

## CHAPTER

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## Inventory

In April 1935, a Mr. Ortenberg, the secretary of the Marchlevsk Polish Autonomous Region, met with a Mr. Litovchik, the administrator of the provincial Communist Party committee. Ortenberg performed the last rites on Polish autonomy within the Soviet Union by signing over the possessions of the extinguished region to Litovchik. The material world that made up the Polish autonomous region consisted of two couches, one desk with two drawers, a typewriter, a food cooler, a metal file cabinet, a wooden box, a long table, seventeen simple chairs; a fine, black, open-air carriage with two horses—one named Mashka, and a stallion, Vaska—and a bust of Stalin (this item added in pencil later). As well, Litovchik signed over one used car—a Soviet make, a GAZ—which had seen better days. The radiator leaked, the frame was rusted, and the battery had only one cell. The speedometer didn't work, nor did the hand or foot brakes.<sup>1</sup>

Besides these humble possessions, the government of the Marchlevsk Region left behind a box of paperwork—protocols, reports, correspondence—carefully stowed in a squat cement building at the end of a tree-lined alley surrounded by vegetable gardens and broken picket fences in the center of Zhytomyr, a provincial capital in central Ukraine. The papers in no way express the essence of the stunted ten-year life span of the Soviet experiment in Polish cultural autonomy. They give no sense of what made life within the borders of the Polish region different from life without. Most of the preserved documents are written in Russian or Ukrainian, fewer in Polish. They describe the usual melancholy struggle for perfection in the quest for socialism that beset many other regional administrations during the second decade of the Soviet regime.<sup>2</sup>

Archival documents fail us at times. Trying to uncover the essence of the

Marchlevsk Region from the documents left behind is like trying to read an autopsy report to determine the nature of the personality, the value of the life. If there was a special quality to the Polish Marchlevsk Region, moments, at least, of pride, or a swelling sense among those who believed in the project that they were building something worthwhile—making a statement to the world about the grand magnanimity of international socialism, or showing the blighted Polish workers across the border the path to a better life—these documents hardly narrate that story.

Among the files there is a photograph, circa 1926. A group of men and women are lying on hay bales, wearing winter sheepskins or furs. The hay seems a prop, a way to show the homey, rustic quality of the event, while the faces look urban. The men's hair is carefully parted down the middle and slicked. Some wear suits of black wool and pinched wire-rimmed glasses. Others wear high leather boots and long shirts belted at the waist in imitation of the toiling peasant. The date is March 30; the caption reads: "The first meeting of the Dovbysh Council of the Polish Region."<sup>3</sup> The delegates to the meeting include elected representatives from local village councils and factories as well as distinguished guests from Kiev, Kharkov, and Moscow. Several eminent Polish communists are present: Felix Kon, the director of the Central Communist Party of Poland, and Boleslav Skarbek, a member of the Ukrainian Communist Party's Central Committee. The woman in the center of the photograph, elegantly dressed, is Sofia Dzerzhinskaia, a member of the Moscow-based Polish Bureau and wife of Felix Dzerzhinskii, the founder of the first Soviet secret service, the Cheka. Polish Bureau leaders called the meeting to formally inaugurate the Polish Region, created a year before in April of 1925. This small, rural corner of Ukraine made it on the map that day. It became something concrete, apart from the greater spread of level fields and scrubby forests of the then western, now central, Ukraine. With the region's founding, Marchlevsk became part of that indefinable mesh of circumstances and actions that made up the Revolution in the Soviet context. At the same time, Marchlevsk stepped into Polish national history, because in creating the region the Polish communists also created an object, a set of borders, however imagined, that would later be unmarked, destroyed (if imagined objects can be destroyed) in the act of Mr. Ortenberg's signing over an old car and other odd items to Mr. Litovchik.<sup>4</sup>

In 1997 I had come to Zhytomyr, a comfortable, lush old city sixty miles west of Kiev, looking for an obscure historical gasp—ten years, no time

really—when Soviet theorists came up with the contradictory notion of organizing the internal borders of the first socialist state not in terms of efficiency or production, as one would expect of a modernizing internationalist regime, but around national borders and ethnic identity. It was a peculiar experiment. Instead of ruling as most modern governments have done since Napoleon—by dividing territory into viable economic units for efficient tax collection and administration—socialist reformers took villages with mixed populations, people of different religions, dialects, and national heritage, and by gerrymandering borders they created tiny islands of national self-rule based on a constantly mutating perception of ethnicity.<sup>5</sup> I sought out the Marchlevsk Region because the Polish population, of all the borderland's ethnic groups, possessed the most ambiguous and fluctuating sense of identity. The Poles, like all officially recognized ethnic groups in Ukraine, were granted cultural and geographic autonomy as part of the Soviet nationality policy whereby Soviet officials formed out of the smallest villages national territories, to be run in separate languages with distinct cultures and languages.

Ukraine led all Soviet republics in implementing the policy. By 1926 there were eleven officially chartered national minority regions in Ukraine, and nearly 300 nationally autonomous villages. To support these minority regions, socialist reformers created an entire infrastructure of publishing houses, newspapers, courts, schools, libraries, cultural centers, radio programs, clubs, and theaters for each ethnic group in each minority language. No minority, no matter how humble and inconsequential, could be overlooked. In Dnepropetrovsk, for example, city leaders set up a newspaper in Hungarian for the thirty-six Hungarians who lived there.<sup>6</sup> In order to staff these new minority organizations, the Ukrainian Commission for National Minority Affairs also founded institutions of higher education to train cadres in Polish, German, Yiddish, Bulgarian, and other languages.<sup>7</sup>

The Marchlevsk Autonomous Polish Region was a product of this ethnophilia. The idea for it was first conceived by a corps of prominent Polish Bolsheviks who attended the Fourth Congress of International Communists, held in Moscow in 1922. The Polish-Soviet War had ended unexpectedly for Polish communists. They had assumed that during the war Polish workers in Poland would rise up and join the Red Army, and that Poles, who had just been freed from a century and a half of rule by Moscow, would turn back again, persuaded by yet another invading Russian army to follow communists down the red path. This historic eventuality did not

happen, and at the conference the words of Felix Kon'—"Our fatherland is here and not there"<sup>8</sup>—rang out with the great hope of rationalizing compensation, emphasizing that loyalty to the socialist cause stood above loyalty to Poland. Even so, millennial convictions are hard to shake, and the two leading communists at the meeting, Kon' and Julian Marchlevskii, decided that if they couldn't export communism to Poland, they could at least import Poland to communism.<sup>9</sup> They proposed to establish, along the newly created Polish-Soviet border, a Polonized autonomous region which would serve as an example for Polish workers and farmers to the west of the border, as it developed independently a proletarian society based on Polish culture.

By 1925 the idea was brought to life. The Marchlevsk Autonomous Polish Region was founded in the borderlands, a place considered the most backward, poor, and un-revolutionary part of Ukraine. The subjects of the national minority experiment were villagers and townspeople who lived in the isolated, hard-to-reach periphery. These people possessed no historical importance as we would determine it now, as contemporaries knew it then. They were categorized as mostly peasants, mostly illiterate, mostly poor. Marchlevsk, the regional center of Polish autonomy, was no place, yet it would become a world unto itself, a microcosm of the Revolution in Polish form.

But what was Marchlevsk? What constituted Soviet Polishdom on the margins of the first socialist state? Although this question would puzzle me for months as I searched through the old documents, Soviet communists simplified the complexities of the borderland terrain by quantifying them. They succinctly summed up Marchlevsk by counting. Marchlevsk had a population of 40,577 "souls": 70 percent (29,898) Poles, 8,089 Ukrainians, 2,805 Germans, and 1,391 Jews. Before 1917, no Polish schools functioned officially and the elementary schools, all four of them, taught in Russian. In just three years, official sources boasted that villagers built forty-one schools—thirty-one Polish, three German, two Ukrainian, and one Yiddish—and were paying the salaries for eighty-nine teachers.<sup>10</sup> By 1930, they had also founded four bookstores, fifteen Polish-language reading huts, literacy centers in most villages (where 4,574 adults were learning to read), and night courses where 14,901 people studied agronomy, politics, and economics.<sup>11</sup> In 1925, the men appointed to run the Marchlevsk Region set in motion twenty-five Polish village councils (*sovety*); by 1930 the number had grown to thirty, twenty-one of which actually functioned in Polish.

