

“THE BLACK POLES OF HAITI.
A STORY PLUCKED FROM OBLIVION”

ABSTRACT: My paper is devoted to the historical and cross-cultural affiliations between Poland and Haiti. I will start with an analysis of the historical context and I will focus on the historiography based on official reports and epistolary correspondence of the Polish soldiers sent by Napoleon Bonaparte to the French colony of Saint-Domingue (1802–1804), as well as on their perception of the need for freedom and national independence claimed by the ancient slaves. Next, I will attempt to highlight some affinities between the Polish and Haitian cultures and the present-day situation of the Mulatto descendants of the Polish soldiers, those who remained in Haiti.

The Polish presence in Haiti dates back to the expedition of General Victor-Emmanuel Leclerc to Saint-Domingue, in 1802. After the dissolution of the Polish state in 1795, subsequent to its partition between Austria, Russia, and Prussia, some Polish volunteers, exiled in French and Italy, formed two legions (the Italian and the Danube legions) in order to take part in the putative liberation of Poland under the banner of the Grand Army. In 1801 Napoleon Bonaparte, the First Consul at that time, naturalized them as French and sent them to fight “against the bandits” in Saint-Domingue. In this, the richest of the French colonies, the former slaves who had gained emancipation in 1794 during the French Revolution were revolting. The two half-brigades of Polish legionnaires were made up of

4,800 soldiers in all, which represented 11% of the French expeditionary corps¹. The privates were peasants, the majority of whom had lived under feudal serfdom before entering the army. The officers were from the petty nobility, the captains and generals from the great landed gentry. Among the latter there were some veterans of the Polish national insurrection of 1794; some had even fought for American independence under Tadeusz Kościuszko and Kazimierz Puławski. Many commanding officers knew French well, having studied at the Military Academy in Paris. They were cultured, believed in Republican ideals, and were receptive to the principle of the sovereignty of peoples. After their arrival in Saint-Domingue, their fate took a bad turn: poorly nourished, without pay for months, and unused to the guerilla character of war in the colonies, the Polish legionnaires felt as though they had been trapped and forced to take part in the French military campaign. Two-thirds of the Polish soldiers died from an outbreak of yellow fever and in combat. Some deserted and joined the Haitian general Jean-Jacques Dessalines and his troops. Forty Polish soldiers even became members of Dessalines' personal bodyguard.

The vast majority of the texts written by Polish soldiers in Saint-Domingue – orders, reports, letters, descriptions, and memoirs, in both Polish and French – were destroyed during the Warsaw Rising in 1944, when the SS set fire to Warsaw National Library with flamethrowers. Today, some rare manuscripts are scattered across various libraries in Europe. Versions published in literary and historical periodicals in the 19th century were annotated and republished in the 1970s and 1980s by both Polish and Haitian historians². These publications sometimes struggle with chronology, and lend more importance to certain facts while ignoring others. But in general, they underline the

1] Marcel Bonaparte Auguste and Claude Bonaparte, *La participation étrangère à l'expédition française de Saint-Domingue*, Québec, Microméga, 1980, p. 128.

2] See, in particular: Jan Pachoński, *Legiony Polskie. Prawda i Legenda. 1794–1807*, vol. IV, Warszawa, Wydawnictwo MON, 1979; Jan Pachoński & Ruel K. Wilson, *Poland's Caribbean Tragedy. A Study of Polish Legions in The Haitian War of Independence 1802–1803* (East European Monographs, Boulder), New York, Columbia University Press, 1986; A.M. Skalkowski, *Polacy na San Domingo 1802–1809*, Poznan, Imprimerie Gebethner & Wolf, 1921; Tadeusz Łepkowski, *Haiti, początki państwa i narodu*, Warszawa, 1967; Beaubrin Ardouin, *Études sur l'histoire d'Haïti, suivis de la vie du général M. Borgella* (2e éd. II volumes, 6 tomes), Port-au-Prince, Chez Delancourt, 1958; Thomas Madiou, *Histoire d'Haïti* (3e volume), Port-au-Prince, Département de l'Instruction Publique, [première édition 1817], 1922–1923; Marcel Bonaparte Auguste et Claude Bonaparte Auguste, *La participation étrangère*, op.cit.

colonial context of Polish participation in the French campaign in Saint-Domingue.

