 1945 we should focus on the looting behaviors at the moment of suspension between the capital’s capitulation and the institutional settling of the German authorities, i.e. during the several-day period from 28 September to 1 October 1939. Many contemporary observers noticed the “disorder” prevailing among Varsovians, which manifested itself in robberies. Furniture and clothes left by residents were removed from abandoned apartments. “And how eagerly they took to robbery, and not only the hungry; even the policemen!”²⁶ Stores were being looted in Praga. The spread of the phenomenon could have been influenced by the great food shortage in the besieged city. As Landau pointed out, the scale of *szaber* ruled out the exclusive participation of “professional thugs.” The social base must have been greater. “The population was using the possibility to loot: neighbors, passers-by and soldiers, who were quartered in the whole city and were in a state of total disorder.”²⁷

This is what the phenomenon of such behaviors is all about: the majority of people participating in *szaber* would never be tempted to appropriate somebody’s property under normal circumstances. Does it mean that these people were just like any other citizens and they simply “became possessed” out of the blue? Sabina Sebyłowa employed the following metaphor: “Moral, civilized rules flake off some individuals like enamel off a struck dish.”²⁸ This flaking could have been occasioned by the fact that the young in particular did not undergo a full process of socialization, and many looters were recruited from among them. Conceivably, for the older people as well the “enamel” was only a surface, and they too had never internalized the official system of values. Individuals from the lower social classes – excluded, “unwanted,” and surely poor, since they risked theft under fire – predominated among the robbers. However, the fact that people found themselves in circumstances which can hardly be regarded as normal remains of key importance.

Here we should devote some attention to the theory of chaos, also known as the “theory of broken windows.” It says that chaos occasions chaos. In an environment changing for the worse (sometimes broken windows are enough) our pursuit of appropriate behavior withers. After one of the social norms has been broken we are tempted to ignore the other ones as well. And when we see that other people have not been punished for bad conduct and when we feel anonymous, we come to the conclusion that we will get away with our offences too. According to Philip Zimbardo, any circumstances placing people in a position of anonymity limit their

²⁴ S. Grzesiuk, *Boso, ale w ostrogach* (Warsaw, 1999), 172.

²⁵ L. Landau, *Kronika lat wojny i okupacji*, vol. 1 (Warsaw, 1962), 18.

²⁶ J. Wróblewska, *Listy z Polski* (London, 1960), 105. (I would like to thank Błażej Brzostek for recommending this book).

²⁷ L. Landau, *Kronika*, vol. 1, 18.

²⁸ S. Sebyłowa, *Notatki*, 46.

feelings of personal and civil responsibility for their own actions.²⁹ Social psychologists have conducted many experiments which have confirmed this mechanism. War and occupation created a unique kind of research laboratory.

***Szaber* in Ghettos and Other Locations**

Proof that *szaber* is a child of chaos lies in another wave of *szaber* which spread across the Polish eastern frontier in July 1941 in connection with Germany's attack on the Soviet Union. Jan Chustecki's memoir *Byłem sołtysem w latach okupacji* [I Was a Chair of a Village Council During the Occupation] published in 1961 contains descriptions of three acts of *szaber*. Residents of Wołkowysk and the surrounding area participated in the first one:

The town is already empty. And now comes the turn of the trains standing in long lines at the platform. God! It is like a celebration after the creation of the world. Soldiers dying in flames and from bullets, squealing children dying in cars in a hail of bombs, frying corpses, crawling casualties, and the all-pervasive cry: 'Help! Water! Mom!' - the nearby villages immediately launch a looting spree. And they carry: wheat, shoes, linen, leather, clothes, fabric, wool, crystals, eiderdowns - such wonders! God, there's everything! Belts, saddles, rifles, revolvers, furs, silk. Some have taken tens of thousands of meters of it because it is really thin and they are putting loads of it onto the wagons. Commotion, hubbub, curses by the cars. Some wagons, bursting at the seams, drive home in long lines, with their wheels screeching. Other wagons arrive at the station.

The situation resembled the one during the fires in 1874: a tragedy of death, people are calling for help, and the peasants from nearby villages are busy looting. Chustecki witnessed boots being taken off killed Soviet soldiers.

They have begun to smell, they need to be buried. Franek Nikłás has come again and begun stripping their feet of the better pairs of boots. He started pulling - they would not come off, the feet have already stiffened. But he is pulling persistently, with the corpse looking at him with his open eyes. His hands are spread out wide, the head is hitting the stone pavement. And he is dragging him along the street. Well, he already has three pairs. They should last for two winters. But he has to bury the body. The commune head ordered him to do so. He took off the belts of the two corpses, tied the belts at the ends, noosed it at the neck and he slowly dragged the corpses onto the meadow, as if he were dragging a harrow in his garden. He piled them up nicely and covered them with some soil - it's done. Smiling, he went home with the boots. He took off his clogs. He tried one pair on, the best one - as

²⁹ P. Zimbardo, *Efekt Lucyfera: dlaczego dobrzy ludzie czynią zło?*, transl. A. Cybulko et al. (Warsaw, 2008), 48 [originally published as *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil* (New York, 2008)].

if custom-made. He washed the blood out. He smeared them with fat. Ha-ha, they're shining, like some master's.

It is difficult to comprehend the scene. It becomes a little easier when we consider that walking barefoot was common in the Polish countryside, especially in the southern and eastern provinces in the interwar period. Poverty and the weakening of social bonds led to such behaviors, stances and opinions. That is why growing rich as a result of *szaber* brought the joy of a fate-changing miracle; however, it also evoked fear.

People secretly started calculating who got what and for how long it would last. There was a rumor that the Germans would search the suspected villages. . . . People were less afraid during bombing raids and bombardments than they are worried about this wealth now. Luckily, there's enough straw. They dig holes in mows, cover them with straw and put the loot there. But there's fear again: because if the barn catches fire, then to hell with it, but what if the hole does? What's in it is worth as much as twenty barns. That would be a pity.³⁰

Another example of archetypical behavior. Just like after the fire in Siedlce, the peasants buried the looted objects. They behaved as if programmed to carry out the scenario of what to do in such circumstances. Conceivably, the *szaber* of the Jewish property in Jedwabne and other small towns of the region during the pogrom wave of 1941 was also conducted according to the scenario. This region also plunged into several days of chaos after the passing of the front line. According to historical research, at least two partly similar scenarios were intertwined in the events' genesis: a *szaber* scenario and a pogrom one.³¹ Jan Tomasz Gross writes in *Neighbors* that on 10 July the peasants from the area around Jedwabne began walking or driving their wagons into the town from the early morning, despite the fact that it was not a market day.³² In Tykocin, Suchowola, and Jasionówka the residents of the nearby villages also looted the Jewish property. In Wasilkowo "during the pogrom, the leaders . . . were shouting, 'Don't break or tear anything, everything is already ours.'"³³ Perhaps there was only one scenario of behavior but in two versions: a mild and a bloody one? The first one, without violence, was employed when somebody's property was ownerless in the looters' opinion. In the second one, when there "was" an owner, he had to be removed – beaten up, killed, driven away – so that the property could come into "our" hands. The second version was obviously far more difficult to carry out (it required at least rudimentary organization, the domination of young, armed men, the breach of far more serious moral and psychological barriers connected with inflicting pain and suffering). Consequently, it was much less frequent in history.

³⁰ J. Chustecki, *Byłem sottysem w latach okupacji* (Warsaw, 1960), 66, 70, 73.

³¹ P. Machcewicz, "Wokół Jedwabnego," in *Wokół Jedwabnego*, vol. 1: *Studia*, ed. P. Machcewicz, K. Persak (Warsaw, 2002), 39, 41.

³² J.T. Gross, *Sąsiedzi. Historia zagłady żydowskiego miasteczka* (Sejny, 2008), 51, 52.

³³ P. Machcewicz, "Wokół Jedwabnego," 40.

The boundary of the behaviors connected with the extermination of the Jews in Szczepieszyn in the fall of 1942 can be more precisely defined. It was predominantly the Germans who murdered the Jews there, with Poles who “had nothing to do” ordered to be their helpers. Some Poles used the occasion and got down to looting. Beginning the action, the Germans “broke the window,” they gave a sign that it was allowed. Zygmunt Klukowski wrote about it in his diary.

22 October 1942:

Some of the Jewish apartments have been sealed; however, the robberies are in full swing.

