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Multiple Visions, Multiple Viewpoints: Apparitions in a Polish—German Borderland, 1877–1880

The article views the little-known apparitions of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the village of Dittrichswalde (Gietrzwałd) in 1877–80 through the prism of the varied religious imagery they evoked and promoted. After considering pre-1877 fixed images of and attitudes toward the Virgin Mary in their historical and cultural context in the Polish–German borderland of Ermland (Warmia), the initial images of the apparitions as well as the three primary dramatis personae, two young female visionaries and the parish priest, are introduced. Further visionaries, the pilgrims, the official ecclesiastic investigation (including the doctors’ examination of the visionaries), and a number of disquieting revelations complicate the picture more, as did the identification of Poles from across the German–Polish border as well as the local Warmians. Ultimately, a multiplicity of religious images, fluid as well as static, became available to the faithful during this challenging period for the Roman Catholic Church that was the Kulturkampf in the German Empire.

One June evening in 1877, a thirteen-year-old peasant girl from Neumühl (Nowy Młyn), headed home from the church in nearby Dittrichswalde (Gietrzwałd). It had been a grueling but ultimately happy day for Augusta (Justyna) Szafryńska. The young girl had surmounted what for her had been no small hurdle: she had just passed the religious examination given to her by the parish priest. This meant that Augusta would finally be allowed to receive the sacrament of Communion.

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As Augusta and her mother set off for home, the evening Angelus rang out. Turning in the direction of the parish church to say a prayer, Augusta saw something above the large maple tree next to the rectory. First she thought it a bright light; at second glance it appeared to be a person dressed in white. Her mother, putting little stock in her daughter's vision, pressed her daughter to continue homeward.

At that moment the parish priest, Father Augustinus Weichsel, approached the pair. Learning what had happened, he invited the girl into the parish garden for a closer look. What did she see? Augusta described a person dressed in white, with long shining hair streaming down her back, seated on a gold throne set with pearls. After praying the Hail Mary, she reported another light from heaven bearing an angel with gold wings, who bowed before the seated Blessed Virgin. At that point the Blessed Virgin rose and ascended into the brightly lit sky—a sky that for all others present remained overcast.

Thus, on June 27, 1877, began the apparitions at Dittrichswalde, according to an account later penned by Father Weichsel for the episcopal authorities in Ermland (Warmia). It was but the beginning. More visions soon followed. By August 8 (the date of Weichsel’s report), the Blessed Virgin had appeared over fifty times to the visionaries. And news of the apparitions had spread. Crowds of several thousand pilgrims reportedly gathered on weekdays, numbering in the tens of thousands on feast days. The Mother of God had chosen to appear in a corner of rural Prussia inhabited by Ermlanders (Warmians) speaking a Polish dialect. She also chose a moment when the Catholic Church in the newly formed German Empire had come under particularly harsh attack: the Kulturkampf.

Apparitions of the Virgin Mary were by no means a rarity during this period. In July 1876, three children claimed to see the Mother of God in Marpingen, near the French border; and Bavaria witnessed apparitions half a year later. Nor were such appearances confined to the German Empire. Pontmain in France (1871), Pompeii in Italy (1876), Knock in Ireland (1879)—these and other unapproved sites saw action in what David Blackbourn has called “the greatest wave of new Marian apparitions that Europe had ever seen.”

Works on the nineteenth-century Roman Catholic Church in Germany and elsewhere in western Europe have emphasized the mid-century devotional renewal associated with the figure of the Virgin Mary. Popular devotion to the Immaculate

3. For the German lands, see, most notably, ibid., and Jonathan Sperber, Popular
Conception was fostered by both greater and lesser clergy, who saw in the new Marian devotions support for the recently pronounced church dogmas of the Immaculate Conception (1854) and Papal Infallibility (1870) as well as a way of weaning the populace from more problematic popular devotions, the pagan essence of which was covered by a thin Catholic veneer.

Local traditions of the Polish-speaking Ermlanders were already rich in Marian images. The Poles were a nation of Catholics with a traditionally strong devotion to the Virgin Mary. Poles had plentiful reason to develop Marian devotions because, as did Spaniards, albeit at the other extreme of the continent, they saw themselves as the defenders of European Christendom. Similar too was the proliferation of local shrines. Even today, miraculous icons of the Blessed Virgin fill the Polish landscape, color popular devotions, and inspire pilgrimages.

The late nineteenth century—a time when no independent Polish state existed—brought something other than a miracle emanating from established Marian sanctuaries at the Bright Mountain (Jasna Góra) of Częstochowa, Święta Lipka (Heiligelinde) in Mazuria, or the Silesian site at Piekary Śląskie (Deutsch Piekar). This time, the traditional painted Marian image of veneration and supplication metamorphosed into a more fluid and communicative form, that of an apparition. Its appearances provided occasions for more direct interaction with the divine. In the summer of 1877, the news of the Virgin’s appearances quickly transcended religious and national borders and promised to raise the obscure village of Dittrichswalde to the celebrity of a new La Salette or Lourdes.

Yet other considerations also figured in this remote borderland. In Dittrichswalde the apparition’s national identity (so to speak) also figured as the visionaries were native speakers not of German but of a Polish dialect, and the apparition addressed them “in the language in which they speak in Poland.”

The topics of language and identity complicate the matter for the researcher as well. Sources present both toponyms and personal names in varied versions. As regards the site of the apparitions, German sources speak of Dittrichswalde or Dietrichswalde, while Polish sources generally use Gietrzwałd. In this article, the German name of the town, the official designation of the locality under Prussian rule and within the German Empire, is preferred, as it represented the political reality of the 1870s.

How to deal with the cast of characters is more complicated. Unfortunately,


5. The sense of otherness is well conveyed by the dramatization of the first apparition in Maria Zientara-Malewska’s popular account in chapter two of _Gietrzwałd—dzieje polskości_ [Gietrzwałd—history of Polishness] (Warsaw: Pax, 1976), esp. 31–33, where she captures and contrasts the local dialect with the more purely Polish utterances of the apparition.

6. In the case of personal names, the treatment varies, with German, Polish, and clerical
there is no way to distinguish linguistically those who considered themselves neither Germans nor Poles but rather local Ermlanders (Warmians), most likely the majority of the region’s inhabitants—at least, prior to the apparitions.

These multiple or overlapping identities betray the complexities of the situation as well as suggest highly nuanced reactions to the events themselves. The significance of the apparitions in Dittrichswalde varied with the prism through which the events of 1877–78 were refracted. These signs were considered an anti-German phenomenon by the new imperial authorities, which decried the “backwardness,” ultramontanism, and perceived gullibility of the newly united Germany’s Catholics. The apparitions were seen as a Polish phenomenon by those inspired to forge new links between this provincial German backwater and the linguistic and cultural nation of the Poles. They were treated as a purely religious phenomenon by the Catholic Church and clergy under siege in the German Empire, which nonetheless attempted to shape popular manifestations of piety to fit Church-approved models. At the same time the apparitions reflected more locally felt influences: they could be viewed as a regional (Ermlandisch/Warmian) phenomenon. The apparitions, thus, could be viewed through various lenses: national, regional, local, as well as religious.

Yet another lens could be used: that of Marian imagery. Discussing the role played by religion in a rural Spanish valley, William A. Christian Jr., observed that “[d]ifferent religious figures have come to stand for the different identities that people of the valley share.” Could such a statement be applied to the region of Ermland and the differentiation of identities in part sparked by the events of Dittrichswalde? For the apparitions as well as the traditions of Marian devotions prior to 1877 provide a rich selection of images, the interpretations of which likewise shed light on the multilayered nature of the events.

The visual metaphor seems particularly appropriate in studying an event that itself hinges upon sight. Nor can the importance of imagery be underestimated in a region where pictures were more generally legible than the printed word. In much the same way as popular music and customs, images featured significantly in the devotions and cultural life of the semiliterate villagers. The events at Dittrichswalde introduced a new—dare I say modern?—element into the region’s identification with the Mother of God. The fact that the images of 1877–78 were not fixed but fluid, not homogeneous but diverse, multiplied the possibilities for varied interpretations of the apparitions.

While the degree of dialogue and interaction between the apparition and the female visionaries was in itself remarkable, interaction went in another direction...
as well. The descriptions of the apparitions provided by the visionaries, shielded for the most part from direct contact with the pilgrims, were (literally) translated into words and images that the Church and faithful could understand. These fluid representations interacted with the more familiar pictorial images of the Virgin Mary, with which they were identified and which shaped the concomitant pictorial and other representations of the apparitions.

That the visionaries were all female—two girls, two women—adds yet another dimension worth mentioning. Their new, exalted status as visionaries gave these villagers an amplified voice in society, one not generally allotted to nineteenth-century women and children of their background. The apparitions to a certain extent empowered the visionaries, who were the sole conduits of communication with the divine.

