

SERMONS OVER MODERN TALKING.
ON LISTENING TO PRIVATE TAPES FROM THE 1980s

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Abstract:

The essay describes audial artifacts from late communist Poland and from the period of economic and political transformation. Based on the analysis of a collection of found cassette tapes with private recordings made in the period, the article starts with a personal family story and grows towards a wider picture of a society divided by economic upheaval and migration. The examples used in the text highlight the differences between the lives of those who remained in the East and those who migrated to the West with the baggage of communist experience. The essay also describes hopes and disappointments related to the transformation itself, and traces these themes in the audial footprints. The fact that cassette recorders were widely popular and commonly used in Poland at that time, enables an assumption that sociological analysis can be – at least partially – based on the vast array of such private recordings. In the conclusion, the essay suggests that the economic transformation from the Soviet version of communism to capitalism is analogous with the cultural shift from a private audial culture to the consumerist culture of the visual.

Keywords: transformation, private recordings, migration, sociology, personal perspective, audial culture, communication.

My father wasn't much of a writer. Just as so many of his generation he would rather choose more modern and faster means of communication. Faster, that is, only in those parts of the so-called civilized world where such uncontrolled speed was allowed. Poland in the 1980s, for that matter, was at the slower end of the spectrum: I remember trying to get through on the phone to my grandmother living in a town 12 kilometers away from us – to do so you would pick up the headset, dial the operator's number and tell her or him (but usually the operators were women) whom would you like to speak to. Sometimes the operator didn't wait for you to dial the magic number: she was there as soon as you picked up the phone and talking to her was the only way in which one could connect to relatives or friends even in the same town. Once you placed your order, the operator would say: «Please hold on, we will connect you shortly». And «shortly» could have meant anything from 1 minute to 12 hours.

A quick exercise now: imagine being such an operator, with all the power of connecting and disconnecting people, with full insight into who's who, with whom and against whom in the local community, able to listen to every single conversation and having all people's voices in your hands, quite literally. How very tempting indeed (from both a post-modern and a totalitarian perspective) not only to perform a little act of eavesdropping every now and again, but also to interact – and even to create some new version of reality from those bits and pieces of human dialogues. Quite naturally, that's what the communists at the time were doing. On the other hand, people were aware that at any moment their words may be intentionally overheard. The phone operators were in a way the guardians of the limits of free speech, as if they all wore badges on their foreheads with a warning: «Here I am, listening, be careful what you're saying». They were also subtle reminders of the importance of voice and of listening in a totalitarian realm.

This system of phoning was not used everywhere, of course. An operator-based technology was of the very old kind, and in bigger cities you could easily dial the desired number directly. Which wouldn't stop the authorities from listening to your conversation, if only they wanted to – there was another technology invented for that. However, even in bigger cities you would need to call an operator each time you wanted to make an international call. The procedure was the same, but the waiting time could last much longer: hours, days, weeks. You would order a connection and then someone had to be near the phone all the time, because you never knew when the operator would call back. In fact, it could have been faster to write down everything you wanted to say, fold the paper, insert it into an envelope and mail it abroad from the post office. Yes, it was a strange time when writing letters might have been faster than making a phone call.

But my father wasn't much of a writer. Just like so many of his generation he had migrated to the US to secure a better life there for his family: got a job, bought a car, applied for citizenship, took a loan for a house, started his own company, and even changed his name to a more American-sounding one. And he never wrote letters. Instead, he used to walk around his new country with a dictaphone in his pocket. Once in a while he used to speak to the microphone and when the cassette was full, he'd send it back to Poland in an envelope.

And yet, when listened to now, those tapes are not a private story at all. They are a story of migration, of being uprooted and surprised, a story of reaching a brand new world and falling in love with it, and finally, a story of the West as seen by a newcomer, a refugee, an economic migrant – in a quite close parallel to today's mass movements of people.

For Chris, many of the things he encountered seemed to be a novelty. In the recordings, he speaks as if he had been thrown into a paradise of technology, overwhelmed by the diversity of available gadgets, appliances and media. All this happens despite the fact that he had been educated as an electronics engineer and despite the fact that he had had some access to Western culture back here, in communist Poland.

