POLISH SOLDIERS AND BRITISH WOMEN – CARNIVALESQUE ENCOUNTERS DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR

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If any historical moment was to bring Poland and the United Kingdom closer than before, it was definitely the Second World War. The Polish-British alliance started to crystallize in March 1939, triggered by the German menace. The latter was growing in the face of Hitler’s annexation of Austria on 12th March, the violation of the Munich Agreement\(^1\) two days later, resulting seizure of the remainder of Czechoslovakia, and the takeover of the Klaipeda Region (Lithuania) on 22nd March. In response to these developments, as well as to the repeated pressure from Germany’s Minister of Foreign Affairs Joachim von Ribbentrop, Polish authorities decisively rejected the demands of joining the Free City of Gdańsk (Germ. Danzig) to the Reich and of creating a free transit route through the Polish Corridor for Germany.\(^2\) The British government supported Poland by issuing unilateral guarantees of assistance. On 31st March, the prime minister Neville Chamberlain announced in the House of Commons that:

in the event of any action which clearly threatened Polish independence, and which the Polish Government accordingly considered it vital to resist with their national forces, His Majesty’s Government would feel themselves bound at once to lend the

\(^1\) Munich Agreement was signed on 30th September 1938. As a result of it Britain, France, Italy and Germany agreed that Czechoslovakia would cede Sudetenland, inhabited by the German minority, to Germany.

\(^2\) According to the 1919 Treaty of Versailles, Pomerania was to be a part of Poland together with largely German populated Gdańsk which was given the status of a free city. Through Pomerania, the Polish corridor, Poland gained access to the (Baltic) sea.
Polish Government all support in their power. They have given the Polish Government an assurance to this effect. [Hansard 31 March 1939]

This was followed by a bilateral agreement of mutual help concluded on 6th April and finally the signing of the Anglo-Polish defence alliance on 25th August 1939. The consequence of these agreements was the United Kingdom’s declaration of war on Germany two days after Hitler’s attack on Poland on 1st September. The British ally was now at war, although it did not give any substantial help to their Polish partner. The latter, after unsuccessful campaigns in their country and then in Western Europe, which culminated in French surrender in June 1940, made their way to the British Isles to continue their fight against the Axis powers.\(^3\) At the end of the war, there were about 50,000 Polish combatants in the UK.

Although the reasons for coming to “the last island of hope” were military and political, the aim of the article is to investigate the cultural space in which the British and the Polish cultures met\(^4\). The author would like to argue that wartime relations displayed, at times, the characteristics of the carnivalesque. In other words, the war gave an opportunity for the emergence of the spirit of carnival which may explain some patterns of people’s behaviour, otherwise uncommon outside the war reality. The important reservation is that the cultural phenomenon is tied here only to the (Anglo-Polish) relations at the home front and not in the combat zone. The theoretical determinants used to support the thesis will be based on the concepts of carnival and carnivalisation as described by the Russian philosopher and literary critic M. Bakhtin. The research material will be selected the Second World War recollections written by Polish combatants, representatives of all Polish armed forces in the West – the air forces, the navy and the army, whose units were based in the British Isles and operated mainly from there. All books were published after the war in or outside Poland as many veterans did not return to their homeland to avoid communist persecution and/or due to the fact that some came from the eastern part of the country which, as a result of the agreements in Yalta (February 1945), became a part of the Soviet Union. Since self-reflecting literature, by its nature, reconstructs rather than

\(^3\) The military agreements signed between the two countries during the war allowed for the formation of Polish air forces (first groups of pilots came to Britain in December 1940, initially reinforcing the ranks of the Royal Air Forces) and the army (among others Brygada Spakochronowa [the Parachute Brigade] with its commander S. Sosabowski which fought on the side of the allies e.g. at Arnhem, and 1. Dywizja Pancerna [First Panzer Division] under the command of General S. Maczek). The Polish navy vessels (destroyers „Burza” [Storm], „Błyskawica” [Lightning] and „Grom” [Thunder]) were already evacuated (Operation Peking) on 1st September to prevent their capture or/and destruction by the much stronger German Kriegsmarine.

