Polacy na Wschodzie. Historie mówione (Poles in the East. Oral histories), Dominik Czapigo (ed.), Warszawa 2023, pp. 660

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The subject of the Polish immigrant community is a vast and quite well-researched topic, explored by both Polish and non-Polish scholars. Polish communities living in the former Soviet republics, including the eastern territories of the former Republic of Poland, have also been the focus of thematic studies. The beginnings of migration to these territories were linked both to voluntary migrations and changes in borders throughout the centuries of the Republic of Poland. An example of this is the Polish community living in the territory of today's Western Ukraine.[1] Sometimes, however, the onset of Polish settlement in a given area was associated to terror, as was the case with the Polish community deported in the 1930s from areas of the Soviet Union to the northern Kazakhstan.[2] And these are only a few examples of places where fate and great history cast the population of Polish origin. One might ask whether there are still any "blank spaces" in the topic of Polish migration. Is it possible to present a new perspective on the experiences of the "eastern Polonia"?

An example of this new perspective, relying on a compilation of multiple stories from witnesses to history, is the volume *Polacy na Wschodzie. Historie mówione* (Poles in the East. Oral histories) edited by Dominik Czapigo. Among the numerous scholarly publications on the topic of Polonia in Eastern Europe, this one is distinguished by its specific material, the method used to obtain the accounts, and its scale. It gives voice to residents of the broadly defined "East" – today's citizens of Belarus, Kazakhstan, Lithuania, Latvia, Russia, Romania, and Ukraine who

1 Examples of publications on the Polish diaspora in Ukraine: G. Hryciuk, *Polacy we Lwowie 1939–1944. Życie codzienne*, Warszawa 2000; O. Linkiewicz, *Lokalność i nacjonalizm: społeczności wiejskie w Galicji Wschodniej w dwudziestoleciu międzywojennym*, Kraków 2018; A. Bonusiak, *Polacy w niepodległej Ukrainie: analiza strukturalno-funkcjonalna*, Rzeszów 2013; series *Polacy na Ukrainie: zbiór dokumentów*, ed. by S. Stępień, Przemyśl 2015–2021; R. Dzwonkowski, O. Gorbaniuk, J. Gorbaniuk, *Postawy katolików obrządku łacińskiego na Ukrainie wobec języka polskiego*, Lublin 2001; S. Siekierka, H. Komański, E. Różański, *Ludobójstwo dokonane przez nacjonalistów ukraińskich na Polakach w województwie stanisławowskim 1939–1946*, Wrocław 2008; A. Świątek, *Gente Rutheni, natione Poloni: z dziejów Rusinów narodowości polskiej w Galicji*, Kraków 2015; A. Wylegała, *Przesiedlenia a pamięć. Studium (nie)pamięci społecznej na przykładzie ukraińskiej Galicji i polskich „Ziem odzyskanych"*, Toruń 2014.

2 It is worth quoting a few items on the topic of Kazakh Polonia such as *Polacy w Kazachstanie*, introduction and ed. by B.J. Kozłowski, Warszawa 2005.; *Iz protokoła zasedanija komissii po pereseleniju „O pereselenii 15 tys. chozjajstw iz Kijewskoj i Winnickoj obłastej w Kazachstan*, in Ł.A. Griwiennaja, W.W. Cziniszłow (eds.), *Polskije spiecposielency w Sewero-Kazachstanskoj obłasti (1936–1955)*, Ałmaty 2022; *Deportacje Polaków i obywateli polskich do Kazachstanu w latach 1936–1941*, introduction and ed. by D. Panto, Gdańsk 2019; *Z dziejów Polaków w Kazachstanie 1936–1956. Zbiór dokumentów z Archiwum Prezydenta Republiki Kazachstanu*, ed. by J.M. Gribanowa, A.S. Zułkaszewa, M.U. Maskiejew, Warszawa 2006; R. Wyszyński, *Deportacje ludności polskiej do Kazachstanu. Zarys historyczny*, Warszawa 2016; W. Kudela-Świątek, *Odpamiętane. O historii mówionej na przykładzie narracji kazachstańskich Polaków o represjach na tle narodowościowym i religijnym*, Kraków 2013; W. Marciniak, *Odzyskać nadzieję wrócić do Ojczyzny: Związek Patriotów Polskich w południowym Kazachstanie 1944–1946*, Łódź 2021.