24 October:

Many town residents were shamelessly robbing what was left.

26 October:

In the afternoon many residents flung themselves into looting with even more enthusiasm. In the end, as a punishment for the *szaber*, the military policemen shot a boy and Felka Sawicówna, who lived opposite the hospital.³⁴

Similar scenes took place in hundreds of other towns and villages, especially in the small towns, where ghettos were liquidated.³⁵ The houses belonging to deported Jews were almost immediately burglarized, destroyed, or sometimes taken apart by local Poles who wanted to obtain some wood, as they were afraid of another harsh winter.³⁶ On 18 September 1942 *Biuletyn Informacyjny*, an organ of the Home Army (*Armia Krajowa*), wrote that Poles from Otwock, Rembertów and Miedzeszyn, “on the memorable day of the Otwock ghetto liquidation, came at night in horse-drawn wagons and began to loot the remaining Jewish property – just a few hours after the barbaric event. They took away everything that fell into their hands. Doors, windows, shelves, floor planks were all broken off, not to mention the furniture, clothes and linen which were the first to fall prey to the looters. . . . In the name of the noblest rules of God and humans, we plead with you, our compatriots, not to stoop to the role of jackals.” The underground reported similar acts of *szaber* also in bigger towns and in cities, including Warsaw.³⁷ They probably also took place in

³⁴ Z. Klukowski, *Zamojszczyzna 1918-1943*, 304, 305, 307, 310

³⁵ D. Libionka, “Biedni AK-owcy opisują Zagładę na prowincji,” *Więź* 4 (2009): 118-129.

³⁶ See e.g. K. Panz, “Zagłada sztetl Grice,” *Zagłada Żydów. Studia i Materiały* 3 (2007): 32-37.

³⁷ “As soon as the tenements in the Warsaw ghetto emptied, bands of jackals went there, behind the ghastly walls, to frantically steal the property soaked in blood and imbued with putrid odor. Policemen of all colors, who were the first to stretch out their filthy and greedy hands for these miserable remains, condescendingly watch the dregs of society follow their example and loot and steal whatever they can. . . . Groups of adolescents, even of 12-14-year-old children, wander about the streets of Warsaw. They unceremoniously trade the stolen goods. The most disturbing is the fact that the people who see it do not react to the

Lublin, but on a smaller scale than in smaller towns and villages, partly because the ghetto borders were better protected by the blue police and the military police.³⁸

Although the *szaber* occurred at that time throughout Poland, the total amount of the appropriated wealth was much smaller than the amount appropriated after the war in the Recovered Territories, because the Jews had already been looted by the occupant or had sold the remains of their property for food. A peasant diarist from the Kielce region wrote about it. His account is all the more valuable since it shows the continuity of such behaviors – those who at first looted Jewish property (or bought their clothes from them for nothing) engaged in the looting of the post-German property after the war. “In my village [in 1948] as far as clothes go you can clearly see that people are very poor. During the unrest and the Jewish catastrophe, when the Krauts gathered them and took them in an unknown direction, then some bought a whole lotta clothes from these Jews, and later they began going west to get the togs the Germans left.”³⁹

Klukowski does not specify the social makeup of the looting crowd. However, we can infer from the text that the municipal officials were not among them. The youth and the urban poor probably constituted the majority. The residents of “infamous” districts (Czerniaków, Annapol, Wola, Powiśle, Praga) probably predominated among the Warsaw looters. They, let us remember, had gained some looting experience in September 1939. Otwock was visited most likely by peasants who came in horse-drawn wagons.⁴⁰ Did these people loot driven by their low material status and the “vision of the world of limited means,” or maybe because they hated Jews? This question is ill-formulated, since perhaps a mixture of both factors was involved here, with anti-Semitism not confined to any social class or stratum. However, it must be stressed that it was usually not the ethnic hatred which played the key role in the genesis of *szaber*. This was illustrated e.g. by Anna Machcewicz in *Newsweek*.

sight of that awfulness. On the contrary, various Mistery and Ladies Muck eagerly buy ‘for nothing’ some miserable rags, plates, paintings, etc. It is a shame that not only lesser mortals, people of low intellect, but also individuals with traces of intelligence or at least with intellectual aspirations also stoop to robbing the Jewish property. These include various stewards of Jewish houses, who are ‘securing’ valuable objects, but also those who have ‘passes’ to the ghetto and do not want to miss a unique opportunity . . . to tarnish their reputation for the rest of their lives. News about other instances of common lack or atrophy of decency and humanity are coming in from the whole country.” (“Niebezpieczeństwo wewnętrzne,” *Agencja Prasowa*, 7 October 1942).

³⁸ D. Libionka, *Polska ludność chrześcijańska*, 310.

³⁹ *Więś polska 1939–1948. Materiały konkursowe*, ed. K. Kersten, T. Szarota, vol. 2 (Warsaw, 1968), 18.

⁴⁰ I deliberately omit here the appropriation of former Jewish real property (workplaces, houses, lots) by the “new middle class.” The process was conducted in a formal way and had little to do with the looting of abandoned property. Similarly, in the subsequent part of the text I do not treat the appropriation of former German farmsteads and apartments conducted by Polish repatriates as *szaber* in the strict sense of the word.

On the night of 14 August 1944 a plane crashed in the hills surrounding Nieszko-wice Wielkie – a village near Bochnia. The whole Polish crew of the seventeen-person Liberator died. Panic spread in the village after the crash. After what had happened was established, some villagers began looting whatever they could: watches, wedding rings, money. Probably in the beginning, in the darkness, nobody suspected that the shot-down pilots were Polish. At dawn a detachment of the Home Army, operating in the area, discovered the truth. Germans arrived as well and they took some parts of the wreck, the radio transmitter and receiver, weapons and ammunition. They tore the insignia off the pilots' uniforms. They ordered the chair of the village council to bury the dead and they left. The peasants, who by then must have known that the pilots were Polish, resumed looting. They ripped the uniforms off the corpses. They stole the parachutes (in total a few hundred square meters of the highly valuable fabric). Like ants, they started snatching away the remains of the plane. The Home Army command organized a repossession detachment. The peasants who did not manage to hide their treasures were publicly lashed. The funeral of the killed crew took place three days later. "For many years we were ashamed of it and we didn't tell anybody about it," the villagers told Anna Machcewicz.⁴¹

The retention of authority is key to the examples of Szczebrzeszyn and Nieszko-wice. In the first town the Germans clearly let go. They totally do not care about the looting conducted by Poles, and consequently they somehow encourage it. When the liquidation action is about to end, the order is restored and the *szaber* ceases. In the other example, the Home Army commands the minds, but its detachment comes and disappears. Moreover, it does not enjoy sufficient prestige among all the peasants since the *szaber* resumes. Chaos and the concurrent weakening of the institutions of control generate a feeling of impunity. Acting in a crowd evokes a feeling of anonymity. But it is the property left unattended which sets in motion the *szaber* mechanism. These circumstances occurred on a multiplied scale, due to the passing of the front line. Joy was connected with disorder, freedom with the lack of authority. The property abandoned by Germans provided an occasion for *szaber*.

***Szaber* in Warsaw**

There were four main waves of the "*szaber* frenzy" in the period of 1944–1945. The first one spread mostly in towns and cities, with the perpetrators being for the most part city dwellers ("unwanted people," urban proletariat), and in the case of Warsaw also peasants. The second one went rampaging through the countryside. The third one, undoubtedly the most intense one, swept through the Recovered Territories. The fourth one (1945–1947) was mostly the domain of soldiers of regular army units, the Internal Security Corps (*Korpus Bezpieczeństwa Wewnętrznego*) as well as military policemen, and it affected the property of Ukrainians and Lemkos.

⁴¹ A. Machcewicz, "Tajemnica liberatora," *Newsweek*, 8 October 2006.

In Lublin *szaber* took place between 21 and 24 July 1944, i.e. at the time of the Germans' escape and the Soviet Army's arrival. The malicious could say that the holiday of 22 July celebrated in the People's Republic of Poland should have commemorated the looters instead of the Manifesto of the Polish Committee of National Liberation (*Polski Komitet Wyzwolenia Narodowego*). According to *Gazeta Lubelska*, "sure of their impunity, the dregs of society were openly looting not only state property but often also private property. The looters got away with it."⁴² The moveable equipment and furniture of the city slaughterhouse at no. 107 Łęczyńska Street fell pray to *szaber*. Later on, its management called in the press for the return of the property.⁴³ In other institutions and workplaces the losses had to be equally great, to the extent that the Polish Committee of National Liberation clerks did not have chairs to sit on, since the head of the Public Security Department (*Resort Bezpieczeństwa Publicznego*), Stanisław Radkiewicz, ordered for an announcement to be posted in the streets in which he threatened "the most severe punishment" to those who would not return the looted goods.