\(^4\) In the context of the resulting from these contacts dialogue (of cultures) between the East and the West it may be advisable, methodology-wise, to explain that the division into Eastern (Europe) as represented here by Poland and Western (Europe) represented by Britain reflects the so called Western world perspective which, on the whole, has the tendency to “orientalize” the countries between Germany and Russia. It is on rare occasions, mainly when Poland is treated instrumentally as, for instance, the bastion of Christian culture defending the West against Bolshevism, that it is perceived as a part of the Western world. The conference in Yalta, on the other hand, showed that when the interests of the West were at stake, Poland was not considered a part of the Western culture hence it could be sacrificed to appease Russia. See e.g. Kuźma 1980 and Skórczewski 2009.
merely mirrors the events which it describes, the presented image of the intercultural relations and their participants will be a (subjective) cultural construct.

Mikhail Mikhailovitch Bakhtin (1895-1975), although an outstanding scholar, by many considered one of the greatest 20th century theoreticians of literature, earned international acclaim only after the 1960s, when the translation of his works into European and other languages, including Japanese and Hebrew, gained momentum. The significance of his writings lies in the fact that his humanist thought permeated various scientific disciplines from literary theory, through linguistics to philosophy. He introduced concepts that, being universally used recycled and updated, outlived their author. Among them were the notions of the “dialogic” (social nature of language), “a polyphonic dialogue” and “carnival”. The major works in which he discussed these ideas are Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics, 1963, which was the second edition of Problems of Dostoevsky’s Creative Art published in 1929, Rabelais and His World (1965) and The Dialogic Imagination (1975). It is in the first two books that he explored the notions of carnival and carnivalesque. In Rabelais and His World, the spirit of carnival becomes the key to the interpretation of François Rabelais’, the French Renaissance writer’s works. Carnivalistic folklore is also taken advantage of in Bakhtin’s analysis of Dostoevsky’s art as presented in Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics. [Encyclopaedia Britannica 2013; Steinglass 1998]

In its original, historical meaning, carnival relates to “the sum total of all diverse festivities, rituals and forms of a carnival type” being “syncretic pageantry of a ritualistic sort” [Bakhtin 1984a: 122]. However, to grasp the complexity of the phenomenon one has to go beyond this hermetic understanding. Carnival permeated people’s lives which resulted in the peculiar carnivalisation (the influence of carnival) of cultures. Its all pervasive nature made carnival a spectacle of people rather than for people. At the same time, it was not an individual experience but a collective one. When the feast was on, it enjoyed a life of its own, being as if the reverse side of its official life’s equivalent and hence it can be perceived as a world “inside out”. An essential characteristic of carnival was the feeling and the exercise of freedom. Rigid rules and views crumbled in the face of it, bringing its revitalizing spirit. People found themselves outside restrictive social and political norms with its hierarchies and appropriateness, all of which were lifted for the period of carnival. One felt the relativity of the world they lived in and they enjoyed it. Such spirit of carnival ruled e.g. during the Roman Saturnalias, taking its participants to the Saturn’s golden age. Bakhtin singled out the features of this carnival sense of the world in Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics6.

5 His first English translation (by Helene Iswolsky) was Rabelais and His World, in 1968 [Gillespie 2000: 34].

6 Carnival categories as enumerated in Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics [Bakhtin 1984a: 123-124]: 1) hierarchical structure (everything resulting from socio-hierarchical inequality or any other form of inequality among people ) is suspended, people who in life are separated by impenetrable hierarchical barriers enter into free and familiar contact; 2) carnival is the place for working out a new mode of interrelationship between individuals counterposed to the all-powerful socio-hierarchical relationships of non-carnival life; eccentricity is a special category of the carnival sense of the world, it permits – in concretely sensuous form – the latent sides of human nature to
Carnival with its power of carnavalisation started to fall into decline in the 2nd half of the 17th century. While its entertaining role in form of festive events has been preserved, the carnival sense of the world, e.g. the carnavalisation of speech life, is no longer socially acceptable. The spirit of carnavalesque has not been lost entirely though, as it still resonates in, among others, literature, political discourse or popular entertainment, something that Bakhtin would foresee. As Andrew Robinson comments: “Carnivals have turned into state-controlled parades or privatised holidays, humour and swearing have become merely negative, and the people’s ‘second life’ has almost ceased. However, Bakhtin believes that the carnival principle is indestructible. It continues to reappear as the inspiration for areas of life and culture.” [Robinson 2011]

