

“Human Lives Are Getting Cheaper...” Discussion with Monika Golonka- Czajkowska, Dariusz Nikiel, Kaja Kajder

The opening words from the memoirs of Wojciech Kuraś, Brother of Józef Kuraś a.k.a. “Ogień” (“Fire”), were used as the motto of the exhibition *The Long World War in Nowotarszczyzna 1939–...*, which was dedicated to World War II and post-war times in the Podtatrze region.¹ The inauguration of the exhibition took place on 22 March 2022, at the Gallery under the Skywalk/Passageway Gallery of the Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology of Jagiellonian University in Kraków. The opening was met with great interest not only among scholars but also within the larger audience, including members of the Kraków branch of the Polish Highlanders (Association). The featured exhibition was the result of long-term fieldwork conducted within the project *Józef Kuraś “Ogień” and his troops in social imagination: An anthropological study of experiencing the past* (National Science Center grant no. 2016/21/B/HS3/02921, duration: 2017–2022). The research team included fellows and Ph.D. students working at the Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology: Monika Golonka-Czajkowska, Kaja Kajder, Dariusz Nikiel, Łukasz Łoziński and Vojtěch Bagin. The group was also joined by Monika Bielak, an artist specializing in exhibition design, who was involved in the graphic design of the exhibition. It is worth highlighting that the exhibition was accompanied by discussions with authors. The initial gathering, attended by representatives of the Kraków branch of the Polish Highlanders Association, took place on the opening day. A seminar held in cooperation with the Institute of History

¹ Podtatrze – a geographic and ethnographic region situated in the area of Tatra Mountains. Podtatrze is divided into Slovakia’s Podtatrze and Poland’s Podtatrze, and includes Podhale, Orava, Liptov and Spiš. The project has adopted a wide understanding of the term.

at Jagiellonian University took place on 7 June 2022 as part of the exhibition's finissage. This exceptionally valuable and rewarding meeting was moderated by Dr. Dawid Golik and Prof. Stanisława Trebunia-Staszel. The seminar mentioned above was an opportunity to exchange methodological insights and challenge ethnological and historical approaches to studying the past.

Previous to the project *Józef Kuraś "Ogień" and his troops in social imagination: An anthropological study of experiencing the past*, ethnographic research in Waksmund and Łopuszna was carried out by students of the Anthropology of War, operating within the Student Association of the Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology. The aforementioned research gave an impulse to approach the challenging subject of German occupation and the turmoil of the post-war period in Podhale and Spiš. Due to the large set of wartime recollections collected by students and a number of questions about memory practices related to Józef Kuraś "Ogień" and the Partisan Group "Błyskawica", the work was further pursued and developed during a professional research project. The central issue of the research was to portray the story of Józef Kuraś in the eyes of witnesses of history, family accounts, and local communities of memory. Collected between 2017 and 2022, large set of wartime recollections collected of the inhabitants of the Podtatrze region provided valuable insight into the different ways of experiencing a difficult past. The tragic figure of "Fire" (Józef Kuraś), the dramatic events related to his actions, as well as his personal life served as a starting point for reflection on the experiences of a person caught up in the chaos of war, which lasted an exceptionally long time in the Podtatrze region. It is worth mentioning that, in parallel with fieldwork based on interviews and participant observation, the research team also conducted archival queries at the Institute of National Remembrance, the National Archives in Kraków, the State Archive in Bytča, and the Dr. Tytus Chałubiński Tatra Museum.

As members of the project mentioned during the debates, research on the activity of Józef Kuraś "Ogień" and his subordinates has uncovered a number of other intriguing and unknown themes related to World War II and the post-war period in the Podtatrze region. While talking about Kuraś, the interviewees also mentioned their own stories and experiences under occupation. Therefore, the figure of Kuraś became a point of departure for complex narrations and reflections on the interlocutors' personal past and the history of the region. The interviews provided insight into the ways in which witnesses of history experienced a difficult past and how they coped with painful events. The collected stories provide a broader perspective on the story of Józef Kuraś and the lives of people caught up in a time of violence and conflict, taking into account the voices of various memorial groups, not to mention the relatives of "Ogień", members of the Home Army, residents of Podhale and Spisz towns, i.e., Waksmund, Ostrowsko, Łopuszna, and Nowa Biała. The ethnographic material gathered during the fieldwork enabled researchers to investigate how memories of a difficult past function

