

# On the Margin of Literature

## Polish Life Writing Competitions in the Context of Autosociobiography

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In 1929, the famous Polish writer Maria Dąbrowska<sup>1</sup> noted in her diary: “Who knows if the time is not coming when the greatest works of art will be written outside official literature” (Dąbrowska 2009, vol. 2:107).<sup>2</sup> From today’s perspective, it looks as if Dąbrowska’s tentative prediction has largely come to pass. When describing the autobiographical and (to some extent) documentary tendencies in Polish literature in the twentieth century, three factors are of particular importance: first, the increasing significance of everyday genres and writing practices undertaken by non-professional writers (e.g., peasants, factory workers, children and adolescents), along with the impact of the latter on professional authors; second, the evolution of life writing towards a more literary character, as evident in the case of intimate diaries (Rodak 2011); and third, the feminisation of autobiographical discourses – whereas Polish literature of the nineteenth century was dominated by male voices, a stronger female presence made itself felt from the beginning of the twentieth century onward, to the point where texts authored by women came to occupy a central place in autobiographical writing across a range of genres.

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1 A prolific novelist and essayist, Maria Dąbrowska (1889–1965) is best known today for her copious diary, which she kept for more than 40 years, from 1914 to 1965 (Dąbrowska 2009, vol. 1–13). Dąbrowska repeatedly highlighted the importance of autobiographical practices such as the writing of diaries, memoirs, and letters. In keeping with this assessment, she translated and prepared the Polish edition of Samuel Pepys’s *Diary*, and was involved in the publication of the *Memoirs of Peasants* (1935–1936), a project I will discuss in detail below.

2 “Kto wie, czy nie nadchodzą czasy, kiedy największe dzieła sztuki będą pisane poza oficjalną literaturą.” Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

In my article, I focus on the first and partly the third of these developments, as they are especially pertinent in the context of the emerging concept of autosociobiography. I will begin by briefly describing the substantial tradition of life writing competitions for peasants, workers, and emigrants in Poland, which began just after World War I and continued unabated throughout the twentieth century. In a second step, I will turn my attention to the much-discussed problem of the literariness of peasants' and workers' memoirs, with a special emphasis on the two most representative examples from the interwar period, namely *Życiorys własny robotnika* [A worker's life history written by himself] by Jakub Wojciechowski (1930) and *Pamiętniki chłopów* [Memoirs of peasants] (1935–1936), a collection of two volumes edited by the *Institute of Social Economy* in Warsaw. Finally, I will examine the texts submitted to life writing competitions from an autosociobiographical vantage point, tracing their most distinctive features. By way of a conclusion, I juxtapose the key characteristics of these memoirs with those of well-known autosociobiographical writings, advancing the argument that the Polish tradition of life writing competitions can be seen as an important point of reference for a global approach to autosociobiographical writing.

### Life Writing Competitions in Poland<sup>3</sup>

In a sense, the tradition of Polish life writing competitions was inaugurated with William Isaac Thomas's and Florian Znaniecki's *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (1918–1920), a five-volume study based on memoirs, personal documents, and private correspondence. Thomas had assembled a sizable collection of letters written by Polish peasants – 764 in total, two entire volumes' worth – after issuing an appeal in the American immigrant press that promised a small financial reward for each letter received. Znaniecki, a prominent sociologist and founder of the Polish *Institute of Sociology* in Poznań, also commissioned an autobiography by Władysław Wiśniewski (Władek of Lubotyń), a Polish peasant and baker who had emigrated to the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century, with half of the manuscript's 310 octavo pages being reproduced in the third volume of the series under the title "Life-Record of an Im-

3 I translate the Polish term 'konkursy pamiętnikarskie' into English as 'life writing competitions', but it is also possible to use the terms 'autobiography competitions' and 'memoirs competitions'.

migrant". The publication of *The Polish Peasant* marked the beginning of a new approach in the social sciences, one known today as the 'biographical method' or the 'method of personal documents'. According to Znaniecki's student, Józef Chałasiński, this approach

appeared on the basis of empirical research on the social conditioning of human attitudes and aspirations as well as the socio-cultural structure of personality. In this connection, the phrase 'life record' does not by itself express the basic meaning of autobiographical material for the sociologist. It is not a question here of chronicle materials for the historiographic reconstruction of the past. The sociologist who has an autobiography written for him uses it as a method of collecting research materials on the contemporaries. He wants to understand them in the context of their biographies, to comprehend their similarities and differences as they see them. (Chałasiński 1981: 120)

Znaniecki and Chałasiński continuously refined the method of acquiring, analysing, and publishing autobiographical materials throughout the Polish interwar period (1918–1939). In 1921, Znaniecki organised the first "Competition for the best autobiography written by a manual worker" (Kwilecki 2011: 323).<sup>4</sup> Partly retained for subsequent competitions, the detailed information provided in the two-page announcement dealt with questions such as who could take part, where the manuscript was to be sent, and what prizes were to be awarded. Particular attention was paid to the issue of desirable content. On the one hand, the directive was "you can write as you like" (Kwilecki 2011: 329); on the other hand, however, the announcement made painstakingly clear which aspects were not to be omitted by the participants:

