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Master’s Thesis

BECOMING LOCALS IN A BORDERLAND OF EXILES.
SENSE OF PLACE IN THE STORIES OF LITHUANIA MINOR DWELLERS.

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The originality of this thesis has been checked in accordance with the University of Turku quality assurance system using the Turnitin Originality Check service.
This thesis deals with sense of place, the relation that we construct with our dwelling and the surrounding environment. The topic belongs to the field of human geography. Sense of place is deeply intertwined with the ideas of feeling at home and having a place where to return. I argue that narratives of life experience help us relate to the places we inhabit, go through, leave.

My analysis concerns Lithuania Minor, the Lithuanian region lying by the border with Kaliningrad, and focuses in particular on Vilkyškiai, a village in the municipality of Pagėgiai. Most of the area’s original population disappeared in the war. After 1945, people from all over the country and the USSR settled here. This raised the prickly question of who belongs to the borderland. Refugees, migrants and settlers allow us to observe closely the development of sense of place and its main constituents. Through this analysis, I challenge the idea of people’s natural rights to places and shows how time, engagement in local-based cultural activities and recollection help foreigners become locals.

To grasp the locals’ sense of place, I collected open, light-structured interviews and applied some elements of semantic analysis to interpret the materials. From my research, it emerges that the cultivation of the region’s cultural heritage and the practice of storytelling were crucial in making the respondents feel at home. Leaving aside all legalistic claims concerning the issue, I suggest that people belong to the land they dwell. I believe that their sense of place deserves consideration from the State and the other actors seeing them as migrants.

Keywords: sense of place, biographic narratives, rights to the place, refugee and migration studies, collective memory, place attachment, State borders, cultural borders, historical narratives, spirit of place, uniqueness, naming, Lithuania Minor, Memelland, World War II, Soviet Union, eviction, Prussian Lithuanians, newcomers, aliens, nationality, cultural activities, storytelling, cultural heritage.
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When we are forced from the place we call our own, when the public spaces in which we have lived and worked with others become spaces of terror and death, when we lose touch with the people who know our names and speak our language, when life is no longer a journey or narrative the meaning of which is consummated in return, or even, indeed, in time, and when suddenly we have no settled place from which to venture forth each day, nor haven at the end where we can recover our lives in the stories we share, what becomes of our stories and our lives?  

We’re here for the time being, I answer to the query—Just for a couple of years, we said, a dozen years back. Nothing is more permanent than the temporary.  

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1 Jackson 2002, 33.
2 Stallings 2012, 299.
I. INTRODUCTION

1. AIMS OF THIS RESEARCH

My thesis investigates the main constituents of sense of place contained in the stories of some Lithuania Minor inhabitants. The research concentrated mainly on the village of Vilkyškiai and the nearby town of Pagėgiai. The border with Kaliningrad provides for the context and the “occasion” for this study. However, I focus on the locals’ relation to their place. Mostly an outcome of the twentieth century political developments, the area displays the overlapping identities and “dense cultural layers” characterising border regions. These features, together with its history, make the Lithuania Minor borderland an interesting case.

Scholars generally define sense of place as the reciprocal relation between a person and the environment where he or she lives. An apparently simple question first triggered my interest in this topic, a question that people ask practically in any language when getting to know someone new: “Where are you from?”. After one’s name, the place – of origin or belonging – appears as the defining trait of a person’s identity. As Pascual-de-Sans notices, this is the rule not just in our talks, but also in biographical entries: we use dates (time) and sites (place) to express birth and death, the beginning and the end of our and others’ lives.

Among all the “pages” where such inscriptions can be found, I would like to draw attention to the tombstone, which commonly reports the engraving of one’s start and end summarised in an essential form. The grave plays a special role in this thesis: it is the recipient of our dust, but, more interestingly, it represents the metaphorical arrival of our journey. I hereby conceive life as an experience – of place, along with other concepts – and a journey – also through places. I imagine our earthly experience as a continuum between the home and the tomb (be they physical or metaphorical). For the purpose of this research, it does not really matter what kind of home sees our arrival in the world. The home – the place where we were born, brought up and first made into social beings – is the starting point of our journey.

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3 Kabakov 2003, 404
4 Cox and Holmes 2000, 63.
5 As it has been observed by Àngels Pascual-de-Sans in her article. Pascual-de-Sans 2004, 348.
6 Ibid.
Being a sequence of places, relationships and events, this journey can be told and thus become a story. Peter Bichsel that our life makes sense only if we narrate it. At least, I would say, our observations and stories cannot escape the essential definitions of our being seated in time and place. In a world where fewer and fewer people conduct their journey in their place of origin (or near it), reflecting on one’s life means envisaging a sequence of places in time – from the hearth to a new home; from the neighbourhood where we grew up to the town where we move to work or study; from the homeland afflicted by unemployment or war to the unknown country receiving us as migrants or refugees. Places are spaces which have been inhabited, dwelled, thought about and given a name: they are sites that we recognise and that we identify ourselves with. In my words, I would say that a place is a space that has been tamed. In sum, places exist and have a story. Understandably, they cannot experience, but they have been lived through. Places need someone to “read” and tell their stories about those who inhabited them and how they changed over time.

I share Pascual-de-Sans’ idea that the study of “place history” (the history of a place) can help gain a wider, global understanding of “the interrelationship that people weave – individually and collectively – with places”, enabling “a socio-territorial inscription of their lives as a whole … ”. Try to see places and individuals as parts in a reciprocal relation and you will understand “place history” in connection with the individuals' history. Such histories are characterised by periods of permanence and mobility: in sum, they are histories of migration. What happens to our stories when we have to leave the home we have lived in, when the cord we weaved to the land is cut off? – Jackson asks. His question draws into the picture people’s rights to places, a controversial topic. Borrowing from Cathrine Brun, who studies forced migration and its effects on sense of place, I think that “[n]o one has natural rights to any place”. I wanted to test my beliefs and researching the topic offered a good chance to do so.

The twentieth century has seen two world wars and numerous conflicts which altered people’s lives by forcing them to move. From this point of view, so far the Twentyfirst is no exception. Today like seventy years ago armed clashes intrude

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7 Peter Bichsel in Formenti 1998, 27.
8 Pascual-de-Sans 2004, 349.
9 Ibid., 356.
10 Ibid.
people’s stories and often cause refugee flows. While we (want to) see eviction only as temporary, the passing of time often pushes such refugees’ state closer to the realm of permanence. I contend that a person cannot live for many years in a temporary state. Temporariness recalls precariousness, which applies both to the evicted ones’ state of mind and the physical condition in which the provisional dwelling lies. However we conceive it, temporariness has the power to erode the refugees’ lives and senses of place. I argue that everybody develops ties to their dwelling place in a more or less conscious and articulated way. In the end we get at least accustomed to the environment: like plants cannot help growing their roots, we develop some relation to our surroundings even if we are unaware of it. Paradoxically, families and individuals can get accustomed to the idea of living in a place only temporarily while time passes. Based on these thoughts, I think that studying sense of place can foster our understanding of cases where the relation between individuals and the environment has been disrupted – especially when places are contended.

I agree with Brun on that observing how migrants and refugees relate to their places can shed light on how we generally cope with places. Like Brun, I also see sense of place as a continually evolving relation far from following obliged, natural codes. Besides, I agree with Pascual-de-Sans, who writes that sense of place is still worth researching for its recurrence in our everyday life. I would add that sense of place can tell us much not just about the people who construct it, but also about the place itself. Interpersonal relationships “do not happen in a void”, but in the same space which they inhabit and form. In the present thesis, I understand place primarily as a relational space where interaction happens. I believe that place remains important even in the contemporary globalised world, characterised by the rise of digital spaces, “translocalities” and ensuing new forms of relationships. I trust indeed that the globalisation trends under way can make the study of the evolution of humans’ sense of place even more interesting.

Understandably, the matter has been widely written about. However, having read a good deal of articles in the field, I have gained the impression that their authors have investigated narratives only to a certain extent. While many have examined narratives as a method and as a key to grasp individuals’ experience, their contribution to

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14 Pascual-de-Sans 2004, 349.
15 Arjun Appadurai, the author of the so-called placial turn in anthropology, first formulated the “translocality” concept. Appadurai in Vertovec 2001, 578.
constructing sense of place seemed to offer still room for research. Cultural geographers agree on the *inter-subjective* quality of sense of place; the role of narratives in creating such inter-subjectivity tempted me to explore this fascinating territory.

The book “The memory and identity of Lithuanian border towns: Valkininkai, Vilkyškiai, Žeimelis” has proved an invaluable help in realising this research. It is the result of thorough fieldwork conducted by Jurga Jonutytė, Lina Būgienė and Aleksandras Krasnovas in three Lithuanian border localities. I had the pleasure and luck to join the team on some of their visits to Vilkyškiai, to participate in the interviews and collect the narratives indispensable for this research. In the text, I refer to the informants as “ours”, expressing how I felt part of the research project together with Dr. Jurga Jonutytė, her colleagues and the narrators. I should specify that, while the book focuses on “the interactions between the individual historical remembrances and the collective historical memory”, my study analyses the dimensions of sense of place emerging from the informants’ narratives.  

While on the field, I could appreciate how narratives of individual and collective memory, identity and place interweave. In the course of the interviews, “[i]t often appeared that stories about the [informants’] migration were [actually] stories about the place they have been attempting to tame”. Going back to Pascual-de-Sans, I hope that my local-based analysis will reveal also how the borderland inhabitants relate to the history of their place. My interest in the experience of eviction, migration and their consequences inspired the present research. For its recent history, the Lithuania Minor borderland represented an ideal study-case. How do we cope with disruptions in our dwellings and in their meanings? How do we make sense of our lives in different places? Lastly, which role do stories play in this process? I know the limits of my research and do not necessarily expect to answer such complex questions. This thesis is just another story – the story of my journey through sense of place and through the stories of people who faced eviction and had to re-grow roots to their new surroundings.

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16 Jonutytė 2013, 231.
17 This is a deliberate translation I made of the Lithuanian term “atsikraustymas”, in English meaning “exodus”, “mobility”, “migration”, “diaspora”, “immigration”, “coming to a new place”. This multi-faceted notion, connecting to a variety of similar human experiences, is understandably of crucial significance to my informants’ stories. The closely semantically related word kraustymas means literally “packing”. Jonutytė 2013, 117, emphasis added.
2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Sense of place in the cultural geography scholarship

My focus on sense of place and the meanings of places situates this thesis in the field of cultural geography. The topic first appeared in some environmental psychologists’ and architects’ studies on place experience. In the 1960s-1970s, these pioneers started investigating the transactions between humans and their surroundings. From the very beginning, environmental psychology affirmed its interdisciplinary in nature and showed openness to contributions from different subjects, theories and methodologies. Works like Norberg-Schulz’s *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*, Edward Relph’s *Place and Placelessness* are considered milestones in the field. More and more social scientists have since then participated in investigations on sense of place, favouring a phenomenological perspective and constructivist approach. Later, Kent Ryden’s *Mapping the Invisible Landscape: Folklore, Writing, and the Sense of Place* also set a landmark in the discipline. Ryden’s cultural work brought new lifeblood to the analysis of “the mystery, dimension and depth of any place people live, listen, and remember, talk and write”. All these contributors made sense of place an autonomous research topic. Today, it is a cross-disciplinary field of study. Echoing David Canter, I find it most valuable that the topic allows us to cross the boundaries of the social sciences, expanding our insight into complex human experiences.

In 2014, how is the study of human-place ties still relevant? Scholars seem to agree that understanding such relationships is indispensable for the humankind. I see sense of place as especially worth studying with respect to migration. Not surprisingly, the topic recurs in many works on contended spaces, refugee flows and resettlement cases: from the war-torn Uganda and Southern Sudan, through Asian growing megacities, to the Western countries facing substantial inward migration. Understandably, also studies on Israeli and Palestinian territories and people appear in scholarly articles on sense of place. Turning to the Lithuanian Minor borderland, less than a century ago this region has known deep shifts and changes in its local population. Therefore, I

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18 Canter 1998, 1.
20 Ryden in Stedman 2003, 672.
22 Canter 1998, 2.
24 See, for example, Schnell and Mishal 2008, and Amit-Cohen 2009, 147-162.
thought it could reveal to me what the aftermath of eradication and resettlement can look like.

2.1.1 What is “place”? Clasping a nebulous daily matter

Before defining sense of place, I think I should explain what a place is. For my research, I have drawn the definition of sense of place from Yi-Fu Tuan and Edward Relph. Both are representatives of the phenomenological perspective in cultural geography, a view emphasising human perceptions. As Tuan effectively puts it, “[p]lace, at all scales from the armchair to the nation, is a construct of experience”. 25 To be a place it has to be *lived in*, which for Tuan means that people have to experience it, “to be aware of it in the bones as well as with the head”. 26 The author qualifies experience as “the various modes through which a person knows his world”. 27 In our life we see houses, towns, streets and forests; we hear the voices of our neighbours and recognise the smell of our homes; we immerse our feet in the sandy land that hosts us and taste the salty water of the sea we are swimming in. We perceive our surroundings in a sensual way, while an image of them takes shape in our minds.

On his part, Relph understands places as “tightly connected assemblages” of physical elements (buildings, landscape, nature), social components (community and neighbourhood ties), activities and meanings. These latter distinguish a place from a space. A place, to be considered as such, has to be imbued with meanings, which are constituted and reproduced by place dwellers (the locals and, to a lesser extent, the visitors) through their experiences, practices and narratives. 28 Meanings call emotions into the picture, adding to the sensual and intellectual aspects of experience. We can feel at home and attached to a place, or, on the contrary, we can feel uprooted and lost. Also, meanings connect with the psychological processes which informed the early studies on sense of place.

In sum, “place” is that portion of space which its inhabitants have gradually appropriated and turned into their dwelling: here, people’s activities and practices progressively take the shape of a routine. 29 I would like to quote Pascual-de-Sans writing that “[p]lace is where the physical substratum merges with the people that act upon it, that think about it, that give it a name – to the place and to its contents; that

25 Tuan 1975, 165.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid., 151.
28 Relph 1996, 907-908; Tuan 1975, 152.
recognize it and recognize themselves in it; and that inhabit it individually and collectively in such a way that their existence is structured by reference to this substratum”. In my own words, I see place, not space, as the interface through which we relate to the world, learn, codify and express meanings.

On the other end from place there is placelessness, the quality which sites derive from “the non-local, international and general influences”. I think the concept can further the understanding of what makes a place by contrast. For Relph, placelessness stands as a witness of our lost capacity to imbue places with local identity and a unique meaning. Shopping malls, airport waiting rooms, international franchising shops are examples of placeless sites, characterised by an anonymous and standardised design traits. Relph’s placelessness underlines the importance of a “local touch” in the creation of an authentic place. For him, experience and meanings are entailed as long as placelessness causes them to conform, to level, so that they end up beholding little or none significance.

Relph affirms that sense of place has an inter-subjective nature. According to the author, people share their place experience and meanings by communicating with each other; in such way, these concepts make sense to them as well as to other individuals. In our everyday life, we construct and reproduce meanings in many ways, for example through storytelling. Coming into the world, we are plunged into a web of relations with the surrounding people and environment. As we develop our communicative skills, we learn to express ourselves and we participate more and more actively in such place-based relations. We entangle ourselves in the web of meanings constituting our place. Thus, while the meanings we attach to our places are individual-specific and personal, they also yield a collective dimension in the local stories that people share with each other and outsiders.

To temper such a strongly constructivist view of sense of place, I integrated part of Richard Stedman’s analysis in my thesis. Stedman gives to the physical landscape

30 Pascual-de-Sans 2004, 349.
31 Relph 1996, 913.
32 Ibid., 914.
33 Ibid., 913.
34 For his part, Edward Relph refuses to see a place’s unique and more general features in alternation or in contrast. Rather, he argues that “they are each implicated in the other, the local in the non-local, the general in the particular”. Ibid.
35 Ibid., 914.
36 Ibid., 908.
37 Kask and Raagmaa 2010, 163.
and its role in the process the attention it deserves, arguing that also the environment contributes to generating meanings of place. 39 Far from seeing constructed and “objective” concepts as incompatible, I believe that Stedman’s idea can widen our understanding the human-place relationship. The author proposes a model to show how our physical surroundings mediate the meanings which we attach to our place, thus contributing to shaping them; in turn, meanings influence place attachment and satisfaction, the key dimensions of a person’s sense of place. 40

2.1.2 Delving into sense of place
Sensing a place involves enjoying a degree of familiarity with it, a trait distinguishing an insider from an outsider. 41 Insideness stands as a core dimension of sense of place: mostly of unselfconscious nature, it comes with “knowing and being known” in a specific place, be it one’s neighbourhood, town or region. 42 At-homeness is a similar idea, as scholars deem it somehow as essential to developing a sense of place. In their article, Cox and Holmes recount the key aspects of at-homeness as follows:

- rootedness, the quality of our home being a habitual and intimate site of ours, “the base for departure and return in an unconscious familiarity”; 43
- at-easeness, by which our home embodying the space where we can act who we want, without having to perform a social role or “wear a face”;
- warmth, nurtured by the conviviality of the hearth and the joy of being together with our own people;
- the regenerating capacity of our own place to revitalise our body and soul;
- appropriation and territorially, entailing our ideas and feelings of belonging, control and guardianship. 44

I would like to notice that at-homeness does not apply just to the home understood as a house. Rather, the boundaries of our place can expand to embrace the whole neighbourhood or village. In the course of my research, I will specify from time to time whether the term “home” refers to such broad space unit or to a person’s private dwelling (this latter will be discussed in the conclusions).

Here I would like to introduce the concept of uprootedness, relevant to migration and sense of place. We feel uprooted when we have to leave what we consider as our

39 Stedman 2003, 671-685, 672.
40 Ibid., 674.
41 Relph 1996, 910, 911.
42 Ibid., 911.
43 Cox and Holmes 2000, 68, emphasis added.
44 Ibid.
This can prove particularly painful when coercion is involved. The “permanent and involuntary expulsion” of a person from his/her dwelling place is called eviction, which calls into question “the distinctions between ‘housing’ and ‘home’”. These themes permeate the recent history of the Lithuania Minor borderland, which allowed me to closely observe its inhabitants’ sense of place.

Is sense of place the result of our deliberate elaboration or do we cultivate it unawarely? For Relph, developing a sense of place “is not a mandatory requirement for survival”. I do not deny this statement. At the same time, as I have written in the introduction, I believe that people sense all the places they go through and live in. They grow ties to their dwelling even when they think they are going to stay there only temporarily. Thus, while constructing a relation to our surroundings is not a vital need for us, I argue that serious disruptions in the meaning of our places do affect our emotions and understanding.

2.1.3 Sense of place or spirit of place?

While travelling the research path, I incurred in a question about the object of my inquiry: is it “sense or place” or rather “spirit of place” that I seek by combing the informants’ stories? How do the two concepts differ and what is the relation between them? Spirit of place has a vague nature that many researchers have tried to catch and define. The term is a deliberate translation of the Latin genius loci, the divinity which the Romans believed to inhabit and protect a place. In the XVIII century, the aesthetic qualities of new rural and garden landscapes were called their “spirit”. Later, also classic and romantic artist and writers made use of the formula “spirit of place”. In a more recent context, the term has designated practically any kind of landscape, including urban sceneries. Scholars laying the groundwork for the study of place perceptions, quality and urban design slowly appropriated the term. It was so that spirit of place collided conceptually with sense of place. Their overlapping caused not little confusion in the field scholarship.

In his book Genius Loci, the Norwegian architect Christian Norberg-Schulz presented spirit of place as the whole of the material and immaterial (“symbolic”)

45 See also Relph 1996, 908.
46 Slatter 2012, 129.
48 Ibid., 909; Jivén and Larkham 2003, 68.
49 Ibid.
50 Relph 1996, 910.
elements of our surroundings. Exploring the psychology of architecture, Norberg-Schulz also first drew attention to the meanings of places, common to investigations of both sense and spirit of place. For my research aims, I value his definition especially in that it encompasses such ensemble of physical and non-material – also subjective – aspects. I agree that, besides the physical, architectural and natural features of an area, its incorporeal components (the layers of histories, stories, culture and memories) can tell us much about the place.

Notwithstanding its role in the action, genius loci is not my real target. As Relph has observed, Norberg-Schulz’s “spirit of place” hints to the inherent and unique attributes of a place. This definition suggests that the formula “spirit of place” signifies the quality of the place; in contrast, “sense of place” refers to the individuals’ perception of the environment. Put differently, while the former focuses on a site by mentioning the spirit which inhabits it, the latter aims attention to the people sensing the world around them. My investigation concentrates on people and their narratives: I understand sense of place as my focus and see genius loci rather as one of its facets. As such, I use spirit of place like a lens when closely scrutinising my informants’ narratives (see further “Categories of Analysis”). Genius loci matters to my study exactly for its connection with narratives. Kask and Raagmaa state that the “identity, spirit and quality of a place” comprise: the natural and the human environment; the social setting (including both locals and visitors); the symbolic meanings embedded in the place and reproduced by its dwellers; the stories about the place. For the two scholars, narratives encompass the local history and legends, current images of a region, town or village in the media and the locals’ accounts. Therefore, they inscribe spirit of place within the wider human-environment relationship. Finally, while the concept of genius loci traditionally pertains to the fields of architecture, environmental psychology and landscape studies, through sense of place we can direct its full analytical potential into migration and refugees studies.

2.1.4 A critique of Hay’s developmental model: we shall become locals – someday

Drawing from Eyles’ work, Relph observes that our family and neighbourhood relations, social status and the environment concur variedly to shaping our sense of

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31 Norberg Schulz in Jivén and Larkham 2003, 70.
32 Jivén and Larkham 2003, 70.
33 Relph 1996, 909.
34 Ibid., 910.
35 Kask and Raagmaa 2010, 163-164.
In the course of my research, I have observed their impact on the respondents’ sense of place, for example, through questions concerning their residency, their relationships in the area or their affection for certain natural views or urban corners. In the fourth chapter, I will bring to light such different nuances and evaluate their influence on the locals’ sense of place.

People’s relationship with their surroundings varies not just in its components, but also in its intensity. A corollary of the definition of at-homeness is that developing sense of place takes time. Considered this, here I would like to discuss Robert Hay’s developmental approach to sense of place. The author claims that people’s connection with the environment consolidates progressively, thus displaying different degrees. Hence, he identifies five main categories of subjects according to their “progress” in constructing a sense of place:

- those having a superficial relation to a place, e.g. tourists and transient visitors;
- people having a base where to return in a certain place – for example a couple owning a summer house there –, who enjoy a partial connection. For Hay, children in the early stages of their sense of place development also form part of this group;
- individuals with a personal liaison to a site, such as new settlers having no roots in the region;
- residents with roots in their living area, believed to have ancestral ties with it;
- locals (in Hay’s words, “indigenous residents”) who, in addition to their local roots, cherish a spiritual relationship with the land of the kind that culture contributes to. For Hay, these people experience a cultural kind of connection, the strongest degree possible in the human-environment relationship.

In Hay’s approach, a person’s length of stay and his/her degree of insideness in a place play an important role. I find it noteworthy that these conditions can be fulfilled by very different people: a family living in the same house as their ancestors did for generations, thus perpetuating a “tradition”; or migrants who settled in a town for an undefined period of time and eventually remain for decades. For Hay, other important

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56 Eyles in Relph 1996, 910.
57 Ibid.
58 Hay 1998, 6; Tuan 1975, 164.
59 Hay 1998, 11, emphasis added.
60 Ibid., 9, emphasis added.
61 I deem worth noticing that a long story of residence and insideness does not automatically entail being (perceived as) part of the local community. Likewise, I do not see such community as the natural outcome of the locals’ collective and inter-subjective sense of place.
factors contributing to sense of place consist in kinship networks, the dwellers’ involvement in the community life and the timing of residence in one’s life cycle. 62 I find Hay’s model useful because it highlights the multifold nature of the human-place relationship. Yet, I deem that roots wield too much discriminating power in it. The scholar argues that those who were born and raised in a place (aged 30 to 49, e.g.) likely possess a more intense sense of place than even those who moved and resided there for more than 40 years. 63 While reminding us that the timing of residence matters, the author also seems to suggests that “local” is a status which only people with an ancestry can attain. 64

Let us turn for a moment to the Lithuania Minor borderland: as I will show later, its population consists mainly of settlers arrived after 1945 who had no family predecessors in the region. Following Hay’s classification, we may expect them to be somehow stuck in the third stage of their sense of place development – the personal level. Virtually all the people who found shelter in this foreign land did not return to their original place. Are they thus less local than – say – their children, just because they can boast no genealogical relation with the borderland? More importantly, the presence of the previous dwellers and their descendants, however rare, complicates the picture. The topic resonates in my mind with age-old inheritance issues. I would like to reiterate my focus on the human being and the individual and inter-subjective perspective of my thesis. Although mentioning one’s entitlement to his dwelling, I do not mean to embark upon a legalistic debate of people’s rights to their place here – this may indeed become the topic for further research. I acknowledge that even the relationship between the concept of local and sense of place is far from straightforward. Sense of place implies experiencing a dwelling, land or wider area; experience is in the first instance subjective, personal in nature. As I will show in the case of the researched area, things can grow problematic when two different groups perceive the same place as their own. I want to openly state that, by this research, I do not intend to justify State colonisation of foreign territories by any means. I comprehend that I expose my ideas to criticism of legalistic and ethical kinds. By now, I can only say that time is an important variable and that while colonisation is underway, measures should be taken to stop it.

63 Ibid., 12-13.
64 The role of roots in consolidating a person’s ties to a dwelling area can be questioned under several profiles: one may wonder how far such ancestry should go back in history. Also, a person may be highly mobile and spend much of his life in another place than the one where his predecessors have lived: could he boast a deeper relationship with such region than a newcomer who first grew roots in there?
Going back to my inquiry: do we have reasons to believe that people who inherited their dwelling place sense it stronger than others who have live their whole life there without any previous local tradition? Probably yes. If so, however – can a person ever become a local without cherishing roots in a village, town or region? For the time being, I cannot answer. In my view, the presence of roots as an exclusive factor in the two final stages impairs Hay’s model. It could be amended by forking at the third step, thus enabling the distinction between natives (locals with roots) and dwellers (locals with no roots), for example. Roots mean a family history – something which does not depend on us alone. Of course, the newcomers’ children and grandchildren can boast an ancestry in the borderland. But are their parents, who have lived most of their life in the same place and consider themselves as belonging there, less entitled to it? Furthermore, I wonder if the settlers’ children consider themselves as locals just like the previous dwellers’ ones do. I believe that having your children born and grown up in a village can enhance your relation to the place where you have been living for some twenty, thirty, sixty years. Probably, time matters the most; yet it is hard to say how long it takes to become a local. This is not just the case for my informants, but applies also to many migrants’ stories.