The spirit of Bakhtin’s carnival influenced Polish-British relations during the last war. This may come as no surprise since the carnavalesque is inscribed into an armed conflict. If carnival turns the world upside down and thus violates order and stands out against the institutional frame, this is exactly what happens during the war which itself is the reverse side of peace, introduces chaos and enables people to do the things they would not have done or would not have been allowed to do in peace time. As mentioned in the beginning though, the major focus here will be the home front. While the front line was the place of destruction, the home front was the construction ground, the meeting place of two (sub)cultures (male/female, male/male encounters) and this is where the various forms of carnavalesque (of carnival type) “revival and renewal” could manifest themselves. One of the arenas where this was particularly visible were the relations between the Polish servicemen and British women. Suspension of rules, role reversal, relativity of truths and blasphemy were all at work here.

The women Poles mingled with in the British Isles came from different walks of life, performing various jobs, usually actively contributing to the war effort. Contact with them was easier since they were no longer tied to their household chores and occupied with bringing up children. Some of them joined the defence schemes as well as the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS) established in 1938 already before 19397. A year later they could enlist in the reformed Women’s Royal Naval Service (WRENS) and the Women’s Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF). What is more, created in 1907 First Aid Nursing Yeomanry cooperated with the Special Operations Executive (SOE) thus offering work in the field of intelligence. Women worked in hospitals, convalescent homes, first aid centres and in the Red Cross. Because of the shortage of labour, by December 194 the government introduced conscription (the National Service Act, no 2). Not only did women put on military uniforms then, but they also replaced men in the labour market. These developments, born out of economic necessity, later revealed a carnavalesque character once it was established.

There was hardly an area where they were not present. They worked on farms, munitions factories, ship and vehicle manufacturing or chemical and metal indus-

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reveal and express themselves; 3) carnavalistic mesalliances – a free and familiar attitude spreads over everything: values, thoughts, phenomena, and things; 4) profanation – carnavalistic blasphemies, debasing and bringing down to earth, parodies on sacred texts, etc.

7 Information in this paragraph has been taken from Harris 2011.
tries. Women occupied workplaces in the public transport system, became tender and ambulance drivers, pump crew members and the ones responsible for vehicle maintenance. Consequently, “by mid-1943, almost 90 per cent of single women and 80 per cent of married women were employed in essential work for the war effort” [Harris 2011]. The war made them leave their homes, the private space associated mainly with females, and enter the public space, traditionally reserved for men. In this sense war seems to be a big equaliser, subverting the traditional order and gender discourses. For many young Polish soldiers who, born after or shortly before WWI, were too young to remember women’s contribution to the previous war, and whose gender socialization would not make them familiar with active presence of women in the public sphere, this was a great novelty. The pilot of the 302 fighter squadron, Wacław Król, thought it important and striking enough to write a lengthy note about it in his book. His description proves though, that even if females performed well in the new positions and proved their competence, they were not necessarily treated as equals but perceived through the prism of gender trivialisation. They may have replaced men but they did not belong there:

WAAFs constitute almost all airport staff members and are also in charge of aeroplanes. The only male workers were technicians and their assistants whereas all other posts were filled by dames. Blondes and brunettes, chestnut and red-haired, plump and slim, obedient and insubordinate, all beating their civilian girlfriends when it comes to coquettishness. They drove lorries and tractors, […], poured fuel and oil to aeroplane tanks, loaded cannon and machine gun ammunition, helped pilots to put on their parachutes and get seated in their cockpits. They kept all records of air training and flight timing, collected materials from warehouses and diligently settled accounts, in short, they ousted men from their workplaces. It was a wartime necessity, men were indispensable in the war front and they had to replace them.8

[Król 1975: 314]

Poles came from a country that in the interwar period was, to a large degree, a mixture of conservatism and traditionalism which did not create good conditions for the political and cultural advancement of women. Yet, the first years after the First World War were promising. The 1918 ceasefire gave Poland independence after 146 years of partition among Austria, Prussia and Russia. The same year Polish women received voting rights which happened earlier than in Britain, where only in 1928 was their voting age equalized with that of men. The equality of all citizens before the law was confirmed in the March Constitution of 1921 [Pietrzak 1996: 35]. Women entered political life becoming members of the Seym and the Senate9 and actively participated in the democratic processes.10 Changes in the civil law gave them more independence from men and access to higher education became the gateway to more professional opportunities and a better life. On the other hand, the reality women lived in offered, as it is often referred to, ‘equal rights [but] unequal

