

# Genealogical Imagination as an Area of Conflicted Memories: A Post-Sarmatic Case Study

## Abstract

In this article, I will discuss two levels of memory conflicts in family genealogies: internal – intimate and private, involving mainly taboos in genealogical practices, and external, which come from broader realms of memory, such as national myths and other collective patterns of imagining the past. The leading story in this article is a multidimensional genealogical narrative provided by an amateur genealogist Iwona Sudnik from Pęgowo near Wrocław. Her genealogical imagination as a form of living “over [family] time” (Jackson 2021) is considered here as an area of accumulated memories that intermingle, complement, or compete with one another, providing background against which conflicts of memory can be studied in the course of in-depth ethnographic research.

**Keywords:** genealogy, ancestors, family, collective memory, Sarmatism

## Introduction

The inclusion of the word *généalogie* in the seventh volume of *Encyclopédie* (1751–1780), edited by Denis Diderot, made genealogy a part of historiography and thus included it in the register of systematic knowledge. It was defined in *Encyclopédie* in the following way: [...] *mot tiré du grec, [...] il est composé des genos, race, lignée & de logos, discours traité*<sup>1</sup> (*Encyclopédie*, 1988: 548). With the reference to this 18<sup>th</sup>-century definition, the German literary scholar Sigrid Weigel noticed the dualism of genealogy, which combines (1) the represented object or phenomenon, i.e., genos, race, lineage, etc., with (2) the language of its representation (Weigel

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<sup>1</sup> This quote can be translated in the following way: “[...] a word taken from the Greek language, [...] it is composed of genos, race, lineage & logos, language (or processed discourse)”

2006: 21–22). Similarly, ethnographic insight into the genealogy of any one family implies a parallel exploration of two main areas: the full spectrum of memory practices centered around kinship and roots, and their end products, i.e., representations of the family past (family trees, private archives, narratives, and more).

As Michael Jackson points out in his latest book, the genealogical imagination – as a central concept of my study – is a mode of being-in-time or living “over [family] time” (Jackson 2021). It can be considered an area where ideas about a family’s past accumulate as a consequence of experiencing traces of its past like circulating or “wandering” memories. Following Astrid Erll’s concept of “wandering memory” (Erll 2011), such a term can be used to describe any information and images acquired by the genealogist and accumulated both in the archive (existing physically and digitally) and in his or her mind. Genealogical practices are focused on both family members who provide “oral” genealogy, and traces set in the material or visual world: archival records (and their digital forms), pictures, objects, places, or landscapes are all referred to as the sources for family history. Because of the diversity and nature of these sources, each individual genealogical narrative is complex and is based on various memories, which are sometimes contradictory. Inspired by Maurice Halbwachs, I also consider genealogical imagination to be an area of accumulation of memories that interpenetrate and complement or compete with each other (Halbwachs 1992: 54–55).

In this article, I will discuss two levels of such memory conflict: internal – intimate and private, such as taboos in family genealogies, and external, which can be called public or ideological and is founded on wider circles of collective memory (Connerton 1989: 36–38), e.g. national myths and other collective patterns of imagining the past (Kurzewska, Kosicki 2006: 71). This is all due to the fact that, according to Bronislaw Baczko, the practice of “organizing and taming collective time at the symbolic level” is the basis of social imagination (Baczko 1994: 43).

My approach to genealogical memory as an area of conflicted memories was developed as a result of the ethnographic study of amateur genealogy in contemporary Poland.<sup>2</sup> The idea and practice of discovering family roots today, over thirty years after the systemic transformation and democratic turn in Central-Eastern Europe, seems to be a kind of manifestation of Derrida’s “archive fever” (e.g., Kurzewska, Kosicki 2006; Kwiatkowski 2012: 100; Rakowski 2016: 278). Each individual genealogy is a separate universe that the ethnographer can explore. Therefore, the narrative of one amateur genealogist, Iwona Sudnik,<sup>3</sup> will

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<sup>2</sup> The ethnographic source material that serves as the basis for the article was collected in 2018–2021. The research is financed by the National Science Center as a project “Between the «great history» and small histories. Popular genealogy in present-day Poland” (PRELUDIUM 17, no. 2019/33/N/HS3/02193). The main goal of the project is to investigate the phenomenon of popular genealogy in applying a variety of ethnographic research methods and interpretative and contextual approaches (Geertz 1973).