While the apparitions in Dittrichswalde share many characteristics with those in Marpingen and elsewhere, the focus of this paper is on the unique aspects of the apparitions in Dittrichswalde, specifically, the proliferation of images and their interpretation, manipulation, even appropriation by various individuals and groups. In an interesting way, the changing depictions of Our Lady of Dittrichswalde reflected the increasingly politicized context of late nineteenth-century Ermland trying to cope with changing identities within and outside the German Empire. Images and symbols, after all, are the building blocks of identity. The way we choose to describe and label what we see also says something about who we are, as does the way in which others perceive or imagine us. Our Lady of Dittrichswalde can be seen as a contested “sacred center,” to borrow Lynn Hunt’s phrase, a potential rallying point for group identity, whether Catholic, Polish, or Warmian.

As fluid representations of a beloved religious image, the apparitions provide a wealth of information not only on the way Mary was viewed but also on the problems of the day, which it was hoped she might ameliorate, not the least of which were the effects of the Kulturkampf. The various depictions of the Virgin Mary likewise shed light on the people who saw them (the individual visionaries) as well as on those who saw something in them (for example, the parish priest and the pilgrims). While the multiplicity of visions that characterized the apparitions at Dittrichswalde seemed to hinder the elevation of the site to something more than a local or regional devotion, the variety of images at Dittrichswalde ultimately enabled the cult to transcend its rocky moments and buttress reverence for the Virgin Mary in the region to this day.

**The Context**

Popular Polish religious culture was heavily dependent upon images of Mary. Ermland felt an attachment to the Mother of God that long predated the events of 1877, one that reflected the geographical and cultural uniqueness of the region. For

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centuries an episcopal dominium, Ermland/Warmia boasted a unique relation to both Teutonic and Slavic states as well as to Catholicism. Once part of the lands ruled by the Teutonic Knights, its German- and Polish-speaking population—under ecclesiastical protection—retained its faith while the Teutonic Knights were secularizing. And, while Ermland has alternated between German rule (pre-1466 and after the partitions) and Polish rule (1466–1772), Catholicism prevailed there exclusively until the mid-nineteenth century.

In its Polish connection, Ermland was the preeminent enclave of Tridentine Catholicism. Under its reform-minded bishop, Stanisław Hosius (Hozjusz), who played an important role at the Council of Trent, it was the first Polish territory to experience the effects of the doctrinal change associated with the Catholic Reformation. It was also during the Catholic Reformation that Marian devotion spread throughout the Polish territories. Furthermore, under Hosius and the next sixteen Polish bishops, Ermland was given no choice but to be Catholic, for the Bishop of Ermland forbade Protestants settling there.

The region’s self-consciousness was underscored by its growing religious isolation—the result of *cuius regio, eius religio*—after 1525. Protestantism and the Prussians surrounded the dominium, with Ducal (later East) Prussia on three sides and only a small strip of land connecting Ermland to the lands of what was once known as Royal Prussia to the west. After the Polish partitions, during which Prussia seized Ermland, its Polish-speaking peasants lost touch with the Polish nation. Furthermore, the traditional Catholic identity of the region, inhabited by both Germans and Poles, made assimilation one way or another a purely linguistic problem, as culturally the peoples were very close. The use of Latin and German as the official languages even under the Polish bishops further attests to the region’s lack of national identity.

Still, the nineteenth century complicated the picture further. In the Prussian lands east of the Vistula River, “Polishness” was by no means synonymous with Catholicism. Polish-speaking inhabitants of Mazuria in East Prussia—labeled *Prusacy*, or Prussians, by the Polish-speaking Warmians (Ermlanders), who thought of themselves as *Warmiacy*, or Warmians—had been converted to Protestantism together with their Teutonic overlords and generally remained faithful to their beliefs. In addition, once immigration laws had been relaxed around mid-century,

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12. Ibid., 92.
German Protestants began to make inroads into the towns of Ermland, all of which had Protestant parishes by 1870.\footnote{J. Obłąk, \textit{Stosunek niemieckich władz kościelnych do ludności polskiej w diecezji warmińskiej w latach 1800–1870} [The relationship between the German Church authorities and the Polish population in the Warmian diocese in the years 1800–1870] (Lublin: Tow. Naukowe Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego, 1960), 17.}

If Ermland traditionally was a Catholic borderland, then the Polish village of Dittrichswalde could be considered a border town par excellence. The signs of other worlds, denominational as well as economic, were practically visible from the lofty perch of the parish church, situated prettily on the top of one of the rolling hills of an area rich in forests and fertile valleys. Hardly a quarter of a mile to the west, the border with the Osterode (Ostróda) district (Kreis), lived Polish-speaking Lutherans, neighbors of some of the Dittrichswalde parishioners, who came from forty-nine villages from outside the Warmian border as well.\footnote{Obłąk, “Objawienia,” 9.} A quarter-mile further lay the train station in Biesellen (Biesal), part of the new railroad constellation linking the lands of East Prussia while bisecting Ermland.\footnote{Father [Professor Jakub] F[ankidejski], “Gietrzwałd,” in \textit{Słownik Geograficzny Królestwa Polskiego i innych krajów słowiańskich} [Geographical Dictionary of the Kingdom of Poland and other Slavic countries], vol. 2, ed. Filip Sulimerski, Bronisław Chlebowski, and Władysław Walewski (Warsaw, 1881), 566.} As so often with apparition sites, Dittrichswalde was an impoverished agricultural enclave, but one perched on the edge of a modernizing region.

For Dittrichswalde, this modernization emanated from its larger neighbor, Allenstein (Olsztyn), the district capital and one of the larger cities on the train route. The growing economic vitality of Allenstein in the 1870s may well have given rise to the same type of jealous relations found in so many towns visited by apparitions.\footnote{On this vitality, see Jasiński, \textit{Świadomość}, 100.} Furthermore, it was as a German and increasingly Protestant town that Allenstein grew—another reason for the stagnant local economies of the region to feel envy.

The parish of Dittrichswalde had one claim to local fame: a miraculous icon, painted in the Byzantine style. Although other Polish territories had similar images, the Dittrichswalde icon was the only one of its kind in Ermland. In the eighteenth century, the Dittrichswalde parish developed its own Marian devotion, which colored even the Sunday masses. On the feast of the Nativity of the Virgin Mary, the faithful attended a special votive mass before the picture of Our Lady to thank her for protecting them from the plague. Visitation records likewise show that, led by their pastors, parishioners from Wrzessin (Wrzesina) and Schönbrück (Sząbruk) habitually visited Dittrichswalde on that day, and that the cult of the miraculous image of Our Lady of Dittrichswalde spread in the first half of the nineteenth century to neighboring parishes.\footnote{Władysław Nowak, “Historia obrazu i kultu Matki Boskiej Gietrzwaldzkiej” [History of the image and cult of Our Lady of Gietrzwald], \textit{Studia Warmińskie} 14 (1977): 122–23.} (It should be noted that when the parish was consecrated...
in 1500, it was given the name of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary.\textsuperscript{18} Dittrichswalde parishioners likewise had the habit of praying the rosary as well as having special services dedicated to the Virgin Mary, in conjunction with which a statue of Our Lady was carried from house to house every nine days.\textsuperscript{19}

Religious tensions between Allenstein and Dittrichswalde must have been exacerbated by the Kulturkampf. As of the early 1870s, numerous parishes saw their priests taken away for defying the infamous May Laws. Religious seminaries, such as the one in Braunsberg (Braniewo), were closed.\textsuperscript{20} As of 1873, all teaching was to be conducted in German except for religious instruction at the lowest levels.\textsuperscript{21} Many parishioners must have wondered whether the Catholic Church as they had known it in Ermland would survive, or whether the “battle of civilizations” would eliminate the Catholic Warmians’ way of life as well as their local dialect.

The national issue further complicated the situation. Insofar as the local clergy supported the use of the Polish language in its dealings with the Polish-speaking population,\textsuperscript{22} the Catholic question became entangled with the Polish question—this despite the probability that, at the outset of the Kulturkampf, most Polish-speaking inhabitants of the region would have identified themselves not in national terms (as Poles) but in local terms (as Ermlanders/Warmians). Linguistic antagonisms were rare in what had until recent times been a culturally homogeneous land where priests as well as many others were functionally bilingual. The harsh repressions of the Kulturkampf, however, led to the mobilization of the latent forces of ethnic nationalism, eager to take advantage of the supernatural assistance seemingly offered by the apparitions.