[T]he childhood years at home, the relationship to parents, siblings, relatives and acquaintances; school (if the writer went to school), where, when and how the writer learned their trade; all kinds of paid work they engaged in from childhood to present; all places where they worked, the working conditions, remuneration, way of life (housing, food, clothing),

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4 For a full reprint of the competition announcement, see Andrzej Kwilecki's article "Pionierskie przedsięwzięcia badawcze poznańskiej socjologii 1921–1922. Konkurs na życiorys własny pracownika fizycznego" [Pioneering research projects of Poznań sociology 1921–1922. A competition for an autobiography of a manual worker] (Kwilecki 2011: 328–9).

the relationships with employers, caretakers, work colleagues, the amusements and pleasures they indulged in, their military service, participation in unions and associations, and their involvement in political and religious life. One ought to describe in detail one's friendships, love stories, married life (if the writer is married). It is desirable for the writer to indicate whether they have been and are satisfied or dissatisfied with their fate in general, and in particular with their occupation, and why; what they expect in life and what they desire most. The more they write sincerely about themselves and others, the better. (Kwilecki 2011: 329; translated by Alessandro Nicola Malusà)<sup>5</sup>

In March 1923, the announcement of the competition's outcome reported that a total of 161 manuscripts had been received, some of them consisting of "more than a thousand notebook pages" (*Rozstrzygnięcie konkursu dla robotników 1923*: 6). It had been decided to award 25 prizes (not just two, as originally envisaged); Jakub Wojciechowski, "a worker from Poznań (now in Germany)", and Kornel Franciszek Żelazkiewicz, "a stonemason from Lviv" (*Rozstrzygnięcie konkursu dla robotników 1923*: 6) were declared joint winners.

In the interwar period, the most important memoir competitions were organised by three institutions: the already mentioned *Institute of Sociology* in Poznań, the *Institute of Social Economy* in Warsaw, and the *Institute for Jewish Research* (YIVO) in Vilnius.

Founded in 1921, the *Institute of Social Economy* remained under the directorship of Ludwik Krzywicki for two decades, until the latter's death in 1941 (Szturm de Sztrem 1959). In the 1930s, the Institute organised three major life writing competitions:

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5 "[L]ata dzieciństwa w domu, stosunek do rodziców, rodzeństwa, krewnych i znajomych; szkołę (jeżeli piszący chodził do szkoły), gdzie, kiedy i jak piszący nauczył się swego fachu; wszystkie rodzaje pracy zarobkowej, którym się oddawał od dzieciństwa aż do chwili obecnej; wszystkie miejsca, w których pracował, warunki pracy, wynagrodzenie, sposób życia (mieszkanie, jedzenie, ubranie), stosunek do pracodawców, dozorców, towarzyszy pracy, zabawy i przyjemności, którym się oddawał, służbę wojskową, udział w związkach i stowarzyszeniach, udział w życiu politycznym i religijnym. Należy również dokładnie opisać swoje stosunki przyjaźni, historie miłosne, życie małżeńskie (jeżeli piszący żonaty). Pożądane, aby piszący zaznaczył, czy był i jest zadowolony lub niezadowolony ze swego losu w ogóle, ze swego zajęcia w szczególności i dlaczego; czego się spodziewa w życiu i czego najbardziej pragnie. Im więcej i szczerze napisze o sobie i o innych, tym lepiej."

- 1931: competition for the unemployed (774 submissions)<sup>6</sup>;
- 1933: competition for peasants (498 submissions)<sup>7</sup>;
- 1936: competition for emigrants (212 submissions)<sup>8</sup>.

The YIVO, meanwhile, organised three competitions for autobiographies written by Jewish youths in 1932, 1934, and 1939. These competitions yielded a total of 627 submissions (34 in the first competition, 304 in the second, 289 in the third).<sup>9</sup>

The largest life writing competition in Poland in the period before the outbreak of World War II was the “Competition for a description of the life, work, thoughts, and desires of rural young people”<sup>10</sup>, organised by the Państwowy Instytut Kultury Wsi (State Institute for Rural Culture). Held in 1936, it received a staggering 1,544 entries. Two years later, Józef Chałasiński delivered his *magnum opus*, *Młode pokolenie chłopów* [The younger generation of peasants], a widely acclaimed four-volume study based on the analysis of the autobiographical narratives submitted (Chałasiński 1938).

After the war, the tradition of organising large-scale life writing competitions and collecting autobiographical accounts was not merely continued, but expanded.<sup>11</sup> This trend was especially intense in the 1960s and 1970s, with

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6 57 of which were published in a special publication entitled *Pamiętniki bezrobotnych* [Memoirs of the unemployed] (1933).

7 61 of which were published in the above-mentioned *Memoirs of Peasants (Pamiętniki chłopów*, vol. 1–2: 1935–6).

8 More than half of the texts in question were compiled in four volumes, two of which were published before the war (France, South America) (*Pamiętniki emigrantów. Francja*, 1939; *Pamiętniki emigrantów. Ameryka Południowa*, 1939) and two as late as the 1970s (Canada, United States) (*Pamiętniki emigrantów. Kanada*, 1971; *Pamiętniki emigrantów. Stany Zjednoczone*, 1977).