<sup>3</sup> Born in 1960 in Pęgowo near Wrocław and living there; retired. Member of the Silesian Genealogical Society, participant in the annual National Genealogical Conference in Brzeg and other

be discussed as the leading story of this article. This narrative is an example of a complex, contradictory, and multidimensional genealogy. It represents one of several in-depth case studies based on ethnographic interviews and a multi-stage “following” of genealogists and their narratives during a multi-site ethnographic study.<sup>4</sup> To show the broader context, the story will be supported by an analysis of the collective genealogical discourse in Poland in the last decade. Discussion threads and statements made by members of the Genealodzy PL Facebook group will serve as material for this analysis (as “netnographic” or virtual ethnographic data collected online during participant observation – see Kozinets 2010).

## Genealogy of the Sudnik family: A story about the inheritance of multiple memories<sup>5</sup>

“When will he die and his name perish?” (Ps 41, 5). The double dimension of death concerns both the body and the name because the name is the memory. Forgetting or erasing a name means symbolically killing the one who bore it. And *vice versa*: recalling someone’s name means resurrecting this person from the dead, making him or her present, and reviving past reality in some sense. When Iwona the genealogist finds her father’s original name in the archive (Mikołaj Sudnik), she returns to him the identity he lost in the course of history. Step by step, trace by trace, the next elements of this puzzle began to be discovered: the name of Mikołaj’s biological mother, the Orthodox Zofia Lewkowicz; the act of official adoption by the biological father, the noble Józef Sudnik, and his elderly wife Konstancja née Hryniewicz-Sudnik; the premises for double baptism of Mikołaj; the death of his parents; and finally, the genesis of a family conflict. In 1936, the orphaned ten-year-old Mikołaj left the family nest in the village Niehnicze (Baranowicze county in present-day Belarus, formerly the Second Polish Republic), and began his new life in Końskowola near Puławy under the care of relatives,

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genealogical events in Poland, describing herself as “self-taught” (also amateur, hobbyist) and practicing genealogy for 15 years; active user of genealogical virtual databases and websites. She identifies with the Sudnik family using her maiden name, not her husband’s.

<sup>4</sup> I adopted the position of an internal observer who followed my ethnographic partner step by step: in her hometown, Pęgowo in the Lower Silesian Province (February 27–28, 2019), during a genealogical trip to ancestral sites in Grodno and Minsk (April 2019, including Mir, Stolpce, Swierzeń Nowy, Połoneczka in present-day Belarus), and virtually, via the Internet for almost three years (2018–2021). Such a research idea was the realization of the concept of “multisite ethnography” (Marcus 1995: 95–117), which assumed the mobility of the ethnographer in the field.

<sup>5</sup> The Sudnik family is not a family whose fate has been recorded in historiography. It is a typical noble family representative of the Northeastern Borderlands of the Republic of Poland, whose genealogy reflects important issues of Polish collective memory in light of the popularity of the search for roots.

who register him in the registry office as “Mieczysław Sudnik”. The act of adopting a new name was a sign of the birth of a new person, so the biography of the previous one was symbolically erased. With the outbreak of the Second World War, the boy was abandoned by his relatives. As Iwona says, “I think it must have been a miracle that he survived the war as an orphan”.<sup>6</sup> To this day, no documents regarding his biography during the Second World War have been found, and he himself has said nothing about it. After several years after the war, he came to the village Pęgowo near Wrocław, married a girl from Volhynia, and started a family there. “My parents got married in 1959 – genealogist Iwona recalls – so I can call it such a liminal moment, because then he decided to start a family, and soon after that he became my father”. It was a turning point that marked the end of what she today calls “the past”. Everything that happened after that is “the present” for her. It seems that along with the original name of Iwona’s father, the genealogy and history of the Sudnik family from before the war is gone. “[My father] pushed it from his memory”, Iwona emphasizes many times. And she adds: “[In 2006] I went to the Oborniki Śląskie Commune Office and asked for my father’s ID documentation”.<sup>7</sup> When she received them and began to study them, at this point her adventure of seeking information and discovering family history began.

