

Joanna Wygnańska

## PART 2

### FROM PPR TO SYSTEMIC TRANSFORMATION

The purpose of the introduction and chapters presented in Part 2 is not to follow the historical, political, or economic narratives about the past, but it is rather focused on sociological reasoning about the biographical experience of the PPR and the transformation times separated by the conventionally adopted date of the year 1989. The inference aspires here to show, on the one hand, the essential advantage of the autobiographical narrative interview which enables the researcher to reconstruct significant biographical processes which shaped one's life and the social processes in which biographical experiences have been entangled and shaped by social frames of those processes (Schütze 1992a, b, 2008a, b, 2014, Kaźmierska, Schütze 2013). When applying such analysis we can see the processual character of social reality. Therefore, investigating the biographical experience gives researchers the opportunity to grasp the relationship between the individual perspective and macro-structural processes.

Thus the perspective of this part of the book is focused on analyzing biographical ways of experiencing and reconstructing the socialist and transformational Polish reality in individual life stories within the frame of processual change. In this view, the transition from the socialist period to the time of transformation through the perspective of the continuity of individual biographies allows one to reconstruct the social contexts of both systems and the structural conditions for the formation of individual biographical identity. In other words, we intend to show the transition through the analysis of the biographical life experiences in both of the indicated social realities and the biographical working out of this time by ordinary people.<sup>1</sup>

It should be stressed here that in the wider perspective of the historical and social context the Grand Narrative treats the year 1989 as the most important turning point in the newest history of Europe. This time boundary is emphasized in the appearance of the democratization processes among the countries and societies of the Eastern Bloc, politically, ideologically, economically, and militarily (to varying degrees) subordinated to the hegemony

---

<sup>1</sup> See *Methodological note*.

of the Soviet Union.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the time after 1989 is connected with the process of democratization of the memory of the past,<sup>3</sup> both in the dimension of the experience of World War II and building a narrative on the 45 years of everyday life in the People's Republic of Poland. Biographical memory<sup>4</sup> allowed after the fall of communism to refer to the topics treated in the PPR as political and social taboos and superseded by the then-current logic of power.<sup>5</sup>

In such a context it is important to consider broader phenomena as a background for the main issues discussed in the book. Today we may say that they are related to the social post-war history of Polish society. At the same time, it is worth stressing that the texts presented here do not fit into the perspective

---

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that the Eastern Bloc in Europe was comprised of such countries as East Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, and Albania. Other ones which were also under the Soviet Union repression were: Lithuania, Estonia, Latvia, Belarus, and Ukraine. The European country which in those times was less dependent on the Soviet Union's ideological power was the Former Socialistic Republic of Yugoslavia, which till the mid-1970s had been economically strong. At the same time, Poland was defined as "the funniest barrack from the bloc" with respectively wider space of freedom and relationship with the Western world, at least in terms of culture and intellectual inspirations. At the same time, we cannot forget that Poland was regularly shaken by bottom-up upheavals that expressed the citizens' discontent and frustration related to different aspects of the socialist system. The common frames of the postwar reality in the aforementioned regions were the communist and socialist ideologies, in which they all functioned differently – from a very strong dictatorship to a so-called soft-totalitarianism.

<sup>3</sup> In a much broader perspective, we can also point to the political changes taking place in the 20th century, leading to democratization of societies not only in Europe, but also in Latin America and Africa, inscribed in the fall of dictatorships. In this case, we are dealing with the "decolonization of memory" (Nora 1989), which means making memory subjective and giving voice to those who could not share their history so far.

<sup>4</sup> It should be stressed here that the mechanisms of forgetting present on the level of collective memory and public discourse didn't mean that individual biographical memory cannot last. As a result, the biographical memory awakened in Poland after 1989 was expressed in the intensification of memories from World War II and its direct consequences for Poland, as well as in the lack of a cultural model for building stories about Polish society shaped by socialist formation. It is important to point out here that biographical memory concerns the experience of the past and it is a form of the (re)interpretation and reconstruction of the images collected in the individual memory of the past dependent both on an individual life-course and a wider socio-historical context (Kaźmierska 2008: 90).