9 In 1947, some of the surviving documents from this collection went to the new YIVO location in New York (384 autobiographies, of which 282 were written in Yiddish, 77 in Polish, and 18 in Hebrew). More material was discovered in Vilnius in the 1990s; it is now held by the Martynas Mažvydas National Library of Lithuania. A selection of Yiddish autobiographies in English translation was published in 2002 (*Awakening Lives*), a Polish edition of memoirs originally composed in Polish and Hebrew followed in 2003 (*Ostatnie pokolenie*).

10 “Konkurs na opis życia, prac, przemyśleń i dążeń młodzieży wiejskiej”.

11 In the immediate post-war period, two institutions were particularly influential in this regard: the *Central Jewish Historical Commission* and the *Western Institute* in Poznań.

more than a thousand competitions taking place in these two decades alone; in just a single year (1969), 114 such events were organised (*Pamiętniki Polaków 1918–1978*, vol. 3: 558–630). This was also the year in which a group of scholars, intellectuals, writers, politicians, and leading memoirists founded the “Society of Friends of Memoir-Writing” (*Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Pamiętnikarstwa*), which in turn hosted many new life writing competitions and maintained an archive of the submitted material.<sup>12</sup>

Of the enormous number of post-war life writing competitions, the largest and most frequent were those aimed at peasants and workers (one of many parallels to the events of the interwar years), as well as at women. The record number of submissions – 5,475 – was garnered by the “Competition for memoirs of the young generation in rural People’s Poland”<sup>13</sup>, announced in December 1961. The call for contributions stated that the competition aimed to “give a picture of the new generation of rural Poland, their lives, work, thoughts, and aspirations”. In boldface, it was emphasised that this objective could only be accomplished “by the young people themselves, those born in the countryside, brought up in the countryside, and connected with the countryside throughout the various turns of their lives” (*Odezwa konkursowa na pamiętniki młodzieży wiejskiej 1964: 727*)<sup>14</sup>. The texts deemed most worthy of publication found their way into *The Rural Youth of People’s Poland. Memoirs and Studies* – 9 volumes of approximately 700 pages each, filled to the brim with over 300 memoirs and diaries (*Młode Pokolenie Wsi Polski Ludowej*, vol. 1–9, 1964–1980).

It can be estimated that over the course of the seven decades from 1921 to 1989/1990, about 1,300 to 1,400 life writing competitions were organised in Poland, a number that had probably risen to more than 1,500 by the end of the twentieth century. Moreover, several hundred printed volumes were published in the wake of these events (*Pamiętniki Polaków 1918–1978*, vol. 3: 524–57). Those are truly astounding figures – indeed, it seems safe to state that this tradition, a phenomenon whose scale and significance we are only now beginning

12 At the end of the 1980s, the Society’s archives probably contained around 900,000 manuscripts and typescripts of autobiographical documents related to Polish life writing competitions. Unfortunately, the vast majority of this material has since been lost – only about 20,000 items were rescued in 2002 and transferred to the *National Archives of Modern Records* (Gluza 2002; Wierchoś).

13 “Konkurs na pamiętniki młodego pokolenia wsi Polski Ludowej”.

14 “[...] chcemy dać obraz nowego pokolenia wsi w Polsce, jego życia, prac, przemysłów i dążeń. Nikt inny nie potrafi tego zrobić, jeżeli nie zrobi tego sama młodzież urodzona na wsi, na wsi wychowana i z wsią związana w różnych kolejach swego życia.”

to appreciate, is unparalleled in global literary history. Much more than just a uniquely Polish contribution to the local development of sociology, these competitions are of profound significance for the social sciences and the humanities in general: not only do they enable the qualitative enrichment of statistical analyses, but they also gave a voice to the representatives of social groups that rarely had the opportunity to be heard, let alone to write – peasants, factory workers, economic migrants, the unemployed and the youth.

### **Memoirs of Workers, Memoirs of Peasants, and... Literature**

The interwar period saw the publication of several volumes of competition-related autobiographical material which generated significant attention and sparked heated debates, with the two memoirs published in the wake of the 1921 “Competition for the best autobiography written by a manual worker” being cases in point.

The first of the two, the autobiography penned by Władysław Berkan, did not fully conform to the rules of the competition, because it was not so much about a worker than about an “ex-worker” (to use Berkan’s self-description; Berkan 1924: XIX); a man from humble origins who, on the one hand, had become a successful entrepreneur, a capitalist even, the owner of a large clothing company in Berlin that employed several dozen people, and, on the other hand, had reinvented himself as a public intellectual. In the preface to the volume, Znaniecki called Berkan

a typical ‘self-made man’ – a man who, from nothing, under difficult conditions, and amid fierce competition, through persistent professional work, accumulated a substantial fortune; who, thanks to his organisational flair and sincere ideals, rose to a leading position within Berlin’s sizeable Polish colony, played an outstanding and creative role in its socio-political life, and as a result of this, and also through his profession, came into contact with broad circles of the Polish intelligentsia in the country, and who, despite all this, found time to fill many gaps in his general education. (Znaniecki 1924: XIII; translated by Alessandro Nicola Malusà)<sup>15</sup>