\textbf{The Dramatis Personae}

This brings us back to the events. Father Weichsel requested that Augusta return the following day (June 28) at the same hour to pray the rosary, which she did with several friends from school, among them Barbara Samulowska from Woritten (Woryty). The images reported that day were even more elaborate than those of

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 114.
\textsuperscript{19} T. Pawluk, “Stosunek kościoła do objawień prywatnych ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem wydarzeń gietrzwałdzkich” [The attitude of the Church toward private apparitions with a particular consideration of the Gietrzwałd events], \textit{Studia Warminskie} 14 (1977), 96.
\textsuperscript{22} In his work on the relations between the Catholic Church and the Polish-speaking Warmians, Obłąk concluded that the Church in Warmia before the Kulturkampf did not try to Germanize the Poles (Obłąk, \textit{Stosunek niemieckich}, 135).
June 27. The sound of the Angelus brought forth from the illuminated tree a golden circle in which appeared several angels performing various services as well as the same figure of the Blessed Virgin, to whom was brought the child Jesus, all bathed in gold light, and introducing various traditional symbols of Church and worldly power: the earth’s orb, an elongated cross lying prone, a royal crown.

The same apparition returned the following day. On June 30, the Virgin Mary appeared without the angels but still seated on her throne. Augusta Szafryńska asked what she wanted, receiving the answer that they should pray the rosary daily. Questioned on July 1, the figure revealed her identity: “I am the Most Blessed Virgin Mary, the Immaculately Conceived.”

Despite the baroque imagery of the apparition, various visual aspects of the events at Dittrichswalde resemble the more famous nineteenth-century apparitions. These include the outdoor appearance of a white-clad female figure on a tree, which was also true for Bernadette at Lourdes, whose “Aquero” appeared over a rose bush.\(^{23}\) The revelation that the figure was the Immaculate Conception likewise parallels the apparition at Lourdes. Nonetheless, the seated figure depicted by the Warmian schoolgirl was unique.

Szafryńska’s own personal situation, however, recalls that of Bernadette Soubirous. Both were poor, young, barely literate peasants inhabiting a hilly area somewhat removed from the flow of modern life. Both had spent time out of doors in the company of animals. Whereas Bernadette tended sheep, Augusta Szafryńska had served for a couple of years as goose girl in the house of Józef Gross of Dittrichswalde.

The main Dittrichswalde visionary does not appear to have been a happy child. Augusta’s father had died when she was only three years old, and her mother remarried five years later. At the time of the apparitions, her older sister Maria was living in the Gross household, leaving Augusta at home with her ten-year-old brother and two young half sisters.\(^{24}\) Augusta Szafryńska was not considered particularly bright, one of the reasons why she was so slow to be admitted to Confession and First Holy Communion. Contemporary accounts describe her as an introspective and shy child, eyes always downcast or inward-looking. Augusta had difficulties in school, perhaps prompting her to transfer from the school in Dittrichswalde to the one in Woritten.\(^{25}\)

Contrary to what might have been deduced from Father Weichsel’s report of the apparition, in which he referred to the figure almost immediately as the Blessed Virgin, the young visionary was not convinced of the vision’s identity for the first


several days. Nor did Szafrynyńska herself decide to interrogate the apparition. The illogical ordering of her earliest questions—asking what the Mother of God desired and whether the sick should come before even learning the apparition’s identity—suggests that the girl was following directions.26

And indeed, from the very outset, it was the pastor who eagerly helped Augusta make sense of what she saw. The child’s mother had assumed that the “woman in white” was a dead soul.27 But Father Weichsel pressed the child for further details. Likewise, the fact that Augusta did not return home that evening with her mother, who did not believe her daughter’s story, but rather took refuge with the family where her elder sister was employed (the Gross household mentioned earlier), suggests yet another intervention on the part of the priest, likely in order to ensure that the child would return the following day to the site.28

Forty-seven-year-old Father Augustinus Weichsel was instrumental in establishing the facts of the apparition. He was the first to listen to the visionary and ascertain the identity of the beautiful lady, the first to translate Augusta’s descriptions of what she saw from Polish into German. Weichsel was born in Mehlsack (Melzak; now known as Pieniężno), a village in the Braunsberg (Braniewo) Kreis, the northernmost part of Ermland, which was inhabited mainly by Germans.29

Father Weichsel came to the parish in Dittrichswalde in August 1869. All accounts report that the new pastor, who had served in other Warmian villages and towns, spoke fluent Polish and gave the overwhelming majority of his sermons while in Dittrichswalde in Polish.30 This was in itself not unusual, for Warmian candidates for the priesthood studied the language at the seminary in order to be able to communicate with their parishioners in their native tongue; and this special rapport between the clergy and the faithful undoubtedly is one of the reasons why their Polish-speaking parishioners united behind their priests during the Kulturkampf. Weichsel’s use of the Polish language does not presuppose any particular enthusiasm for the Polish movement that was to ride on the heels of the apparitions.


27. This point is not mentioned in the parish priest’s report but is included in F. Hipler, Die Erscheinungen in Dittrichswalde für das katholische Volk nach amtlichen Berichten dargestellt, 2nd ed. (Allenstein, 1924), 6. A Polish edition of this work, Objawienia Matki Boskiej w Gietrzwałdzie dla ludu katolickiego podług urzędowych dokumentów spisane (Brunsberga: Druk. Warmińska, 1878) can be found in the Biblioteka Narodowa, Warsaw.

28. In his sworn statement (Dodatek źródłowy, 54), Józef Gross of Dittrichswalde affirmed that Augusta Szafrynyńska had been a guest since June 27—that is, since the very first apparition.

29. Much of the information on the pastor is gleaned from Zbigniew Jakubowski, “Ksiądz Augustyn Weichsel—proboszcz gietrzwałdzki w czasie objawień 1877 roku” (Father Augustinus Weichsel—Gietrzwałd parish priest at the time of the apparitions of 1877) Studia Warmińskie 14 (1977): 147–52.

30. Ibid., 147; Obląk, Objawienia,” 25; Jakubowski, “Ksiądz Augustyn Weichsel,” 149.
He saw himself chiefly in his role as a priest, responsible for the souls under his care and concerned for the level of religious life in the community. Nonetheless, like other priests who continued to use Polish in their dealings with their parishioners during the Kulturkampf, he could be seen as a “spokesman for Polishness” despite himself.\(^{31}\) Depictions of the priest as being particularly pro-Polish appear unfounded, however. Witness his concern that the German clergy of Ermland advocate praying the rosary on a daily basis in their parishes and following the instructions provided by the Virgin Mary in her appearances.\(^{32}\)

Given his religious zeal, one may be surprised to learn that Weichsel delayed sharing what he knew of the events in Dittrichswalde with the episcopal authorities. The bishop of Ermland, Philippus Krementz, learned of these new events in his diocese in the second half of July, while he was on business in Lithuania, via the pages of the German-language *Königsberger Zeitung*.\(^{33}\) Only after the bishop wrote to demand an account of what was taking place in his diocese did Weichsel send a report. By that time, over a month had passed since the apparitions had begun.

Weichsel’s delay may have been caused by his desire to confirm his hunch that the children had seen the Virgin. For the pastor had sent several leaves from the maple tree as well as a piece of cloth that had been blessed to the Belgian stigmatic, Louise Lateau, in the hope that she would react reaffirmingly to items carrying the touch of divinity.\(^{34}\) She did.\(^{35}\) The message from Bois d’Haine reporting the stigmatic’s smiles upon seeing the items was deemed important enough by the Dittrichswalde priest to be included verbatim in his first report to Bishop Krementz. By linking the traces of Dittrichswalde with the supernatural powers of the Belgian stigmatist, Weichsel apparently intended to provide additional proof that the apparition gave all signs of being genuine.

Weichsel’s recourse to the controversial Louise Lateau likewise sheds light on the priest’s attitude toward popular manifestations of piety. For although other accounts have made no mention of the communication with the stigmatic, they have concluded that Weichsel had some closer familiarity with apparitions, perhaps even traveling to Marpingen the previous year.\(^{36}\) His actions—even his reaction that first evening—suggest as much. Nor can one assume that the local community was unacquainted with apparitions before the June events: at least some of the Dittrichswalde parishioners had learned about the apparitions that had taken place the


\(^{32}\) Jakubowski, “Ksiądz Augustyn Weichsel,” 149.


\(^{34}\) This presumably took place after July 5, when the first linen cloth was placed under the tree. Hipler says that these were sent by a Warmian clergyman, but does not specify whom (Hipler, *Die Erscheinungen*, 22).

\(^{35}\) Dodatek źródłowy, 46.

\(^{36}\) See, for example, Pawluk, “Stosunek kościoła,” 96.
previous year in Marpingen through their subscriptions to the Pelplin newspaper, *Pielgrzym* (The Pilgrim).  

June 30 was a significant day in the history of the apparition. On that day the seated figure appeared by herself for the first time—the way she was to appear to Szafryńska and Samulowska henceforth. Twelve-year-old Barbara Samulowska, who had been among the friends accompanying Augusta on June 28, told the priest that she too had seen the apparition since the second day. Weichsel claimed that he had not put much stock in her story. Two days later, however, a series of events changed his mind. After the devotions on July 1, a tearful Barbara reported that she had not seen anything that day. However, that evening in bed she awoke to the touch of an “invisible hand,” to see the same apparition that Szafryńska had reported. When asked who she was, the figure replied, “Mary, the Immaculate Conception.” Reportedly Barbara also asked if the ill should come, but the figure disappeared. Henceforth, presumably on the basis of this news, Father Weichsel accepted both girls as visionaries.

