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The borderland experience in the memory of witnesses to history during the 1945 Death March in the Polish Northern Lands. Pedagogical dimensions of a memory-place

DOI: 10.26774/wrhm.336
Submitted on: 17 October 2022
Accepted on: 15 October 2024
Published on: 29 November 2024
The work is original and has not been published elsewhere before.
Originally written in English.

Abstract
This article presents the experience of the borderlands in memories of witnesses to history during the evacuation of KL Stutthof in the winter and early spring of 1945. The route crossed the former Free City of Gdańsk and Kashubian villages, reaching as far as German territories, leaving behind the markers of a memory-place analysed here within their pedagogical context. The aim of the article is to present the attitudes of prisoners and the borderland inhabitants and their remembrances.

Keywords
witness to history, Death March, oral history, pedagogy of memory, pedagogy of place, memory-place category, Kashubs

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Introduction

Oral history is an interdisciplinary research method with the goal of enhancing the prominence of marginalised narratives that have been downplayed and often disregarded in the public discourse of state historical policy. The accounts of witnesses to history, linked to the experience of the interface between cultures and places, build a multi-layered landscape of memory. Oral sources take into account the subjectivity of the narrator. The narratives of witnesses to history provide an important voice in the social discussion about memory and the meaning of certain events, shedding new light on often familiar and researched areas of everyday life. Oral sources are unique and, when combined with other sources, constitute abundant research material because "they tell us not only what people did, but also what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now believe they did."[1]

Allan Nevins states that talking to witnesses requires not only courage but also compassion; it can be like slowly but firmly running a scalpel over the most delicate areas of memory.[2] The witnesses themselves also face the enormous challenge of organising the events of their life into narratives, making them 'worth mentioning.' They must, according to Mary Patrice Erdmans, wield a language that will allow them to articulate their emotions and thoughts and, moreover, to acknowledge to themselves that their life is worth narrating. Often those who fall within the field of interest of oral history are not public figures. They might have experienced worse access to education and therefore often face problems of limited vocabulary. Oral history allows the telling of stories that have been forgotten, unheard, and have not yet been part of the public historical discourse. These are often 'background' people, experiencing long-term subordination, which can result in uncertainty, entanglement, and unclear statements. People who have been marginalised for years, who are bearers of trauma or have experienced atrocities, as the researcher notes, face a huge challenge in publicly proclaiming their truth.[3]

1 A. Portelli, *Co stanowi o odmienności historii mówionej*, "Wrocławski Rocznik Historii Mówionej", special issue (2018), p. 30.

2 A. Nevins, *Oral History: How and Why it Was Born*, in D.K. Dunaway, W.K. Baum (eds.) *Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*, New York 1996, p. 34, 37.

3 M.P. Erdmans, *The Problems of Articulating Beingness in Women's Oral Histories*, in M. Kurkowska-Budzan, K. Zamorski (eds.), *Oral History: The Challenges of Dialogue*, Amsterdam 2009, p. 96.

Pedagogical context of place and memory categories

The oral history method works well in the discipline of the social sciences, especially at the interface between research in the pedagogy of memory[4] and the pedagogy of place.[5] The narrator/witness often only makes sense of his or her experiences in dialogue with another person. Memory, in this method, is seen as an active process of meaning-making and is therefore a pedagogical asset. Oral history is an important starting point for research into individual and social memory and is thus a part of the pedagogy of memory. There is a reciprocal relationship between memory and place. Theiss and Mendel, by creating a pedagogical term of a 'memory-place,' highlight remembering as a social activity in a space, performing the following roles: consciousness-related, integrational, and educational.[6] Memory is sensitive to place;[7] therefore, witnesses to history recollect their memories in relation to time and space. Moreover, the inhabitants of those meaningful places bring back the memories, remembered collectively by building memory markers such as graves, monuments, chapels, etc. "Memory is, therefore, a place, in particular a place in present reality, in which the subject processes the past, making it something that is part of today."[8] The micro-history embedded within the narrator's biography provides an educational opportunity for the listener, prompting introspection on the lessons that the story imparts.

Pedagogy of place is sensitised to the multi-faceted human–space relationship. A place carries creative potential, is created by the community but, with reciprocity, affects those who reside in the place. It carries pedagogical potential. Space, therefore, cannot be considered a static territory, but rather the result of social activity, the arrangement of forces, actions, and influences of people in a given place.[9] The place we are in shapes the basic structures of thought and action and our interpersonal relations or moral action.[10]

The witnesses whose narratives are presented in the following article are both participants of the Death March and inhabitants of the border region: Kashubians, women, and children. Kashubian women's voices have not yet appeared

4 D. Demetrio, *Pedagogika pamięci. W trosce o nas samych, z myślą o innych*, Łódź 2009.
5 M. Mendel, *Pedagogika miejsca*, Wrocław 2006.
6 M. Mendel, W. Theiss, *From Editors. Memory, place, and the Category of Memory-Place from a Socio-educational Perspective*, in M. Mendel, W. Theiss (eds.) *Pamięć i miejsce. Perspektywa społeczno-edukacyjna*, Gdańsk 2019, p. 31–32.
7 *Ibidem*, p. 33.
8 *Ibidem*, p. 32.
9 J. Puchert, A. Kurowska-Susdorf, *Podmiotowe bycie w mieście. Perspektywa niemieckiej pedagogiki miejsca/przestrzeni*, "Miasto Pedagogiczne, Studia Pedagogiczne", vol. 69 (2016), p. 37.
10 M. Winkler, *Der pädagogische Ort*, "Handbuch der Erziehungswissenschaft", Paderborn 2011, p. 34.

in the wider social discourse;[11] and therefore, oral history becomes indispensable as it "brings out forgotten or silenced voices from the past."[12] The witnesses residing in the borderland areas faced all the above-mentioned challenges; moreover, they spoke German or Kashubian during their childhood, which affected communication during interviews. So far, the hidden voices of those from ethnic minorities, who experienced the war as young women and children, have been immersed in the local, Kashubian cultural context. Oral history represents the optimal method when examining individual and collective memory since "oral history is inherently local."[13]

The narrator is constantly locating and relocating the subject in time, space, and meaning, as his or her autobiographical memory is rooted in the collective codes of remembering. Their experience undergoes multiple reinterpretations and is also determined by wider social and cultural contexts.[14]

Borderland

At the time of the Death March of 1945, the political borders between the Free City of Gdańsk (*Frei Stadt Danzig*), the Pomeranian Voivodeship of the Second Polish Republic, and the *Reich* district of Western Pomerania did not exist. The experience of the former borders has a great impact on the formation of memory. The former border as a 'place of memory' in the year 1945 as well as today still evokes emotions[15] and when understood sociologically, it might be seen as a special kind of mutual interaction.[16] The 'phantom' or 'relict border,' i.e. one that does not exist, still actively co-shapes space. The border, even if it no longer exists in the administrative sense, still exists in a given socio-cultural environment, being constantly experienced:

11 However, several important initiatives have appeared in recent years, but mostly local in scope: *Stutthof jidze. Marsz Śmierci we wspomnieniach mieszkańców Pomieczyna i okolic*, D. Kaszubowska (ed.), Pelplin 2017; movies: *Wieś sprawiedliwych*, by A. Dudziński, 2020; *Stutthof idzie*, by Monika Wejer, 2020, and the latest reissue of the publication: J. Grabowska, *Marsz śmierci. Ewakuacja piesza więźniów KL Stutthof i jego podobozów. 25 stycznia – 3 maja 1945*, Sztutowo 2023, expanded and revised by A. Kłys and M. Owsiński. There is also one book with a nationwide coverage by T. Słomczyński, *Kaszëbë*, Wołowiec 2021.

12 M. Kurkowska-Budzan, *Informator, świadek historii, narrator – kilka wątków epistemologicznych i etycznych oral history*, "Wrocławski Rocznik Historii mówionej", vol. 1 (2011), p. 13.

13 D. Kałwa, *Herstoria mówiona w Polsce. Kilka uwag o feministycznych projektach oral history*, "Wrocławski Rocznik Historii mówionej", vol. 11 (2021), p. 11.

14 K. Kaźmierska, *Biography and Memory: the Generational Experience of the Shoah Survivors*, Boston 2012, p. 97.

15 C. Obracht-Prondzyński, *Wprowadzenie, czyli o czym jest książka oraz jak i po co przeprowadziliśmy badania*, in C. Obracht-Prondzyński (ed.) *Granica polsko-niemiecka na Pomorzu (1920–1939). Historia–pamięć–ślady w przestrzeni*, Opole–Gdańsk 2022, p. 13.