<sup>5</sup> The democratization process of memory concerned those Polish citizens who survived World War II in the Eastern Borderlands, that is, on the territories of current Ukraine, Belarus, and Lithuania (Kaźmierska 2016).

of memory studies or oral history analysis of the transition from the PPR to the systemic transformation. On the contrary, they are focused on the sociological approach and study biographical experience and social construction of reality of the PPR and the biographical experience of the process of transformation, as well as its social construction (separated by the conventional date of 1989). Thus, the subject of the analysis, on the one hand, refers to the biographical experience of the reality of the PPR entangled in the collective influence mechanisms of the system subordinating the individual to the hegemonic and ideological power of the USSR. On the other, it focuses on the experience of the transition from socialism to capitalism in the biography and the reconstruction of the links between both aforementioned social realities in the individual life story. The biographical perspective presented in this book allows us, in other words, to capture the individual biographical experiences entangled in the social processes linked with both indicated social realities and logics of power.

Although the intention of this introduction is not to recreate the social history of the PPR and the time of transformation in Poland, yet it is worth pointing out here a few important issues that outline the social-historical context for the analyses undertaken in the following chapters. Fritz Schütze (1992a: 193) noticed that socialism to a certain extent bore the hallmarks of social movement and from the beginning was reactionary in its character. It means that the propaganda work of its supporters was based on the political and social problems of the afflicted people. As Schütze stresses, otherwise they would not have had a chance to succeed. It should be mentioned, however, that the author speaks of National Socialism, and in the case of countries such as Poland, rather than the reactionary nature of socialism, we should speak of certain imagined alternatives to social and political life on which the building of Polish reality at the time of PPR was based. But, significantly for the analytical perspective presented in this part of the book is Schütze's observation that biographical experiences of living in socialism, seen as a type of totalitarian societal system, are symbolically triggered and subordinated by the representation of social energy and a demonstration of strength combined "with the barely hidden threat to use organizational, administrative, or sheer physical force" (Schütze 1992a: 195).<sup>6</sup> As it will be seen in some of the texts included in this section of

---

<sup>6</sup> Schütze is analyzing the phenomena of National Socialism from a German perspective, but his reflections about the mechanisms of functioning of this social formation we can, to some extent, observe in the other countries in Europe which were under political dominance of the Soviet Union after World War II. However, it is worth noting that it is not the intention of the text of this introduction to present all features of socialism listed by the researcher. It is rather an attempt to capture a certain framework for interpreting the impact of this system on individual biographies also in Polish perspective.

the book this type of phenomena of control and power revealed itself in the biographical strategies of dealing with this type of reality.

The social order of the socialist period was characterized by a strong influence of disciplinary power and a lack of free market (i.e., Mach 1998: 9). This social reality dependent on the power of the USSR should be also considered as a specific cultural heritage and specific mentality of the Polish society at the time (e.g., Mach 1998, Marody 2010, Miszańska 1996, Świda-Ziemia 1997).<sup>7</sup> In the historical and political perspective of the period of socialism in Poland, it is also important to point out a few events typically defined as the breakthrough moments or the turning points determining the framework for the post-war Polish history. Primarily, October 1956 should be stressed here, known as the Polish October or the Polish thaw – the turning point of the PPR inner politics resulting in the liberalization of the political system. Secondly, March 1968, which resulted in the suppression of students, and a subsequent repression of the Polish dissident movement and mass emigration following the anti-Semitic campaign.<sup>8</sup> Thirdly, December 1970 in which workers' protests took place, sparked by a sudden increase of prices of food and other everyday items.<sup>9</sup> Thereafter, it is important to list August 1980 when the Independent Self-governing Trade Union "Solidarity" (*Solidarność*) emerged. Last but not least, there should be a reference to December 1981, the time of introducing Martial Law in an attempt to crush political opposition. This narrative is present on a public discourse level and it is connected with the process of pluralization of the collective memory after 1989 (Korzeniewski 2010).