The second recognized visionary, although likewise a poor village child, was very different from Augusta Szafryńska in ability and temperament. Barbara Samulowska was a year younger than her friend and a good deal brighter. While Augusta was extremely timid and retiring, Barbara had a more exuberant personality. Barbara was the youngest of three children. Her mother seemed to have impressed neighbors and the parish priest with her piety and religious zeal, which was noted in several reports. Significantly, the two girls were no strangers: the families were distantly related and apparently Szafryńska sometimes stopped at the Samulowski house when she began to attend school in Woritten.

While Augusta Szafryńska did not comment on the content of the visions in her statement, Barbara Samulowska put what must have made a tremendous impression on the child into the words that apparently came less easily to her friend. Samulowska’s own description of her first apparition gives a sense of the child’s simple recreation of the picture, one in which traditional religious symbols are named as she understood them: the throne was an “armchair,” the Christ Child held a “round apple with a cross” in his hand, and one of the angels carried a “pick” (which the
The image described by the children was not the traditional depiction of the Immaculate Conception. A seated Mary was perhaps a more familiar figure for them, as the icon that graced the main altar of the parish church could also be construed as seated. (In the same image, angels likewise were present overhead.) The apparition may have more closely resembled their own local patroness—or could likewise be construed by some to be, in her royal visage, Queen of Poland.

The Events of Summer 1877

Once the apparition had been identified as the Immaculate Conception, Dittrichswalde witnessed an influx of visitors. The earliest were local people from the town and surrounding villages, speakers of German as well as of Polish. Most likely the inhabitants of Dittrichswalde and Woritten, where the two young visionaries attended school, were among the first to investigate. Others may have ended up learning about the apparitions by accident, as annual pilgrimages to local shrines were commonplace in Ermland.

The scale of the phenomenon soon increased. On July 3, after appearing daily for a week the apparition announced that she would continue to appear for the next two months. During the following week, the organizational mechanics of an apparition site were developed. Procedures for blessing linen cloths to cure the ill were established, and the Virgin reportedly requested that either a cross or a chapel be built with the figure of the Immaculate Conception, with a place where the cloths could be laid properly.

Visitors began to arrive from more distant parishes. The behavior of some of the pilgrims was less than exemplary, as witnessed by the changing demeanor of the apparition itself (the Virgin looked sad) and the length of her appearances (they had regularly lasted from the second of the five joyful mysteries to the second of the five glorious mysteries). On July 22, the Virgin Mary reportedly complained that no attention was being paid during her appearances, that people were not even kneeling, and she threatened to come no more unless the situation improved. This admonition apparently had the desired effect: as of July 24, the apparition appeared joyful once again—as she would until the end of the apparitions.

Still, even German critics of the Dittrichswalde apparitions confirmed the peaceful conduct of the pilgrims. One Leon Niborski, author of what appears to be the earliest brochure on the apparitions (in circulation by early September), claimed that the five policemen posted at Dittrichswalde were unnecessary. Then again,
this writer took offense at the thought that it might be natural for the Blessed Virgin Mary to speak Polish there, as most of the pilgrims spoke German: “Das ist aber gar nicht natürlich; denn der größte Theil der Wallfahrer spricht deutsch” (That is not at all natural, as the greatest number of pilgrims speak German).

The author of the pamphlet *Ein neues Marpingen* (A new Marpingen) pointed to a growing commercialization and opportunism. Villagers were abandoning their fields for the more lucrative transport of pilgrims from the Biesellen train station to Dittrichswalde. Allenstein merchants were peddling “soap with the image of the virgin and the tree” as well as rosaries and crucifixes, not to mention beer and some expensive items of food. At the same time, donations of money to build a chapel were sought from the pilgrims. By late August the chapel already stood next to the maple tree, awaiting the arrival of a statue of the Immaculate Conception ordered from Munich. Given the effects of the Kulturkampf, which had closed many Warmian sites of popular pilgrimage, the appearance of a new sanctuary was timely—or even providential. Naturally, German liberals such as Niborski viewed the matter skeptically, claiming that the visionaries and others had “created” a new holy place.

The Warmian clergy, however, were decidedly less enthusiastic than their parishioners. Perhaps their skepticism grew out of an incident—the one instance in which even the ever-supportive parish priest’s belief was shaken—that took place on July 25. As mentioned earlier, the previous day marked the return of the apparition’s smiling approbation of the improved conduct of the crowds. School vacation had just begun, freeing the children’s schedule so as allow for a shortening of their long evening vigils. It was decided to divide the rosary into three parts, each of which would be prayed at the sound of the Angelus. Thus, the joyous mysteries were prayed in the morning, the sorrowful at noon, and the glorious alone now reserved for the evening service, which previously had lasted well over an hour. The increased frequency of prayer resulted in more numerous sightings of the apparition, which tailored its appearances to fit the new routine. The Blessed Virgin was now seen three times a day. Furthermore, she seemed to be at the disposal of the visionaries, who were pressed on all sides with questions for Our Lady. It was as though Dittrichswalde had a direct link to heaven.

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Polish press (“Z nad Wisły” [From by the Vistula], *Kuryer Poznański* 6, no. 207, September 11, 1877, identified the author—for Leon Niborski was a pseudonym—as one Judge Kolkmann, who reportedly was seen gathering material around the local taverns.

46. Ibid., 10–13.
This development underscores a singular and somewhat disquieting feature of the Dittrichswalde apparitions: their incredible frequency and number. Other, more famous visionaries saw their Blessed Virgin Mary many fewer times: Bernadette Soubirous eighteen times, and the Fatima children only six times. The children of Dittrichswalde had visions three times a day for well over a month as well as the earlier daily visions. This amounted to over 160 visions between June 27 and September 16.51

This leads us to the moment of doubt. On July 25 at the noon prayer, a discrepancy arose between the children’s visions: Szafryńska informed that the Blessed Virgin had requested that banners and a cross be placed under the maple tree, while Samulowska merely reported seeing the apparition standing between two banners and a cross. Father Weichsel reacted with alarm. Suspecting that the girls simply had not managed to coordinate their answers fully, he decided to put an end to the spectacle: the two children were forbidden to attend the rosary services, and Weichsel announced to all the pilgrims present that they should not return to Dittrichswalde again.52 This news surely must have spread, for daily attendance had already reached the thousands by this time.53

Nonetheless, this discrepancy in reported visions did not put an end to the apparitions, which after all were to last until some time in September. The local people reasoned with the parish priest, asking him to maintain his belief in the children’s truthfulness. In order to guarantee that there would be no opportunity for the two to contrive matching reports, a wealthy landowner from Woritten offered to take Barbara Samulowska under his care, and the Dittrichswalde landowner with whom Szafryńska had been staying did the same, to make sure that the girls did not meet. Ultimately, the children were allowed to attend the praying of the rosary, and the apparitions resumed the following evening.54 In the next several days, the following revelations were heard: “Everyone should obey the priests,” and, in response to the question of whether priests from other parishes should come, “They may.”55

The crowds swelled. By the beginning of the third week of the apparitions, pilgrims were arriving from West Prussia, Posen, and beyond the border with Russia. On regular days the pilgrims—coming on foot, by carriage, or by train—numbered about 2,000, while Sundays and feast days witnessed crowds of 8–10,000.56 On August 15 (Assumption Day), 5,000 tickets were sold to pilgrims returning home by train in Biesellen alone.57

Accounts from early September provide a litany of towns, villages, and regions whence the pilgrims came. The editor of a Polish daily, Goniec Wielkopolski (Greater

51. Obłąk, “Objawienia,” 24. The apparitions in Marpingen were also numerous.
53. Hipler, Die Erscheinungen, 16.
54. Dodatek źródłowy, 44.
56. Hipler, Die Erscheinungen, 16.
Poland Courier), reported traveling by train with several dozen residents of the Posen province representing all ages and estates. The wagons were cramped by the time they reached Thorn (Toruń), where several hundred more people waited to board. A very crowded train finally reached the station in Biesellen, from where they could either walk or hire a driver to take them the last half mile to Dittrichswalde.  

Once there, they found pilgrims who had come from other directions: Poles from East and West Prussia as well as Kashubians and Kurps, pilgrims from the northwestern gubernia of Russia (which had formerly been part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth). Mazurians, came as did inhabitants of the Congress Kingdom—even some from the Polish Catholic Mecca, Częstochowa. All had arrived in a wet, muddy Dittrichswalde, where there was little food available and even less room to sit down. (One published account recommended that pilgrims traveling to the site bring an umbrella, a chair, and food.)