have Polish origins. The time span of the stories presented in the main part of the book is the beginning of the 20th century up to the collapse of the USSR and the beginnings of life in the newly organised independent countries of Eastern Europe. The volume contains stories collected during the project of recording of biographical accounts organised by the KARTA Center and History Meeting House in 2006–2017. The collection totals as many as 1075 accounts. The publication is hence a part of a larger whole – a project aiming at maintaining the memoir narratives of the Polish population living in the areas of the former republics of the USSR. It is worth emphasizing that during the research project, in addition to collecting accounts, archives were also gathered. Some of the materials were published on the website,[3] which includes fragments of recordings that allow listeners to hear the statements of the interviewees.

The introduction to the volume opens with a reflection on the terminology used in the project relating, among others, to the problematic term "Borderlands" (in the sense of periphery, referred to in Polish as *Kresy*), which could be used to describe the territory of origin of the interlocutors. As its author Dominik Czapigo puts it, it was a conscious decision to use the safer meaning of the term "East," as the notion of "Borderlands" was alien to the very interlocutors: "One can risk a thesis, that it is a notion coming from outside, which does not refer to the experience of the people from here, for whom "Borderland" is not a periphery but the centre of their own world" (p. 7). The Polishness of the interlocutors was not necessarily linked to their origin in former Polish areas, as not all of them were born in the territory of the Second Polish Republic before the Second World War. Their identity was often a matter of self-identification. They considered themselves Poles, and were identified as such by their neighbours and authorities, as a result of which they often suffered various repressions, as mentioned in the introduction. However, it is not a homogenous group, and the identities of the interlocutors were quite fluid and labile. The introduction also presents the recording method inspired by the free biographical interview technique, describes preparations for field trips, and outlines the specifics of archiving the collected material. For the most part, the interviewees were born before the Second World War in territories specified very broadly as "borderlands of Poland," most of them worked physically, and spoke Polish language to varying degrees.

The first chapter is preceded by a map showing the borders at the time the interlocutors talked about and the marked locations where the recordings took place. The reader can see that the conversations were recorded also in areas where the Poles were moved by force due to Soviet deportation. It is worth underlining that the research team recorded accounts both in large cities and smaller towns and vil-

3 https://polacynawschodzie.pl/ [accessed: 20.06.2024].

lages, making the collection more varied and representative. The age of interlocutors, mostly born in the 1920s–1940s, accounted for the fact that already during recording, this generation was a passing one. This sense of the passing of time of the generation of witnesses to history and the desire to "save from oblivion" the stories of "Polish people in the East" was also experienced by the researchers collaborating on the volume (p. 11). The project was in keeping with the assumptions of rescue history, whose "principal task is to find, recover, maintain and make available the overlooked, suppressed in the great history and often forgotten pasts."[4]

The main core of the book is a polyphony composed of excerpts from recorded accounts which interweave to show us a detailed picture of interlocutors' experiences over almost the entire 20th century. This part of the volume is divided into seven chapters, linked to the chronology of 20th century events, and to the places of origins of the interlocutors. Each fragment of the cited statements is signed with the name of the interviewee, and his or her date of birth, while it ends with place or places where he or she lived. Additionally, there are QR codes in the margins that provide deeper context for the content of the book and refer to recordings, giving the reader a broader picture of the experiences and emotions connected with specific historical events. Playing the recordings gives an opportunity to listen to the specifics of the interviewees' languages. Each excerpt of the accounts is accompanied by footnotes explaining the historical context, professional terms, foreign words or persons appearing in the stories. Fragments of accounts correlate with rich and diverse illustrative material obtained from the interlocutor's home archives. All fragments of the stories are in Polish, whilst the translated narrations from other Slavic languages are marked with a letter "T".