However, the biographical research perspective shows that those historical dates do not usually organize the individual life history. It does not mean we can generalize that the narrators do not have knowledge about them, it just shows that when people were not structurally engaged in the mentioned historical

---

<sup>7</sup> In contemporary perspective there are many scientific texts which study the cultural heritage of the PPR and make an attempt to describe the complexity of the mentality of Polish society during socialism time. Inter alia there can be listed *Opowiedzieć PRL* (2011) which touches the heritage of the era of communism in Poland in a cultural, historical, symbolic, and discursive way. In this understanding of studying the past of PPR, one should also point out the studies of PPR memory collected in the journal publication titled *Sondowanie pamięci* (2013) edited by Ryszard Nycz and the recently published book *Życie codzienne w PRL* (2019).

<sup>8</sup> Recent studies of events of March 68' in Poland are conducted, that is, by Andrzej Czyżewski in his project titled "Generation or generations of March 68' – between oral history and biographical method" (NCN, 2017/27/N/HS3/01602). Here the researcher's article: Czyżewski (2016: 553–580) can also be recalled.

<sup>9</sup> The riots were brutally put down, at least 42 people were killed and more than 1,000 wounded.

events they are just not so important for shaping one's biographical identity. In this understanding, studying the biographical experience of socialism times and transformation enables us to uncover the biographical processes which has shaped an individual life in subsequent phases of biography (Każmierska, Schütze 2013: 131) and the social processes which influenced an individual's life course, and reconstruct them in political, historical, and social frames.

In turn, the collapse of socialism is connected with the events from the late 1980s and the early 1990s which took place in Poland and other Soviet countries. In short, this fall can be linked to the triumph of the "Solidarity" ("Solidarność") movement and the democratization processes happening in the post-soviet European republics. In terms of economic and social changes, it can be linked to the transition from a socialist to a capitalist system, which led to the collapse of the hegemony of the Soviet Union. In political optics, it meant also the transition from the disciplinary logic of power entangled in the socialist propaganda work to the neoliberal rhetoric and the processes of the reformation of the Polish political system following the West-European patterns of democracy. This transition can also be understood as the process of changing the cultural heritage of Polish society built in socialist times and shaping the new Polish social reality (Krzemiński 2011: 31).

In the analysis of the processes mentioned above, turning to the biographical approach enables us to capture the strategies of normalization of the past both of the PPR and the transformation times vivid in the individual biographical experience. Thus, the texts included in this part of the book describe the social processes and the patterns of action characteristic for both discussed realities. This is done by showing the presence of the phenomena of continuation or the break-up of concrete attitudes towards the system, referring to the whole life history of individuals (conditioned by the influence of both time frames). Moreover, the study of the biographical experience of the time of the PPR and time of the Polish transformation makes it possible to reach the ways of building stories within these time frames. It allows us to discount the categories which often take the form of certain labels in public discourse, for example, "pro-communist" (in other words, post-communist) or "anti-communist" (in other words, post-Solidarity). It also allows us to redefine the visions and myths present on the level of the collective memory of those times. Additionally, such a study is an opportunity to reconstruct the experiences of everyday life in those time frames and to reconstruct the social and historical changes, their influence on the dynamics of the narrators' lives immersed in both the socialist and post-transformation reality.

In this perspective, it is worthwhile to refer to the results of an international research project: Biographical experience in PPR and GDR and its discussion in the post-war generation of 1945–1955. Sociological comparison based

on biographical analysis<sup>10</sup> in which the researchers found out that in Poland and Germany there is no valid cultural model for building stories of socialist past and on how both societies had been planned, established, formed, developed, and impacted by the socialist societal formation; and what actually happened to them in the aftermath of the system transformation and its resulting processes. It is hard to observe a profile of such a model in Poland, whereas in East Germany contradictory attitudes are predominant, whose coexistence has not been accepted by the society, not to mention reaching a common thinking pattern and reference system. This lack of an accommodated or even agreed, but not schematic, collective way of narrating hinders the construction of a historical–autobiographical narrative about everyday life experiences and biographical experiences of that time – particularly such narratives, which could subsequently function in the public discourse. Also, it seems that in the case of Poland, it is hard to speak about models of storytelling deeply rooted in the Polish culture, which go beyond the experience of World War II, the framework for which is well-embedded in the Polish literature of symbolic suffering and heroism of the Polish society and war narratives. Thus, in the case of the time of the People's Republic, it is hard to define such an unambiguous framework. The reason for this lack can be linked with the ambiguity of life experiences. In many, if not in most cases, the PPR's experience in a personal dimension was neither a heroic experience nor related to biographical suffering, nevertheless – particularly from the perspective of the present time – it was related to an increasing sense of deprivation, helplessness, and hopelessness of the socio-political situation and no prospect of change.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, we could observe a nostalgic longing