Although Niborski claimed that “no princesses and countesses” could be found visiting Dittrichswalde, at least a smattering of Polish nobility did visit the site. Most of them seemed to come from the region of Greater Poland (at that time, under German rule), although at least one noblewoman, Anna Potocka née Działyńska, came all the way from Rymanów, close to the southern border of present-day Poland (then a part of Galicia), bringing with her a Ruthenian count. In her memoirs Countess Potocka related how she managed to entice the likes of August Cieszkowski to join her on her pilgrimage. Cieszkowski was hardly your average pilgrim: founder of the Polish League (1848) and of the Society of Friends of Learning (Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Nauk, in 1857) in Posen, he was a noted thinker and Hegelian philosopher as well as a social and political activist. The noblewoman was also accompanied by two clergymen.

The holy Marian days of August and September 1877 drew enormous crowds. By this time, one could purchase photographs of the site as well as other souvenirs, although on one occasion the splintering crash of an old branch from the maple tree provided the crowd with souvenirs gratis.

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58. “Najświętsza Panna w Gietrzwałdzie” [The Most Holy Virgin in Dittrichswalde], continuation, Goniec Wielkopolski, no. 163 (September 14, 1877).
59. Ibid.
60. Ibid., no. 161 (September 12, 1877).
62. Anna z Działyńskich Potocka, Mój pamiętnik [My memoirs] (Warsaw: Pax, 1973), 240. It is not clear from her memoirs when Potocka made the trip. Although the chronology appended by her editors gives 1877 as the year, Potocka’s references to the absence of the two young visionaries (p. 242), the evening services (p. 240), and already having read much in the press about the events (p. 242), when Galician publications made no mention of Dittrichswalde until October 1877, suggests that 1878 or even 1879 was more probable.
63. Ibid., 434, 240.
64. Kuryer Poznański 6, no. 209, September 13, 1877.
The Nativity of the Virgin Mary (September 8) marked what was supposed to be the last day that the Virgin Mary would appear. The 50,000 pilgrims in attendance included residents of Bohemia, Upper Silesia, Brandenburg, Silesia, the Tatra region, and Warsaw as well as of places already mentioned (some 2,000 came from across the Russian border); there were speakers of Plattdeutsch and Hochdeutsch as well as Polish. The apparition had promised to bless a little spring on the parish grounds that same day, which was done before the evening service.65

As the statue for the chapel next to the maple tree had not yet arrived from Munich by September 8, neither had Mary’s business in Dittrichswalde ended. On September 12 she appeared again, seemingly to comfort the children, who thought that the newly arrived statue, praised by everyone else, was much uglier than their apparition. Of course, it is true that it resembled not the seated form perceived by the young visionaries but her often stated identity as the Immaculate Conception. Whereas the latter image may have been promoted more by the clergy, more at ease with the conventional depiction of the Virgin, the statue reportedly was not misconstrued on purpose, but simply represented a work in progress that the parish had been able to procure at relatively short notice.66

The final appearance of the Blessed Virgin took place during the solemn blessing of the figure on September 16. Fourteen priests and more than 15,000 pilgrims witnessed the celebration, complete with song (in several languages), musical accompaniment, even a procession around the church with the statue. Both Polish and German clergy were represented, all apparently from the German Empire. The Virgin Mary’s last words exhorted the faithful to pray the rosary zealously.67 This festive event marked the end of the “official” apparitions.

THE ECCLESIASTIC INVESTIGATION

A religious event of this magnitude clearly called for an official ecclesiastical response. As mentioned earlier, the bishop of Ermland, Philippus Kremetz, did not learn immediately of the apparitions from Father Weichsel. After receiving Weichsel’s first report, the bishop summoned an episcopal commission to investigate what was happening in Dittrichswalde. For this purpose he called upon two respected priests (Erzprieister), German-born and -educated but with a good command of the Polish language, familiarity with the region, and as state school inspectors, experience in observing children: Father Augustinus Karau of the Allenstein deanery and his counterpart from the Wartenburg deanery, Edward Stock.68 They spent four
days in late August investigating the apparitions, writing protocols, examining the visionaries, and analyzing their statements. The bishop had exhorted them to pay particular attention to certain matters: the character, health, and behavior of the visionaries; the effects of the events on believers and nonbelievers; and the content of the communications. The two priests were also asked to form their own impressions of the events.69

By the time the episcopal commission arrived (around August 22), there were more visionaries and different visions to analyze. Once news of the apparitions began to spread, a number of people approached Father Weichsel to report that they too had seen the apparition. Many of them, including several men, were quickly dismissed out of hand. However, two others were soon elevated to the status of credible witnesses. They were not children, but a young woman and a widow of ten years: twenty-three-year-old Katarzyna Wieczorkówna (Catharina Wieczorek) of Dittrichswalde and the forty-five-year-old mother of three children, Elżbieta Bilitewska (Elisabeth Bilitewski) of Woritten.70 Both claimed to have seen the Mother of God more or less regularly from the third week of the apparitions: Bilitewska as of July 12, while Wieczorkówna’s first vision took place the following day.71

Bilitewska was depicted as pious (but not overly so), judicious, and modest, but also as having sharp mental faculties—in welcome contrast to the more dim-witted Augusta, of whom Father Weichsel complained that she could not remember the exact questions to be posed to the Virgin.72 The widow appeared quite bent on relaying the revelations of the Virgin; as one source put it, “[w]hen [Bilitewska] speaks, it is always to give certain devout instructions as to what the blessed Virgin likes or does not like, herself being the model of piety.”73

The younger woman was in many ways unusual. Katarzyna Wieczorkówna was the child of a mixed marriage, her father being a Protestant. He had drowned several years earlier, after which time Katarzyna had supported her mother and eleven-year-old brother by weaving, spinning, and working in the fields. As the only one of the visionaries who was employed, she could not always be present at the devotions. Furthermore, she did not join in the questioning of the apparition until late July, under pressure of some of the pilgrims.74

With the acceptance of the two adult visionaries and inclusion of their visions in the protocols, the number of images of the Dittrichswalde vision increased. The apparition seen by the women resembled neither the children’s vision nor each

69. Obłąk, “Objawienia,” 29; see the text of Bishop Krementz’s letter of August 18, 1877, in Dodatek źródłowy, 47.
70. From the report of the episcopal commission of August 30, 1877, in Dodatek źródłowy, 49.
71. See their sworn statements in ibid., 54–55 and 58–59; also Obłąk, “Objawienia,” 11–12.
72. “wegen ihrer schwachen Fassungskraft” (Dodatek źródłowy, 44).
73. Goniec Wielkopolski, no. 166 (September 18, 1877).
other’s. Interestingly, many contemporaries apparently were disposed to accept the visual discrepancies. A noted example of this is the “official” account of the apparitions, written by Father Franz Hipler, regent of the seminary in Frauenburg (Frombork) and Ermland’s most renowned church historian, whom Krementz had also asked to investigate the events. (The bishop later gave his imprimatur to Hipler’s eighty-page chronicle of the apparitions, the German version of which appeared in November 1877, and was translated into Polish the following year.\textsuperscript{75}) After having spent ten days investigating the apparitions, Hipler justified the visionaries’ varied receptions of the Virgin as follows:

Born of four nearby localities, differing among themselves in age and status as well as in appearance and mental capabilities, they see the Blessed Virgin Mary according to their disposition in various shapes. She presents herself to the children on a throne as mother-teacher, to the widow as the Mother of God, to the maiden as the Immaculate Conception.\textsuperscript{76}

The Virgin Mary was seen as a person with whom each of the visionaries could identify, the two adult women personally. For example, the widow reported that the apparition was her own height, but of a more delicate build.\textsuperscript{77} But even this generous interpretation does not encompass the varied nature of the women’s apparitions. For, whereas Bilitewska’s ultimate version approached the one presented by Father Hipler above—a standing, crowned Mother of God with child—she began by seeing only a bust of the Virgin. This first apparition, she added, was not a static form, but rather “a living figure with a shining crown on her head.”\textsuperscript{78} It was as though the miraculous image from the church—also depicted only from the waist up—had come alive. On special Marian holidays, her now full-length Mother of God was dressed more festively in a golden cloak, much in the same way that the venerated image of Dittrichswalde was “dressed” on special holidays. This characteristic was for the most part shared by the apparitions of all the visionaries. On important feast days a more festive Mary—with angels, dressed differently, or particularly brightly illuminated—was generally seen.

Even the children’s visions were not identical. This became clearer when yet another priest sent by the bishop, Father Augustinus Kolberg, subregens of the Braunsberg seminary, questioned them on August 22. Kolberg was a thorough man. He began by improving upon Weichsel’s orders to keep the children apart, placing them where they could not see each other during the apparitions and not allowing them to approach each other afterward, even having them removed to

\textsuperscript{75} Hipler, \textit{Die Erscheinungen}; and idem, \textit{Objawienia Matki Boskiej w Gietrzwałdzie dla ludu katolickiego podług urzędowych dokumentów spisane, Brunsberga 1878}. My citations refer to the 1924 German reedition of the pamphlet (see note 27).

\textsuperscript{76} Hipler, \textit{Die Erscheinungen}, 16.