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15 “typowym ‘self-made man’ – człowiekiem, który z niczego, w ciężkich warunkach, wśród zaciętej konkurencji, wytrwałą pracą zawodową dorobił się poważnego majątku; który dzięki swemu zmysłowi organizacyjnemu i szczerzej ideowości, wybił się na jedno z przodujących stanowisk wśród licznej kolonii polskiej w Berlinie, ode-

As such, Berkan did not meet the organisers' idea of 'the Polish worker', which the call for contributions had outlined as follows: "The competition is open to all those who earn their living by manual labour: workers in factories, mines, industrial plants, urban workers, agricultural workers, railway workers, craftsmen of all professions. Supervisors and foremen may participate if they themselves have once worked physically." (Kwilecki 2011: 328; translated by Alessandro Nicola Malusà)<sup>16</sup> And yet, Znaniecki decided to publish Berkan's autobiography as an example of spectacular American-style social advancement, a success story that had propelled its author from the milieu of hardworking peasants and artisans (Berkan's father had been a shoemaker) to a life of prosperity and the ownership of sizable company.

The second of the two publications was the already mentioned *Życiorys własny robotnika* [A worker's life history written by himself] (1930) by the winner of the first prize, Jakub Wojciechowski.<sup>17</sup> Radically different in outlook and style, it provided – as Stefan Szuman wrote in the preface to the first edition – "a direct and faithful description of the real, essential concreteness of a worker's life" (Szuman 1985: 10).<sup>18</sup> The book ran to twice the length of Berkan's autobiography, and it was written in a language far removed from literary Polish – in fact, Wojciechowski's heavy use of everyday speech, dialect expressions, and Germanisms had prompted the editor, Chałasiński, to undertake a number of fairly substantial revisions (Chałasiński 1930b: 23–5).<sup>19</sup>

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grał wybitną i twórczą rolę w jej życiu społeczno-politycznym, i wskutek tego, a również za pośrednictwem swego zawodu, wszedł w styczność z szerokimi sferami inteligencji polskiej w kraju, który wreszcie przy tem wszystkim znalazł czas na dopełnienie wielu braków swojego ogólnego wykształcenia."

- 16 "W konkursie mogą brać udział wszyscy, którzy zarabiają na życie pracą fizyczną: robotnicy w fabrykach, kopalniach, zakładach przemysłowych, robotnicy miejscy, robotnicy rolni, pracownicy kolejowi, rzemieślnicy wszelkich zawodów. Nadzocy i kierownicy robót mogą uczestniczyć w konkursie, jeżeli sami kiedyś pracowali fizycznie."
- 17 Jakub Wojciechowski was born in 1884 to a peasant family in Tworzymirki (Wielkopolska). At the age of 15, he left for Germany, where he worked in brickyards, mines, and also as a tram driver. During the First World War, he served as a soldier in the German army. After 25 years, in 1924, he returned to Poland and settled in Barcin, where he died in 1958.
- 18 "bezpośredni i wierny opis prawdziwej, istotnej konkretności żywota robotniczego".
- 19 Chałasiński listed the most important changes as follows: "1. introduction of chapters and paragraphs; 2. use of punctuation; 3. spelling changes." (Chałasiński 1930b: 23–5)

Since its publication, “A worker’s life history written by himself” has become the object of many commentaries, scholarly articles, and strident polemics. Above all, the literary value of this life history has been a matter of dispute. Already in Chałasiński’s notes to the 1930 edition, two significant categories appear: that of the document (i.e., sociological research material) and that of literature (Chałasiński 1985b: 23–5, 1985a: 19–22). In the introduction, entitled “Życiorys jako materiał socjologiczny” [Autobiography as sociological material], Chałasiński wrote:

One cannot [...] overlook the value this biography holds for the sociology of the individual. After all, it is the life story of an individual who began their life journey in a peasant’s shack as a child of poverty [...], and grew to become the president of a Polish Society in Magdeburg, and thus to some extent a leader of a national local movement. Two merits of this history of the social ‘self’ of the individual deserve emphasis. One is the accuracy of conveying the various intersecting social and cultural influences of different social environments that affected the author of the biography; the other is the relative accuracy, honesty, and concreteness in depicting the author’s own reactions to these influences. Thanks to this, the biography provides an accurate picture of the formation of the author’s social personality and the development of their social and national consciousness. (Chałasiński 1985a: 21–2; translated by Alessandro Nicola Malusà)<sup>20</sup>

In his “Uwagi wydawnicze do wydania z roku 1930” [Editorial notes to the 1930 edition], meanwhile, Chałasiński asserted that Wojciechowski’s unique language gave “a picture of the literary culture of the working class” (Chałasiński 1985b: 24),<sup>21</sup> from which he concluded that “correcting the spelling would clash

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20 “Nie można [...] pominąć wartości, jaką życiorys ten posiada dla socjologii indywidualium. Wszak jest on historią życia jednostki, która swój start życiowy rozpoczęła w chłopskiej lepiance jako dziecko nędzy [...], a wyrosła na prezesa polskiego towarzystwa w Magdeburgu, a więc w pewnym stopniu na przywódcę ruchu narodowego. Dwie zalety tej historii społecznej ‘ja’ jednostki zasługują na podkreślenie. Jedną z nich jest dokładność oddania różnych krzyżujących się ze sobą wpływów społecznych i kulturalnych różnych środowisk społecznych, które oddziaływały na autora życiorysu, z drugiej strony – względna dokładność, szczerłość i konkretyzm w odmalowaniu własnych reakcji na te wpływy. Dzięki temu właśnie życiorys daje dokładny obraz kształtowania się społecznej osobowości autora oraz rozwoju jego świadomości społecznej i narodowej.”