Before the Revolution, there had been no elections in the region for local government; by the mid-1920s, 63 percent of villagers turned out for elections, and 24 percent of the village council members they elected were women. During tsarist rule there had been no hospital in the region, not even a doctor or nurse; in a few years the residents of the Marchlevsk Region had built one hospital and six medical clinics.<sup>12</sup>

To read the official correspondence is to experience the tempo of the decade. Overnight the quiet settlement of Dovbysh was turned into the capitol of Polish Marchlevsk, becoming a city without ever having been a town. One morning the settlement was awakened from centuries of provincial slumber by frantic construction pounding at a host of new buildings meant to mark Marchlevsk as a place of importance, a regional and national capital. Carpenters set to work on a courthouse, a library, a police station, several two-story apartment buildings, a pharmacy, a movie theater, and a veterinary clinic; they built two new glassworks and modernized the prerevolutionary factories, so that the number of workers in the region grew from two hundred to nearly two thousand by 1930.<sup>13</sup> Marchlevsk received electricity and phone service before any other settlements in the district, and regular bus service sprang into action to and from the provincial center, Zhytomyr, with twelve kilometers of the road already paved—all of this constructed within a few years of the rustic photograph on the haystack. There is no space here to list all the social and political organizations that took root in the postrevolutionary soil. For the small rural region of Marchlevsk, they number over one hundred: literary, drama, and political circles, women's leagues, consumer and producer cooperatives, children's organizations, labor unions—the Union of Chemists, the Union of Loggers and Farmers, the Union of Medical Workers—not to mention dozens of Communist Party cells, communist youth and children's clubs. And for each organization, Marchlevsk leaders made up charts about its social and ethnic composition—how many rich, middle, and poor peasants; how many Poles, Germans, Jews, and Ukrainians—in an intoxicating incantation of figures swiftly flowing in a broad current of mathematical abstraction to one noble and common destination.<sup>14</sup>

When Soviet officials wanted to please their superiors, they drew up charts. In the chart they expressed progress in terms of numbers, which rose steadily from year to year. In fact, their superiors chided them if the numbers remained static from one year to the next.<sup>15</sup> Progress amounted to a quantifiable formula: Time (stretched out slowly over the long winter

months of inactivity, cursed soundly during the mud season, sped up a hundredfold at planting and harvesting) plus Energy (derived from the backs of laborers stacking bricks and digging ditches; the organizational acumen of officials gathering villagers in meeting after meeting, answering questions, typing up reports) and Emotions (fear, anger, hope, ambition, disappointment, envy, confusion, embarrassment), all condensed into shorthand so that as you read these charts you have the sensation of flight, as if you lived not in increments of time ticked off in earthbound seconds but in an *epoch*, one that had finally broken free from the immobile bedrock of backwardness, conservatism, and tradition, which many felt had cursed the borderlands for centuries. Marchlevsk was such a numerical creation, born and reborn hundreds of times in the reports and charts of diligent civil servants.

And that is the problem: this Marchlevsk of charts and numbers is a fictional representation sketched out in tabulated columns. The men and women who made the charts helped draft Polish Marchlevsk into existence. Yet few people who lived in the region and read the numbers in newspaper accounts and government reports could have believed that these numbers represented reality; it was, rather, a unidimensional projection of it cast onto the backdrop of the postwar, postrevolutionary semi-chaos—which no one needed to mention in their reports because most people understood it implicitly, witnessed it daily. In other words, to live in the Soviet Union at the time meant frequent and arbitrary encounters with the unexpected and unplanned, with departures, great and small, from the charts. As such, investigators sent to the countryside often played the numbers against what they saw. Many investigators arriving in nominally Polish villages were surprised to discover that the villagers spoke only Ukrainian. One investigator recounted that “in principle” there were eleven Polish-language news-sheets in Polish villages, but that was a fact on paper only: “In reality, only one news-sheet appears regularly; for the rest there is no one in the villages who knows how to write and edit in Polish.”<sup>16</sup> The numbers represented as much aspiration, as much living in future tense, as present-tense existence. The figures in the charts, striding across the pages of the national newspapers, became important and later rote because of their ability to soothe and reassure. Amidst all the daily shortages, mistakes, rudeness, and ignorance, amidst the misshapen limbs, the miswritten lives, and general suffering, which most people in the Soviet Union encountered frequently, the numbers brought readers the message that they

were on the right track, that they were building, brick upon brick—or, at least, digit upon digit—a new reality, a great new society.

### Looking for Marchlevsk

The charts describe aspiration, a particular way of ordering a chaotic world, but not life as most people knew it at the time, waking in the morning to the lowing of the neighbor's cow and the clanking of the bronze church bell. A more grounded memory of Marchlevsk, one full of the banalities of the everyday, must be recorded somewhere, and I went to Zhytomyr in central Ukraine to look for imprints of it. My path to Zhytomyr was not direct. I left Moscow in early spring of 1997, bought a train ticket, and rambled west across the flat, frozen fields of European Russia and eastern Ukraine, riding and listening to an old woman, my companion in the couchette, narrate her long life in extended monologues punctuated by heavy sighs. In Kiev, archivists handed me file after file, cheerfully unveiling secrets the Soviet government once guarded so closely. But the files mentioned Marchlevsk and the other national regions in the borderlands only in passing; the eyewitness report that would tell all eluded me. And so I headed west again, flagging down a car on the road to Zhytomyr, where the provincial archives are located, figuring the closer I came, the more I would learn of Marchlevsk.

Once in Zhytomyr I hailed a cab and gave the driver the street name, repeating to him the directions I had been given to the archives: "Stop at the only modern building on the street." He steered the car down a pitted lane of overgrown fruit trees and whitewashed cottages and halted before a dog sleeping mid street. Nearby a few chickens pecked in the dust. The archive was cold and cavernous, a concrete structure built in the shape of an anvil, but I found the Zhytomyr archivists even more congenial than those in Kiev. In the narrow, green room that served as kitchen and club for the women on staff, they filled me with tea, boiled potatoes, sardines, sugar cookies, and epic tales of how they managed their households on a few dollars a month, speaking wistfully of the day, eight months before, when they had last been paid, waxing nostalgic about the good old days in the Soviet Union, when they always were paid. They led me up into the archive stacks and hauled out the box of files left over from Marchlevsk. I looked at the box, my heart sinking: "That's it? One box for an entire region for ten

years?" They explained that most of the files had been lost during World War II.

Historians usually complain about their sources; they are never complete, always encoded, elusive. With a gambler's fever we sit day after day, turning pages and hoping the next file will contain the document that answers all questions. My problem seemed particularly acute. I wanted to know about people who made up a minority living on the outskirts in rural obscurity and poverty; people who left few historical traces. Those they did leave behind had been driven over by the tanks of two armies and the incendiary fury of thousands of partisans. Though I had placed a great deal of hope in the archives, it soon became clear that the surviving documents offered only a small part of the story. Perhaps, I thought, if I went to Marchlevsk, the place itself might tell its story.

It took a long time to get to Dovbysh, the former Marchlevsk. There was no train connection, and bus service had fallen off considerably with the long economic convalescence of independent Ukraine. Beyond that, spring rains had brought spring floods and sent country roads, made of mud and sand, rolling into the ditches, cutting some villages off to any but foot traffic. I took the train as close as I could and set off walking under the first hot sun of spring. The countryside of the former Soviet Polish region spread out before me, the road damp and sandy underfoot and my eyes resting on nothing in particular along the gently smoothed plane. Off in the distance sprawled a forest of soft pine.

I hiked into a village, along rows of cottages and swept courtyards, the smell of the river marshes touched lightly with the aroma of chicken scat. The village was deserted: it was a Saturday in planting season and most everyone was in the fields. A man pulled up and asked whether I wanted a ride. I took the ride, sitting on a plank behind his plank as he purred directions to his horse. The wagon rolled slowly in the bleached light of midday as if outside all time and destination. We glided along a forest of thin birches and through fields of waist-high green rye, emerging in a place which the driver said was a Czech village. He dropped me in the next village, a Ukrainian village called Ukrainka, which looked no different from the Czech village: more whitewashed cottages, neatly swept courtyards, fences of woven branches, every potato mound perfectly spaced. I walked on, but didn't make it to my destination that day.

I reached Dovbysh, the former Marchlevsk, a week later, when the roads

had dried, with a friend in a borrowed car. We pulled the car into a huddle of low, gray, wooden buildings set squarely in the midst of plowed fields. The town itself was ten streets abreast and twenty avenues deep, lined with cottages surrounded by vegetable patches, outhouses, and animal pens. Dovbysh has a porcelain factory, a truck repair station, two stores, a little plumbing, no sewers, asphalt, or street lights, and no real center of the sort most Soviet regional centers used to have—with a formal square for parades, a statue of Lenin, and as much marble as the local builders could scrub up. Dovbysh is classified as “a rural settlement of the urban type,” a Soviet euphemism which translates as a village with a population and industrial base nearing that of a town. It means Dovbysh lacks both the conveniences of the city, and the charm, the space, and greenery of a village. The result is sludge, lots of it, washing the overtaxed infrastructure in human and animal excrement. From this hard-to-reach, boggy little outpost, the Bolshevik Revolution to Poland was to have been launched. As I looked around, it struck me that it must have taken a great leap of faith for Polish communists to believe that from these humble origins the Revolution would overtake the proud and aristocratic capitals of historic Poland—Lwów, Wilno, Kraków, Warszawa.<sup>17</sup>