16 *Ibidem*, p. 21.

both at the individual and collective level. Cezary Obracht-Prondzyński [et al.], in their research on the former Polish–German border phenomenon, emphasize that "the border primarily due to its specificity (phantom/relict border) is connected with the issue of memory. The border, just like the space, is an important memory carrier."[17]

In this research, the experience of the borderland appears both in the witnesses to history who entered this borderland, walking in the Death March of January and February 1945, and in those who inhabited the borderland. The borderland, in the memory of the witnesses, is multi-layered, appearing "as a space within which permanent and multifaceted contacts between different cultural groups occur. Borderlands are spaces for establishing and maintaining intercultural contacts."[18] These contacts can be tense but also full of mutual care and assistance. Both the inhabitants residing in the borderland and the participants of the KL Stutthof evacuation strove to leverage the uniqueness of the borderland area. They utilised their interpersonal networks, linguistic competence, and deep understanding of local customs to protect not only their own lives but also the lives of others. Kashubians, as borderland people, often knew German customs and language. We have eyewitness accounts, such as the one of Urszula Górna from Pomieczyno, where it is clear that Kashubians used personal contacts to help the prisoners:

> When the Death March was passing through Pomieczyno, my father Franciszek Pipka, despite the danger, did everything to save the prisoners. And I did together with him. When the war began, my father received German citizenship and enjoyed the general respect and trust of the Germans. He had served in the First World War, lost one arm and received a war invalid identity card of the *Deutsche Kriegsinvalide*. Later he worked as a postman, so he knew many people, including Germans, with whom he maintained good contacts [...]. My mother and I prepared soup, and then my father and I took a twenty-litre can to the church to feed the prisoners [...]. The *kapo* took a ladle and started hitting the prisoners on the head, and I shouted in German, "They're pushing so hard because they're hungry" [...]. I am surprised that he didn't do anything to me, probably because I spoke German so well.[19]

Bernard Mizerski, Death March participant, recollects the distinct characteristics of the borderland in the following manner: "Initially, the escort did not want to allow distribution of food; however, after a longer persuasion by Kashubians who knew German, they agreed. Each prisoner received half a litre

17 K. Ciechorska-Kulesza, M. Sacha, C. Obracht-Prondzyński, *Granica i jej społeczne znaczenie. Uwagi teoretyczne*, in C. Obracht-Prondzyński (ed.), *Granica polsko-niemiecka...*, p. 29.

18 M.S. Szczepański, A. Śliz, *Pogranicza w perspektywie socjologicznej*, "Pogranicze. Polish Borderlands Studies", vol. 2, no. 1 (2014), p. 52–53.

19 U. Górna (née Pipka), in D. Kaszubowska (ed.), *Stutthof jidze...*, p. 83–85.

of soup."[20] Wacław Lewandowski, another Death March participant, in his memoirs, also highlights the significance of being well-versed in both Polish and German languages, as well as familiar with the customary greetings between the Polish and German inhabitants residing in the borderland region:

> Reaching Niestępowo[21] [...] when we came out onto the road [...] we met a boy. I asked him in German about the mayor's house, but he didn't understand anything. When I repeated the question in Polish, he pointed me to a cottage at the end of the village. I also asked him about the inhabitants of this village – he answered that both Poles and Germans lived there, and he pointed out their houses [...]. We asked the *wachmann* (English: watchman), when we went to the Germans, to go first and greet them officially with "*Heil Hitler*" [...]. When we visited the Polish cottages, I asked the *wachmann* not to say a word and said that we would take care of everything. When we greeted them, we would say "Praise be to him" and then tell the whole truth that there were about 2,000 emaciated and hungry people [...].[22]

Czesław Sirocki, a resident of Luzino, reminisces about his involvement in assisting prisoners as a 13-year-old Kashubian boy. He attributes the relative ease of gaining the *wachmann*'s trust and safely approaching the prisoners with bread to his fluency in the German language:

> I am from the year 1932 [...] our mother gave us bread; we brought it to the church, not in large quantities, we also lacked bread [...]; how did it come to be that we, the boys, carried it; because we knew German, that's why those watchmen believed that we were probably Germans, so they let us inside, albeit reluctantly, but we had a chance to reach them through this language [...]. We mastered this language well, after all, knowing the enemy's language is very good, because how else can you fight against them?[23]

The Kashubians' motivation to help prisoners was multidimensional and also related to the borderland phenomena. One of its contexts was certainly the fact that among the inmates of Concentration Camp (KL) Stutthof and the marching prisoners there were members of their families and communities: "Many were from these regions, from here, but there were also many from various parts of Poland."[24] "The Kashubian people were very kind to us. Their attitude towards us

20 B. Mizerski, AMS, *Wspomnienia i relacje*, vol. XVII, p. 116.
21 First Kashubian village on the Death March route.
22 W. Lewandowski, AMS, *Relacje i wspomnienia*, p. 200. '*Wachmann*' is a German word for a guard.
23 Cz. Sirocki, Interview, Special Collection of the Library in Luzino, 2020.
24 H. Pajewska, *Witness Testimonies on the "Death March" in Luzino, January and February 1945 and Associated Study Comments*, compiled by Stefan Fikus in 1979, in the collection of the Museum of Kashubian–Pomeranian Literature and Music in Wejherowo, 1981-K/C1/45, p. 22.

was completely understandable given that almost every family here had someone close to them in the camp or in prison. They were looking for news about their own people; maybe, they also expected to find them in the driven columns."[25]

Antoni Necel from Luzino, a witness to the Death March, recalls his conversation with *Politische Leiter* Wiktor Rabca when he was informed who was being brutally driven in the Death March. "Antoni, Antoni, our brothers have been brought from prison, we have to save them."[26]

Oral history as a method facilitates manifestation of the relation between space and memory. This relationship, like every borderland, is characterised by friction, because "a borderland is a territory of clashing cultures."[27] The relationships will include themes of help or lack of help along the evacuation route, from Stutthof, through the area of the former Free City of Gdańsk (Frei Stadt Danzig), via Kashubian villages such as Luzino or Pomieczyno (former Pomeranian Voivodeship of the Second Polish Republic) and former German settlements (former *Reich* district of Western Pomerania)[28] such as the then Rieben, Kolkau or Burgsdorf. The ethnographic area of Kashubia is somehow caught between two hostile narratives, and the memory of this borderland in particular is mostly shared. For many witnesses to history, the Kashubian land (former Pomeranian Voivodeship of the Second Polish Republic) from the village of Niestępowo to Luzino became a symbol of life and hope that they would survive the war.

Before turning to the analysis, I will provide a broader historical context of the operation of KL Stutthof and the course of Death March 1945.

Research material

The research material includes memories of witnesses to history living in the borderland in the present-day municipality of Gniewino and the municipality of Luzino. I recorded the memories of the witnesses to history during the project "Adaptation and work in the narratives of the native population and post-war settlers in the Gniewino commune" in the framework of the 9th edition of the Oral History Grant awarded by Ośrodek "Pamięć i Przyszłość" (The "Remembrance and Future"

25 B. Sruoga, *Las bogów*, Sztutowo 2019, p. 148.
26 A. Necel, *Witness Testimonies on the "Death March" in Luzino...*, p. 55.
27 M.S. Szczepański, A. Śliz, *op. cit.*, p. 52.
28 Historically and culturally, the present Gniewino commune and the neighbouring Luzino commune constitute a border area, where German and Polish influences have crossed over for centuries. As a result of the Treaty of Versailles, the surrounding Gniewino commune found itself on the German side with the border running through the middle of Lake Żarnowieckie. The municipality included (in brackets are the German place names at the time): Bychowo (Bychow), Gniewino and Gniewinko (Gnewin, Gnewinke), Perlino (Perlin), Tadzino (Tadden, Lissow, Entow), Toliszek (Burgsdorf), Kolkowo (Kolkau), Strzebielinek (Rauchendorf), Opalino (Kniewenbruch, Oppalin), and appearing in later documents Mierzyno (Mersin), Rybno (Rieben), Wierzchucino (Wierschutzin), Prusiewo (Prussau), Słuszewo (Schluschow).

Centre) in Wrocław. The aim of the project was, using the oral history method, to record the history of everyday life in the years 1945–1973 in the Gniewino commune and to show the social and political contexts in which a witness to history – the narrator – is entangled. Subsequent memories were recorded during the project "From the past generation let our voice go to all generations – an intergenerational collage of Kashubian memory of the Death March of KL Stutthof" as part of the programme "Patriotism of Tomorrow."[29] The aim of the programme was to disseminate the idea of knowledge of ancestors, their experiences, and life choices, and the way they see the world.

Particularly important data, collected during this project and yet not published in such an extended format, is the testimony of a witness to history, 97-year-old Tadeusz Rydzewski, a participant of the Death March who escaped during a stopover in Luzino. He visited Luzino in the year 2022, a place that once again triggered the need for remembering; hence, many accounts quoted here, concern Luzino and its surroundings (such as Pomieczyno or Rybno). Sharing the memory is place-based. Telling stories, as well as listening to the stories, triggers an inner drive to reconstruct and then encapsulate one's life into an existential whole, enriched by subjective ideas and images about oneself and one's life.[30] Rydzewski, born in 1925, as a Home Army (AK, Polish: Armia Krajowa) soldier with the underground alias "Czupurny", was arrested in 1943 for partisan activity and imprisoned first in the Gestapo prison in Łomża, and after a few months, together with his mother, brother and sister, deported to KL Stutthof and incarcerated under number 27164. Tadeusz Rydzewski arrived in Luzino from Pszczyna to see, exactly 77 years later, the church from which he managed to escape during the evacuation of his column in February 1945. During the visit to Luzino, it was possible, using the oral history method, to record an interview[31] with Rydzewski. The interview with the witness was not transcribed; it was compiled by Aleksandra Kurowska-Susdorf and recorded on 2 February 2022 by Monika Wejer and deposited in the special collection of the library in Luzino. The witness Tadeusz Rydzewski also made available some of his written but yet unpublished memories and manuscripts. Additional sources are the written memoirs of former inmates[32]

29 Patriotism of Tomorrow is a nationwide grant programme implemented with funds from the then Ministry of Culture, National Heritage and Sport and operated by the Polish History Museum. The programme serves to discover, document and disseminate knowledge of Polish history. There were eight interviews recorded by Monika Wejher in 2020, used partly in the movie "Stutthof idzie", and deposited in the special collection of the Library in Luzino and eight interviews collected as a result of the Patriotism of Tomorrow Projects 2021–2023.