In Radom, liberated on the night from 15 to 16 January 1945, people bolted to the loading platform, where they expected to loot some food: flour, sugar or groats. On Czachowskiego Street somebody ripped the boots off a dead German soldier.⁴⁴ After cars and railway storehouses, it was time to loot the local enterprises, with tanneries being hit the hardest. According to *Dziennik Powszechny*: "Tanneries... met the same fate as many other enterprises in our city did in the critical days of the Germans' escape from Radom. The locals have looted everything that could be taken away."⁴⁵ The use of the expression "the locals" might constitute further proof that not only "the dregs of society" participated in the *szaber* and that it had a broader social basis.

Cracow, the capital of the General Government, had more that could be looted. A few dozen thousand Germans lived in the city. They left their apartments; however, usually without furniture. Moreover, a large proportion of the industry, warehouses and military storehouses had also been under German management. When the Germans were busy escaping – on 12 and 13 January 1945 – the people of Cracow flung themselves into *szaber*. An eyewitness claimed that the tobacco and cigarette factories on the corner of Dolnych Młynów and Czarnowiejska streets were the first to be burglarized. For a few days crowds of people with backpacks, suitcases and bags filled with tobacco and cigarettes were emerging from the factory. The *szaber* wave also passed through the Herbewo rolling papers factory and gradually moved into the city center. A fabric warehouse, located in a several-story tenement on Mikołajska Street, was emptied in one day. Since it had massive doors

⁴² "Obrazki ulicy," *Gazeta Lubelska*, 27 October 1944.

⁴³ *Gazeta Lubelska*, 29 January 1944.

⁴⁴ R. Loth, *Wspomnienia Kochanowskie czyli Radom sprzed półwiecza* (Radom, 2007), 15.

⁴⁵ *Dziennik Powszechny*, 19 May 1945.

guarding it, the looters made small holes in them in order to get inside. Then the stock was thrown out onto the street. Grocery stores were also broken into; however, there were no substantial supplies. Offices and institutions were less popular among looters. A hole was made in the oak door of the former National Socialist German Workers' Party's office located in the Old Town Square and once in a while somebody got inside. It is said that the *szaber* proceeded slowly without the nervousness characteristic of such situations.⁴⁶

Lublin, Radom, Cracow – these were no exceptions. *Szaber* also took place in Łódź, immediately after the city's liberation. Among its inhabitants there was a German minority of about one hundred thousand people. The Łódź ghetto, the last one to be liquidated by the Germans, was also a scene of multiple acts of *szaber*. From January to ca. July 1945 everything that could be taken from the ghetto was taken apart and stolen away – doors, roofs, windows.⁴⁷ The subsequent looting of the former German and Jewish property demands special attention, as its example shows that it was an instance of the same social phenomenon.

In January 1945 the looting of German storehouses conducted by Poles was the rule in smaller towns. Some of the mills, sugar factories, distilleries, bakeries and slaughterhouses under German management met a similar fate. If some places were not looted, it was only because the people did not know about their existence or because Soviet soldiers proved to be faster. Everything proceeded totally spontaneously, without any previous organization whatsoever, in the chaos following the Germans' escape. Irena Krzywicka participated in the *szaber* in Zalesie near Warsaw. However, according to the description, most of her companions lived in the nearby villages. The author of *Wyznania gorszycielki* [Confessions of a Scandalizer] did not regard *szaber* as something scandalous. On the contrary, she thought it a natural and fully-justified social reaction to the mass looting the Germans had indeed conducted in the fall and winter of 1944. One might infer that she regarded the *szaber* of the former German warehouses, whose owners actually “did not exist” any more, as a patriotic act. Not ignoring her genuine hatred of Germans, it seems more probable that Krzywicka, a resident of the pre-war intellectual Parnasus, many years later felt a need to explain her behavior by putting the blame on the occupant. In reality her reaction was probably spontaneous, unpremeditated and instinctive (?). Krzywicka recalls:

at night [probably it was the night from 16 to 17 January] I ran to the warehouse with Marynia. We didn't go there to find something, gain anything, but to loot the Germans, to take German property after they had taken everything away from us. We ran there and dragged home some strange things. An iron bed with a metal mattress, a can of marmalade. Anyway, quite a lot of people

⁴⁶ S. Ziemia, *Czas przelomu. Wspomnienia dziennikarza z lat 1944–1946* (Cracow, 1975), 129.

⁴⁷ A. Sitek, M. Trębacz, “Życie codzienne w Łodzi w 1945 r.,” in *Rok 1945 w Łodzi. Studia i szkice*, ed. J. Żelazko (Łódź, 2008), 173.

from the village were already there, and they were looting what they could. I thought that they were absolutely right, because everybody had been looted in some way by the Germans.⁴⁸

In January and February 1945 not only the former German property or former Jewish houses in Łódź fell prey to the looters. Ethnic strangeness was something of a marker indicating the goods to be looted – it facilitated the breaking of inner barriers, because “taking a German bed or Jewish duvet was not a sin.” Nevertheless, it was not the most important or even a necessary factor setting in motion the looting crowds. It is illustrated not only by the example of Nieszkowice, but also the example of burnt-out and empty left-bank Warsaw, which at that time underwent perhaps the most destructive raid of looters. Just one day after the liberation (17 January 1945) *szaber* of the goods abandoned after the Uprising commenced. The attack came from two sides. The first wave came from the nearby villages on the left bank of the Vistula. In *Życie Warszawy* of 20 January we read that “crowds of plunderers, which emerged as if out of thin air, are already prowling in the abandoned houses. They are looting everything: clothes, linen, settings, pots. They are even taking furniture using hand carts and horse-drawn wagons that arrived from who knows where.”⁴⁹ Crossing the frozen Vistula, Praga inhabitants attacked from this district’s side. As early as on 19 January the city military commandant issued an order forbidding them to stay in left-bank Warsaw and threatened those who should break the order with provost court. The military police cordoned off the city. It did not help much.⁵⁰ Not only was the pressure too great, but some of the military policemen also wanted to cash in on it.⁵¹ The article under a title typical of the period – *Żądamy surowych kar dla rabusiów* [We Request Severe Punishment for the Plunderers] – which appeared in *Życie Warszawy* describes the situation at the beginning of February: “One can spot women carrying household appliances, children with sacks of books, men pulling carts full of furniture. Comfortable armchairs are thrown out of the windows and they fall into the stretched-out hands

⁴⁸ I. Krzywicka, *Wyznania gorszycielki* (Warsaw, 1995), 397.

⁴⁹ “Warszawa żyje,” *Życie Warszawy*, 20 January 1945.

⁵⁰ The report of the deputy Citizens’ Militia (*Milicja Obywatelska*) chief of the capital city of Warsaw of 26 January reads: “Only in one case are the militiamen not able to cope with their duties: they cannot stop mass theft and robberies conducted by criminal elements from the suburbs and nearby villages. This phenomenon came about due to the absence of the owners of the salvaged basements and not yet penetrated apartments. This pillaging is on a mass scale and on account of it the authorities have issued a series of orders by virtue of which nobody can enter the city of Warsaw, newcomers cannot settle in the city, objects and furniture cannot be transported, etc. (Archiwum Instytutu Pamięci Narodowej [Archive of the Institute of National Remembrance, later: AIPN], 01265/379, p. 3).