8 All translations from Polish are mine.
9 The lower and the higher, respectively, chambers of the Polish Parliament.
chances. They were still underrepresented and discriminated against in the public sphere, with higher positions dominated by men and married women finding it difficult to pursue a career outside home. The patriarchal model of a family and traditional role of a woman as a mother and a wife remained unchallenged. In the end, “the twenty years of Polish independence were rather a period of time when the society and women themselves were getting accustomed to the newly gained equality of rights, when barriers were removed and not a time of significant participation of women in the public life” [Żarnowska, Szwarc 1996: 6].

Independently of political and legal constraints which prevented full emancipation, it is mental changes that take most time to occur as they compete with socialization influencing one on both, conscious and unconscious levels. Hence, in their relations with the British women Poles had to deal not only with wartime changes in the economy which pushed females in conventionally male job positions but also with the cultural shift provoked by these economic as well carnivalesque circumstances. The soldiers could learn it hard way, as the role change they witnessed shook the foundations of the power structure and questioned the notions of masculinity and femininity which they were not always prepared for. First encounters with the opposite sex could leave them bewildered then.

Polish servicemen realized that British women could be as active and eager participants of social exchanges as their men were. They were not afraid of signalling their interest in Poles. By taking initiative they demonstrated their equal status to Polish combatants in what could be considered a male domain. They seduced without scruples and engaged themselves in (love) “conquests” [podboje] [Nuszkiewicz 1983: 87]. Writers recollected their “tender” [czule] glance, “coquettish” [zalotny] ways and determination: “Actually I do not know who she is. She keeps pushing a baby along in a pram at my window. She accosts me, smiles, even knocks at my window. I do not even know if this is her tot or if she is just a baby-sitter” [Wasilewski 1978: 124]. To attract attention British women purposely blurred the boundaries between male and female type of reactions thus de-gendering certain behaviours: “Down there and in the squares there were many shapely girls serving in the navy. Seeing us they started to whistle, just like the English men whistle at attractive girls. We whistled and waved back to them” [Cygan 2011: 285]. Waclaw Król found it hard to accept such gender democratization. He took it for granted that it is the man who conquers women and he expressed his disapproval when he experienced something to the contrary: “These English women are totally different from Polish women. Very straightforward. – Do you love me? – she asked at parting. She is very nice but you can’t win a boy’s heart this way!” [Król 1982: 226] Król and his brothers in arms obviously brought to Britain a different image of their countrywomen and different knowledge of, what Hofstede would call cultural rituals (here related to courting). According to his standards, in the social ritual of courting, it was the man who assumed a (stereotypical) role of a seducer, be it romantic Romeo or Don Juan. To his surprise, his Juliet, here Janette, did not want to be modest and timid and entered the

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11 E.g., there is a book titled Równe prawa i nierówne szanse. Kobiety w Polsce międzywojennej [Equal rights, unequal chances. Women in interwar Poland] [Żarnowska, Szwarc 2000].
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ground reserved for men instead. Therefore, what in the case of the latter would have been evaluated positively as decisiveness, in case of Król’s Janette was translated into pushy conduct. Family background could reinforce negative responses if servicemen, like Król, came from peasant families which were the stronghold of a patriarchal model of a family.