in the Podtatrze region today, and how it is lived, expressed, and practiced. The multi-threaded and multifaceted approach to the subject is well reflected in the titles of the exhibition panels. Segments of the exhibition cover various aspects of the wartime and post-war reality of the Podtatrze region, simultaneously creating a panoramic context for the story of Kuraś "Ogień" and his subordinates. To illustrate the multifaceted nature of the panels, I cite some of their titles: (1) Józef Kuraś "Ogień" – In the Resistance; In the Woods of Gorce; In the Department of Security; Return to the Mountains; (2) The Economy of a Long War: The Administration of the General Governatore; The Underground Units of the Podhale Region; Banditry; Communists; (3) The School: Childhood (memories of daily life during the war – ed. S.T.S); (4) The Bloody Christmas Eve: The Nike of Ochotnica; (5) Jan Sral "Potrzask". One of the 700; (6) Disputes Over Orava and Spiš; (7) Records of Enmity 1945–1947 (acts of violence against Jews shortly after the war in the Podtatrze region – ed. S.T.S). The audience of the exhibition found these issues very intriguing, thus provoking a number of questions that were vividly discussed during the meetings. Many of the issues linked to Józef Kuraś's actions, especially the delicate ones, have not yet been addressed with such courage and sensitivity as was done by the authors of this exposition. While not avoiding difficult matters, researchers made an effort to listen to the people entangled in this conflict, thus giving a closer look at their emotions, feelings, and experiences.

Moving from empirical data to an exhibition. What to choose? How to present it?

The data collected over the course of the long-term project *Józef Kuraś "Ogień" and his troops in social imagination. An anthropological study of experiencing the past* – the interviews, field notes and archival sources – turned out to be an extremely valuable corpus of data for the study of World War II and post-war in the Podtatrze region. To quote what Monika Golonka-Czajkowska said about the preparation of the exhibition:

In all honesty, I convinced my team to think about all the collected data and try to frame the main idea of the exhibition. This was the greatest struggle: how to find a shared theme for such vast and multifaceted material and narrate it within a dozen boards? We knew that it would be a matter of selection and major shortcuts. As we are all aware, the exhibition is governed by its own principles. Therefore, there was concern about what to do so as not to trivialize the discussed issues. And we knew very well that these issues are important and difficult for different groups, which perceive the activities of "Ogień" in very different and sometimes opposite ways. When portraying Józef Kuraś, we tried to take into account these different opinions and positions, while at the same time not amplifying the existing divisions. In fact, even though the main subject of the project itself was contemporary memory conflict, we wanted to show that in this conflict there is an element that unifies all the groups. That element is the deep experience of suffering, violence, and fear. We also wanted to bring to light the story of the nameless victims

of the war – families, children and mothers, living in fear and anxiety over the fate of their loved ones. This group also includes victims of ethnic cleansing. For this reason, the exhibition contains boards dedicated to Shoah and anti-Semitic crimes committed in the Podtatrze region just after the war. There are also boards dedicated to the people of Spiš and Slovakia, who in the post-war period became the target of Ogień's subordinates.

Portrait of Józef Kuraś "Ogień"...

During the exhibition's events, the audience frequently raised questions about Józef Kuraś himself. What is the truth about "Ogień"? What image of "Ogień" emerges from the collection of data? What kinds of episodes, events and facts are linked to "Ogień"? Is there a set of themes, moments, and events that keep repeating in the interviewees' statements, regardless of their opinions about Józef Kuraś? Referring to these questions, the authors of the exhibition stressed that the goal of the project was not to reconstruct the biography of Józef Kuraś but to examine how this particular figure is remembered by the inhabitants of Podtatrze. In the light of the collected material, it is impossible to reconstruct a single "true" portrait of "Ogień" due to his complexity and ambiguity, as well as his life and memories of him. Citing project Principal Investigator Monica Golonka-Czajkowska:

A common motif that arose in interviews was the death of his loved ones, that is for sure. Whether he was portrayed in a positive or negative view, this tragic moment – the deaths of his father, wife, and two-year-old son – was mentioned with empathy, even by his opponents. Frequently, this moment has been presented as the trigger of his actions. Through this tragedy, people tried to explain the behavior of Kuraś, which even included acts of violence against the inhabitants of Spiš or Jews. This event undoubtedly caused the desire for revenge and retaliation. Meanwhile, the rest is very complex, ambiguous, and full of contradictions. For his opponents, surely an important moment is the Kuraś's insubordination in December 1943. "Ogień" was fighting in the structures of the Home Army at that time, and his action contributed to the attack by the Nazis on the partisan camp near the Red Peak. People also mentioned Kuraś's cooperation with Soviet partisans during the war and the fact that he joined the structures of the security apparatus after. Some talked about rapes, killing of innocents, robberies, drunkenness, etc. These are certainly the most common themes that create a negative image of "Ogień". But for those who glorify him, the most crucial aspects are his resistance against the Nazis during the war and against the communist regime after it. In this context, the key events are him leaving the Office of Public Safety [UB], the combat with Internal Security Corps near Ostrowsko, and his capture, which ends with a heroic episode involving a suicide shot that completes his guerrilla biography.

According to project participants Dariusz Nikiel and Kaja Kajder:

Our intention was not to reproduce and consolidate strong opinions about Kuraś. What seems to be a unique outcome of the project is the gathering and presentation of various points of view and opinions. Without ethnographic research, it would not have been possible to spend such a long time recording so many voices. The acknowledgement of diverse perspectives might create grounds for dialogue. [D.N.]

After the project was completed, a concern for us was how future generations of the Podtatrze region will maintain and transmit memories of World War II and the post-war period. Will they simplify history at some point? Or will they be interested in the complexity and the paradoxical aspects of relatives' recollections of the past along with bright and dark moments of it? [K.K.]

An Invitation

The above are just a few observations and remarks concerning the exhibition *The Long World War in Nowotarszczyzna 1939–...* dedicated to World War II and post-war times in the Podtatrze region – an exhibition which residents of Podtatrze and those interested in its history should see firsthand. Indeed, it is impossible to comprehensively describe what it brings and covers. It is only by seeing this exposition in person that the viewer can enter into the story, pause, and quietly reflect on the humans caught up in the drama of the war. Moreover, the visual display is excellently designed. *The Long World War in Nowotarszczyzna...* exhibition now awaits its premiere at the place where it all began – in other words, in the Podtatrze region. The authors intend to present the exhibition first and foremost to the people who co-created it, to those who entrusted the research team with their personal recollections and opinions.

Project Info

Józef Kuraś "Ogień" and his troops in social imagination: An anthropological study of experiencing the past (National Science Centre grant no. 2016/21/B/HS3/02921) at the Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology of the Jagiellonian University. The aim of the project was to study important cultural phenomena associated with the story of Józef Kuraś "Ogień" and his soldiers. A thorough consideration of how the stories of partisan soldiers affect social imagination seems justified given the conflicts this topic provokes. Such conflicts are observable among residents of the Podhale and Spiš regions; in the broader context of Poland, they are an element of discussions on the so-called 'cursed' or "indomitable" soldiers. Aside from the story of Józef Kuraś, the scope of our research also included the phenomena associated with contemporary perception of experiences from the Second World War and its aftermath in the studied region. The material thus interpreted included existing sources (archival material, historical studies, journalistic texts, statements found in internet media, works of art and pop culture) as well as sources created through ethnographic field research. Observations of events relevant for the topic as well as interviews and conversations were conducted primarily in towns and villages in the Podtatrze region, i.a. Waksmund, Ostrowsko, Łopuszna,

Gronków, Ochotnica Dolna and Ochotnica Górna, Krościenko nad Dunajcem, Witów, Nowy Targ and Zakopane; as well as the Spiš region: Nowa Biała, Jurgów, Czarna Góra, Łapsze Niżne.

Project website: www.ogien.project.uj.edu.pl