I argue that newcomers to the Lithuania Minor borderland have striven to grow deep, spiritual ties with the land like in Hay’s cultural stage. If his model could distinguish between natives and not, cultural connections would be a variable worth observing in people’s sense of place. Through my research, I will show how the locals – at least some of them – endeavoured to construct their ties with their new dwelling by cultivating the local cultural heritage. I think that the events following the borderland’s “new birth” urged its old and new inhabitants to fast re-grow a new sense of place. Compelling factors like the painful eviction experience and the loss of place meanings pushed them to elaborate their new relationship with the borderland and with one another.

In this regard, I would like to quote Cathrine Brun. When criticising essentialist views of space and place, she notes that influxes of refugees make the issue of “rights to the place” (and place ownership) contentious. Therefore, Brun contends that “being a refugee is not a pathological state of being, and that understandings of nativeness are

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65 Brun 2001, 22.
difficult to maintain”.  

My idea that individuals cannot live considering themselves displaced for long has found an anchorage in Brun’s “here and now” as crucial to these people and their sense of place. Her approach implies that refugees – and, with the due differences, migrants – are not irremediably displaced, nor forever feeling that they are living – or want to live – somewhere else.  

Indeed, Brun writes, they are urged by the present reality to react to the loss of their place and seek to endure. In my words, I would say that people create their place exactly by reacting to survive in their new dwelling.

On such premises, those who reached the Lithuanian borderland at the end of the war stopped wearing the refugee label long ago. In my thesis, I call them “newcomers” for reasons of clarity and when I need to distinguish them from the previous dwellers. The refugee status is no permanent and thus is subject to change – although it leaves an undeniable mark on these people’s memory. In like manner, I argue that the “migrant” label – whose form recalls an action underway or repeated – should not be applied as permanent. While suggesting that newcomers “have arrived recently” and thus questioning the strength of their belonging to the borderland, I believe this word opens up to some dynamism. We may interpret it as “those who have just arrived later”. Upon settling in a place, people slowly adjust themselves in the environment and start developing a form of relation to it. Social relationships – neighbourhood ties, e.g. – in the area concur in gradually making the place their new home. In my research, I call “locals” two different groups of borderland residents: not just those having a family history in the place they inhabit, but also those who have been cultivating their relation with the borderland, who have learned its “spirit” and, like the former ones, can narrate its history, legends and stories.

2.2 Narratives, storytelling and sense of place

For my research purposes, I understand narratives as “a particular style of ritualized [sic], imaginative, creative behaviour enacted in language through which shared social meaning is produced”. Such distinct discourse types display the classic pattern of stories, i.e. they have a beginning, a development, and an end – with the events put in a

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66 Ibid., 18, emphasis added. In this research, it is exactly the issue of nativeness that is problematic, as we will see in the interview with The Tourist Information Centre staff.
68 Ibid.
69 Ibid., 18.
The idea underlying my study is that narratives offer us an insight into individuals’ sense of place. Indeed, stories “provide a window into people's beliefs and experience”. The informants’ stories that I will present farther tell us about migrations, arrivals and the beginning of a new life, as “refugee narratives” typically do. Jonutytė has observed that the analysis of similar stories recurs in several anthropological works concerning many borderlands in the world.

I can give many good reasons why narrative analysis matches the topic of sense of place. For example, narrative research is grounded in theories which envisage “discursive processes as on-going social actions”. When I introduced meanings as a key component of place, I have mentioned the role of storytelling in constructing, attaching and spreading them. As Kask and Raagmaa rightly put it, the reiteration of stories contributes to adding meanings to a site, layer by layer. When developing their ties with the place, people make sense of life experiences through an array of discursive practices, for example storytelling. Imbued with stories, places hint to different historical traditions, cultures and identities. Also, narratives draw the concept of intersubjectivity into the picture. Quoting Jackson, Jonutytė writes that “[t]he narrative is an ‘intersubjective element’ in which private and public interests are always problematically in play”.

On such premises, I chose to use deep and lightly-structured interviews with a strong biographical and narrative component as a method. Stories served as the lens through which I conducted my fieldwork. Moreover, they form a special part of my informants’ sense of place and represent an important topic in my thesis. I conceive storytelling as a “re-constructive” practice allowing people to re-create traditions, place memories and activities. I will show later how our informants have been cultivating their collective memory by telling stories – somehow looking towards the past as well as into the future. Steven Schnell writes that storytelling enables us “to weave ourselves into the fabric of our imagined – and real – communities and to begin to care deeply

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71 Ibid.
72 Sinclair Bell 2002, 209.
73 Derrien and Stokowski 2014, 116.
74 Derrien, Jonutytė 2013, 134.
75 Derrien and Stokowski 2014, 108.
76 Kask and Raagmaa 2010, 163. The two also argue that such discursive processes contribute to consolidating the identity of a place. Ibid.
77 Derrien and Stokowski 2014, 120.
78 Jonutytė 2013, 125, my translation.
79 Derrien and Stokowski 2014, 120.
again about history and place”. 80 We create such communities by reiterating stories – to ourselves and the others – about our past, heritage and place. 81 Like our collective memory, he writes, “all of the narratives we use to build community are bound to be incomplete, filled with hindsight-driven reinterpretations and selective memories”. 82

Furthermore, saying it with Michael Jackson, “storytelling gives us a sense that though we do not exactly determine the course of our lives we at least have a hand in defining their meaning”. 83 The narrative practice has an existential component, which Jackson describes as a “vital human strategy for sustaining a sense of agency in the face of disempowering circumstances”. 84 Storytelling may thus empower refugees, help them overcome displacement and grow ties to their new place. As I have anticipated in the introduction, it is through stories that people make sense of their life experience and, at the same time, of their ties with the environment. 85

Finally, another value of the stories which inform and reproduce a sense of place is their local nature, linking to the idea of place authenticity implied in Relph’s placelessness. The radio news Director Dan Grech notes that the local level and lived experiences have immediate relevance to people and their relationship with their surroundings. 86 “Universal stories aren’t enough for local listeners”, Grech comments. 87 He observes that people mostly associate to the concept of “place” stories recalling the “shared lived experience” of some neighbourhood or group. Grech adds that the local context offers an advantage, i.e. the chance to include contrasting and unexpected voices – a task hard to fulfil when national stories are concerned. 88 The idea connects with oral history as a research method. 89 As Nuala Johnson has noted, “[t]he deployment of local and oral histories in the formation of group identities can be a

80 Schnell 2003, 25.
81 Ibid.
82 Ibid.
83 Jackson 2002, 16.
84 Ibid., 15.
87 Ibid.
88 Ibid.
89 Ibid.
90 Oral history is “a field of study and a method of gathering, preserving and interpreting the voices and memories of people, communities, and participants in past events”. Oral History Association, “Oral History: Defined”, <http://www.oralhistory.org/about/do-oral-history/>. It consists in recording personal memories and accounts of historical relevance through interviews. The happening of an “exchange” between an interviewer and an interviewee – recorded by audio or video means – is seen as a necessary condition for the study of oral history. Ibid.
powerful antidote to both State and academic narratives of the past; especially where marginalized groups are concerned”. 90

2.3 Collective memory and sense of place

As Nicholas Entrikin observes, human geographers have widely discussed “[t]he role of place as the repository of collective memory”. 91 Collective memory matters to my research as the land’s past surfaces in the informants’ stories. Historical narratives form part of my categories of analysis, comprising accounts about the region’s history, its inhabitants’ lives and the local cultural heritage. Here I adopt Foote and Azaryahu’s definition of memory as “socially constructed, not innately given, and always shaped by economic, social, cultural, economic, political, and ideological contexts of its creation”. 92 Drawing from Maurice Halbwachs, Johnson conceives collective memory as the common memories of a social group’s past. Relations of kinship, class, or religion bind the group as a whole, while such memories tie its single members “with a common shared identity” when invoked. 93 In other words, the group maintains its shared identity through social memory. Individual memories differ from collective memory. Indeed, the latter needs the collective entity of the group to recall the memories which aim at preserving its common identity. 94

The French scholar Pierre Nora described memory as being attached to sites, which can be physical (e.g. cemeteries, churches, battle grounds, prisons) – thus embodying “tangible notions of the past” – as well as non-material, e.g. celebrations and rituals reviving “an aura of the past”. 95 Therefore, the phrase “sites of memory” embraces geographical areas, monuments, memorials and buildings, historical personalities and public spectacles and commemorations. 96 Such lieux de memoire, as Nora defined them, are intentionally designed to celebrate and pass on selected elements of the past – and, as a consequence, they omit and aim to forget others. In these places,

91 Entrikin 1997, 264.
92 Foote and Azaryahu 2007, 126.
94 Johnson 2004, 317. On the relation between public or collective memory and place, see also Lewicka 2008.
95 Nora 1989 in Hoelscher and Alderman 2004, 349.
96 Ibid. An interesting analysis is carried out by Kuusisto-Arponen in her study of the commemoration of the Karelian evacuation in Finland and its implication for the construction of the participants’ sense of place. In her article, the scholar also underlines that “experiences of place are personal, but, by nature, the sense of place is intersubjective … intersubjectivity is often created through narrations”. Kuusisto-Arponen 2009, 549.
as Nora puts it, “memory crystallizes and secretes itself”. In my study of sense of place, the cultural heritage appears as an important reference in the interviewees’ stories. In particular, I will discuss the case of the cemeteries, a memorial space where individuals cherish everyday personal narratives of place, in contrast with the grand national ones which encompass the same burial sites.

Researchers may grasp a group’s social memory by analysing, for example, the architectural heritage and monuments in an area. Memorials enshrine crucial elements of a nation’s collective memory. Here I should highlight the mechanism of “filtering” or “forgetting” at play: what a nation chooses to memorialise in a monument, or what not to memorialise, reveals something of its collective memory to us. Foote and Azaryahu see this process as two-fold. On the one side, they detected an act of “de-commemoration” of personalities and historical events linked to the previous regime; on the other, the two authors envisage the commemoration of events and people compatible with – and thus promoted by – the ideology and values of the new regime. The original meanings which memorials embody may be eroded, replaced, if not neglected and vandalised through time.

When contemplating the borderland’s landscape, everybody would recognise the German traces in its architecture a first glance. It is the result of the centuries-long Prussian and then German rule, for which the area has a different “taste” than the other Lithuanian regions. Until World War II, mainly Prussian Lithuanians inhabited the borderland. In a few months, foreign people came and populated it. Like the rest of Lithuania, the region was under the Soviet regime for nearly fifty years. Finally, the recuperation of its cultural heritage took place only after the restoration of Lithuanian independence in 1990. As Hoelscher and Alderman note, the case of locals participating in the re-making of memory sites recurs with particular value in post-totalitarian realities. In the next chapters, I will show how people in the Lithuania Minor borderland actively involved in the re-discovering the region’s cultural heritage.

97 Hoelscher and Alderman 2004, 350.
98 Concerning the distinction between “mythical/big” places and “everyday-life” ones, see Schnell and Mishal 2008.
99 See also Foote and Azaryahu 2007, 129.
100 Foote and Azaryahu 2007, 132.
101 Ibid.
102 I will enumerate the main sites of the local cultural heritage in the part “Categories of analysis”; we will get to know about their recent history in the course of the interview analysis.
103 Hoelscher and Alderman 2004, 351.
104 According to Jonutytė, the village of Vilkyškiai is now going through a delicate process as it is “recovering” (literally “getting back”) or “resuscitating” its past (Lit. “praeities atgavimas” or
2.4 Transnationalism
Most scholars writing on transnationalism and migration have concentrated on migrants’ networks and on the economic, social, political and cultural factors influencing transnational processes. Popular themes comprise migrants’ adaptation to their new place and the ways by which these people keep contacts with their town or country of origin – for example, remittances or the exchange of letters. Here I subscribe to Patricia Clavin’s words, which reminds us that “… transnationalism, despite its early identification with the transfer or movement of money and goods, is first and foremost about people: the social space that they inhabit, the networks they form and the ideas they exchange”. 

During my research, I have come across stories of locals keeping contacts with some Prussian Lithuanians’ descendants, who now live in Germany. Often, these people first get in touch with the locals through letters or e-mails: many times, they ask to take care of their family tombs in the borderland. To my eyes, they hence try to establish a connection with their forerunners’ place. Drawing inspiration from Ruben Gielis’ “migrant places as meeting places”, here I will present two sites where different social networks coexist: the Vilkyškiai Lutheran Church, an important element in the local German heritage believed to symbolise the village, and the Prussian Lithuanian cemeteries, often dating back to the XIX century, scattered all over the region. I argue that the two heritage sites have grown increasingly transnational, especially after the Nineties, when they were restored in the wider context of the re-discovery of the local past. I consider them a meeting place, the centre of the interaction between the old dwellers, the current inhabitants and the German visitors.

“gaivinimas”). Jonutytė 2013, 58, 82. In the course of my research, I have also grasped this component in our informants’ narratives and, in my own words, I refer to it as “the re-discovery of the past”.
105 Vertovec 2001, 574.
106 Clavin 2005, 422.
107 Gielis 2009, 278.
II. METHODOLOGY

1. DOING RESEARCH WITH NARRATIVES

Sinclair Bell has described the merits of narrative as a research approach as follows: to start with, they enable us to understand life experience.\(^{108}\) Secondly, narratives make it possible for scientists to gather information of which their informants themselves often go unaware. The analysis of people's stories “allows deeply hidden assumptions to surface”.\(^{109}\) Narratives highlight the temporal nature of experience, reminding us that our understanding of people and events is subject to change.\(^{110}\) Despite its values and the suitability of stories as a research focus when studying sense of place, narrative research is also a slippery ground. The researcher’s bias appears as the main issue. “[W]hen researchers take people’s stories and place them into a larger narrative”, Sinclair Bell observes, “they are imposing meaning on participants’ lived experience”: in some way, we end up “re-storying” our informants’ narratives.\(^{111}\) Furthermore, stories are “inherently multilayered and ambiguous”, so the constructive quality of results and the investigator’s subjectivity become particularly evident in such works.\(^{112}\) Finally, it should be noted that clear-cut criteria for the narrative approach do not exist yet.\(^{113}\)

In this thesis I do research with narrative. I am interested in the informants’ stories and “the realm of experience” they open up to, where speakers deliver their personal experience and give it their own subjective meaning.\(^{114}\) I hope to apprehend and better understand personal and special experiences by analysing the respondents’ stories. During my study, I have encountered interesting expressions by which my informants qualified their places. Therefore, I have included some elements of linguistic analysis in my research. I have taken note of the words my interviewees used and I have analysed their semantics to enrich my comprehension. I believe that such words can reveal something special or even unconscious of these people’s sense of place. In sum, saying it with Bamberg, I have adopted a narrative method focused on “texts as words

\(^{108}\) Sinclair Bell argues that social scientists concerned with people’s lives have focused mainly on outcomes, thus generally neglecting the impact and significance of the very human experience. Sinclair Bell 2002, 209.

\(^{109}\) Ibid.

\(^{110}\) Ibid.

\(^{111}\) Ibid., 210.

\(^{112}\) Ibid.

\(^{113}\) Ibid.

\(^{114}\) Bamberg 2012, 3.
and sentences” and followed it quite freely.  

Lastly, sometimes I have drawn from my own background knowledge and comprised elements of cultural and anthropological studies for the sake of exploring the meanings of places and symbols (e.g. the home and the tomb), images and practices.

1.1 Learning the craft of the biographical interview

I have collected my research interviews in the Pagėgiai municipality (County of Tauragė), precisely in the villages of Vilkyškiai and Piktupėnai and in the very town of Pagėgiai. However, the study mainly concentrates on Vilkyškiai for its significance to the borderland. The only exception – I interviewed Gerda in Kaunas; she grew up in Vilkyškiai and goes back to her place often. Altogether, the collected primary sources consist of approximately 12 hours of interviews.

I was most interested in how people narrate the relation to their place, so I used qualitative deep and open interviews to retrieve information on sense of place. Such interviews allowed me to develop an “intimate familiarity” with the topic.  

The fieldwork served the task of having informants to speak their life experience in the borderland. Given the complete novelty of the method to me, building suitable interviews and managing them proved a challenging learning process. I found a precious resource in Tom Wengraf’s book *Qualitative Research Interviewing*.  

This guide helped me outline the questions for lightly-structured deep interviews. I found the “Single Question Aimed at Inducing Narrative” (SQUIN) a valuable tool.

It took me a few attempts to define a working SQUIN. Eventually, I found it by rephrasing my main research question in common, concrete terms relating to people’s every-day life. My SQUIN sounded like this: “I would like to hear about your personal life experience in the region. Could you tell me some stories about your hometown [where you lived with your family and grew up]? You may talk about the places, like the landscapes or architecture which are meaningful to you”. Given her familiarity with the informants and the fact that she is a native speaker, Dr. Jurga Jonutytė conducted the interviews and asked the question for me. When needed, she would let me introduce my SQUIN or ask more detailed questions, which I could draw from my list of interview queries. Nonetheless, this did not exempt me from defining my research, theory and

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117 Wengraf 2001. The book was illuminating and contributed to the realisation of the present study by highlighting the path from a central research question to theory questions and, finally, the relation between these and the interview questions and interventions.
118 Wengraf 2001, 111.
interview questions. Altogether, Dr. Jurga Jonutytė’s mastery of the method secured me the materials, for which I am immensely grateful.

The boundaries of my informant sample proved to be quite loose. I decided that people of different age groups could contribute to my research. According to the research objectives, the essential criteria required potential interviewees to have resided in the borderland for at least twenty-thirty years and to be able and willing to tell me about their sense of place. Envisaging my respondent sample pushed me to define more clearly my research aims. It helped me identify the relevant narrative themes. While collecting the interviews, I accepted that the findings could be surprising and unexpected. The richness and complexity of the interview materials challenged my current knowledge and interpretive skills. Yet today I believe that my research had a satisfactory outcome.

1.2 The analytical odyssey: sailing the sea of the interview materials

I recorded my interviews with an electronic device. I took no notes during the interviews as this distracted me from understanding the informant’s narrative and eventually proved to be far from an indispensable tool. Subsequently, in the calm of my home, I listened through the records carefully, striving to get a whole image, but also clutching on the most important components of my respondents’ sense of place. I found myself face to face with a huge amount of data and looking at my questions in search for a reference point. Where was my Ithaca, the sense of place I had read of? It took me some perseverance and a good deal of learning, but finally the fog cleared up. I had to better define my categories of analysis and finally found an anchor in them. Drawing from Weiss, Kvale and Brinkmann, I could identify the most relevant excerpts and attempt an early coding of them. Then, I had such salient interview excerpts transcribed word by word. I needed transcriptions as I have a good knowledge of the Lithuanian language but do not master it fully.

After I got the excerpts transcribed, the analytical phase started. I proceeded with studying the main place-related discourses which the informants had disclosed. I listened to the audio fragments repeatedly and as carefully as my language skills

120 I often received from my collaborators transcriptions including a revised version of the text, aiming at correcting the flaws of my informants’ spoken language. I kept the original text and analysed the words which the respondents used when I deemed this captured the genuine meaning that my respondents wanted to convey.
121 I found it easier to analyse written texts rather than spoken language, especially taking into account the dialectal forms that some informants used in their interviews.
allowed me to, which enabled me to understand the main constituents of the informants’ sense of place. The theory questions which drove my inquire during each listening sessions were mainly the following: which elements make up the informants’ sense of place? How are constituents of sense of place qualified in this respondent’s narrative? What meanings are attached to them in this narrative? Finally – going back to Jackson’s reflection on sense of place and storytelling – what happens when the original dwellers of a region disappear almost completely and others take their place?

Later, I perfected the coding of the selected excerpts basing on their theme and the narratives that they informed. This allowed me to link some informant’s specific narrative to the concepts and categories recurring in the others’ interviews. Weiss holds that coding depends largely on the researcher’s skill to interpret the respondents’ comments. In my case, I had to learn a lot about the history of the Lithuania Minor borderland and its culture. Consulting secondary sources was crucial in establishing a dialogue with previous works in the field. At the same time, I put all my efforts into developing some special sensitivity to the informants’ stories.

In my analysis I favoured contents and semantics over narrative structures and functions or syntax. It was not an easy task, first of all because I am not a Lithuanian native speaker – secondly, it was my first work of such a scale. However, I succeeded. I finally re-emerged from the depth of narratives holding the precious catches in my hand. I examined and compared them with other findings in the same narrative as well as in other stories. Using relational analysis helped me capture meanings and interpret them. In the end, I put the coded contents from each interview in order and highlighted the relations among the different stories: I carried our cross-interview comparisons to present the materials according to a main line. It was a delicate moment as the writing and the final discussion of findings depended on its success. When writing my report I gave my informants imaginary names to preserve confidentiality – especially in the case of well-known individuals or people holding administrative positions in the researched area.

122 See also Weiss 1994, 56.
123 See also Weiss 1994, 154.
124 Weiss 1994, 155.
125 Derrien and Stokowski 2014, 113.
126 Weiss 1994, 452.
2. CATEGORIES OF ANALYSIS

Hereby I present the main categories which are relevant to my informants’ sense of place. Also, they inform the labels by which I coded each narrative. Defining such categories allowed me to acquire a full, functional picture and to make sense of the narratives. Hopefully the themes listed under each label will also help me trace the boundaries of the informants’ own places, their main material and immaterial constituents and each respondent’s “we”. I used the categories to easily classify and analyse my respondents’ stories: since narratives resemble more spontaneous flows than compartmented thematic units, the labels are likely to overlap, with one utterance actually pertaining to more than one category.

- Personal relation to the place: this label codes all statements concerning an informant’s tie with the place, its main aspects and descriptions. I see places as inhabited by our relations. Therefore, the label includes all factors connecting the informants with their dwelling, for example family relationships, networks of acquaintances, job or community life. I paid special attention to the respondents’ remarks qualifying their own place as the *locus* (or site), the main reference in their relation to the region – e.g. the home, the neighbourhood, the village and so on. ¹²⁷ When needed, under this category I have taken note of the interviewees’ reach beyond their place, i.e. having to migrate for study-purposes or commuting to the workplace.

- The border: in the researched area, the river Nemunas stands for the State border between Kaliningrad and Lithuania. Undoubtedly an essential part of the local environment – supposedly contributing to the spirit of the place, the border deserves to be considered separately. Under its label I have listed all the stories containing the themes of smuggling, border crossings, tourism (usually from Russia through the borderland) and remarks on the visa regime.

- History narratives: this category encompasses the interviewees’ references to historical events. Possible examples are the recollections of World War II and the early post-war years (Lit. “pokaris”), communal life in the Soviet period and the situation following the re-establishment of Lithuanian independence. This group often interweaves with accounts of the local cultural heritage and spirit of

¹²⁷ I love the evocative power and concise form of the term *locus* (Latin for “place”) and thus use it deliberately in my thesis. I understand as “[t]he effective or perceived location of something abstract” and apply it to the perceived own place of the informants. *Oxford Dictionaries*, language matters, “Locus”, <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/locus>. 
place. Although historical events frequently appear in the respondents’ narratives, mine is not a historiographic investigation. Rather, I am interested in what such narratives can reveal about the locals’ sense of place in a given period. History is entailed, but in its oral form. Therefore, I raise no claim of truth when reporting and analysing personal accounts of historical events.

- Spirit of place: the present label has quite broad boundaries and often blends with narratives on the region’s history, cultural heritage and uniqueness. As we have seen, spirit of place consists in the inherent and peculiar qualities of a place, be they material as well as incorporeal. Thus, I have attached this label to: a) utterances concerning the place constitutive elements, the physical sites which in the informants’ opinion represent the region – buildings, monuments and memorials, street views, rivers and other natural landscapes; and b) to assertions concerning the immaterial layers of histories, culture, memories and the stories which “inhabit” the borderland.

I have decided to comprise in this group all the relevant mentions of “the German scent” in the area. Although I did not have the chance to interview any of the region’s old dwellers, I considered some aspects of Prussianness as part of the spirit of this place. Examples could be the traces of German architecture in the architecture, the stories about the Prussian Lithuanians, the German visitors of Vilkyškiai and the connection they strive to establish with their ancestors’ land – sometimes surfacing in my respondents’ narratives.¹²⁸

- Narratives of the material cultural heritage: cultural heritage is generally defined as the whole of the material artefacts (buildings, monuments and memorials, landscapes and views, but also books and works of art) as well as the intangible attributes (the folklore, traditions, legends, language and knowledge) of a group or society. Under this label I have listed all the informants’ utterances concerning the former group of elements. Examples of the cultural heritage sites in the Lithuania Minor borderland include the Lutheran Church in Vilkyškiai, the hill forts (mounds), the houses of the local prominent figures, the cemeteries which enshrine ancient metal crosses bearing inscriptions in the old local language. The concepts of cultural heritage and collective memory are linked. As I have mentioned, by preserving and maintaining the former, we cultivate

¹²⁸ These people have a palpable interest in their history and roots. Būgienė 2013, 102. For this reason, I consider the German outsiders as contributing to the spirit of the place.
and reproduce the latter. The whole cultural heritage is considered as *inherited* from the previous generations and is cherished in the present to be passed on to the future ones.

- **Culture:** in my thesis I refer to “culture” as to the immaterial constituents of cultural heritage, such as the region’s folklore and legends, customs and knowledge. The label also applies the informants’ accounts concerning local characters such as writers, publishers, cultural activists, public figures. Besides, I include in this category artistic activities and events, for example the concerts held in the local Lutheran Church, the performances of music and dance groups (Lit. “*kolektyvai*”), painting exhibitions, celebrations of the region’s folklore and traditions, and the like.

- **Uniqueness:** by this label I classify all discourses depicting the borderland, the village of Vilkyškiai or the informants’ own place as different, peculiar. Hereby I include the words and phrases which qualify the landscape, the heritage and the region’s inhabitants as special. The category overlaps with other narratives, such as those concerning the region’s history and cultural heritage.