---

<sup>10</sup> The project was produced between 2012 and 2014 and was funded by the Polish-German Foundation for Science (application 100201/ project no 2012-03). The Polish team of researchers included: Kaja Kaźmierska, Katarzyna Waniek, Joanna Wygnańska (Department of Sociology of Culture of the University of Łódź), Piotr Filipkowski and Maciej Melon (History Meeting House of KARTA Center); The German team included: Fritz Schütze, Ulrike Nagel, Anja Schröder-Wildhagen, Carsten Detka (University of Magdeburg). On both sides of the project 80 interviews were collected (each side conducted 40 interviews) with the narrators born in the post-war generation in the PPR and the GDR.

<sup>11</sup> The study done by Katarzyna Andrejuk (2016) describing the experience of social advancement of women in the times of the PPR can be given as an example of presenting the PPR structures in different contexts. It concerns the analysis of biographical interviews collected from a contemporary perspective (2014–2015). The analysis allowed, on the one hand, the highlighting of the category of the individual agency in the biographies of the examined women. On the other, the research showed the role of macro-structural factors in the dimension of changes and control of their professional careers in the period of the PPR.



for the times and symbols of the PPR and the ritual celebration of the “good life” in socialism, which did not produce a diverse and living culture of memory nor biographical work on this experience. These two interpretations rooted in different strategies of social reality construction are identified and analyzed by the chapters’ authors from various perspectives, which consider both the narrators self-presentations and argumentations, the way they were involved in the system and/or strategies to deal with it. What should also be stressed here is that when we speak about the biographical experience of the PPR and transformation time from the perspective of nostalgic longing for socialism, we may be dealing with obscuring the need for analysis and reflection on biographical suffering, on the hindered development in socialism, and on persecuting dissidents, which included ruining their lives or at least intruding into their biographical potential for development and social participation rights.

This kind of narrating about the experience of those times has been abundant in recent years in many statements or written autobiographies of the so-called children of the system (children of prominent functionaries of the system), where the above-mentioned blurring is built from the perspective of life in a totally different social world<sup>12</sup> (no queues, no economic, social, or political deprivation).<sup>13</sup>

In recent years, we can also observe a certain awakening of the generation born in the 1980s, describing their childhood memories of the period of the People’s Republic of Poland with reference to the changes after 1989. These texts very often bear all the hallmarks of autobiographical stories. It is worth mentioning here the autobiographical comics by Marzena Sowa with drawings by Sylvain Savoia describing the adventures of Marzi – a little girl growing up in Poland in the 1980s.<sup>14</sup> In one of the interviews, the author of the comics

---

<sup>12</sup> It is illustrated by, for example, a book *Towarzyszka panienska* by Monika Jaruzelska.

<sup>13</sup> It should be mentioned that the narratives presenting the time of socialism in terms of the lack of oppression can also be found in some of the workers’ narratives. This remark is not intended to indicate any particular narrative of this kind, but is marked to show that such stories can also be found when studying the period of socialism in Poland.