The first chapter was devoted to the stories of people living in the eastern area of the Second Polish Republic and their memories of the interwar period up to the outbreak of the Second World War. The second, on the other hand, deals with the lives of the Polish community living in the territories of today's Latvia, Lithuania and Romania and ends with the outbreak of the Second World War. Another deals with the memories of USSR citizens (the Ukrainian, Belorussian and Russian SSR) up to 22 June 1941, i.e. the German occupation on these territories. Part of the chapter is devoted to today's citizens of Kazakhstan who were deported as part of mass deportations from the Ukrainian SSR to the northern territories of the Kazakh SSR between 1935 and 1938. The presence of voices of this unique group of memoirs is worth noting, as there are relatively few publications that deal with the lives of this particular group on the publishing market.[5]

4 E. Domańska, *Historia ratownicza*, "Teksty drugie", vol. 5 (2014), p. 13.

5 J. Barańska, L. Bogucki, Z. Dzieńdziczewski, S. Miliński, *Za ryskim kordonem. Losy Polaków –obywateli radzieckich w latach 20.–40. XX w.*, P. Cichoracki, M. Jakimowicz, M. Ruchniewicz (eds.), Wrocław 2023, p. 5.

Chapter 4 begins the part of the book devoted to the experience of the Second World War, and contains stories told by citizens of the Second Polish Republic about the period of Soviet occupation. To help readers become more familiar with the fates of the interlocutors, there are again maps explaining the complexities of border changes and the entering of individual occupants into the territories of the Central and Eastern Europe during the Second World War. Readers can familiarise themselves with excerpts of recollections on e.g. deportations to Siberia or declassification of landed gentry by the Soviet authorities. The next chapter presents the narratives of interviewees about the period from 22 June 1941 to 1944 and the experience of German occupation of both citizens of the former Second Polish Republic and Polish residents of USSR living "beyond the Riga border." All interlocutors saw the German invasion of the USSR as the beginning of the wartime chaos, a change of life organisation, and some of them were passive observers of the Holocaust. This part of the book also includes a subsection on anti-Polish operation organised by Ukrainian nationalists and a section on deportations to labour camps in the Third Reich. Fragments of testimonies about military and guerrilla actions against the occupying forces, including those of the Home Army, were also presented. The next subsection includes interesting and relatively rarely published recollections of soldiers of the 1st Polish Army.[6] The chapter ends with a "polyphony of memory" about the beginnings of Soviet rule.

The sixth chapter covers a rather extensive time span – the changes between 1945 and 1993, i.e. life experiences of interviewees in the USSR universe. It begins with a story about the immediate post-war time, which the interlocutors recall as not only the time of great joy triggered by the end of the war, reunions with the men returning from the army, but also the time of fights with guerilla troops, deportations to labour camps in the East or border changes and new state of affairs in the territory of the Central and Eastern Europe. The next subsection is devoted to the emotions and reflections of those who remained in their places of residence and observed others leaving for Poland as part of post-war repatriations. Thanks to the compilation of dozens of stories, the reader can discern how many factors could have influenced the decision to stay in their small homeland, that was to be left outside the borders of Poland. The reasons why they stayed varied, from the decision of the head of the family to stay (p. 349), through being late with the decision to leave by one day (p. 346), to the fear of the unknown post-German lands and starting life anew (p. 360). Another section is devoted to the organisation of kolkhozes and memories of being forced to register there, as well as other facets of Soviet terror, including, among others, deportations of *kulaks* to the far east in the 1950s. This is followed by stories about everyday life in the republics of the USSR;