Or actually, maybe precisely because of the fact that he was prepared, and because he anticipated a huge pleasant culture shock. Either way, what strikes the listener is that it is not the technology itself that matters most: rather it is the abundance thereof.

The first tape starts with a few comments on politics and on the situation in Poland as seen from the outside. In a gravelly voice, Chris reads some extracts from American newspapers, he also gives a summary of how Martial Law (introduced in Poland just a few months earlier) is being presented on US television. One can sense that this has not become his own perspective yet – there's too much emotion in his voice, no matter how hard he tries to keep it hidden. This slow process of the internalization of the Western perspective is clearly visible (audible) in a brief moment of hesitation when a TV news broadcast (Chris is holding his dictaphone close to the TV speakers) is interrupted by a block of commercials. Chris pauses for a few seconds and, after a brief silent reflection on the fact that there were no commercials on either of the two channels available on Polish TV, he patiently – and with slight, again well-hidden enthusiasm – explains what they are and why they are there.

Stories of Martial Law and news coverage of Soviet spies captured somewhere in the US interrupted by a block of commercials – this is an intermission-becomes-a-gamechanger kind of recording: the sudden shift of focus and of perception mark the main difference between being a narrating subject and being just an observer. That's at least how I imagine it right now: it must have felt awkward to listen to those otherworldly commercials in a Polish provincial town back in 1982 or 83.

Being an observer was perhaps the only possible position Chris could have taken. Just as so many of his compatriots in the new world, he couldn't really get rid of his memories. Raised and educated in a different reality, he must have desperately struggled to stop comparing. Being an observer, an outsider, may seem to be a very comfortable role – but it is so only as long as you know how to not pay too much attention to details. Not fully merged with the new world, not really connected to the old one anymore, homeless and struggling, and doing as much as possible to quietly understand the rules and to act accordingly.

Chris at least was lucky to be a big, honest fan of his new homeland's culture. This was not always the case. Many people had serious trouble detaching themselves from their native culture, habits and traditions. The borders of their integration were marked out by language, ambitions, longing and by an environment full of like-minded people, self-imposing a ghetto of memory on their communities. I'm far from being an expert, but this seems quite natural: people tend to hold on closely to predictable versions of reality – predictable as in «familiar», «friendly», «understandable». Predictable as pretty much everything which does not require a conscious effort of submitting oneself to a change.

And the bigger the contrast between the old and the new reality, the more difficult the transition is. The stereotypical view of Poland (and other countries in the Eastern Bloc) in the 1980s consists mainly of grey streets, sad people, overwhelming helplessness and the heroic struggle

to overcome such a world. Do old private recordings confirm this image? Soon after listening to Chris's tapes for the first time in over 30 years, I decided to find out. Driven by a growing need of listening to the past (possibly in order to understand today), I have started collecting old tapes from flea markets and on auction websites. To my surprise, some of them appeared to be telling even more insightful stories of their time. They just required a very close listening.

The 1980s were special. It was then when microphones became a natural common part of the equipment of many households. Audio recordings were no longer unusual: everyone could make them. Handheld walkmans with a dictaphone option, analogue answering machines, tape players always equipped with a red button and a tiny hole to which one should speak in order to have their voice archived – all of these were to be found pretty much everywhere and pretty much everyone knew how to use them. There was no philosophy behind it: tapes cost pennies. And many of them have survived to this day.

The recordings from that time can be grouped into several categories: private recordings made with a dictaphone (of conversations, as well as of ceremonies and festivities, such as weddings and family gatherings), radio recordings (of music, but also of documentary programmes, both from Polish Public Radio and from Western stations, particularly Radio Free Europe, even though it was heavily jammed by the Soviets), political recordings (such as anti-communist cabarets or opposition speeches) and of course music (both official and underground, studio recordings and bootlegs).