Let us consider some of the lesser-known episodes of what is already largely a well-known historiography. The legionnaires understood that their mission was to disarm the rebels, whom they, like the French, refer to as the "bandits". They also realized, soon after their arrival, that there was an outbreak of yellow fever which was killing hundreds of soldiers each day. They ignored, however, the fact that slavery had been reinstated in Guadeloupe by General Richepanse on 28 May 1802. Moreover, they were unaware that Leclerc had extended the practice of slavery to the Spanish side of Saint-Domingue and ordered the slaughter of the Black and Mulatto population on the French side, which he deemed likely to support the rebellious units of the disobedient colonial army. Last but not least, they ignore the fact that, during the May of the same year, the chief of the rebels, Toussaint Louverture, who had previously defeated Leclerc and concluded a peace agreement with him, was captured by Leclerc himself. Louverture was feared as an outlaw and sent back to France, to Brest. He died tragically there in 1803 in Fort Joux, in the Jura Mountains.

The bulk of the military operations with the Poles' participation took place in the period when the rebellion had evolved into a war of independence, a fight against the reestablishment of slavery in the French part of the island by General Rochambeau in January 1803. Nevertheless, while the military actions can be reconstructed in their true temporality, their interpretations by the writers of memoirs and chroniclers, and those who wrote letters and war reports, are contradictory. The memoirs and letters of generals and senior officers who returned to Europe were compiled in Polish journals or dedicated publications in the second half of the 19th century. This literature tends to reinforce the legend of Bonaparte as the "little corporal, saviour of nations". For en route to Russia in 1807, Napoleon had created a tiny Polish state, the Grand Duchy of Warsaw. The Polish people, free and thankful, later took part in the war that the Emperor waged against Austria and Russia. In 1812, during the expedition against Russia, there were a hundred thousand Poles among the half-million soldiers of the Grande Armée. These troops, always faithful, remained on Napoleon's side until his ultimate defeat.

Against this edifying vision justifying the sacrifice of the Polish legionnaires in Saint-Domingue, other publications filtered the materials in order to interpret them according to the Jacobin and Republican

tradition, which perceives Napoleon as a tyrant. According to this perspective, Napoleon foresaw the unfortunate turn of the events in Saint-Domingue after the renewal of hostilities with England and Spain but sent the Poles to their deaths because he feared their spirit of independence³. The 19th- century Haitian historians Thomas Madiou and Beau-brin Ardouin relied on the “Jacobin” version of events and supported the act of insubordination⁴. During the 20th century, the Jamaican writer P.I.R. James would glorify the insubordination and rebellion of the Polish soldiers in *Les Jacobins noirs* (1936). Aimé Césaire, in *Toussaint-Louverture. La Révolution française et le problème colonial* (1960) would see it as an act of radical and tragic disobedience against colonial rule. More recently, a study published in Quebec in 1980 by Haitian historians the Auguste brothers, contains the following reflection on the desertion of about a hundred Polish soldiers based in Port-au-Prince and Saint-Marc in 1803: “So why consider a cowardice the desertion of these men, who were following the French troops because they thought that they would help them in liberating their country from the domination of Russians, Austrians, and Prussians, but in the end found themselves in Saint-Domingue, committed to a war against the last defenders of the French Revolution?”⁵.

The overall portrait sketched by the historians is quite sinister: the Polish were vulnerable to yellow fever, with insufficient food and weapons, often divided into small units of five to six soldiers and one officer, not used to the poisoning of the rivers by the enemy, and confused by the rebels wearing French uniforms and singing the Marseillaise, a battle song at the time. This explains their exasperation; they felt deceived, and above all they were upset with the French for having abandoned the Polish cause. The famous motto of the Legions, “For your freedom and ours”, that had spurred them on to acts of military bravery in Europe, seemed to have no hold over them in Saint-Domingue.

On the other hand, it is also true that the Poles rapidly recognized the bravery of the rebels and their determination in defending their cause as citizens, delivered from slavery by the Revolution. On a whole, they also quickly comprehended the colonial stakes of their military mission. In a letter written in March 1803, Lieutenant Józef

3] Cf. Jan Pachoński, *Legiony Polskie*, op. cit., pp. 411–412.

4] Cf. Jan Pachonski & Ruel K. Wilson, *Poland's Caribbean Tragedy*, op. cit., pp. 104–107.

5] Marcel Bonaparte Auguste et Claude Bonaparte Auguste, *La participation étrangère*, op. cit., p. 142.