⁵¹ The report on the activity of operational officers for political and educational affairs sent to Warsaw in September 1944 reads: “The Citizens’ Militia, the majority of which participated in the looting under various pretexts, was yet another obstacle in the way of fighting the civilians’ marauding.” (Archiwum Akt Nowych [Archive of New Records, later: AAN], PPR, 295/IX-353, p. 1).

of the plunderers. Gangs of plunderers storm into abandoned apartments through broken doors, only to emerge a moment later with the loot.”⁵² In a way the author traditionally accused “the dregs of society, the scum,” but others commenced looting as well. The most frequently mentioned group is the peasants, who were walking from apartment to apartment with a sack on their back. They peeked through broken windows. When they saw the owner, they muttered, “Oh, you’ve already taken the apartment,” and they went to loot someplace else.⁵³

Let us examine this scene, because it says a lot about the nature of *szaber* – conducted without violence but also without the owner, whose absence made the property right somehow vague. Our moral obligations (including the commandment “you shall not steal”) encompass, first and foremost, familiar persons, “our” people, and when “they are not there,” these obligations rapidly waver. As Dariusz Stola points out, *szaber* is a relation between people and things and not between people, and as a result the inner barrier against it is weaker.⁵⁴ In Warsaw, where looters turned out to be faster than the returning apartment owners, the latter usually saw a sight similar to this one: “When we entered the house, we saw a scene of destruction: all the doors were torn from the hinges, the leather furniture was all stripped off. There were plenty of feathers from the bedding, because the looters took the filling, and the whole apartment was littered with feathers.”⁵⁵

The second wave of *szaber* spread in the provinces. This time the looters were mostly peasants, farm laborers, country “unwanted people,” with landed property being the aim of their attacks. Yet again the role of authority proved to be of key importance. In this case it was the role of the new regime, which during the landowner reform encouraged people to take land into their own hands, so that “historic justice” would be served. During the partition of the property the farming appliances and tools were sometimes looted, which the communist authorities did not really object to. Initially, the Home Army managed to counter such situations, but as it was becoming less effective in field operations, the acts of *szaber* became more frequent. To give one example, a mansion abandoned by its owners in the village of Morawsko near Jarosław was taken apart and only its foundations remained in place.⁵⁶ Another example can be found in Franciszek Starowieyski’s memoirs. They provide a description of a typical *szaber* scenario: the race for valuables, anonymity guaranteed by the over-exploited personal pronoun “we.” The means of transport the same as usual – horse-drawn wagons. Despite the fact that the presence of women and children in the mansion somehow upsets the *szaber* scenario, we should remember

⁵² “Żądamy surowych kar dla rabusiów,” *Życie Warszawy*, 8 February 1945.

⁵³ W. Dąbrowska, *Z Bielana do Zalesia in Exodus Warszawy. Ludzie i miasto po powstaniu 1944. Pamiętniki i relacje*, vol. 1, selection and ed. M. Berezowska, E. Borecka, K. Dunin-Łasowicz, J. Korpetta, H. Szwanowska (Warsaw, 1992), 245.

⁵⁴ See footnote 13.

⁵⁵ F. Borycka, *Exodus z Powiśla in Exodus Warszawy*, 192.

⁵⁶ *Kronika rodzin Kopeckich i Turnauów*, ed. K. Kopecki, A. Bogdańska-Zarembina, E. Sawicka (Warsaw, 2001).

that for peasants the woman was, unlike the man, a second-class owner. And perhaps in their opinion it was already a “dead class.” Starowieyski recalls: “The first raid on the mansion commenced when only women and children remained there. A few wagons packed with armed people arrived. But they were poorly armed and they were wearing half-Polish, half-Russian uniforms. About four or five wagons came and the search in the mansion [started] – in the name of the people. Great *szaber* commenced. . . . They were looting whatever they could. They even took some of our toys, my paintbrushes. . . . Some of the things had already been removed. They were not looting the things which would be valuable to us. They were looking for jewelry, money, furs. . . . it was a frantic search for hiding places, things that could be appropriated, fast, fast, because their companions might find a better tidbit.

“Then a document had to be signed, certifying that this or that had been confiscated in the name of the people. It was the beginning of the manner of speaking which we would hear every day for the next forty years. Nobody was an ‘I,’ everybody was a ‘we.’ We – everybody referred to themselves so – we – this way of speaking got to people instantly.”⁵⁷

Looters’ Union

The third and most devastating wave of the “*szaber* frenzy” spread in the territories belonging to the Reich and in the Polish territories where a colonization action was conducted. It started as early as in winter, and with respect to the number of participants it reached its peak in the summer and fall of 1945. It is difficult to say if people of specific age, sex or social class predominated among the looters. “Perhaps *szaber* is not the only sin of our society,” admitted *Głos Narodu* from Częstochowa in August 1945, “. . . but fortunately there is no other ‘plague’ so widespread in the whole society regardless of age, profession and social class. Hundreds of people are looting, beginning from half-blind beggars dragging along to Silesia and ending with clever young men, who drive west in automobiles every week.”⁵⁸

The range of this “plague” is also difficult to define. However, it will not be an exaggeration if we call it a mass one. Some villages and towns, especially those on the Polish side of the Reich border, became almost completely deserted. Wanting to use the opportunity to loot, thousands went to Lower Silesia or to Gdańsk and its vicinities. *Dziennik Bałtycki* from 1 June 1945 reads: “In the last months we saw tens, hundreds and thousands of people gripped by the frenzy of looting other people’s apartments and farmsteads. They swarmed after the army like locusts. They stormed into towns and villages abandoned by Germans – and they robbed, destroyed and trampled.”⁵⁹ In November there was a manhunt, one of many at that time, at one

⁵⁷ *Franciszka Starowieyskiego opowieść o końcu świata, czyli reforma rolna*, written down by K. Uniechowska (Warsaw, 1994), 115, 116.

⁵⁸ “Zaraza,” *Głos Narodu*, 29 August 1945.

⁵⁹ “Skończyć z szabrem,” *Dziennik Bałtycki*, 1 June 1945.

of the railway stations in Poznań. Reportedly, looters made up about 60 percent of the travelers. Even if the group were half as numerous – “people on a journey” are a very important element of the landscape then – it still does say a lot about the scale of the phenomenon. Most of them came from Warsaw, Cracow and Tarnów.⁶⁰ But we must remember this was only the number of looters traveling by train. Statistically speaking, most looters, at least in the beginning, went hunting on foot, by horse-drawn wagons or were given lifts by Soviet drivers. And so the biggest “looting belts” were located in the Augustów region, in northern Mazovia, in Kaszuby, in western Greater Poland or Lesser Poland and in the area around Częstochowa. Everybody went to the place closest to them. For instance, Elbląg became the gold vein for the inhabitants of Kaszuby. Edmund Osmańczyk came across “bands of the worst dregs of society” who traveled to the Opole region from the Kielce and the Częstochowa Provinces and from the [Coal] Basin.⁶¹ Looters from Zakopane went to the Sudeten Mountains, from where they brought, e.g. telescopes to view Giewont from Gubałówka. Stanisław Ziemia, the then editor-in-chief of *Dziennik Zachodni*, a daily describing the situation in the area along the Oder River in detail, recalled that its circulation was especially good in the Rzeszów region and in central Poland. In his opinion the readers from those regions were mostly “travelers” who went to Silesia to get “stuff” and after each return home they wanted to have up-to-date news as to whether something had changed in those regions and if they could risk another journey to the west.⁶² If it had really been so, it would testify to the fact that the looting journeys became professionalized to a certain degree. However, the beginnings were different.

We can distinguish between a few phases of *szaber*.

The first one occurred in the ethnically mixed regions immediately after the passing of the front line. It was the most chaotic, incidental phase, in the course of which blind fury sometimes revealed its presence. Taking everything that fell into their hands, looters wrought senseless havoc. A teacher from Racice in the Inowrocław district in the Kuyavian-Pomeranian Province recalls the demolition of the school:

The long-lasting occupation had warped people’s minds, which was the most evident during the first days after the Germans’ escape. The inhabitants of the village, who stayed in one place during the whole occupation, decided, if I can put it like that, to make use of the economic situation. They immediately flung themselves into looting, taking everything which could be taken and which had any value whatsoever, or they began destroying things. Former German farms were looted. So were the farms belonging to deported Poles. They did not even spare the school. A band of rowdy people with axes shattered the door and stole everything that was there, that is: furniture, pots, paintings, books, gymnastics equipment, charts, globes (which they then broke into pieces in the courtyard), radio receivers, etc. They even

⁶⁰ “Nagonka na szabrowników,” *Ilustrowany Kurier Polski*, 17 November 1945.

⁶¹ E. Osmańczyk, “Szabrownicy,” *Dziennik Polski*, 7 April 1945.