<sup>14</sup> The comics were first published in France between 2005 and 2009. In Poland they were published in three collective volumes translated by the author: *Dzieci i ryby głosu nie mają* (2007), *Hałasy dużych miast* (2008), *Nie ma wolności bez solidarności* (2011). Marzi, the heroine of the comic books, lives in a block of flats (large panel system-building, in Polish “blok z wielkiej płyty”) in one of the Polish cities. Each part of the comic book includes short stories showing various aspects of everyday life in the PPR. The author also made a comic book *Dzieci i ludzie* (2012) presenting this time not an autobiographical story but still the story told from the childhood experience

stresses: “I didn’t make a comic book about a great story. I made a comic about the lives of ordinary people. About everyday life in the PPR from the point of view of an ordinary man.”<sup>15</sup> *Marzi* is a fully autobiographical story, only the names of the characters have been changed. Another interesting vision of the PPR is the book by Wioletta Grzegorzewska entitled *Gugule* (2014), containing a narrative about growing up in the Polish countryside during the socialism period. It is a very personal, even intimate story, which shows the biographical fate of the narrator’s family. Another book worth pointing out is *Znaki szczególne. Pierwsza autobiografia pokolenia urodzonych około 1980 roku – dzieci polskiej transformacji* (2014) by Paulina Wilk. This publication was very widely discussed by literature critics and Polish researchers because Wilk, as the only one from the aforementioned authors, is trying to construct some social diagnosis of the PPR and the transformation times and generalize her personal biographical experience against the whole “generation” which she feels a member of. Still, apart from the critical judgement of this publication which is not the subject of this book, this kind of attempt to deal with biographical past is, here, the example of reconstructing the PPR and transformation memories in a personal story.

The aforementioned international research project concerning the biographical experience of the PPR and GDR times in the comparative perspective was conducted by the researchers of the Department of Sociology of Culture (University of Łódź), who are also the executors of the biographical research of the process of transformation in Poland studied in this book. Moreover, the above-mentioned narratives concerning the experience of World War II, in which one can see a cultural pattern of building a story about this difficult biographical experience, were collected in another research project titled *Biography and National Identity* in 1992–1994,<sup>16</sup> also conducted

---

perspective about the Polish reality in the 1950s. A boy named Wiktor, who is the main character of this narrative, is entangled in the mechanisms of repressions of the totalitarian system.

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.polityka.pl/tygodnikpolityka/kultura/1523195,1,dziewczynna-komiks-i-stan-wojenny.read> – interview with Marzena Sowa (published January 14, 2012). Retrieved: September 15, 2019.

<sup>16</sup> Still available recordings and transcriptions of the interviews were archived in 2013–2014 in Qualitative Data Archive in IFiS PAN Institute (Warsaw). The collection address is: <http://www.adj.ifispan.pl/katalog-3>. The interviews create a colorful and heterogeneous record of the biographical experiences of the wartime. They contain both borderland narratives (Eastern Borderlands) and narratives from central Poland. The former often contain much more extensive descriptions of the wartime experiences and interestingly constructed images of other nationalities. What connects and distinguishes all the available interviews is that they are certainly contained in the



in this Department. The collection of the wartime biographical experiences is therefore complemented by the interviews showing the PPR reality, biographical experience, and the biographical experience of the transformation process in Poland. Thus, the commentary which reflects a certain tradition among the researchers of the Department of Sociology of Culture (University of Łódź) is important in order to show many years of experience of working with the biographical method and conducting research which focuses on the analysis of individual cases within a framework of macro-structural references. This short introduction to the previous projects carried out in the Department should make it clearer to understand the approach towards the examination of the transformation process in Poland outlined in this book.

As already mentioned, this part of the book is devoted to showing the relationship between the biographical experience of the People's Republic of Poland period and the biographical experience of the transformation time. It is based not only on the interviews collected in the *Transformation* project, but also presents the lives of the narrators of interviews from other collections. The common framework for all the presented texts is the connection of the biographical experience of both the PPR and the transformation of social realities in terms of biographical and social processes. The following chapters (IV–IX) show the already mentioned phenomena of transition from disciplinary power to neoliberal rhetoric and its impact on the biographies of the narrators and also the biographies of their parents and grandparents. The perspective of family history is important here especially due to the impact of the narrators' parents and grandparents' biographical experience on the life story of the narrators themselves. Moreover, these chapters refer to the aforementioned nostalgic memory of socialist (as well as communist) times, often inscribed in the recreation of the memory of objects and products of symbolic culture. The individual subsections in this part of the book also describe the connections and important differences between the discussed logics of power.

