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Rybnik oral history project at the Faculty of History, University of Warsaw

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In 2024, for the first time in the history of the Faculty of History, University of Warsaw, classes on oral history were organised as a project focused on both research and documentation. This involved five students of master's studies under the guidance of Dr hab. Dobrochna Kałwa: Dominika Nowicka, Aleksander Peszel, Katarzyna Szarla, Dr Natalia Zajączkowska, and Maciej Zawistowski. Rybnik was chosen as our destination, although in the course of our fieldwork, our interest expanded to include the Rybnik Coal Area. This choice was dictated not only by a familial connection to Upper Silesia of the person conducting the classes and part of the group, but also by the peripheral location and the complex situation of heavy industry and mining after 1989, distinguishing this subregion from other parts of the Polish coal basin. From the start, we assumed that our target group should comprise people connected to the mining industry.

After several preparatory meetings, during which we discussed the historical context of Rybnik, organisation of the fieldwork, documentation and the research topic, we decided to focus on two issues of the city's post-war history. The first objective of the project was to explore the biographical experience of contemporary citizens of Rybnik from the period of 1960s and 1970s, when the city saw intensive industrial development and territorial expansion. This was the period when most of our interviewees began their adult lives, started families and entered the mining industry.

Also, we wanted to locate the biographical experiences of Rybnik residents in the context of the intense social and economic changes after 1989, accounting for such phenomena as production cutbacks, mass layoffs, the collapse or reconstruction of industrial plants, as well as the shrinkage of the privileges of heavy industry workers. We wanted to ensure that we did not value these events unequivocally negatively; therefore we also paid some attention to the development of private economic initiatives, labour migration or changes within the city limits. Both ideas were embedded in the professional trajectories of the interviewees we were looking for. This made it possible to grasp such memory processes as sentimentality, and to conduct an overall assessment of Rybnik's transformations in the 20th century in terms of biographical experience.

With such a narrowed framework, we together drafted a questionnaire covering the various stages of family life, work life and the transformation of the city from the perspective of the interviewees. We decided to conduct interviews in accordance with the autobiographic method proposed by Fritz Schütze, which, by the way, was previously used by most of project participants. All members of our group had already had some experience with interviews, but so far we had dealt with different disciplines – not only history, but also ethnology, cultural studies

and political science. This created a very fertile ground for exchanging experiences and complementing each other already during the fieldwork.

The research itself was conducted between May 6 and 9 of this year and was facilitated by funding from the Faculty of History, University of Warsaw. Our guide in and around Rybnik was Dr Monika Glosowitz, a literary scholar and translator from the University of Silesia, who comes from and resides in this city. We contacted her due to the book she had edited, *Pamiętniki kobiet z rodzin górniczych* (Memoirs of Women from Mining Families), published by the Czerwionka-Leszczyny Community Development Movement Association, Czerwionka-Leszczyny 2024, containing memoirs written down for a memoir contest she had organised. We also established cooperation with the historic "Ignacy" mine in Rybnik, where we received support during the research stage from Adam Grzegorzek, the coordinator of a project that started this year, entitled "Social Archive of the Rybnik Coal Area."

Already on the first day after arrival, we visited the historic residential estate in Czerwionka-Leszczyny, a town that was built thanks to the "Dębieńsko" mine. There, we met the first six interlocutors invited by Dr Glosowitz, some of whom are characters in her book. This was preceded by a group tour of the historic estate and museum chamber with a guide Mr Czesław "Buła" Żemła. From this meeting, we gained insights into the perspective of a mining community that retained a semi-agricultural character for many years after the war, with the gradual decline and eventual closure of mines after 1989. It was also a valuable opportunity for women working in the mining industry to express their experiences. The second day of the project was filled with talks with two groups. The first two interlocutors were invited for us by the Ignacy mine – they were retired workers of that mine and "Jankowice" coal mine. Another two persons were a married couple connected with the mining construction sector. For professional reasons, they left for Ethiopia for some time in the 1970s, which made it a wholly atypical biographical account, as compared to those obtained from other interviewees.

On the eighth of May, we set off to "Chwałowice" coal mine in Rybnik with Dr Glosowitz at the invitation of the mine management. In its hospitable premises, we had an opportunity to interview retired and current employees of the mine, holding posts of middle-level supervision and management, and visit the local chamber of tradition. The greatest attraction not only of the day, but of the entire research visit, was the chance to go down into the mine. After entering the mine, we changed our clothes and underwent safety training. Then we used shaft no. 11 to reach the 700 m deep deck, which is currently the deepest mining area of the plant. There we could see a wall where blasting work was carried out for the construction of new traffic routes. Also, we took a ride on an overhead cable car, saw a fan station or a medical dressing station. Our guide was Marek Łodziński. The trip to the mine allowed us to experience at least a fraction of the conditions under

which most of our interviewees had to work for several decades of their lives. Just like them, although only for two hours, we experienced the dust, heat and darkness, wearing a mining uniform and an emergency escape breathing device weighing several kilos, which allowed us to look at their memories conveyed in the biographical accounts in a new way.

Thanks to new contacts obtained in the "Chwałowice" mine, most of the group ended up in the village of Czernica near Rybnik on the last day, where they were received very hospitably by the local community of "Spichlerz" Local Activities Association, which manages the historic von Roth palace there. Meanwhile, I took the opportunity to visit the Chamber of Tradition at "Dębieńsko" mine in Czerwionka-Leszczyny and supplement the material gathered on the first day.

Throughout the entire project, eighteen biographical accounts were collected in Rybnik, Czerwionka-Leszczyny and Czernica. Presently, we are processing the material with another research trip being planned for next year, after which we would like to publish a collective work discussing the oral history of Rybnik and the surrounding area from various aspects. All interviews will shortly be deposited in the Social Archive of the Rybnik Coal Area operating at the historic "Ignacy" mine.