Jan Saulevich, the vice director of the Ukrainian Commission of National Minority Affairs and unofficial founder of Marchlevsk, made a trip to Dovbysh in 1925, and he too was unimpressed with what he saw. He knew even as he proposed the site that Dovbysh as the new Polish capital had little to recommend it. He wrote in his report: “The region is located far from the railroad. There is no telephone and no radio connection. There is absolutely no existing building for a regional administration. . . . The locality is empty as far as good building infrastructure and economic activity goes, even in relation to the already backward [Province of] Volynia, let alone compared to other provinces.”<sup>18</sup> He went on to report that forty percent of the territory of the proposed region was marshy, sandy soil and thin pine forests, soil not suitable for farming. The region was situated one hundred and twenty kilometers from the Polish-Soviet border and half that distance from the largest city, Zhytomyr. Saulevich reported that the state of agriculture was especially poor: peasants would need loans for livestock, milk production, and seeds for sowing.<sup>19</sup> In 1925, three thousand people lived in Dovbysh. The majority were Polish and Ukrainian workers in the porcelain factory, who kept small farms on the side. They were complemented by a group of mainly Jewish cobblers, tan-

ners, tailors, blacksmiths, millers, and traders, and by people who ran the granary, steam plant, windmills, and a small (one-worker) brick factory. Of the three thousand persons in Dovbysh, fourteen were Communist Party members: six Poles, four Ukrainians, and four Jews. There was no telegraph, and mail service depended on bad roads; hence the link between the province’s capital, Zhytomyr, and Dovbysh, the future Marchlevsk, was tenuous.<sup>20</sup>

So why put the center of the Polish region in a forgotten, remote settlement? There were towns and small cities in the borderlands that already possessed the infrastructure and economic base to support a regional government. The cities of Proskuriv, Novograd-Volynsk, and Zhytomyr all possessed sizable Polish populations and had a good road or two, or a train line, as well as phone and radio links. Why not one of these small cities? In early 1925, Jan Saulevich negotiated with the Central Executive Committee in Moscow over the size and location of the proposed Polish region. Saulevich suggested a large area encompassing most of the northern territory bordering Poland. But other parties, especially representatives from other ethnic minority bureaus, objected to a Polish region that would swallow up substantial populations of Ukrainians, Germans, and Jews. As a result, the negotiators trimmed the Polish region down to a small oval of territory.<sup>21</sup> They chose Marchlevsk as the capital because it had a clear majority (70 percent) of Poles.

The choice of capital determined in part the form Soviet-Polish nationalism would take. For communist theorists on nationality, two kinds of national culture existed. The first—bourgeois nationalism—produced high culture connected with religion, bourgeois art, and literature, and generated the kind of exclusive nationalist feeling that divided people and fueled wars. The second—proletarian nationalism consisting of formerly oppressed classes—did not exclude other nations but joined them, celebrating the great abundance of peoples who stood united under the banner of the proletariat.<sup>22</sup> Poles presented a troubling problem for communists. True, they had been oppressed during the tsarist period, exiled, imprisoned, forced into poverty and Russified, but at the same time Poles had also been the traditional landowning exploiters of the *kresy*. Polish nobility had long been the most nationalist in its yearning to reunite the scattered remnants of the Polish Commonwealth, and Poles in the Russian Empire were known for their religious devotion and conflation of the Catholic religion with the Polish nation. This “Polish bourgeois national-

ism” thrived in provincial, borderland cities such as Zhytomyr. Thirty percent of the city’s population was Polish, and even more Poles came in from the surrounding countryside to attend the Polish theater, celebrate high holidays at the Roman Catholic cathedral, and participate in church social organizations and literary clubs.

Dovbysh, on the other hand, did have to its credit a factory with a proletarian base of 244 wage laborers, Polish working-class raw material who—so the men creating Marchlevsk believed—by the very fact of their daily toil in a socialist setting would lead the way in creating a new Polish-Soviet proletarian culture.<sup>23</sup> I wouldn’t want to make men like Saulevich sound simple or naive. Lifelong communists like Saulevich had thought about these questions for years, in great complexity. And they had dreams: they thought they could flood the old world of capitalism and land on a new, harmonious, socialist one. Dovbysh, with its population of working-class and peasant Poles, represented the New World, a city on a hill, or a plateau at least, free of an entrenched, religious, and chauvinist Polish nationalism.<sup>24</sup> The problem was that both the theory and the choice of Dovbysh inspired a new set of consequences. Selecting Dovbysh as the Polish capital of the Soviet Union slated the experiment to a rural, poor, and largely illiterate context, exactly the setting that caused Polish culture in the *kresy* to fade into the general Ukrainian culture and become lost.

In Dovbysh, I found two women chatting over a fence. I asked them if they knew anyone in town who was Polish and old enough to remember Marchlevsk. “Oh yes, across the street there is a Polish woman who has lived here forever.” One of the women took my arm and brought me over to a large unpainted wooden house surrounded by a farmyard, where a woman walked bent from the waist at a right angle. As we approached, my informant whispered, “Her daughter died a month ago, and she is . . . well, not the same.”

The old woman nodded slightly when I mentioned Marchlevsk, her eyes a matte gray, flat with grief. She lifted a worn hand and swatted away my questions about the Polish Autonomous Region and instead began to tell me about her daughter, how she died, how they had buried her, how she had held her as a child and raised her. The old woman’s story wound on, her voice never rising above a whisper, until the sun set into a birdsong twilight. Because of her grief she could tell me nothing about Marchlevsk, although she had lived in it, seen it come into being, and watched it flicker out. We said our good-byes, and I walked off, saddened and unenlightened.

I had known already that people require a past to give the present meaning, but I had never before realized that the inverse is also true; that in order for history to have significance, one’s life in the present must also have purpose.

I was left in the middle of Dovbysh, the former Marchlevsk, still looking for traces of this corner of Polish socialism, lit up for ten years and then quietly, unceremoniously extinguished. Its birth and death are recorded. Should not a chronicle of the intervening years exist somewhere in public memory? Proximity, however, shed no light on Marchlevsk, in fact only clouded it. A place that has never been considered to have historical importance does not possess a historical narrative with a beginning, middle, and end. Marchlevsk existed only as a heap of relics piled randomly, a junk heap of memorabilia. With no historical narrative attached to it, I had only unsorted relics from the former Marchlevsk to offer a glimpse into life there.

### Reading Marchlevsk

In 1930 the Marchlevsk Polish autonomous region began to publish its own fortnightly, sometimes weekly, newspaper, the *Marchlewska Radziecka*. It was a small local paper published in Polish and concerned with farming, local administration, and the latest news from Moscow and abroad. At irregular intervals the newspaper appeared in the scattered corners of the region, affirming that Marchlevsk existed, that Polish autonomy was no fiction. It seems, reading the paper, that *Radziecka* correspondents were everywhere at once—there at the theater in Marchlevsk to see Polprat, a Kiev-based, Polish-language drama troupe, performing “The War of Wars”; there to watch Mrs. Frishman, chairwoman of a village council, fall asleep at a council meeting because she had been out drinking the night before, as was her habit, with a company of drinkers.<sup>25</sup> The *Radziecka* was also at the scene when Marchlevsk workers pledged twenty-five rubles to help build a Soviet dirigible to rival the German zeppelin that had floated into Moscow a week before. At the same time, at the other end of the region, the newspaper transported its readers to a union meeting at the glassworks in Bukovets’ka Huta where Maria Torzhevskia was accused of gossiping during work hours and of making antisemitic statements, for which she was excluded from the union. And the *Radziecka* was present on that notable day in late summer 1930 when the first radio waves floated

into the Soviet Polish capital.<sup>26</sup> A crackle of white noise, a stammer, and then the resonant boom of radio and the voice of Moscow one thousand miles away; one voice drifting across the Soviet Union to Marchlevsk and continuing on, the *Radziecka's* journalist pointed out, beyond the borders to fascist Poland: one republic, one union of republics, one cosmos.

In the newly electrified air of Marchlevsk, the amplified radio voice beckoned from the wood-gray walls decorated with red bunting of the Marchlevsk workers' club. Of course, the newspaper was there too on that evening in early September 1930 when Marchlevsk celebrated the fifth anniversary of Soviet Polishdom with a rally. Ten or so cars lit up the dark corners of Marchlevsk; from the club came laughter and the music of the Five-Factory Orchestra. A crowd gathered by the door because there wasn't enough room inside. The chairman of the Marchlevsk Regional Council, Mr. Shteinbergskii, stood to speak, but a storm of applause interrupted him. He finally spoke a few words and turned the floor over to Mr. Pritchodko, who gave a speech in Ukrainian and introduced General Pozniakov, the very same man who forced the invading Polish army from Marchlevsk in 1920. Following the general, the crowd heard from the German chairman of the neighboring Pulin German Autonomous Region, who announced: "Five years ago I was in Dovbysh. Today I can't recognize it. Da ist nicht mehr der sumpflige, finsternisse, zurückstehende Dovbysh [This is no longer the swampy, gloomy, backward Dovbysh.] It is now the new socialist Marchlevsk." The rally ended only late, late into the night, the reporter noted, and the satisfied crowd strolled home.<sup>27</sup>

No incident was too small to report in the *Radziecka*: no task was too large for the socialist proletariat to accomplish. The *Radziecka* seems to have missed nothing, recording everything everywhere simultaneously. In so doing, it was to become the vehicle by which readers in a remote hamlet began to imagine themselves as members not only of their appointed village council, or later of a collective farm, but as residents of the greater entity, the Marchlevsk Autonomous Polish Region, which was located within the larger Ukrainian SSR, a republic of the Soviet Union.<sup>28</sup> The *Radziecka's* role was to inform and publicize the affairs of the young reforming government, and also to place Marchlevsk on the map and embed that map in the minds of its readers.