Zadora, hoping to dissuade his brother Theodor from sailing for Saint-Domingue with the last group of Poles, spills all his inner devastation and distress at the killing by both sides:

I'm writing to you probably for the last time before my death, because there are only 300 of us and a few officers still alive out of the third half-brigade [...] all the others have died, including your Brother, who committed suicide a few months after his arrival. I'm writing to you in absolute agony, reproaching myself for my foolish attitude, my desire to go to America; I would never wish this on my worst enemy. It is far better to beg for bread in Europe than to try to make a fortune in America, where there are a thousand diseases and one considers oneself lucky if one doesn't have any of them, where they never let one rest, but force one to serve and fight, and the Blacks, when they catch one, commit the most terrible atrocities [...]. Despite a six-day storm, I made the trip over the sea safely and I am doing well. I hope to stay well and to come back to Europe by any means possible; this is all I think about day and night. [...] What a miserable time, to think of my stupidity, despite many exhortations; try to convince Teodor, for the love of God, not to sail. Of the two of us, may it be he who survives [...]. The first battalion won against the Negroes, we take up arms the day after tomorrow [...], write to me via Brest⁶.

If some Polish soldiers decided in 1804 to desert and surrender to the soldiers of the insurgent Generals Christophe and Dessalines, it was largely because the latter assured them fair treatment and respected their prisoner-of-war status. According to Colonel Wierzbicki's letters, Paul Louverture, Toussaint's brother, invited the Polish prisoners to stay in Haïti and benefit from citizens' rights long before Jean-Jacques Dessalines, who became the first President of the Republic of Haiti and officially granted them citizenship and the right to purchase land by the constitutional decree of June 1805⁷. Here are two excerpts from that Constitution concerning the Poles:

12. No White Man, of whatever nation he may be, shall set his foot on this territory with the title of master or proprietor, neither shall he in the future acquire any property therein.

6] Laurore St. Juste, Frère Enel Clérismé (éds.), *Présence polonaise en Haïti*, Archives Nationales d'Haïti, Port-au-Prince, pp. 17–18, on the basis of documents collected in "Dossiers Dabrowski", located in the Central Archives of Historical Records in Warsaw.

7] Piotr Bazyli Wierzbicki, "Mémoires", in: Artur Oppman, *Na San Domingo*, Warszawa, Gebethner & Wolf, 1917, p. 42.

13. The preceding article shall not in the least degree affect white women who have been naturalized Haitians by the Government, nor does it extend to children already born, or that may be born of the said women. The Germans and Polish naturalized by the government are also included in the dispositions of the present article⁸.

Behind these episodes of military history, there are some personal stories that show a progressive degree of awareness among Polish soldiers about the question of slavery in the Americas and the anticolonial stakes of Haitian resistance. It is far from the political mythologies, and between the lines, in reports (submitted to the Legions' headquarters in Paris) and letters exchanged with their relatives, that we can discern the real feelings and attitudes of the Polish soldiers towards this war. They can be clearly seen, for example, in this confession of extreme exasperation in a letter sent by the leader of the second battalion, Jasinski, besieged in the Cloche plantation, to General Fressinet, who never received it, however: "General, ... I am surrounded by 3,000 Negroes, I am unable to defend myself, as the leader of such a weak detachment, and I do not want to fall into the hands of a savage people that is fighting for independence, therefore I am going to take my own life."⁹ Another letter, written by Sub-lieutenant Weygell to his superiors on 19 March 1803, shows his lack of moral commitment to the fight:

The war here is conducted differently than in Europe. Three days ago, 200 dogs were brought here from the Spanish colonies...we expect 400 more tomorrow. The cost of a dog's food is 6 French escudos per month. The dogs are taken care of by the Spanish; each one of them takes care of two dogs, leads them out to attack before the infantry, and earns 20 escudos per month. They train the dogs each day on living Negroes, which the dogs tear apart mercilessly and devour¹⁰.

We must certainly also mention the accounts of intercultural exchanges occasioned by contacts with Black inhabitants of the island. One illustration of these is this excerpt from a description of Saint-Domingue by Colonel Kazimierz Lux, who evokes an authentic exchange of experiences:

8] *Présence polonaise en Haïti*, op. cit., p. 3.

9] Jan Pachoński, *Legiony Polskie*, op. cit., p. 347.

10] *Présence polonaise en Haïti*, op. cit., p. 19.

