

# Katarzyna Warmińska

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## Polish and Lithuanian Tatars : One history and two stories

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## **Polish and Lithuanian Tatars. One history and two stories**

*Katarzyna Warmińska*

warminsk@uek.krakow.pl

Department of Sociology, Cracow University of Economics



Sociologist, cooperates with the Department of Sociology of the Cracow University of Economics; her scholarly interests concentrate on the problem of identity, ethnicity and the relationship between minorities and surrounding dominant groups, as well as anthropological practise; she authored more than 50 publications, including a book: *Polish Tatars. Their Religious and Ethnic Identity* (1999); she has conducted a research into Polish Tatars and Kashubians.

In my article, I would like to discuss the current status of the ethnicity of two Tatar communities – Lithuanian and Polish – which, for almost 600 years, have been part of one ethnos, yet separated by country borders, therefore entangled in different social and political conditions a few decades ago. I'd like to take a closer look at similarities and differences pertaining to the character of the ethnicity of Polish and Lithuanian Tatars, with a special focus on the impact of the above-mentioned conditions on their identity. I am particularly interested in the vision of ethno-history shared by each group. In that context, I am going to analyse four video movies to show how Polish Tartars and Lithuanian Tartars use their cultural resources e.g the history and the past (partly common, partly different) to communicate their ethnic characteristics.

According to historical sources, contemporary Polish and Lithuanian Tatars are, first of all, the descendants of newcomers from the Golden Horde, who settled on the territory of the Grand Duchy

of Lithuania from the first half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. In those days the population was not dense as it is estimated to have been a dozen or so thousand in total. The main concentration of the Tatar population was in Vilnius and its surrounding areas – Troki, Minsk, Słonim and later since the 17<sup>th</sup> century in the Podlasie area. In the context of the discussed issue, it is important to stress that arriving on the territories of Lithuania and later in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth meant, in the majority of cases, a specific location of the Tatars within the space of these political entities, both in reference to the location of the settlement (geographically) and in reference to the legal status based on the right to land and nobility and related privileges and obligations (which does not pertain to those who were not free or who were descendants of Tatar prisoners).<sup>1</sup>

One can say metaphorically that, during the period of a few hundred years, a Tatar ethnic world has been born and developed, not a temporary world but a well-established one. It had a specific character, in which such elements as religion (Islam), the nobility ethos as well as traditions and social and cultural values of the surrounding environment permeated each other, especially that their own ethnic language ceased to be the center of communication already in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Within this world, a community life went on, new mosques were built, and cemeteries and places of remembrance established.

The situation changed only in 1918 when the country borders divided the Tatar community for the first time. The statistics from 1930 show that there were about 6 000 Tatars in Poland and that the main areas inhabited by the Tatars were in the Vilnius, Nowogródek, Grodno and Białystok regions. About 2500 Tatars lived in the Soviet Belorussia, and a little over 1000 in Lithuania.<sup>2</sup>

The consequences of World War II were also crucial for the Tatars' situation because at that time another breakup of the group took place. After the change of country borders, some Tatars took the decision to leave their local mother country already in 1945 and, together with others Polish citizens, left the territories then annexed to the Soviet Union and moved, first of all, to the Western Territories, and then to the Podlasie region. The immigration movement included one third of the population which lived in Poland before the war.<sup>3</sup> [Miśkiewicz,

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<sup>1</sup> P. Borawski, *Tatarzy w dawnej Rzeczypospolitej*, Warszawa, 1986.

<sup>2</sup> A. Miśkiewicz, *Tatarzy polscy 1919-1939*, Warszawa, 1990.

<sup>3</sup> A. Miśkiewicz, J. Kamocki, *Tatarzy Słowiańszczyzną obłąkawieni*, Kraków, 2004.

Kamocki 2004]. The borders, which divided the Tatar community for many years to come, not only brought about physical alienation of the members of the group but also, in consequence, contributed to the creation of different Tatar ethnoses.

At present, according to the results of the recent censuses, less than 2000 Polish Tartars inhabit Poland (1916)<sup>4</sup>, in Lithuania less than 3000 (2793)<sup>5</sup>, whereas in Belorussia just over 7000 (7316)<sup>6</sup>.