⁶² S. Ziemia, *Czas przełomu*, 213.

stole a whole window, the stove grills and they pulled out the hooks from the walls. Only four bare walls were left. The floor was covered with plaster and garbage.⁶³

Since it is not the only piece of information about a school being destroyed by a village crowd, in all likelihood the first reaction to the “interregnum” in the border area was often a mad race conducted under the principle: who is going to get more?⁶⁴

The second phase did not commence immediately after the first one. Military operations were being conducted in Lower Silesia and along the whole length of the coast. Red Army units were quartered everywhere. Further journeys from the place of residence posed a great deal of danger. Consequently, only those who did not have to leave their homes did not. The front line moved west in April 1945, which to some extent triggered the next *szaber* wave which was somehow following the retreating army. According to a village diarist from the Łódź province,

Inexpressible joy pervaded in the countryside. Inhabitants of the village of Bzów went to nearby Silesia by Soviet cars and by the immediately activated trains. They were looking for what they had lost and there was plenty to go there for: sewing machines, bikes, radio receivers, various kitchen appliances, linen, clothes, shoes. They were taking what they had lost under the German occupation, i.e. their economic well-being.⁶⁵

Encouraged by the prospect of treasures abandoned by Germans, people became braver and started coming from more and more distant places. Nevertheless, they were still taking mainly small objects, which they could carry or transport by cart. Initially, only the army was able to loot bigger objects, since only the military had the necessary vehicles. With the passing of time gangs of looters were formed. They were able to comb the area more methodically, i.e. house after house, they were setting up dens and transfer points as well as bribing clerks to obtain necessary permissions. Maria Zientara-Malewska recalls:

The first looters appeared in Olsztyn as early as in March. They loaded onto trucks whatever they could and took it away. They walked from house to

⁶³ *Wieś polska 1939-1948. Materiały konkursowe*, vol. 1, 157.

⁶⁴ The village of Chmielinko, Nowy Tomyśl district: “During the critical January days, after the Germans had escaped in panic and before the Russians’ arrival the village plunged into an interregnum and anarchy, which lasted about a dozen hours. Poles – farmhands who did not escape together with their employers [who were Germans – author’s note] – knew how to make use of such an opportunity. They made up for all the suffering and for what they had to endure from the hands of the German employers during the whole occupation. They took all the former German objects they could, first and foremost clothes, shoes, linen, bicycles and other things, and they brought the stuff to their relatives living nearby. They took revenge even on the school, whose doors, desks and cabinets they smashed with axes while searching for valuable things. (ibidem, 418).

⁶⁵ Ibidem, 647.

house, looking for treasures. They would remove from the houses the best furniture, carpets, china, glassware and paintings – everything they could get hold of. They were so greedy that sometimes they took things which they then left in the street while they were looking for new ones. More and more objects and pieces of furniture were lying on the streets. . . . If these were things left behind by refugees at the mercy of fortune – it was half as bad. But often people who were there lost everything they had. I saw with my own eyes people bringing whole loads of sewing machines, carpets and furniture from the nearby villages into the tenement in Pułaski Square in which I lived. It must be added that *szaber* was going on not only in Olsztyn. Armed gangs traveled to villages in order to rob their defenseless inhabitants. They did not ask whether something belonged to Poles or Germans. They simply took it.⁶⁶

In one of the apartments on Brata Alberta Street in Wrocław there was a storehouse of looted goods, which were to be sold. “The floor in the apartment was covered with carpets lying one on top of the other, forming a thick layer. Paintings, actually of various value, wall clocks, grandfather clocks, wristwatches and pocket watches were piled by the walls. In the adjacent room there were a few pianos.⁶⁷ The professionalization of *szaber* proceeded gradually: it was becoming an occupation, the main source of income and a way of life. According to an epigram popular at that time:

A new trade union’s been set up,
its members innumerable –
a Looters’ Union.⁶⁸

A system of “communicating vessels,” a certain kind of division of labor was formed: some people looted, some provided necessary papers, others transported the stuff east or south and finally the last group sold the loot. Looters’ bands had their people among city clerks, militiamen and at the railway. Militiamen and soldiers were often looters themselves. Actually, the initial anti-looting “round-ups” at railways stations were conducted in order for the Citizens’ Militia and railway guards to be able to appropriate the goods previously looted by somebody else. On the one hand, it seems that among the looters there were many demobilized, unemployed and occupation-time smugglers. On the other hand, *szaber* relatively quickly ceased to be a peasant phenomenon limited only to the “unwanted people.” It began to be a matter of the whole society. Officials also became infected with the “looting frenzy.” According to the envoy of the Ministry of Public Administration of Lower Silesia and the Opole region (*Ministerstwo Administracji Publicznej na Dolny Śląsk i Opolszczyznę*), half of the employees of public agencies left their offices during working hours in order to loot or trade.⁶⁹ Higher-ranking officials used public

⁶⁶ M. Zientara-Malewska, *Śladami twardej drogi* (Warsaw, 1966), 247, 248.

⁶⁷ J. Konopińska, *Tamten wrocławski rok. Dziennik 1945–1946* (Wrocław, 1987), 148, 149.

⁶⁸ *Ibidem*, 73.

⁶⁹ AAN, MAP, 2443, Kazimierz Janczewski, *Sprawozdanie z lustracji Śląska Opolskiego oraz województwa dolnośląskiego*, 15–25 October 1945, p. 41.

cars as well as their powers thanks to which they could e.g. take over apartments and empty them. Afterwards, they could establish patron-client links thanks to the distribution of such apartments. In Lower Silesia, only during a few weeks of August and September, the causes of as many as fourteen district governors and mayors were directed to the public prosecution office.⁷⁰ The phenomenon can be partly explained by the meager salaries of public servants and militiamen. It is difficult to deny that especially people who had to provide for their families simply could not get by on such salaries, and everybody was aware of that. But the collective imperative was also important – the general conviction that since various goods were literally lying in the street, one needed to take them because everybody was doing so. The report written by Jerzy Zubek, one of the more intelligent inspectors in Lower Silesia, reads: “People who came here with an ideological attitude succumbed to the psychosis the minute they found themselves in the ‘gold rush’ atmosphere.”⁷¹ It was especially evident during the deportations of Germans, which Poles impatiently awaited. The excitement felt by some, the joy they experienced when they managed to obtain something valuable, but also the brutalization of the attitude toward Germans when the gains turned out to be too small – all these should be included among the symptoms of the “*szaber* frenzy.”

In the Recovered Territories Germans constituted an important group of looters. These were almost exclusively women who knew where to look for things appropriate as loot and which they then exchanged for food in the so-called “*szaber*-squares.” Joanna Konopińska described the all-knowing “old Miss Weiss,” who brought home various goods in order to exchange them for food at Grunwald Square in Wrocław.⁷² The situation in other cities and towns was similar. In Bytom “German women were bringing various objects to the bazaar, which they laid out on towels spread on the ground . . . ; in turn the repatriates acted according to the rule: buy at a low price, sell at a higher one. At the end of the day one came home with a meager profit, sometimes with the unsold merchandise.”⁷³ Next, Polish “ants” (small-scale smugglers) transported to the center of the country the things which they had bought for nothing or which they had looted. Often they carried the objects on themselves. One of the first reports describing Pomerania after the war featured the following scene, probably slightly exaggerated: “A huge pack on the back, suitcases in both hands, bike tubes around the neck and some lesser “looted” acquisition dangling by the belt. And the said citizen can barely breathe under the burden as heavy as a pack animal’s; he is staring somewhere far ahead as if he wants to bring his Poznań, Łódź or Warsaw closer.”⁷⁴

⁷⁰ Ibidem, p. 40.

⁷¹ AAN, MAP, 2443, Jerzy Zubek, *Sprawozdanie z przeprowadzonej inspekcji*, 18 August 1945, p. 31.

⁷² Ibidem, p. 63, 95.

⁷³ T. Wróbel, *Przystanek Gliwice. Dalsze losy chłopca z Borysławia* (Warsaw, 2004), 11.

⁷⁴ Z. Drózdź, W. Milczarek, *Zakochani w Pomorzu* (Cracow, 1945), 24.