- **Place naming:** place naming emerged as an interesting phenomenon while on the field. Our informants would name towns and sites in the Kaliningrad region using the Lithuanian version of their old Prussian names. In this way, narratives of the old Prussian tradition, Lithuania and Russia coexist, adding to the image of one region beyond the present border.  

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129 In some cases, other actors’ naming strategies were reported (it is the case of the Soviet authorities presenting Kaliningrad as “an ancient Slavic land: see the interview with Vaiva). On the issue of naming streets as a way to bring official history into everyday life reality see Foote and Azaryahu 2007, 128.
III. LITHUANIA MINOR: ON THE BORDER BETWEEN PRUSSIA, RUSSIA AND LITHUANIA

1. OUTLINING THE RECENT HISTORY OF THE REGION

1.1 Locating the borderland within Lithuania Minor

The area I researched is situated in Western Lithuania near the border with the Kaliningrad region. Like many borderlands, in its history it has changed regimes, known wars, epidemics and famines; it was emptied of its dwellers and eventually re-inhabited – often by people of completely different ethnicities and religions. As I have anticipated, my research focused mainly on Vilkyškiai, a village – or, like the locals say, “a little town” – in the territory of the Pagėgiai municipality. The borderland belongs to the ethnographic region called Lithuania Minor.

The phrase originally encompassed a wider ethnographic area which extended beyond the borders of both present and interwar Lithuania. In my research, when inscribing the borderland within Lithuania Minor, I refer to the territories which have been part of Lithuania starting from 1923, namely the Klaipėda region. I deem such explanation necessary because the existence of two concepts defined by the same term (Lithuania Minor) can raise doubts.

Historically, Lithuania Minor (German “Klein Litauen”; Lit. “Mažoji Lietuva”) was the ethnographic region of East Prussia inhabited by a substantial population of Lithuanian speakers (see map 1). As such, it comprised the Lithuanian-populated lands of Memel – now Klaipėda, in Lithuania – and Tilsit (Sovetsk), Ragnit (Lit. Ragainė, currently Neman) and Insterburg (Chernyakhovsk) – the latter three now pertaining to Kaliningrad, Russia. No universal consensus seems to exist about the boundaries of this historical ethnographic region, which vary according to the defining principle – e.g. Lithuanian place names, the architectural style or the use of Lithuanian language in the liturgy.

130 Bügienė 2013, 100.
132 Ibid. It should be noted that some sources include in Lithuania Minor also the now Russian towns of Gusev (Lit. Gumbinė, German Gumbinnen) and Nesterov (Lit. Stalupėnai, German Stallupönen). The Borders of Lithuania 2010, 72.
The Lithuanian-speaking inhabitants of Mažoji Lietuva were called Prussian Lithuanians (Lit. “Lietuvininkai”) and mostly professed the Lutheran faith. In 1920, more than 90% of the Lithuania Minor population was listed as Evangelical Lutheran – in contrast with the average in Lithuanian proper, where the vast majority of the Lithuanians were Catholics. ¹³³

Nowadays Lithuania owns only a small part of the historical ethnographic region. Indeed, during World War II, the Soviet Union took over most of the territories constituting Lithuania Minor, which thence formed part of the newly-created Kaliningrad SSR (now Kaliningrad, Russia). ¹³⁴ Later, part of its territories came to constitute the ethnographic region of Mažoji Lietuva, along with Aukštaitija, Dzūkija, Suvalkija, Žemaitija (see map 2). According to the recommendations of the Council for the Protection of Ethnic Culture, Lithuania Minor includes the municipalities of Klaipėda, Neringa and Pagėgiai, and the elderships grouped under the Šilutė (namely the elderships of Šilutė, Rusnė, Kintai, Saugos, Juknaičiai, Usėnai), Tauragė (eldership

¹³⁴ A few territories in the south of ancient Minor Lithuania now belong to Poland.
of Lauksargiai), Jurbarkas (Smalininkai and Viešvilė) and Klaipėda districts (Dovilai, Kretingalė, Priekulė, Sendvaris, Dauparai-Kvietiniai and Agluonėnai).


I deem important to notice that the town of Tauragė – whose county now comprises the Pagėgiai municipality (see map 3) and the Lithuania Minor village of Lauksargiai – historically did not belong to Mažoji Lietuva. Until the late 1990s, Vilkyškiai lied within the administrative district of Šilutė (Lit. “Šilutės rajonas”). In 1999, the village was transferred to the municipality of Pagėgiai. A subsequent municipal reform assigned Vilkyškiai to the County of Tauragė, whose main town is not part of Lithuania Minor. Indeed, Tauragė belongs to Žemaitija, which differs culturally.

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135 An eldership (Lit. “seniūnija”) is “the Lithuanian smallest administrative unit. An eldership could either be a very small region consisting of few villages, one single town, or part of a big city. ... A few elderships make up a municipality”. Apparently, the boundaries of the elderships do not necessarily correspond to those of the municipalities they inform. “Elderships manage small scale local matters, such as repairing pavements, dirt roads, keeping records on all families living in the eldership”. Nowadays there are 546 elderships in Lithuania. Wikipedia, “Elderships of Lithuania”, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elderships_of_Lithuania>. Lietuvos Respublikos Seimas, Informacija apie Lietuvos etnografinius regionus, “Lietuvos etnografinis regionas Mažoji Lietuva”, <http://www3.lrs.lt/pls/inter/w5_show?p_r=7039&p_d=95439&p_k=1>.

and historically from Lithuania Minor. To be precise, the latter distinguishes itself from the rest of Lithuania due to the long German rule, which shaped the urban landscape – marked by red bricks buildings and Lutheran Churches –, folklore and culture. For example, Prussian Lithuanians had their own dialect, traditional costumes and were Evangelical Lutherans.

Lithuania Minor holds a special place in the history of the Lithuanian nation and its modern culture. The very Lithuanian language is said to have its roots in the old local dialect. Allegedly, the first book written in Lithuanian, Martynas Mažvydas’ *Cathechism* (1547), was printed here. Kristijonas Donelaitis, a Prussian Lithuanian poet, wrote “The Seasons” (1818), a work widely celebrated as the pillar of modern

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138 Lietuvos Respublkos Seimas. 

139 Lietuvos Respublikos Seimas. Always in Lithuania Minor Jan Bretkun translated the Bible into Lithuanian for the first time (1590) and Daniel Klein wrote the first Lithuanian language grammar book in 1653. Ibid.
Lithuanian literature. In his poem, the author described the traditions, faith and way of life of his people. Many “cultural activists” of Lithuania operated in the region in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. To recall just a few – Martynas Jankus (1858-1946), a publisher and representative of the Lithuanian national movement, one of the founders of the newspaper “Aušra” (“The Dawn”, printed between 1883 and 1887), who participated in the smuggling of books during the prohibition of the Lithuanian press; Vydūnas (whose original name was Wilhelm Storost, 1868-1953), a philosopher and cultural activist; Ieva Simonaitytė (1897-1978), a Lithuanian writer and public figure.

1.2 The Memelland: from Germany to Lithuania

Until the end of the First World War, the studied area formed part of East Prussia and thus belonged to the German Empire. In compliance with the Treaty of Versailles (January 1920), the territories north from the Nemunas river (called Memelland) were separated from Germany and put under French military administration. The fate of the port town of Memel and its district was debated for several years. Eventually, in 1923, the young Lithuanian State took control of the area following a revolt in Memel; Lithuanians seized the port town and renamed it Klaipėda. The League of Nations took note of the new situation and the Klaipėda region remained with Lithuania. The newly acquired territories were organised into the counties of Pagėgiai, Šilutė and Klaipėda.

Before 1923, the inhabitants of the Memelland were mainly Germans and Prussian Lithuanians – as it was for the rest of the ancient Lithuania Minor territories. German handicraftsmen and farmers had been living in the Lithuanian borderland near...
Germany since the fourteenth century. When Lithuania incorporated the region, the population was divided in two groups: some of them remained with the East Prussian land, while the others became the inhabitants of the new Lithuanian region of Klaipėda. As Raudonytė notes, assessing the local inhabitants’ ethnicity proved all but simple, as multiple allegiances (linguistic, political, local) coexisted here. The Klaipėda region – including the borderland which I researched – clearly differed from the rest of Lithuania for its religious and administrative traditions, political loyalty, economic standards and culture, due to two hundred years of German rule.

It proved hard to retrieve any punctual data on the local population between 1923 and 1939. Probably the Klaipėda region was Lithuanised to some extent – and that the share of local Catholics increased. In 1939, Hitler issued an ultimatum on the restitution of the Memelland. Lithuania submitted and ceded the contended area to Nazi Germany, who re-annexed it to East Prussia.

1.3 World War II: a new birth date for the borderland

The late developments of World War II and the immediate post-war years gave the borderland the shape it has today. These moments had a deep impact on the local population both in the Lithuanian and former Prussian borderlands. “Pokaris” – a Lithuanian word meaning the post-war months and years – is a pervasive narrative theme when it comes to the region’s history. In the summer of 1944, the Soviet Union regained control of Lithuania and of the Klaipėda region, which the communists assigned to the newly-created Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic. A few months later (October 1944), the Red Army engulfed the Reich attacking its easternmost margin. “After seven centuries German East Prussia was swept away overnight and emptied of

146 Kibelka 2000, 39.
147 Raudonytė 2008, 12.
148 Ibid., 14.
149 Ibid., 14-15.
150 Many sources report that the identity of the region’s inhabitant had a strong local trait. This apparently pushed the Lithuanian state to homogenize the population, making it to conform with the national image. After the Memel region had been made into a distinct administrative unit in 1920, many of its inhabitants started defining themselves as “Klaipėdiškiai”, i.e. Memel native people who considered themselves citizens of the new homonymous district. Raudonytė 2008, 19. “The fact that the Klaipėdiškiai’s identity was undefined caused significant troubles to the State of Lithuania and the governorate [sic] who strove to lithuanise the borderland”. Blaževičius 2010, <http://www.xxiamzius.lt/numerai/2010/03/10/istving_02.html>.
152 Bügiienė 2013, 100.
Germans”, Alaistair Noble effectively wrote. 153 Nothing was left of East Prussia, whose devastated lands were partitioned between the USSR and Poland. 154

The Red Army turned against the local civilians in their strife to avenge the misdeeds of the Nazis on their homeland soil. The Soviet military saw the German civilians as enemies, potential spies, fascists. Blinded by the anti-German propaganda and brutalised by the war – the soldiers gave vent to their hatred against the people. 155 The Soviet functionaries deported and condemned to exile numbers of Prussians suspected of collaborating. At the end of the war, those who survived were kept as prisoners of war and labour force. 156 Even after May 1945, the majority of the Prussians in their homeland did not learn that the war was over. 157 Still the Red Army raided civilians’ settlements, whose social fabric was torn apart. The tumults reverberated on the Lithuanian border towns and villages, many of which had been evacuated in the previous months. In the harsh winter 1944, many Prussian families left their homes and sought salvation by crossing the river Nemunas.

1.4 A history of eviction
During the last few months of the war, substantial refugee influxes reached the northern bank of the Nemunas. Once the conflict ended, very few of the original dwellers who had sought salvation in Germany managed to return. Those who could still find their homes were confronted with strangers who had taken over their place. 158 They went experienced enduring sufferance as the people who now dwelled their place often would not even let them in. When lucky, they were allowed to stay just for a while and in humiliating conditions – sleeping on the floor or in the yard. These people lost their home, they were deprived of it – a traumatic experience which left deep scars in their lives. 159 This was the moment when the concept of “native” lost its value and the land’s life started anew.

A baptism of fire saluted this re-birth. During the post-war months, the recurring raids of the Red Army made life even harsher: its soldiers would plunder the villages, stealing food and searching for a way to vent their rage. 160 In such atmosphere of

154 Ibid.
155 Kibelka 2000, 7.
156 Ibid., 8.
157 Ibid., 13.
158 Būgienė 2013, 103.
159 Jonutytė 2013, 91.
160 De-humanisation and violence constituted an everyday reality, as reflected in many of the locals’ accounts. Jonutytė 56; see also Kibelka 2000, 72.
common tragedy and uncertainty, people started settling in Vilkyškiai. 161 Jonutytė exactly catches the spirit of the epoch by writing that the post-war narratives contain stories of fear, distrust and misery, but – at the same time – of extraordinary solidarity and vicinity among the settlers.

I see the home as a key locus in the locals’ post-war accounts described in Jonutytė’s book. Arrived in the borderland, the newcomers found shelter in abandoned houses which many passengers had looted and devastated. The fragments of the previous inhabitants’ lives populated every wall, stone, door: they told a story of wealth and prosperity, torn apart by violence and war. 162 In this deafening murmur of signs, the newcomers arranged their new place. Food, clothes, furniture could be traded with the Red Army soldiers, thus granting whole families survival. However, I contend that their presence constantly reminded the new dwellers that they were outsiders intruding what had been someone else’s place until short before.

Quite often, the newcomers survived thanks to some set of cutlery, rare cattle or furniture which the dwellers had hidden just before leaving their place. I believe that the settlers’ taking over someone else’s home symbolised a debasing act for them. In many cases, the fact that, while the newcomers found a shelter, its legitimate owners had lost it must have poisoned the blessing of survival. A bitter, stinging sense of guilt alighted on the settlers’ hearts. 163

With hindsight, I may now interpret the signs which the original dwellers left behind as a memento meaning: “There has been a time for taking; there will be a time for giving back”. 164 I have caught glimpses of the “taking and giving” motif in some of my informants’ stories and in other testimonies and finally coined such phrase. Precisely, the theme surfaces in combination with certain practices of the newcomers (adopting the Prussian orphans, taking care of the ancient cemeteries) which I deem of high symbolic value; I will analyse them in the course of my research.

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161 Jonutytė 2013, 119.
162 Ibid., 119-120. Concerning this, Vaiva, one of our informants, will share with us a symbolic account of her and her grandmother running from a room to the other in a German manor they had just settled in looking for dolls and finding 4 dead soldiers in the house basement (see also Jonutytė 119-120).
163 Ibid.
164 When coining the phrase of “taking and giving”, I have remembered the Ecclesiastes 3, which I deem expresses a universal idea of return and the cyclic nature of life: “There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens: 2 a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot, 3 a time to kill and a time to heal ...”. BibleHub, Ecclesiastes 3, New International Version, “A Time for Everything”, <http://biblehub.com/niv/ecclesiastes/3.htm>.
2. “WHO BELongs HERE?”: THE REGION’S MANY LOCALS

World War II altered the region’s population almost completely. I find it useful to compare the situation before and after the conflict. I should specify that the information which I am presenting here concerns the village of Vilkyškiai. Nonetheless, one may consider them as representative of the rest of Lithuania Minor. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Vilkyškiai was inhabited for about one half by German speakers and for the other by Lithuanian speakers. 165 A few months of war impacted the land so severely that, by 1945, people who could understand German had hardly disappeared.

What we see in Vilkyškiai still today has its origin in the troubled post-war years. Two main groups currently inhabit the village: the original dwellers’ descendants and the newcomers and their offspring. 167 The youngest settlers were children when their families came to live/established in the borderland, so many of them have passed away or are in their seventies now. The same applies to the old dwellers. Let us have a closer look at who these people were exactly.

2.1 The Prussian Lithuanians

“Bin gar keine Russin, stamm’ aus Litauen, echt deutsch”. 168

T. S. Eliot wrote *The Waste Land* in 1922. I believe that the verse above encapsulates the growing nationalist spirit of his time, which eventually lead to World War II. Slightly ironical in nature, Eliot’s words suit the case of many borderland inhabitants, who chose their nationality often according to the advantages they could earn from it. 169

Given the complexity of their identity, the idea fits well the Prussian Lithuanians, the original dwellers of the borderland. They were called in many ways according to the defining trait – for example, *Lietuvininkai* (“Prussian Lithuanians”). *Lietuvininkai* distinguished themselves for an acknowledged vicinity to the German cultural tradition. 170

As such, they “were loyal to Germany, but did not identify themselves with the Germans”. 171 Otherwise, people also called them *Šišioniškiai*, a word used until the

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165 Būgienė 2013, 100.
166 Not even considering German native speakers. Ibid.
167 Jonutytė 2013, 89.
169 For a review of the concept of national indifference, see Zahra 2010, 93-119.
mid-twentieth century which now has nearly disappeared from the language. I find the term interesting because it refers to these people’s relation with their place – it stems from their dwelling. I would like to notice that the appellative Šišioniškis does not bear any ethnic or religious connotation. As I have stressed earlier, the Prussian Lithuanians distinguished themselves for their Lutheran faith. For this reason, Lithuanians considered and called them “Germans”, “half Germans”, or “Prussians”. Facets of ethnicity and religion clearly overlapped in the old dwellers’ identity – interestingly, people referred to the Lutheran confession as to “the Prussian faith”.

Very few of the old dwellers finally remained in the Lithuania Minor borderland after the war. Mostly, the escapees who survived the war stayed in Germany. In the post-war years, the Soviet propaganda still would inflate the view of the Prussian Lithuanians as Nazi collaborators due to their Germanness. For their language and/or faith, Prussian Lithuanians came to be seen more and more as Germans; people often named them “fascists”. Therefore, Prussian Lithuanians and German speakers had to hide their identity, language and faith for years – even well into the 1960s. During the Soviet times, the words “Prussian” and “German” acquired an extremely negative meaning: people used them as an insult and often mocked and stigmatised the Lietuvininkai.

After the Soviet system collapsed and Lithuania became independent, the image of “the Germans” – the name by which eventually the Prussian Lithuanians and their descendants were recognised – and Germanness started changing. Nowadays, people in the borderland apply the label “German” to both the old dwellers and the visitors coming from Germany to Vilkyškiai. This group’s principal narrative themes concern the war, post-war hardships, displacement and the painful return to (what used

172 Jonutytė 2013, 89.
173 Ibid., 99.
174 Ibid., 90; Būgienė 2013, 101.
175 See the interview at the Tourist Office in Vilkyškiai.
176 Interestingly, in the aftermath of World War II, the majority of the Kaliningrad Germans lived in Lithuania. From here, Ruth Kibelka tells us, many managed to escape to Germany by train. Kibelka 2000, 111-113.
177 Ibid., 8.
178 Jonutytė 2013, 90; Būgienė 2013, 101; Kibelka 2000, 134. Later in this thesis we will see how long the stereotype lived in the borderland through Barbara’s story.
179 Jonutytė 2013, 89. Apparently a say exists in Lithuanian which portrays Prussians as “fools” – probably “durnas kaip prūsas (po pietų)”, meaning “as fool as a Prussian (after lunch)”. See further Julija’s narrative and the interview at the Vilkyškiai Tourist Office.
180 Būgienė 2013, 103.
to be) their home place. Eviction also surfaces in their memories as a recurring concept. Similarly to the situation in Kaliningrad, but on a smaller scale, the Prussians’ eviction (Lit. “iškeldinimas”) constituted an everyday matter and ownership did not exist anymore.

2.1.1 The Wolf’s children

In the winter of 1944, many East Prussian families left their homes and commenced a desperate journey through a particularly inclement winter. A famine hit the region, tearing families apart and clearing whole villages. By this time, groups of starved children started appearing on the northern bank of the river Nemunas. They were German orphans in their childhood and teenage years, dressed in rags – when they did not go completely naked –, sick and emaciated. Their view scared the locals like that of ghosts or beasts. The people renamed them “the Wolf’s children” (Lit. “Vilko vaikai”, German “Wolfskinder”). Apparently, the orphans’ resemblance with the wolves earned them such an epiteth: like the wild animals, they straggled in packs from village to village, stealing potatoes, begging for a morsel of bread and shelter. Yet, I believe that the appellative also had something to do with the association between the wolf and Adolf Hitler’s figure.

The image of the Germans as enemies, which the communist authorities had actively nurtured, was deeply absorbed in the fearful post-war Lithuanian society frayed by the war and the Stalinist terror. Having a German name became a curse. The Wolf’s children were no exception and found themselves in an extremely violent reality. They escaped to Lithuania, hiding on the roof or footboard of a train from Königsberg (now Kaliningrad) heading to Kybartai and Kaunas. They followed rumours that some Lithuanian farmers employed German children in exchange for bread and prepared to cross the Nemunas. Pass the border, they went astray and started living in the woods –

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181 Jonutytė 2013, 89.
182 Kibelka 2000, 27.
183 Ibid., 69.
184 Ibid., 23.
185 Ibid., 66.
186 Ibid., 66-80.
187 The bunker where Hitler spent part of the war years was known as “the Wolf’s Lair” (Rastenburg, former East Prussia). Wolf’s Lair. Hitler’s Headquarters 1941-1944, “History”, <http://wolfsschanze.pl/index.php/history>. Similarly, the Nazis have been portrayed as wolves in Edmond-François Calvo’s comic strips “La bête est morte!”!, which tells the main events of World War II. University of Cambridge, Victor Dancette, “La Bête Est Morte! La Guerre Mondiale chez les Animaux: Images de Calvo”, <https://exhibitions.lib.cam.ac.uk/liberation/artifacts/la-bete-est-mort/>. 188 Bügienė 2013, 101. Concerning this, I would notice that many European cultures and the North American tradition attribute devilish traits to the wolf. I have attempted to catch a glimpse of the animal’s symbolic meaning and its significance in the Lithuanian national narrative in an article: Marucco 2014.
stealing pilfering food, hiding in the hay as soon as they saw a uniform or the guns of the strībai. 189

According to the laws introduced by the Soviet authorities, the locals were prohibited from giving shelter to foreigners. However, many settlers’ families challenged the rules and the hardship of their life by taking some orphans with them. 190 Many Wolf’s children found rescue in such Lithuanian families: yet they had to work hard to earn it. 191 If discovered, the hosting family could be exiled to Siberia: therefore, the little Germans received Lithuanian names and were allowed to speak only in Lithuanian. 192 I see the Wolf’s children (together with the few natives who returned) as the embodiment of the region’s previous life. Turning to the idea of “taking and giving” which I have expressed earlier – what if we saw these children’s adoption as an attempt of the settlers to return the blessing of their own survival? I will discuss the topic thoroughly in the conclusions.

2.2 The newcomers

The majority of the present inhabitants of Vilkyškiai settled around 1950 or later; only a few of them arrived in 1945. 193 These people are known as “newcomers” and originally came from all over Lithuania and even from some remote regions of the USSR. Sometimes they are also called “ateižūnai” (literally “those who arrive”, “strangers”) or “atvykėliai” (meaning also “visitors”). 194 Despite their origins, nowadays they consider themselves as Lithuanians – also, the Lietuvininkai call them so. 195 Indeed, newcomers formed a multinational group – usually also the Šišioniškių’s descendants acknowledge it. 196 Who were these people? Where did they live before moving to Vilkyškiai? Like the old dwellers, also newcomers had gone through eviction and displacement. They had left their homes for different reasons: some escaped from imprisonment in Nazi concentration camps with their children hungry and ill. Many others came to the

189 “Strībai” is the Lithuanian translation of the Russian term “istrebiteli”, which literally means “exterminators”. The name referred to the armed groups of civilian volunteers who supported the Soviet regime in Lithuania. The wolf children often found themselves in the middle of the harsh fight between the strībai and the partisans (Lit. “miškiniai”), who suspected them to be spies and slew them on the spot. Kibelka 2000, 72, 73.
190 Jonutytė 2013, 97, 117. As Kibelka notes, most of the Lithuanian villagers lived in very poor conditions, compared to the standard many Wolf’s children were used to. Nonetheless, many helped the orphans in different ways, from adopting them to giving them some alms. Kibelka 2000, 73.
191 Ibid., 70.
192 Ibid.
193 Jonutytė 2013, 119.
194 Ibid., 96.
195 Ibid., 91.
196 Būgienė 2013, 101. Concerning this, see further Vaiva’s and her husband’s account of their “multinational neighbourhood”.
borderland fleeing the perspective of an exile. 197 “Sometimes they were ‘warned’; in other cases, they had to understand an unwritten and unarticulated message: either moving to the Klaipėda borderland or going on exile”. 198 For this reason, the region was known as a borderland of exiles. 199 Finally, some settlers were driven by pragmatic and economic motives, such as the search for a better place for farming. This means that “peaceful” cases of families who moved following their own will existed. 200 At the time, the voice circulated that in the Klaipėda borderland there were good lands for farming and attractive living conditions. 201

Before reaching Vilkyškiai, newcomers had thus left behind their homes, which, in many cases, the war had destroyed. At other times, their homes were still there and they would still have wanted to live there, but their dwelling was located in areas where it had become too risky to stay. Indeed, in the immediate aftermath of the war, political persecutions and violence haunted many settlements and their inhabitants. 202 The impending famine pushed many to leave. 203 Therefore, like the old dwellers, also the newcomers experienced the loss of their home. 204 Their narratives display the story of their arrival in the borderland and present key words such as “persikėlimas” (“displacement”, “movement (of population)”, “transfer”) and “įsikūrimas” (“settling”, but also “foundation”). 205 Another frequent term is the verb “persikraustyti” (“to move”, “to remove”), as I will show in the interview with Vaiva.

Concerning the resettlement phase, I have mentioned the importance of the home as the locus around which narratives of eviction and displacement gravitate. Jonutytė has observed that the newcomers’ narratives eventually focus on how this place became their home. 206 I found it hard to figure how seriously the war had disrupted the old and new dwellers’ lives. We should consider that, at the time, a person

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197 Jonutytė 2013, 119.
198 Ibid., 117, my translation.
199 Lietuvos Respublikos Seimas.
200 Jonutytė 2013, 119.
201 Ibid.
202 As it is the case for the story of Vaiva, whose parents fled from Veliuona first to Jogaudai and finally settled in Vilkyškiai.
203 Ibid.
204 On the sense of loss see also Cox and Holmes 2000. Concerning this Jonutytė has underlined the issue of “primary place alienation” which derives from settling in a new, unknown place (Lit. “naujakurystė”). Jonutytė 2013, 90.
205 Ibid., 95. The book by Jonutytė, Būgienė and Krasnovas gave me access to information on those who were adults when they moved to Vilkyškiai in the late 1940s. Apparently, their children and the youth slowly “created a suitable environment and [place]”, which explains why their memories differ sensibly from their parents’ ones and do not display the theme of the home loss. Ibid., 118.
206 Ibid., 93.
would abandon his or her birth place only for really compelling reasons. In other words, people would leave behind the family home – the primary place of their history, feelings and identity – just for question of survival. Changing place thus meant changing life. When I learned about the newcomers’ story, I had an impressions that they started a new life when settling in the borderland. As Jonutytė interestingly noted, it is as if they finally “came back to their senses” (Lit. “atsigauti”) after the dehumanising war experience. As time passed, people slowly re-established the routine and started to earn a living in their new home. 207

2.3 The borderland from 1990 to present
Currently, the newcomers’ descendants make up most of the inhabitants in Vilkyškiai; the Prussian Lithuanians’ offspring constitute a smaller group. After 1953, the situation in the borderland stabilised and the influx of refugees and settlers stopped. Following the independence in 1990, apparently no sizeable inward migration has happened in the area. In contrast, growing unemployment has pushed many to migrate. With the youth moving out, the village population is growing old. The first settlers, who started the process of making the borderland “their place”, are slowly dying out.