\textsuperscript{77} Sworn statement of the widow Elisabeth Bilitewski from Woritten, Dodatek źródłowy, 55.

\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 54.
The Polish Review

separate quarters for the writing of the protocols. He then quizzed them on the
details of Mary’s appearance, which were shown to vary, with one child seeing only
the right foot, the other both feet, one claiming that rays of light emanated from her
feet as well as from her hands, and other small variances. Present for some of the
ecclesiastical commission’s investigations, he also examined them physically during
the apparitions to see if they really were in an ecstatic trance or were simulating.
Upon concluding his investigation, Kolberg left Dittrichswalde convinced that the
apparitions were genuine and so informed the bishop.

The proliferation of images, not to mention the fate of the apparitions them-

selves, was complicated by another development. Each of the four female vision-
aries also had apparitions of a questionable nature, concluded not to be of God.
The children’s took place at the house of a seamstress, where they rested one day.
Wieczorkówna likewise had “bad” apparitions, so defined because they too did not
take place at the appropriate time and place (they were to take place only during the
praying of the rosary). Hers were distinguished by the changed configuration of the
vision: Mary then appeared differently dressed, in a white dress with blue cloak, and
with the child Jesus at her side. Then again, her apparitions of the Virgin seemed
less consistent than the others, both as to imagery and to place. Less disciplined vi-
sions, they occurred in the field, church, sacristy, and rectory. Like Wieczorkówna,
Bilitewska saw Mary dressed differently: in blue cloak and white gown, as opposed
to the usual shimmering gold garments. However, her “bad” apparition was filled
with funereal images: four coffins, a funeral procession. Interestingly, Bilitewska
claimed that she could not move after that apparition until she was sprinkled with
holy water. These “bad” images reek, not surprisingly, of hallucinations caused by
hysteria, overwork, or sheer exhaustion.

With events such as these, there could be no ecclesiastical approval of the appari-
tions without scientific investigation. Krementz himself visited the site on September
4, and observed the events that evening and the following morning from a window
in the rectory. The bishop expressed regret that no doctors had yet examined the
visionaries while in their trance. This wish resulted in the immediate summoning
of three doctors (two Catholics, one Protestant) to perform experiments on the four
female subjects. After questioning and measuring, during the trance (at different
times and on different days, with some overlap), the doctors manipulated their heads
and limbs, shining light into their eyes and dilating their pupils with atropine, and
even sticking them with needles during the ecstatic state to see if they truly were in
a trance (which meant they should be unresponsive to outside stimuli). Ultimately,

79. Obląk, “Objawienia,” 20. Kolberg himself described his methods and conclusions in
a lengthy letter written to the bishop on August 25, 1877, reproduced in Dodatek źródłowy,
65–69.
81. In her sworn statement, ibid., 58–59.
82. Dodatek źródłowy, 54.
the doctors divided along confessional lines: the Protestant doctor thought they were simulating, the two Catholics were convinced the trance was genuine.  

The doctors’ reports, contradictions and all, were published in full in Hipler’s official account of the apparitions. Many other discrepancies of vision as well as descriptions of the “bad” apparitions found their way into this account as well as into the episcopal commission’s report, parts of which also reached readers of Die Erscheinungen in Dietrichswalde. At any rate, these problems did not prevent the conclusion of the episcopal commission, sent to the bishop in the first days of September, from being positive. Its forty-seven-page report unequivocally states the conviction of the two priests that the apparitions in Dittrichswalde had a real basis.

Hipler’s own reflections on the apparitions are noteworthy for their insights into perceptions of the coincidence of the apparitions and the Kulturkampf. He drew an exact parallel between these religious events and government oppression. Bismarck was reported to have been regaling several Protestant clergymen with stories about apparitions of the Virgin Mary (apparently those in Lourdes and Marpingen) while also noting the connection between the Poles in the eastern provinces and the Kulturkampf. This conversation took place on the afternoon of June 27, coincidentally at just about the same time as Szafryńska was beginning her catechism test. Hipler also hinted at the outcome between Church and state, noticing the spread of such events from the western border of the German Empire to its easternmost parts. The implication seems to be that the Empire would ultimately be powerless in the face of a greater, nontemporal power.

There remained, however, one stumbling block for the recognition of the apparitions: the lack of properly documented miraculous cures. The Church considered sudden cures from incurable illnesses the ultimate—and necessary—proof of heavenly favor. That is not to say that reports of cures did not circulate, as many accounts of the apparitions mentioned them—one reason, perhaps, why the pilgrims continued to come well after the apparitions ended, despite the lack of an ecclesiastical stamp of approval. However, most of these cures were neither sudden

83. The doctors’ reports are published in Hipler, Die Erscheinungen, 37–38 (Dr. August Dittrich’s report), 38–41 (Dr. Poschmann’s report), and 42–44 (Dr. U. Sonntag’s report).
84. See Hipler, Die Erscheinungen, 28–32.
85. “Aus allen Untersuchungen, derer Resultate in dem vorliegenden Berichte niedergelegt sind, haben wir die Überzeugung gewonnen, dass die Erscheinungen in Dittrichswalde einen realen Untergrund haben müssen” (from the episcopal commission’s report, reprinted in Dodatek źródłowy, 52–53).
86. In the Böckheler Bericht, according to Hipler, Die Erscheinungen, 66.
87. Ibid.
88. “Dabei herrscht aber natürlich . . . viel Unglauben und Zweifel an die Wahrhaftigkeit der Erscheinungen, da dieselbe sich bis dahin durch keine offenbaren und ungläubbaren Wunder und Heilungen dokumentirt haben” (from the episcopal commission’s report, reprinted in Dodatek źródłowy, 52).
nor proven miraculous. A number of instances were in fact analyzed in a rather learned treatise in 1882: of the ten cures noted in Hipler’s account, only four were deemed worthy of further investigation.89 None were investigated by the Church authorities, however, although recognition of the site could not proceed without evidence of miraculous cures. The sanctuary in Dittrichswalde remained in limbo.

Disquieting Revelations

There were other reasons why Bishop Krementz may have been less than persistent in the investigation. His wait-and-see attitude undoubtedly was reinforced by a series of events that took place after the “official” apparitions, that is, the appearances of the Virgin Mary between June 27 and September 16, 1877. While the Church had maintained a modicum of control over the events of the summer, it encountered a new series of challenges in the fall.

There was increased interference on the part of the state, which harassed the visionaries and led them to fear they would be put in prison; policemen took notes on the coming and goings of visiting priests who heard confession, distributed communion, said masses, or gave homilies—all infractions of the famous May Laws in effect during the Kulturkampf. As a result, the authorities repeatedly summoned Father Weichsel to court, even imprisoning him for several days.90 Emboldened, the police interfered with the sale of pictures and books at the site, harassed visitors, monitored entrance to the church in order to keep visiting priests from assisting, and imposed fines for the most minor of infractions.91

The increased persecution and more frequent absences of the parish priest would be less worthy of note, were it not for their probable effect on the newest developments: a new series of apparitions.92 While September 8, 1877, was to be the last appearance of the Virgin Mary, she reportedly told Bilitewska and Wieczorkówna that she would return the following year on three Marian feast days: the Visitation (August 2), the Assumption (August 15), and the Nativity (September 8).

The visions of fall 1877 and beyond were solely those of Elżbieta Bilitewska and Katarzyna Wieczorkówna. The two women, whose visions were originally of lesser interest, had only gradually become associated with the apparition. For most of the summer, they had remained in the background, as both general interest and the

89. Jan Zieliński, O widzeniach i zachwyceniach przyrodzonych i nadprzyrodzonych w ogóle i o rozpoznawaniu takowych z zastosowaniem do objawień gierzwaldzkich [On natural and supernatural visions and ecstasies in general and on the recognition of such, with application to the the Dittrichswalde apparitions] (Peplin [sic]; S. Roman, 1882), 209–13.
90. Piszcz, “Echa,” 218; W sprawie wytoczenia śledztwa” [In the matter of the instituting of the inquisition], Kuryer Poznański 6, no. 257, November 9, 1877, based on reports first published in Germania; according to a report from Allenstein published on November 13, in the Danziger Zeitung, related in Kuryer Poznański 6, no. 261, November 14, 1877.
92. As the Church has chosen to disown them, they do not figure in the official count.
investigation focused on the children. By the end of the apparitions, however, the two adult visionaries had become fully integrated into the picture, with Bilitewska perhaps even becoming a dominant player in the reporting of heavenly revelations.

The two women had already chafed under the watchfulness of the clergy. One of them reportedly said that the Virgin Mary permitted them to receive the sacrament of Communion more often than the parish priest had allowed, her word clearly being more valuable than Weichsel’s. This behavior stands in direct contrast to that of Szafryńska and Samulowska. Once established as visionaries, the children appeared to become more passive media for heavenly revelation, reporting more what they saw or what the Virgin had said rather than posing their own questions.

