

Cold War in the Baltics

Account of a Partnership

Part II

Lime Trees for Witnesses

There is something wrong with this place. This could be the first thought that occurs to a traveler stopping in the town of Borne Sulinowo. Slab buildings. Structures in the style of barracks set amidst pine woods. Merely the narrow Limowa Road commemorates the village Linde (ger. ‚Lime‘), whose name first appears on Pomeranic maps of the 17th century. And it is a lime tree that embellishes the coat of arms of Borne Sulinowo. This is the second meeting point for Danish, Estonians, Germans, Norwegians and Polish to collectively follow the tracks of the Cold War. Here, we need not search. From all pores of its surroundings, it oozes its military heritage.

We are introduced to this history by Dariusz Czerniawski, head of the community center and a diligent collector of diverse historical testimonies which he presents on the ground floor in a small local museum. On a postcard a soldier leaves greetings to his loved ones at home, dating from May 16, 1943. The photo shows an impressive building with a protruding terrace. It is the officers' mess at Groß Born in the county of Neu-Stettin. Like the many barracks, it was erected in the 1930ies, while the original village Groß Born disappeared as did the neighboring Linde, leaving just one row of houses. Besides the soldiers quarters and messes, mansions, sports grounds, a public bath on Great Pielburg Lake (Jezioro Pile) as well as a military hospital dominate the site. Thousands of soldiers received their training on the exercise fields and parade grounds. The importance of the place for preparing the war was underpinned on August 19, 1938 with a visit by Adolf Hitler arriving on the special train ‚Amerika‘. To honor him, one of the messes, the latter-day community center and the main street were named after him. Only a year later the first polish prisoners of war were deported just south of here to the Westfalenhof (West Falian Farm at Klomino). Over the Second

World War several detention camps were added. Termed Stalag II E und Oflag IID, they largely interned soviet and French soldiers. One Frenchman left a few drawings from life in the camp. Also on postcards, the German guards promote the 'Olympic Games' they organized among their prisoners.

Months later, troops of the Red Army reach these military grounds, and Groß Born becomes Borne Sulinowo, from now on the closed soviet garrison town of the 6th Witebsk-Nowgorod Division, invisible on any polish map. Up to the early 90ies more than 20,000 soviet military and civilian personal lived here with their families. On October 21st 1992 the last troops left town.

In the following year, the first polish families moved to Borne Sulinowo, and began to change its face. What they have achieved since, is incredible. Many barracks have been converted and renovated. Apartments were developed together with a school complex and the neighboring community center. The former military hospital now houses a retirement home and a modern rehabilitation facility for invalids suffering from multiple sclerosis. Lakes, forests, moors and Pilawa river invite for recovery. At the same time, the forests also hold the stone ruins of the past, such as the secret bunker systems around Podborsko and Brzeźnica Kolonia which harbored atomic warheads. They make the first stop on our tour into the past. This compound of 48,000 hectare still features 600 military objects, so our guide Dariusz Tederko explains, while Agnieszka Socko translates into English. Both work in the administration of Borne Sulinowo, and engage passionately in their community.

We stop along the Pilawa. In summer its waters carry many kayak travelers, and its shores are lined with camps. Now, in April 2013, there are rather fallen trees crossing our sight: the work of beavers who feel safe and undisturbed here in recent years.

In Klomino, the former West Falian Farm, forest rangers and their families have moved into the still intact buildings and have laid out gardens. The neighboring ruins of German barracks and soviet slab buildings, type 'Leningrade' however, are squatted by crows. Nothing though, remains of the detention camps.

We arrive at a forest site studded with light-colored, birch-wooden crosses.

More than ten thousand soviet troops lie in this soil. Since the year 2002 there

are excavations here. Identification marks help as many of the unknown dead as possible to reappropriate their names.

We pass the former exercise area, 'Devil's Moor', now a nature reserve since 2008, where wolves howl nightly.

Other parts of the community and of the town are explored by bike the next day. We roll by the burnt down officer's mess, mansions, the town hall. All over town plates indicate its military history. The nature trail was conceived by Agnieszka. It leads into the old Lipowa Street with the lime trees. From there we ride on to the soviet cemetery. Its monument has the shape of a hand stretching out a Kalashnikov up high. Apart from children's graves adorned with cuddly animals by today's polish inhabitants, there are gravestones that read 'Unknown'. The cemetery, however, was not established until 1945. Who then are those unknown, if everyone entering this so-called 'closed town', was thoroughly controlled and registered? This has long bothered Dariusz Czerniawski, and so he asks us as well. We offer helpless shrugs.

On the way we encounter men equipped with detectors. They comb the surrounding forests, searching ammunition. And they find a lot.

Our bicycle tour passes a gloomy place with derelict warehouses and garage halls, perfectly fit as location for a thriller. It terminates on a terrain of sandy hills in front of the sprockets of a decommissioned soviet amphibious vehicle. Its commander is a young man who, together with other enthusiasts, puts 'oldtimers' like this one back into service, and invites tourists on adventurous rides. Similarly, paintball too is among the past time offers. In summer, Borne Sulinowo features the largest European convention of military vehicles, explains Agnieszka. Then the town with its roughly 4,700 inhabitants grows up to 50,000. „A good source of income to the whole community“, declares administrative official Arek Malarski. „One thing is history, the other is past time, play. We divide it.“

On the issue of military parades, tank rides and paintball combatants the opinions in the group vary. While some see it as leisure facility, play and a source of income, another party will have none of it. But this controversy too belongs to our learning process, just as the excursions and our exchange over

further collaboration on our touring exhibition; not to forget the conversations on difference in culinary cultures.

Dariusz always takes care that it is traditionally polish and abundant.

On the last day of our meeting, we once more return to the thirties. We drive towards Szczecinek and visit tunnel systems and bunkers of the German fortification line ‚Pommernwall‘, once stretching from the Baltic down to Landsberg on the Warthe, and still cutting right through the community’s territory. No one knows how many tons of concrete and how much manpower went into these edifices. There are supposedly about 1,000 structures.

Nowadays they look grotesque. Most of them did not even offer the protection they promised. When the Red Army marched in, they were largely understaffed, and were mostly ignored or circumvented. Thanks to volunteer supporters, some of these constructions can be visited today.

The final evening ends at the restaurant ‚Sasha‘. A born Ukrainian, and now owner of the restaurant with a little shop on the side, Sasha lived at Borne Sulinowo in soviet times as a civilian employee, working as a photographer. His photos grace a whole wall and recount everyday life in the ‚closed town‘: Soldiers at sports, in political education, on May Day march. He tells of his double income, a booming black market for televisions and other sought-after consumer goods. There are no bad memories on his side, and so he returned a few years ago.

His story sounds so very different from one heard the day before from another Ukrainian who was stationed here. Due to baseless accusations and his love for a polish inhabitant, he got into the mills of the KGB, and spent many years in prison, without any rehabilitation up to this day. And he too, has returned to Borne Sulinowo.

Once again, encounters like this one have made us aware how complex and multifaceted our history is, and that ‚guilty‘ or ‚not guilty‘ fail as moral standards.

Simone Labs,

August 2013

Translation: Marc Steinbach