Even in the interwar period the community functioned under the common name of the Polish-Lithuanian Tatars, which had historical connotations. Today, however, we speak of Polish Tatars, Lithuanian Tatars, and Belorussian Tatars. As a result of the mentioned historical events, the borderland Tatar community underwent spatial dispersion and the described above cultural world - sometimes referred to as the *Tatarszczyzna* - fell apart. In its place, local Tatar universes arose.

In my opinion, the ethonym (composed of two elements) can serve as an interesting indicator of an identity situation among contemporary Tatars. Firstly, it informs about the Polish-Lithuanian Tatars' common origin, their ethnic history, culture or specific Muslim religiousness, which - when considered together - decide of a separate, unique character of this historical community.

Moreover, it allows to differentiate this community from other Tatars, for instance those from the Crimea or Kazan, with whom they feel a certain bond as well as some distance resulting from the different historical fate, their customs, the language (it was important to the Tatars living in the Soviet Union).

Secondly, the adjective "Polish" or "Lithuanian" or "Belorussian" is not just a territorial indicator of a group's roots in the meaning of contemporary state locations but also - as the case of the Polish Tatars shows - a national identification or - in the case of the Lithuanian or Belorussian Tatars - a potential piece of information about the pancommunity ties or citizen loyalty.

One can indicate a different in each of those countries manner of managing the ethno-cultural diversity (mono-ethnic model of the state in Poland, multi-ethnic one in the Soviet Union), the freedoms or limitations in cultivating ethnic or religious values, different logic of intercultural contacts, for instance in reference to possible relations between other Muslim or Tatar groups (from the Crimea or Kazan) in the case of the former Soviet Union or a relative isolation in the case of

<sup>4</sup> [www.stat.gov.pl](http://www.stat.gov.pl) [dostęp 15.10.2016]

<sup>5</sup> [www.osp.stat.gov.lt](http://www.osp.stat.gov.lt) [dostęp 15.10.2016]

<sup>6</sup> <http://census.belstat.gov.by> [dostęp 15.10.2016]

Poland, and many other factors influenced the condition of their cultural resources. Following the system changes, each state formulated a new formal and legal rules for coexistence of ethnic or national groups within their territory. For example, in Poland, Tatars are considered an ethnic minority, whereas in Lithuania they are a national one and in Belorussia they are an ethnic community.

The scope and character of losses was also different within the ethnic resources of each group during the period of socialism, pertaining to material culture (mosques, cemeteries), therefore a different kind of issues became important for each of them after the changes of more than 20 years ago. The political context and also the character of nationalism of dominant groups in individual countries had a unique impact upon the shape and semantic content of Tatars' collective identity, and ipso facto upon the way the ethnicity was managed. Polonization, and Sovietization in the case of Tatars of the former Soviet Union, and later Belorussianization or Lithuanization are important factors influencing individual communities within the last decades. The institutional dimension of functioning of each community, the religious and ethnic leadership are also located locally in accordance with the logic of inner-group relations, aims and tasks which exists there.

Metaphorically speaking, Tatar element carries some cultural similarities, which are recognizable and communicated by members of the group as well as by the persons from the outside of the group. However, the other element – let's call it a "geographical" one – connotes many differences.

After these general considerations, I'd like to take a closer look at similarities and differences pertaining to the condition and character of the ethnic identity of Polish and Lithuanian Tatars, with a special focus on the identity and ethno-history shared by each group.

Before I move to the empirical part of the article, I focus attention on issues concerning past, memory and identity in general. Memory is an essential element of each and every identity, for identity at its very basic individual level is a feeling of being oneself in the time preserved by memory acts. It can be said, after Confino, that we can become someone only if we find ourselves in our memory.<sup>7</sup> Memory and identity allow to answer such questions as "Who am I," "Who are we?" to feel at home in the world. They provide us with a cognitive and temporal maps, and place within which an individual with

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<sup>7</sup> A. Confino, *Telling about Germany: Narratives of Memory and Culture*, "The Journal of Modern History" no. 76, 2004, s. 389-416.

his/her biography and a community with its history can be placed. The memory of an individual is socially mediated and it relates to a group. Personal and collective identities as well as memory overlap, because - as being social in their core - the phenomena are created, reproduced or changed in the same processes<sup>8</sup>. They are not fixed things but representations or constructions of reality. Both phenomena share the feature of selectiveness and the fact that we perform constant revision of our memory so that it can serve our present identity, thus - with its help - to give sense to the world we live in<sup>9</sup>.