6 Cf. D. Czapigo (ed.), *Berlingowcy. Żołnierze tragiczni*, Warszawa 2015.

the interviewees in this part of the book talk about education, work or leisure, but also about the hardships of post-war life: hunger and poverty. The following chapter presents excerpts on the influence of politics – the introduction of order rooted in the principles of real socialism, which affected each and every aspect of lives of the USSR citizens. Whilst in this part of the publication, the political system is a background for telling stories of the "ordinary lives" of the interviewees, the next part of the compiled accounts gives a picture of Soviet terror, including the fight of the authorities against the religiosity of citizens, the liquidation of temples. The reader can see how important it was (and usually still is) for the Polish community in the East to belong to a community of faith and to be attached to a nearby church. This was followed by stories that were extremely emotional, as they dealt with post-war contacts with relatives who had left as part of the so-called repatriation to post-war Poland, as well as the first trips to Poland for trade and to visit relatives. An extremely reflective subsection addresses passages that discuss the identity of the interviewees, their concern for the preservation of Polish cultural heritage in the places where they lived, their command of the Polish language (or lack thereof), their concealment of their nationality from Soviet authorities, and their reflections on the assimilation processes that affected parts of the Polish population in the USSR.

Chapter 7 of the volume tackles the period of the disintegration of the Soviet Union, focusing on the transformations that took place, sometimes overnight, and the ways in which citizens of already independent states coped with the new order. New national borders meant that often the interlocutors also had to redefine their identities, not because of inner processes, but because the environment did not understand the specifics of their identities and the past of their community groups.

An important and cognitively valuable part is the afterword, which contains three articles presenting the contexts for selected excerpts of interviewees' accounts. In the chapter entitled *Poles in the East before 1939*, Małgorzata Ruchniewicz, from the perspective of a historian, reflexes on the evolution of the term "Eastern Borderlands" (*Kresy Wschodnie*) in the Polish social discourse, and explains the specificity of lives of the Polish people in the areas of broadly understood Eastern Europe, including the eastern areas of the First Polish Republic; the fate of the Polish population in Russia until 1917; the Polish diaspora in the territories of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire; the migrations ensuing from the First World War and the emergence of nation states and, subsequently, the situation of the population calling themselves Poles at the time of the establishment of the Second Polish Republic. This section presents an important reflection on who we can define as a "Pole in the East." What categories should we use: self-identification, community identity, religious affiliation, or maybe language used? As Ruchniewicz puts it, the multiculturalism of the area and the underdeveloped

national identities in some regions have resulted in a situation where it is difficult for researchers to unambiguously determine the number of Poles in the area (p. 502). The author also describes the migrations triggered by the establishment of the Second Polish Republic in 1918 and the troubling decisions of some of the people with Polish roots living in the Soviet Russia to migrate westward. She describes the fate of the Polish population in the USSR "beyond the Riga border," where the situation of ethnic and national minorities was subject to an ideology subordinated to the building of a communist society – from the organisation of "Polregions" under Lenin, through the diametric change in Kremlin policy towards other nations and ethnos in the 1930s, to the introduction of Stalinist terror against national minorities in the USSR, including the "Polish operation" by NKVD. Ruchniewicz devotes a separate section to the Polish minority in the Baltic republics and Bessarabia and Bukovina in the interwar period.

Another text written by Ruchniewicz deals with the plight of the Polish population in Eastern Europe after the outbreak of the Second World War. It tackles the occupation of the eastern areas of the Second Republic of Poland and the sovietisation of the population, followed by the fate of those deported deep into the USSR between 1940 and 1946 in the successive waves of deportations, and the situation of the Polish population in the former Eastern Borderlands under German occupation. The author depicts the period of large-scale migrations during and just after the war between 1944 and 1947, including the so-called repatriation of people deported deep into the USSR. Soviet terror affected the Polish people in the USSR also in the postwar period – the author presents individual groups of repressed Poles from the territories incorporated to the USSR after the war, as well as the sovietisation of all aspects of lives of the inhabitants of the Belarussian, Lithuanian and Ukrainian Soviet Republics. She also tackles the issue of the so-called second repatriation, which took place in the second half of the 1950s, and the situation of the Polish people remaining after the border change in the western areas of the USSR, taking into account the fate of Poles deported from the USSR in 1936 to northern Kazakhstan. She also briefly presents today's situation of the Polish community outside the country's eastern borders. Both texts by Małgorzata Ruchniewicz allow the reader to see what factors influenced the fate of the interviewees quoted in the main part of the book.