Different circles of memory are mixed in this genealogical tale. For many years, genealogist Iwona Sudnik has been verifying information, collecting family stories and historical records, thus obtaining often mutually incompatible clues. These clues include her father’s autobiographical narrative, which was full of gaps and repressed memories; disapproving comments by the mother and aunt; residual and incomplete messages by relatives and inhabitants of Mieczysław *alias* Mikołaj Sudnik’s hometown, as well as all records stored in archives and other memory places, and digitally recorded (“mediated”) in the case of the content of digital archives as well (Dijck 2007). Archival resources made available to the public are a very important factor in the development of amateur genealogy. In the archives, physical and digital, genealogists search for identity documents, church registers of baptisms, marriages, and funerals, 19<sup>th</sup>-century confirmations of nobility (if they need them), or notes from old newspapers – paper or digital, original or scanned copies, and many other traces. Based on these archives, volunteers and members of genealogical societies create name indexes, which then feed genealogical digital databases. Also, genealogist Iwona has been using them for many years. However, other “places of memory” than the archives are equally important to her: tombstones found during trips to the land of ancestors, houses, and other spaces and things that are the witnesses of the Sudnik family’s history. As clues or prerequisites for the search, genealogist Iwona also considers all the stories told by people as transmitters of the memory of the family. Finally, all this

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<sup>6</sup> Pęgowo, February 27, 2019.

<sup>7</sup> Pęgowo, February 27, 2019.

is overlaid with narratives that play a large role in Polish collective memory: the Sarmatian myth and the myth of the Eastern Borderlands.

## Internal, intimate memories

The circle of family memory determines how genealogists perceive and process the history of individual family members, and what is the nature of relations between them and their ancestors and relatives. It happens that genealogists are often given a special status and place in the structure of the family group; thus, playing the role of “kinkeepers”<sup>8</sup> (Rosenthal 1985; Stanisz 2014: 109). This means that a genealogist can be not only a searcher, collector, and interpreter of family history, but also a kind of institution (or memory leader) that cares for existing ties in the family and creates new ones with other relatives or any individual useful for further research. Relatives are often considered by genealogists as sources of “oral genealogy”, also called “shambled genealogy” by some in the genealogical circle [M-21-09-2016]. At this level, however, there may be obstacles that prevent or hinder the search: family taboos manifested in the negation of troublesome experiences, or tendencies to spread contradictory versions of the past that exist within the family community and paradoxically bind it together. It happens that when one family member finds out that another is investigating a family secret, it can provoke opposition or even anger. Sometimes a family member’s genealogical passion generates so much interest that relatives join or even support the search. Usually, however, when a genealogist breaks a family taboo, he may face silence or even anger from relatives. The act of breaking the taboo, in a sense, makes him an “outsider” and puts himself on the margins of the family group. This is the situation in which Iwona the genealogist found herself on several times:

When I started my adventure with genealogy, my mother [...] did everything to discourage me, she did everything not to touch it [father’s history]. It turns out that it lived somewhere in everyone’s subconscious. [They were afraid] that something bad would come out (Pęgów, February 27, 2019).

Mieczysław *alias* Mikołaj Sudnik’s wife (and Iwona’s mother) was the keeper of family secrets and did not want to reveal them. In contrast to her, Iwona the genealogist, as an explorer, decided to discover the reason for her silence. When she undertook a genealogical search, she somehow changed the natural intergenerational order of memory transmission. Living relatives, on the other hand, began to express distance from the search, and when asked about family relations in

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<sup>8</sup> The term “kinkeeper” in kinship theory refers to a person who maintains family ties e.g., by collecting information and items inherited from ancestors.

the past, they often said they did not know and did not remember. As genealogist Iwona herself recalls:

I made a call to my aunt and asked, “I would like to take care of it, but why is the name Mikołaj in these archives when my father’s name was Mieczysław?” [And then] she replied, “who knows, my dear child? I do not remember anything at all” [...]. (Pęgów, February 27, 2019).