21 “obraz literackiej kultury warstwy robotniczej”.

with the author's style and with the character of the autobiography as a document of working-class life" (Chałasiński 1985b: 25).<sup>22</sup> Thus, what 'literariness' Chałasiński attributed to Wojciechowski's autobiography placed it on the very margin of literature, if not "outside official literature" altogether (to use Dąbrowska's turn of phrase). Assessments of this kind were to appear time and again in subsequent articles and books on the topic, with the literary value of the memoirs of workers and peasants constituting one of the key issues discussed (Gołębiowski 1973; Sulima 1980; Ziątek 1999).

The literary ennoblement of Wojciechowski's autobiography was brought about almost singlehandedly by Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński, an outstanding Polish essayist and translator: it was he who dedicated several columns to Wojciechowski, calling him "our living Švejk" (Boy-Żeleński 1959a: 326–38) and "a Polish classic in a workers' blouse" (Boy-Żeleński 1959b: 369–80)<sup>23</sup>; and it was he who entered into correspondence with Wojciechowski, travelled to Barcin where the author had settled after his return from Germany, and encouraged him to continue writing. All told, it was thanks to Boy-Żeleński that Wojciechowski gained great popularity and recognition, which, in 1935, resulted in the Polish Academy of Literature awarding him with the Golden Academic Laurel for his services for the good of Polish literature.

Boy-Żeleński admired Wojciechowski's writing for "the sharpness and plasticity of his memory, the accuracy of his words, his ability to see and perceive, in a word, all the gifts of a thoroughbred writer" (Boy-Żeleński 1959a: 326).<sup>24</sup> On the one hand, *Życiorys własny robotnika* was to be considered "an invaluable document of the psyche of a Polish worker, his notions, customs, the way of life in certain special conditions"; on the other hand, it constituted "an outburst of a completely uncommon writing talent, a phenomenon the equal of which would be difficult to find" (Boy-Żeleński 1959b: 370).<sup>25</sup> In writing about Wojciechowski, Boy-Żeleński formulated a characteristic paradox: in his view, *Życiorys własny robotnika* was at once of "enormous literary value

22 "Poprawna pisownia literacka nie harmonizowałaby ze stylem autora i z charakterem życiorysu jako dokumentu życia klasy robotniczej."

23 "naszym żywym Szwejkem"; "klasykiem polskim w bluzie robotniczej".

24 "ostrość i plastykę jego pamięci, celność słowa, zdolność widzenia i spostrzegania, słowem, wszystkie dary rasowego pisarza".

25 "bezcennym dokumentem psychiki robotnika polskiego, jego pojęć, obyczajów, sposobu życia w pewnych specjalnych warunkach"; "wybuch zupełnie niepospolitego talentu pisarskiego, fenomenowi, któremu trudno by znaleźć równy."

and free from literariness” (Boy-Żeleński 1959c: 67).<sup>26</sup> He also pointed out the crucial role of the autobiographical competitions organised in the interwar period: “[I]f it had not been for this blessed competition, this forty-year-old worker would have continued to live without ever finding out that inside him there was a writer, an artist!” (Boy-Żeleński 1959c: 67)<sup>27</sup>

A quite similar situation occurred in the case of the 1933 competition for peasants’ memoirs organised by the *Institute of Social Economy* in Warsaw. Out of 498 manuscripts, 61 were published in two bulky volumes (*Pamiętniki chłopów*, vol. 1–2: 1935–1936), both of which, like all of the Institute’s publications, contained an introduction by Ludwik Krzywicki. In addition, volume two also included an extensive preface authored by Maria Dąbrowska. Dąbrowska emphasised that a completely new (which was not entirely true), hitherto unheard-of voice had entered the stage of Polish writing:

Today, in the *Memoirs*, the Great Unknown – a peasant, whom to call a class of the nation is actually too little – has spoken to all who have ears to hear. For he constitutes such a vast majority of the nation that, in reading his reflections, the nation itself is fully recognised, seen, and judged. (Dąbrowska 1936: XI–XII; translated by Alessandro Nicola Malusà)<sup>28</sup>

At the same time, Dąbrowska foregrounded the autobiographical character of peasant writing, citing as one of the “conditions for the creation of culture” the ability to “take material from memories” and to “use memory” (Dąbrowska 1936: XIII), which led her to conceive of diaries and memoirs as mainstays of

26 “książka o ogromnej wartości literackiej, a wolna od literatury.”

27 “gdyby nie ów błogosławiony konkurs, ten czterdziestoletni robotnik byłby żył sobie nadal, nie dowiedziawszy się nigdy, że w nim siedzi pisarz, artysta!”