When listening to them now, one often asks oneself a question: what was the purpose of making these recordings? Did people ever come back to the badly recorded ceremonies where pretty much nothing is audible and words blend with each other into an incomprehensible aural pulp? Or is it just the very fact of documentation that mattered the most? One of the saddest tapes I have found bears a handwritten title on the cover saying, «Conversation with father». It's a 20-minute long recording in which you can hear someone's steps on the floor, a radio playing old tangos and a clock ticking. Somewhere between these noises there are voices hidden, probably those of the father and son talking. The only words you can make out from this distant conversation are – quote – «fucking loser» uttered in an angry voice, slightly louder than all the other sounds. Let's not even try to imagine how it felt to listen to this tape later on.

Disappointment is a recurrent theme in these tapes. The jammed Radio Free Europe broadcasts, the vulgar sexist cabarets which stopped being funny many, many years ago (if they were ever funny at all) and above all the conversations describing new taxes, the difficulties of everyday life, or even complaints about the phoning system and the need to wait hours by the phone before being able to speak to relatives abroad.

The other day, I found a box of tapes with recordings of phone conversations from 1982-1984. The man who was recording them – Jan – documented every single talk he had over the phone throughout these

years. The range of topics is wide: from holiday plans to business conversations. His wife lived in Vienna at that time and was sending him Western goods that he distributed in Warsaw among friends and, as we hear, amongst friends of their friends as well. Making quite good money on it, as it seems. Oh, I do remember very well those Western products and their social importance back then: even looking at the packaging could be a source of bizarre excitement, the first symptoms of being vulnerable to consumerism, even if such a word did not exist in the Polish language at the time. The fetish of colorful chewing gum wrappings or collections of beer cans from all around Europe – these were our first attempts at diversity and our first encounters with multiculturalism. The good old days when those with access to Western goods were perceived as multicultural local heroes – and thus, both privileged and envied.

This disequilibrium was repeated in the cassette tapes themselves: Polish ones, manufactured by Stilon in Gorzów Wielkopolski, only pretended to look fancy and modern. Their brilliance quickly faded away when confronted with tapes produced by Philips, BASF or Sony. Everything foreign (and somehow language quickly adapted to remove the countries of the Eastern Bloc from the definition of «foreign»; «foreign» referred exclusively to the West) was automatically an object of desire. One of the most frequently mentioned of the goods that Jan was selling in Warsaw were foreign cassette tapes.

Every now and again, when Jan is speaking with his wife, Wanda, the listener can sense a huge difference between the realities here in Poland and there in the West. Wanda is a born businesswoman, speaking fast and asking pragmatic questions about prices, deals and business contacts. Who is going to take more than 20 tapes and whom Jan can lend money to (and on what terms). Her official job in Vienna is cleaning flats, sometimes helping out in rich families' kitchens. Jan, on the other hand, is sitting by the phone in his Warsaw flat, only sometimes making lazy deals with tape-buyers. He complains about people, about stolen cars, gossips and expresses longing for a long easy conversation with his wife. These are, of course, the personal features of these two particular lives, but they also seem to reveal a deeper layer of possible lifestyles here and in the West. There is space for another potential disappointment here, one that seems to spring almost directly from the pages of a book of post-colonial theory: those who migrate are usually forced to agree to jobs they are overqualified for. Nevertheless, they are still in a better position when compared to what they left behind: on a social, personal and cultural level, they are exposed to a reality way more rewarding than the one experienced by those who stayed by the phone. Disappointment is usually an emotion pushed aside, as there are more valuable advantages all around. The B Side of migration consists of an unavoidably growing bubble of hidden disappointment, self-accusation and grief, mixed with rare gasps of homelonging. Here starts the ghetto of memory, transposed onto the small communities of compatriots, families, younger generations, and revealed in occasional complaints.

Jan seems to understand this and, in his clumsy way, does all he can to cheer Wanda up. He speaks a lot about meeting relatives in Warsaw, forwards greetings from friends and shares his doubts about her daughter's decisions. He tries to keep Wanda alive in his world over the phone. And Wanda, exposed to completely different stimuli, rejects his help by directing each conversation to solely pragmatic issues. Apparently, in migration economy can erase intimate bonds not because capitalism is brutal and inhuman, but because it causes painful disappointments.