The stories collected from her family members became a collection of clues and leads that, like an investigator, genealogist pondered for many years. In 1978, Mieczysław *alias* Mikołaj Sudnik, who usually did not want to talk about the past, began to remember his childhood. As an eighteen-year-old girl, Iwona as his daughter asked him about the genealogical relationship between him and his cousin from the UK. There was then a meaningful and pivotal dialogue between them, a fragment of which she remembered in the following way:

[...] So, where was this property, daddy? – Niehnicze. – But what was there? – Well, there was... I don’t know. Cheeses were made there, and there were new buildings and a large orchard and I don’t remember anything more». Here I am quoting my father’s words [a moment of silence]. [...] Well, he just pushed it from his memory[...] Because, as some have confirmed, for many years he was urged not to remember his father [Józef] (Pęgów, February 27, 2019).

In 1991, according to his daughter, Mieczysław *alias* Mikołaj decided to visit the church in Połoneczka (the seat of the parish to which Niehnicze belonged), where he was baptized. “When the Soviet Union was about to collapse, my parents – and my dad probably secretly dreamed about it all his life, [...] it all had to accumulate somewhere in him, [...] – [my parents] went [there],”<sup>9</sup> reports Iwona. He met two gentlemen there who recognized him as Sudnik, and he saw his wet-nurse from a distance. The past came alive in him. The last words he heard from the locals were “Don’t leave, don’t leave! Let’s look, she’s going there, the one who fed you!”<sup>10</sup> Soon after returning from Połoneczka, he fell silent forever. Since then

[...] daddy cut off every question. It was gone, the end. You understand. As if he wanted to put up a wall with the message: “There was nothing. It is just here and now” (Pęgów, February 28, 2019).

Erasing or suppressing family memories is the complete opposite of genealogy, which over-accumulates memory. From the psychological perspective, successive generations’ efforts to seek details of the past may be a form of compensation or an attempt to work through trauma or painful experiences inherited and accumulated in the individual as a kind of post-memory (Hirsch 2007: 22). This therapeutic aspect of searching for roots is also emphasized by Fenella Cannell, a British anthropologist specializing in the study of kinship and the phenomenon of genealogy. According to her, this activity may also have a sacred dimension, as some believe that their ancestors expect them to resolve matters from the past or

<sup>9</sup> Pęgów, February 27, 2019.

<sup>10</sup> Pęgów, February 27, 2019.

even supervise the search process<sup>11</sup> (Cannell 2011: 462). The relationship between the genealogist and her father was (is) fundamental in this case. “I can’t explain to myself whether I’m doing all this [conducting genealogical searches – MRK] for myself”, says genealogist Iwona in a breaking voice, “or whether I’m doing it for the memory of my dad as a little boy”.<sup>12</sup>

The issue of internal family reactions is meaningful from an anthropological point of view. Participants of the Facebook group *Genealodzy PL*, of which Iwona is a member, describe their personal experiences with family members who tried to block their research by providing unclear and misleading information. Similar to Iwona’s genealogical practices, the interests of many explorers did not coincide with the interests of their families. After analyzing the statements in the comments of users of *Genealodzy PL* group, I focused on the following suggestive narratives:

For some time now, I have thought my ancestors may have been Jews. This thought came back to me recently after the Mormons permitted public [digital] access to the church records from my grandparents’ parish. When I talked to my cousin and told him about my assumptions, he took offense at me and stopped calling me. Then when I asked my uncle [about it], he got angry and said that his grandfather just was a beekeeper, a farmer, and played the dulcimer (F-5-06-2018).

There were times when I still heard the questions: “What do you need this for? What does that even get you? Aren’t you wasting your time? Don’t you regret your money? They are long dead, you have to live in the present, and not deal with some old family conflicts”.

The comment below: I have the same. Grandma doesn’t want to say anything about her father and his family. “Because he was a bad man”, she says, and asks: “what do you need this for?” (FF-6-12-2018).

My great-grandfather just “disappeared” from the family. My mother (born 1952) mentions that he was not talked about at all in the family circle and that he is not buried with his great-grandmother. Older family members say they don’t remember anything but look at each other suggestively (F-8-04-2019).