For the inhabitants of the island, the armies of ants of all kinds and sizes are a real calamity. Swarms of these insects penetrate the walls of the houses, looking for food. As protection from the ants, [the local people] put containers filled with water under the dining table, at least twelve inches from the wall. Without this precaution, the ants make straight for the table where the food is placed, especially if there is something sweet there. The same trick is applied to the beds. Our soldiers who were stationed in barracks got around that in their own way, making deep incisions in the wall with a bayonet, one inch wide, around pieces of meat and bread pinned to the wall, and filling them with charcoal. When the ants fell into them, looking for food, they fell to the ground with the coal dust. Since the dust fell with the ants, the incisions had to be reworked many times every day¹¹.

A closer look at the Polish adventure in the Caribbean reveals the process of hybridization (*métissage*) at play, above all the factor of unpredictability that Edouard Glissant attributes to the phenomenon of creolization of languages and cultures¹². In fact, even today in Haiti there are still Mulattoes with a fair complexion whose family names are Lovinski, Belnoski, Bisereski, Laboda, Fleurisca, Poto(cki). They are some of the few hundred families descended from the Polish soldiers (in the eighth and ninth generations), naturalized as Haitians by Art. 13 of the Constitution of June 1805. These Poloné-Aysiens live in the West (Cazale), South-East (Fonds-des-Blancs, la Baleine) and South (Port-Salut, Petite Rivière de Saint-Jean du Sud) departments.

In addition to Polish surnames, a few other cultural traces are still in evidence: a generalized Creole expression, "mwèn chajé kou Lapologn", meaning, depending on the context of the enunciation, "I am ready to face the challenges", or "I'm fed up"; a dance, called the *koko-da*, which is reminiscent of the mazurka; the use of lanterns, called "fanaux", made especially for Christmas, which are slightly similar to traditional Kraków nativity scenes; and a design of wooden house with skylights under the roof similar to the small country houses of Lesser Poland. Apart from the biological hybridization and such cultural residues, traces of this Polish heritage are also to be found in the works of some Haitian writers: the play *Pélin-Têt* (1978), by Frankétienne, performed throughout the country, is an adaptation of *The Emigrants* by Sławomir Mrożek, while the main character of the novel *Ils ont tué le*

11] Kazimierz Lux, *Description de l'île Saint-Domingue*, Biblioteka Warszawska, vol. 4, 1854, p. 28 (translated from Polish).

12] Cf. Édouard Glissant, *Poétique de la Relation*, Paris, Gallimard, 1990, pp. 117-132.

vieux blanc (1988) (*They Killed the Old White Man*) by Roger Dorsinville is a Polish-Haitian, Lodinski, who leads the people's revolt against the oppressive regime of Jean-Claude Duvalier, "baby Doc".

It is equally striking to see that during some voodoo ceremonies, in the temples located in the villages where the descendants of the Poles live, the Black Madonna of Poland is assimilated to Eyzili Dantò, the voodoo goddess (Iwa) of maternity. This figure is distinguishable from other Black Madonnas in Brazil (Nossa Senhora de Aparicida) or Mexico (Nostra Señora de Guadalupe), for example, by the two scars on her face, a feature typical of the representation of the Black Madonna of Częstochowa, brought as an item of personal devotion (amulet) on lockets by the Polish soldiers who arrived in Saint-Domingue in 1802 and 1803¹³. We know today that the Black Madonna of Częstochowa, the only image in Poland in which the mother of Jesus has the same skin color as the Polone Aysyens, is an icon painted with tempera on lime wood, and that she has Byzantine origins. With her face scarred on its right side and her black son in her left arm, she is credited with many military miracles that saved the Polish Kingdom from the Hussite ("heretic" reformers), Tartar, and Swedish invasions. She has become an object of national cult and since 1717 has borne the crown of Queen of Poland.

As a consequence of the cultural hybridization of the colonial era, which could not have been foreseen by any political or military project, the image of this black virgin, who has become one of the main gods in the voodoo pantheon, is today to be found in locations including Rampart Street in New Orleans and the church of Saint Michel in Cazale, Haiti. She was introduced to Guadeloupe in the 1970s by Haitian immigrants under the name of "Danton" (Dantò) or "Santa Barbara Africana", and she is venerated on the island as the guardian of cemeteries¹⁴. In turn, the voodoo imaginary and the painting of the Saint-Soleil School had a great impact on the drama research of the Polish playwright Jerzy Grotowski. After his repeated stays in Haiti between 1978 and 1980, he invited many Saint-Soleil artists, including Tiga and Maud Robard, to take part in an art workshop in Poland in 1981¹⁵. Twenty-eight years later, in 2009, during the International Jerzy

13] Cf. Sebastian Rypson, *Being Poloné in Haiti. Origins, Survivals, Development, and Narrative Production of the Polish Presence in Haiti*, Varsovie, Aspra-JR, 2008, pp. 82–90.