Events took an innovative turn in late autumn: the women reported seeing not the Virgin Mary, but Saint Joseph. These new apparitions apparently began when the situation grew more oppressive in Dittrichswalde. In fact, the appearance of Saint Joseph seems to correlate with the absence of Father Weichsel, in prison at the time. At least one report gave further credence to the apparition by claiming that it correctly predicted when the parish priest would be released from jail.

The tone of the Saint Joseph apparitions was quite different from that of the earlier Marian series. Instead of appearing during the day, Saint Joseph preferred to visit Dittrichswalde between eleven o’clock and midnight, giving the old Polish greeting (not part of the Warmian tradition) “Niech będzie pochwalony Jezus Chrystus” (Let Jesus Christ be praised)—a sign to some that the Saint Joseph apparitions were for the Poles. Eyes were raised by some of his revelations, for they were dogmatically questionable.

One interpretation of the apparitions has it that, whereas the Blessed Virgin’s appearances in Dittrichswalde were meant for a wider public, Saint Joseph came rather to cheer the oppressed Dittrichswalde residents. Part of his appeal certainly lay in the more personal nature of his messages to them. Indeed, through the intermediacy

93. The episcopal commission’s report notes this fact (Dodatek źródłowy, 52) and is itself a reflection of it, as it devotes less space to the two women as well.

94. Continuation of article by Father (Dr.) Łukowski, “Wycieczka do Gietrzwałdu” [Trip to Dittrichswalde], Kuryer Poznański 6, no. 209, September 13, 1877.

95. At least the questions they posed seemed to be less challenging to the authority of the Church.

96. “Kronika Gietrzwałdzka” [Dittrichswalde Chronicle], Warta, no. 226, October 27, 1878.

97. See the continuation of “Kronika Gietrzwałdzka,” Warta, no. 226, October 27, 1878, 2472. The Polish-language press, on which this account of the Saint Joseph apparitions is based, was not in agreement on the beginning date of these new apparitions: some thought it was November 18, while others claimed that Saint Joseph had already appeared some twenty times (“Kronika Gietrzwałdzka,” continuation).

98. Ibid., no. 227, November 3, 1878, 2482.

99. For example, it was claimed that Saint Joseph was bodily in heaven, as he had ascended to heaven on the arms of angels twenty-two years before his death at age eighty-two. See Obłęk, “Objawienia,” 13; “Kronika Gietrzwałdzka,” Warta, no. 225, October 20, 1878, 2453.
of Saint Joseph the adult visionaries conveyed information of a more local (one might even say gossipy) interest. For example, they listed the numbers of souls from the Dittrichswalde parish who had been taken to heaven as the result of passion masses as well as the Way of the Cross (the stations of which Father Weichsel had had built along the route leading to the blessed spring). Similarly, Saint Joseph reportedly revealed to Wieczorkówna and Bilitewska a view of purgatory, where the latter saw the suffering—some of whom they recognized—crying out for help. Still, Saint Joseph was a big promoter of sobriety and prayer of the Warmian rosary, the latter necessary to free souls from purgatory. (In the relations of Saint Joseph, neither Protestants nor drunkards seem to fare well after death.)

All this went too far. On May 7, 1878, the bishop advised Father Weichsel to disregard any further apparitions and forbid the nightly services. To this the visionaries, unhappy with this decision, responded by reporting on August 2 that the Virgin Mary requested “that the Bishop and the Holy Father affirm her apparitions at this place,” adding that for this reason Saint Joseph had been sent earlier. At her next scheduled appearances, Mary continued in the same vein. With a mournful expression once again on her face (August 15) she noted that the bishop still refused to believe in the apparitions; and on September 8 repeated her earlier comment regarding the role that Saint Joseph was to play in convincing the Church of the apparitions’ authenticity.

The connecting of the two different apparitions by the two visionaries ultimately hurt more than it helped. In 1880, Wieczorkówna confessed that she and the widow had simulated their visions (since the feast of the Nativity in 1877, according to one source; but it does not appear clear that the twosome had not been simulating from the beginning, which would be a truly damning revelation). This news brought justified complaint from the bishop, who likewise questioned the authenticity of the earlier apparitions and asked to be informed of the whereabouts of the two children and their behavior.

The two younger visionaries had not witnessed the later apparitions. Already by mid-September 1877, the fate of the girls was under discussion. Should they go to convents, they asked the Blessed Virgin, who thought they should. Bishop Krementz, however, was not convinced. Nonetheless, both girls were to be found in Saint Joseph’s House, run by the Sisters of Mercy, in Culm (in West Prussia) as of January 1878. Thus, by the second round of Marian apparitions in the summer

of 1878, the children were no longer in Dittrichswalde, nor would they ever again play a personal role in the events there.

Despite earlier signs of episcopal tolerance, if not full affirmation, the site remained unapproved and undeveloped. Nonetheless, the bishop never joined the Allenstein deanery and other Warmian clergymen who had either doubted the apparition from the beginning or later became convinced that they were simulated. In 1883, three years after the confession of Bilitewska and Wieczorkówna, Bishop Kremenitz still gave his imprimatur to the second edition of Father Hipler’s brochure. He never condemned the apparitions, but rather continued to reserve judgment, pending the appearance of authenticated miracles. And, although many claims of miracles and cures were made, none were proved to be genuine.

In the meantime, the bishop’s cautious reserve seemed justified, for the apparitions did seem to be having a positive effect among the faithful of Ermland. Reports confirm the spread of the prayer of the rosary and of temperance brotherhoods, as well as the influx of gifts, votive offerings, and, of course, pilgrims. As the years passed, most of these pilgrims were Poles. It is time to consider their identification with Our Lady of Dittrichswalde.

**Polish Aspects**

The events of Dittrichswalde were not perceived solely in religious terms. The Polish Question arose rather early during the apparitions, a result of both the language of communication used by the Virgin and other supernatural signs that ostensibly alerted Poles across the nearby border (in the Płock guberniia) to the apparitions. At some time before Father Weichsel’s first report, the priest received news from just across the Russian border, in the former Kingdom of Poland, of a special sign that reportedly took place on the first day of the apparition. From nine o’clock in the morning to two o’clock in the afternoon, a bright light was noted, which extended from Częstochowa to Ermland. The supernatural phenomenon was supposedly noted by hundreds of people. Although this apparition does not appear to have been confirmed, Weichsel considered it important enough to mention in his first report to the bishop, in a separate section titled “Special Remarks” (*Besondere Bemerkungen*). 105

Such signs may have predisposed the priest and others to assume that there was some connection between the events of Dittrichswalde and the Polish nation. The church authorities clearly were sensitive to the dangers of identifying the Mother of God with a certain segment of the faithful. The official published account of the

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105. Dodatek źródłowy, 46. This information was originally provided by Józef Puchalski from the Przasnysz Monastery, one of the men whose personal visions were later rejected (see note 70), and reiterated by Marianna Jabłonowska, who added the information about the hundreds of other witnesses.
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apparitions deemphasized the nationalistic schizophrenia that was beginning to affect Ermland. As a historian of Poland and member of the Polish Academy of Sciences, Father Hippler reserved space in his narrative to review a great moment of “brotherly unity” between the Catholic Germans and Poles: the siege of Vienna in 1683, in which the infidel Turks were defeated. The Germans and Poles, after all, were children of the same Mother, the one who drew them all to Dittrichswalde.  

Nonetheless, nationally self-conscious Poles in the Russian, Austrian, and German empires found messages of their own in her appearances. Among other things, they learned that the Warmians did share with them a common tradition of Marian devotion, represented by similar miraculous images of Our Lady, one that could be used to draw the groups together.

The complicated circumstances in Dittrichswalde facilitated the meeting of those traditions. As mentioned earlier, the parish church contained a miraculous picture of the Virgin Mary, Our Lady of Dittrichswalde. During the period of the apparitions, the picture at the main altar was mistakenly identified as a faithful copy of Our Lady of Częstochowa, Poland’s most famous icon. At first glance there is a certain resemblance between the pictures, as there would be between many ancient Madonnas. Both show the Virgin and child, the latter with his right arm raised in blessing and holding a book. The coloration of the garments is similar, although the Częstochowa icon shows patterned garments. Nonetheless, the angles of the bodies, in particular the hands and feet (besides the faces, the only part of the bodies visible when the icon was dressed in coronation garb) as well as the more direct and sadder visage of the Polish Madonna clearly distinguish the two pictures.

How the mistake began is not clear, but it soon found its way into many of the accounts of the apparitions, beginning with Father Hippler’s authoritative version: his widely circulated brochure had the unfortunate consequence of propagating the error far and wide. Nor was the mistake corrected in the 1883 reedition—this despite the efforts of Father J. K. Łomnicki, an art historian, who strove to correct the misperception.