Such people filled the post-war trains and railway stations. Orbis opened a coach line from Warsaw to Wrocław, which soon began to be known as the “*szaber-bus*.”⁷⁵ Some people returned a few or a few dozen times – maybe more. Czesław Borek, a 28-year-old turner’s helper, having spent a short time in the Citizens’ Militia, started buying various things in Jelenia Góra and then transporting them to the center of the country. In his testimony before the Special Commission he admitted to visiting Jelenia Góra about ten times. Moreover, he sent some of the things by mail. He was not directly involved in *szaber*. He sometimes bought the stuff from Germans but mostly from Citizens’ Militia functionaries, with whom he had long been acquainted.⁷⁶ In February 1946 two unemployed women were apprehended. They had been constantly traveling back and forth between the Recovered Territories and Poznań (one since April and the other one since July 1945). They had transported watches, cameras and clothes in order to sell them in a consignment shop. At the time of their arrest they had three suitcases with them which contained among other things tablecloths, linen, two motorcycle rims and a coil of cable.⁷⁷ They were retailers, though.

Types of *Szaber*

“Ants” were actually the most numerous; however, gradually *szaber* became divided into branches – it underwent diversification with respect to the assortment. Clothes, shoes, carpets, domestic appliances such as sewing machines and radio receivers did not require major specialization. By contrast, transporting furniture, not to mention farming machines, did take a lot of effort. Thousands of UNRRA trucks, which came to Poland across the Czech border, continued their journey to Warsaw and other cities and towns bursting at the seams with furniture and other goods. Coffee machines, grinders, kitchen appliances for cafes and restaurants, as well as plates and cups from which the Varsovians drank coffee and tea were brought, probably on request, from Wrocław or Gdańsk.

Some looters specialized in car parts, while others – e.g. the gangs of employees of the Post Offices and Telegraphs Head Office [*Dyrekcja Poczty i Telegrafów*] in Katowice – specialized in telecommunications devices (using a mail car, the group looted e.g. the switchboard in Strzelce Opolskie.⁷⁸)

There were also “specialists” who penetrated abandoned drug stores and transported expensive and rare medications to the country center.⁷⁹ Another common sub-type of *szaber* involved appropriation and emptying former German apartments, after which the looters moved into another apartment. Kudowa’s deputy

⁷⁵ M. Urbanek, *Wielki szaber*.

⁷⁶ AAN, Special Commission, 1079, Akta sprawy przeciwko Czesławowi Borkowi, p. 2.

⁷⁷ Ibidem, 1088, Akta dochodzenia przeciwko Krzywińskiej Ludwice i Jacek Wiktorii, p. 1, 18.

⁷⁸ Ibidem, 760, Akta sprawy przeciwko Stanisławowi M., Władysławowi P., Franciszkowi I., Henrykowi P., Ludwikowi L., p. 8-10.

⁷⁹ A. Ropelewski, *Pionierskie lato* (Warsaw, 1972), 172.

district governor changed his company apartment five times in six months. Despite the fact that he stayed in one of them for less than a day, he took all the furnishings with him each time.⁸⁰

There was yet another type of looters – “cultural looters.” According to Stanisław Ziemia, as far as cultural property is concerned, the *szaber* of books commenced the latest. “In the beginning there were no adepts of this discipline among the looters.”⁸¹ Nevertheless, books found their enthusiasts pretty soon as well.⁸² At the beginning of August 1945 dozens of people began wandering about Gdańsk looking for works of art, which they hoped to sell (probably these were hungry Germans who knew where to look).⁸³ According to the files of Stanisław Ziewiec’s investigation, in the first half of 1946 he smuggled from the Recovered Territories four Afghan and Persian carpets, three Dutch school paintings, one Munich school painting, four paintings in the Empire style and many smaller objects.⁸⁴ Putti, which to this day decorate some apartments of the intelligentsia, must have been removed from a ruined church after the war. In the files of the Special Committee there is evidence against a person who in September 1946 bought from somebody in Kłodzko nineteen showcases with a collection of butterflies and beetles. As a result, the said person spent three months in a labor camp.⁸⁵

There was also – let us say – an official kind of *szaber* for which one usually did not go to jail. It began in the devastated Warsaw and it was successfully continued later as well. A great number of institutions, e.g. universities, suffered from a total lack of furniture and equipment. Therefore, looking for a solution to the problem, they sent searching teams “on business trips,” during which they were to look for chairs, desks, typewriters, books.⁸⁶ Many schools, libraries and health centers, espe-

⁸⁰ M. Urbanek, *Wielki szaber*.

⁸¹ S. Ziemia, *Czas przełomu*, 215.

⁸² The report *Zakochani w Pomorzu (In Love with Pomerania)* features a grossly exaggerated description of one of them: “Then there is a newly-accepted student, an enthusiast of ‘rara avis,’ the face of an ascetic, the nose as long as a woodpecker’s due to his eagerness to learn. Huge glasses with American frames hide his piggy eyes, sly and crafty. Initially one is surprised by his articulation and the knowledge of the topic – one might infer that he is a curator or an artistic or cultural director. He is rummaging through a heap of parchments and Bibles from the 13th century; his sticky, alert fingers seem to multiply like a pill bug. He catches something, puts it inside and ties it . . . And one feels like laughing and vomiting at the same time, and in the end one is tempted to come up to him, spit in his festering peepers, grab him by the collar and throw him out of the third floor window onto the dumpster so that this hyena would not tarnish the precious books turned grey over the ages. (Z. Dróżdź, W. Milczarek, *Zakochani w Pomorzu*, 25).

⁸³ “Szabrownicy kultury,” *Dziennik Polski*, 6 August 1945.

⁸⁴ AAN, Special Commission, 3155, Akta dochodzeń przeciwko Ziewcowi Stanisławowi, p. 66.

⁸⁵ *Ibidem*, 1094, Akta dochodzenia przeciwko Edwardowi Kaczanowskiemu, p. 1.

⁸⁶ See e.g. Z. Samsonowicz, *Wspomnienia o Straży Akademickiej Politechniki we Wrocławiu* (Wrocław, 2002).

cially in the Recovered Territories, but also in the center of the country, commenced their activity thanks to prior trips of that kind. At times, the inhabitants' genuine civic concern was involved. Wanting to open a school or library, they brought everything that could possibly prove useful and which they had looted elsewhere.⁸⁷ It is difficult to regard such behavior as *szaber* in the strict sense of the word, since they were not aimed at private profit. Nevertheless, the "official *szaber*" had its negative educational effects – it showed that the elites were looters too.

Some behaviors should be regarded as something between *szaber* and – let us say – being houseproud. For instance, the takeover of former German property conducted by the settlers by virtue of law cannot be regarded as *szaber*. But how should we treat a repatriate who was given an empty farmstead and who was looking for the furniture he needed at another, more affluent farmstead, and who, having found the table and chairs, never set out on such trips again? Nobody came to the Recovered Territories with full hands. Everything was valuable after the war – basins, buckets, bicycles, windows, etc.

Undoubtedly, criminal behavior on the part of Polish soldiers and militiamen toward Germans and Ukrainians cannot be labeled as "*szaber*." However, the deportations were often conducted in a criminal fashion. Deportees did not have time to pack and they could take only a limited amount of baggage, which meant that later the "abandoned" property could be looted. During Operation "Wisła," such practices became almost the rule.

Looters, especially the young ones, easily turned into thieves, or even bandits, if they found the owners present in an allegedly abandoned German house. The image of Poles imprinted in the Germans' collective memory is an image of a band taking everything brutally and mindlessly. The boundary between *szaber* and armed robbery with the use of violence was commonly breached in the contacts with Germans and Ukrainians. Sometimes the victims of such aggression were Poles: autochthons and recently repatriated ones. According to an inhabitant of the area around Olsztyn:

One felt totally insecure. At that time the looters would come and steal things at night or, more often, they came armed, in broad daylight, and they would take everything they could, that is actually everything that was left: eider-downs, clocks, somehow salvaged bikes, clothes, linen, sewing machines, etc. Each and every day the looters paid some villagers a visit. The tragedy consisted in the fact that they were Poles, our brothers, and that these very brothers came to rob their brothers.⁸⁸

Digging up cemeteries resembled looting behaviors. As perhaps everybody knows this phenomenon has been known to humanity for thousands of years. One of the first war-time examples comes from Jasło, where graves were looted in the fall of 1944, when the Germans were still present in the town. Not only was it the

⁸⁷ Cf. C. Priebe, "Szkola szabru," *Karta* 14 (1994): 79–91.

⁸⁸ *Wiś polska 1939–1948. Materiały konkursowe*, vol. 1, 91.