14] Cf. *Présence polonaise en Haïti*, op. cit., p. 47; Catherine Benoît, "Voyage de la Vierge Noire de Pologne vers la Caraïbe", *Portulan*, octobre 2000 (éd. Vent d'ailleurs), 264.

15] Cf. Leszek Kolankiewicz, *Grotowski w gąszczu narracji haitańskich*, "Polska Sztuka Ludowa. Konteksty", vol. LXVI, no 1–2, 2012, 107–117.

Grotowski Year in Wrocław, an exhibition of work by five painters from the Saint-Soleil group was held. In the city's main square, the Haitian artists painted a mural, "Poteau Mitan : source de la vie", as a tribute to the Polish playwright¹⁶.

Another interesting American, Polish, and Haitian historical episode dates back to the first half of the 20th century: Erzili Dantò was identified as a figure divinized by voodoo in a sort of memoir, *The White King of Gonave*, published in the USA in 1931¹⁷. The author, Faustin Wirkus, a young farmer of Polish and German descent from Pennsylvania, had been a lieutenant in the US marines in the 1920s, during the American occupation of Haiti. He fell in love with a young Mulatto woman of Polish descent from Cazale, coincidentally named Maria. In 1926 he became the chief administrator of the island of Gonave and was elected king by the local population, under the name Faustin II (after Faustin Soulouque I, an emperor of Haiti in the 19th century). In Gonave, Wirkus ordered the construction of a small airport outside Anse-à-Galet, organized the first nursing home and care unit where mothers and their children could be treated, the first school, and the first crop rotation system. All this he supposedly achieved in three months, before he was recalled to the USA in 1929¹⁸. It was probably Wirkus's story that was used as the model for the short story *Le sous-lieutenant enchanté* (*The Enchanted Sub-lieutenant*) in Jacques Stephen Alexis's *Romancéro aux étoiles* [1960] (*Romancero with Stars*), a collection of short stories published before its author was captured in Cazale by the Tonton Macoute after his arrival from Cuba in 1961 and disappeared in Papa Doc's prison. It is at once a novel and a folk-tale, probably the first work in which a Haitian author depicts a white character not as a "slave master" or "white friend", devoted to the Black cause, but as a complex character, a protagonist of "magical realism" living his Haitian adventure from an inner perspective.

16] Cf. Józef Kwaterko, *O malarstwie vodou na Haiti*, "Polska Sztuka Ludowa. Konteksty", vol. LXVI, no 1–2, 2012, 123.

17] Faustin Wirkus and Taney Dudley, *The White King of Gonave*, Garden City, Doubleday, Dorun & Co., 1931.

18] Cf. Maria Paradowska, *Polacy w Meksyku i Ameryce Środkowej*, Wrocław–Warszawa–Kraków–Gdańsk–Łódź, Ossolineum, 1985, pp. 268–270; Jan Pachoński and Ruel K. Wilson, *Poland's Caribbean Tragedy*, op. cit., pp. 316–317. For a French translation of Wirkus's description of the voodoo ceremony, see *Antilles, Guyane, Mer des Caraïbes*, Hachette ("Guides bleus"), 1992, pp. 101–102. This is an excerpt from William Seabrook's 1929 book *The Magic Island*, with an introduction by Paul Morand (French translation *L'Île magique. En Haïti, terre du vaudou*, Paris, Phébus, 1997 (Phébus libretto series).

Finally, in recent times, a very important event took place, founded on mutual exchange of Polish and Haitian experiences. An important education support programme was implemented at the University of Warsaw, where from February 2011 to July 2015 my faculty, the Faculty of Modern Languages, hosted ten students from the Ecole Normale Supérieure of Haiti State University in Port-au-Prince, on five-year scholarships leading to bachelor's and master's degrees. Those students, who had been prevented from pursuing their studies in their home university by damage inflicted by the earthquake that struck Haiti on 10 January 2010, found an educational framework organized especially for them by the staff of the Faculty of Modern Languages, with the support of the rector of the university. In that five-year period, they completed their higher education (at bachelor and master level), learned Polish, and found lasting friendships in Poland. Some of them found jobs and stayed; others returned to Haiti, where they were employed in the higher education system. Three of them are pursuing PhD studies, in France and Quebec.