With reference to memory, social identities, similarities and differences are subject to negotiation. In the times of multiple identities, memories are also multiple. We talk about democratization of memory and the past, processes of proliferation of this cultural resource, especially ever since it was taken from the hands of historians and placed in the hands of active social actors. This pertains to both individual and collective levels of social life, because every human being and every group, religion, any given organization must have their own history, just like it has to have their own identity<sup>10</sup>. Moreover, everyone has a right to their identity as well as to their memory and to express and protect it. One would say that both memory work and creation of identity are a challenge the contemporary world poses to individuals and communities.

In the case of ethnic groups, the relation between memory and identity is especially strong because, by definition of ethnicity, it is past-oriented. Popular definitions of ethnicity (in an attributive sense) define it as in the one of, for instance, A.D. Smith's:

"[...] a named human community connected to a homeland, a possessing common myths of ancestry, shared memories, one or more element of shared culture, and a measure of solidarity, at least among the elites."<sup>11</sup>

Cultural memory shared on a group level allows to preserve group awareness and its uniqueness, as it preserves knowledge from which the group taps its collectiveness and provides with symbolic tools for communicating it in social relationships. Thus, it is a source of a system of values and rules of dividing the world into us and them<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> R. Jenkins R., *Rethinking Ethnicity. Arguments and Explorations*, London, 1997.

<sup>9</sup> J. R Gillis, *Memory and identity: the history of a relationship*, [w:] J. R Gillis (red.) *Commemorations. The Politics of National Identity*. New York, 1994, s. 3-24.

<sup>10</sup> J.R. Gillis, op. cit

<sup>11</sup> A. D. Smith., *Nationalism. Theory, Ideology, History*, Oxford, 2001, s. 13.

<sup>12</sup> J. Assmann., *Collective Memory and Cultural Identity*, "New German Critique. An In-

An ideology of common origin, called ethnicism, postulates existence of the "We" (means community) in the anchored past and collective memory is its basic building material. It would be said after Sontag, that memory is always individual, and what we call collective memory is a collective instruction, a story of what has happened, and what and how was important in the past.<sup>13</sup> She argues that

"What is called collective memory is not a remembering but a stipulating: that *this* is important, and this is the story about how it happened, with the pictures that lock the story in our minds."<sup>14</sup> (2003: 76).

Ethnic ideologists create archives of memory, representative images which comprise common ideas of a meaning and set in motion thoughts and emotions. They do it by using and uncovering a collective memory of symbols, myths, values, traditions, historyw. They place events, objects, and persons in an order, thus create ethnopast, ethnomemory, and ethnohistory. Collective memory can unite a group and locate an individual and his/her biography in a collective history/story, it can also be a specific resonance. Ethnicity includes a dose of obligation, a collective pressure to belong and conform to a degree, because it says who we are and what we should be like.

As I have mentioned, my paper is based on the analysis of documentaries. Two of them were produced under the auspicious of Tartars communities. The Lithuanian one is untitled *I am a descendant of Tartar Murza* (2007)<sup>15</sup> and was produced, among others, by the Union of the Tatar Communities of Lithuania. The Polish documentary untitled *Kruszyniany. Historia i współczesność Tatarów polskich* (2006) [*Kruszyniany. History and the present day of Polish Tartars*]<sup>16</sup> was made by persons from within the group and produced in cooperation with the Muslim Religious Union in Poland, among others. The other two films I used are about Polish Tartars. They were placed on YouTube and produced by persons from the outsider of the Tartar community. The first one

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terdisciplinary Journal of German Studies", no. 65, Spring/Summer 1995, s. 125-133.

<sup>13</sup> S. Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, New York, 2003.