28 “Dziś w *Pamiętnikach* przemówił do wszystkich, mających uszy ku słuchaniu, Wielki Nieznany – chłop, którego nazwać warstwą narodu – to właściwie za mało. Cdyż stanowi on tak olbrzymią większość narodu, że czytając jego rozpamiętywania naród siebie samego dopiero w pełni poznaje, ogląda i sądzi.”

modern Polish literature.<sup>29</sup> On the basis of these considerations, Dąbrowska concluded:

To say of the *Memoirs* that they are works of art is both too little and too much. There is no artistic intention here, yet elements of unfeigned artistry are embedded in them like abundantly scattered crumbs of gold in raw, unrefined ore. (Dąbrowska 1936: XII-XIII; translated by Alessandro Nicola Malusà)<sup>30</sup>

At Dąbrowska's request, the second volume of *Memoirs of peasants* was awarded the prize for the most outstanding book of the year 1936 by *Wiadomości Literackie* (the leading Polish literary magazine at the time). The front page of the magazine's eighth issue, dated February 14, 1937, featured an extensive report on the meeting of the jury, which had taken place in the Warsaw wine bar *Bachus* on January 30, 1937. Despite the fact that many books had been submitted by established writers, Dąbrowska managed to convince the assembled jurors to award the prize to *Memoirs of Peasants*. In her speech, she stressed that in Poland "this is the first large-scale peasant voice" ("Nagrodę 'Wiadomości Literackich' uzyskały *Pamiętniki chłopów*" 1937: 1).<sup>31</sup>

The panel's decision elicited vehement disapproval in parts of the press. Dąbrowska responded to critics who questioned the literary and intellectual

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- 29 Dąbrowska was right. Sixty years later, Zygmunt Ziątek, in his seminal study *Wiek dokumentu* [The age of the document], stressed emphatically that neither the issue of documentarism, so important in modern Polish literature, nor the related questions concerning the status of truth and fiction in literature could be treated as an "internal affair" taking the form of a continuation, transformation, or negation of autonomous artistic processes. Instead, Ziątek highlighted the importance of "the relations between artistic prose and massive-scale, non-professional documentary writing, which was born completely independently of all the novel's troubles with its own literariness, fabularity, and fictionality, and initiated new phenomena that developed as much in opposition to the established traditions of fiction as in symbiosis with its explorations, including avant-garde ones." (Ziątek 1999: 7,8) One example of this phenomenon is the "prose of the peasant current" (proza nurtu chłopskiego) embraced by the likes of Tadeusz Nowak, Julian Kawalec, Wiesław Myśliwski, Edward Redliński, and Marian Pilot.
- 30 "Powiedzieć o *Pamiętnikach*, że są utworami sztuki, to i za mało i za wiele. Nie ma tu zamierzenia artystycznego, jednak pierwiastki niektamanego artyzmu tkwią w nich niby obficie rozsiane okruchy złota w surowej nieoczyszczonej rudzie."
- 31 "jest to pierwszy głos chłopca na wielką skalę".

value of *Memoirs of peasants* with the long article “Documentary and Literature. On ‘memoirs of peasants’” [1937], in which she argued once again that the *Memoirs of peasants* were simultaneously something more and something less than literature, that they did not constitute a work of art in the classical (i.e., aesthetic) sense, but possessed “a significance more varied than that of a novelistic work” (Dąbrowska 1964: 152)<sup>32</sup> – paradoxically, their artistic value lay precisely in the fact that “they are so very non-literary” (Dąbrowska 1964: 155).<sup>33</sup>

## Memoirs of Life Writing Competitions and Autosociobiography

If we apply the perspective of today’s autosociobiographical discourse to the memoirs of 1930s workers and peasants, and, more broadly, to the texts submitted in the course of Poland’s post-war life writing competitions, a number of illuminating parallels can be established.

First, the narratives in question portrayed the lives of Polish peasants, workers, and emigrants in a new light: for the first time in the history of Polish writing, their world was extensively described from the inside, that is, by its inhabitants themselves – a world of hard work and very difficult living conditions, if not grinding poverty.

Second, the memoirs tended to highlight the importance of education in general and literacy in particular, which had allowed their authors to escape the constraints of their social class. On the other hand, steps in this direction were routinely met with condemnation by parents who saw learning not only as unnecessary, but as a threat to the cohesion of the traditional community. The participants in life writing competitions were often ‘first readers’ and ‘first writers’, i.e., the first members of their families to complete elementary school and to acquire the ability to read and write (Hébrard 2009: 123–8). One of them describes this experience as follows:

And yet, despite everything, despite the poverty and misery I have lived in since childhood, there is something that gives me inner satisfaction and does not allow me to fall into complete pessimism and apathy. That ‘something’ is self-education and participation in social work. Since childhood, I had a special innate attraction to reading. The biggest obstacle, however,

32 “posiadają doniosłość bardziej różnostronną niż utwór powieściowy”.