In many respects, the significance of the 1944 events appears to be broader than that of the events which followed the Lithuanian independence. Concerning the dwellers’ sense of place, the Nineties deeply affected the locals’ life as the border with Russia was virtually closed then. People who had grown up in the communist system saw the town of Sovetsk as the point of reference in what was a cross-border region and had to cope with the change underway. By now, seemingly 2004 – the year when the country accessed the European Union – did not crucially impact the locals’ sense of place. However, today many argue that opening the border would benefit the region’s tourism. 208

207 Ibid., 118-119.
208 See further the interviews with Gabija and the Tourist Office staff.
IV. VOICES OF LITHUANIA MINOR

1. Travelling the borderland with Gerda: from Prussia to Europe\textsuperscript{209}

Gerda (about 30 years old) works as a researcher whose main interests concern Lithuanian-Polish relations after World War II and emigration from Lithuania Minor. Her narrative sees the scholar’s voice combine with the personal memories of “the little girl from Vilkyškiai”.\textsuperscript{210} For analytical purposes, I have split the interview into two parts. In the first one, Gerda discloses her ties with Lithuania Minor – principally with her village, which she always mentions with an affectionate tone. In the second part, her narrative concentrates on how Lithuania’s accession into the EU impacted the locals’ everyday lives. Family relations and memories occupy a central place in the first moments of the interview and appear besides mentions of the region’s history. Her personal story seems to be deeply intertwined with the borderland’s past. As her narrative flows, I catch a glimpse of my respondent’s sense of place through a subtle veil of nostalgia.

Gerda grew up in Vilkyškiai, where she spent all her life before moving to Kaunas in the most recent years. Like most of the borderland’s inhabitants, her grandparents settled there after the war. They had had nothing in common with the land before – she says.\textsuperscript{211} Her grandmother still lives in Vilkyškiai and Gerda visits her often. I have an impression that nostalgia, in the course of the interview, becomes palpable with the appearance of Gerda’s grandmother.\textsuperscript{212} Speaking about the origins of her family, this young woman explains to me that her surname derives from the German language. In my family, we believe that we have some German roots – she says.\textsuperscript{213} Her great-grandmother was “a true German and Lutheran”,\textsuperscript{214} but, \textit{we are Lithuanians} – Gerda specifies. Seemingly, her kindred has a special place in her narrative: by saying “we” she intentionally refers to her parents and siblings.\textsuperscript{215} Placed in the frame of Vilkyškiai, her family emerges as the main factor shaping her sense of place.

\textsuperscript{209} This was the only interview I collected on my own – that is, without the support of Dr. Jonutytė’s research group. Gerda, my informant, decided to deliver her story in English, which definitely facilitated my task. I believe that the quality of her narrative remained appreciable although the informant did not tell it in her native language.

\textsuperscript{210} Gerda (researcher), in discussion with the author, February 18, 2013, the Lithuanian Emigration Institute, Kaunas, 17:45.

\textsuperscript{211} Ibid., 03:00.

\textsuperscript{212} Ibid., 01:25.

\textsuperscript{213} Ibid., 02:15.

\textsuperscript{214} Ibid., 02:25.

\textsuperscript{215} Ibid., 02:08.
Besides this, images and stories from the borderland’s past stud her narrative. The name of Lithuania Minor recurs, often accompanied by mentions of its distinctive landscape and architecture. Gerda is very fond of the red brick houses typical of the Klaipėda region. Interestingly, she opposes them to the blue wooden houses which characterise Tauragė – “an ugly city” – and stresses their uniqueness compared with the architecture of “Big Lithuania” in general. 216 The motif of countering types of buildings will surface also in other narratives. In the course of this research, I shall appreciate how different architectural styles link with specific traditions, e.g. the Prussian or German, the Soviet and the Lithuanian ones. Furthermore, Gerda tells me about the “huge trees” planted at the roads sides, a peculiar landscape of “this Klaipėda region or Lithuania Minor”. 217 Its view awakes something “magic” in my informant, as if it was in “a fairytale”. 218 She comments that the same landscape can be found in the north of Poland – once East Prussia. 219 Subsequently, my respondent mentions the Lutheran Church in Vilkyškiai, a renowned piece of the local cultural heritage. 220 We could not touch it, it was not ours – Gerda tells me. 221 “We are Catholic”, she underlines. 222 Her family’s religion goes hand in hand with the previous statement on her Lithuanian identity. Nonetheless, she engages with the latent German component which inhabits her narrative.

She visits Vilkyškiai frequently: while describing her trips back home, my informant reveals me something I have never heard of and that I labelled as “the former border discourse”. Allegedly, on her way from Kaunas to the village, Gerda always feels a discontinuity when she reaches the town of Jurbarkas. “That is not my place”, she tells and repeats later. 223 She gives me quite precise coordinates: her place extends from Jurbarkas to a village located a couple of km southeast from Pagėgiai: “Mikytai is the other border of my ... space”. 224 She also mentions Smalininkai (German Schmalleningken), a village about 28 km from Vilkyškiai. Smalininkai belonged to East

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216 Ibid., 07:03.
217 Ibid., 14:39.
218 Ibid., 15:51, 14:57.
219 Ibid., 15:15.
220 Later we will see how the Church is a meeting place for the Lithuanian and German traditions and a locus of the region’s cultural life.
221 Ibid., 16:00.
222 Ibid., 02:28.
223 Ibid., 12:19, 12:40.
224 Ibid., 13:30. Mikytai is located 12 km west from Vilkyškiai.
Prussia until 1923 and lay by the border with “Grand Lithuania”. I take note of what Gerda tells me but cannot fully understand the meaning of such narrative yet. I will see this thread surfacing in other interviews and will finally manage to interpret it.

Subsequently, for the first time I hear a description of everyday life in the Soviet borderland, as Gerda kindly shares with me some of her grandmother’s stories about that time. Under the communist rule, Vilkyškiai was divided into a “sovkhоз” (Lit. “tarybinis ūkis”) and a “kolkhoz” (Lit. “kolūkis”). The former consisted in a State farm whose workers were paid a wage by the State; in the latter, indeed, people earned no wage and lived by sharing the products of the fields. The inhabitants of the kolūkis deeply felt for such difference: living by barter prevented them from buying clothes and food or going to the cinema in Tilžė (the Lithuanian name for Tilsit), Gerda reports. The town stood as the main city in the region throughout the whole communist period. Its “real” name was Sovetsk (Lit. “Sovieckas”): when Kaliningrad was born, the ancient Prussian town was re-baptised as such. Yet my respondent uses the Lithuanian translation of the ancient Prussian “Tilsit”, which I find noteworthy.

“Then the Nineties came”, Gerda narrates, and they brought turmoil and deep changes to the borderland. The border was virtually closed and, for the locals, Tilžė became harder and harder to reach. My informant confesses having never visited Kaliningrad since then; she just cherishes childhood memories of her border crossings. For many of her grandparents’ and parents’ generations, Tilžė and other places across the border gradually vanished in the realm of the past. It is not clear when this exactly happened. Apparently, the visa regime did not enter into force straight after Lithuanian independence; I suppose that border crossings were limited after 1990 and until 1997, when Lithuania signed the border delimitation agreement with Russia. Gerda’s account gives me an impression that the events surrounding Lithuanian independence appreciably affected border crossings and the locals’ sense of place. People did not regret it – she furthers: rather, they felt nostalgic for Tilžė, which had always been so close and had disappeared quite abruptly from their maps of the region.

The border theme leads Gerda’s narrative into the second part of the interview, which focuses on smuggling, its various nuances and implications. She identifies three

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225 Ibid., 04:16. We will gain a clearer idea of this “former border” in the course of the combined interview with Dalia and Julija.
226 Ibid., 20:00.
227 Ibid., 18:20.
main categories of people involved in cross-border trade: those who cross the border legally for purchases or trade; the small smugglers; and the families who run the profitable cigarette *kontrabanda* – a “dynasty”, in Gerda’s words. At any level, the border authorities seem to be well conscious of such practice. My informant’s *kontrabanda* narrative links to the social situation in Vilkyškiai. Indeed, smuggling appears to many students as an attractive source of income; many happened to leave school to pursue it. *Kontrabanda* did not emerge following the Lithuanian accession into the EU; on the contrary, it is a much older life companion to the borderland which prospered in the 1990s. The political developments which characterised the last twenty years have affected the smuggling activity. With the Lithuanian market growing more and more autonomous, a variety of new products became available in the country; this discouraged the locals to cross the border to smuggle goods, Gerda recounts. Who needs “bad Russian stuff” when you can buy everything in Lithuania?

Has the life of people here changed after 2004, I ask? Gerda answers that, among her older acquaintances, even euro-sceptics would say that things improved in the first ten years in Europe. In her opinion, the Union’s financial support gives two good reasons to think so: firstly, she tells me that small private farms can access structural funds quite easily and often without further monitoring. Paradoxically, she describes them as “funds for not having [cattle, for example] ... for not working [your land]”. Secondly, Gerda recalls European money allocated to restore and maintain the heritage of Lithuania Minor (namely its architecture), something she is very fond of. In the end, she presents Lithuania’s integration into the EU through the narrative of a change of direction in the country’s history. As Gerda puts it, Lithuania re-oriented itself from Kaliningrad (i.e. Russia) to Western Europe. Here, identity and geopolitical discourses meet: “we always wanted to go to the West” above everything else – she declares. Western civilisation offered a far more inviting perspective than the “cheaper Eastern one”. On these words, we concluded my first interview. I thanked Gerda and set off again on my research path, a swarm of questions buzzing around in my head.

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229 Ibid., 25:38.
230 On the life of *kontrabanda* as an integral part of the border land, see further the interview with Dalia.
231 Ibid., 33:15, 44:45.
232 Ibid., 43:30.
2. “I think of my place and I see Lietuva”: living by the border in a small country

Gabija, 26 years old, grew up in the border region, where her family currently resides. As it was for Gerda, her grandparents settled in after the war (Lit. “po karo”). Her father and mother also grew up here: “They are locals” (Lit. “vietiniai”), she tells. This young woman has many acquaintances in the area, mostly from her school years. Still, they do not seem as crucial to her sense of place as, for example, her life experience and employment. Today, she works as a teacher and assistant in the schools of Vilkškiai, Pagėgiai and Piktupėnai, thus covering all the borderland.

When Dr. Jurga Jonutytė and me ask her what best defines the region, the border immediately comes to her mind. We live by the Nemunas and when you look to the other side you see, that is already Russia – she puts interestingly. “You feel that you are by the border”: for her, it is a “physical experience”. Such depiction in concrete terms sounds in contrast with the intangible Jurbarkas border – a frontier of Gerda’s own, subjective space. Likewise, I note that the previous informant did not qualify the Russian-Lithuanian border by pointing to physical or natural elements.

For Gabija, the nature constitutes the second distinctive element of the borderland, what she missed when she was studying in Vilnius. Here (Lit. “pas mus”) the woods, fields and lakes are “carefully looked after” and preserved, unlike what happens in Kaliningrad – she tells us. The nature is different (Lit. “skirtinga”) on our side – she will reiterate: they keep it as orderly and clean as it should be.

Gabija touches upon the local architecture as a constitutive element of the borderland; yet, in her narrative, nature stands out as the key component of the region’s landscape. Reportedly, people enjoy the wilderness, they “live” it: the river banks and the cranes’ colonies make the region an attractive destination for tourists.
relax in these recreational areas “free of charge” and plunge into an environment which
she calls “unique” (“savita”).

The interview flows now towards the topic of border crossings. For Gabija, tourism constitutes one of the main reasons why Kaliningraders travel across the frontier. From what we saw – she reports – Russians like the local food and nature very much. I note that she refers to those on the other side as “Russian citizens” (Lit. “rusų piliečiai”), which conveys a sense of regard, but may also hint to some coldness. She explains that the region serves often as a transit place for tourists heading to Belarus or Druskininkai. Business represents the second reason for which Russians come to Lithuania, according to the informant. I would notice that Gerda did not cite tourism at all when talking about the border and focused mostly on smuggling. As to the movement towards Russia, Gabija enumerates low-cost purchases, cheaper fuel and visiting relatives as the main motivations of the Lithuanians. Personally, she does not have any kinperson there, but she knows many youngsters who study in Lithuania and travel to Russia to visit their families, for instance.

Smuggling represents another practice linked with the border narrative. In an entertaining tone, Gabija tells us some stories of how the locals participate in the illegal trade, their adventures and misadventures with kontrabanda. Her accounts show smuggling as a trans-generational practice, involving families, adults, as well as some of her school students. She tells us that the youngsters feel attracted by “the business”, as they call it, for the money and reputation it earns them. However, such practice also bears some negative consequences. Basing on her work experience in the local schools, Gabija recounts having seen some pupils leaving their studies and devoting all of themselves to smuggling. Sometimes they were discovered and fined or convicted for it. If they accomplished their studies and looked for a proper job, they could have better perspectives and live a safer life – she observes serious.

243 Ibid., 04:33, 05:25.
244 Ibid., 06:00.
245 Ibid., 05:55.
246 Ibid., 07:05. Druskininkai is a renowned Lithuanian thermal source and the birth place of M. K. Čiurlionis, Lithuanian romantic composer and painter.
247 Ibid., 07:45.
248 Ibid., 08:00.
249 Ibid., 09:32, 10:56.
250 Gabija uses precisely the word “garbė”, Eng. “honour”, “prestige”.
How does she see the Lithuanian-Russian border? “It is a border with Europe”, Gabija replies. As such – she continues – it should give the citizens of Kaliningrad a real opportunity to cooperate and communicate (“bendrauti”) with other European countries. We apprehend from her that numerous cross-border projects are underway, especially in the cultural field: most commonly, music and dance associations tour between Russia and Lithuania. Gabija herself dances in a folk group which sometimes performs in Kaliningrad. I believe that such cultural practices tend to “blur” the State border and hint to a region which actually transcends it. Is such idea of oneness the legacy of a long-living spirit of the region, which preceded the war and survived the Soviet years? For the time being, I cannot reply this question.

Meanwhile, Gabija frankly comments on the border regime: “If the border were open, it would be a huge advantage to Lithuania – not just to Russia”. In her border narrative, I frequently spot the word “bendravimas”, meaning “contact”, “communication”, “interaction”: I believe that it reveals and forms part of the “one region” narrative. Concerning her personal experience, she recounts the difficulties and intricacies of going to the other side. The visa is necessary for both the Kaliningraders and Lithuanian borderland inhabitants. Indeed, people in Vilkyškiai and in the small village of Piktupėnai do not enjoy the status of border residents – she explains. The main issue with the visa lies in its cost – “especially for Russian citizens”, Gabija underlines.

When her parents were in school age they would normally go on trips or to the cinema to Sovetsk – she narrates. However, they “withdrew” in the Nineties. Gabija’s account gives me a sense of resignation, as if her parents had reacted to the changing border meaning by renouncing crossing it. Besides, I have an impression that going to Kaliningrad may have grown useless or uninteresting to them, now that they can find in Lithuania what they sought in the nearby town. “They have no time” to cross the border, she concludes.

When we ask the informant about her experience of Sovetsk, she mentions the state of the architectural heritage right away, starting a discourse that will reappear in
many of the following interviews. In sharp contrast with her description of the nature on the Lithuanian side, the buildings in Sovetsk fall apart and lie in decadence. I feel sorry for such abandonment and degeneration – Gabija says. 258 “That was Tūžė”, she reproaches. 259 Our informant recalls the ancient Prussian heritage, embodied by the red brick houses and the beautiful sculptures adorning their balconies – in contrast with the Soviet-era blocks of flats. 260 Like when she told us about the uniqueness of the Lithuanian greenery, she puts it in terms of “approaches” (Lit. “požiūris”), a term which I deem as bearing a cultural connotation. 261 As a reason for such cultural difference, Gabija adduces that the Lithuanians experienced private property in their history, which allegedly would make them care for the place they dwell: they will not have any other place except their home – Gabija says. On the contrary, in Russia, they do not cherish their abode because they know there might be a new one – she illustrates. 262

Connecting with the Prussian material cultural heritage, Dr. Jurga Jonutytė asks our respondent if the borderland still conserves its German spirit: “I do not know”, Gabija replies laughing, looking slightly embarrassed. Concerning this, she tells us that exchange programmes for students have been operating between the schools and some institutes in Germany. 263 Pupils from Germany travel to the borderland to study and “see the remains” of their family history: a grandfather’s farmstead, the village their ancestors lived in and so on. 264 Apart from this, she makes no further reference to the ancient dwellers of the land.

Towards the end of her interview, Gabija shares with us an interesting image. Talking about her sense of belonging, she recalls she had to travel to some major city for her studies. Finally, she returned to the borderland to work in the school. 265 She shows strong attachment to the pasienis: “I was offered a job here and I was really happy ... [to work here and] help the others”. 266 Still, her following assertions suggest that her sense of belonging goes even beyond the region’s boundaries. When I imagine

258 Ibid., 15:06.
259 Ibid., 15:47.
260 Ibid., 15:30. The architecture is often at the centre of culturally-framed identity discourses, as we will see also in Dalia’s “Lithuanian VS Russian farmsteads” narrative.
261 Ibid., 15:58.
262 Ibid., 16.05.
263 Ibid., 22:40.
264 Ibid., 23:27.
265 Ibid., 27:00. As I mentioned in the introduction, having a place where to return is crucial to a person’s sense of place.
266 Ibid., 27:15.
myself in place, I see Lithuania – Gabija states. She has travelled all over the country and thus has appreciated its tininess. “[Lithuania] is all home”, she states fondly. In four hours you can cross it from side to side, while in Russia, for example, distances are much wider – she comments. Her view appears in contrast with Gerda’s account of the “long and boring” trip from Kaunas to Jurbarkas. Gabija uses a powerful word to describe what she considers Lithuania’s value: she says, “it is as one, a whole” (Lit. “vienetas”). Gabija thus depicts the place where she belongs as a part of the Lithuania whole. I start envisaging that several understandings of Lithuania Minor coexist, which may reflect in narratives on multiple levels of identity, i.e. the local, the regional, the national ones. As Gabija has suggested by saying “pas mus”, personal identity goes hand in hand with place definitions. I expect I will come across a number of different “we” while proceeding on my research path.

267 Ibid., 27:33.
268 Ibid., 27:35.
269 Ibid., 28:08.
3. Making oneself at home through culture, the *anima* of Lithuania Minor

The word “anima” comes from the Latin and means “breath”, “vital force”, “spirit”, “soul” (like “atma” in Hindi).\(^{270}\) I chose the term to describe the *breath* of Lithuania Minor, which emerges from this informant’s narrative as a region living through history. During the present interview, the border land (Lit. “kraštas”) also appears as the place with which Dalia, our respondent, identifies.\(^{271}\) Her story is an example of how participating into the *cultural life of the region* – as she puts it – can play a primary role in making people at home.\(^{272}\)

Dalia is a woman in her forties who works in a school of the Pagėgiai municipality. She comes originally from Šiauliai, a town in northern Lithuania. In the early 2000s, Dalia moved to Bitėnai, her husband’s village. Dalia’s story starts from the time when she taught in a small Lithuanian school in Ragainė, currently Neman, in the Kaliningrad region. The town stands by the border, facing the beautiful Rambynas park. As it was for Gerda when talking about Tilžė, this informant uses the Lithuanian name of such ancient Prussian town throughout her interview. She would teach Lithuanian language in the framework of a project promoted by the Lithuanian Department for National Minorities.\(^{273}\) Interestingly, all her students participated in the language classes – not just the Lithuanian-speaking ones – yet, Dalia notices, not all considered themselves as Lithuanians. Some had a stronger motivation and more familiarity with the language than others – she tells –, but all strove to learn Lithuanian to communicate with school children on the other side of the border. Dalia says she and her colleagues aimed at fostering their pupils’ *Lithuanianness* (Lit. “Lietuviškumas”): they did so by organising celebrations for the national festivities and instilling their students with the Lithuanian culture.\(^{274}\)

She narrates that her teaching at the Ragainė school constituted the only reason for which she would cross the border. Travelling to Kaliningrad would cost time and energies, which Dalia devoted to her teaching “mission” only. She recalls spending hours at the crossing point, especially when the border guards did not know about her

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\(^{271}\) Eng. “border”, “brink”, “margin”. I deliberately translate it as “borderland”, since I suppose that it does not refer to the demarcating line itself, rather to the land surrounding it – as it was for “pasienis”.

\(^{272}\) Dalia (teacher), interview with Dr. Jurga Jonutytė, January 25, 2013, Piktupėnai Main School, Municipality of Pagėgiai, 50:25.

\(^{273}\) Ibid., 02:05.

\(^{274}\) Ibid., 05:35. This word will recur later in an identity discourse based on the local architecture, namely the Lithuanian farmsteads. Dalia tells us that the children’s families would participate in the celebrations of February 16th and March 11th, which mark the 1918 and the 1990 national independence respectively.
work. Precisely, she puts it “when the guards were not ours” (Lit. “musiškai”), which conveys a sense of “complicity” between Dalia and the guards who, indeed, knew why he was travelling to Kaliningrad. Once the Department’s project was over, she never went to the other side again. She and her husband cannot understand why so many people go purchasing cheaper food, medicines or fuel in Kaliningrad when they can buy everything in their own country. “If we are Lithuanians and live in Lithuania, then why should we ever spend our money somewhere else?”, she echoes her husband. Since she has not crossed the Nemunas for years, Dalia reports some stories she heard from the elders concerning life in the borderland during the Soviet times. According to what she recounts, seemingly Sovetsk and the Lithuanian border town of Pagėgiai were well connected still in the Nineties, with buses travelling every 10-15 minutes. Again we hear that Sovetsk would be the main city in the area under the communist rule, also because it was the closest one. People from the Lithuanian SSR used to go there to the cinema or the hairdresser, to buy sophisticated clothes and enjoy the city’s buoyant cultural life: allegedly, people went to Sovetsk “to get more educated, cultivated” (Lit. “kultūrintis”). On the contrary, the near town of Tauragė was not so meaningful to the locals. I would like to notice that such account does not concern our informant’s personal experience, which reveals her scarce – or even non-existent – relation to Sovetsk.

Going back to her own Kaliningrad experience, Dalia remembers taking her pupils on excursions to the Prussian castle in Ragainė. In the past, it must have been an imposing building, visible in the distance. Today it lies in “miserable conditions” – she deplores. Obviously, the building fell apart because nobody even planned any maintenance work. They turned it into “a rubbish dump” (Lit. “šiukšlinai”). The bushes and twigs overgrew and engulfed what remained of the castle – Dalia denounces recalling her school trips. However, she admits that she has no idea of what the site may look like now, as she did not travel to Ragainė in years.

275 Ibid., 08:03.
276 Ibid., 19:15, 20:20.
277 Ibid., 20:10.
278 Ibid., 28:05.
279 The town of Tauragė lies about 23 km far from the researched area. Sovetsk is approximately 18 km away and Vilkyškiai and Piktupėnai seem to lean more towards this latter.
280 “Buvo vargana padėtis”. Ibid., 20:32.
282 Ibid., 21:30. We will find the word “šiukšlinai” also in Vaiva’s and her husband’s narrative of the material cultural heritage in Russia.
Always drawing from her teaching experience, Dalia narrates how she and her colleagues would travel the borderland and try to have the children step into some Lithuanian village.\textsuperscript{283} Namely, she refers to the households (Lit. “\textit{sodybos}”) which some “astray” (sic) Lithuanians set up after the war.\textsuperscript{284} She describes these people has those who settled on the Russian side of the Nemunas in the 1950s and 1960s. In her opinion, everybody could distinguish such Lithuanian farmsteads from the near “Russian” houses for their \textit{well-kept surroundings} – the flowerbeds nicely arranged, the path clean and orderly, and so on.\textsuperscript{285} “Sometimes you just approach the gates and you immediately see that it is a Lithuanian farmstead”, she states proudly.\textsuperscript{286} Like Gabija, Dalia frames such discourse in terms of \textit{cultural differences} epitomised by the word \textit{požiūris} (Eng. “approach”).\textsuperscript{287} “If I own a house, I must also embellish, tidy its surroundings”.\textsuperscript{288} “Well, we know how to show our culture”, she furthers.\textsuperscript{289} In the LTSSR – she tells – those with no “Lithuanian roots” lived mostly in blocks of flats (Lit. “\textit{daugiabučiai}”). Allegedly, such people did not feel responsible for the maintenance of a place they would never own: “I am not supposed to clean and fix what is not mine”.\textsuperscript{290} “Everybody knows that Lithuanians [take care of their home surroundings], during the autumn and early in spring, out amid the mud, the copse, wearing galoshes” – while “they”, the others, do not have such approach.\textsuperscript{291} “Maybe that is why we are different”.\textsuperscript{292} Interestingly, both Gabija and Dalia mention the Soviet-era block of flats in opposition to the nature in Lithuania – the former – and the idyllic Lithuanian cottages – the latter. I believe that such images, together with mentions of the region’s red bricks houses, serve as epitomes of the Russian/Soviet, Lithuanian and ancient Prussian traditions respectively.