<sup>14</sup> S. Sontag, op. cit, s. 7

<sup>15</sup> Documentary film about Lithuanian Tatar community *I am a descendant of Tartar Murza*. Producer Alij Aleksandrovic, director Leonid Gusajev.

<sup>16</sup> *Kruszyniany. Historia i współczesność Tatarów polskich*. Realization Fundacja im. Światowego Zgromadzenia młodzieży Muzułmańskiej w RP. Co-operation Samorząd Województwa Podlaskiego, Muzeum Podlaskie w Białymstoku, Urząd Gminy Krynyki, Muzułmański Związek Religijny w RP.

*Lipkowie XXI* [*Lipka Tartars of XXI century*]<sup>17</sup> was filmed in 2013 and the other simply "*Tatarzy*" [*The Tartars*]<sup>18</sup> from 2011. I have chosen two extra films because the one which was produced by Polish Tartars was dedicated, first of all, to Kruszyńiany as a village and as a palace where a mosque is located. I needed more Tartar voices to be heard.

Visual representations produced by a given group can play an important role in the process of creating collective identity. Pictures, films and other visual materials can convey desired meanings, being "a model of" and "a model for" reality, paraphrasing Clifford Geertz's concept<sup>19</sup>.

The aim of this paragraph is not to discuss the genre of documentary films, but mainly focus on several issues concerning this kind of visualization practice in relation to the main topic of the article. Generally speaking, as other kinds of representations, documentaries are no more than fiction. They are, as John Grierson writes, "the creative treatment of actuality".<sup>20</sup> Such representations usually contain selective image of the phenomena. This kind of films are produced for the purpose and they reflect a given point of view on presented reality and promote specific discourse. It finds its expression through the images and text included in a film. In documentaries, like these discussed in this article, one can find the results of the specific ideological work done by their authors. Moreover, as mentioned by Dirk Eitzen, documentaries „are presumed to be truthful, even though considerations about the veracity of particular assertions may play little role in how viewers actually make sense of them."<sup>21</sup> In that sense, they have power over its consignees.

Studying and analysing visual materials produced by ethnic minorities not only enables to reconstruct how individuals, groups, situations and events are depicted. It helps to uncover the version of the world which is hidden under visual textual level. Ethnic groups, like others who want to have „the power of representation" in their own hands, create own version of history, tradition or identity, by visual means. Through manipulating the cultural resources, excluding and including, underlying and omitting given facts, heroes, events

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<sup>17</sup> 2013. *Lipkowie XXI*. [www.youtube.com/results?search\\_query=lipkowie+xxi+wieku](http://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=lipkowie+xxi+wieku), [dostęp: 10.09.14].

<sup>18</sup> *Tatarzy*. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=lwiaa3feoyA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lwiaa3feoyA) [dostęp 10.09.14].

<sup>19</sup> C. Geertz, *The interpretation of culture*, New York, 1973.

<sup>20</sup> J. Grierson, *The First Principles of Documentary*, [w:] F. Hardy (red.) *Grierson on Documentary*, London 1966, s. 147.

<sup>21</sup> D. Eitzen, *When Is a Documentary?: Documentary as a Mode of Reception*, "Cinema Journal", Vol. 35, No. 1 Autumn, 1995, s. 82.



etc. they produce self-images which they want to disseminate among co-members as well as outside the group.

The question is: what kind of vision of groups characteristics is communicated through this medium? Due to the limits of this text, I will focus on three issues:

First of all, as one can see watching these movies, both Tatar groups share the fact that religious and ethnic elements permeate each other in the process of defining ethnic boundaries. In the film, the interlocutors often said: "We have survived thanks to our religion." We can speak about a process of ethnicization of religion or about a strong religious component of ethnicity. The character of a religious practice is also similar. As we can see, Islam, which is cultivated in both communities, was described as having a local character, as "Tatar Islam" or "our Islam". Members of both groups, as they stated, are aware of the differences between their religious practice and the one of other Muslims. It does not change their pride in their religiosity which has survived, as they claim, for a long time in the sea of Christianity. In these films, nearly the same kind of pictures and spoken descriptions were presented. We could see: looking alike mosques, cemeteries, religious books, prayers. What is striking, however, and which can easily mislead a less attentive audience, is which Tartars group is being presented as they are so similar.