Chapter IV: *The experience of systemic transformation in contemporary biographical narratives of older Poles* written by Danuta Życzyńska-Ciołek, explores whether (from the subjective perspective of the people born before the end of World War II) the systemic transformation brought about significant changes in their individual lives. The presented analysis clearly shows the discrepancy between individual biographical experiences and public discourses, giving meaning to the transformation processes.

---

frames of “living history.” The narrators talk about the everyday life of the war, which is experienced and remembered uniquely in each of the narratives. Scientific works on analyzing those narratives include Czyżewski, Piotrowski, Rokuszewska-Pawełek ed. (1996), Kaźmierska (1999), Rokuszewska-Pawełek (2002), Dopierała, Waniek ed. (2016), Kaźmierska (2016).

The fifth Chapter by Agnieszka Golczyńska-Grondas titled: *Social innovators in coping with social problems – PPR, systemic transformation, and new Poland*, is describing mainly the opportunity structures emerging in Poland under the socialist regime and during the post-systemic transformation. The analysis conducted in the text describes the interrelations between the use of the opportunity structures involved in the two types of political and economic systems, and the social reformers' careers. The most crucial issue here is also the analysis of the whole biographical life history of the studied social innovators in terms of their individual experience of the PPR and the transformation times.

The text written by Renata Dopierała (Chapter VI): *Life of things from the perspective of the Polish systemic transformation* is focused on presenting a "biography" of things which appear in the life stories of the biographical experience of the transformation process in Poland. The author analyzes the passages of autobiographical narrative interviews and tries to catch different social actions connected with things. The theoretical frame of this approach connects the sociological and anthropological study of the "life of things." These interdisciplinary considerations are mainly embedded in the context of the People's Republic of Poland and the process of transformation of the 1990s.

Chapter VII by Kaja Kaźmierska: *Paradoxes of ideological privileges – a case study of a female textile worker from Łódź*, discusses a case study based on Łódź as an industrial city and a biography of a female textile worker who worked in one of the textile factories in Łódź between 1975–1998. Her life history is analyzed in both chronological and social context in order to reconstruct a complete image of Łódź and the world of female textile workers. Łódź – as the industrial city which had not been damaged during World War II from the point of view of Polish authorities – was the place where the main assumptions of the new political deal could come true. Conversely, the analyses of empirical data disclose the paradoxes of the system related to the asymmetry between the powerful ideological definition of workers as a leading class and the reality of their lives represented in the analyzed material.

Chapter VIII, written by Katarzyna Waniek, titled: *The process of acquiring and developing a critical attitude towards the socialist regime in Poland* presents the biographies of people born in the post-war generation. The author focuses on showing the biographical experience of the PPR from the perspective of the so-called *awakened*, that is, people who, at the beginning, were often fascinated by the communist ideology and the promise of a better future, but encountered important turning points in their biographies and, as a consequence, developed opposition to the systemic rules.

The last text (Chapter IX) is written by Joanna Wygnańska titled: *A new logic of power, old biographical patterns of action. The case study of Weronika's life history*. It concentrates on showing the change in the status of the narrator's

family from a privileged position in the socialist period to the experience of unemployment and poverty after 1989. On the other hand, the text analyzes the necessity of the narrator's mother's emigration to Italy in the mid-1990s. Also, an important perspective adopted here is the experience of migration by the narrator, who at the time of the interview had also been living in Italy for 10 years. The case study shows the experience of the transformation process in Poland with reference to the previous PPR's logic of power. The author focuses on showing the biographical costs present in the experience of the narrator's parents and her individual biographical experience of those costs crucial for shaping her biographical identity.

We treat this part of the book as a sort of prelude to further analysis of social phenomena and processes. In each of the presented texts, despite concentrating on other detailed issues, a comparative perspective can be seen. It is related to the juxtaposition of two systems in the biographical experience. Of course, it is framed by different generational perspectives. For those born in the 1980s, it is to some extent intermediated by the biographies of the parents. Last but not least, the comparison of the two systems will accompany us in the successive parts of the book, although sometimes in a recessive dimension, but always significantly formatting (whether we want it or not) the present perspective.