As much as the content of the *Radziecka*, the newspaper's appearance also has a story to tell. The first issues of the paper were yet uncooked, a pre-evolutionary version of the sleek, steely format the paper would

achieve by 1935, the year in which the paper abruptly ceased publication. At first the paper's editors couldn't find type with a Polish alphabet to print the paper. They scraped around and put the issues together from whatever they could locate, type from German, Russian, and Ukrainian presses in different sizes and fonts so that the newspaper resembled a ransom note, the letters jolting across the page. The language of the paper was not the standard Polish spoken in Poland but a Polish reconciled with Ukrainian and Russian influences and Bolshevik jargon. In size the paper was modest, two sheets in all, but beautiful to look at. The masthead in bold gothic script curled around the front page like a fertile vine.

The appearance of the newspaper conveys a sense of the effort and optimism of the new world under construction in Marchlevsk, a world where hope wrapped itself in a worn overcoat, leaning over to copyedit a page in unheated twilight; where a pulse-quickening idealism kept hands bracketing lead type, arranging and rearranging sentences of enlightenment all the night through. Less than the content, it is the look of this homespun newspaper that breathes the modesty of the material existence and the wealth of imagination that distinguished Marchlevsk from the expansive, low-lying countryside surrounding it.

Marchlevsk was an aspiration, but was it a reality? One can quantify Marchlevsk, and one can glimpse moments of it, shadows flickering across the pages of a newspaper, yet Marchlevsk in its entirety, the distinctiveness of Soviet Polishdom, remains elusive. We know it was a geographical territory, given borders and shape, a name, a budget line, founding and ending dates, yet its form as a cultural creation vaporizes on contact. In fact, Marchlevsk is such an artful dodger that it raises doubts. What if, after all, it never existed? What if it was given a birth (when notable people were photographed) and a death (when unnamed people were deported), but in between a unified entity never took shape?

I began to have doubts about the existence of Marchlevsk while reading the professional correspondence of Jan Saulevich. At that point I realized I was not the only person who had spent a great deal of time looking for Marchlevsk. Saulevich had encountered the same problem. He was the vice secretary of the Ukrainian Commission for National Minority Affairs. His task in 1925 was to activate the decree on Polish Soviet autonomy issued in 1922, as well as to create national territorial units for Germans, Jews, Czechs, Greeks, Bulgarians, and other minorities in the Ukrainian Republic. Because Soviet communists saw nationality as inevitable and real—

having historical roots and existing in some concrete cultural and physical form implanted in bodies, dwellings, clothing, and language—Saulevich needed to embody the national minorities of Ukraine. He needed to locate, for instance, Polish culture in the Ukrainian hinterland and give it a physical and cultural shape—boundaries, territory, and governing bodies.

In order to divide up the borderlands by nationality, Saulevich first needed to know what and who was out there. When he sent investigators off to the countryside or went himself to determine where national minorities lived and in what numbers, Saulevich's first problem emerged—getting to the far-flung villages and hamlets. Roads were bad, often trailing off into cow paths. Bridges were few and fords became impassable torrents in spring, cutting towns and villages off for months at a time. In European Russia, peasants tended to live in villages, their homes clustered together, but in the Ukrainian borderlands, the farms (*khutory*) were spaced far apart, surrounded by fields, which further complicated the gathering of demographic data. And Saulevich had no horses or cars to give to his investigators. They had to get to the distant homesteads, hamlets, and villages as best they could on their own. One inspector described how he traveled:

It's a big problem getting out to villages. The regional administration has only one car, and the chairman of the region and his secretary use it. So I have to wait for chance rides. . . . I go to the market and search out a collective farmer who is going where I'm going. I make an agreement with him and wait while he takes care of his affairs. Sometimes I wait all day, and at night, it often happens that he's pretty well drunk and he sits on his cart and sings songs. It's uncomfortable to ride with a drunk, and so I stay home, and the whole day is lost.<sup>29</sup>

Once Saulevich and his inspectors arrived in the villages, they encountered an even greater problem: they could not *see* nationality. Because of the distances and the difficulty in traveling, the lack of communications, and an incoherent consumer economy, villagers lived in isolated subcultures that eluded standardizing taxonomies. Investigators sent ambiguous reports back to Saulevich: "There is no one picture of the border region. There are many; the picture is diffuse."<sup>30</sup> Or investigators found that people supposedly belonging to different nationalities were indiscernible: "Ukrainians and Poles hardly differ from one another in their material existence beyond their conversational language—however, language too is problem-

atic because the local Polish sounds very much like the local Ukrainian." Another investigator stated the problem a different way: "The issue of gathering conclusive evidence on the Polish population is hindered by the fact that people, especially the rural population, are bilingual."<sup>31</sup> Language, dress, religion, the social and ethnic composition of the populations, changed from village to village, which made it difficult to fix nationality in place, as the definition of what it meant to be Polish shimmered about in a haze of vernacular. And yet Saulevich and his staff set out to encircle and chart nationality, such as "Polishness," assuming that it existed in some definite, invariable form. Perhaps Saulevich was thinking he would find a peasant version of the secular, aristocratic Polish culture into which he was born on his family's country estate in the northern reaches of the *kresy*.

For, although Saulevich dedicated his life to serving the toiling peasant and proletariat, he himself was no lowborn man of the people, conceived in a sinking hut with wadding stuffed in the chinks. Rather, Jan Dominikanovich Saulevich was born in 1897 to a venerable Polish gentry family on their ancestral manorial estate near Dvinsk, a provincial city in the then Vitebsk Province, in the northwestern reaches of the Russian Empire. Polish aristocratic families like Saulevich's family owned most of the land and villages in the *kresy* and a great number of "souls," as serfs were then listed. Polish landowners compelled their serfs to grow beets and grain, which in their refineries and distilleries they turned into sugar and alcohol, which they sold and transformed into gold, mahogany furniture, leather-bound books, great mansions, and lavish hospitality. The enserfed armies of natives were peasants who spoke in local vernaculars and practiced Russian Orthodoxy, Catholicism, Protestant evangelism, or a combination of the three. The Polish landowners also employed Jews to work as stewards on their estates, to collect taxes, trade, bank, and manufacture barrels, shoes, lumber, clothing, alcohol, and other necessities.<sup>32</sup>

The Polish nobility first settled the borderlands in the sixteenth century, gradually usurping the rule of a fading noble class of feudal princes and vassals who adhered to the Orthodox rite imported from Byzantium. The Polish magnate families—Potocki, Czartoryski, Branicki—saw their estates as the final fortification against the marauding East, protecting all of Europe against Genghis Khan, the Mongol hordes, Turkic and Tatar invaders who rode in on swift horses. Yet despite the bravery and armories of the Polish nobility, in the eighteenth century Poland lost first its eastern fron-

tier, the *kresy*, and then the entire kingdom. But it was not, in the end, infidels from the East who dismantled the Polish kingdom, but enemies much closer to home. The demise of the Polish nobility grew out of the Polish parliament's contentious feuds, which weakened the Polish crown and army. The final blow came from within its own intermarrying family of Christian and European nobility. In the late eighteenth century, Russia, Prussia, and Austria partitioned the lands of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. During the reign of Catherine the Great, the Russian Empire annexed Right Bank Ukraine (lands west of the Dnepr River) and renamed it Western Russia. A generation later an ideologue of Nicholas I announced that the annexation was the divine restoration of Orthodoxy and Russian rule to the borderlands.

Offended by foreign and Orthodox rule, the Polish Catholic aristocracy in Russia fed its children on stories of Polish knights fighting off invaders from the East, of noble-hearted Polish kings and their kingdoms, which used to know no mortal bounds. Raised on these stories, the young grew up rebellious. Polish aristocracy revolted against tsarist rule twice, in 1830 and 1863. Both times they failed, and afterward the tsars unleashed royal vengeance, divesting four out of five Polish families of their aristocratic crests and banning the sale of land to Catholics. Noble families who lost their property slipped into a growing class of impoverished Polish gentry engaged in subsistence farming.<sup>33</sup> Without wealth and education, the poor *szlachta* (gentry) began to resemble in speech, dress, and dwelling the peasant classes, losing the distinctive patois and trappings that marked them as noble, thus Polish.<sup>34</sup> Gradually, from the 1840s to the 1880s, a new class of independent farmers came to the borderlands—German and Czech colonists.<sup>35</sup> They arrived in groups, pooled their money, and bought the estates of bankrupt Polish aristocracy. Around the new farms they built religious communities that lived peaceably with the surrounding villages of peasants.