Jan is also a romantic guy: the tape on the bottom of the box was titled (again, in handwriting in pencil) «Wanda's Dream, May 1982». It's a quiet, 8-minute long recording of someone's snoring. Did Jan ever listen back to his wife sleeping? Did he go to sleep in a grey communist Warsaw flat with this tape on after both TV channels had finished their broadcasts? Did he ever try to imagine the sounds, the smells and the looks of Wanda's bedroom in colorful capitalist Vienna? Again, disappointment is a recurring theme. In a way, Jan lived a polygamic life, with one wife behind many passport controls and another one on his tapes. Both invisible, but which one was more real? The second one was at least tangible. Each time he wanted to go to sleep with her, he would just hold her in his tape player and press the Play button – without needing to persuade anyone, or to ask an operator for an urgent connection. From one of the later tapes, we learn that Wanda died soon after returning to Warsaw. It is quite symbolic that 30 years later, the second wife of a tape-dealer was sold in an online auction for less than 10 zloty, postage included.

But there's more to Jan's tapes than just conversations and the stories of Poland and migration back in the 1980s. The stereotypical image of Poland, with its ugly streets, boring life and general sadness is hidden in the background of these conversations. The music played on the radio while they speak is never happy, the silence when the radio is off is significant. There are no city noises on any of the tapes I have found – cities were not something to be recorded. Or maybe it seemed suspicious to walk around Warsaw with a dictaphone at that time. Probably, this is not something I would have noticed were it not for my father's tapes – these are full of car traffic, machines and fancy commercial audio signals. Chris's amazement with the audial reality in the US stands in a very strong opposition to the Polish tapes.

Maybe this is why the transformation of the early 1990s was so strongly marked with anticipation. As kids raised in communist Poland we were not fully aware of what the new world would bring, although we knew that something significant was underway. Contrary to our fathers, mothers, uncles or neighbors, who moved toward the change, people like us (or like Jan for that matter) stayed still, waiting for the change to happen. We could only imagine it, we could only guess how it will impact on our everyday experience: what video games will it bring, what music will we listen to, what new perceptions will we be faced with...? Or, in a very basic way: how will it feel to have a film interrupted in the middle only for the sake of commercials. We'd heard about com-

mercials, but how are they made? What stories do they tell? What do they look like? Can one get used to them? In the early 1990s, we, kids, were disappointed that this interruption wasn't as brutal and as sudden as we'd expected and secretly hoped for. Yes, we wanted a big change, while what we got was safe and soft: the interruption didn't happen in the middle of an actor's line, it did not happen in the best scene of the film, it was rather agreeable, there were no strong reasons to protest or to revolt against it. Capitalism seemed likeable.

And yes, this too can be heard on the old tapes. There's a sudden change in the recordings from the 90s – the categories are more or less the same, but the contents differ drastically. Private recordings become rare (yes, VHS has won this battle), with the medium now being used mainly to collect music. There's an explosion of electronic music (including major hits from the West – which still seems to be something worth aspiring to, but is much more real and tangible now); political satire dies in the wake of privately-owned TV stations showing all this kind of entertainment in fancy colors; and taped cabarets are replaced with C90's filled with long marathons of jokes, recorded professionally in the studio and thus with all the audience's laughter taken away. Recordings from the radio are not jammed anymore and are interrupted not only by commercials (funnily enough, the recordings are usually paused for the commercials which, although they may be likeable, don't seem to be worth documenting), but also by happy comments from radio hosts who seem to be encouraging listeners to make more effort in the pursuit of general happiness. In this massive flood of professional entertainment and common contentment, there is no place anymore for deeper reflection. Jan would probably be lost, Chris would probably offer a deep sigh of relief.

Chris wasn't much of a writer, but his intuition was correct. He chose the right medium with which to report from his new homeland. Even though it would have been easy for him to videotape the US and send us all the equipment necessary to watch it, he chose to speak and record sound, rather than image. Maybe he thought that the West, seen from the East, would look unreal? Maybe he was afraid that we would not be able to comprehend the complexity of a strikingly visual culture on our black and white TV sets? In the end, the plan was that my family would join him there at some point. He probably wanted us to understand this place as well as possible, and felt that he should use a medium that would not be too distant from our experience. By sending the tapes, he left a huge margin for our imagination. And imagination always works in color.