Our informant narrates how, since she moved there, the history and culture of Lithuania Minor have become her “everyday life” (Lit. “\textit{kasdienybė}”),\textsuperscript{293} thanks to

\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{283}] “… \textit{pataikydami į lietuviškus kiemus}”, literally “trying to step into some Lithuanian court/household”.\textit{Ibid.}, 22:10.
\item[\textsuperscript{284}] \textit{Ibid.}, 22:25.
\item[\textsuperscript{285}] \textit{Ibid.}, 22:30.
\item[\textsuperscript{286}] \textit{Ibid.}, 22:28.
\item[\textsuperscript{287}] \textit{Ibid.}, 23:00. As we have seen, in Gabija’s narrative the cultural differences allegedly manifested themselves through the state of the nature in Kaliningrad and in Lithuania.
\item[\textsuperscript{288}] \textit{Ibid.}, 23:45.
\item[\textsuperscript{289}] \textit{Ibid.}, 23:00.
\item[\textsuperscript{290}] \textit{Ibid.}, 23:14.
\item[\textsuperscript{291}] \textit{Ibid.}, 23:45.
\item[\textsuperscript{292}] “\textit{Savi žmonės}”, literally “people of our own kind”.\textit{Ibid.}, 23:53.
\item[\textsuperscript{293}] Dalia reiterates such expression at the beginning and at the end of this narrative thread.\textit{Ibid.}, 13:12, 17:42.
\end{itemize}
some acquired relatives who involved her in their interests and activities. She acquaints us with the story of the Martynas Jankus Museum, which enshrines a years-long collection of articles and information on the notable publisher of Lithuania Minor – about whom I have written earlier. 294 Years before – Dalia tells us – one of its founders, a woman, had got in touch with an old neighbour of the Jankus family, who had moved to the West leaving behind their ancestors’ tombs. 295 Through such neighbour, the Jankus’ had learned that a woman from Bitėnai was collecting materials concerning their forefather; thus, they asked her to take care of their family graves: “They wrote letters, they looked for some contact (Lit. “ryšys”, also “connection”), so that she would keep an eye [on the tombs], that she would take care of them (Lit. “prižiūrėti”). 296

Similarly, culture shapes Dalia’s identity discourse. Asked what constitutes the essence of the region for her, she distinguishes “the people of the borderland” between those who care for the local cultural heritage and those who do not, clearly identifying with the former. 297 The desire to nurture this land’s Lithuanianess (Lit. “lietuviškumas”) 298 brings them together – she declares. Culture means so much to the local community, that it “lived in poverty” for few years before the new, beautiful Culture Centre in Pagėgiai was built – Dalia continues. In that period, people were left without a place capacious enough to host cultural events. “People missed their cultural life very much”. When eventually they thronged the new concert hall, seeing the crowd of the participants brought about “a joy beyond words”. They felt “no longer nook” (Lit. “užkampis”), she explains. 299 Dalia also speaks about the Bitėnai community, in Lithuanian “bendruomenė”, which recurs frequently in her narrative. “Everybody supports cultural activities and always devotes efforts to them”, she continues 300. In the end, therefore, “everything tends towards a better life”. 301

Talking about the identity of the region, our informant discloses two intriguing narratives. The first one stems from her account of Sovetsk and the communist times and

295 Ibid., 14:24.
296 Ibid., 15:18. I will discuss the meaning of such practice and the transnational nature of the ancient graveyards in the final part of this thesis.
297 We will find a similar distinction also in Vaiva’s interview report.
298 Ibid., 37:36, the same idea that she strove to foster in her pupils from Ragainė.
299 Ibid., 44:46. The word “užkampis” means “excluded”, “in a secluded corner”. The concert hall was packed, but what mattered was that they were “all together”, Dalia says. Ibid., 45:07.
300 Ibid., 47:42.
301 Ibid., 48:55.
concerns the “tradition” of smuggling. 302 There was a time when people in Kaliningrad could not always purchase fresh meat and dairy products; therefore, they “would run” from Sovetsk to Pagėgiai to buy sausages and butter – Dalia tells. 303 In turn, Sovetsk resonated among the Lithuanians for its famous buns and sweets. “Life in the borderland was in full swing”, Dalia stresses. 304 It seems that a sense of belonging to the same region across the border existed: “Before the 1940s there was no strict frontier”, she illustrates – just a few points from where the guards patrolled the border, especially on market days. 305 Going backwards, Dalia has learned that it was prohibited to smuggle sausages from Lithuania to Tilsit roughly until the ban on the Latin alphabet was in force (1904) (sic). 306 Still, people bootlegged the meat products in exchange for Lithuanian books and newspapers. The line (Lit. “riba”) where they hid the smuggled goods was at the intersection between Panemunė and Ragainė (sic) – she tells. 307 “Contraband … grew deep roots in this borderland” and now forms an integral part of the place – Dalia tells us. Its contents changed, but the smuggling practice “lives forever” (Lit. “amžinai gyvena”). 308 She shows no personal involvement, but an affectionate tone. The tradition of kontrabanda informs the spirit of the region: as such, it also forms part of Dalia’s sense of place.

The second narrative by which Dalia further expresses the identity of the region belongs to the next interview, where she participated with Julija, our next informant. She tells us about “the former border”, referring to that between Lithuania Minor and Lithuania Proper. 309 As I am not fully familiar with it, I suspect that such ancient frontier may correspond to Gerda’s “Jurbarkas border”; indeed, it is. A couple kilometres from Tauragė – Dalia narrates – stands a shrine devoted to a book carrier (Lit. “knygnešys”: that is the place where Lithuania ends and Lithuania Minor begins. Lauksargiai (German “Laugsargen”, former East Prussia), situated about 10 km from Tauragė, constitutes the first settlement within the territory of Lithuania Minor – she

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302 Dalia introduces the story of smuggling by describing it as “customary” (Lit. “įprastas”).
303 Ibid., 29:35.
304 Ibid., 30:28.
305 Ibid., 30:39.
306 Ibid., 31:11.
307 Panemunė is a small Lithuanian town connected to Sovetsk by the Queen Louise bridge – today one of the border crossing points. Panemunė is situated approximately 10 km from Ragainė (Neman), which lies by the Nemunas river and, as I have said, faces the woods of the Rambynas regional park. I may suppose that my informant mistakenly referred to Ragainė rather than to Sovetsk.
308 Ibid., 32:12.
309 Lit. “buvusi siena”, literally “the were-border”.

Also Klaipėda belongs to Lithuania Minor: I find it curious that she calls the borderland “Klaipėdos kraštas” (Eng. “the Klaipėda region”), although the area administratively belongs to the Tauragė County, not to the Klaipėda one. Hence I learn that the “kraštas” I am studying lies within such ancient, invisible border. Dalia believes Lithuania Minor was peculiar for its distinct architecture and the proper shape of its farmsteads. “Maybe that’s why we are interesting”, Dalia ponders. When you travel there from Lithuania, as you cross the “were-border” you immediately feel that this is that region – she emphasises. I think our respondent here has best expressed the spirit of the place, with its overlapping histories, narratives and memories.


Julija, our next informant, will further specify that the border of Lithuania Minor stretches just “behind Smalininkai” (German Schmalleningken), 15 km far from Jurbarkas.

Ibid., 14:28.

Ibid., 14:32.
4. Vilkyškiai re-conquers its past: bringing the cultural heritage back to light

Julija, approximately 40 years old, works in the same school as Dalia. She begins her story by explaining the origin of her relation with the borderland: “I was born in the village of Opstainiai. … My birth place is there, in that little village”. The hamlet of Opstainiai lies within the territory of Vilkyškiai. As she continues to tell, I can appreciate how the village represents the main reference in her narrative, her locus. Julija narrates that she has spent nearly all her life in Vilkyškiai. Her family lives there. After completing her studies in Šiauliai, she came back, as usually happened in the Soviet years. The authorities guaranteed that “the young specialist would return to his or her village”, she says. I returned to Vilkyškiai, I returned to my parents”, she narrates. Since then, Julija has worked in the schools of Lumpėnai and Piktupėnai. “I did not run anywhere far away from here”, she smiles. She considers herself a Vilkyškietė, i.e. “from Vilkyškiai”, in general a person from the village. Indeed, the city never attracted her: “I can’t imagine how one should live shut in their home … go out on the asphalt”. “I never felt ashamed to say that I come from a village!”, she declares.

Our language, the way we speak and pronounce words can tell much of the place we come from. Concerning this, people allegedly think that she comes from Jurbarkas for her accent and intonation. She sounds proud, probably because her parents come from Jurbarkas, as she acknowledges shortly after. Julija is an Evangelical Lutheran. However, she may have no German blood in her veins – she says, apparently by ways to dissolve the topic. Her faith explains her connections with specific places (and people) in the region, above all to the Lutheran Church in Vilkyškiai. Here I learn that her parents have been participating in the renovation and guardianship of the religious site. During the Soviet years – Julija recounts – the building was used as a granary. “It was tragic”, she comments. She still sees it before her eyes. They had set up a penthouse to store chemicals and fertilisers: the fans droned with no pause. “I can still

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314 Julija (school director), interview with Dr. Jurga Jonutytė, 25 January, 2013, Piktupėnai Main School, municipality of Pagėgiai, 01:12.
315 Ibid., 00:48.
316 To put it simply, “Vilkyškietė” is for Vilkyškiai the equivalent of Londoner for London.
317 Ibid., 02:05.
318 Ibid., 08:05.
319 Ibid., 09:05. Reportedly, people recognise her dialect as Jurbarkietiškas, meaning “typical of the town of Jurbarkas”.
320 The renovation works were carried out in the framework of a local action group (“vietos veiklos grupė”) project and received the support of European funds – Julija illustrates.
321 Ibid., 28:31.
hear that noise”, she grieves. Listening to Julija’s description of the perennial smell and noise permeating the walls of the church and her memory, I cannot help recalling T. S. Eliot’s verses: “Here is no water but only rock ... If there were water we should stop and drink/Amongst the rock one cannot stop or think/Sweat is dry [dried by the huge ventilators] and feet are in the sand [in this case, in the grain] ... Here one can neither stand nor lie nor sit/There is not even silence in the mountains [due to the whirr of ventilators and tractors]/But dry sterile thunder without rain”. 322 They had stripped the place of all the elements which made it look like a church. 323

“Then the time came also for our little church”, Julija narrates with an affectionate tone. Before starting the reconstruction works, they had to clean the site thoroughly to eliminate any trace of grain. The priest had his room established in the former penthouse. The smell of chemicals had penetrated the walls and the ground: it was perceivable still for a long time – she remembers. I would like to notice the sensual quality of Julija’s description: she can still see the church as it used to be, hear the ventilators buzz and smell the enduring stench of chemicals. In 1993, the church was finally returned to its religious function. 324 Today people can stop and enjoy the shelter that the church offers to them. 325 The place now resonates all over Lithuania for its summer organ music festivals: people travel there from anywhere to celebrate weddings and christenings, enchanted by the church’s aura – Julija concludes. 326 The number of Lutherans participating in the masses floats between ten and thirty people. However, the Evangelical Church of Vilkyškiai represents a space where not just Lutherans, but also Catholics, the locals and people from all over Lithuania can attend. 327 As she proudly states, the church is “open to everybody” 328: they even offered the local Catholics to celebrate their masses there when the Catholic Church was under renovation. 329

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323 At that time, Julija recounts, they would celebrate the religious services (sic) in the building where the eldership (seniūnija) is now located. Julija, interview, 31:03. I must admit that, sometimes, I find it difficult to ascertain if Julija’s memories refer to the Soviet years or to the Nineties.
324 Būgienė 2013, 112.
325 Ibid., 113.
326 Another important event for the community consists in the Bishop’s visits, which allegedly attract believers of different confessions. Julija proudly informs us that Mindaugas Sabutis, the Lutheran Bishop of Vilnius, comes originally from the County of Tauragė; also, he has served as a priest in Vilkyškiai for years.
327 Ibid., 114.
328 “Ne uždara”, Eng. “[it is] not closed”. Julija, interview, 32:28, 33:49. Julija depicts the local community as very active, celebrating religious festivities in a traditional way. Ibid., 07:30. Like in Dalia’s narrative, the society (Lit. “bendruomenė”) is at the core of our respondent’s social relations: the
The story of the church seems to reflect the transformation from a village to “a little town” (Lit. “miestelis”) which Vilkyškiai went through. Also, the municipal tourist information office was set up near the Lutheran Church. “Now we realise that we live in a beautiful and unique place”, she observes. The Rambynas Regional Park contributed to the process, as it coordinates any development concerning the local landscape and heritage according to *ethno-cultural principles* – Julija explains –, aiming to preserve the *peculiarity* (Lit. “savitumas”) of the region’s nature and architecture. She recalls when she was a student (seemingly during the Soviet period). Then, the local dimension, the culture and history of the borderland went mostly unknown, neglected – she asserts. Indeed, students were taught the history of the USSR, its culture and establishment. Learning by heart the names of the central politburo members, whose portraits hang in her class, was a usual homework for her. Historical sites would lie in decay, sometimes well into the Nineties – Julija tells. This recalls Gabija’s and Dalia’s reports of the buildings in Kaliningrad. In most cases, the local heritage went unseen and was brought to light only later. Julija remembers going on a trip to Vilkyškiai as a high school student: the teachers would take her class to see a fort hill. “We climbed up on that only-God-knows slope … nothing in that place suggested that a fort hill actually stood there”, she evokes. “We did not realise that we were on a fort hill, that it was a famous place”. I would label Julija’s narrative of the cultural heritage as a story of “re-discovery”. I will say more about the recuperation of the heritage when discussing the results of the interview analysis.

After the Lutheran Church and the fort hills, Julija mentions another interesting place in the borderland, the house of writer Johannes Bobrowski in the village of Mociškiai. Bobrowski (1917–1965) was originally from Tilsit and spent his youth between East Prussia and Mociškiai, where his grandmother lived. Julija remembers that people would call her dwelling “the old environs”. The village administration community thus appears as expressing itself by participating into the cultural (in Julija´ discourse also religious) life.

329 It would be interesting to compare and contrast her view of an open Church with Gerda’s account of a place that in no way could belong to “them”, as they are Catholics.
330 Ibid., 07:50.
331 Ibid., 03:08.
332 Lit. “piliakalnis”. There are many such mounds in the borderland. The Vilkyškiai fort hill “was the first one”, Julija says, then came that in Opstainiai and Šereitlaukis.
333 Ibid., 05:17.
334 Ibid., 06:17.
devoted him the road where the house stands and a commemorative board. The reference to Bobrowski opens up to a brief but valuable reflection concerning the multi-ethnic and -cultural history of the region, a topic which the writer explored in his writings. Dr. Jurga Jonutytė asks our respondent about the Jewish presence in the region, often mentioned in the author’s books. Nor Julija nor Dalia, who joined the talk, seem to remember that many Jews lived in the borderland, like in the majority of Lithuanian towns and villages before World War II. Also Julija appears reticent about the issue: they might have had to hide – she replies –, or they retreated somewhere in an attempt to save themselves and their families.

As to the other original dwellers, very few are left in Vilkyškiai – Julija reports. She uses exactly words semantically related to the Lithuanian verb “likti”, Eng. “to remain”, “to be left”. Also, I deem interesting that she calls them “the true dwellers”, using the adjective “tikras”. Hence she refers to the men and women who lived here before the war. A few still live in Pagėgiai by the Lutheran Church and in Šišutę – she recounts. Our respondent recalls that, when she was younger, the word “vokietis” (“German”), would bear a negative meaning. Today, such connotation has faded together with many of the original dwellers and the majority of Vilkyškiečiai seem to respond with respect both about the old dwellers of Lithuania Minor and their cultural footprint – unlike during the Soviet era. “The people in Jurbarkas say that we are Germans”, she tells referring to the dwellers of Lithuania Minor.

Julija closes her narrative by telling how her school eventually became a special place for its students, who identify with it. It sounds like she, Dalia and their

336 Besides, Dr. Jurga Jonutytė and her colleagues observe that, curiously, no Jews figured in the local register already before the war.
337 Concerning the demolition of the Lutheran Church, Būgienė notes that “the sacrilegious act of the cross overthrow by the Soviet authorities in the narrative tradition of the local society is signified by pure folkloric models: the story about the sacrilege executioners’ further fate [one froze, one was hung, while we do not know about the third, Būgienė 113] repeats almost literally specific scenes from the sad end of the Jews or other immoral people [sic!] – none of whom died of their own death nor survived ... People saw it as God’s punishment”. Būgienė 2013, 113.
338 Eng. “correct”, “actual”. In her interview, Vaiva will also call the Prussian Lithuanians “the real masters of this land”.
339 Julija admits that she does not know much about the original inhabitants of the borderland. Her knowledge is fragmented: she heard once that in Šišutę they had a society called the “Heide bendruomene” and knew that in Vilkyškiai a family lived near the school. Many times, the Prussian Lithuanians are members of philanthropic organizations (Lit. “labdaros”) – she adds. In town you meet their descendants more often: they go to the cemeteries on festivities – Julija explains.
341 Julija, interview, 15:34.
342 In this part of her narrative, Julija also discusses the social question in the small villages of the area, touching upon the topics of emigration, village school budgets, the increase in withdrawals from studies.
colleagues are carrying out a veritable mission to educate all their students and to keep them involved: “Everybody is important to us”, she says. Our pupils enjoy special care as they study in such a small village school – she furthers. By breeding each of them, they have seen a “sense of community” (Lit. “bendruomeniškumas”) grow and permeate the school – she boasts. Also outsiders have acknowledged it. By organising events and meetings at the local Culture House, teachers and assistants strive to cultivate connections not just with the students, but also with their families. It seems that their efforts are rewarded in the end. Every time when they take their students on trips and meet with the staff of other schools, their students allegedly stand out. “Our kids are completely different”, Julija concludes. In the course of the upcoming interviews, I will hear other informants claiming the locals’ uniqueness and will later reflect on the meaning of such utterances.

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343 Ibid., 52:40.
344 Ibid., 54:41.
345 Ibid., 01:03:53.
5. “Nationality never mattered to us”: of aliens settling in a foreign land
The interview with Vaiva and her husband (both in their seventies) has marked a crucial point in my research. From the very beginning, it appeared rich in interesting aspects, whose analysis required special attention from me. I believe that the narrative which they shared with me and Dr. Jurga Jonutytė has contributed to my understanding of some major discourses which I have encountered in the interviews so far.

We meet Vaiva in her home in Vilkyškiai. She warmly welcomes us with coffee and sweets and appears willing to share her experience with us. “From where may I start telling – maybe how we arrived here?”. Like few early newcomers, her family moved here in 1944-1945. Vaiva uses the term “persikraustyti”, which means “to move”, but also “to remove”. This latter meaning connects with the idea of eviction, a leading theme in the post-war narratives in the borderland. They came from Veliuona, about 80 km east from Vilkyškiai, their belongings and children packed on a carriage. She does not tell us what pushed them to leave, yet I may suppose that living in Veliuona had become too dangerous. They roamed the region north and south, fleeing the Soviet soldiers’ assaults which spread beyond the Nemunas river. It sounds like an odyssey through a post-war landscape.

During their peripeties, from time to time Vaiva’s family made its home in an abandoned house; the owners had left behind all their inessential belongings in their precipitous departure. Such stories are common to many families of newcomers and inform their narratives of post-war eviction. The house represents the space where

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346 Vaiva (former newcomer in Vilkyškiai), interview with Dr. Jurga Jonutytė, March 1, 2013, Vilkyškiai, 09:23. At the beginning, Vaiva touched upon some topics which she will further as her narrative unfolds, such as her life-long work in the cultural field, the state of the heritage in Kaliningrad and the uniqueness of Vilkyškiai people.

347 I could not retrieve why exactly Vaiva’s family left its place. As I wrote, many were attracted by the borderland’s suitability to farming. Yet plausibly widespread violence and the strife between stribai (the pro-Soviet armed civilian squads) and partisans made it an unsafe place to live. I carried out an internet research and found sources about the elimination of Jews in Veliuona and about an attempted assault to the town (November 23, 1945). International Jewish Cemetery Project. International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies, “Veliuona: Kaunas”, <http://www.iajgs.org/cemetery/lithuania/veliuona.html>; Versme.lt, “Veliuona”, <http://www.versme.lt/veliuona.htm>; see also Terleckas 2013, <http://www.xxiamzius.lt/numerai/2013/04/16/krzyzk_01.html>.

348 From Veliuona they reached Mociškiai, a village located 4 km west from Vilkyškiai, separated from it by the river Jūra. All the bridges had been wrecked down, so thence they had to travel to Tauragė (30 km to the north), where they could cross the Jūra.

349 Vaiva shares with us an evocative account. Upon settling in an abandoned German manor in the village of Jogaudai, she – a child at that time – and her grandmother were running from room to room looking for toy dolls. Once they reached the basement, the game stopped abruptly as they found four dead Russian soldiers – “At least I think they were Russians.. I do not remember exactly now”, Vaiva recalls. Vaiva, interview, 15:05. Vaiva narrates that the soldiers were first buried in a cemetery set up not far from the new place her family had found. Subsequently, the authorities transferred the remains to Vilkyškiai.
such stories crystallise. It is the start and the end of the exodus of both the newcomers and the old dwellers. The new settlers came to the borderland after leaving their abodes. In the borderland, they sought shelter, a place where to start their story under a new roof. Narratives of settling in a new place are also relevant to the fate of the old dwellers and the inhabitants of East Prussia. Seeing the house as the *locus* of the post-war years and the experience of eviction as universal allows me to see some commonality between the borderland and (what would then become) Kaliningrad. Precisely, the common trait consists in the *origin* of its population. Later in this interview, Vaiva will give us hints about such shared dimension.

Eventually, the family settled in Vilkyškiai. To my eyes, such event marked a new beginning for them. Seemingly the destruction of war spared most of the village. The post-war years proved tough for its inhabitants, striving to live together to secure their families and poor belongings from the raids of the Red Army – as Vaiva tells us. Her memories seem to turn happier as she recalls starting attending the local school. Very slowly, a routine was put in place: life went back to normality.

Our respondent comments that very few of the original dwellers returned. In most cases, only orphans were left in their place. Some new settlers adopted the “little Germans” and brought them up as their own children – Vaiva remembers. 350 Also her parents took one with them: he was a Šišioniškis, a Prussian Lithuanian. 351 She recalls that her father considered the Prussian Lithuanians “the true masters of this land” – quite an uncommon stance to be found during the Soviet times. 352 He admired them and passed such admiration to his daughter – our informant tells. 353 She reports the case of an old dweller who claimed her property but could not have her family house back because she was not entitled to the Lithuanian citizenship. 354 “I feel sorry [for her]”, Vaiva comments: “It is their property”. 355 “They were closer to the Germans than to the Lithuanians – yet, this was their land”, she adds. 356 Her special consideration for the

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350 Vaiva, interview, 53:50.
351 See also Jonutytė 2013, 89.
352 Lit. “*tikri šeimininkai to krašto*”. Vaiva, interview, 28:52. See also Jonutytė 2013, 97.
353 Vaiva, interview, 29:45. See also Jonutytė 2013, 90. Vaiva explains her father’s views by saying that he had inherited “a superior intellect” from his mother, a Polish aristocrat of refined manners.
354 According to our interviewee’s words, the claimant must possess the Lithuanian citizenship – which is awarded and not acquired by *ius soli*. Vaiva, interview, 01:05:05.
355 Ibid., 01:05:13.
356 Ibid., 29:10.
original dwellers pervades Vaiva’s narratives of the region’s history, its cultural heritage, memory and identity.

Talking about her ties with Vilkyškiai, Vaiva’s participation in the local cultural activities seems particularly significant, besides her neighbourhood relations. She worked as an event director at the Culture Centre for twenty years. Among the many events which the Centre would organise, she recalls the pipe organ concerts they held in the Lutheran Church. 357 On such occasions, Šišioniškiai showed up to meet each other: indeed, they have maintained their networks in the area – she says.

Aiming to show Vilkyškiečiai’s extraordinary sensitivity to the history and cultural heritage of the borderland, Vaiva tells us about the reconstruction of the bell tower of the Catholic Church. Allegedly, the locals warmly welcomed the initiative and largely participated in it. Like in Dalia’s case, Vaiva’s words suggest that culture (understood as the cultural activities and heritage) has the power to revitalise the community, connecting people with the land’s past. 358 Furthermore, Vilkyškiai emerges from Vaiva’s accounts as playing a central role in promoting cultural events. 359

When working at the Cultural Centre, Vaiva organised some “thematic evenings” – as she defines them. 360 Everyone had the chance to tell their story – precisely, how they ended up in Vilkyškiai and what the place looked like then. It was a unique event in the region – Vaiva comments –, people would say: “I have never seen anything like this”. 361 This triggers some considerations on the importance of storytelling, a core issue in my research. Possibly, narrating their stories would help the newcomers find their place, overcoming the chaos caused to their lives by the war. I speculate that Vaiva’s narrative evenings may have marked the start of their tellers’ new lives. 362 Vaiva’s initiative is noticeable: indeed, we should remember that narratives in public places were strictly controlled by the Soviet system. Only family could provide the intimacy and secrecy to share one’s own story. 363

357 The Germans donated the pipe organs to the Lutheran Church – Vaiva tells us. Ibid., 33:21.
358 As it was for Dalia, Vaiva seems to see culture as keeping the community active and involved – especially the youth, which is fading. Reportedly, youngsters suffer from unemployment and the lack of social events.
359 Soon we will learn that, during the Soviet period, the village was at the head of the local state farm (Lit. “Vilkyškių tarybinis ūkis”). I believe that the settlement seemingly claims “a legacy of centrality” in the cultural sphere. Concerning this topic, see farther the interview with Elena.
360 Vaiva, interview, 16:08.
361 Ibid., 16:27.
362 I see a therapeutic power in storytelling and will discuss the question widely in the conclusions.
363 “In totalitarian regimes ... State-sponsored terror and violence destroy the individual citizen’s capacity to speak ...”. Jackson 2002, 34.
Whose stories were these? They belonged to individuals coming from all over Lithuania – and beyond. “Here live people from Dzūkija, from the Polish territory, Žemaitija and Aukštaitija. They came from everywhere. People gathered in this land and got along very well together …”, Vaiva recounts. Her husband, a loquacious man with an ardent talk, joins the conversation. He proudly enumerates all the nationalities and ethnicities which live in Vilkyškiai: Lithuaniains, Latvians, Russians, Jews, Salzburgers, Prussian Lithuaniains, Germans.. So far, Vaiva and her husband are the only informants who willingly mention the Jewish inhabitants of the borderland. He tells us of a Jewish woman, now living in Vilkyškiai, who miraculously survived the Holocaust. Dr. Jurga Jonutytė and me are not the only ones to be surprised: Vaiva thought that she was Armenian, but her husband denies: “Žydė, žydė” (the Lithuanian for „Jewish”). Despite such differences, there was never any enmity among them – they both acknowledges. Indeed, they felt “such warmth among the people”, Vaiva remember.