As genealogical topics that block the process of obtaining knowledge from relatives, Polish genealogists used to consider mainly Jewish roots (sic!), misalliances, illegitimate children, incestuous relationships, suicides, or traumatic experiences. They discuss on the forum *Genealodzy PL* how to deal with their family’s lack of acceptance of their activity, and they signal the division between “us” (i.e., genealogists tasked with discovering the truth) and “them” (family members and other persons who hide the truth about the past). “My husband and dad do not approve of this [search], and now my grandfather’s sister is worried about my discoveries because I destroy family legends”, confesses one of the genealogists in the Facebook group, “but it’s my own family tree and it’s nobody’s business; if someone doesn’t like it, I’m sorry, but I want to know the truth”

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<sup>11</sup> “There is a belief [among genealogists] – says genealogist Iwona – and I learned it while participating in the group «Genealodzy PL» that if your ancestors do not want you to find them, you will not find them” Pęgów, February, 28, 2019.

<sup>12</sup> Połoneczka, April 10, 2019.

(F-21-12-2014). In the course of virtual external observations of genealogical practices among participants of this and other thematic groups, I have quite often felt that taboos were a kind of driving force behind genealogy that encourages explorers to “dig” in state and church archives to solve questions that relatives do not want to answer. Nevertheless, the more I delved into individual family histories with genealogists as my ethnographic partners, the more delicately they treated and reflected on taboos. Rather, it turned out that the genealogist could not completely step outside the family and distance himself from its rules (see also Nash 2002; Kramer 2011). Despite the fact that genealogist Iwona broke the taboo, in the ethnographic conversation she began to set her own boundaries and control herself on what to say and what not to say. The reason for this may be that as a researcher I was still an outsider. Our conversations were spread over time and space, so we returned to especially more difficult family topics several times. I was trying to give space to the stories the genealogist carried within herself. More than once I was asked: “I don’t want you to write about it”, or “I’ll tell you something, but please turn off the recorder”. I also noticed strong emotions accompanying stories: crying, sadness or difficulties in uttering words. Together, we figured out where the boundary is, what can be accurately described, and what cannot. I decided that this research result is the summary of our shared experience: a record of intimate ethnography, meeting another human being who has the right to designate spaces in which he feels comfortable and safe and who is an equal subject (see Rapport 2014).

The accumulation of contradictory accounts from “oral” family histories and from archival sources means that a “genealogy-mythology”<sup>13</sup> and “fact-legend” opposition arises in the collective genealogical discourse. “Leave the legends aside, let’s deal with genealogy”; “genealogy without a solid foundation of documents is still mythology”; these are just some of the comments posted in the Facebook group.<sup>14</sup> This is due to the need for confirmed data from handwritten documents that have the power to prove historical truth<sup>15</sup> (Troszyński 2014: 49). The belief that there is a “genealogy-mythology” opposition may be a form of dealing with conflicting memories and a demonstration of distance from the subject of genealogical research. “Genealogical fact” i.e., information found in an archive and confirmed by a source (and therefore considered objective), has become a tool for the genealogist to legitimize the vision of the past he has created in the case studied.

[...] A terrible thing has happened. Once again, a family legend, and even a personal relationship with a relative, lost its validity when confronted with documents, with “naked” facts and indisputable evidence [...]. My uncle, whom I was so fond of, ceased to be my relative as a result

<sup>13</sup> Words “mythology” and “myth” are common sense here.

<sup>14</sup> F-15-07-2019, F-8-02-2019, M-19-06-2018, M-15-03-2014.

<sup>15</sup> As a kind of handprint, written documents also can personify ancestors, like old photographs.



of genealogical research. Because of new discoveries, he was excluded from the genetic community (M-30-01-2017).

For many genealogists, including Iwona, archival sources, such as documents, and handwritten testimonies, are crucial. They use documents to defend against so-called family myths, legends passed down orally from generation to generation. At the same time, however, he gives these documents special meanings. In this way, it creates another myth.

In the case of Iwona Sudnik's genealogical story, the conflicting moment was not only the confrontation of the family's oral history with the archives relating to her father. Another conflict arose around documents. Having received records from the Diocesan Archives in Drohiczyń that confirmed the adoption by a married couple, Józef and Konstancja, of Mikołaj Lewkowicz, the illegitimate son of Zofia the servant on the Niehnicze estate, she was given a chance to investigate the origin of her biological grandmother as well. Perhaps some will take this path as genetic genealogy<sup>16</sup> is gaining popularity today (Kramer 2011: 89). But she finally focused on her non-biological grandmother, Konstancja née Hryniewicz-Sudnik.