By the onset of the Russian Revolution, the upholstered existence of Polish landowners had already faded. From 1914 to 1921, during the seven long years of world war, revolution, and civil war, invading armies continually occupied the *kresy*. Each successive army ground a boot heel deeper into the already sullied fabric of the old feudal society that had once divided people by confession and landholding but had been crumbling for a century. After the Treaty of Riga in 1921, the fate of the Right-Bank Ukraine was wedded to the ambitious Bolsheviks, and most of the remain-

ing landowning Poles fled to Poland or drifted, like Saulevich, into a new class of Soviet administrators, or were exiled to far-off places, where they died or changed their old identities for that of proletarians.<sup>36</sup>

By the mid-twenties, though the thick walls surrounding the mansions of the old Polish landholding magnates stood intact, the manor houses within were crumbling, the roofs collapsing, the reflecting ponds vaporizing into the childhood memories of Polish families who wrote their bitter and nostalgic memoirs from the safety of the newly reconstituted independent Poland. A school of *kresy* writers emerged in interwar Poland, and they depicted the absent portion of the *kresy* as unnaturally amputated from the body of the Polish nation. They mourned the failure of the Polish army to reconstitute historic Poland after World War I and treated the Polish-Soviet War as a saintly crusade, a matter of saving the Christian peasant from the eastern infidel, this time ideological rather than religious heathen. They described the socialist rabble breaking up pianos with hatchets, storming manor houses, destroying books, and generally hacking away at the stays of civilization.<sup>37</sup>

And when Saulevich arrived in the borderlands in 1925 to look over the territory proposed for Polish autonomy, the trappings of civilization had largely dissolved. He noted that one of four prerevolutionary factories was functioning, with two hundred workers, and the others, "absolutely all the rest," he writes, "were peasants." This peasant population inhabited the wreckage of the collapsed economy in a nether zone of subsistence farming, barter, petty trade, and cottage industry in a region densely settled and overpopulated.<sup>38</sup> Families were large—six to nine children—and landholdings small. They lived mainly on *khutory*, independent homesteads, and were monochromatically poor or middling, soil quality and population densities making the difference between bounty, subsistence, and hunger.<sup>39</sup> The tsarist government had banned schools and newspapers in Polish and Ukrainian, and since few peasants spoke Russian, most of the population was cut off from education and written sources of information. As a consequence, religion eclipsed education. Facing the four prerevolutionary schools in the Marchlevsk Region were three Catholic cathedrals, four Catholic chapels, two Orthodox churches, and four Lutheran churches (there is no enumeration in the government report of synagogues and prayer houses, although they too were there).<sup>40</sup> Most of the culture that existed in the borderlands after the revolution no longer showed up in libraries, theaters, and drawing rooms, where literacy and mobility had stan-

andardized languages and national identities. Rather, culture was enacted in particularly local formulas—under the linden tree, in front of the stove, on a bench before the prayer house, in line at the grain mill during the harvest, all of which meant that each place had its own culture (in lower-case letters); its own vernacular for language, tradition, and identity. All this signifies that by the time Saulevich arrived to order the borderlands by nationality, it had become very difficult, without the markings of class and religion, to tell the difference between a Pole and a Ukrainian.

Saulevich, raised in the traditional conventions of the Polish landowning elite of the *kresy*, probably read the works of Adam Mickiewicz, Juliusz Slowacki, and Józef Ignacy Kraszewski, writers who chose the Polish-Ukrainian borderlands as the subject and setting for their works after it was annexed by Russia.<sup>41</sup> In the works of these Romantic writers, it was easy to distinguish a noble Pole from a peasant Ukrainian. The writers penned poetic sentences full of longing for a lost idyll of simplicity, of Polish aristocratic honor unyielding to tsarist repression, and of swampy, superstitious mystery. They inspired a genre of *kresy* landscape painting that turned the land which the Polish nobility no longer ruled into an object of desire, a feminine landscape of voluptuous hills, lithe, shapely streams, and nubile (Ukrainian) peasant girls napping on fertile soils.<sup>42</sup> But it is impossible to ascertain whether Saulevich was influenced by these nineteenth-century artists who painted the remote borderlands in romantic tones after it was swallowed by the Russian Empire; whether he worked so hard to create Marchleusk because somewhere in his childhood he too was imbued with a subliminal desire to return to the lost Arcadia.

For, unfortunately, we cannot recover Saulevich's thoughts. We only know the "facts," the kind of data gleaned from a job résumé or police report. In 1908 Saulevich inherited a family estate in the Province of Kurland, but it was a dubious gift: in 1905, half the peasants in the province had risen against their landlords and burnt their estates.<sup>43</sup> In 1914 Saulevich graduated from the Dvinsk Technical College and went to Kharkov to study in the agricultural institute, but his education was interrupted by World War I and the Russian revolutions. Kharkov was the center of the Bolshevik movement in Ukraine, and Saulevich fell under its spell and gravitated leftward. In 1917 he turned his back on his entitlement and became a member of the Polish Socialist Union. When the Red Army occupied his native region, he returned home to help establish Soviet rule, but Soviet rule in Kurland collapsed less than a year later, when the armies of

Polish General Józef Piłsudski (another Pole from the borderlands who savored romantic visions of a greater historic Poland) captured the territory for Latvia, which meant that Saulevich's family property was free for the time being from the Russian Revolution's anti-aristocratic fury. Nonetheless, Saulevich joined the Red Army and fought against the White Army, against the Ukrainian independence movement centered in Kiev, and against Piłsudski in the Polish-Soviet War, when the general was attempting to win for Poland as much of the contested land between Moscow and Warsaw as he could. Saulevich wrote flawlessly in Polish and Russian and seems to have read German and possibly understood spoken Yiddish. He started to work in national minority affairs in 1923, and in 1924, at the age of twenty-seven, he was put in charge of National Minority Affairs for the entire republic.<sup>44</sup>

Saulevich's biography bears a personal likeness to the arch of Soviet rule in the borderlands. In 1920 the Red Army came to the borderlands to establish Soviet order with guns and decrees, accompanied by a second army of Soviet statisticians and administrators whose job it was to administer and improve the lives of local inhabitants.<sup>45</sup> The nature of Soviet rule hinged upon these difficult operations of occupying and reforming. Often, the officer and the social reformer were united in the body of one man who, like Saulevich, had just exchanged a rifle for a pen. He and his colleagues set to work imposing order upon the mediocrally dismembered, overwhelmingly illiterate borderland populations of the former tsarist empire. They sought to govern and convert one of the last regions to be wrested from the enemies of socialism, one of the least developed and most highly suspect territories in the European part of the Soviet Union.

What is often overlooked in the flurry of words concerning the Revolution is that Soviet authorities frequently expressed their revolutionary fervor in the most staid and mundane ways. After the red flags were raised, the street barricades torn down, and the Red Army largely demobilized, carrying out the Revolution consisted of hundreds of small-scale projects of a usually prudent and reforming nature. Land improvement, crop rotation, punitive and progressive taxation, literacy and schools, hygiene and sanitation—in the twenties these quotidian concerns made up the new revolutionary front in the rural regions of the borderlands.<sup>46</sup> The first task was to "sovietize," a euphemism for modernizing using locally elected village and town councils (*sovety*) as the basic unit of political organization, and consumer cooperatives as the building blocks of the economic struc-

ture. Village councils were run by a chairperson and reported to district (*raion*) councils, which in turn answered to regional (*okrug*) councils in a chain of command that ideally reached from the village through the republic government in Kharkov and all the way to Moscow.<sup>47</sup> The link from village to capital, however, was tenuous, perforated by long distances, bad roads, poor communications, and grievous misunderstandings of what it meant to rule in a communist way.

### Counting National Bodies

In order to reform, modernizing societies first take stock. As we have seen, the army of social reformers who scattered to the countryside was granted a boundless power: to count. They counted not only Bolshevik progress, but anything of value. They counted barns and the livestock inhabiting them, forests, fields, pounds of produce, and bushels of grain. They counted farms, villages, and, most importantly, they counted people. But they did not just add up heads, one after the other; they counted people according to categories. They enumerated rich peasants, poor ones, and those who fell in the middle. They recorded workers, artisans, and craftsmen. They counted people “of the former classes” who were deprived of civil rights, such as former White Guard officers, former tsarist officials, gendarmes, and traders. And when they had finished counting, generating great charts decorated lavishly with percentages, they started all over again numbering people anew, this time by nationality.

Jews were relatively easy to count. They were marked distinctly by religion and tsarist laws which had governed their movement and professions, restricting them to towns within the Pale of Settlement and barring them from government service. Germans too were distinguished by religion and tradition. They often lived in compact hamlets, organized around religious sects (Lutheran, Mennonite, Baptist, less frequently Catholic), and until the 1880s they had been granted special conditions (tax breaks and exemption from army service) that made them autonomous—independent of the landowning nobility and distinct from the peasant classes. Even so, the German populations were in no way homogeneous. They spoke many different dialects, followed a wide range of religious beliefs, and had assimilated to varying degrees to the cultures around them.<sup>48</sup> What helped greatly in distinguishing Germans as a discrete community rather than a number of separate communities was their shared fate during World War I, when

the tsarist regime had singled out Germans and Jews for deportation as enemy subjects.<sup>49</sup> Deportation and the problems of returning and reclaiming land worked especially to mark Germans and Jews as distinct nationalities.