30 A. Kurowska-Susdorf, *Oswoić śmierć. Edukacyjny potencjał kaszubskich rytuałów pogrzebowych*, Warszawa 2019, p. 160.

31 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lf3iua9OdNw [accessed: 24.02.2024].

32 AMS, *Wspomnienia i relacje*.

of KL Stutthof (some of them not yet published), who were driven in the Death March. Furthermore, accounts from residents of Pomieczyno and Luzino who offered aid to prisoners along the Pomieczyno–Luzino–Rybno route are included in this publication. The memories of Luzino inhabitants were collected by Stefan Fikus in the year 1979 (not yet published).[33]

The research material can be divided into primary and supplementary resources. The primary research material consists of recordings made using the oral history method in the Gniewino and Luzino communes by the author as a part of the two mentioned projects. In addition, supplementary materials include published and unpublished, but previously edited, memoirs of participants in the events related to the Death March. The language of the interviews is mostly Polish, sometimes Kashubian (Luzino), or includes some elements of German vocabulary (Gniewino).

Stutthof concentration camp and the Death March

On 2 September 1939, the initial group of 150 prisoners entered the Stutthof camp. Originally functioning as a transit camp for civilians, it subsequently transitioned into a Special Camp, and by 1942, it operated as a concentration camp (KL, German: *Konzentrationslager*). For 5 years (2,077 days), 110,000 prisoners from 28 countries representing 45 nationalities[34] were imprisoned there, around 65,000[35] of whom died either as a direct result of the policy of extermination or indirectly as a result of conditions in the camp. On 9 May 1945, the tragic history of the Stutthof camp came to an end.[36] The rapid pace of the Soviet offensive forced the authorities of the Third Reich to consider the possibility of losing the occupied territories. The evacuation plan for the Danzig–West Prussia District was codenamed *"Eva-Fall"*. In the third evacuation stage, using the codename *"Seehund"*, the Stutthof camp was to be evacuated towards Lębork (to the SS school), 140 km away. A 7-day march was envisaged. In reality, none of the nine columns reached their destination. The premises were taken over by Wehrmacht soldiers along with a field hospital. The situation at the front was very dynamic; the roads were full of refugees from East Prussia. The camp commandant Paul Werner Hoppe received information from the party aid stations in Danzig to liquidate all the prisoners. Theodor Meyer, the evacuation manager, was given all the RAD (German:

33 *Witness Testimonies on the "Death March" in Luzino, January and February 1945 and Associated Study Comments*, compiled by Stefan Fikus in 1979, in the collection of the Museum of Kashubian–Pomeranian Literature and Music in Wejherowo 1981-K/C1/45.

34 M. Orski, *Struktura państwowa i skład narodowościowy obozu koncentracyjnego Stutthof w latach 1939–1945*, "Zeszyty Muzeum Stutthof 10", Wrocław 1992, p. 55.

35 A. Kłys, *Wykaz więźniów zmarłych w obozie Stutthof w latach 1939–1941*, "Zeszyty Muzeum Stutthof", no. 5 (15) (2017), p. 173.

36 K. Ciechanowski [et al.], *Stutthof – hitlerowski obóz koncentracyjny*, Warszawa 1988, p. 317. See also T. Gliniecki, M. Owsiński, *Stutthof, 8/9 maja 1945 r.*, Sztutowo 2020.

Reichsarbeitsdienst) labour service camps in the Lębork district instead, 13 in total. The evacuation camps, among other locations, served as sites for detaining the prisoners: Gęś, Krępa Kaszubska, Tawęcin, Rybno, Nawcz, Łówcz, Gniewino, Toliszczek. The personnel of these camps consisted of column escorts under the command of the evacuation manager Theodor Meyer.

The evacuation from the central camp stands as a profoundly tragic occurrence in the annals of the camp's history. Over a span of approximately 46 days, half of the 11,500 prisoners who embarked on the perilous journey in January 1945 died. This sombre episode, known as the Death March, would have inflicted even greater loss of life if it had not been for the benevolent assistance rendered by numerous denizens of Kashubian villages, including Luzino. The news rapidly spread across the Kashubia region regarding the imminent arrival of Stutthof concentration camp prisoners. This information spurred many local residents into action, as they felt a strong sense of obligation to aid the exhausted and impoverished prisoners. Regrettably, the harsh winter conditions, chronic hunger, rampant disease, and the inhumane behaviour of the *Wachmänner* (English: watchmen) collectively imposed a devastating toll.[37]

On 25 January 1945, the evacuation of KL Stutthof commenced. Column I comprised prisoners from blocks I and II, as well as some members of the hospital staff, totalling approximately 1,600 individuals. Column II consisted of prisoners from blocks III and IV, consisting of both Poles and Russians, as well as Jews, with a combined headcount of around 1,350 people. Column III was comprised of approximately 1,400 prisoners from blocks V and VII, consisting mainly of Polish, Russian, Danish, Czech, German, Norwegian, Lithuanian, Latvian, and Jewish individuals.[38] Column IV accommodated prisoners from blocks VIII and X, with a total of about 1,250 individuals, consisting of Poles and Russians. Column V comprised prisoners from blocks IX and XIII, including Poles and Russians, Italians, Germans, and Jews. This column contained approximately 1,100 individuals. Consisting primarily of Poles and Russians from blocks XII and XV, column VI encompassed around 1,500 people. Lastly, column VII was comprised of nearly 900 female prisoners from block I in the old camp. The march out was delayed, only column I set off at 6:00 am. The last one of the day set off at 3:00 p.m.

The next evacuation stage occurred on 26 January 1945; two separate columns commenced their departure. The first group, comprising 121 Norwegians and Finns from the Germanic camp, alongside approximately 700 prisoners including Poles, Jews, Russians, and French from the main camp, embarked on their journey promptly at 3:30 a.m. Soon after, at 6:00 a.m., the second group consisting

37 J. Grabowska, *Marsz śmierci. Ewakuacja piesza więźniów KL Stutthof i jego podobozów. 25 stycznia – 3 maja 1945*, Gdańsk 1992, p. 36.

38 D. Drywa, *Zagłada Żydów w obozie koncentracyjnym Stutthof*, Sztutowo 2001, p. 282.

of 1,600 women of various nationalities, predominantly Jewish women from the new camp, initiated their departure. The combined total of prisoners embarking on this route reached approximately 11,500 individuals, accounting for nearly half of the 24,207 prisoners detained in the camp during that period. Adequate provisions were prepared for the evacuation, consisting of roughly 120 grams of margarine or melted cheese and approximately 500 grams of bread.[39]

Three of the nine columns that left KL Stutthof walked first through the former territory of the Free City of Gdańsk, and then through the Kashubian village of Luzino (columns VI, VII, and IX). In the village, they set up field kitchens at locations such as the slaughterhouse at the Wojewskis, the slaughterhouse at the Maschks, and the old school. Accommodation was provided in St Lawrence Church, the Evangelical Church, the Hall at Wittbrodt's, and in the farm buildings of the former Żelewski estate, which had been taken over in 1940 by Jakub Bamberger. Column VI spent the night of 3 to 4 February 1945 in Luzino and was mainly comprised of Poles and Russians. Column VII, consisting of 900 women of various nationalities, including Poles, Russians, Danes, Germans, Norwegians, and French, spent the same night in the village. Column IX, with about 1,600 women, mainly Jewish, Polish, and Russian, arrived in *Luzino* on 4 February 1945 and also received assistance from the local population. In just three days, over 3,000 people from columns VI, VII, and IX, hungry, exhausted, and sapped by Nazi physical repression, passed through Luzino. The memories of those who supported the ailing and starved prisoners by preparing food, offering bread, assisting in their escape, and hiding prisoners endure in the local villagers' memories to this day. Also remembered in the hearts of the inhabitants of Luzino are the memories of two women who cared for babies born during the detention of prisoners from columns VII and IX.[40] The route of the March ran in the direction of the German towns and villages to, among others, the sub-camps in Rybno (then Rieben), Gniewino (then Gnewin) or Kolkowo (then Kolkau).

No accommodation, food or medical care was prepared for the prisoners. No consideration was given to the weather conditions, the physical exhaustion of the prisoners, the threat of typhus and other evacuation currents and the moving army. The evacuation of Stutthof concentration camp, known as the Death March, is considered an integral part of the overall methods of Nazi genocide and is one of the most tragic events in the history of the region.[41]

39 J. Grabowska, *Marsz śmierci....*, p. 15–16; J. Grabowska-Chałka, *Stutthof. Informator historyczny*, Gdańsk–Sztutowo 2014, p. 107.