33 “są tak bardzo nieliterackie”.

was that I had nothing to read and no money to buy a book or subscribe to newspapers. (*Pamiętniki chłopów*, vol. 1, 1935: 372; translated by Alessandro Nicola Malusà)<sup>34</sup>

The texts submitted to memoir competitions make it possible to trace changes in writing about oneself and one's own life over the course of a century. After World War II, competitions became more frequent and were attended by an increasing number of people representing different professions and social backgrounds, even though workers and peasants were still the most numerous group. There was also a much larger share of women writers than before the war, growing progressively more aware of their rights and actively participating in the fight for equality and emancipation. At the same time, more and more memoirs were being composed in accordance with the conventions of the writing and publishing world. This trend was particularly noticeable among female authors, due in part to the expansion of education, rising literacy levels, and the growing availability of book and magazine publications. A very important role in this process was played by the “world expansion of mass education’ that began around 1870 [and] accelerated massively in the post-1945 world” (Lammers/Twellmann 2023: 62) – undoubtedly a factor of transnational importance as far as autobiographical writing was concerned.

Anthropologists and media scholars such as Marshall McLuhan, Walter J. Ong, and Jack Goody have repeatedly pointed out that an individual's entry into the world of writing results in a loosening of ties with his or her immediate family and/or neighbourhood community, as well as the adoption of a distanced and critical attitude, which in turn can engender a self-analytical approach to his or her own life. When a person becomes literate,

nearly all the emotional and corporate family feeling is eliminated from his relationship with his social group. He is emotionally free to separate from the tribe and to become a civilized individual, a man of visual organization who has uniform attitudes, habits, and rights with all other civilized individuals. (McLuhan 1994: 82)

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34 “A jednak pomimo wszystko, pomimo biedy i nędzy w jakiej od dzieciństwa żyję, jest coś co daje mi wewnętrzne zadowolenie i nie pozwala popaść w całkowity pesymizm i apatię. To ‘coś’ to jest samokształcenie i udział w pracy społecznej. Od dzieciństwa miałem już jakiś specjalnie wrodzony pociąg do czytania. Największą jednak w tem przeszkodą było to, że nie miałem co czytać i nie było za co kupić książki, czy zaprenumerować gazety.”

In the memoirs of Polish peasants and workers, as in later autosociobiographical texts, we can detect (although not in such a radical way as in the works of Annie Ernaux or Didier Eribon) the emergence of a critical attitude towards the author's own family – or, more broadly, his or her closest community. The most important reason behind this distancing process was the memoirist's coming into contact with the world of writing (usually by attending school), and, above all, with reading practices that allowed him or her to discover unknown forms of behaviour and to develop alternative visions for future adult life.

Third, the female voice was clearly beginning to make itself heard, despite the fact that women's memoirs were still significantly fewer in number compared to men's.<sup>35</sup> In one such text we read:

Wanting to give an idea of what the life of a rural woman looks like, her childhood, maidenhood, and later period of life, I wish to give my diary, even if written briefly, but most honestly. I want to render faithfully what I have experienced from the dawn of my life over the course of thirty-some years. Those who will read these words of mine, written by a hand trembling from work, should know that I am writing the most sincere truth, as if in confession, and that I am not vying for any reward, because how could I, an uneducated woman, aim for that! I only want sympathy and understanding. I want everyone to finally understand that we rural women, on whose shoulders an enormous burden of duty has fallen, a hundred times heavier than that of men, are calling for our rights! (*Pamiętniki chłopów*, vol. 1, 1935: 28–9, translated by Alessandro Nicola Malusà)<sup>36</sup>

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35 In the 1933 peasant memoirs competition, women accounted for only 4% of the participants (17 memoirs out of 498); in the 1938 competition for memoirs of “the younger generation of peasants”, the figure was 34% (381 memoirs out of 1,544); in the 1961 competition for memoirs of “the young generation of the rural areas of People's Poland”, about 47% (2,544 memoirs out of 5,475).

36 “Chcę dać wyobrażenie jak wygląda życie wiejskiej kobiety, jej dzieciństwo, panieństwo i dalszy okres życia, pragnę właśnie dać swój pamiętnik choćby pokrótce spisany, ale najszczerzy. Chcę oddać wiernie co przeżyłam od zarania życia w ciągu trzydziestu kilku lat. Ci co czytać będą te moje słowa drżącą od pracy ręką kreślone, niech wiedzą, że piszę najszczerzą prawdę, tak jak na spowiedzi i nie ubiegam się o żadną nagrodę, bo gdzież mnie tam do tego nieuczzonej kobiecie! Chcę tylko współczucia i zrozumienia. Chcę, by nareszcie zrozumieli wszyscy, że my kobiety wiejskie, na których barki spadł ogromny ciężar obowiązku, stokroć cięższy, jak na mężczyzn, wołamy o swoje prawa!”

Fourth, the issue of social advancement, present in memoirs and the concomitant scholarly discourse from the very beginning and arguably the most important aspect of the entire phenomenon, became even more dominant after the war due to increasingly dynamic rural-urban relations and large-scale migration from the countryside to Poland's cities. The first book on the subject drawing on material submitted to autobiographical competitions was Chałasiński's (1931), the most recent is Szcześniak's monograph (2023).