Germans' initiative, but the German soldiers were also the perpetrators of the devastation. An article from *Dziennik Polski* from March 1945 reads: "After these operations the cemetery looked like a battlefield. The ground was covered with dozens of corpses dragged out of their coffins. The city of the dead began to resemble the city of the 'alive.'"⁸⁹ It is difficult to say whether the article served as an inspiration to Poles searching for gold teeth. It is important that the idea was popularized, e.g. in nearby Cracow. A private letter (of May 21, 1945) written by a female inhabitant of the city, whose family had probably been buried at one of the local cemeteries, reads as follows:

The thieves have been looting the tombs at the cemetery for a week, they are looking for gold teeth. Kazio's tomb has also been opened and three coffins have been moved – Kazio's, Wanda's mother's, and the sister's. We saw Kazio's coffin, it was lying on its side. . . . At night from Saturday to Friday twenty-four tombs were opened and looted. Of course the board is to blame, because they watch the graves during the day, they close [the cemetery?] in advance, but even the board cannot do much these days.⁹⁰

The example of Treblinka is the most infamous one. Local peasants became specialists in looting the graves of the murdered Jews. In the fall of 1945 the whole area of the former camp looked like an open-pit mine – dug and burrowed, full of holes with human bones lying about. The stench of the decomposing bodies lingered in the air. Some "gold-diggers" were using bombs in order to bring the corpses to the surface. Thanks to the gold obtained in that way the neighboring villages enjoyed financial revival.⁹¹ Legends of alleged hidden Jewish treasures circulated in the whole country. The press was reporting on that.⁹² The script of the 1949 film *Skarb* [The Treasure] could have been written under the influence of such stories. Looking for gold teeth and wedding rings, robbers were also destroying the German burial sites in the Recovered Territories. Later on some of the cemeteries – e.g. in Kołobrzeg – were leveled to the ground in the name of bringing back Polishness. The dug-up graves and ravaged crypts should be included among the images of the post-war period.

Causes and Effects

Szaber stemmed from the war-time demoralization, and at the same time deepened it. The report of the deputy provincial commandant of the MO (*Milicja Obywatelska*, Citizens' Militia) in Lower Silesia dated November 1945 reads:

⁸⁹ S. Peters, "Jasło – miasto śmierci," *Dziennik Polski*, 10 March 1945.

⁹⁰ AIPN, MBP 3378, Specjalne doniesienie dot. działalności dywersyjnych band, p. 75b.

⁹¹ M. Rusiniak, *Obóz zagłady Treblinka II w pamięci społecznej (1943–1989)* (Warsaw, 2008), 29–33.

⁹² "Poszukiwaczy skarbów wystraszyło widmo śmierci," *Echo Wieczorne*, 23 December 1946.

a stranger coming to Lower Silesia is struck by the moral gangrene festering around everybody. It is a problem of public prosecutors and district governors, of the province apparatus, of all ranks of the security authorities or the administrative and judiciary apparatus, of all social strata. Moreover, a wave of people is coming here only to steal everything they possible can and to transport the stuff off to Central Poland. Bribery is an everyday phenomenon, one can get anything done anywhere for money. *Szaber*, that is actually the theft of public property, is almost a component of the air one breathes here. People have completely lost their grasp of basic ethics.⁹³

As we can see *szaber* became a component of the air, an element of the post-war style of life. Outside the official, intellectual discourse hardly anybody treated it as something wrong. On the contrary, the objects appropriated by such means were something to be proud of. People exchanged them with one another.⁹⁴ Their distribution in the Recovered Territories played a very important role in the construction of social bonds, which often had a kind of patron-client character.⁹⁵ A mayor gave something to the Polish Worker's Party secretary, the chief of a Citizens' Militia station gave something to the mayor, the latter gave something to the so indispensable doctors and teachers, and last but not least the Soviet commander also got his share – in such a way furniture, apartments, horses and all other required goods were transferred. This gave rise to connections, constellations and links – i.e. to society. In central Poland successful journeys to “the Wild West” proved one's virile resourcefulness and shrewdness. *Szaber* influenced the everyday culture of the times: the system of values, material culture, leisure. An epigram written to the tune of a mazurek declared:

One more *szaber* today –
The car won't break down –
One more lady's fur
And we're moving on...⁹⁶

Szaber questioned the sense of work. As we have seen, it demoralized people. It simply did not pay to work conscientiously or to work at all, since a small effort ensured life in relative affluence. In the Recovered Territories it was common for officials to quit their jobs. For who would sit at the desk with the “looting frenzy” raging outside the window? Breathing the air with an admixture of *szaber* weakened the immunological barriers preventing people from committing other crimes.

⁹³ AIPN, KG MO, 35/922, Raport sytuacyjny zastępcy komendanta wojewódzkiego MO do spraw polityczno-wychowawczych na Dolnym Śląsku za czas od dn. 25 października 1945 r. do dn. 10 listopada 1945 r., p. 58, 59.

⁹⁴ “Those who would not stoop to stealing even a penny are now shamelessly looting property worth hundreds of thousands of zlotys. And they are not ashamed of their activity. On the contrary, they proudly announce that they have managed to loot this or that.” (“Zaraza,” *Głos Narodu*, 29 August 1945).

⁹⁵ Cf. C. Priebe, *Szkoła szabru*.

⁹⁶ M. Urbanek, *Wielki szaber*.

I would like to ask one question: if *szaber* had not been such a widespread phenomenon, would the militiamen who – colloquially speaking – sought to conduct a stickup have stormed into the Jewish community house on Planty Street in Kielce (and thereby started a pogrom)? Why, their colleagues in Lower Silesia were looting freely. The other thing is that it must have been extremely frustrating for those who – like the Kielce militiamen – “did not luck into” *szaber*.

The “frenzy” was triggered by the passing of the frontline, the chaos and the weakness of the institutions of control. Germany’s surrender gave many Poles a feeling of victors’ impunity. In turn, the moment of suspension, war-time disorder and the “interregnum” made people feel almost completely anonymous. As psychologists point out, when all members of a group are in a similar state, their psychological functioning changes: they are living in a widened context of the present, which makes the past and the future irrelevant. Feelings take over the reason, and action dominates over reflection.⁹⁷ Consequently, it facilitates the situations we have observed during *szaber*: the mindless ravaging of buildings, the mad race to seize the abandoned property, the digging up of graves. According to a former soldier of the National Military Union (*Narodowe Zjednoczenie Wojskowe*) in the Olsztyn province, “In these ‘Recovered Territories’ people went amuck, even quite sensible people were destroying everything. Perhaps it was an act of revenge against the Germans for the occupation years? Even I felt that if I saw a whole, German window, I would have to smash it.”⁹⁸

The phenomenon of thousands of Poles “snatching away” other people’s property can be explained in terms of the moral degradation which took place during the war and the occupation. However, we need to bear in mind the fact that *szaber* is a behavior much older than WWII, that it is a child of chaos. It took place in Warsaw in September 1939 even before the Germans had marched into the city. It appeared in Jedwabne and in other small towns in the Białystok region as well as at the Polish eastern frontier in July 1941, before we could point to the demoralizing influence of the German occupation. On the other hand, we cannot undermine the importance of the over-five-year-long school of *szaber*, which Poles were treated to. The topic of the most important lesson was: there is war. You are beyond good and evil, turn off your morality. Obviously, the scope of the post-war “looting plague” should be explained in terms of the lesson learnt in 1942 in the looted ghettos. As for the looting education, the Red Army soldiers also did their best. The trophy-collecting mood (i.e. looting) firstly passed onto Polish soldiers and then necessarily had to radiate onto society as well. It was difficult not to notice Soviet transports going east, filled to the brim with German goods. A private letter from August 1945 reads:

Theft and bribery from the bottom up are flourishing . . . For the last five years people have grown used to people’s property being plundered with impunity;

⁹⁷ P. Zimbardo, op. cit., 240.