40 J. Grabowska, *Marsz śmierci...*, p. 28, 31, 34–35; A. Kurowska-Susdorf, *Marsz śmierci z KL Stutthof w pamięci mieszkańców Kaszub, odcinek Luzino. Projekt edukacyjno-kulturalny*, "Pomerania", no. 1 (560) (2022), p. 24.

41 J. Grabowska, *Marsz śmierci...*, p. 36.

Today, we can trace the space/memory markers of these tragic events along the route of the Death March.[42] The initial mass burial site for inmates from KL Stutthof in the winter of 1945 is situated in the former Polish territory of Pręgowo. "The commemoration of the collective sacrifice made by thousands of prisoners carries significant social significance."[43] As a pedagogical category of a memory-place, it contributes to raising awareness, fostering community integration, and providing education.[44]

Numerous locations continue to await the erection of memorials dedicated to the thousands of victims who perished during the Death March. Additionally, there is a need for monuments that honour the Kashubian women and children who bravely endangered their lives to assist the prisoners from KL Stutthof.

Metaphors of the borderland

The assistance experienced by the prisoners of KL Stutthof who walked in the Death March varied depending on the territory. There are several dimensions of attitudes worth mentioning. In the first days of the Death March, the German population living in the former territory of the Free City of Gdańsk (incorporated into the Third Reich in 1939) was indifferent or even hostile.[45] Witness accounts, however, refer above all to the courageous demeanour of the Kashubians, with particularly frequent threads of help provided by women and children. It is worth mentioning that the assistance concerned not only the attitude of the native population towards the prisoners, but also the prisoners towards other fellow prisoners. In addition, the accounts also indicate that the prisoners themselves provided help to the Kashubian people. The collected memories show how the experience of the borderland changes depending on the section of the evacuation march. In the memoirs, one can discern the remarkable dynamics of the borderland, including the metaphorical fluidity of borders, the convergence of influences, and the noticeable movement of Kashubian women along the former Polish–German border to assist prisoners held in the Rieben camp.

It is worth noting that in January 1945 there was no formal border there; the area covering the evacuation of the KL Stutthof central camp was incorporated into the German Reich. Nevertheless, the mental border (relict/phantom boundary) between the former area of the Free City of Gdańsk, the former Pomeranian Voivodeship of the Second Polish Republic, and the third border with the former

42 E.M. Grot, J. Ellwart, *Śladami Marszu śmierci więźniów KL Stutthof*, Sztutowo 2020.

43 J. Grabowska, *Marsz śmierci. Ewakuacja piesza więźniów KL Stutthof i jego podobozów. 25 stycznia – 3 maja 1945* (second edition expanded and revised by A. Kłys, M. Owsiński), Sztutowo 2023, pp. 272–273.

44 M. Mendel, W. Theiss, *op. cit.*, pp. 31–32.

45 There are not many accounts from German civilians who witnessed the Death March, see J. Grabowska, *Marsz śmierci…*, Sztutowo 2023, p. 14.

Third Reich district of Western Pomerania was still present in the memory of the inhabitants of these areas.

The testimonies given by the witnesses are characterised by the presence of highly emotive statements, words, and even entire phrases. These elements have served as the impetus for the introduction of three distinct borderland metaphors, namely uncertainty, life, and hope. The intermingling of these borderlands is evident, wherein their experiences exhibit a state of fluidity. It becomes apparent that the act of traversing the intangible border resonates within the encounters and narratives of the prisoners – participants of the Death March. Three metaphors of the borderland can be distinguished: **the borderland of uncertainty** – the march from Stutthof concentration camp through the area of the former Free City of Gdańsk inhabited mainly by the German population; **the borderland of life** – the march through ethnographically Kashubian areas (former Pomeranian Voivodeship of the Second Polish Republic); and **the borderland of hope** (former Third Reich district of Western Pomerania) – the last section of the Death March, accompanied by a growing sense of hope for the end of the war.

The borderland of uncertainty

The prisoners crossed the boundary of KL Stutthof for the first time and set off on the evacuation march on 25 and 26 January 1945. A sense of fear prevailed. The prisoners were starved and sick. The food rations they received were scarce. In addition, the weather conditions were incredibly harsh, with freezing temperatures, heavy snowfall, and wind. The prisoners awaited the next decisions of the SS officers with uncertainty; a mixture of joy, hope, and fear.

Tadeusz Rydzewski set off on the Death March on 25 January 1945 at around 1:00 p.m. in column VI, which consisted of around 1,500 people, mainly Poles employed in Stutthof concentration camp's workshops and offices. The route of column VI initially led through the former territory of the Free City of Gdańsk, through Mikoszewo–Cedry Małe–Cedry Wielkie–Pruszcz Gdański (with an overnight stay in the camp premises at the airport). As Tadeusz Rydzewski, a witness to history, recalls in his memoirs:

> The day of 25 January 1945 [...] from the very beginning, hunger, frost, heaps of snow and herding us through the fields, because the roads were occupied by the army, enormously increased the difficulty of the march and exhaustion. It was a literal Death March. We slept in farmyards or barns. Prisoners who did not make it on the march, after being shot in the head, were left by the side of the road [...]. The roadside was strewn with corpses.[46]

46 T. Rydzewski, *manuscript*, p. 4.

Henryk Tempczyk, a KL Stutthof prisoner from 1944, recollects this moment: "The news of the evacuation raised hopes for a swift recovery of freedom. In our discussions, we envisioned this pivotal moment in our lives in different ways. It was difficult to imagine where and how the evacuation of thousands of prisoners would be carried out."[47] Jan Jarzębowski, who was interned in KL Stutthof from October 1942, recalls the day of their column's departure: "An important but difficult thing to convey is the thoughts and mood prevailing among us – after so many years of captivity, it's time to move into the unknown [...] Surely there was a sense of hope and even greater unease."[48]

A resident of Warsaw, Krzysztof Dunin-Wąsowicz also walked with column VI in the Death March towards the RAD camp in Rybienko (then Althammer) near Rybno. He recalls the terrible conditions of the evacuation, which also involved a large number of refugees on the roads and constant stopovers in the snow:

> At that time, the roads were not only clogged with the previous columns of evacuated Stutthof prisoners, but also with huge numbers of refugees from the civilian population and, last but not least, the German army [...]. Side roads and fields were deliberately chosen to avoid blocking the main routes needed for the military transports and also to prevent the Polish population from noticing and helping us.[49]

The evacuation was not sufficiently prepared, and already in the first days of the March the prisoners noticed that there was neither food nor accommodation for them. In Tadeusz Rydzewski's memories, the attitude of the population living in the former territory of the Free City of Gdańsk, through which the route of the March led for the first four days, comes up: *"AKS: On the first days of the March, did people give food. The locals?* T.R: No! Much later."[50] As further recalled by Rydzewski, the local German population also treated the prisoners with hostility. The witness recalls the particularly negative attitude of the women:

> When we were led down the street as prisoners, the Germans would threaten us from the windows [*the witness waved his fist significantly*], calling us bandits and so on, looking at us as if we were rubbish, with a reproachful look, so Danzig-like, *Swabian*. The behaviour in general I would describe as pro-Hitler, 90% were women, because their sons were killed there and so on, and men 80%. Surely, they were also decent and anti-Hitler in a certain way, but they

47 H. Tempczyk, AMS, *Wspomnienia i relacje*, vol. 1, p. 333.
48 J. Jarzębowski, AMS, *Wspomnienia i relacje*, vol. 2, p. 180.
49 K. Dunin-Wąsowicz, *Stutthof*, Gdańsk 1970, pp. 115–116.
50 Interview with Tadeusz Rydzewski, 2.02.2022, by Aleksandra Kurowska-Susdorf [Luzino], within the framework of the Patriotism of Tomorrow Programme 2021–2023.

> couldn't reveal themselves, they had to be highly conspiratorial, because otherwise they would get sent to prison, to a camp [...].[51]

Krzysztof Dunin-Wąsowicz reports that as soon as they crossed the former border of the Free City of Gdansk the situation of the prisoners started changing: "While on the first days of the evacuation the German population, in the villages we passed through, looked at us with reluctance, if not outright hostility, a fundamental change occurred already in the first undoubtedly Kashubian village."[52] The SS-men and the functionary prisoners who escorted the prisoners during the evacuation especially on the first days reacted violently to any attempt to obtain food, help or delay in the march. Rydzewski recalls, that "a thousand people were locked inside the church. They sat on the benches, feeling terrible, exhausted, and freezing, hoping for a rest. None could bring anything into the church because of those *Swabians*, not even hot soup [...] nothing, literally nothing."[53] Dunin-Wąsowicz points out that the areas inhabited by the German population significantly reduced the success of any possible escape by prisoners from the evacuation march. The German population, in the recollections of the former prisoner, did not provide assistance to the participants of the Death March, while from the Kashubian village of Niestępowo, a huge change took place. Column VI spent the night of 28/29 January 1945 and a two-day stopover there. On 31 January 1945, they set off in the direction of Żukowo, where the column was divided into two sections – one spent the night in a barn, the other in a church:

> Many prisoners tried to escape at the beginning of the evacuation, but our Warsaw group found it still premature, since we were passing through an area without forests, inhabited by the population of Gdańsk, hostile to us. The situation changed when we reached ethnographically Kashubian areas, i.e. from Niestępowo onwards [...]; women and children tried to serve bread, as long as this was not obstructed by the SS-men. News spread throughout [..] that "Stutthof is coming."[54]

Dunin-Wąsowicz mentions the help of the Kashubians, pointing to the courage of the women and children and the malice of the *SS-man* who poured soup on the ground or trampled slices of bread into the mud. He also draws attention to the massiveness and spontaneity of the aid and the Kashubians' unyielding attitude in bringing hope:

51 *Ibidem*. 'Swabians' is a racist term of abuse used to refer to brutal Germans.
52 K. Dunin-Wąsowicz, *Obóz koncentracyjny Stutthof*, Gdańsk 1970, pp. 226–227.
53 Interview with Tadeusz Rydzewski.
54 K. Dunin-Wąsowicz, *Stutthof...*, pp. 116–117.