Fifth, the abiding literature on the topic has repeatedly drawn attention to the internal tension and conflict experienced by those undergoing social advancement, associating "individual acts of border crossing" (Lammers/Twellmann 2023: 50) with a sense of distance, alienation, and loneliness. According to Richard Hoggart,

the people most affected by the attitudes now to be examined – the 'anxious and the uprooted' – are to be recognised primarily by their lack of poise, by their uncertainty. In part they have a sense of loss which affects some in all groups. With them the sense of loss is increased precisely because they are emotionally uprooted from their class, often under the stimulus of a stronger critical intelligence or imagination, qualities which can lead them into an unusual self-consciousness before their own situation. (Hoggart 1957: 238–9)

A very similar diagnosis can be found in Magda Szcześniak's *Poruszeni. Awans i emocje w socjalistycznej Polsce* [Moved. Advancement and emotions in socialist Poland], where she stresses that

class transformation requires those advancing to constantly work on their emotions, to actively strive to control them. An excess of emotions hinders daily functioning. The burden of this work depends on the extent of the advancement. Considerable psychological effort is also required to negotiate between the two habitus of the advancing individuals – the new and the old – generating a state referred to by Pierre Bourdieu as a cleft habitus (*habitus clivé*). (Szcześniak 2023: 104; translated by Alessandro Nicola Malusà)<sup>37</sup>

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37 "przemiana klasowa wymaga od osób awansujących ciągłej pracy nad emocjami, aktywnego wysiłku na rzecz ich opanowania. Nadmiar emocji przeszkadza w codziennym funkcjonowaniu. Ciężar tej pracy zależy od zakresu awansu. Niemało wysiłku psychicznego wymaga również negocjacja między dwoma habitusami osób awan-

Sixth, categories such as peasants' memoirs, emigrants' diaries, and workers' autobiographies challenged the traditional concept of what constituted literature: what at first appeared marginal became increasingly important, and the 'non-literary' nature of this writing was increasingly considered a strength rather than a weakness.

Seventh, it should be remembered that it was Polish sociologists who played a crucial role in initiating this phenomenon at the intersection of sociology and literature. If we look at the life writing produced in the context of Polish memoir competitions, we can say that it represents, in a sense, "a genre located between sociological analysis and literary narrative" (Lammers/Twellmann 2023: 50). This characterisation would closely align the texts in question with autosociobiography. However, in autosociobiographical works such as Didier Eribon's *Retour à Reims* or Annie Ernaux' *La place*, social analysis takes place within the author's own text, whereas the biographical method, a research tradition encompassing the acquisition, study, and publication of peasants' or workers' memoirs, engages with the memoirist's writing practice from the outside. Moreover, the form and style of the competition memoirs was significantly influenced by the guidelines formulated in the respective calls for contributions. Thus, if we encounter manifestations of self-analysis in these memoirs, we can conclude that they were inspired (at least to some extent) by sociologists or other social scientists, who in turn used the acquired material for their own studies of social attitudes and dynamics, especially those pertaining to upward mobility.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to point out once again the most important similarities and differences between memoirs composed in the context of Polish life writing competitions and autosociobiographical narratives.

The memoirs of peasants, workers, and emigrants written *en masse* in twentieth-century Poland are similar to autosociobiographical texts (including the most famous ones, such as Annie Ernaux's *La Place* or Didier Eribon's *Retour à Reims*) in that their most important theme is the description of a life story through the prism of the protagonist's social condition and the changes that

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sujących – nowym i starym – generująca stan nazywany przez Pierre'a Bourdieu pękniętym habitusem (*habitus clivé*)."

occur within it. In both cases, the writer's (or memoirist's) retrospective on family background and everyday life is significantly conditioned by class affiliation. Another parallel is that the transformation experienced by the "socially mobile protagonist" tends to create a sense of alienation (Lammers/Twellmann 2023: 50). Again in both cases, the motif of school is very important, as the skills acquired there (reading and writing) are essential preconditions for both social advancement and the development of self-awareness regarding one's station in life.

Yet there are also noteworthy differences: for one, the texts submitted to Polish memoir competitions were written in response to calls for contributions that set out very specific rules and requirements. The writing competence of participating memoirists also tended to be much lower, a fact many of them were acutely aware of (often even apologising to readers for their lack of literary ability). And finally, in the case of competition memoirs, the ultimate decision to publish was not taken by the writers themselves (as in the case of autosociobiographical texts), but by the organisers of the respective event, who often undertook large-scale revisions.

In light of the above, it bears pointing out that the merger of the individual ('auto-'), the social ('socio-'), and the biographical ('biography') that manifested in the outstanding works of Ernaux and Eribon was preceded by a remarkable interaction between Polish working-class authors and social scientists. The works of Hoggart, Bourdieu, and others have been identified as potential historical precursors of the phenomenon of autosociobiography. As has become clear, sociologists such as Florian Znaniecki, Józef Chałasiński, and Ludwik Krzywicki should also be mentioned in this context. Not only has the Polish tradition of life writing competitions produced a truly extraordinary corpus of autobiographical narratives – it could even be argued that the memoirs of twentieth-century Polish peasants, workers, and emigrants constitute a kind of autosociobiography *avant la lettre*.

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