This case of mistaken identity is further complicated by the fact that, within the Dittrichswalde church, there actually was a copy of the famous picture of Our Lady of Częstochowa. The copy dated from the early years of the eighteenth century, when the cult of the icon was being popularized in Ermland and elsewhere in Poland. It had been located, however, on one of the side walls, where it too was venerated, with a silver votive lamp burning in front of the silver-crowned image. During the events of 1877 its cult likewise increased, for on occasion it was mistaken for the miraculous image of Our Lady of Dittrichswalde hanging at the main altar.

106. Hippler, Die Erscheinungen, 56.
108. Ibid., 113.
Thus, we see how fluid the boundaries between the images of Our Lady, whether of Częstochowa or Dittrichswalde, had become. To a certain extent the icons had become interchangeable.

The case of mistaken identity of the Marian images was further compounded once renovations of the church, which had become too small for the enormous crowds of pilgrims, were undertaken in the early 1880s. After the church had been enlarged, the pictures were rearranged: pride of place was given to a statue of the Immaculate Conception, while the miraculous picture was relegated to a side chapel. Which of the three images now would be considered the real Madonna of Dittrichswalde: the traditional Dittrichswalde Madonna, the Polish “Queen,” or the Immaculate Conception, which later became the Marian image favored by those parishioners who considered themselves Germans?

The Dittrichswalde parishioners may not have felt the effects of this displacement, for they had a new cult of their own, connected with the apparitions, that focused on the acceptable figure of the Immaculate Conception as identified by the visionaries. Thus displacement had been superseded by replacement, the effects of which were lessened by the blurring of distinctions between the images. All of them were now bound up in the events of Dittrichswalde. Marian devotion did not wane as a result of the reshuffling, but rather was channeled in new directions, in which Catholic, local, and Polish identities all figured.

The first anniversary of the apparitions witnessed even greater crowds than the original events. By then, news of Dittrichswalde had circulated throughout the regions of the former Commonwealth; and Poles took pride as well as comfort in the Virgin’s visit to a tiny corner of their oppressed nation. The Polish community (most notably in the Posen province) lobbied successfully for the revelations communicated by the visionaries to be written into the protocols not in German (as had been the practice) but in Polish. Such attempts reflect the increasing attempts by the Poles, who considered the Polish-speaking Warmians as part of their nation, to appropriate the apparitions for their own use.

The Dittrichswalde apparitions gave impetus to, and provided a rallying point for, the nascent Polish movement in Ermland. Its most notable representative was a Warmian from nearby Schönbrück. Andrzej Samulowski was Ermland’s first folk poet and a man whose literary interests brought him close to Polish sources.

111. “Protokóły Gietrzwałdzkie,” Warta 5, no. 216, August 18, 1878, 2365, and no. 220, September 15, 1878, 2409.
He moved to Dittrichswalde and, in 1878, established the first Polish bookstore in Ermland, publishing among other things his own hymns in honor of Our Lady of Dittrichswalde. Already by the first anniversary of the apparitions, Samulowski and his partner Stanisław Roman of Pelplin were selling pictures, brochures, scapulars, and medallions at their bookstore, conveniently located across the road from the apparition site. With time, the bookstore, known officially as a “Catholic Bookstore,” supplied pilgrims as well as the local readership with popular literature of a Polish national or patriotic character.

Like other self-declared Polish Warmians, Samulowski saw in Dittrichswalde signs of a commonly oppressed nation, one in which the devout Warmian peasants were on equal terms with the Polish nobility and intelligentsia in the eyes of God. In a subtle way, the apparitions were a means of broadening the Poles’ understanding of the Polish nation, which in modern times would have to include not only the old Commonwealth nobility but Polish-speaking peasants as well.

No less important was Samulowski’s role in propagating a common stock of images, prayers, and hymns that traversed the entire Polish-speaking region. Shared images, after all, made for a shared identity. Memorabilia related to the apparitions—images etched or photographed, booklets explaining the way the rosary was prayed at the site, collections of hymns connecting the Poles to the unprepossessing visionaries in a forgotten enclave—for purchase at Samulowski’s bookstore or through other publishers both spoke to the less literate and helped to strengthen this common bond.

The combination of language and national identity may well have brought another group of potential “Poles” into the fold: the Protestant Mazurians. Accounts from 1879 in particular single out the Prussians’ fear that Mazurians were making pilgrimages to the site, feeling a greater affinity with those who spoke their language than their coreligionists.

The village of Dittrichswalde managed to survive the apparitions—and the Kulturnäpf—albeit changed by the experience. While the authorities periodically blocked access to pilgrims from Russia, they did not forbid the religious devotions, in which interest waxed and waned as the years passed. A mini-revival took place in the interwar period under Bishop Maximilian Kaller (1930–45), who used the apparition site in his fight against Nazi oppression. After World War II, Dittrichswalde managed to survive the apparitions—and the Kulturnäpf—albeit changed by the experience. While the authorities periodically blocked access to pilgrims from Russia, they did not forbid the religious devotions, in which interest waxed and waned as the years passed. A mini-revival took place in the interwar period under Bishop Maximilian Kaller (1930–45), who used the apparition site in his fight against Nazi oppression.

swalde—now Gietrzwałd—became part of communist Poland; only recently have the Church authorities been truly free to revive this forgotten sanctuary.

The apparitions of Dittrichswalde were characterized by a multiplicity and ambiguity of images and identities. The Virgin Mary comforted the faithful in a number of guises. She appeared as a wealthy and powerful Mother of God to the two young visionaries; a more matronly self-reflection to the widow Bilitewska; and a figure more akin to traditional images of the Immaculate Conception to Wieczorkówna. In these capacities, she exhorted the faithful to prayer and temperance, gave advice, and reassured her defenders that, despite the oppression they faced in their lives, she had not forsaken them. Pilgrims to the site had no direct visual experience of her. If fortunate enough to approach the chapel site, they saw the figure of the Immaculate Conception; if they entered the parish church, they were faced with various images of Our Lady. Many also experienced that depiction (or, more rarely, other visual conceptions) in other media—pictures, medallions, scapulars—available from street vendors or Samulowski's bookstore.

These simultaneous yet different visions echo the different interpretations of the events. Nearly any of these Marian images could be construed as the defender of the Catholic faith under siege, a shared rallying point for the Polish and German faithful, the comforter of the downtrodden Polish nation or a new “sacred center” uniting Polish speakers, whatever their estate. To a certain extent, all of these interpretations were successful, if only for a time. Both Germans and Poles frequented the site, many returning with renewed faith to pray the rosary as the Virgin had instructed. Countless Poles in the territories partitioned by the Russians, Prussians, and Austrians a century earlier took solace from the event, imagining the Mary of the apparitions to be Poland’s Queen returning to support her faithful subjects. Still others capitalized on the Polish-speaking apparition to reclaim the Polish-speaking Warmians for the Polish nation and strengthen ties between this tiny region and more politically active Polish circles. So many people wished to avail themselves of the powerful magic of the Mother of God, whether for reasons national, international, or personal.

At the same time, modifications and manipulations of the images were met with mixed results. The visionaries persisted in seeing and hearing Mary in their own individual ways. Yet the traditional image of the Immaculate Conception, its appearance in Dittrichswalde a visual accident of sorts, eventually displaced the children’s more original vision of Mary enthroned. Traditional Catholicism came to prevail in this regard as well as in regard to more questionable visions. The “bad” apparitions were effectively bracketed by the protocol-writing clergy, who asserted that only visions seen at the designated time and place were of God. Nor were the visionaries allowed much more than a passive role, mediating between heaven and the crowds who came to the Warmian village. While this might have suited the children, whose abilities may have been taxed by all the questions they were asked to pose, the two adult visionaries conceived of a different, more active role. In their desire to maintain a direct link to heaven, Bilitewska and Wieczorkówna...
concocted a new series of apparitions on the heels of the first. However, their Saint Joseph proved to be too controversial a figure, and the women ultimately lost all credibility and status.

Nonetheless, even such innovations did not discredit the apparitions in Dittrichswalde as a whole. Bishop Krementz chose not to condemn Bilitewska and Wieczorkówna openly, even though their simulations put the later apparitions beyond what Brian Porter-Szücs has called the “outer frontiers of orthodoxy.”

Coming at a time of great stress in his diocese, the apparitions were in a way welcome: they provided a much needed outlet for religious fervor that had lost its traditional channels. And, at least among the Polish Warmians, they strengthened their ties to a Church that still allowed them their language, faith, and traditions. Bishop Krementz effectively sat on the evidence, reserving judgment pending the receipt of irrefutable evidence: news of miraculous cures. But, although sightings of religious figures were commonplace during this period, sudden recoveries from proven incurable ailments were not. The images of Dittrichswalde, so notable during the final years of the Kulturkampf, faded with time. Dittrichswalde never developed into a Polish Lourdes. Even today, Gietrzwałd remains a relatively obscure sanctuary in a country full of miraculous images, pilgrimage sites, and practicing Catholics who no longer need the solace that Our Lady of Dittrichswalde first offered them over a century ago.