The Polish population, however, was more ambiguous. Although the official statistics listed the population of Poles in the Marchlevsk territory as 70 percent of the total population, less than half of that number actually spoke Polish; fewer than half of those spoke it well and used it daily, and only a tiny percentage read in Polish or knew Polish literature, culture, and history. Rather, a majority of the people described in the census as Polish spoke a number of dialects of Ukrainian influenced by Polish, and—except for the fact that they were Catholic—lived in economic and material circumstances largely indistinguishable from the surrounding population of Ukrainian peasants.<sup>50</sup> In short, after the aristocrats and the educated people had left, it was hard to tell the difference between Poles and Ukrainians because both were simply peasant. Thus the first and greatest problem facing the leaders of the Polish region was to determine the minimum official criteria for Polishness. For to be Polish in a Soviet and proletarian setting was a yet unwritten text, while to be Polish in the old way—religious, aristocratic, bourgeois—had become a crime.

When asked to state their nationality, many peasants replied simply “Catholic.” One peasant said he spoke quite well in the “Catholic language.”<sup>51</sup> Other peasants said they spoke *po-chlopski*, “in the peasant way,” or “in the simple way” (*po-prostomu*), or “the language of here” (*tutai’shi*). Investigators went from location to location reporting that no two villages were alike; each place contained a different blend of language, ethnicity, and social composition. Village council chairmen said they had no Poles in their village, but they did have a large number of “Ukrainian Catholics,” which made no sense to anyone at the Polish Bureau because everyone knew Poles were Roman Catholics while Ukrainians followed the Eastern Rite. A Ukrainian teacher wrote in to say that in his village over 80 percent of the villagers were Polish, spoke Polish, and were Catholic, but they had once been converted from Ukrainian Orthodoxy and the teacher was not sure whether the local school should be Polish or whether the village should be restored to the original Ukrainian of several centuries before.<sup>52</sup> Meanwhile, other villagers described themselves as *szlachta*, Polish gentry, but said they had forgotten the Polish language and wanted a Polish school to help remember it. In several villages, locals identified themselves as Poles and spoke well in Polish, but the village officials explained they had written

them down as Ukrainians because “they were born in Ukraine.” Rejecting this logic, one village wit quipped back, “If a man were born in a horse barn, would you call him a horse?”<sup>53</sup>

At the Commission for National Minority Affairs they wrote memos back and forth, smiling over the simplicity of villagers who could not identify their nationality and were ignorant of their own language. But who was ignorant of what? The peasants too thought the “bureaucrats” were ridiculous, ineffectual, and ignorant of “our village ways.” One peasant complained, “They send out an inspector who speaks in a boss’s tone of voice. He drives up, pulls out his notebook. . . . He stayed a whole month, filled in dozens of pages in his notebook. . . . He was a big boss, we expected decisions from him . . . but then he orders a wagon, and drives off. . . . We still don’t know what he wanted, he didn’t give us any advice.”<sup>54</sup> It was not in-born ignorance on the peasant side or callousness on the side of the bureaucrats that drove this conflict, but rather a colliding discourse over identity. When asked who they were, villagers answered in a way that incorporated the complexities of the hybrid culture in which they lived. For them, identities were local, rooted in the soil of a particular river bed, forest, or valley. Identity represented a dynamic relationship that depended on whom one was identifying oneself against, whether it was landowners, workers, Jews, Russians, Germans, or educated urbanites. In the borderlands, identity was tied to locality, class, profession, and social status rather than to nationality, a designation which few in the villages understood.<sup>55</sup> Nor were identities permanently fixed in an indelible genetic imprint. National identity was a characteristic that could change depending on marriage, education, and fate. “Nationality was not a race, but a choice,” the Polish memoirist Jerzy Stempowski notes; “A Pole could become a German,” or “if a Pole married a Russian, their children would usually become Ukrainian or Lithuanian.”<sup>56</sup>

In other words, to call the villagers in the borderlands Ukrainian or Polish is beside the point. They were, as they often described themselves, simply “local.” They made up a continuum of cultures that stood literally and figuratively on the border between Poland, Ukraine, and Russia, in a place where mass media had not yet standardized vernaculars or made boilerplates of ritual and tradition. The communists who came to rule the large tracts of land sought to systematize vernacular identities and languages, fix them in space, translate that space onto a map, and with that map gaze out from their underheated offices in Kharkov or Moscow and see all of the kingdom laid out before them, a modern crystal ball.<sup>57</sup>

This is not to say that people did not want national autonomy—villagers often campaigned energetically to have their village granted autonomous minority status. But as Ronald Suny points out, this desire for national autonomy was not so much a reflection of national identification as it was a desire for local rule.<sup>58</sup> The promise of autonomy meant the end of the arbitrary power of the landowner and the state, which in the *kresy* had traditionally taken the form of Russian and Polish officials and landowners as well as Jewish overseers and moneylenders. National autonomy could also mean that national minorities could claim access to more land and additional government aid.<sup>59</sup> Or similarly, a vote for national autonomy could be an expression of religious or social aspiration. Many villagers who voted for Polish schools and village councils said they wanted to learn Polish because it was the language of the Catholic Church.<sup>60</sup> In fact, before Soviet power was established in the *kresy*, locals had organized their own underground Polish schools in order to teach catechism to their children.<sup>61</sup> The Polish language also signified culture and status; learning Polish was a way for some to lift themselves above the mass of (Ukrainian-speaking) peasants in a language-driven form of social mobility.

In short, there was no consensus on who was who, or even what nationality meant in the rural borderlands. In the end, what greatly helped to make the Marchlevsk Region decisively Polish was Jan Saulevich’s insistence on it. He and a few assistants in his office, using the tools of modern civilization, could see what no one else could see—they could pass their eyes over pine forests and low green fields and see a nation-filled landscape, bodies of Polish, German, Jewish, and Czech nationality. Saulevich’s primary task in setting up the national regions in Ukraine meant deploying what has become one of the most universally powerful tools of modern governance: the census.<sup>62</sup> He needed a head count so that his office could construct another innovative tool of modern rule—a demographic map. With a map they could draw borders and make what was illusionary (or rather, visible only to the initiated) plain for all to see—concrete ethnic territories encircling tangible bodies, the smallest components of the newly forming Soviet nations.<sup>63</sup>

Unfortunately, although numbers never lie, the people who wield them sometimes do. The 1922 tally of the countryside found a mere 90,000 Poles in all of Ukraine. The Polish Bureau accused Ukrainian local leaders of nationalism, skewing the results in favor of Ukrainians, and asked for a recount.<sup>64</sup> Meanwhile, leaders on the Ukrainian side charged that the Polish Bureau was trying to Polonize Ukrainian villagers by establishing Polish

schools and village councils.<sup>65</sup> The census became a highly political affair; it rocked back and forth from region to region, adding and sloughing off Poles.<sup>66</sup> A dispute emerged over Catholics who spoke Ukrainian, called Ukrainian Catholics. Ukrainian scholars argued that these people were originally Ukrainians who had been Polonized after centuries of serving Polish landowners and therefore should be considered Ukrainian; Polish theorists insisted they were originally born of Polish stock and, because of tsarist repression of Poles, had been forced to accept the Ukrainian language and suppress their Polishness.<sup>67</sup> The Polish Bureau naturally clashed with Ukrainian leaders whose task it was to Ukrainize the Ukrainian Republic, which, communist historians agreed, had been forcibly Russified and Polonized by five centuries of foreign rule.<sup>68</sup> The conflict generated more and more paperwork, and finally, deciding whether villagers in the borderlands were really Poles who had been Ukrainized or Ukrainians who had been Polonized became, strangely enough, a matter of state security. In 1925, officers from the Ukrainian Ministry of Internal Affairs, the NKVD, joined Saulevich to form an investigatory commission. They went back out to the countryside, gathered more information, computed the data into percentages, and finally ruled that most of the “nationally unconscious” who called themselves Catholics and used both Ukrainian and Polish in their daily life were really Poles by heritage who had been Ukrainized over a century and a half of living with Ukrainians and marrying them.<sup>69</sup>

People make their territory by naming the things in it. For this reason communist officials were repeatedly arriving in the villages, notebook in hand, counting, recording, forming commissions, and writing reports. And after they counted and mapped, they knew. They knew who a Pole was, just as they knew what made up the psychological and physical demeanor of a rich peasant, a kulak.<sup>70</sup> Soviet officials assumed that nationality, like class, bore essential traits commonly held by all members of that nationality; Poles, they assumed, possessed similar national interests, loyalties, and sentiments, sentiments that could be especially dangerous, a security officer noted, because Poles lived in a “compact mass in their own *separate administrative entity*.”<sup>71</sup> Soviet officials had only just created this entity, yet it quickly acquired agency to shape official attitudes. In 1926, Polish Bureau investigators wrote the following summation of borderland Poles:

In a political sense the Polish population can be characterized in the following way: (1) During the revolution, the influence of the Catholic

Church was completely unshakable. Presently the Church uses its influence against Soviet rule, and a broad range of the population from adults to teenagers takes part in religious prayer circles; (2) they exhibit a fear of and a lack of faith in the Soviet government, which is their inheritance of the nationalist and religious yoke from the tsarist era, complicated further by the war against the White Poles [Independent Poland] . . . (3) the poor and landless class are fixated on White Poland and national solidarity. They refused to oust the wealthy peasants (kulaks) or join poor peasant committees.<sup>72</sup>

At the Commission for National Minority Affairs, Saulevich and his colleagues ascribed to each national minority a set of features, a personality profile, which, as with this collective biography of borderland Poles, incorporated the history of tsarist repression, religious affiliation, and an economic present to come up with an estimation of the given national minority's loyalty to the Soviet state. In this way, Soviet officials came to understand the territory they ruled. For communists to know how many people belonged in each national category meant they knew whom they were leading, where they lived, and where their loyalties lay. They could fill in the empty spaces on the map with colored-coded circles indicating nationality, each color embedded with a corresponding set of adjectives and national-historical characteristics.<sup>73</sup> For this reason, the matter of nationality in the *kresy* was such a precarious issue that the NKVD needed to mediate. It revolved around not merely cultural questions, but the viability and security of the state.<sup>74</sup>

The 1925 Ukrainian NKVD ruling gave the Polish cause a green light; Catholics who spoke Ukrainian were essentially seen as Poles, and this decision greatly influenced census results. From 90,300 Poles in Ukraine in 1923, the number rose to 369,612 in 1926. Locally this made a large impact. In the village of Staro-Siniavskiyi the regional executive committee in 1924 had counted twenty Poles and 2,006 Ukrainian Catholics, but in 1925 they recounted and found 2,325 Poles and no Ukrainians.<sup>75</sup> The Polish Bureau felt it had won a victory: “In the 1920–22 census, people were still afraid to say there were Polish. . . . But now the Polish population is blossoming thanks to our nationality politics, and the number [in 1925] is 309,800 Poles, 22 percent of whom are definitely Poles.”<sup>76</sup> The job left for Saulevich's office was to Polonize the remaining 78 percent of the Catholic population who were not “definitely Poles” but listed so on the census. With this task before them, officials at the Commission for National Mi-

nority Affairs monitored the growth of Polish-language schools, libraries, and newspapers and chided local mayors and teachers when they continued to speak Ukrainian although they were counted as Polish.<sup>77</sup>

During those first inspiring years, the Marchlevsk Region and the National Minority Council in Kiev that backed it stood as the moral and legal protectors of Poles throughout the borderlands. Communities that asked for a Polish school or village council received them. In the winter of 1926, a Polish Bureau employee named Viutskyi described a village-council election meeting in a nominally Ukrainian village:

Whenever the poorer element started to say something critical about the local leaders, Comrade Pal'chykov [the county executor] threatened them and said they didn't need to be making any speeches. When I started to speak in Polish, Comrade Pal'chykov said, "There are no Poles here, only Ukrainians." But when I asked if there were Poles, they answered, "We are all Poles." I started to tell them about the nationality politics of our party, that they can demand a Polish village council and they will get one . . . that I will help them and explain everything in the center.<sup>78</sup>

The more minority village councils, the better for the Commission for National Minority Affairs. Because Soviet officials understood increases in numbers as a sign of progress, Saulevich's task was to insure that the number of minority villages never ceased to multiply. If a village was split between Ukrainian and Polish residents, the villagers were assigned two schools and the village council was instructed to carry out its business in both languages. Employees at the Commission minutely calculated the numbers in each village and tried to fairly apportion schools and village councils. They wrote exacting, meticulous memos back and forth:

Protovskyi council consists of four villages with 2,242 residents: Poles number 408 (18%); Ukrainians, 630; Germans, 1,058; and Jews, 146 . . . Because the majority is German, who are located exclusively in the Prutovka colony, the colony was assigned an independent German village council, which was then divided into two sections, a German and a Ukrainian section.

It was a painstaking search for the national. The subdivision of territory went on endlessly, splitting not only villages, but cottages down the middle, dividing sister from brother.<sup>79</sup> And each new territorial subdivision meant that the numbers of national villages and schools continued to

grow, the charts showing a majestic march upward. It was a proud moment; the socialist state magnanimously gave to all what the tsarist regime had once taken—language, self-determination, local autonomy. And in this, the Ukrainian Republic led the way. By 1927, no republic in the Union had surpassed Ukraine in the statistical rendering of nationalities. While in other republics officials had trouble reporting the national composition of their populations, Saulevich's office sent charts to Moscow indicating precisely where national minorities lived, in what number and density. Saulevich's charts won praise in Moscow: "The most eloquent figures come from Ukraine."<sup>80</sup> He led the bureau that shaped the Ukrainian Republic's uniquely successful minority policy, a policy that officials in Moscow held up at a union-wide conference on nationalities as a model experiment for the rest of the republics to follow.

At the same time the Soviet plans developed, the Marchlevsk newspaper focused on the failures of Polish government minority politics just across the border in Poland. Every fortnight a new headline appeared describing how in the Polish *kresy*, where a majority of the population was Ukrainian, the Polish government in 1924 had passed laws to transform Ukrainian schools into Polish schools; how Ukrainians were excluded from the university in L'viv; how chairs in Ukrainian Language and Literature were closed as Polish scholars argued Ukrainian was not a language but a country dialect.<sup>81</sup> The *Marchlewska Radziecka* reported how the Ukrainian population in eastern Poland was getting pushed off the land by a Polish government colonization program that gave homesteads in the already overpopulated eastern borderlands to Polish army veterans, while land-starved Ukrainian peasants grew steadily poorer and more dissatisfied.<sup>82</sup> The Soviet press charged (and Polish sources today agree) that the Polish government was trying to transform the mixed Ukrainian-Belorussian peasant populations on the Polish side into one unambiguously Polish population in order to quell once and for all the question of Ukrainian separatism continually raised by Ukrainian political parties in the Polish parliament and by the nationalist Ukrainian terrorist organization, the UVO.<sup>83</sup> At the same time, the UVO exhausted the patience of Polish government officials by carrying out a series of successful assassinations of Polish officials, teachers, and policemen in the Polish *kresy*.<sup>84</sup>

Just as Saulevich's office was intent on discovering and naming the borderland territory, so too the Polish government was engaged in stitching together the partitioned remnants of the old Polish Commonwealth, try-

ing to come to an agreement on a common definition of Polish culture, language, and history. In the 1920s both Poland and the Marchlevsk Polish Autonomous Region were in the process of becoming, and they leaned against each other for self-definition. Interwar Poland was modeled to a large extent on the rejection of Soviet communism. Meanwhile, Soviet officials looked to “bourgeois” Poland as a guide for what socialism must avoid. And so Polish officialdom’s harassment of Ukrainians in Poland made a telling backdrop for the multiplication in Soviet Ukraine of Polish (and German, Jewish, Czech, and Ukrainian) schools, courts, and village councils. The Ukrainian Republic’s progressive nationalities policy gave Saulevich, and Soviet officials in general, not only a valuable propaganda tool (which they used liberally) but living proof that socialism could solve serious social problems, problems that seemed to be tearing apart capitalist countries.<sup>85</sup>

And during those first intoxicating years of the nationality experiment, staffers at the Polish Bureau felt they were getting somewhere. Because the Soviet government granted people national autonomy, they reported, the “fanatically religious, conservative” Polish population was edging its way slowly toward the Soviet government, starting to participate in elections and to send their children to public schools.<sup>86</sup> In a territory barraged by one foreign ruler after another, noblemen and peasants alike buffeted from one language and religion to the next—in such a land Polish Bureau staffers pointed out the momentous quality of villagers electing their own leaders, in their own language. Viutskyi observed council elections in the village of Sharuvechka in the Proskuriv Region and narrated the scene:

The village was split into two factions. One group consisted of horse thieves, criminals of all types, kulaks, and a part of the village’s poor peasants, basically the worst part of the village. The second group contained the best element among the poor and middle peasants and the local intelligentsia. The first group of thieves tried to bribe the second group; a rich peasant, Kurzh’e Demian, pledged four buckets of honey and a pound of sausage if he got elected; Ivan Shapoval promised 30 rubles for drinks if he was made chairman. Despite the bribes and the fact that the first group scared the second group with threats, the honest group held out. They showed up at the electoral meeting, discussed the issues from all sides, with shouts, a great clamor. And finally the women of the village came to the rescue, saying there is no life for those who are

always frightened. The meeting went on from six in the evening until five the next morning, women, elderly, everyone stayed until the end, and finally the side that was meant to win, the competent side, won out.<sup>87</sup>

It may not look like it, but Viutskyi’s story serves as an inspirational tale, a small but rousing one for the socialist reformers in Ukraine working for local self-rule. A decade before the revolution, only idealists would have believed peasants would stay up all night threading their way through bribes and threats to elect the “right” leaders.