Nowadays, there are strong literary and artistic ties between Poland and Haiti. In Poland, classic Haitian prose by authors such as Jacques Roumain, Jacques Stephen Alexis, and René Depestre is already known. Since 2000, a new Kraków publisher, Karakter, has been publishing the novels of Dany Laferrière, Lyonel Trouillot, and Yanick Lahens. There is a growing interest in Haitian studies at the University of Warsaw and the University of Toruń, where four masters' dissertations and one PhD thesis on Haitian literature have been written (and a further two PhD theses are currently being researched).

Last but not least, a group of Polish artists and the residents of the "Polish village" of Cazale have recently worked together on a new project of cultural collaboration, *Halka/Haïti.18°48'05"N72°23'01"W*. This is a multi-dimensional artistic performance that brings Polish-Haitian collaboration into the globalization process. The masterpiece of Polish 19th-century Romantic opera, *Halka*, by Stanislaw Moniuszko, was recorded in Cazale in February 2015 with the participation of Haitian musicians and dancers. After the screening of its Haitian première, the film was shown on a panoramic screen in Venice from May to November of the same year. Then, between June and August 2016, it was screened at the Zachęta National Gallery in Warsaw, and thereafter in Vilnius, Lithuania, where the opera was first staged, in 1846. In the meantime, it was also shown in Haiti, during the "Ghetto Festival"

in Port-au-Prince, and ultimately also in Cazale, where residents watched it on a smaller screen.

The authors of this touring project, the Polish art historians Joanna Malinowska, Magdalena Moskalewicz, and C.T. Jasper, were originally inspired by the film *Fitzcarraldo* by Werner Herzog (which won Best Director award at the 1982 Cannes Festival). This tells the unlikely story of the adventure of an Irish engineer, known by the name "Fitzcarraldo", who at the end of the 19th century tried to mount an opera in the heart of the Amazon rainforest. In the end, he transformed his steamboat into a theatre, where he welcomed musicians and singers. The performance of *Halka* staged in our time and performed at a crossroads in a rural region of Haiti falls into a similar category. As part of the project, a whole process of research, reflection, and reading was proposed to the Haitian participants. The "magic key" was the explanation given to the Cazalois about the parallels between the story of *Halka*, the eponymous character of Moniuszko's opera, and that of P'tit Pierr', hero of the famous lyric poem *Choukoune*, written in 1883 by the first great Haitian poet, Oswald Durand, and set to music as one of the best-loved dancing songs in Haiti, a slow *meringue*. In Moniuszko's work, *Halka*, a young peasant from the mountains, falls into insanity and takes her own life after her fiancé, Janusz, a Polish noble whose baby she is carrying, leaves her for the daughter of a rich aristocrat. Durand's poem is a complaint in Creole by P'tit Pierr', a young Black Haitian jilted by his lover Choukoune – a Marabout (Mulatto woman with fair skin and straight hair) – who prefers a white man passing through, despite the commitment she had made. The inhabitants of Cazale rapidly understood that behind the tragedy of unrequited love and betrayal, the two works are also similar in terms of the concepts of race (colour) and class (nobles versus peasants). They also realized that the two works are illustrations of the shared condition of all those who, no matter where or when, are victims of economic and social exclusion. This mutual understanding was fundamental to the successful realization of the performance. It also gave the young people in Cazale, who know *Choukoune* by heart, the opportunity to dance the opening polonaise from *Halka* with soloists from the Poznan opera. As Grzegorz Wierus, conductor of the Poznan opera orchestra, remarked:

The history of *Halka* could have taken place in Haiti or indeed anywhere. It is astonishing how people of very different cultures, who speak different languages and live thousands of kilometers apart, are intrigued by the same story, by the

same sounds and images. It was wonderful to travel to another continent, sit with a group of strangers, start playing music, and create something that speaks a language that everybody can understand¹⁹.

This universalization of experiences, in which Polish culture opens up to new interpretations, lays the foundations for new debates about Polish identity – the kind of identity that has no desire for ethnic confinement and isolationism: on the contrary, the study of the historical and cultural ties between Poland and Haiti is crucial to conceiving a pluralistic, syncretic, multi-faceted (Haitian, French, and African) Polish identity. This identity appears as a constant in the process of self-construction, beyond the confusion generated by the obsession with unique and homogeneous origins; it is an identity which does not fit with the identity politics being promoted by current policy in Poland.

19] Quoted in C.T. Jasper, J. Malinowska, *Halka/Haiti 18°48'05"N 72°23'01"W*, Warszawa, Inventory Press, 2015, p. 143.