> During the March, they [SS-men] did not allow dry provisions to be given to the prisoners. The brave Kashubians were able to cope with this as well. On the road along the evacuation route, women would stand with bread and wait for a better moment, until the guard turned the other way. They would then throw the bread at the columns of prisoners, who would grab it on the fly. At the stops, some SS-men were bribed [...]. The Kashubians would give them money, cigarettes, and vodka for allowing them to give prisoners a few barrels of hot soup or a few buckets of boiled potatoes. [...] Therefore, had it not been for the self-sacrificing help of the Kashubian population, who gave proof of their Polish identity and great patriotism at every step, the losses during the evacuation, enormous as they were, would have been much greater.[55]

A prisoner of KL Stutthof, Elżbieta Ziemann (née Dampc), born in 1925, a liaison officer of the Pomeranian Griffin secret organisation and a nurse in the Kębłowo area, in her memoirs collected by Stefan Fikus, recalls the evacuation from the camp, which led, through her home area, the vicinity of Luzino and Kochanowo: "When we entered purely Kashubian areas, then everything seemed to change, the population spontaneously started to help us, although such help was forbidden by the authorities and the guards [...]. We marched closer to our areas."[56]

The borderland of life

After entering the Kashubian lands, the prisoners, in their recollections and direct reports, spotted a noticeable change in the behaviour of the escorts and the local population as well:

> Now we noticed a change – the escort arranged for a sleigh pulled by a pair of horses and did not shoot at the stragglers. We assumed that this was on the Landrat's orders, because the entire route along which the Stutthof prisoners had marched in the previous days was strewn with corpses. [...] At this stage, we already felt significant help from the local population and thanks to them we were able to survive the hardships of the evacuation.[57]

Similarly, Olaf R. Walle's accounts indicate that the prisoners felt they had crossed a phantom, metaphorical border between the former Free City of Gdańsk and the former Pomeranian Voivodeship of the Second Polish Republic: "We had no doubt that we had entered Poland. [...] As we passed through the villages, people ran out to us and stood on the side of the road, looking for their loved ones who

55 *Ibidem*, pp. 118–119.
56 E. Ziemann, *Witness Testimonies on the "Death March" in Luzino...*, p. 76.
57 J. Krzewski, AMS, *Wspomnienia i relacje*, vol. 2, p. 196.

had been taken from their villages. The guards and *kapos* drove them away from us; they even shot those waiting."[58]

Thanks to the help of local people, the prisoners for the first time received a warm meal, porridge and bread. On 2 February 1945, the column set off for Pomieczyno. Wacław Mitura recalls staying overnight in this Kashubian village. It was the village of Pomieczyno, or more precisely the nearby village of Barwik that can boast of its inhabitant Monika Szwerdfeger, who was awarded the title of Righteous Among the Nations by the Yad Vashem Institute for saving a Jewish woman named Lusia Schimel from the Death March.[59] There were more people who, risking their lives, helped the prisoners, but their story has never been heard.

Genia Rosental, a Jewish woman from Wilno, describes her attempt to escape from the Death March and the help she received probably from a Kashubian woman:

> Village women were taking out food along the way, but then the Germans started shooting, and we knew that an invisible hand had placed potatoes and bread on the road. So, people knew we were coming [...]. I told Edith that we would escape next time [...]. We wandered around for 5 days, sucking pinecones and drinking snow. During such a hike, I noticed an isolated house which, with its broken windows, looked abandoned. We approached, and the dog started barking. I opened the door and saw a painting of the Virgin Mary on the wall. Inside there was a tall woman. I boldly said "Praised be Jesus Christ." This greeting opened the way for us: "Sit down"[60] – she invited us in, gave us milk and coffee [...] after the meal we wanted to leave, she stopped us, put a white canvas on the straw, I thought it was for herself. But it was for us. Then I refused to stay in bed, telling her the truth that we were lice-ridden. She washed and dressed us and forcibly placed us on this white cloth.[61]

Wacław Mitura recalls the stop of his column in the Kashubian village of Pomieczyno and the help he received:

> Outside the church something began to happen. Clusters of women and children, with buckets of soup, cans of coffee and baskets of sliced bread, were coming from the village and lined up in a row against the fence of the church, in anticipation of when the prisoners would be released.

58 O.R. Walle, *Norweska policja za drutami kolczastymi. Historia pobytu policji w Stutthofie w latach 1943–1945*, Sztutowo 2015, p. 169.

59 Interview with Lusia Schimmel, 24.06.2023, prepared by Janina Goldhar (Izrael, March 2011), compiled by Elżbieta Pielowska https://sprawiedliwi.org.pl/pl/historie-pomocy/wasze-opowiesci/lusia-pinczuk-lusia-schimmel-ocalona-teraz-ty-bedziesz-swieta [accessed: 20.02.2024]; see also Yad Vashem https://righteous.yadvashem.org/?searchType=righteous_only&language=en&itemId=9840586&ind=0 [accessed: 20.02.2024].

60 In original testimony we find an invitation to take a seat "siądźta" which may suggest this was a Kashubian home.

61 G. Rosental, AMS, *Wspomnienia i relacje*, vol. 7, pp. 64–66.

> When the order was given to march on and the church was opened, the prisoners saw huge rows of women and children who ran towards them, giving them food [...] And so, after the daily march, we reached the village of Luzino, where we spent the night in a barn.[62]

Rydzewski recalls the monotony of the march, fatigue, hunger and its hardship. After several days of marching, even a thin piece of garment became an unbearable burden. Fellow prisoners obtained help from the local community but also tried to help each other, looking for any food and a place where they could find shelter at night:

> I had a thin, fluffy down quilt, I don't know how it came to be on me, [...] I wasn't able to carry this light quilt, which gave life, somehow kept me warm, I wasn't able to carry it... a young boy, seemingly full of energy, but one day, another day [...]. There was Mr Frydrych with us one day, I remember his name, an elderly man, very cultured, already tired, so we helped him, carried him by the hand. One on one side, the other on the other. And we continued like that one day, the next day. And each day was more or less the same, unchanging. Whoever made it to the barn, threshed the ears of rye with his fingernails [...] and it was a bit warmer there, because it wasn't windy anymore, but those who stayed in the farmyard and those who made it to the cowshed didn't even use it, because where could they milk the milk, and those camp bowls, red, made of tin, nobody carried them either, because they were no longer needed for anything and they were only a burden. And so it went on day after day [...]. There was help from the population, from the Kashubian community, but the number of us was enormous in relation to the fact that they weren't allowed to come up to us to deliver a slice of bread or something to eat.[63]

After a stopover in Pomieczyno, where the prisoners spent the night from 2 to 3 February 1945, in the morning the prisoners set off for Luzino, 22 km away. After about eight hours of marching, they reached the village, where they were billeted for the night in both churches (Evangelical and Catholic), in a school and a shed. According to the memories of the former prisoner Jerzy Krzewski, born 12 March 1910, evacuated in column VI, material and moral support of the inhabitants of Luzino was significant:

> On the last day of January, we set off for Luzino. We received help many times along the route, and in Luzino people, ignoring the *SS-men*, dared to bring us bread and buckets of soup. [...] There, the distribution of food began on a large scale, as well as escape attempts, which were often successful. Prisoners were bought for watches, bacon, rings, etc. Even more important for us was emotional help – taking addresses of families, words of encouragement about hope.

62 W. Mitura, *Wspomnienia więźnia Stutthofu*, Warszawa 1978, p. 164.
63 He is referring to the *SS-man* who dropped off one of the prisoners and, throwing him into the river, shot him on the fly. Interview with Tadeusz Rydzewski.