The neighbourhood surfaces as the space where Vaiva and her husband cultivated the most significant relations. They depict it as a quiet, safe environment where mutual trust prevailed: “We would not lock our doors”, she eloquently puts it. Now I understand why, when starting her interview, Vaiva has asserted: “Vilkyškiai people are the best in all Lithuania”. Both she and her husband insist that nationality never represented a divisive issue among them: “No one would ever raise the [nationality] question”, she comments – indeed “such issues did not exist at all”, he stresses. Apparently, people were indifferent to nationality when it came to personal

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364 With “the Polish territory” Vaiva refers supposedly the Lithuanian ethnographic region of Suvalkija.
365 Lit. “suteikti”, “to come together”, “to meet”, “to converge”. Vaiva, interview, 17:00.
366 Vaiva’s husband, interview with Dr. Jurga Jonutytė, March 1, 2013, Vilkyškiai, 01:34:40. The family of this Jewish woman exemplifies the situation in the borderland after World War II. Vaiva and her husband tell us that she was married to a Latvian; the couple had a girl whom everybody thought was their daughter, while she was Russian and their adopted child. “All of three different nationalities” (Lit. “Visų trijų ... nacijų”). Ibid., 01:34:39.
367 Vaiva, interview, 16:50.
368 Both Vaiva and her husband frequently mention their neighbours (Lit. “kaimynai”) and the neighbourhood (“kaimynystė”) in the course of the interview, which underpins the importance of this locus to their sense of place.
369 Lit. “nerakindavo”. Ibid., 01:10:03.
370 Ibid., 08:55.
371 “Neskyrė tautybės”, Vaiva states. Ibid., 17:16. The same discourse recurs at the beginning of the interview, as well as in the following part, when Vaiva’s husband joins the conversation. Ibid., 01:36:42.
372 Vaiva’s husband, interview, 01:36:44.
relations. For our respondents, seemingly such indifference constitutes the unique trait of Vilkyškiai. 373

Vilkyškiai is clearly the centre of gravity of Vaiva’s and her husband’s narratives. As the most significant places, they mention the Evangelical Church and the fort hills. 374 She narrates of how people did not know about the ancient mounds before they were brought back to light. She worked at the Cultural Centre when they rediscovered: with her husband, they placed the signalling boards there. 375 Their attachment to the village does not prevent them from mentioning significant places out of the village borders – even beyond the Nemunas river. The man speaks of a hill in the village of Šereitlaukis that they used to visit: from its height you could enjoy the regional landscape all around you – he proudly tells. 376 The view embraces the rivers Šešupė 377 and Jūra, the Nemunas’ inlet and meanders and Ragainė. Vaiva also recounts a number of towns they would visit in Kaliningrad. Most of the times, they would cross the border to go on excursions – she explains –, for example to visit the tomb of the poet K. Donelaitis in Tolvinkiemi. 378 Also, they would go purchasing food and clothes in Tilžė, the main town in the area.

Now it must be about fifteen years since she last crossed the border – Vaiva thinks. After the visa regime entered into force, the couple stopped travelling to the other side. 379 “Why should one ever go there now?!”, her husband blurs. 380 Once again, the reason for such reaction is the deplorable state of the nature and heritage in the Kaliningrad border area. Vaiva defines it “brutal”, “savage”, while her husband calls it “terrible”. 381 Allegedly, in the Soviet times, the heritage sites went largely neglected.

373 When Dr. Jurga Jonutytė asks if any tensions would exist among the people, Vaiva recalls her work at the Culture Centre. Vaiva, interview, 17:26. The youth of Vilkyškiai and Žukai “belonged together” – she tells –, while Pagėgiai, Lumpėnai and Tauragė “formed already [something] separate” to their eyes. Vaiva, interview, 17:48.
374 See also Jonutytė 2013, 95.
376 The village is located in the eastern part of the Rambynas regional park and belongs to the municipality of Pagėgiai. This beautiful heritage site is well known for its manor (Lit. “dvaras”) and the old distillery.
377 A river flowing through Poland, Lithuania and Kaliningrad
379 Ibid., 08:02.
380 Vaiva’s husband, interview, 01:41:18.
Beautiful places ended up looking miserable, they turned awful – she narrates. Like in a refrain, she reiterates the image of the wild weeds and twigs growing everywhere among monuments and ruins, which embodies a sense of neglect and abandonm

Shortly after, Vaiva and her husband mention the ancient Lutheran cemeteries, a remarkable piece of the material cultural heritage in the borderland. I see these places as bearing important symbolical meaning, which links Vaiva’s narratives of the heritage, the history of the kraštas and the identity of its inhabitants. The area is studded with old cemeteries enshrining the graves of the original dwellers. Nobody would take care of them in the Soviet period, except probably the relatives of the very Lutherans who were buried there – Vaiva comments. Today, some groups of locals are committed to renovating and maintaining them – Vaiva’s husband is one of them. Interestingly, they do not take care of the graveyards upon request of the Germans, nor do they necessarily have their ancestors buried in there. The Germans often travel there to visit their forerunners’ tombs. They feel surprised and very happy when they realise that someone takes care of the place – Vaiva says.

Once again the heritage narrative of neglect emerges, reinforced by Vaiva’s husband, who witnesses it through his experience at the graveyards. He has seen tombstones stripped off to make up fences for the cattle and many of the ancient metal crosses adorning the Prussian Lithuanians’ tombs disappear. People steal them and sell them for scrap metal – they explain. I cannot discern who the authors of such misdeeds are, though. Hence the couple returns to the decay in which the heritage lies in the Kaliningrad region. Mentioning their trips to Tolminkiemis, they complain about the conditions of the pools there: “The twigs have grown everywhere … the water is hardly visible”, Vaiva reiterates. “Not even a frog lives in those ponds … they should have called them ‘Muddy Ponds’ indeed!” he exclaims.

His comments remind me of the practice of naming and its implications. As people develop ties with a place, they give it a name. This marks a gradual appropriation of the space, they make it their home. As we saw, after the war the place was cleared from Prussians, by the same token, its streets and towns were stripped of their German names. New Russian names were made up and applied as brand new

382 Lit. “varganai atrodė, baisiai”. Vaiva, interview, 07:56.
383 Ibid., 01:28:49.
384 Ibid., 01:45:07.
385 Vaiva’s husband, interview, 01:45:00, 01:45:25.
386 For more about the value of naming, see Marko Lehti 2003, 12.
labels. East Prussia became Kaliningrad, which meant that its dwellers had changed. Concerning this, Vaiva recalls when, many years ago, she saw a map of the Kaliningrad Oblast on the Ragainė newspaper. It was titled “ancient Slavic land” – she says.

“They caused such an hydrophobic reaction [giggling] … There have never been any Slavs in the old times!”, Vaiva protests. We ask them about the culture of the Kaliningrad borderland. He replies that no trace is left of the Prussian tradition: in its place, they implanted “the old Russian culture” – he reports.

Finally, talking about people in Kaliningrad, Vaiva observes that they were also newcomers. Seemingly, she draws a line between the people who choose to cherish the cemeteries as an integral part of the local heritage and nature, and those who neglect or even vandalise them. From her tone, I would say that her distinction transcends nationality. She thinks the reason lies in the different “understanding” of people (Lit. “supratimas”). Yet, she does not trace it back to culture or nationality; thus, I believe her discourse differs from Gabija’s and Dalia’s arguments. They have explained the Russians’ disrespectful behaviour through their culture and approach (“požiūris”). In contrast, recalling Vaiva’s view of “the Šišioniškiai’s land”, I have an impression that she envisages a “shared past” for newcomers on both sides of the border. She has no understanding for their behaviour and is no less bold than others denouncing it. Still, I feel as if our informant was talking about a relative whose choices she cannot agree with. Seemingly, Vaiva considers people on both the Lithuanian and the Russian side of the border as newcomers. I believe this hints to a common “origin” between the two borderlands, consisting in the fact that people who were “aliens” came to populate them.

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387 Vaiva, interview, 01:16:56. The USSR made wide use of the ideological propaganda to persuade people from all over its territory to move to the newly acquired lands. Kaliningrad was presented as “an ancient Russian land”, where Peter the Great found his birth place. As such, the Soviet people would have to re-conquer it. Apparently, the majority of settlers came to Kaliningrad with the idea that they would bring such Slavic land back to life. Kibelka 2000, 56.

388 Vaiva’s husband, interview, 01:43:55.

389 Such idea rests upon the fact that there are many Lutheran graveyards on the Lithuanian side of the border and that Vaiva’s husband talks of his work there without mentioning border crossings – allegedly, he went to the to the other side for the last time in the Nineties. As to Vaiva’s statements, I would notice that she – unlike Dalia – does not define Lithuanians as the “we” and Russians as “the others”.

6. “Who belongs here?”: storytelling to cope with the overwhelming question
Barbara (about 26 years old) works at the municipal Tourist Information Centre which stands next to the Lutheran Church in Vilkyškiai. We meet her along with four other people – Martynas, Ada, Rasa and Gabriela, all in their forties. From the beginning of our conversation, the informants place Vilkyškiai in the frame of the Klaipėda region and mention two elements as constitutive of this area: the architectural heritage – part of the urban reserve area – and the landscape. The former dates back to the early twentieth century and includes the characteristic buildings of the Klaipėda region, namely the red brick houses. Its preservation is the regional administration’s priority – they explain –, but also the region’s landscape is safeguarded. Barbara boasts that some views of today’s Vilkyškiai have been so carefully cherished they are the same displayed in pre-war photographs. Besides, tourists come to see the “Witches’ Fir Tree”, the hill forts, the Rambynas hill, the rivers Jūra and Nemunas – our respondents tell. The Lutheran Church is naturally quoted as part of the heritage. Once again, it connects the dimensions of the region’s history and architectural heritage by hosting cultural events and concerts. History is arguably an important element in our interviewees’ everyday life as it permeates the region’s spirit of place. Indeed, many of those who visit Vilkyškiai are Germans in search for their roots. In the summer “not a single day goes without some Germans visiting Vilkyškiai”, our informants say.

Working in the tourism sector, the border theme has certain importance to our interlocutors. What first comes to their minds are the challenges of cross-border cooperation, first of all the lack of information which definitely impacts the tourists’ inflow. They have no doubt that abolishing the visa regime would benefit the region’s business and tourism.

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390 Dr. Jurga Jonutytė and me also had a separate conversation with Barbara, which I will analyse in the next report. I have selected the relevant parts of her narrative from this excerpt and will discuss them in the following report, along with the rest of her own interview.
391 The Tourist Information Centre staff, interview with Dr. Jurga Jonutytė, February 27, 2013, the Tourist Information Centre of Vilkyškiai, 07:07. Reportedly, the urban landscape has changed in that virtually none of the traditional local wooden houses were left.
393 Adding to what we heard in the previous interviews, these informants tell us the Church was renovated with funds from the old German residents.
394 The Tourist Information Centre staff, interview, 25:05.
395 As Barbara puts it, the information spreads quicker and farther through personal experience: closer cooperation is needed to make sure tourists give a positive feedback on their border crossings. Ibid., 19:50.
396 Ibid., 16:42. The same as Gabija argued.
common discourse: visa cost and the level of prices evening up has made it less and less profitable to shop in Kaliningrad. It is not worth it and we can find everything in Lithuania nowadays – they assert.

The border discourse awakens their nostalgia for the times when, allegedly, the region used to be one and, as such, transcended the border. 397 It was “a habit” for them to go to school, shopping or to the cinema to Sovetsk “rather than to Tauragė”, they stress. 398 Soon the discussion turns to the region’s identity through time. They mostly acknowledge this original “Prussian land” has always been peculiar, its “Prussian scent” still lingering in all its people nowadays – the informant used exactly the word dvasia, which means “breath”, thus also “soul”. 399 There was a connection throughout this land, Barbara points out: people did not differ across the border, they were not detached from one another. It was only when Lithuania gained its independence from the USSR that “this was made into a separate land”, she explains. 400 Naming practices confirm such previous connection: reportedly, the denomination “Tilžė” is recognised and utilised by both the Germans and the Lithuanians. 401 This is also indicative of the centrality this city enjoyed in the region’s history: from East Prussia through World War II, the creation of Kaliningrad and well into the Nineties – Tilsit constituted the heart of one cross-border region.

Moving from naming to language, the informants mostly agree that Russian is more popular than German due to the border vicinity – although German is allegedly easier to study and closer to English, which has recently been prioritised. Besides, Russian is the language of business both in the kraštas and in Vilnius. “We Lithuanians have to learn many languages – English, Russian, German”, Barbara intervenes. 402 Her statement reveals the coexistence of the German, Lithuanian and Russian traditions in the region. In addition, it suggests that they see themselves in the middle of the German and Russian languages, heritages and cultures.

397 Ibid., 14:10. Our respondents confess they really feel nostalgic about what life was like, concerning the place the live in, during the Soviet times.
398 Also “women went to bear children to Sovetsk – not to Tauragė”. Ibid., 16:25. Even earlier, until World War II, also the Germans living in Vilkyškiai would go to study to Tilžė, Barbara tells us. Ibid., 13:25.
399 Barbara: “This land … was Prussian – its culture and everything”. Ibid., 47:30, 51:20.
400 Ibid., 13:42.
401 “If you say to the Germans “Tilžė” everything is clear to them. If you mention Pagėgiai 401, instead, they do not understand”, Barbara illustrates. Ibid., 13:49. The bygone Prussian land is evoked by the local milk factory products, labelled as “Memel Blue”, “Prussia”, “Tilžė”, e.g.
402 Barbara. Ibid., 26:46.
Hereby, our respondents disclose different views about their identity. At first glance, they all display a certain degree of localism, yet some identify more with the Prussian or German tradition – mostly belonging to the past –, while the others seemingly connect more with the Russian one which started cementing during the Soviet times. Two of the informants cherish a personal connection to the Prussian tradition in the region. One of them is Gabriela, who frequently mentions her husband’s fondness for his Prussian roots. Allegedly, the man’s grandmother had a German surname. We are Catholics – she explains –, still he does not consider himself a true Catholic, because the Prussian element plays a more important role than religion in the definition of his identity. “‘I am Prussian’, he says”, Gabriela smiles. Ada, the other respondent, tells us that her dad would proudly remember his grandfather, who was a Lutheran pastor: he instilled the Evangelical belief – “the Prussian faith, as we call it” – in his children. The informants hold that the words “Prussian” and “German” would not bear any negative meaning to them: on the contrary, Ada’s father was very proud of his origins. I believe that the Lutheran religion looks directly connected to Germanness: seemingly, it plays an important role in defining these people’s identity.

Rasa and Martynas, indeed, who identify themselves with the Russian component. Rasa states: “People in the Pagėgiai municipality are closer to the Russians – as I am. I will not be wrong if I say [we are] maybe a bit more tender than farther where … the true Lithuanians [live]”. Allegedly, there is no such palpable difference between people from Pagėgiai and the Russians in Kaliningrad. Martynas agrees with her, and adds – we got used to each other. Since they always interacted, many people in Pagėgiai have friends or acquaintances in Kaliningrad – they tell us confirming Gabija’s words. As I anticipated in the last report, I believe that the overlapping identities typical of border regions are here problematised by the population changes that followed World War II. Going back to the German visitors of Vilkyškiai, the informants disclose in a number of statements their perceptions. Allegedly, Germans are curious, interesting people: they write letters, they actively look for their old neighbours – in other words, they are especially concerned with their past. As Evangelicals, they cooperate much and somehow they consider themselves as of one kind.

403 Ibid., 43:04.
404 Ibid., 42:13, 43:47.
405 Ibid., 15:45.
These people fled to all corners of the world after World War II, but in the end “they always find one another”. 406 Lithuanians could never devote themselves to such task with the same perseverance – everybody agrees. 407 There is such bitterness in their accounts; clearly, it is painful to return – Barbara observes. It is as if some hurdles prevented them from coming back – she continues. 408 The younger generations plausibly are distant enough to go through such a pervading experience, so they often start the quest for family roots, our interviewees recount.

In the aftermath of the war, flats in the region were allotted free of charge, thus attracting huge numbers of new settlers, they tell. At the time, people would constantly move from one region to another, from village to village: “Flowing in, flowing out – people would continuously flow by”. 409 Here the theme of eviction ties the threads of the Germans’ and the region’s history together. Similarly, World War II haunts the informants’ identity discourse, leading their narrative to an “overwhelming question”: “Who belongs here?”. 410 At first, an informant puts forward that the “main locals” were considered the people who had occupied the former German houses. Bearing in mind their general degree of localism, one may think that their identity construction process is closely tied to their relation with the land, as shown by such notion of “native” the locals have elaborated. In such view, taking the place of the former dwellers in their now empty houses is equivalent, on a wider scale, to acquiring the status of natives in a now empty land. Nonetheless, the other interviewees eventually clarify that “there are no proper natives whatsoever”. 411 Indeed, all the region’s inhabitants moved here from Jurbarkas or Tauragė, they tell us. Eventually, these refugees made up most of the region’s new population. 412 As to the few Prussians who came back after 1945, they slowly died out. Still, sometimes confused ideas about who lived in the region before the war emerge from our respondents’ utterances, e.g. when Martynas argues that Catholicism existed in the area before 1945 and others hold that it appeared only later.

406 Barbara. Ibid., 46:04.
408 Ibid., 24:19.
409 “Nutekėjimas, ištekėjimas – pratekėjimas visą laiką vyko”. Ibid., 01:15:43.
411 “All these people have come together, here there is no such thing as natives”. The Tourist Information Centre staff, interview, 37:10.
412 Ibid., 37:27.
To conclude, I would like to discuss two practices, two strategies by which the locals try to cope with the overwhelming question – on the basis of our informants’ assertions. The first I have detected is storytelling. The interviewees meditate upon the fact they hardly spoke about the post-war years with the older generations (in their family or among the Germans).\footnote{The trauma of eviction for newcomers is already non-relevant to their descendants. Quickly the arrival in Vilkyškiai and the hardships of post-war years become a highly unpleasant theme in family conversations. Jonutytė 2013, 90. In the conclusions I will also analyse as storytelling the value of the informants’ own narratives, an essential part of this research.} “We who would have even wanted to ask now have nobody left to [do so]”.\footnote{Ibid., 01:16:40.} Their tone conveys a perceivable sense of loss, as if they realised they have missed a decisive opportunity to cast a light on their origin, to answer the overwhelming question. Concerning the topic, Ada tells the story of her acquired grandmother, a Prussian woman who shared her own house with the informant’s parents after war in exchange for their assistance. “I called her grandma and she would narrate all the time. She said: ‘Comb my hair’. So her hair I combed, and all the time she would narrate to me”.\footnote{Ibid., 01:17:10.} She would tell about the war, about her relocation to Vilkyškiai after the war was over and on how she took over some Germans’ empty house there. This informant’s parents also moved in the same house and promised to take care of her.

The theme of the home connects to the second strategy supposed to help locals cope with the question concerning their place of belonging: taking care of the German cemeteries.\footnote{\[A\]š ją vadindavau ‘babyte’ ir jinai visą laiką pasakodavo. Jinai sakydavo ‘sušukuok man plaukus’. Tai aš jai plaukus šukuodavau, ir ji man visa laiką pasakodavo”. Note the many chiasmus in the phrase, giving it a sense of lullaby. Ibid., 01:17:10.} Usually, German families ask people in Vilkyškiai to take care of their family tombs; still, as Vaiva’s husband showed us, many a times the locals do it spontaneously. The Germans do not expect that their ancestors’ tombs are preserved – Barbara says.\footnote{Ibid., 01:28:27.} Nonetheless, it is not just their ancestors’ burial place that the Germans come to visit. Some renowned people’s tombs are also highly significant to them. As it was for Bobrovskis, also the tomb of Elena Kondratavičienė – the protagonist of Ulla Lachauer’s novel “Paradiesstraße”\footnote{B. Lena Grigoleit.} – has become a worshipping place for the Germans. They travel with their brood to Bitėnai, where the woman was entombed, and deliver the story to the youth – Barbara uses the word “pertitki”, Eng. “to convey”, in

\begin{itemize}
  \item \footnote{Finally, a noteworthy aspect of this practice is the production ad spread of visual materials about the cemeteries. Barbara reports a German visitor once photographed all the tombs, issue a short movie and uploaded it on YouTube, so that people could easily search for their predecessors’ graves in Vilkyškiai.}{Ibid., 01:28:27.}
  \item \footnote{B. Lena Grigoleit.}{\textit{Rojaus keliai}}. For more about Ulla Lachauer: \textit{Ulla Lachauer, “Paradiesstraße”, <http://ulla-lachauer.de/buecher/buch-paradiesstrasse/>}.}
\end{itemize}
my opinion best translated with the Latin *tradere*, Eng. “to transmit by telling”, “to teach”. Plausibly, visiting Bobrowski’s and Lena Grigoleit’s graves was made into a *tradition* for the Germans, who are concerned with keeping this history alive generation after generation – after all those who lived through it will have passed away. That tomb is *indicatory* – Barbara continues. Arguably, a highly symbolic meaning has crystallised around L. Grigoleit’s grave, tying together the Germans’ family history, their identity, their relation with the land they left and which eventually disappeared.
7. The village where people “feel best the spirit of the land”

Barbara mentions mainly sites related to cultural activities and tourism as physical place constituents, since she works at the Tourist Information Centre. As it was for Gabija, she also finds that one of the most characteristic elements of this area is the wilderness, precisely the meadows by the Nemunas river. She tells us that most of the region’s heritage has come to light only lately. Compared to when she was a student, there is enough information available now and the youth knows much about the region’s history and heritage. As a tourist officer, she has observed the younger generations are not so interested in museums like the Martynas Jankus one. They are rather fond of the “Open Air Paintings Garden”, which reproduces Lithuania Minor symbols and reconstructs its “vanishing cultural heritage – schools, manors, railways stations, bridges, churches”. 

In the interview with her colleagues, Barbara delivers her view of the region: she alleges the official Lithuanian discourse often considers only four regions – overlooking Lithuania Minor – and demands recognition of the region’s cultural specificity. Some may see in her words a hint to a tendency in the Lithuanian national discourse to disregard this problematic region, considered too of its own (“savas”) to fit in the national boundaries. Linking to the Jurbarkas border discourse, the informant draws a line dividing the inhabitants of Lithuania Minor (we) from those of “Great Lithuania” (they). Some of them cannot find Lithuania Minor on the map – Barbara affirms. When I tell them that national activists such as M. Jankus or Vydūnas are buried here, they look at me as if I was a fool – she says. It seems that “true Lithuanians” cannot believe some of their nation leaders are sleeping in this rural periphery.

The discourse reflects at regional level and re-emerges in the second interview as Barbara counters Tauragė and towns “on this side” of the cultural border. It is a shared opinion that Tauragė people are like the typical Lithuanian: unsociable,
distrustful and suspicious – she tells 428. In contrast, people here are “warmer” – she says, linking to the discourse on the uniqueness of Vilkyškiai. 429 Also speaking about its image, Tauragė seems to have no recognisable soul (dvasia): “everything is scattered” there, while in Šilutė, e.g., the old town is well-kept and it looks alive. 430 Barbara explains such difference by adducing Lithuania Minor’s historical economic superiority. She holds its inhabitants enjoyed higher life standards than their Lithuanian counterparts (sic). 431 Yet the respondent admits things have changed and Lithuania Minor’s legendary people and fertile fields eventually vanished.

In this context, Vilkyškiai appears again as a special place whose people “recognise themselves” in the church, the school, the old granary – apparently key buildings characterising the village. 432 Barbara argues that the milk factory is a “corner stone” at national level. 433 Also, she states Vilkyškiai people have the best knowledge of the region and tells the story of how the local students won a competition with the Pagėgiai ones thanks to their greatest sense of the land’s soul. 434 The informant holds that growing up in Vilkyškiai gave them a uniquely genuine approach. 435 This fragment is rich in words semantically related to feelings: “It is all another sensation”, she stresses. 436 Interestingly, she says they spread their unique view when communicating with each other.

I find it a bit hard to understand which tradition Barbara identifies with. However, it is plausible that she considers “we” as the descendants of the Lietuvininkai. Referring to the book “A Prussian Lithuanian”, she tells Lietuvininkai were the lowest social class and claims they were enslaved and “oppressed” for a century by the Prussian rule. 437 When the Protestants expelled from the Salzburg Catholic Church landed in Vilkyškiai in the eighteenth century – she continues – the Prussian

428 Ibid., 54:20.
429 Ibid., 55:07.
430 In Šilutė “life boils”, Barbara says. Ibid., 55:59.
431 The Tourist Information Centre staff, interview, 39:20.
432 Barbara, interview, 56:27.
433 Ibid., 56:37.
435 Ibid., 32:50.
436 Lit. “pojūtis”, belonging to the same semantic field as the verb “jautis”. Ibid., 32:50
Lithuanians became their servants. Delegations of the Salzburgers’ descendants still visit Vilkyškiai today. They come here with their own beliefs and you cannot tell them ‘because of you, our forerunners had to suffer’ – Barbara says –, because at the time it was like that. Here the respondent’s considerations take a leap of nearly three centuries, hurling us straight to World War II and raising complex memory issues. She starts telling about when, in the 1930s, supposedly the majority of Prussians in Lithuania Minor embraced Nazism – she refers to them as “hitlerites” – hoping the region would be adjoined to Germany. Of course, it was the ideology of the time which inculcated them such values – she admits. “Now, are those people innocent or guilty – this is still a dilemma”. Going through the history of the twentieth century, her account continues with the status of Germans in Kaliningrad and in the border land after 1945. Those who failed to escape from here lived hiding their identity: it was a question of life and death – she accounts. Barbara’s narrative suggests an image of the region at the crossroads of the Soviet and German trajectories, something they all took turns paying for. What is left of this land today? “The old Germans knew best what it was like here”, she says. Reportedly, the young are not interested in Lithuania unless they had roots here and start searching for them.