Another element of the “carnivalesque sense of the world” that challenged gendered power relations was the British females’ awareness of their needs, which they overtly expressed and aimed at satisfying them by influencing the course of events. Women were said to kiss in the public not minding the strangers watching them. At Christmas time they “accidentally” found themselves under mistletoes so that their admirers had no choice but to follow a custom and kiss them. Ostentatious behavior made Poles feel at unease. Soldiers were embarrassed and even blushed. They described the conduct in the categories of an attack, aggressiveness and possessiveness (which in most cases did not prevent them from giving in to the ‘aggressors’ anyway). Many were flabbergasted. “The chick must have gone mad!” reasoned Król when a stranger asked about his marital status and then asked for a kiss: “But very, very strong and sweet, my darling! [...] Please – she whispered in my ear – Be brave” [Król 1991: 46]. In order to see their male favourites they sent Christmas invitations via the units’ commanders which, from the perspective of the invited, were not necessarily an awaited distinction. “I do my best to shirk because, after all, I would like to spend it [Christmas] among my own folks”, complained a soldier, Antoni Wasilewski [1978: 142]. To be closer to the beloved fighter pilot, the WAAF Elizabeth, arranged a transfer to the Royal Air Force in Speke (England) where Mieczysław Wyszkowski’s squadron was based. Determined as she was, she then fought for the loved man only to finally lose the battle to her competitor, Lucille [Wyszkowski 1970: 99]. It was thus women who, at the home front, assumed the role of warriors, traditionally associated with the opposite sex. Nothing seems to have stopped the women. Warnings against “amorous allies” and their indecent conduct were counterproductive. According to Tadeusz Niwiński, a NCO of Polski Samodzielny Dywizjon Artylerii Przeciwlotniczej Ciężkiej [Polish Independent Heavy Anti-Aircraft Battalion], “they did not help at all or rather: did help” as they became “the best advertisement of Poles” [Niwiński 1999: 49, 46]. Men reported they could be as ‘helpless’ as women. This is how the Cichociemny [the unseen and silent] [Stefan Bałuk 2007: 134] recalled one of his reunions with a girlfriend: “Let’s celebrate my comeback with dinner./ OK, but first we go to bed and then we will think about food, it will definitely taste better then – she replied./ I was in no position to oppose this...”. “The Scottish women were crazy about ‘hot’ Poles” summed it up Niwiński, anti-aircraft gunner [Niwiński 1999: 38], and it can be taken for granted that the statement applied to British women in general.

The influence of women on the course of events in their relationships consisted not only in initiating relations but also setting the limits to them. They chose the men they liked but rejected others. A Scotswoman Nancy, for example, might have

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12 The parts of the sentences which are in italics are Król’s translation and are provided here in their original form.

13 Elite Paratroops of the Polish Army in Exile, parachuted into occupied Poland.
helped Król to find her under a mistletoe and kiss her but, on the other hand, she was very careful not to make it possible for other officers attracted to her [Król 1991: 45]. Females also controlled the level of intimacy. With the words: “Go on your own. God bless you” an Englishwoman dispelled a Pole’s hopes for a continuation of their time together, after their chance meeting during an air raid and passionate kissing in a ramshackle house [Wasilewski 1978: 159]. For most men that could be hard to swallow. The woman Kazimierz Psuty, the soldier of the First Panzer Division met, was eager to continue kissing even when he urged her to stop, but refused to go any further. Psuty was disappointed: “[...] she liked to kiss and, as it turned out, to kiss only” [Psuty 2007: 59]. For others such behaviour was a blow to their male sense of pride [Król 1975: 320]. Cichociemny Nuszkiewicz, on the other hand, found it curious: “The behaviour of the Scottish women was surprising. Both Elsie and Juliet [...] allowed, even now, for much, but not for everything” [Nuszkiewicz 1983: 90].

In carnival, body and bodily functions come to a fore. According to Bakhtin, in a grotesque concept of the human body the emphasis is put on its lower part (the genital organs, the belly and the buttocks) as opposed to the upper part (the face or the head). In the Russian theorist’s words, if “upward” and “downward” assume their topographical meaning and are understood as “earth” and “heaven” respectively, then the carnivalesque reality is characterized by degradation, that is coming down to earth, “hurl[ing] [an object] to the reproductive lower stratum, the zone in which conception and a new birth take place”. So understood the lower part of the body responsible for the broadly understood growth and regeneration obtains a positive meaning then. [Bakhtin 1984b: 21]

As exemplified above, the upward-downward “cosmic-carnal” shift was an integral part of the wartime reality which confirms Bakhtin’s comment about “sensual, material bodily unity and community” in carnival [1984b: 21, 255]. Even the practicalities of war circumstances: separation of couples and families and, at least temporarily, growing economic and cultural independence of women, were particularly highly conducive to such body liberation. The upside down character of the world and “an emphasis [...] on what is typically hidden and repressed” [Robinson 2011] legitimized the carnivalesque suspension of rules. In Problems of Dostoievsky’s Poetics Bakhtin explains: “The laws, prohibitions, and restrictions that determine the structure and order of ordinary, that is noncarnival, life are suspended during carnival” [Bakhtin 1984a: 122-123].