> We received news from the front, [...] that the days of this torment were numbered, that we would not get far. Such news spread like wildfire throughout the column, refreshing our strength.[64]

The chance of a successful escape from the March increased. The Kashubian population gave encouragement and hope to the prisoners. Rydzewski decided to escape together with a fellow prisoner:

> At risk to themselves, the Kashubian community supported us with food; every bite of bread was worth a life [...]. For the night of 3 February, we were locked in the church in Luzino. The church was closed and bolted. At that time, there could still be half a thousand people in the marching group. From that church, my friend Jerzy Zawistowski and I jumped out of the window [...]. After two months of wandering around forests and barns, we were returning home [...].[65]

Rydzewski tells how the prisoners themselves tried to help each other during the Death March, despite their exhaustion. There is the story of the guidance of the elderly man, Mr Frydrych, and the assistance of other prisoners in organising an escape:

> We dragged this friend, the elderly Mr Frydrych, for the last few kilometres, we reached that church, he couldn't [...] he had to.... with regret, but we had to leave him, he probably wouldn't have gone any further. And then when we looked around in that church, the church was immediately bolted with all the locks possible. Jurek and I looked around, all the windows downstairs were locked. There was no way out. Break a window? There was no way, because immediately the guard would come and there'd be a problem, there'd be shots, so we asked our fellow prisoners to help us, to put the church bench on the lower bench and then it was raised [...] it was our decision [...] we asked them to keep an eye on the guard that was walking around the church, so that it would be on the opposite side of that window. I jumped down and waited for a while, wondering what was going on with Jerzy, but all of a sudden he jumped up and safely, on two legs. There was a lot of snow there and he braked, offsetting the fall. And we saw a copse not far away and quickly rushed there [...].[66]

After his successful escape from the church, the witness wanders with his fellow prisoner, Jerzy Zawistowski, around Kashubia, experiencing various forms of assistance provided by local Kashubs and Poles, such as being fed, provided with shelter, accommodation, supplied with clothing, letters, etc.

64 J. Krzewski, *op. cit.*, p. 196.
65 T. Rydzewski, *manuscript*, p. 4.
66 Interview with Tadeusz Rydzewski.

In the recollections of the witness to history, there is also an example of help given to the local community by the prisoners themselves. Rydzewski mentions a thread related to the entry of Soviet troops into the Kashubian region; one family from Będargowo in particular stuck in his memory. In the narrative, he mentions the housekeeper, referring to her as his "would-be mother-in-law." The account shows that help was sometimes mutual:

> I recall her daughter Bronia with great affection. We were there with them when the Russians entered, and we knew what they did with the girls [...] they're such *sobaki* (here: dogs). So quickly, the bed was made by Bronia and we got into this bed together, pretending that she is my girl. Also, they [Russians] were coming in and [...] Bronia was a pretty girl, [...] but fortunately they left us alone [...], they absolutely didn't move anyone. It was all for protection.[67]

In the Kashubian village of Luzino, from 3 February to 5 February 1945, there were approximately 3,000 prisoners, who were given support in the form of food, some of them also managed to escape. Many women and children demonstrated great bravery, as they risked their lives to aid those oppressed by the Nazis. Dunin-Wąsowicz specifically mentions the village of Luzino on the evacuation route as one of the exceptional places: "Personally, with the greatest gratitude I remember the help of the Kashubians during those hard times, especially the village of Luzino in the Wejherowo district. Its inhabitants fed several thousand prisoners with great generosity, offering them the best they had, and above all, opening their warm Polish hearts to us."[68]

Rydzewski describes in turn how the Kashubian population helped, both by supporting the prisoners with food and by providing shelter at night:

> We are looking through the window into one flat, eight of them... on the table a big bowl, mash on milk and eight little kids, each with a spoon and each reaching into this bowl and eating. But the children's mother moved them away from the bowl and now she was saying: "You guys eat up, you're hungry" [...] You can imagine how we felt when we reached for the bowl... we felt so sorry for those kids. But we didn't know when the next meal would be [...] so tired that we could not walk any longer.[69]

The narratives often mention that it was mainly women who provided help: "One lady, a well-dressed Kashubian woman, received us with dignity, we chatted. Every time they took us in, they would put one loaf of bread on the table, and we ate, and she gave another one for the road. For God's gratitude, because how

67 *Ibidem*.
68 K. Dunin-Wąsowicz, *Stutthof...*, p. 119.
69 Interview with Tadeusz Rydzewski.

else were we supposed to say thank you?"[70] There are also threads where former inmates of KL Stutthof are helped along their journey by Kashubian men:

> We went into a rich farmer's house once, a big barn, and found out where we could possibly go, who the decent people were, where we could knock. But we were given his address. He himself was a rich farmer. He had a couple of oxen, a lot of land. Such oxen for ploughing, for field work. And a flat... and he says, if one of you was a shoemaker or a tailor, he would have left us for longer, but unfortunately none. But he took us in the barn, we slept until morning, covered with straw and thanked him, because he didn't report to the Germans that there were such people there. So, in that respect we were somehow protected. And earlier in the evening I had a French uniform with a large red cross painted in oil, still from the camp, and he said to me that he could use this uniform. I was a bit taken aback, but on the other hand I thought maybe it would be worth leaving this uniform for him, even though it was cold, and the uniform was so warm, military. But maybe he will let us stay one more night.[71]

Rydzewski also mentions a man who provided them with accommodation overnight: "One gentleman in the evening permitted us to spend the night in the barn and even provided us with a blanket to keep warm."[72]

In the collection of the Museum of Kashubian Literature and Music, there are also noteworthy letters. One is by a former prisoner of KL Stutthof who thanks the Kashubian population for the help he received during the Death March:

> I turn with great respect and thanks to the people of Kashubia, who helped me in 1945 when Stutthof concentration camp was being evacuated [...]. In the villages we passed on the way, Kashubian women and children tried to give us bread, but the SS would not let them. Later, we found bread tossed on the road. When an SS-man spotted a slice of bread, he would trample it into the mud. The road behind us was full of corpses shot in front of my eyes [...]. On the roads along the evacuation route, women would stand with bread and wait for a right moment until the guard turned the other way, then they would throw the bread and we would grab it in the air. Personally, I remember with the greatest gratitude the help of the Kashubian people during those hard times, especially the village of Luzino [...]. I kindly ask you to inform the people of Luzino that I, unknown to them, Mińko Stefan, personally send my wishes of good health to all the good people.[73]

The testimonies of witnesses to history collected in 1978 by Stefan Fikus are a rich collection of examples of the provision of aid by the Kashubian population,

70 *Ibidem.*
71 *Ibidem.*
72 *Ibidem.*
73 Acknowledgement, Białystok, 17.12.1978, Minko Stefan, in the collection of the Museum of Kashubian–Pomeranian Literature and Music in Wejherowo 1981-K/C1/45.

who also ventured into German territory, for example to the sub-camp in Rybno (then Rieben), a dozen kilometres away from Luzino. Stories about Mrs Bach, who took in a newborn baby who was born in the church were vivid among the local population. His mother, a Jewish woman, died immediately after the birth: "One of the women also gave birth [...] she herself died, while the child was taken by a resident of Luzino, a lady called Bachowa (née Skanczkowska) on the advice of a guard. However, the child died after 14 days."[74] However, according to the account of Janina Wasylke,[75] the child was baptised and brought up by Maria Bach and after a few years a couple from Germany came to collect the child. Other Luzino residents do not confirm this narrative. According to the account of Wanda Mejer, born in 1929, two children were born while the women's column was stationed in Luzino: "The child was taken in by one of our women – Bachowa; it was a Jewish child, he was given the name Janek. However, he did not live long, something around 14 days. The other person who took the prisoner's baby was Piszkowa, a childless couple."[76]

One of Luzino's residents, Helena Pajewska (née Fikus), born in 1925, recounts how young girls, distracting the guards, tried to help the prisoners locked up in Luzino's churches:

> In order to reach the prisoners, we had to placate those *szkiebry* (here: contemptuously Germans), but words alone were not enough. So, in order to divert their attention from the door, some of us courted them, others offered them pork fat; it seems that Patelczykówna got a bottle of vodka somewhere; Regina Bizewska [...] brought vodka and cigarettes to bribe the dangerous *wachmänner*; someone brought vodka and cigarettes to give to *wachmänner*; someone brought a cube of butter and slipped it to them [...] When the *wachmänner* were busy with the girls and bribes, [...] others opened the church door and went inside, and there was a real doomsday. Screams, groans, squeaks, cries for help and the hungry, miserable faces of the humiliated people. We quickly gave away all the bread.[77]

Wanda Mejer was 16 years old in February 1945; this is how she recalls the Death March entering her village:

> There, other girls were already operating, they were jumping on the guards, bringing food in watering cans, buckets and baskets. They were mostly young girls, under-age, although some women also showed up [...]. One of the most self-sacrificing women was old Reszkowa, now deceased, who used to come to us with a full load of bread, flour and potatoes to give to the prisoners. She lived far outside the village, in Pustki, and yet in that snow and frost she walked

74 S. Fikus, *Witness Testimonies...*, pp. 11–12.
75 Interview with Janina Wasylke by Aleksandra Kurowska-Susdorf [Luzino], 2019, private collection.
76 W. Mejer, *Witness Testimonies...*, p. 42.
77 H. Pajewska, *Witness Testimonies...*, p. 21.

in her long dresses, heedless of hardship. She and her daughter also kept four prisoners who had escaped from the transport during the march.[78]

Witnesses were particularly moved by the sight of a column of Jewish women. Help was spontaneous and on many levels. Clothes, food, clotheslines to help in the escape were provided, places to hide were pointed out, secret information were received and, as mentioned earlier, newborn babies were rescued:

Once they brought in unfortunate Jewish women, barefoot, hungry and miserable. They had been beaten terribly, tortured; their screams could be heard from afar. We set about helping them again, distributing clothes and whatever we had. Our Wanda had just got some new woollen stockings, but seeing such misery, she took them off and gave them away, and so did old Szulcowa [...]. That evening, when dad came from work, we urged him to let the runaways from the church into the house [...] we wanted to have them in our house, but dad was afraid, because they could wreck our whole family. So, we agreed that they would hide in the huge outside oven still warm after baking bread, and the oven was far away in the garden, which might not draw the attention of the neighbours, because we had fierce *Volksdeutsche*[79] who reported everything at once, and that's why dad and mum were afraid of them. But the prisoners readily agreed to spend the night in that very big oven.[80]