About her relation with the German visitors of Vilkyškiai, more than once Barbara discloses this interesting statement: “Sometimes what is not held as valuable in one culture is very significant to another one”, with special reference to the German cemeteries. As an example, she tells she knew nothing about the writer J. Bobrovskis before she came in touch with the Germans, who always ask to visit the places he lived in. From her words I understand she has developed some sensitivity for the Germans’ quest for their roots. At first glance they look strange – she tells –, but when you get to

438 With the name “Salzburgers” Barbara refers to the people exiled to Lithuania Minor and Prussia in 1700. Jonutytė 2013, 96.
439 Barbara, interview, 01:02:12.
440 Lit. “hitlerininkai”. Ibid., 01:02:21.
441 Ibid., 01:03:01. Here she recalls a conversation she had with a German acquaintance of hers who lived in the region throughout these traumatic developments.
442 One of the images nurtured by the Communist institutions throughout the Soviet period was that of Germans as enemies of the “united” Soviet people. In this view, German citizens were automatically associated with the Nazi. Jonutytė 2013, 90.
443 Barbara, interview, 01:03:43. Again here the informant reports the words of her German interlocutor.
444 Ibid., 01:04:58.
445 Barbara tells us that, while living in Germany, she could appreciate the average Germans’ view of Lithuania: “Lithuania ends and Palanga and the Curonian Lagoon begin”, they thought. Indeed, tourist agencies report that Germans spend averagely one day in Lithuania, visiting some key places like Palanga, Klaipeda, sometimes Vilnius and few others before moving forward to Latvia and Estonia.
know them you discover interesting, genuine people with a surprisingly open worldview.  

In the closing part of her interview, Barbara talks long about life in Vilkyškiai and the perspectives of this isolated “rural village”. When it comes to “real life”, as she puts it, the future looks bleak. Living in Vilkyškiai is expensive and there are constraints related to food products and medicine supplies. Another problem for Barbara is “there is nothing to do here”, compared for example to Pagėgiai: despite its small population, indeed, the town has a Cultural Centre and an active social life. It is just a question of time – she continues: when the elders will die, their children will sell the land and Vilkyškiai will start a seasonal life. Likewise, the school will exist as long as there are children. “It was ignorance which ruined this village” our informant alleges. At this point, the survival strategy of the region comes to light: resonating the heritage of the border land is apparently the only way to cope with the future. In this, storytelling has a crucial place: the heritage – Barbara says – does not speak on its own, it needs people to tell its story. Again, they emerge as a pillar in this region’s life. It was the people who promoted the renovation of the Evangelical Church: without them there would have been no church – Barbara states. This kraštas is ours – she tells –: it is us who need it, not anybody else. Hence the importance of knowing the region, its history and legends, and to transfer it all to the younger generations. We know only a small part of it – Barbara states –: if we do not share it, then this land will go completely unknown.

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446 The Tourist Information Centre staff, interview, 45:16.
447 “Kaimų kaimas”. Barbara, interview, 01:26:57.
448 Literally “nothing to be busy with, engaged in”. Ibid., 01:27:16.
449 Ibid., 01:31:36.
450 Still she acknowledges this kind of tourism, by which you get to know a place full of history and stories, takes time.
451 Ibid., 01:22:19.
452 Ibid., 01:23:49.
453 Ibid., 01:36:16.
8. Vilkyškiai and Pagėgiai: a contended “legacy of centrality”

Our final informant is Elena, a woman in her forties working at the Cultural Centre in Pagėgiai (Lit. “Pagėgių Kultūros Centras”, hence the PKC), the municipality to which Vilkyškiai belongs. Elena is originally from another Lithuanian borderland and moved to Pagėgiai after marrying a local. I lived all my life working on culture – she states fondly when introducing herself. In the course of her interview, we will appreciate how cultural activities played a key role in assigning the informant a place in the region.

It seems that we are not the first ones who have a scholarly interest in this border land. The informant tells us indeed that she got in contact with researchers before. “In some way, all those who travel here cherish a good memory of it”, she says proudly. To be precise, she says “they remember it warmly”, “in a welcoming way”, and find it different from other regions. Elena does not explicitly tell what makes this land so unique. As it was for the previous interviews, we start envisaging the answer as her narrative flows.

At the PKC, a multifunctional Centre with a wide array of tasks, Elena and her colleagues work with the kolektyvai – mainly music and folk dance groups – to propagate professional and amateur arts. A reference for all the organisations in the local eldership, the PKC provides for assistance and financial support, designs scenarios and manages the events. After an institutional reorganisation in 2004, it is now the only Cultural Centre in the municipality, thus bearing all the workload. Its staff brings together specialists, artists and graduates from “our kraštas” – Elena adds. Few years ago, the Centre underwent important renovation works. People did not expect such an outcome, it was surprisingly good – she reveals: “They gave us this building and we rejoiced”. During the restoration of the Centre, its workers had to operate in very restrained conditions. In my mind, Elena’s words echo Dalia’s assertions on how the people of Bitėnai “missed” a cultural centre. Still, given her position, the present informant speaks about it more in practical terms.

As we could observe in the course of this chapter, culture represents a central theme in most of our informants’ narratives – it permeates their sense of place. Here,

454 Elena (working at the Pagėgiai Cultural Centre), interview with Dr. Jurga Jonutytė, March 1, 2013, the Cultural Centre of the Pagėgiai municipality, 47:15.
455 Ibid., 01:45.
456 Ibid., 05:50. Prior to such reorganisation, 8 institutions among cultural centres, kulturos namai and venues operated scattered all over the municipality territory.
457 Ibid., 44:26, 45:29, 45:57.
458 Ibid., 17:40.
different concepts of culture emerge from Elena’s narrative. Seemingly, for the municipal authority, events are a sufficient proof that the cultural heritage is fostered in the region: “If there are events, it means there is culture, and that’s all”. 459 For instance, they deem giving a concert fulfils the demand for culture and accomplishes the task of cultural workers, with no need for further efforts. 460 Allegedly, they consider worth promoting mainly happenings which can win attention in the political arena – such as the celebration of February 16 (the Day of the State Restoration) or the day of the Klaipėda Region unification. On its part, the PKC also organises events for the popular “calendar celebrations” with a view to foster Lithuanian traditions. 461 As an example, Elena mentions a cycle of meetings devoted to the egg painting tradition the Centre organised with its ethnographer’s support. Reportedly, the community particularly appreciates such events and actively takes part in them. She holds their success rests in that they “touch people’s hearts”. 462 Through such celebrations “we all come back to life”, Elena tells. 463 Again, culture is the means to keep the community alive and cope with the issue of unemployment and ageing population in the region. Basing on Elena’s words, including all the social groups is part of the Centre’s mission. The territory is so small that they offer cheap tickets to foster people’s participation in Pagėgiai’s cultural life. She says the voice spread so that even people from Tauragė come to the PKC to attend its events.

As to the local youth, its presence has been decreasing terribly – rather, “there is no youth at all”, Elena observes bitterly. 464 Despite this, at least part of the local youth is active and engaged in social or cultural projects, namely the Indigo Jaunimas clubs established in the last two years. 465 This organisation professedly aims at socialising and raising the youth’s awareness on issues such as tolerance, respect for the environment and the like. Indigo Jaunimas is apparently the only organisation including young people beyond school age. It is they who suffer the most for the unemployment and lack of occasions to be engaged in the town’s social life. 466 Elena calls it a “vicious circle” to which they have found no compromise. Yet the organisation attracts

459 Ibid., 13:27.
461 Ibid., 22:45.
462 According to Elena, popular and traditional events are the most “heartfelt”, Lit. “jatriausiai”, “the most sentimental”. Ibid., 22:25.
464 Ibid., 24:22.
466 Lit. “užimtumas”, Eng. “the condition of being busy with something”.
youngsters also from outside of Pagėgiai and it cooperates closely with the Cultural Centre – she adds. 467 When mentioning the PKC partners, this respondent always uses words from the semantic field of friendship – e.g., they “made good friends” with the youth clubs.

Moving over to the region’s cooperation in tourism, the informant discloses a centre-periphery discourse that recalls my speculations on Vilkyškiai’s “legacy of centrality”. For the first time we observe the key role that Vilkyškiai people play in the whole municipality administration, where Vilkyškiečiai apparently hold several offices. It seems not just a question of identity: a village or town in the area benefits of municipal and State funds thanks to its citizens sitting in the municipal administration, and thus “flourishes” for the following couple of years. We learn from our respondent that the establishment of the municipal Tourist Information Centre in Vilkyškiai raised questions due to its “peripherality” in comparison with Pagėgiai (the centre). 468 Yet, Elena also acknowledges Vilkyškiai’s uniqueness by referring to its cultural heritage, renowned figures and enlightened people. 469 Before – she says – there were not so many key personalities committed to improving the region’s cultural heritage and life. 470

Going deeper into the area’s peculiarity, Elena starts telling about cultural cooperation with cross-border entities, disclosing an interesting view of the region. It is mostly the municipality which undertakes cooperation projects. The town of Pagėgiai has built strong ties with Ilawa (former Eylau in East Prussia) in Poland and Sovetsk 471 – which the informant does not name as “ Tilžė ” arguably because she is not originally from the region. Together with Gabija’s mention of school exchanges with Germany 472 , this is the only time we hear about cooperation with entities lying out of the Kaliningrad region. Historically speaking “we are in the territory of what used to be East Prussia”, Elena tells. 473 For two times, she refers to Sovetsk and Ilawa as a veritable “family”,

468 Ibid., 31:06. It should be remembered that Pagėgiai was made into a municipality as of April 2000. Pagėgių Savivaldybė, “ Taryba ”, <http://www.pagegiai.lt/index.php?2679677979>.
469 Ibid., 30:25, 32:24.
470 Ibid., 32:28.
472 From our respondent, we learn that also the Algimantas Mackus secondary school in Pagėgiai has been cooperating with the Bad Iburg school from Germany.
473 Ibid., 35:38.
not only in cultural, but also in personal terms: every time it is as if we met with some kin – she stresses.  

It is surprising to hear such words from a person who is not originally from this land. Clearly, culture and cooperation in the field were the connecting factor between Elena and the locals. “Of course, I had to get interested in [the region’s history and culture], to learn about it and observe much”, she tells us.  

Working as a kindergarten educator, supervising the youth’s events and finally cultivating some amateur activities along with the elders, she “got into” the local life and found her place in the region.  

As to her contribution to the cultural life in the border land, she was among the promoters of the Open Air Paintings Garden, allegedly a very ambitious task for all the cultural workers in the municipality. Concerning this component of the region’s cultural landscape, I would say that – given its location in the green (between the Martynas Jankus Museum and the river Bitė) – the Paintings Garden may become a special place where the landscape, culture, history and identity of the region meet, blend and crystallise.

Towards the end of the interview, Elena narrates a story concerning the burial sites as a heritage site in the region. Around 2009, the grandson of Jonas Vanagaitis – a signatory of the Tilsit Act in 1918 – sought help to transfer his grandfather’s remains from Germany back to Lithuania Minor. Apparently, upon its establishment, the Pagėgiai municipality had set itself/proposed to construct a veritable “pantheon of Lithuania Minor” in Bitėnai, rejoining as many as possible of the signatories’ remains there. Elena was the person in charge for this delicate work. We made such good friends that we buried here not only this man’s grandfather, but also other relatives of him – she proudly recounts. Personally, I find her graveyard narrative different from, for example, Vaiva’s husband one. Concentrating on the “fathers of the Lithuanian nation”, Elena’s discourse seems to bear an official, national component, in contrast with the idea which the man conveyed in his account of the Prussian Lithuanian people’s cemeteries.

474 Lit. “Sovecko ir Ilavos giminė”, literally “the kin of Sovetsk and Ilava”. Ibid., 35:30, 35:52.
475 Ibid., 48:08.
476 Ibid., 51:27.
477 Ibid., 57:27.
478 Ibid., 58:10.
V. BECOMING LOCALS

1. MAKING SENSE OF THE INTERVIEW FINDINGS

When the newcomers arrived in the Lithuania Minor borderland, they did not find a blank page, a space. To say it with Tuan, space is “abstract”, as it lacks any content (namely the relations that inhabit and characterise place). In its open and still undefined nature, space is a “possibility” and an allure of the future. In contrast, place is “the past and the present” – which I see as linking to Pascual-de-Sans’ idea of place history. In the present thesis, I have attempted to present such history as human life experience. It was a place that the new settlers came to in Vilkyškiai. Tuan reminds us that, for a place to be and remain as such, people have to inhabit it and give a meaning to it. Understandably, in the immediate aftermath of the war, the borderland still bore the traces of its original dwellers. As Jonutytė writes, the first newcomers “landed” in an environment which witnessed the tragedy of other people. The land, the streets, the walls of the houses where the refugees sought shelter told the stories of individuals stripped from the land. The Prussian Lithuanians had been cleared, eradicated from their abodes. Therefore, the new settlers could not see Vilkyškiai as a mere space. The fact they inhabited others people’s homes, the presence of cemeteries where strangers slept, and the return of some of them haunted the foreigners. Everything reminded them that the borderland belonged to others, who had grown up, lived there and roamed it back in their days.

Also the newcomers were struggling with the disruption happened to their own lives. They were uprooted and plausibly experiencing a deep sense of displacement. I agree with Jonutytė when she writes that the loss of the home can be seen at the origin of both the original dwellers’ and the newcomers’ narratives. I would notice that their narratives collide exactly around the home. The Prussian Lithuanians abandoned it, while the newcomers took it over. As Jonutytė points out, such loss is associated with the idea of deprivation of one’s dwelling. The home became a contended place. The author explains how this conflict eventually prevented the old settlers’ descendants from identifying with “the Lithuanians” – as they called the multinational group of

479 Tuan 1975, 164-165.
480 Jonutytė 2013, 117.
481 The situation was similar in the Kaliningrad region. Although they were very few, some of the original dwellers still lived there after World War II. As to those who were sent to populate the newly acquired territories, they had been forced to leave their home somewhere in the USSR. Kibelka 2000, 55.
482 Jonutytė 2013, 136.
483 Ibid., 91.
newcomers. The clash happened upon the refugees arrival and was “never clarified nor articulated”, also due to the historical and political circumstances. As such, it was passed from adult new settlers to their children. I find it clear that such tensions complicated the development of the newcomers’ sense of place. Undoubtedly, they problematised the question of nativeness.

Observing the informants’ narratives, I have come to the conclusion that nativeness as a category has lost part of its value when it comes to the borderland nowadays. I would rather use the term “dweller” and consider the existence of old and new dwellers – respectively the Prussian Lithuanians and the so-called “Lithuanians”. This view entails a “before – later” perspective, which can arise claims of rights to the place on the basis of history. Indeed, I distinguish between old and new locals for analytical purposes and hold that, today, the two groups equally belong to the borderland they inhabit. Recalling Robert Hay, I nonetheless acknowledge that the components of their sense of place may differ, since the descendants of the old dwellers boast ancestral roots in the borderland. I do not intend to underplay the perceived differences between the two groups of dwellers. Rather, I take note of them and consider their role in tying these people to the land. Using the term “dweller” I underpin my idea that both the mentioned groups can consider themselves as locals today.

Probably, the label of native lost most of its relevance already long ago – but when did this exactly happen? How did aliens become locals? Connecting with Cathrine Brun, I will show how newcomers clang entirely to the “here and now” developing their sense of place. Such dimension brings a sense of urge, which I consider crucial to the development of these individuals’ sense of place. I find it particularly important in a context where the subjects “lack a past”. Recalling Vaiva’s narrative, I have drawn attention to the origin of the current inhabitants in the Lithuanian and Russian borderlands. In the newcomers’ case, the history of their lives has been erased with their original places. Time here emerges as a crucial factor. For one moment, let us visualise the passing of time as the stratification of many “here and now”. An Indian proverb tells: “Men say that time passes. The time says that men pass”. We can see how the layers of time materialised in new generations being born in the borderland. Indeed, I believe that time has allowed for a new group of locals to emerge. Eventually,

484 Ibid..
485 Ibid., 96.
487 See also Jonutytė 2013, 123.
Vilkyškiai and the borderland became the newcomers’ home. Our informants are all rooted in here and see the village as a place where to return. In some cases, strong place attachment was countered with the reach out to other towns or regions, usually for education- and job-related reasons. This was the case for Julija, Gerda and Gabija, respectively first- and second-generation descendants of the new settlers.\footnote{I hereby consider as “first generation immigrants” the first cohort of children being born by those who settled in the borderland after 1945. This group includes people who, like Vaiva, were children minor to 10 years of age, who were formed and educated in such new place. Besides – for the time being – I thus understand the second generation as the descendants of the first generation. I am aware of the confusion such definition may arise. Seemingly, no consensus exists yet in scholarship about the topic.} 488

I should spend a few lines to discuss the case of Dalia and Elena, who moved to the borderland twenty-thirty years ago after marrying with a local man. I would name them “adopted” borderland dwellers. Their narratives reveal how (acquired) family ties, work and socio-cultural relations have fostered their integration in the region. In particular, the cultural component has proved crucial in connecting them to the place. I will show how newcomers have slowly appropriated the region and become locals by re-discovering the cultural heritage of the borderland and handing it down orally.

1.1 Three generations of sense of place

I would like to confront the sense of place of three generations – respectively those of Vaiva (about 70 years old), Julija (in her forties), and Gabija and Barbara (approximately 26). I find it indicatory that the ordeal of displacement hardly surfaces in the new generations’ narratives. Indeed, the topic recurs only with reference to their grandparents’ lives.\footnote{Jonutyté 2013, 118.} 489 While being aware of their family history and relation to the place, the youngsters consider themselves fully locals. Likewise, their self-perception in space differs from that of their predecessors. Quoting Gabija: “I see Lithuania, we are so small ... it is so tiny, that all Lithuania is like home [for me]”.\footnote{Gabija, interview, 27:33.} 490 Somehow, I also regard Barbara’s assertions as depicting her country as small and in-between other cultures: “We Lithuanians need more [than the others] to learn [all] those languages – English, Russian and German”.\footnote{Barbara, interview, 26:50.} 491 I would say that the younger generations raised their eyes to embrace, together with the borderland they inhabit, Lithuania and Europe.

I think this development summarises part of the political changes which occurred in the country – but also in the other Baltic States and in Eastern Germany. Recalling the metaphor of life as a journey through places, I argue that differences among the generations’ senses of place have to do with people’s mobility. The Soviet
system exerted tight control on it. Newcomers like Vaiva travelled to the borderland after leaving their place and mostly remained where they had arrived. In the case of Vaiva and her husband, they were clearly meant to stay in their village, unless otherwise decided by the authorities. Their descendants happened to move to other Lithuanian towns for their studies, but eventually returned to their original place – as we saw in Julija’s story.

The third generation has lived more shortly under the communist system and has benefitted from the enhanced mobility which followed the end of the Cold War. As Gabija interestingly noted: “Maybe to some people – who spent all their life in the same place, only around their home, if they happened to go somewhere – Lithuania looked bigger, but to me it looks like one”. Through their wok, Gabija and Barbara have frequent contacts with the local teenagers. Thanks to our two respondents, we have grasped some hints about the newest age groups. The fourth generation – currently in school age – fully plunged into the contemporary world, where technologies made travelling and connecting to the rest of Europe and the world more accessible. These youngsters were born in an era of high mobility – and increased emigration from the rural borderland –, which widens their image and supposedly affects their sense of place. As Barbara put it, the adolescents know best the spirit of their place. Another manifestation of time passing in the studied area consists in the ageing of its population: those who came to the region right after the war have started passing away. Their descendants – the high school students mentioned by Barbara – can thus boast the ancestral ties so important to Hay’s sense of place.

1.2 State and cultural borders: boundaries of an evolving sense of place

From the respondents’ stories, I could appreciate the significance of the border to their sense of place. The first and the second generations of settlers lived in quite close connection with localities of the then Kaliningrad SSR – Ragainė, Tolminkiemi, Gumbinė, Tilžė/Sovetsk. At that time, crossing over to the other side was a smooth, everyday matter. When Lithuania reaffirmed its independence, our informants’ reports suggest, the border practically closed. For people born before 1970-1975, who used to hang out in Sovetsk for shopping and cultural entertainment, the town faded behind the red tape. Most of them withdrew to a corner of their place, whose boundaries shrunk. At the moment when Lithuania made its entrance into Europe, going to Sovetsk had lost its

492 Literally “sedentarily”; Lit. “sėsliai”. Gabija, interview, 28:01.
493 Ibid., 27:59.
attraction to the eyes of Dalia, Gerda and the people of their ages. Seemingly, the cost of the visa concurred to such outcome. Despite the transformations in the border meaning, a practice has survived, “changing its skin” as decades passed: contraband. From books to sausages, to sugar, fuel and cigarettes – smuggling “lives forever”, resembling the breath of a sleeping animal. 494

You choose to research an area for its visible State border and you end up discovering that another frontier haunts the locals’ narratives – that of Mažoji Lietuva. I first spotted it in my informants’ discourses on the architectural heritage, which distinguishes the borderland from the rest of the country. As we saw, Gerda has countered the red brick houses of Lithuania Minor, representing the German architectural tradition, and the blue wooden houses typical of the Tauragė region and the rest of Lithuania. 495 She has also explicated the existence of “the Jurbarkas border” – where her place begins –, whose coordinates Dalia then illustrates in a detailed fashion during her interview. Such narratives evoke the vision of a wider region extending beyond the current Russian-Lithuanian border. 496 Likewise, I believe that mentions of the area’s distinctive architecture actually point to the cultural and historical specificity of the ancient ethnographic region of Lithuania Minor. Our informants recognise the region’s uniqueness and portray it as their own place. The idea formed in my mind that the “were-border”, as Dalia called it, can be actually be considered as a cultural border within the country. 497 Barbara, for instance, conceived it as dividing “two Lithuanias” and claimed recognition for the specificity of Mažoji Lietuva, rejecting its assimilation to Žemaitija.

Vaiva and Barbara have adduced historical explanations for the lasting peculiarity of Lithuania Minor. “Despite the vicinity of language and origin, what prevented Prussian Lithuanians from getting closer to the people of Lithuania [proper] were the different State tradition, the discrepancies in the economic standard of the two regions, the religious and cultural environment (the Lutheran and German tradition on one side, Catholicism and the Polish legacy on the other one)”. 498 Yet we should

494 Dalia, interview, 32:12.
495 Gerda, interview, 07:03.
496 See the interviews with Gerda, Dalia and the Tourist Information Centre staff. As to Elena, in her interview she has built on history to explain the sense of “kinship” that cultural actors perceive between Pagėgiai and the towns of Ilawa and Sovetsk – based on the fact that “we are in the territory of what used to be East Prussia”. Elena, interview, 35:38.
497 See also Jonutytė 2013, 99.
remember that the German spirit of this region has been silenced throughout the Soviet rule. I propose that, for a moment, we observe the developments of the border status as combined with those of the informants’ sense of place. Apparently, the locals’ perceptions of the place evolved quite quickly, as they adjusted to the changing border meanings. In such view, I think that demands of recognition of the region’s essence derive from a slower evolution, linked with the re-surfacing of the local cultural heritage. This process started in the Nineties and has slowly brought back to light the history of the region and of its people. As Barbara told us, fifteen years ago the local cultural heritage was partially hidden, while those who are in school age now can fully appreciate it. Such process is cross-generational, as people of different ages are – or have got – in close contact with the spirit of the borderland – Vaiva and her husband, Barbara and the local teenagers she mentions in her story. As part of the re-discovery of the cultural heritage, I see this development as selective in nature and connected with the topic of collective memory. I will discuss it thoroughly in the following pages.

1.3 Life starts anew: Vaiva’s emblematic historical narrative

In her interview, Vaiva has disclosed many memories concerning the resettlement experience and life in the borderland during the early post-war years. Where did this former newcomer’s story start from? When did her relation to the place commence? Her narrative began from when she arrived in the region with her family. She mentioned their original place, the village of Veliuona, but apparently the peripeties which her family went through bore more significance. The event of her family settling in a big German manor in the village of Jogaudai, for example, appeared vivid in her story. Yet their odyssey ended only in Vilkyškiai, where Vaiva’s family settled definitely.

Helped by the emergence of a routine and attendance at the local school, young Vaiva started developing her sense of place. Apparently, such process went hand in hand with the growth of interpersonal ties. Slowly, the neighbourhood became the new locus of her sense of place. Understandably, people who were young at the time found it easier to cultivate their sense of place from scratch: Their youth and greed for living helped them slowly create their place in the borderland. Also, probably that many newcomers felt alienated. Concerning this, our respondent remembered that some

499 As Jonutytė observes, the stories of newcomers usually start from their previous place. Jonutytė 2013, 90. In her study, the scholar also reports that many of her respondents’ stories actually open with the taking over of a new dwelling. Ibid., 91. As I have anticipated, I consider the house as the locus of such post-war narratives, the physical site and the context in which the informants’ stories concentrate.

500 Ibid., 118.
people did not want to share their stories during the narrative evenings she organised. It means that people adopted different strategies reacting to feelings of uprootedness and displacement – often depending on their age.

Today Vaiva feels happy – if not proud – to live there. Her story suggests that *community ties* had an important role helping her and other newcomers feel at home in Vilkyškiai. Jonutytė mentions in her book “the idyll of communal life” with reference to how people of the same age as Vaiva tend to portray the Soviet years. In the Soviet idyll of the *Vilkyškiečiai*, the scholar argues, there was no room for the region’s past. Indeed, newcomers nurtured the spirit of community to shield themselves from all tensions reaching out from the past and crystallised in the conflict around the home. I agree with Jonutytė as I found myself contemplating the “re-birth” of the region in 1945. Most new locals created the idyll completely *from scratch*. We now have an impression that not only people, but also the place started a new life.

I have hinted to an idea of common origin among the newcomers in the Lithuanian and Kaliningrad borderland. “After the war, all people *came together* to this region”, Vaiva recalled. But what brought such people together? As we saw, they formed a multinational group. All they shared was the experience of displacement and the fact of being aliens to the land where they had arrived. Vaiva defines herself and her neighbours as “*we* who now live in this place, in Vilkyškiai”, “*Vilkyškiečiai*”, i.e. *locals*. As we could appreciate from her words, her “*we*” is not defined according to nationality. Jonutytė notes that such group does not have clear boundaries. Furthermore, the author holds that the communal spirit and “*warmth*” which Vaiva celebrated are actually short-lived, because they sprouted from loss and common misfortune. For this reason, the scholar welcomes the “*recovery of the historical memory*” in Vilkyškiai as an extremely positive process. I agree with her. Hereby I will expose the importance of cultivating the cultural heritage to human sense of place.