By 1930, Marchlevsk had made the map; this corner of Ukraine was heralded by national newspapers as a successful demonstration of Soviet nationality policy.<sup>88</sup> And it was largely Saulevich’s doing. To read the archive correspondence and the contemporary newspapers is to understand how Saulevich and his hardworking staffers created the Polish Autonomous Region—created it, at least, on paper. They counted, they calculated, they fought over the census because they understood that in participatory governments numbers talk. With the census data, they drew up maps, plotted longitude and latitude lines, and made borders. They carved Marchlevsk out of the ambiguity of the borderland cultures by generating enough evidence with such thorough numerical veracity that no one who read the reports could deny the existence of a compact group of Poles along the western edge of the Soviet Union. Saulevich and his colleagues had gone looking for Marchlevsk, had found it, and breathed life into it; next, they had only to sit back and watch Soviet Polish proletarian culture blossom.

But sometimes our ideologies and technologies overtake us. The most puzzling thing about Marchlevsk is that once it was founded, once its population was labeled, arranged in national villages, encircled with borders, national designations, and standardized languages, the numbers did not stop; they continued to roll in, on and on, as if the numbers had taken on a life of their own. And as the figures flowed in, gradually they no longer added up to progress but—doggedly piling up—they authorized a mass indictment.

### Dismantling Marchlevsk

In 1929, Saulevich reported that the number of Poles deprived of voting rights for being “socially alien” had grown from 3.7 to 3.8 percent.<sup>89</sup> In 1932, the national average for collectivizing peasant households was calcu-

lated at 58.8 percent, while the percentage for Marchlevsk came in at only 7.<sup>90</sup> In 1934, when the rest of the minority regions in Ukraine had collectivized at 98 percent, Marchlevsk had not reached 50 percent.<sup>91</sup> The number of livestock grew in every other region but Marchlevsk between 1933–34, where the number of horses, pigs, and sheep fell by 40 percent.<sup>92</sup> In 1933, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Ukraine reported that of the 116 Polish school teachers in Marchlevsk, 59 had only an elementary school education and were essentially half-literate, and only two were party members. A republic-wide survey found that Poles in Ukraine were joining the Communist Party in extraordinarily low numbers. The circulation of Polish newspapers in Ukraine fell from 17,900 in April to 6,600 in May 1933.<sup>93</sup> From November 1933 to January 1934, the chairman of Marchlevsk reported that 1,789 families fled the region without official permission or passports.<sup>94</sup> Meanwhile, between 1930 and 1935, over 1,500 families were deported from Marchlevsk for “especially inimical behavior.” Between 1933 and 1935, the plan in the border zone for social construction had been filled only by 30 percent, which meant that roads supposed to be built were not built, and the buildings, streets, wells, bathhouses, cooperatives stores, and medical clinics called for in the plan remained unconstructed. And the lowest number of all: in the political economy section of the Marchlevsk bookstore, all of one book lay, covered in dust, on the shelf.

What was happening? Why were the numbers that were once so promising going sour? A very puzzling change occurred between 1929 and 1934 in the way Marchlevsk was described in the official charts: the numbers filed for Marchlevsk no longer spelled success. Or rather, something caused the criteria for success to change as the Revolution wore exhaustingly on. In the early thirties security officials from the state political police, the Ukrainian GPU began checking party cards, inspecting regional and village administrators, following up on charges of corruption and sabotage.<sup>95</sup> With the GPU UkSSR filing reports first alongside and then instead of the Commission for National Minority Affairs, the nature of the data itself changed. Instead of demographic and sociological charts, officials began tabulating arrest rates, deportations, convictions, and expulsions from the party. And because the security officials pursued the numbers with the same numerical tenacity as Saulevich had, the numbers of arrests and prosecutions grew and grew. In 1930, the GPU deported 15,000 kulaks and enemy elements, especially those of Polish nationality, from the border-

lands. In 1932, the GPU purged 121 counterrevolutionaries and nationalists from the Marchlevsk Region; in 1933, they unmasked another 303 enemies; in 1934, 254 more. In 1934, at the Polish Institute of Proletarian Culture in Kiev, all but one member of the staff, from the director down to the dishwasher, were found to be spying for Poland.

In 1935, another purge swept Marchlevsk: 85 percent of the village council chairs were fired, as were 95 percent of the chairpersons on the collective farms. In September of 1935, 58 Polish language schools in Marchlevsk were transferred to the Ukrainian language, and regional leaders were instructed to staff formerly Polish village councils and schools with Ukrainians.<sup>96</sup> Polish schools and councils were becoming superfluous, because in the spring of 1935 a total of 8,300 households were sent from the border zone—2,800 Polish families, 3,400 Ukrainian, 1,903 German, and 126 others—or, counted another way, 1,156 kulak families, 3,725 independent farmers, 3,396 collective farmers, and 52 others. In their place, 4,000 Ukrainian families were moved in, good families of proven loyalty. However, of the 36,000 people sent away in the spring of 1935, 23,300 returned.<sup>97</sup> And so the numbers couldn't end, the job yet incomplete.

In 1936, a new order, this one all the way from Moscow, requested the removal and resettlement to Kazakhstan of 15,000 Polish and German families from the border zone which encompassed the now former Marchlevsk Region. This group of deportees went in three convoys, one in the early summer of 1936 and two in the fall. But even after 70,000 disloyal Poles and Germans were put on trains and escorted away, the security agents continued to report on an ever-increasing number of spies and counterrevolutionaries littering the border zone. So between 1937 and 1938, the NKVD SSSR (Peoples Commissariat of Internal Affairs, which took over the OGPU in 1934) arrested 56,516 people in Ukraine for transgressions in the “Polish line.”<sup>98</sup> But that is going well beyond the boundaries of the biography of the Marchlevsk Region, because after 1935, Marchlevsk had ceased to exist. In the records after 1935 it is called the “former Marchlevsk Region,” and without a region, without borders, there was nothing left to count.

The Marchlevsk Region, modest and of humble origin, endured for a decade. It left behind only a few traces in a brown cardboard box to convince me, sixty years later, that it had in fact once existed, however equivocally. After sifting through the box and roaming the former Marchlevsk territory, there was little left for me to do in the former borderlands. So I

returned to Kiev to work among the documents of the Communist Party, including the declassified security files of the NKVD. I searched through the stout files of arrests and interrogations to try to find out what happened to the men who had made Marchlevsk and disappeared with it. Among the others, Saulevich's file is held. After all the figures he calculated and the charts he compiled, his life too finally became a number listed in an inventory, a file on a shelf. In 1934, Saulevich was purged from the party and demoted. In 1935, he was arrested and charged with Polonizing the western borderlands of Ukraine, of falsifying statistics to make it look as if Ukrainians were really Poles so as to create a bulwark of Polishdom to be used as a springboard for Poland to attack the Soviet Union.

National histories require national heroes, and if the Marchlevsk Autonomous Region still existed today, Saulevich's photograph would stare from the pages of local textbooks, bespectacled, scholarly and calm, clean-shaven, handsome in a delicate way. He would have been christened as one of the selfless founders of the Soviet Polish nation. And that would have been fitting, because although many things have been said about the Evil Empire, the totalitarian Soviet state and its divide-and-conquer nationality experiment, I have been persuaded after reading most of Saulevich's professional correspondence that this noble-born Pole spent years splashing over muddy roads, sleeping in tick-ridden straw mattresses, signing his leaky pen to proposal after proposal because he wanted people, in whatever form they happened to take—Polish, German, Czech, Ukrainian, Jewish—to believe in the Soviet state, to find a home at last after decades of the knout. Instead, Saulevich suffered an ignoble death, a hero overlooked because his cause never went anywhere. The subset of nations he founded slipped back into the greater unmarked landscape of Soviet Ukraine and disappeared.

Saulevich sat in his cell during the two years between his arrest in 1935 and his execution in 1937 and recanted his life's work. He admitted that the number of Poles in the Polish territory had been inflated, that he had established Polish schools to Polonize Ukrainian Catholics, that he created, in his words, "such an exceptionally swollen number of Polish newspapers in regions where there was no Polish-speaking population," because, he continues in his official confession, "these newspapers were supposed not only to Polonize the Ukrainian population but also to organize the counterrevolutionary movement in the localities."<sup>99</sup> I wonder if Saulevich ever questioned from prison the consequence of the national taxonomies he

created; if he considered whether the experiment in Polish autonomy had collapsed under the very weight of the numbers that he had created to justify Polish Marchlevsk? How did it happen that the Poles he sought to have called Poles, who may have never learned to speak standard Polish, became so real they constituted a threat—to the state, to socialism, to the people who built and lived it, and, finally, to the borderland culture on which Marchlevsk was constructed?