Rydzewski points out during his narration that after escaping from the Death March in Luzino, he and a friend wandered through Kashubian villages at night, hiding from the German soldiers. Together with another prisoner, Mr Jerzy, they paid attention to the furnishings of the houses before asking for help. The narrative goes on to say that more modest homes meant that prisoners were more likely to receive help:

Until the evening, we sat in this rye hollow, then we went out. We walked and looked at the poorer houses, the smaller ones. We looked through the window to see if there were any holy paintings hanging. If there were any, then we knocked on the door, and immediately, from the first ones we knocked on, apparently, they had already realised that we [prisoners] were coming. They let us in and fed us. When we were leaving, we were already congratulating ourselves that we were alive, that we were saved. We won life! From that church, from that Kashubian

78 W. Mejer, *op. cit.*, p. 40.
79 Nazi term, literally meaning "folk-German", used to refer to ethnic Germans living outside of Germany. *Volksdeutsche* did not hold German or Austrian citizenship, but the Nazis felt it important to strengthen their communities throughout east-central Europe, https://www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%206345.pdf [accessed: 24.02.2024].
80 H. Pajewska, *Witness Testimonies...*, pp. 23–24.

house [...], we knew [...] they were Kashubians! Bravo Kashubians! They saved me, **gave us lives!** Death is over! And then so on every evening.[81]

Columns VI, VII, and IX set off at the beginning of February 1945 through Luzino towards the German border to the sub-camps. The prisoners left the borderland of life.

The borderland of hope for the end of the war

After leaving Luzino, further columns headed towards Rybno, entering German territory. According to Grabowska, the column moved from Luzino to Rybno (then Rieben) – a total of 150 km in 11 days. The losses in the column amounted to approximately 400 people.[82]

Witnesses recall that after crossing the former border, initially they felt lack of support from the German population. In his memoirs, a prisoner recounts the events following their departure from the Kashubian regions and subsequent entry into the territory that, due to the power of the Treaty of Versailles, had come to be situated on the German side: "We marched through Kębłowo, Zelewo, all the way to Zamostne. While here, as in previous villages, the Kashubian women gave us bread, after we had passed the former Polish–German border, no one was waiting for us with bread in the nearest village."[83]

Magłorzata Hebel, born in 1937 in Słuszewo (then Schluschow), indicates that the local German population was rather indifferent to prisoners from KL Stutthof passing through the surrounding villages:

AKS: You talked about this Death March from Stutthof; were the local Germans willing to help or were they afraid?

M.H: No. I think they were here for a short period of time because they went on. They must have gone this way because they were in Gniewino and here [...] they must have gone this way.[84]

After crossing the former Polish–German border, there was a change in the mood of the local community. Food and the most necessary things, according to the accounts, were brought by Kashubians from the borderland, while the local community presented attitudes ranging from indifferent to hostile. If the *wachmänner*

81 Interview with Tadeusz Rydzewski.
82 J. Grabowska, *Marsz śmierci...*, Gdańsk 1992, p. 28.
83 *Ibidem*.
84 Archiwum Ośrodka "Pamięć i Przyszłość", PL OPiP III-1-9-8-3, Testimony of Małgorzata Hebel, 16.03.2019. (Testimony prepared and compiled by Aleksandra Kurowska-Susdorf), p. 11.

ordered the locals to prepare meals for the prisoners, such assistance was organised. Władysława Rowińska, born in 1938 in Kochanowo, notes that there was also a belief that the sub-camp kitchens were adequately equipped and help was not needed.

WR: They were going here, down here, then there for the *lager*[85] and here....
AKS: And where was the lager?
WR: It's not far from here. [...]
AKS: But where was it? It was in some buildings like this....
WR: Barracks. There are barracks still standing.
AKS: And was there anything else that people said? In terms of how it was organised, were there locals here to help? Did anyone cook any food? Or...
WR: Nothing. There, they had [...] there was, they had their own kitchen, because there were pots later, broken plates and everything. They must have had their kitchen, for sure.
AKS: In those barracks?
WR.: *Jo*, exactly in those barracks.[86]

Talking about her parents, who were Germans, Małgorzata Hebel recalls that her parents were ordered to prepare some kind of meal for the camp's inmates:

And I was 8 years old, it was before the war,[87] they rushed those from Stutthof here, as if it was today. I saw them coming from the other side, I saw them going, they were leading them here right away, I remember there was a barn and, in this barn, they stayed [...] these people. I saw them walking. Their shoes were all broken, and there was still so much snow [...]. They were walking there barefoot. And this inspector [...]. The inspector lived there, he was the one who ran it all, and at that time he told the people here, for these people, for food [...] for something to [...]. My mum was also here, all these people, every family had to [...] they cooked milk soup, what they had, so there was this kind of pasta, everyone got such a bucket of milk and they got it, and on the estate they cooked them potatoes with these skins, and this one and that one [...] we children were curious, we always looked, and there was a guard standing in front of the gate and they were watching so that no one would run away, and yet three women managed to escape, they escaped from there and came to our house, and I remember it like today. We lived

85 Occasionally, the narrators incorporate German or Kashubian vocabulary. *Lager* is the German term for "camp", while *Jo* is the Kashubian word for "yes".
86 Archiwum Ośrodka "Pamięć i Przyszłość", PL OPiP III-1-9-4-1, Testimony of Władysława Rowińska, 14.09.2019. Testimony prepared and compiled by Aleksandra Kurowska-Susdorf, pp. 23–24.
87 For the German inhabitants of what is now the eastern part of the Pomerania Province, military activity actually became noticeable only towards the end of the conflict, with the entry of Soviet troops in 1945.

> on that side of the house, they came in and wanted bread, and my mother stood up and cut the bread. A whole loaf, because we were baking that bread there. My mother, while she was slicing, she cut her finger, because soon this German came after those women. He knew they had escaped, I think he had seen them, so he came to us, he had a baton like they say [...] and he picked it up and at mum, he wanted to, and mum said he could hit as she was not afraid, but he didn't do anything and those women didn't do anything either. And then later they went back there, and then they took them from there, but I don't know where, because they were still in Kolków [...] Well, and then when the Russians, the ones I remember the worst, how they drove those tanks through Kostkowo.[88]

Elżbieta Ziemann, a Kashub from the Stutthof camp, was sent to a sub-camp in Gniewino (then Gniewin) after the evacuation. She recalls how the attitude and assistance of the inhabitants of the territories through which the March passed changed. The attitude was different between the Kashubians and the Germans. She points out that the Germans did help, but only conditionally:

> On 5 February, we marched out of Luzino in the direction of Kębłowo, through Zamostne, Rybno, Kniewo and to Gniewino [...]. But the Kashubian population from these parts brought food by sleigh. The Germans also helped the prisoners, but according to their well-known slogan: "*Nur für Deutsche, nicht für Polen!*". Strangely enough, in the areas inhabited by our [Kashubian] population, these slogans were not mentioned; [here in Kashubia it was] not just for the Poles, but for everyone, because everyone suffered equally.[89]

Many accounts indicate that the Kashubian population endeavoured to assist the prisoners by transporting provisions and medication across the former Polish–German border to the sub-camp in Rybno (then Rieben) or Gęś (then Ganz). In the accounts, we see the intermingling of Kashubian border influences, its fluid, dynamic character and great determination of the Kashubian population to help the prisoners. There are three secret messages in the archives of Museum of Kashubian–Pomeranian Literature and Music (MPiMKP) in Wejherowo, generously donated by Mrs Elżbieta Arendt from Wejherowo, but never published. The last borderland of hope was not only hope for prisoners to regain their freedom or for the end of the war, but also for receiving help from Polish and Kashubian residents of the area:

88 Archiwum Ośrodka "Pamięć i Przyszłość", PL OPiP III-1-9-8-3, Testimony of Małgorzata Hebel, 16.03.2019. (Testimony prepared and compiled by Aleksandra Kurowska-Susdorf), p. 2.

89 E. Ziemann, *Witness Testimonies...*, p. 76.

Dear Sir or Madam,
You will be surprised that a complete stranger dares to write to you. I am completely cut off from my family and do not have any form of assistance. As you may know, we are in critical conditions in terms of food. If you could help me, I would be extremely grateful. If God allows me to survive, I will find a way to repay you. Please forgive me for my audacity and kindly provide your address.