Another issue concerns the similarities in the context of a cultural practice in using the history to communicate ethnic distinctness on the one hand and their place in a nation-state in which they are a minority, on the other. Both groups were described as communities which have lived here (e.g. in Poland or Lithuania) for a long time. There is a mantra-like sentence "we have been living here for 600 years." While talking about their settlement, they emphasize the role of Tartar military service in Lithuanian and Polish military formations. They also mentioned the gentry status given to some Tartars by Grand Dukes of Lithuania and Polish kings. While describing their vision of these 600 years of settlement, the narrator has recalled a few historical figures whom they cherish and whose deeds they value. For Lithuanian Tartars, they are Grand Dukes of Lithuania - Giedym and his son Witold and king Jagiełło. For Polish Tartars: Duke Witold, King Władysław Jagiełło, the Polish king Jan III Sobieski. The latter does not appear in the Lithuanian vision because he is the hero of Polish Tartars as the founder of the Tartar settlement in Podlasie, which nowadays is a symbolic centre of the Tartar community.

They were described as patrons of the Tartar settlement as they gave them land granted privileges. They also invoke the battles

which were important for both the Polish and Lithuanian armies and which were to show the spirit and loyalty of a Tartar soldier over the centuries. Interestingly enough, in fact both films present the same historical characters, only the narration based on them somewhat differed. Its main theme was the Tartars' merit in the military field. But the vision in the narrated stories had a specific colour. For instance, the Lithuanian Tartar spoke about the participation of their predecessors in the Battle of Grunwald in the troops of Duke Witold. The Polish Tartars, on the other hand, although they did not omit the battle of Grunwald altogether, still they stressed their merit in uprisings or on the fronts of World War II. They recalled a myth about how one of their predecessors had saved the life of King Jan III Sobieski.

Metaphorically speaking, when building their historical narrations, Tartars in both groups would weave their own history into the history of the dominating group, Lithuanian and Polish respectively. They did, however, invoke the common Polish-Lithuanian heritage – hence the term Polish-Lithuanian Tartars in the films. Yet, the vision of ethnohistory being built for the purpose of the documentaries was a report on the history of the group's belonging to given state on the one hand and on the other a story about their merit for Lithuania and Poland as currently two separate states. One can say that history is such a resource which can serve one's current interests. In both cases, it seems to legitimize the right of both communities to be "here." Such narrations are typical for minority groups with migration origin and which strive to get recognition from the dominating group. In this respect, both groups are similar.

The third issue I would like to mention is the manner in which Polish and Lithuanian Tartars are presented in the context of identity characteristics. We can say metaphorically that this part of the ethnonym of both groups which refers to being Tartar connotes similar meanings.

The way the communities were described in the categories coming from the sociological vocabulary describing ethnocultural properties of communities was different. In the Lithuanian documentary, the Tartar community was presented as a nation which has its history in the territory they inhabit, i.e. in Lithuania, as a distinct group which has its cultural features (first of all a religious one), histories, places of prayer, material and symbolic resources.

In the stories told about Polish Tartars, one could hear first of all about the group of Polish Tartars or Tartar Poles, which did not refer to the place of residence but national or civil aspects of one's identity.

The statements in the films speak about Poles of Tartar descent as a group with a praiseworthy past but a less certain presence, a community significantly tied to Polishness, being loyal toward it in a symbolic way based on the history but also on their current situation. Sometimes, the characters spoke about the assimilation of Tartars as an inevitable process.

We can say that the Tartar ethnicity in the Lithuanian edition is in its climate more assertive, it blurs in the Polish edition, and at times it is invoked.

To interpret the difference, we can refer to two categories.

As I mentioned before, the post-war period was a key period for both communities. When living in totalitarian countries, both communities could not fully and in their own way realize their ethnic aspirations, which contributed to weakening of their ethnicity. However, the official logic governing the organization of ethnic relations differed in both countries markedly. When formulating the vision of a single-nation Polish society, the Polish state marginalized the issue of ethno-cultural diversity. Other than Polish provenance was concealed not only in public but also privately.