⁹⁸ J. Karwowski “Newada,” “Ludzie akcji specjalnej,” *Karta* 14 (1994): 21.

they are robbing each other[,] it is called looting... rags are being transported from the regained territories on a great scale. Germans are harmed in the course of that, as are local Poles and new settlers.⁹⁹

The *szaber* wave would not have reached the scale of a tsunami if it had not been for the resettlement of Germans who left – from the Polish point of view – enormous wealth in the Recovered Territories. Despite the fact that the hatred the French or Belgians felt towards Germans could be compared with the emotions of Poles, the *szaber* in Western Europe could not be compared with the one which occurred along the Oder or at the Baltic Sea, for in the West the Germans neither abandoned nor deserted their property. Hence, the condition essential for *szaber* to take place did not arise: there was no ownerless property. In turn, looting behavior did take place in the Czech Sudeten Mountains, on a smaller scale though; but there – as we know – the Germans were forced to leave their domiciles. The other thing is that the French, Belgians, the Dutch or even Czechs were incomparably wealthier than Poles and they simply did not have to pitch into bed clothing, clothes or shoes. In other words, they were familiar with the “vision of the world of restricted means” to a much more limited extent.

Poverty was undoubtedly one of the key motives of *szaber*. If it had not been for the lack of shoes, clothes, sewing machines, bicycles, furniture, radio receivers, nobody would have set out on risky journeys. Similarly, nobody would pull out doorknobs from the door, take windows out of the window frames or ravage kitchen stoves in order to take the grills. The war-time and post-war *szaber* can be treated as a kind of reaction of the marginalized, who became marginalized firstly during the Depression (by living in basements and through unemployment), and then during the war (by being reduced to the role of “subhumans” (*Untermenschen*)). We must also remember that due to the post-war destabilization of the economy, the unemployment and subsistence wages, *szaber* often turned out to be the only available source of income for thousands of people. As for the genesis of the phenomenon, it was important that there was a common conviction, which was perhaps involved in all previous “gold rushes” – a conviction that it was the only moment in one’s life when one could get rich fast, “take revenge” or “fix something up.” Stanisław Łach suggests one more interpretation, within the category of crowd psychology: he sees *szaber* as an irrational behavior which sometimes can be summed up by the saying “first come, first served.”¹⁰⁰ One might infer that the looters were guided by the motto: “Don’t waste your time, go on, loot.”¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ AIPN, MBP, 3378, Specjalne doniesienie, p. 104.

¹⁰⁰ S. Łach, *Osadnictwo miejskie na ziemiach odzyskanych w latach 1945–1950* (Słupsk, 1996), 219.

¹⁰¹ “Kto pierwszy, ten lepszy” (*First Come, First Served*) – the title of a short note in *Dziennik Polski* (26 July 1946) – referred to people setting off to the Recovered Territories in order to settle down; it did, however, express another, more general trend.

The imaginative sphere proved important too: the legends about “Polish Canada¹⁰²” in the Recovered Territories and the rags-to-riches stories both stimulated people’s imagination. The new regime’s propaganda contributed to the creation of the myth of the Recovered Territories as a land of milk and honey. The regime thought that successful settlement of the region would be a useful legitimizing argument, a remedy to most social problems. Descriptions of abandoned towns abounding in all goods and with plenty of abandoned farms just waiting for new owners, published in newspapers, had a magnetic power over the readers. Jerzy Zubek, quoted herein, remarked that the expectations raised in this way, which not everybody could fulfill, motivated people to loot. In August 1945 he reported that “[t]he propaganda portrayed Lower Silesia as a land of milk and money; it was screaming that there were luxurious, fully-furnished villas just waiting for those who would kindly deign to take possession of them, that there was plenty of everything, that one had to go and take it.

“And people went with such an attitude to the Enchanted Land – and they faced disappointment. The villas are there but they are occupied by Germans, there is board but in canteens. They wanted to get everything immediately, because the articles had promised them that, but the reality was different.

“Therefore, in order not to come back empty-handed people took up looting and that is how it started. The germ of *szaber* lies in bad, botched propaganda.”¹⁰³

There is also a naturalistic interpretation. After a fire, according to the immemorial ritual of nature, the world needs to come back to life, to recover after the destruction. That is what was said at that time. Was it that the urge to loot stemmed to some extent from the urge to live?

The “*szaber* frenzy” began to decline in the spring-summer of 1946. The looting went on, but on a much smaller scale. The intensification of the settlement process turned out to be the remedy. It was becoming more and more difficult to come across houses and apartments not inhabited by Poles. The fount of *szaber* began to dry up. The authorities’ activities – such as the organization of “roundups” at train stations,¹⁰⁴ the combing of squares and marketplaces, the confiscation of looted objects, the punishment of apprehended looters, including sending them to labor camps – all contributed to it. In the fall of 1945 Wrocław was blockaded by means of barriers at which sentries were searching everybody leaving the city. All objects without the so-called red cards – special permissions issued by the government’s plenipotentiary – were confiscated and their owners were directed to the “concentration camp for looters.” The authorities were also threatening the drivers

¹⁰² “Kanada” (Canada) was then a synonym of a land or situation of prosperity and abundance [transl.].

¹⁰³ AAN, MAP, 2443, Jerzy Zubek, Sprawozdanie z przeprowadzonej inspekcji, 18 August 1945, p. 31.

¹⁰⁴ A description of one of such “roundups” S. Babisiak, “Na tropach przestępców i szabrowników. Jak pracuje Milicja Obywatelska – Nocna obława,” *Ziemia Pomorska*, 29 September 1945.

transporting hot cargo that they would be directed there too and that their driving license and cars would also be subject to confiscation, regardless of whom they belonged to.¹⁰⁵ Despite these bans and barriers, obtaining the necessary papers did not pose a problem in corrupted post-war Poland.¹⁰⁶ Consequently, in March 1946 Władysław Gomułka, the Recovered Territories minister, appointed himself as the only person in charge of issuing such permissions.¹⁰⁷ Clearly, at least in this subject matter he did not trust even his closest co-workers. In May 1946 he came to the conclusion that the stick was not enough, and he issued an order by virtue of which those who contributed to the discovery of property illegally transported from the Recovered Territories were to be rewarded.¹⁰⁸ Transporting furniture to the center of Poland ceased to be easy. Moreover, more and more corrupted officials had to face punishment. In other words: the authorities began replacing windows. Nevertheless, the tradition of *szaber* did not vanish from the nation. Justyna Kowalska-Leder was correct in saying that the waves of *szaber* subsequent to 1939 made Poles disrespect other people's property, especially public property, and taught them to affirm "wangling" or "fixing-up" goods difficult to obtain, which was often done by means of simple theft, except that it occasioned fewer qualms of conscience.¹⁰⁹ Mass "carrying out" from public workplaces of practically everything which could come in handy or which was of any value serves as the best example of the looting culture's long "life after life."

Translated by *Anna Brzostowska* and *Jerzy Giebułtowski*

Abstract

The subject of this article is wartime, and especially post-war, *szaber* – a phenomenon of mass looting of unattended property. The text is divided into three parts. In the first part, I attempt to explain theoretically the origin of *szaber*, indicating (among other things) its links with the culture of poverty and a necessary condition for the *szaber* to take place – a moment of chaos and a temporary decline of the power structures. In the second part, I formulate a hypothesis that ethnic difference

¹⁰⁵ Wrocław walczy z szabrownictwem," Julian Podolski's interview with Wrocław vice-president Alfred Górny, *Dziennik Polski*, 3 October 1945.

¹⁰⁶ "The authorities have declared an uncompromising war on rampaging *szaber*. During one of the round-ups at a railway station it turned out that the majority of the train passengers were looters who unfortunately could present formal travel permits. One of them even had a document issued by a district governor certifying that he was going to Wrocław in order to 'look for his lost pigs.' 'Looted' things, mostly linen and clothes, were confiscated and given to the district social services and the looters were directed to work at road repair." ("Nieubłagana walka z szabrownictwem," *Dziennik Polski*, 11 July 1945).

¹⁰⁷ A. Kochański, *Polska 1944–1991. Informator historyczny*, vol. 1 (Warsaw, 1996), 139.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibidem*, 146.

¹⁰⁹ J. Kowalska-Leder, *Szaber*, 341.

was a necessary condition for *szaber* to emerge. I illustrate it with examples from September 1939, when we first faced a phenomenon of mass looting of unattended property. The article also deals with the pillage of the ghettos by Poles in 1942. The third part is devoted to the largest wave of looting, which took place mostly in the Regained Western and Northern Territories, immediately after the war. The text is constructed in such a way that at the end I return to the origin of the phenomenon, formulating a thesis that it created a certain *szaber* culture.

Key words

looting (*szaber*), war chaos, culture of poverty, property pillage