1.4 Uniqueness personified: the significance of people to collective sense of place

Seemingly, our informants’ identities display quite strong local traits. These people consider their place as *unique*, different from the lands beyond the Russian-Lithuanian border and the frontier of *Mažoji Lietuva*. We have heard that people from other parts of

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501 Jonutytė 2013, 123.
502 Ibid., 124.
503 Vaiva, interview, 17:00.
504 Jonutytė 2013, 137.
Lithuania acknowledge such distinctiveness. If the respondents’ narratives depict the regional architecture and landscape as peculiar, they consider uniqueness a quality of the borderland dwellers. In this context, the inhabitants of Vilkyškiai seem to hold the lead. Vaiva has declared that “the people in Vilkyškiai are the best in all Lithuania”. 506 Likewise, Barbara hold that the young Vilkyškiečiai know the spirit of the borderland better their fellows in Pagėgiai. 507 Elena also pointed to the special heritage of Vilkyškiai and the substantial presence of people from the village in the tourism administration. 508

Connecting with Relph’s observations on how the language of nature fits the descriptions of human sense of place, I would like to draw a similarity between the trees and the individuals, who are perceived as major contributors to the collective sense of place. Relph notes that metaphors from the natural world tell us much about the meaning of places. To have roots means to have a home and certain attachment to a site. In contrast, forced migration and eviction cause people to be uprooted. 509 As a devotee of semantics, I agree that the choice of such terminology is all but accidental. The metaphor suggests that having a roof under which to return is universally perceived as desirable and natural. For Relph, it is equivalent to “belonging to the earth”. 510 Similarly, I like to envisage roots as keeping also the earth together. This reminds me of national strategies of populating border areas to secure and anchor them to the centre. Adopting a centre-margin perspective, 511 I think that States consider people as stakes and thus “plant” settlers in border areas or new territories to keep the nation’s body connected. I would like to stress how this practice is far from being merely a State issue. Indeed, it directly impacts the lives of individuals and whole families. Let us return to the inter-subjective nature of sense of place. 512 Our relation with the environment is socially constructed and reproduced. Also, interaction with other individuals is crucial to the understanding of place as a relational space. 513 Considered this, I hold that the individuals’ commitment to the neighbourhood, village or region contributes to

506 Vaiva, interview, 08:55.
507 The Tourist Information Centre staff, 32:10.
508 Elena, interview, 31:06.
509 Relph 1996, 908.
510 Ibid.
511 Parker 2008, 3-23.
512 Relph 1996, 908.
513 Pascual-de-Sans 2004, 349.
collective sense of place: like trees secure the land, these people keep the fabric of sense of place together. 514

1.5 The spirit of Vilkyškių

Spirit of place frequently emerges as a key dimension of the respondents’ relation with their region. Kask and Raagmaa put forward the importance of the history of a site in creating its meaning – i.e., making a place of it. 515 The authors add that meanings may be constructed by cultural and historical actors such as artists, politicians and scholars investigating a place through their work or devoting their artistic expressions to it. 516 In such respect, I find the village of Vilkyškių especially interesting, as it has been substantially researched and written about. Likewise, some of our informants have stressed the importance of spreading the knowledge of the region, its history and culture (e.g. Dalia). By storying the land, its dwellers perpetuate their sense of place. 517

How do we cultivate a sense of place? Trying to answer this question, Cox and Holmes quote Codiga: we develop a sense of place by exerting our orientation in the new space, by looking at where the sun rises and sets, by getting interested in the political and ecological dimensions of local life; more interestingly, by researching the local history and the customs, language and, I would add, the stories of those who used to dwell the place before us. 518 We have come across these themes in our interviewees’ accounts (Dalia, Julija, Vaiva, Barbara). Knowing the legends and stories of a region reveals a deep sense of place, as Barbara stated in her interview. She held such unique knowledge – together with being born, growing up and living in the region ever since – more valuable than merely knowing the local history or even the ancient language of the borderland inhabitants.

Being born and – I would stress – made into as a local dweller through education and internalization of parents’ values about their dwelling gives a person the strongest sense of place. 519 Barbara’s words on the competition held between the Pagėgiai and Vilkyškių schools confirmed such idea. She asserted that Vilkyškiečiai’s stronger sense of place derives from their knowledge of all the most secreted aspects of their place, which a person who has not been living there cannot know. Does such presumption

515 Kask and Raagmaa 2010, 162.
516 Ibid., 163
517 Our founders 2011.
519 Hay 1998, 12.
stem from the narrative of uniqueness shrouding the village, or from other factors? Indeed, the inhabitants of Pagėgiai have been living there as much as Vilkyškiečiai have lived in their place. When nearly all the dwellers have arrived from somewhere else, how can some claim a better sense of their place than others? As Kask and Raagmhaa suggest, the spirit of a place is rooted in its history and traditions, alongside with its environmental features. One may think that the claimed supremacy of Vilkyškiečiai stems from the central role the village enjoyed during the Soviet period. After going through this research, it seems to me that Vilkyškiai and its inhabitants are constructing an image of themselves as the core of the Lithuania Minor heritage. Possibly, the village is riding the wave of the re-discovery of its heritage, capitalising the fame it owes to its outstanding Lutheran Church and the ancient cemeteries.

1.5.1 The German visitors

In my research, I could see “the Germans” only through the locals’ words. However, I believe that they constitute an inescapable component of the spirit of the borderland. They appear in the informants’ stories, seeking a connection with the locals and cultivating it by their correspondence (Dalia, the Tourist Information Centre staff). They visit the borderland searching for their roots, a practice which I deem two-fold. On the one hand, they look for their family’s remains – photographs, houses, information on the history of their predecessors. On the other, I would say that they have seemingly consolidated an itinerary of “worshipping places”, sites devoted to or connected with personalities other than their family members. This is the case for Bobrowski’s house and tomb, the landscapes narrated in his books, which they want to “taste”. Also Lena Grigoleit’s tomb is part of their itineraries. Therefore, we should not consider the Germans just as tourists. They seem to cope with the interruption of their ancestors’ story in the borderland. Yet, they may not cherish any desire to re-settle in their forerunners’ land. Tuan has coined the formula “field of care” in reference to a place which people have grown attached and affectionate to by repeatedly visiting it, by having roots, good memories, family remains and social relations in there. 520 I believe that the concept suits the relation between the Germans and the borderland. They ritually return to the region, seek contacts, write letters and tell their brood their story, thus finding themselves and perpetuating their family memory.

520 Tuan 1974, in Kask and Raagmhaa 2010, 163. Kask and Raagmhaa apply the phrase to tourists visiting the same place for many years.
2. THE JOURNEY TOWARDS HOME

2.1 “Culture dignified us, it gave us a place in the world”

Robert Hay suggests that only dwellers with a local-based ancestry can enjoy the depth which cultural ties bring to human sense of place. Thanks to the stories which my informants have generously shared with me, now I can challenge his conceptualisation better. I have observed that, through decades, newcomers endeavoured to establish a spiritual connection, to grow cultural bonds with the borderland. I thus contend that culture and the participation in the resurgence of the local heritage turned aliens into locals. The importance which these aspects hold in the respondents’ lives stands as an evidence of this process. Firstly, these topics recur in most informants’ narratives (Dalia’s, Julija’s, Vaiva’s, Elena’s). I admit that this may be because all my respondents worked in some context where cultural activities took place – schools, universities, tourist offices, cultural centres. However, in my opinion, such circumstance does not downplay the significance of culture to their stories and relation to the borderland. Secondly, cultural activities emerge as part of the borderland’s life, informing the locals’ strategy for staying alive. After examining the interview materials, I have come to see cultural activities as the means by which the locals react to the social issues in Vilkyškiai, namely high unemployment, emigration and ageing population. The image of culture as doing well to the community is epitomised by Dalia’s and Elena’s accounts of how the people missed the place for cultural events before they restored that Cultural Centre. Thirdly, the topic connects with the re-discovery of the region’s cultural heritage. I have defined culture as the immaterial components of the cultural heritage of a community or society. I will now explain how, in my view, new settlers eventually become locals. Here the road forks: one side will tell us how newcomers strove to connect with the land by cultivating its artefacts; the other, how they would tell their stories, which went across the walls of their homes and sedimented in the border land.

2.2 Cultivating the local cultural heritage

After the Nineties, the “re-discovery of the past” (for Jonutytė, its “resuscitation”) has pushed the borderland inhabitants to confront with questions concerning its heritage,

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521 Dalia, interview, 44:46, my rearrangement.
523 I would point out how this life-related lexicon (staying alive, anima, and so on) effectively serves my analytical purposes. Also, it semantically connects with the idea of “re-birth” of the region after World War II.
above all: “Whose heritage is this? Which heritage is ours?” I see such inquiries as variations of the universal query “Who are we?”.

For Tuan, “[t]o know a place is also to know the past: one’s own past preserved in schoolhouse, corner drugstore, swimming pool, and first home; the city’s past enshrined in its architectural landmarks”.

In the cases of Gabija, Dalia and Vaiva, the narratives of the cultural heritage emerged as a denunciation of its state in the Kaliningrad borderland. Reportedly, the Soviet authorities severely damaged ancient religious sites, such as the Vilkyškiai Lutheran Church, partly demolished and turned into a grain storage. I see as similar denunciations also the narratives of how the regional history and heritage were silenced, neglected or hidden during the Soviet times (Julija), and of how these were brought back to light (Barbara).

While Gabija and Dalia adduced the “approach” of the Russians as an explanation for the phenomenon – thus associating individuals’ culture and their nationality –, Vaiva spoke of “understanding”. She resigned and said that she cannot understand why people should neglect or vandalise the heritage. Apparently, she does not trace the difference back to nationality. Her words seem to hint at a common origin. Indeed, people on both sides of Kaliningrad and Lithuanian SSR borderlands suffered from eviction. So did, of course, the old dwellers. In the narrative which Vaiva suggests to me, people like her and her husband are guarding the land taken over by the newcomers. Therefore, the re-emergence of the heritage takes up the meaning of inheriting the borderland and its (painful) history.

I see the process of Jonutytė’s “recuperation of the past” as following two main tracks. On the one end, the re-surfacing of the artefacts of ancient local tribes (e.g. hill forts) and the recuperation of places inhabited by the “fathers of the Lithuanian nation”, which have been “mythicised” as part of the Lithuanian national narrative. On the other end, the recuperation of private or spiritual sites such as the houses, the Lutheran Church and the old cemeteries, which tell the story of the previous dwellers, not an easy task.

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524 See also Mellon 2008, 58-77.
525 Yet Tuan notes, following the distinction between collective and individual memory: “But the communal past is not truly one’s own past unless history ex-tends without break into personal memories; and neither is vividly present unless objectified in things that can be seen and touched, that is, directly experienced”. Tuan 1975, 164.
526 Or, as Drozdzewski puts it, “made to re-surface”. Drozdzewski 2012, 304. Like the local heritage, the new regime silenced the language, identity and family history of the Germans and the old dwellers.
527 In the cases of Dalia and Elena, such idea may be informed by their provenance external to the borderland and their involvement in nationally-endorsed projects, such as the fostering of Lithuanianness across the border (Dalia) and the construction of the pantheon of Lithuania Minor (Elena).
one to include in the national narrative due to its peculiarity. This second group of heritage sites concerns mainly common people who went unknown, but who lived on this land and have left behind an array of places. The concept of collective memory is of immediate relevance to the heritage narrative, precisely to the informants’ participation in the re-discovery, maintenance and renovation of the local heritage (Julija, Vaiva, Barbara). “Vilkyškiai is clearly taking back its historical past”, Jonutytė observes. I agree with her as I see the locals cultivating their collective memory also through storytelling, i.e. passing their stories over to the younger generations, giving the borderland a voice.

2.2.1 Heritage sites as transnational spaces
The Lutheran Church in Vilkyškiai represents one of the most significant heritage sites in the region and in the informants’ narratives. It is a symbol of the village, an important part of its architectural heritage and the locus of crucial narratives on the re-discovery of the heritage in the borderland (as we saw in Julija’s interview). The church is now the meeting place for the rare local Lutherans. Yet it also constitutes the “cultural and spiritual heart of the community”, a “centre of symbolic attraction” and one of the cultural centres of the area. Its significance to the local landscape and the locals’ memory is widely acknowledged and cuts across religious and ethno-cultural boundaries. We have learned how all the village inhabitants perceived its reconstruction as an event of high momentum. I thus propose to see the Lutheran Church as a transnational space where different nationalities, religious confessions and cultures interact.

Besides the church, the ancient cemeteries dating back to the late XIX century constitute another site where collective memory is cherished and reproduced. I visualise them as the place where the practices of the Germans and the locals – respectively of visiting and of caring – crystallise. I like to imagine the graveyards as a “meeting point” for the borderland inhabitants and the Germans reaching out to re-connect with their grandparents’ dwelling place.

529 Yet, I want to stress that also other ethnicities existed in the borderland. Precisely, many of its towns were inhabited by the Jews, who nowadays are practically forgotten, as we have seen.
530 Jonutytė 2013, 99.
531 Bügiene 2013, 116; see also Julija (school director), interview; Jonutytė 2013, 95.
532 Bügiene 2013, 113.
533 Understandably, cemeteries as memorial spaces have been thoroughly studied. Apparently Lily Kong has envisaged the cemeteries as the place of “a symbolic encounter between the living and the dead in the form of individual gravesites and the ritual activities taking place in the burial space”. See Foote and Azaryahu 2007, 128.
“population”, thus encompassing the past, the present and else-where (in the case of the Germans) of the borderland people. I consider also them as transnational spaces. In their interesting article, Derrien and Stokowski mention gardening as a “re-con constructive technique”. While acknowledging the difference between gardening and caring for the heritage, I see such practices as attempts to connect with the earth, the land, the place. This perspective allows me to stress the meaning of the tomb as a place, a home in the earth, the locus where the original dwellers and post-war newcomers meet each other.

Finally, I would like to consider the differences underlying State and individual narratives of the cemeteries. Drawing from Schnell and Mishal, I think that the engagement of people like Vaiva’s husband in maintaining the burial sites informs a “small”, “personal” practice of memory and place. In contrast, the creation of a “Pantheon of Lithuania Minor” endorsed by the Lithuanian authorities appears to my eyes as the “big”, “mythical” narrative of hegemonic actors at the national level. As we heard from Elena, many prominent figures of Mažoji Lietuva have had their remains transferred to Bitėnai. I would point out that also Lena Grigoleit’s tomb is there. In contrast with “the authors of the national awakening” sleeping in the “Pantheon”, her tomb attracts many Germans and stands as a memory of the people who originally dwelled this land.

2.3 Storytelling: re-conquering one’s place
In the course of this research, I have showed how the war and the ensuing hardships hardly spared the borderland people at large. The baptism of fire affected the Prussian Lithuanians, the people uprooted from their living place and re-settled in the new Kaliningrad SSR and the newcomers who took over the old dwellers’ houses in Lithuania Minor. The narratives of the region’s genesis convey a sense of loss. This stems from the history of the region and its re-population as a borderland of exiles. Although their case is different – the authors analyse people’s sense of place following a devastating bushfire in their region –, I believe that the process applies to the origins of

534 Derrien and Stokowski 2014, 120.
535 Schnell and Mishal 2008; Lietuvos Respublikos Seimas; see also Elena (working at the Pagėgiai Cultural Centre), interview.
536 Jonutytė 2013, 90.
537 See the interview with the Tourist Information Centre staff.
539 Cox and Holmes 2000, 69.
Vilkyškiai. Cox and Holmes focus on the locals’ sense of loss and on the disruption of meaning the catastrophe caused to the environment and to their lives. Investigating the relationship between loss, memory and dwelling place, they observe how memories fill our dwelling places. This initially stimulated one of my questions, i.e. once we have lost our dwelling, how do we relate to our new one place?

Unlike Cox and Holmes’ informants, seemingly people in Vilkyškiai did not cling on to the nature to heal from the ordeal of displacement. Rather, some of them started sharing their stories, in an attempt to make the point and find themselves in the new place. As I could appreciate during the encounters with Vaiva and the Tourist Information Centre staff, the practice of storytelling has borne certain significance to the borderland inhabitants. Looking into the future, I have also detected the informants’ need to tell, to pass over to the younger generations the story, legends and values connected to the land, as emphasised by Dalia and Barbara: “If we do not share what we know, this land will go unknown and forgotten”.

The place for storytelling was initially the home, which connects to the family, a private dimension. As it was for the heritage, also the locals’ stories gradually emerged after the silence imposed by the totalitarian Soviet regime was broken. The dimensions of memory and identity which had been muffled in the public sphere progressively gained freedom. Still today, people feel they should tell before it is too late, to prevent the borderland and its people from going forgotten (Dalia, Barbara, the Tourist Information Centre staff). Those who failed to collect the story experienced a sense of loss, as one of our informants at the Tourist Information Centre regretted: “When we were young we would not ask and now there is nobody we can ask”. On their part, also the adopted dwellers have striven to give a voice to the borderland: “I had to get interested in [the region], to learn about it and observe much”, Elena remembers.

I would add, with Dalia’s words: “The culture here is beautiful with all its legends, the cultural activists.. You know, you must teach the children about your borderland”.  

Apparently, in the case of the Lithuania Minor borderland and Vilkyškiai, stories have played a major role turning an abandoned, foreign land into the newcomers’

540 Ibid.  
541 Barbara, interview, 01:36:16, my rearrangement.  
542 The Tourist Information Centre staff, interview, 01:16:40, my rearrangement.  
543 Elena, interview, 48:08.  
544 Dalia, interview, 34:41. I would notice that the idea of giving a voice to the borderland recurs in her narrative, exemplified by the words “garsus” (Eng. “loud”, “well-known”) and “garsinti” (“to make famous”): “And now our borderland is quite well-known and resonates all over Lithuania”. Ibid., 13:42. Also: “[We wondered –]how to make this region known?”. Ibid., 16:13.
dwelling place. The thematic evenings mentioned by Vaiva apparently served the aim of inaugurating the settlers’ new life and start their neighbourhood ties – which reminds us of Cox and Holmes’ view of place as a defined space where people live together. Quoting Tuan, “[e]xperiences that make a corner of the street an intimately known neighbourhood [sic] are not those that can be made visible and public with ease. They resist objectification as verbal tracts, maps, or pictures. Such experiences of place grow imperceptibly with each subconscious imprint of taste, smell, and touch, and with unheralded acts, like lending or borrowing sugar, daily compounded”.

Storytelling is undoubtedly a means to reproduce the sense of place. Before the uncertainty of what will be of Vilkyškiai, storytelling emerges as a silently agreed-upon way to perpetrate the memory of the village and of Lithuania Minor. It informs a reaction to the ageing of its population and sizeable emigration. Besides, the perspective of Vilkyškiai to become a seasonal place spawns general reflections on the story of places and the impact of the transformation of their meanings. In the informants’ narratives, I have perceived their fear that not just the land and its people risk to go forgotten, but also their sense of place. In this sense storytelling gives the borderland a voice.

This idea completes the circle. Routines, practices and storytelling help people slowly make a space into a dwelling. The narratives its dwellers tell contribute to their own sense of place. Finally, through the perpetuation of such local stories anchored in the land, the local inhabitants struggle to save their sense of place, i.e. the land as they have experienced it. I agree with Jackson that constructing narratives – putting events in a logical order to tell them – enables us to turn from passive experience to an active re-elaboration of events. I believe that the same process has allowed the borderland inhabitants to “tame” the borderland. Cox and Holmes argue that developing a sense of place has a healing power, just like storytelling. Namely, they refer to the role that the nature’s revival had in re-awakening the locals’ hope. In contrast with the isolation where they closed themselves after their uprooting, the newcomers in Vilkyškiai took over an active role in developing their sense of place, coping with their sense of loss by telling their stories.

545 Cox and Holmes 2000, 67.
546 Tuan 1975, 158.
547 Concerning this aspect, see Stedman 2003.
548 Our founders 2011.
549 Jackson 2002, 15, 16.
550 Cox and Holmes 2000, 74.
2.4 Becoming locals: a time for taking, a time for giving

When illustrating how the borderland was born, I introduced the so-called “logic of taking and giving”. Often newcomers managed to survive thanks to what they had taken from the old dwellers. Up to today, some of the former new settlers have been taking care of the graveyards, which constitute part of the remains of the Prussian Lithuanians.

I like to imagine that this is a way for these particularly sensitive newcomers to return the grace they received. Similarly I consider the adoption of the Wolf’s children. The orphan (or the child) and the grave could be seen respectively as symbols of birth and death, as the corresponding poles of the life cycle. This image connects with the idea of perpetuating the story of the borderland inhabitants, whoever they be. I have striven to keep the land at the centre of such process. Like time does in the Indians’ say, the land sees men pass and cope with the overwhelming questions related to their belonging. In the borderland, within the boundaries of a nation, hopefully a transnational narrative began to sprout.

I have shown how the newcomers clang completely to the borderland in the cultivation of their sense of place and how this, coupled with the passing of time and the birth of new generations, has allowed them to become locals. In the time span of their human life, the former aliens developed cultural ties with the place. Like Brun wrote concerning refugees, I believe that one does not stay a newcomer forever. Indeed, in terms of their (non-legal) rights to the place – the right to be considered as local – these people have changed their status by cultivating sense of place, acknowledging their stay in the borderland as definitive and having their children growing up in the region. Remembering that the land holds a central position in the process, I think that not only places have a history of their own, but also does sense of place – if we see Hay’s essentialism critically.

Drawing from Jonutytė’s “resuscitation of the past”, I have shown how the researched borderland has gone from silence – on the heritage and the locals’ fate – to storytelling. After the Nineties, the land was stripped of the band that kept it from

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552 Yet I would stress again that this label helps distinguishing those who settled after 1945 from the descendants of the Prussian Lithuanians.
553 Remember Jackson 2002, 34.
telling its story. Now it can be told. ⁵⁵⁴ Year after year, voices have grown and in some cases they have told transnational stories – as hands have cared for tombs in transnational sites. The stories pass from generation to generation, with some aspects deliberately selected and other obliterated. As Jackson suggests, stories, lives and journeys are deeply intertwined: “Stories are counterfactual and fictional ... because they aid and abet our need to believe that we may discern and determine the meaning of our journey through life: where we came from and where we are going”. ⁵⁵⁵ I have encountered these questions in our respondents’ narratives. They seem to apply to the past, present and future of people in Vilkyškiai. Also, they are relevant to the humankind. For this reason, I find sense of place a topic worth studying. If we see our life experience as a journey, ⁵⁵⁶ storytelling becomes the link between us and our place. It brings the place into being. “A sense of existential peril always attaches to such migrations. ... journeys throw one open to the unknown, and, when related as stories, involve, first, losing one’s way, then trial, tribulation, and lucky breaks ... and, finally, a denouement or moment of closure when justice is meted out, social bonds are reaffirmed, and moral meanings are revealed”. ⁵⁵⁷ Every story takes place. Likewise, we happen and live in places. Hence the persisting significance of places and roots – be they mobile, thin and quick to grow in today’s world. In the whole process, culture reasserts its value, reminding us how we have come in the current globalised, fast-changing world. Finally, I believe that such high speed imposes the need to reflect on our life – like in a story, place after place.

⁵⁵⁴ For the Germans it meant “re-becoming a German”. Kibelka reports how they would start telling everything, little by little. From the first confessions to the accomplishment of a person’s story weeks if not months could pass. Kibelka 2000, 135.
⁵⁵⁵ Jackson 2002, 16.
⁵⁵⁶ Ibid., 16, 30, 31.
⁵⁵⁷ Ibid., 33.
3. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Through my research, I have tried to show how the label of nativeness can be the product of decades-long experiences and sense of place construction. This means we should not see aliens, refugees and newcomers as powerless and stripped from the social environment. On the contrary, I have described how they empowered themselves by cultivating ties with their surroundings. In contrast with the natural, given, eternal quality of rights to the place which national narratives of the land enshrine – people’s stories stand out as the inter-subjective product of ongoing subjective reflections. We continuously tell and elaborate them to make sense of our lives. I believe also that the land does not belong to anybody. Rather, the people who live on the land belong to the earth – as Relph wrote. The people who experienced a place, lived it, worked it, grew old in it and storied it belong to it. As such, I think that they deserve not to be eradicated.

559 Relph 1996, 908.
VI. PRIMARY SOURCES

Gerda (researcher). In discussion with the author. February 18, 2013. The Lithuanian Emigration Institute, Kaunas.
Duration of the interview: 51 min.

Duration of the interview: 50 min.

Duration of the interview: 52 min.

Duration of the interview: 1 h 24 min.

Vaiva (former newcomer in Vilkyškiai) and her husband. Interview with Dr. Jurga Jonutytė. March 1, 2013. Vilkyškiai.
Duration of the interview: 2 h 27 min.

The Tourist Information Centre staff. Interview with Dr. Jurga Jonutytė. February 27, 2013. The Tourist Information Centre of the Pagėgiai area in Vilkyškiai,
Duration of the interview: 1 h 46 min.

Barbara (Tourist Officer). Interview with Dr. Jurga Jonutytė. February 27, 2013. The Tourist Information Centre of the Pagėgiai area in Vilkyškiai.
Duration of the interview: 1 h 51 min.

Elena (working at the Pagėgiai Cultural Centre). Interview with Dr. Jurga Jonutytė. March 1, 2013. The Cultural Centre of the Pagėgiai municipality.
Duration of the interview: 2 h 24 min.


Total duration of the interview recordings: approximately 12 hours.
VII. BIBLIOGRAPHY


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VIII. APPENDIX

List of interview questions

1.1 Are you and your family originally from this region? Are your friends and acquaintances mainly from this same area? Do your family members live and work in this region, too?

1.2 Have you ever considered moving somewhere else? Why?

1.3 What places or views do you like the most in this town/region? Why?

1.4 In your opinion, what landscapes/places/buildings best represent this town? Why?

1.5 Did this place change much through time? Can you recall some old story about this region?

2. Does it mean anything special to you living on the border? Does it somehow affect your everyday life? (Think for example of border crossings, smuggling, tourism to/from Kaliningrad, if you have friends or relatives in the Kaliningrad region, etc.)

2.1 Do you often cross the border? If yes, what for?

2.2 Was it easier before to cross it? When did it change?