Women in the UK enjoyed the immersion in the bodily life. The atmosphere of carnival, enhanced by the fame of Polish combatants’ front line successes, their gallantry and their exoticization facilitated and encouraged intimacy. “We heard through the grapevine that each young woman in the city only dreams ‘to spend a night with a Polish airman in the bomb shelter’”, reported a fighter pilot Jerzy Damsz from Blackpool (North West of England) [Damsz 2009: 90]. Newly met girls were ready to visit Polish men in their apartments at night and, in the words of Bałuk, “it of course ended as it was to end” [Bałuk 2007: 92]. For some women it was the time when they rediscovered their femininity and got rid of restricting social roles. Thanks to Poles, they were said to have understood what it meant to be a woman
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[Borchólski 1990: 74] and that they could be “darlings”, and not only “wives” [Wasilewski 1978: 210]. They were ready to take an active part in “the renewal on the material bodily level” [Bakhtin 1984b: 83] which they earlier might have repressed. “They improved our morale but not necessarily morality” wrote a fighter pilot Herbst [2013: 188].

Surprisingly enough for the author of the article, in one of a bomber pilot’s recollections, she found a mention of a situation which is an example of a gallant rape on an older Scotswoman by two Polish soldiers. Even more surprisingly, the woman involved had a relaxed attitude to the incident which she then reported on to a Scottish newspaper in the May 1941 issue: “[…] they gave me delightful moments similar to those I had in my youth. They talked to me in a foreign language addressing me ‘Madam’, finally they both kissed me in two cheeks, said ‘Sorry and thank you’ in English and disappeared”. The newspaper concluded: “The old Scottish woman did not bear a grudge against them but she laughed saying ‘these Poles are really gentlemen’, because they treated me nicely all the time” [Kwolek 1984: 51]. Provided the situation was genuine and the newspaper really printed the story14 (and abstaining from a moral judgment), with both sides enjoying it, this would have been a carnival in full swing – celebration of body, of carnal love. However, there are issues which may raise doubts about the truth of the event. For example, one may call into question the memory of the author of the recollections and his reliability, as well as the reliability of the Scotswoman and the newspaper. We may not be sure either that it was not simply a piece of fantasy which each of the parties involved might have had an interest in revealing. In any case it is crucial to emphasize that such a deplorable behaviour of soldiers was strictly forbidden and severely punished in the Polish army.

A natural, though not always necessarily wanted outcome of such intercultural encounters were pregnancies because “in celebrating sexuality and fertility, Carnival celebrates the birth of children often, it is said, by producing them” [Milla Cozart Riggio]. More than every third child out of the total of 5.3 million born in wartime Britain was illegitimate, with the highest rates in the last year of the conflict [Leder 2006: 119]. Shirley Foster Hartley indicates though that, at least for England and Wales, the peak in illegitimacy levels in 1945 had other reasons than “immorality”:

It was not an increase in premarital conceptions, but a very sharp decline in the legitimation of those conceptions, that was the main cause of the peak in illegitimacy. In that year the probability of legitimation of a premarital conception carried to term was only about half what it had been only seven years earlier. [Hartley 1975: 195]

In his recollections, Wiktor Tomaszewski, a soldier and a doctor of the Polish School of Medicine at the University of Edinburgh15 notes that towards the end of the war, the number of illegitimate children Poles allegedly fathered in the UK was

14 The author of the article will try to find the article in the wartime Scottish press.
15 The Polish School of Medicine at the University of Edinburgh – established in March 1941, aimed at the Polish armed forces members but eventually it also accepted civilians, www.ed.ac.uk/medicine-vet-medicine/about/history/polish-school
to be about 5000. He and other combatants admit unwanted pregnancies were an issue. Superiors urged unwilling soldiers to marry their pregnant girlfriends and cooperated with the latter and their families when they looked for the Polish fathers. The identification of the male parent was not always an easy task though. Sometimes the woman’s memory failed her:

The day and the hour were set and on that day all regiment was mustered. [...] the girl pointed to one of the soldiers as the one guilty of her condition. He was a handsome and well-built a boy. The poor fellow blushed and immediately reported to the colonel that it was first time in his life he saw the woman. [...] Fortunately, the guardian angel watched over the wretch because while settling the date of the incident it turned out he had then been on a leave in England and this is what saved him. [Borchólski 1990: 74]

On other occasions, commonality of the carnivalesque among combatants could be a stumbling block. A Scotsman who just wanted to know who the father of his grandchild was became unsuccessful. He could learn this neither from the pregnant daughter nor the commander of the division he turned to for help. The daughter did not know it because it was dark in the cinema where she met the soldier and then the blackout in the street prevented her from seeing him. The commander was helpless too, as in the end not less than six of those he was in charge of turned up, claiming they found themselves in the circumstances described by the Scotsman’s daughter which made them all candidates for fathers-to-be [Walentynowicz 1969: 152].

As popularity of Poles was out of question, appeals were made to the Polish School authorities to discipline their students so that they would not flirt with nurses. Tomaszewski, the school staff member, rightly retorted that it took the consent of two people to have an affair [Tomaszewski 1976: 185]. It is also true that a part of the British society, including doctors, approved of the births from a biological point of view [Tomaszewski 1976: 185]. Other Britons reminded their fellow countrymen that Poles should not be singled out as this was a more common phenomenon with servicemen of other nationalities having their substantial share in the rise of the British population in that war as well as in the previous conflicts. More critical citizens recalled their compatriots’ similar behaviour in the British colonies [Walentynowicz 1969: 151]. Poles tried to protect their reputation claiming that they did try to take responsibility for their actions and married allied women.16 In their defence they also proudly emphasized that the mixture of Polish and British genes made the children “exceptionally comely” [Borchólski 1990: 74].

Not always were women in the position of a victim though. Sailor Borys Karnicki recalls his colleague’s experience when he was made to believe that the innocent single woman he fell in love with got pregnant. As soon as he paid her the money to terminate pregnancy he was visited by her husband who reprimanded the Pole and complained it was the third time she had played such a trick on a man [Karnicki 1987: 122].

16 Jarek Gąsiorek notes that according to Neal Asherson (essay in: Scotland and Poland Historical Encounters, 1500-2010) there were 2500 Polish-Scottish marriages contracted during the war, at: polishscottishheritage.co.uk/?heritage_item=scottish-polish-coexistence-during-the-dark-days-of-wwii (July 13, 2015).
Since carnival is democratic in its nature and everybody, irrespective of age, gender and marital status can enjoy its benefits, a question that may crop up in the context of the celebration of senses is the one about morality. There were moments during the war when the veil of the carnival was lifted, making its participants sensitive to such issues. Stefan Bałuk was one of them. Being in a relationship he made no secret of having a Polish wife. Neither did his British girlfriend, Helen Mac Phee, hide the information that she had a fiancée. In a moment of non-carnival reflection Bałuk asked his Polish confidante about the moral judgment of his and Helen’s conduct:

In a popular meaning of the word we were both unfaithful to our partners but was it marital unfaithfulness? […] Can a woman, a wife, a fiancée or a lover remain faithful to a man through all the long years of war […] and can what we are doing and thousands of soldiers are doing be called ‘adultery’? [Bałuk 2007: 123]

The answer he received seems to correspond with the thesis posed in the beginning of the article about the exceptionality of the war conditions. She justified moral relativity, still leaving room for individuality:

Maria remained silent for a long while and then said: Keep in mind one authentic truth that people who were at war will never be the same again. Let us put aside words like adultery, perfidy. Due to war experiences people simply change. They start applying a different set of values, ethics, morality. Moreover, it all depends also on the traits of character, temperament etc., that is purely individual traits. [Bałuk 2007: 123-124]