I am looking for a conclusion to this text while re-listening to the Wanda's Dream tape. The Polish soundscape in the 1980s was very much happening on the level of the imagination. On tapes, people were sharing things they had never seen, the voices of people they had never met and recordings of music they could never experience live in a concert. The audial was shaping their longing for the visual. The audial had the power of changing a reality which otherwise was too much stuck in

its greyness. It is not uncommon to find tapes with Father Popieluszko's sermons about truth, disguised (perhaps to fool the militia?) as Modern Talking cassettes, with the tracklist handwritten on the red and white Stilon inlay card. In the illegal underground circuit of the 1980s, the visual could function just as a cover-up for the audial. And then, just a few years and one transformation later, the visual betrayed the audial. We may very well look back at the 1990s or 2000s, but to understand the 1980s it is necessary to focus on listening. Wanda will be dreaming in color, Chris will be reporting his astonishment with the wonders he has seen on American TV and maybe, just maybe (and yes, I'm aware this may sound a bit pretentious), if we recall how to shut our eyes tight, and if we remember how to listen closely enough, we may be finally able to make something out from the taped conversations with our fathers.

Chris wasn't much of a writer but just as so many of his generation, he left behind a precious document of his time. No matter if it's a story of disappointment or of successful transformation (from communism to capitalism, from East to West, from audial to visual culture), together it all adds up to a big bag of testimonies enriching our own spectrum of experience. It does not kick open any new doors: it just has a potential to widen our perception of the past. At least within the limits set by those who lived then and who were in charge of the Record button. And the best thing about it is that they still keep us attracted by not revealing all their secrets. «Stop recording, it's me...» – says an unknown female voice in the second to last recording of phone conversations on Jan's tapes – and Jan obediently presses the Stop button. A second later, the last call is answered not by Jan, but by some woman who was not on any tape before. The person who's calling remains anonymous and says: «Be careful with Jan, dear, you live with him but you don't know him at all. He's had two wives before and now they are both dead». True story.

Afterword

The above essay is intended as an experimental, rather than a strictly academic article, and therefore lacks direct references to previous academic research or writings. The aim was that, in both form and content, the text would both move the reader and provoke reflection. Nevertheless, some readers may find the essay interesting and may want to read more about certain topics or points that I touch on in my text. Firstly, I should mention that the tapes on which the article is based will be released as an LP later this year on the Reading Group record label (www.readinggroup.co) under the title *Wanda's Dream*. More of my sound research can be followed on the site of the independent research platform, Instytut Pejzażu Dźwiękowego/the Soundscape Institute (www.idp.org.pl). In terms of other recommendations, *Café Europa: Life After Communism* by Slavenka Drakulić (London: Abacus, 1996, 213p) is a volume of insightful reportages and essays, describing the process of transformation in Eastern Europe and focusing on various aspects of everyday life. The social critique offered by the author is eye (and ear-) opening,

even for readers who experienced the process from the inside, but who perhaps were not fully aware of the culture shock the region faced in the early 1990s. *Opposite Poles: Immigrants and Ethnic in Polish Chicago, 1976–1990* by Mary Patrice Erdmans (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1998, 267p) gives a detailed insight into the problems faced by Polish migrants to Chicago in the two last decades before the fall of communism. Especially interesting is the chapter about different approaches to living in the USA and about conflicts arising between the approaches of older and younger generations of Poles who left the communist East in hope of a better life in the capitalist West. There are several excellent books and articles exploring the phenomena of sound recordings and its impact on cultural shifts in modern societies: however, for a better understanding of how audial culture became one of the most important – if not the most important – ways of perceiving, negotiating and documenting reality in the technologically underdeveloped countries of the communist bloc, I believe *The Audible Past* by Jonathan Sterne (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003, 472p) provides the widest frame. It would also be very useful to have an example of sound studies' work exploring the current migration crisis: unfortunately I have not been lucky enough to come upon one yet. *Hijra. Noise from the Jungle* by Rafał Kołacki (Zoharum, 2016) is an album of field recordings made in a refugee camp near Calais, France, that can be understood as an attempt to describe a similar (although much more brutal) cultural dichotomy as the one experienced by some of the characters in my essay.