Lithuania, on the other hand, as part of the Soviet Union and together with other Soviet republics was placed in a completely different vision in respect to national issues. In accordance with the politics, as R. Brubaker points out, not only did the state have a multinational character but also each of its citizen was included in the system of ethnic classification within which he/she was placed obligatorily. The key was the person's ethnic origin, inherited from one's parents and recorded in identity documents, consequently being the key element of a person's legal status<sup>22</sup>. Naturally, we can ponder upon the role and the extend of the influence of nominal identity aspects on shaping identity resources of an individual person or a community. In my opinion, this factor was important in the case of Lithuanian and Polish Tatars at least on the level of group habitus. When asked about one's nationality, many Polish Tatars answer "Polish", whereas Lithuanian Tatars answer "Tatar". In Poland, it is hard to be a Tatar while in Lithuania it is hard not to be one.

In the end, I'd like to mention just one more important factor which can explain the Polishness of Polish Tatars and the Tatariness of Lithuanian Tatars. It is the specificity of Polish nationalism in which the

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<sup>22</sup> R Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe*. Cambridge 1996.

Polish Tatars live, i.e. the ethno-religious nationalism which excludes from a community the "others", especially those of a different provenance and faith. While in Lithuania, in the country's historical shape, Tatars were at home, well rooted, identified or recognized as expressed in the words of my Lithuanian interlocutors, in Poland - whose borders after 1945 included only a patch of the old territories the Tatars inhabited - their fate became uncertain. It must have been one of the reasons for which part of the elites built the image of Tatars on the grounds of the interwar traditions as the familiar others, different in respect of their descent and religion but loyal toward the Polish *raison d'état*, settled "here" (in the Republic of Poland, not in Lithuania) for the last 600 years, loyal and devoted Polish citizens. Lithuanian Tatars could maintain the continuity of their settlement. Polish Tatars, metaphorically speaking, had to grow their roots in Poland all over again.

To sum up, through their use of history and the past. The Tartars want to achieve two main goals. Firstly, they want to define the distinctness of the ethnic group. The reference to the distant past and present history allows to determine who they are, what they are like, and where they come from. This, in turn, allows them to build a sense of continuity in time and in the historical space. Secondly, they want to constitute a desired majority-minority relationship with the use of the past and history as crucial social and cultural resources justifying the group's aspirations on the symbolic level and on the level of political or formal and legal interests.

One of the musical motives in the Lithuanian documentary is a song whose words can be paraphrased as follows: 'I have live in Lithuania for 600 years already, my home is here, and in the distance the Crimea shore. I am a descendent of the Crimea murza.' Polish Tartars have already a different, their own song.

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KATARZYNA WARMIŃSKA

### **Polish and Lithuanian Tatars. One history and two stories**

#### **Abstract**

The aim of this article is to discuss the problem of relations between history, memory and ethnic identity. The closer look at similarities and differences pertaining to the character of the ethnicity of Polish and Lithuanian Tatars is taken with a special focus on the vision

of ethno-history shared by each group. The empirical part of this text includes the description and interpretation of four documentaries. The analysis of visual materials show how Polish and Lithuanian Tatars use their cultural resources, e.g. the history and the past (partly common, partly different) to communicate their ethnic identity.

**Keywords:** Polish Tatars, Lithuanian Tatars, ethnic identity, ethnohistory, documentary.

KATARZYNA WARMIŃSKA

### **Polish and Lithuanian Tatars. One history and two stories**

#### **Streszczenie**

Celem tego artykułu jest analiza relacji między historią, pamięcią i tożsamością etniczną. Szczególną uwagę skupiono na ukazaniu podobieństw i różnic między polskimi i litewskimi Tatarami w kontekście występującej w każdej z grup wizji etnohistorii. W części empirycznej zwarto opis i interpretację czterech filmów dokumentalnych. Analiza materiałów wizualnych pokazuje jak w obu społecznościach używa się kulturowych zasobów, to jest historii i przeszłości (podobnej, ale też odmiennej) w procesach komunikacji etnicznej tożsamości.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Polscy Tatarzy, litewscy Tatarzy, tożsamość etniczna, etnohistoria, film dokumentalny.