My address:
Edmund Jerzyk
No. 18623 Block I
R.A.D. Lager Ganz kr. Lauenburg[90]

1.3.1945
Dear Sir/Madam,
I am writing to you with a heartfelt request for any kind of food assistance. I am sorry, but circumstances force me to do so.
Please be understanding and help me. Thank you in advance.
Yours sincerely,
Jan Małach 92455
Block I. The village where this camp is located is Ganz, Kreis Lauenburg[91]

Thank you very much for the package I received on February 27th! I was filled with great joy when I received your package. I believe that you will continue to send them and not forget about us, the hungry ones. I kindly ask you, dear madam, not to forget us, the hungry ones. Thank you, Jan Roz.... [*hard to read*], 86219. Stuba 2.
Elizabeth Arendt
Neustadt Westpr.
Parkstr. 30. [92]

One of the letters in the collection of the MPiMKP, written by Wiesława Wegchaupt, describes how Kashubian women helped prisoners in the barracks of the RAD sub-camp, where the mortality rate was enormous:

I went to Rybno mostly by bicycle with Genowefa Drzewiecka, my sister Kazimiera and the last time with my sister Irena when we were arrested. Once I helped three prisoners to escape from the camp. Among the three of them, there was a Yugoslavian camp guard named Wojewski [...]. My help in their escape consisted of driving a horse-drawn carriage to an address in Zamostne

90 A donation from E. Arendt, Gryps from Ganz, MPiMKP.
91 *Ibidem.*
92 *Ibidem.*

> [by my father] and taking them to our house [...]. Material aid was organised by my father; my mother also helped. Our task was to supply food and medicine to the prisoners from Rybno.[93]

According to Helena Pajewska, many of the girls rode bicycles from Luzino to Rybno, despite the snow and frost, where they also collected secret messages from prisoners. The witness recalls that they had more than 300 such massages in total and attempted to collaborate to address the prisoners' requests outlined in covert messages known in Polish as *gryps*. They contacted the prisoners' families, organised clothing, food, and medicines.

> We didn't know where this Rybno was, or how to get to this *lager*. But dad showed us the way [...] always going west and then asking about Rieben, because that was the name of the village. We loaded our bikes, on the racks, on the handlebars, as much as we could pack and set off. I wouldn't have ridden on my own, but our Stasia was always brave, and she led the way. From Kochanowo, we turned left and rode to the village of Kniewenbruck, then over the bridge over the river and on along the road to Rieben [...]. Meanwhile, prisoners were already looking out of the barrack windows, stretching out their hands, making prayers and requests to us for help. They would wrap a stone in paper and throw it to us. We collected it, and on each piece of paper there was an address, name, surname, and a request for help.[94]

One of the prisoners who went on the Death March, Jan Potrykus, born in 1913 in Wejherowo, wrote a secret message during a stopover at a church in Luzino and passed it on to one of the young girls from Luzino asking her to give the *gryps* to his family in Wejherowo, 15 km away. A witness recalls the event:

> I managed to hand one of the girls a card, to my mother in Wejherowo. Her name was Stasia Fikusówna. She took the card and promised to deliver it [...]. We were taken to Rybno on 3 February. As it turned out, that girl, whose name was Stasia, handed the card to my mother on the same day [...] and told her that the prisoners were being led to Rybno. Soon, my family came to me with parcels, food and care and, most importantly, the hope of getting out of the camp. On 8 February 1945, I managed to escape from the camp [...].[95]

The Russian army was approaching, the prisoners were hoping for the end of the war, and the *wachmänner* were trying to save their lives by various means. In fear of the approaching Soviet army, the evacuation of prisoners from the subcamps was ordered once again. The prisoners were rushed chaotically towards

93 Letter from Wiesław Wegchaupt, Kwidzyn 22.12.1979, in the collection of the Museum of Kashubian–Pomeranian Literature and Music in Wejherowo 1981-K/C1/45.
94 H. Pajewska, *Witness Testimonies...*, p. 25.
95 J. Potrykus, *Witness Testimonies...*, pp. 81–82.

Wejherowo. The witness recalls how the *wachmann* crew used the prisoners' clothes to change their identities to save their lives:

> There was a *lager* there in Rybno, now there's a cemetery there, and they stayed there overnight and next went to Kolków. That's where they took them to the cowshed, where the cows were, it was better there, because it was warm there. And from there they went to Gniewino again [...]. And from there they led them to Wejherowo again, and here, behind the bridge, the Russians were coming from Wejherowo, and they were en route to be transported to Gdynia for deportation to Germany via ships, but the planned arrangement was disrupted due to the impending arrival of the Russians, so the *wachmänner* took off their uniforms and put on the dead prisoners' clothes so they wouldn't be recognized. Mum fled from there and didn't go back to Niepoczołowice. First to Zelewo, where she spent the night, then to Luzino and so to Niepoczołowice on foot.[96]

The last frontier again appears indifferent or hostile, but nevertheless fills the prisoners with hope. The Kashubians infiltrated the German zone, bringing help to prisoners, food, medicines, and news, but above all hope that they were not alone and that the war would soon be over. The prisoners experienced and reported different treatment depending on the territory they moved to and people they met:

> Wherever we met Polish women, we always felt their help and sympathy. Poles did everything in their power for us, like brothers, in the full sense of the word. The situation was different with the Germans, who considered us bandits and unrepentant enemies of the Third Reich. In their eyes, we were anything but human. We couldn't even get a drop of coffee from them, and if they sold anything, they charged us three times more.[97]

Conclusions

Oral history has the potential to educate, as it immerses the researcher in the witness's micro-history. The life of the witness themself, seen as a whole, their will to survive, to fight for their identity, to rise from crises and traumas and, above all, the will to live, all this is also educational. The significance of the unacknowledged bravery in assisting others becomes apparent. Our surroundings shape our identity, and the recollections and spoken accounts that garner attention serve as a teaching aid.

96 Archiwum Ośrodka "Pamięć i Przyszłość", PL OPiP III-1-9, Testimony of Roman Dominik, 7.09.2019 (Testimony prepared and compiled by Aleksandra Kurowska-Susdorf), p. 3.

97 B. Sruoga, *op. cit.*, p. 251.

The prisoners, participants in the Death March who were brutally driven across phantom borders, and also across boundaries of identity and historical memory, read this clash of cultures very clearly, despite hunger, hardship, and fatigue. The borderland in witnesses' memories appears as a dynamic construct of intermingling influences, different moral attitudes, from indifference, aggression to attitudes full of care and courage. There is a perceptible change in the borderland, which in a sense fills one with hope. The places we live in today, monuments, street names, cemeteries, all influence the sense of local identity. It is a dialectical relationship. Memory is seen as an active process of meaning-making. Each micronarrative has its own value, as it becomes a pretext for meeting another person and learning more about the local history of a place. In the historical context at the national level, voices of Kashubian women and children hitherto scarcely heard are highlighted and heard in the stories of witnesses to history.

Working on a biography is a pedagogical experience and place-based, because in the process of narrating one's own life, the speaker and the listener "learn about each other" and attempt to place themselves in time and space.[98] Places trigger memories in us and serve as carriers of memory. The concept of a memory-place shows us how memories of others can influence our actions, even in the face of danger. It also retrospectively demonstrates how places impact our identity, how they integrate us around collective recollections of events, and how powerfully they function in an educational capacity.

Even today, many years after the war, we notice that the memory of borders persists.[99] On the initiative of local authorities, residents of Pomerania and employees of the Stutthof Museum in Sztutowo, further markers, monuments, and information boards regarding the course of the Death March are being created in the landscape of the local area.[100] The pedagogical category of memory-place[101] is implemented by restoring the memory of the events of the winter of 1945, integrating the local community around these events, celebrating anniversaries, celebrating Holy Masses for the victims of the Death March, and educating young generations through educational projects, educational walks, LARP field games, and lectures.

98 D. Demetrio, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

99 K. Ciechorska-Kulesza, *Zamiast zakończenia. O widoczności granicy – jak jest i jak (według mieszkańców) powinno być?*, in C. Obracht-Prondzyński (ed.), *Granica polsko-niemiecka…*, p. 311.

100 J. Grabowska, *Marsz śmierci…*, Sztutowo 2023, p. 281; see also A. Kłys, *Więźniowie obozu Stutthof w Pomieczynie w 1945 r. Pamiątki po Marszu Śmierci w pomieczyńskim kościele*, "Zeszyty Muzeum Stutthof", vol. 11 (21) (2023), pp. 133–152.

101 M. Mendel, W. Theiss, *op. cit.*

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Summary
This article presents the memories of prisoners and borderland inhabitants during the evacuation of Stutthof concentration camp in January 1945. The evacuation, called the Death March, led through the former Free City of Gdańsk, and Kashubian villages such as Pomieczyno and Luzino primarily towards Launeburg. The memories mostly focus on the experience of columns VI, VII, and IX. Three metaphors of the borderland occur as dynamic constructs: the borderlands of uncertainty, life, and hope for the end of the war. The category of a memory-place becomes a pedagogical tool. Each micronarration has its own value, as it becomes an opportunity for meeting another person and learning more about the local history of a place and the values shared by borderland inhabitants and enables life affirmation, embedding research in the discourse of pedagogy of place and pedagogy of memory. The process of commemorating the events of the winter and spring of 1945 continues to this day, with the creation of informative plaques, educational projects, scholarly publications, and commemorative events honouring the victims. These efforts highlight the fact that the locations through which the Death March passed are memory-places that resonate and integrate residents around shared remembrance.

The research material consists of oral history interviews with witnesses to history, archival materials, published memoirs of prisoners, and unpublished memoirs of Luzino residents held in the collection of the Museum of Kashubian–Pomeranian Literature and Music in Wejherowo. The narratives were collected within the framework of an oral history grant from the "Remembrance and Future" Centre in 2019 and the Patriotism of Tomorrow programme in 2021.