War is often shown in the context of mass killing, mutilation and destruction. Researchers say wars move us back in time and, from a Darwinian point of view, stop evolution, as men turn into animals again. If we accept that war can be a metaphor of anti-evolution then, by pointing to the idea of Bakhtin’s carnival, the article aimed to show war from a completely different perspective – war as playground of pleasure experienced at the home front where intercultural encounters allowed for it. In this context, the traditional, very negative and cruel image of the war we have is put on its head but it is the carnivalesque which makes such oppositions possible. By the same token, pleasure here is not only for pleasure’s sake but it is justified as a sign of opposing power, for a limited period of time, as long as carnival is celebrated. Power factors which construct our hierarchy, including male chauvinism, nationalism or religion are overturned during the war and women take an active part in it. Their roles are reversed – they were supposed to take the responsibility while their men were gone and they went into war industries. But, according to veterans, they also took over in the private sphere. Females were willing to be as adventurous and independent as men were. It is them who were in the control of the moment. They chose their boyfriends, took decisions when to give a kiss and not more or they enjoyed sex with strangers. British women no longer wanted to be caring wives only and took action to change it. Carnival allowed them to give a vent to hidden fantasies and realization of dreams that otherwise they would have been too embarrassed or too scared to reveal. That is why they left assigned social roles and, in the words of a veteran, became “darlings”, which new role they enjoyed without remorse. Poles chased by British women learnt that the ac-
tivity was no longer a male domain and felt insecure. It was by convention that men could change as many women as they liked but now, in the war, it also applied to women. No wonder combatants were at a loss. Even if interwar Poland, against popular myths to the contrary, was not that prudish and women saw in eroticism the chances for greater liberation [Janicki 2015], Polish men preferred to keep the status quo. They wanted an angel in the house – and obedient, sensitive and quiet woman. The influential role of religion in their country meant that they were familiar with female models propagated by the institution of Church which in turn asked women to emulate the Virgin Mary. Consequently, values such as moral restraint, passiveness and submission were perpetuated. But carnival mocks moral standards and religious commandments which in the end become relative. Pieties of Christian life are disputed and the concepts of faithfulness and faith are undermined. Polish servicemen showed in their self-reflective writing that both women and men gave in to their instincts and urges; despite religious dogma they had relations outside marriage and before they were married. This is also what made the reconstruction of the image of the Other possible. The concept of the latter as threatening was rejected. British females approached the Polish Other in a carnivalesque fashion showing that the Other male is to be kissed, not hated. What Bakhtin called the lower body and what in Freudian terms could be referred to as the Id, was at work there. People with, to use Victor Turner’s concept, liminal identities who, on the brink of life and death were neither here nor there and who did not know if they would survive the next day, wanted to seize the moments they did have. This is what other Polish authors acknowledged. In his diary from the Warsaw Uprising Miron Białoszewski reveals that sex was everywhere because the proximity of death and the awareness that the insurgents would not experience love and sexuality in their lives lifted moral barriers [Białoszewski 2007].

After the war most women vacated the workplaces for the men returning from the frontline. They were then (in the late 1940’s) encouraged to go back into the labour market to assist the country’s reconstruction. However, gender inequality persisted putting women in a disadvantaged position money- and career-wise and married women again found it difficult to keep the job. Even if more self-confident after WWII, they still suffered from discriminatory social roles in the private sphere [Women at Work. Post World War II: 1946-1970]. Families were reunited. Women came back to their partners. Some of the wartime Polish-British marriages ended in divorce. The Polish Other was no longer wanted. “No dogs, no Irish, no Polish” was the motto of many Britons who were afraid of foreigners taking up their jobs.

When war finishes so does the carnivalesque. Because carnival, though not limited in space is limited in time.

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Summary

Polish soldiers and British women – carnivalesque encounters during the Second World War

Hitler’s attack on Poland on September 1, 1939 and related to this British declaration of war two days later suddenly made two countries (Poland and Britain) which knew little, if anything, about one another allies. Polish soldiers, representing all military branches, came to the British Isles.

While in collective memory the military effort of the Second World War occupies prominent place, it is also worth paying attention to the time which soldiers spent off the battle fields as it may deliver valuable information on cultural exchanges. After all, during the last war not only two nations, Polish and British one, but also representatives of two different cultures met. One example of these cross-cultural encounters were the relations between British women and Poles, the soldiers of the navy, army and air force.

The article presents these relations in the context of Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of carnival. The present author argues that war, in certain situations, acquired the characteristics of Bakhtinian carnival. The analysis is based on the published Polish combatants’ wartime accounts of the war period.

Key words: Second World War, recollections, Polish-British relations, Bakhtin, carnival