A very interesting complement to the polyphony of interviewees is also the text by Anna Wylegała, which, as the author writes, is "a kind of methodological revision." The researcher participated in more than a dozen documentation trips as part of the project. In the text, she presents the potential inherent in the collection, as well as subjects the effects of the work during the project to critical reflection. It is worth noting that Wylegała depicts the recording of accounts, so to speak, "from behind the scenes," shows, using her own example, the "pitfalls"

lurking for researchers. The author, looking at her experience in the research area, shows difficulties and shortcomings. One example is when, with the interviewee's best interests in mind, she refrained from asking "difficult questions," which, however, could have provided information about the specifics of the experience of difficult memory and helped identify, for example, the perpetrators of the murders (p. 587). An interesting issue is the reflection on the "Polishness" / "borderlandness" of the interviewees. The author points out that during the field research, the researchers were "emissaries of a distant great homeland" for the interviewees, therefore part of the stories were told from the perspective of a certain canon of narratives about the Eastern Borderlands in the broadest sense. This meant that the events that did not fit, according to the interviewees, into the biography of a "Pole in the Borderlands" were sometimes omitted (pp. 586–587). The scholar also presents the problematic nature of the "Polishness" category itself in the interlocutors' narratives. The ambiguity of the term in Eastern Europe, as well as its contextuality, led to surprising findings for the researchers during the collection of accounts. For example, some individuals, despite being referred to as Poles by their neighbours, did not identify themselves as such. An interesting example of the fluidity of the interviewees' identities is the situation during the interview in which, on one occasion, the interviewee referred to himself as a "Pole," only to identify himself with the "Ukrainian nation" in the second part of the interview (p. 595). These types of situations encountered in the field were described by Jarosław Derlicki, who pointed out that when asked by a Polish researcher about their identity, a resident of lands formerly belonging to Poland may identify as a Pole, even if they define their identity differently in everyday life. Therefore, he postulates that the broadest category used in this type of study is "population of Polish origin." This group can include individuals who identify as Polish, speak Polish, and/or have Polish roots, but who currently emphasise their affiliation with their own country.[7] This is just one example of the difficulties that a researcher may face when dealing with identities in the border areas of the former USSR. As Wylegała rightly points out, the conversations during the projects and her individual field trips led her to conclude that affiliation with a certain nation can be produced through negotiation, and that national identity is a construct. However, a person can choose to affiliate with a given nation, even in contrast to the ethnicity assigned to them at birth (p. 597). The author also reflects on the factors influencing the memory of the interviewees, highlighting the significance of the culture of memory in the relationships of individuals (p. 601). She emphasises that, in the majority of cases, the interlocutors lacked the support of the local

7 J. Derlicki, *Nowe podejście do starych tematów? Ludność polskiego pochodzenia w krajach byłego ZSRR*, "Etnografia Polska", vol. 59 (2015), no. 1–2, pp. 34, 40.

community and were unable to create local communities of memory, which significantly influenced their narratives. The researcher also presents potential avenues for further study using the material collected in the project, highlighting the great potential of the entire collection for social and humanistic research.

The book is one of the many outcomes of the "Poles in the East" project. Together with the website and the accounts collected in the archives of the KARTA Center, it constitutes a cohesive whole, and from this perspective, it is a unique and innovative project. In addition, it forms an interesting collection that has so far been absent from the Polish publishing market. Through chronologically and geographically arranged excerpts from the accounts of interlocutors of Polish descent residing in the former republics of the USSR, the diverse experiences of this group in the 20th century are presented. The volume may be of interest to readers who are curious about the subject, who have family roots in Eastern Europe, as well as researchers who have the opportunity to utilise the unique and rich archive of accounts from "witnesses to history" within the Polish diaspora in the former republics of the USSR for their own research.