After all, he [father] was not a child of Konstancja, because this beautiful maid gave birth to him [*as the record confirmed*]. [...] But Konstancja, theoretically, is still my grandmother. [...] With any genetic tests, of course not. However, if we are to create a family history, I understand, and we have documents confirming it, it means that he was legally adopted by both of them (Józef and Konstancja) and entered the family (Pęgów, February 27, 2019).

Since the genealogist decided that the inherited stories were mutually exclusive, she chose the one that was more significant to her due to the legal affiliation of Konstancja to the Sudnik family. The selection was made in accordance with the principles of traditional noble genealogy, which made it possible to legitimize, but also restore, her father's forgotten ancestry. This act introduces us to another public circle of collective memory that makes up the practice of this genealogy.

## External, public memories

Genealogist Iwona Sudnik has accumulated in her imagination a very complex system of symbols and collective memories. Now she has to confront them with each other; she accepts selected motives, rejects others, and questions and criticizes still others. Some of them do not fit with her views and ways of under-

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<sup>16</sup> "It is this irresistible and contradictory combination of truth as experience with truth as a scientific method that generates the fascination and compulsive epistemophilia that genetic genealogy represents" – as Anne Marie Kramer suggests about genetics as a tool for the modern democratic genealogy (Kramer 2011: 89).

standing national history, so she tries to rationalize them (like the political myth of the Eastern Borderlands), while others seduce and work on the imagination, like the Sarmatian myth or the motifs of noble genealogies.

Iwona is making her genealogical tree focusing on the patrilineage (called the spear-side).<sup>17</sup> Her mother – who accompanies us when I visit Pęgów in February 2019 – appears here only in the context of the biography of the father. The system of meanings in which this genealogical story of Iwona is embedded reflects a certain symbolic, cultural, and social structure, based on a patriarchal model of relations typical of traditional genealogies. An important role is played here by the pedigree based on the family name, rare and representative of the territory of the Northeastern Borderlands of the former Republic of Poland. “A Sudnik is a Sudnik” – with these words, the genealogist answers my question about the criteria of someone’s family membership when searching for relatives and ancestors. This can also be inferred from the dialogue quoted in the conversation between the genealogist and her relative:

I asked [my cousin] the question, “Listen, what kind of cousins are we to each other?” and he replied: “We are just cousins”. I added: “Well, okay, but how? – You know...”. Anyway, it started to interest us because we wanted to finally see why we were family. [...] Then I met my uncle [and asked him]: “Uncle, what is the genealogical relationship between us? – Oh, who knows! – Who knows? – Well, a Sudnik is always a Sudnik”, he replied [after a moment of silence]. And added that “someone once said that we are family, so I decided that we are” (Pęgów, February 27, 2019).

Iwona Sudnik, as a member of the community of meanings created by Polish genealogists, uses only her maiden name. In her case, therefore, the “father’s surname” is a kind of social mask, camouflage, or even a symbol. The practice of emphasizing noble ancestry through the maiden name was described by Janusz Tazbir, among others, in the context of post-war Poland and examples of the influence of noble culture on the collective imagination of the time (Tazbir 1978: 208–209). The Sarmatian myth, on which genealogies and other elements of the noble way of life were based on the 16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, adapts to contemporary problems of collective memory and forms the foundation of the story.<sup>18</sup> More precisely, Iwona’s genealogical imagination can be described as post-Sarmatian. What does the prefix “post-” mean here?

First of all, noble culture is a thing of the past in Poland, and today we can only observe its echoes, incarnations, and reinterpretations. However, the phenomenon of amateur genealogy is one of those areas where they are undoubtedly most noticeable. “Sarmatism – as Jakub Niedźwiedź writes – is a space common

<sup>17</sup> There is a stereotype that men tend to focus on spear-side genealogies, while women are more likely to look for ancestors on the mother line, placing emphasis on the stories told, not evidence. The in-depth case studies that I conducted during my research problematize this assumption a lot.

<sup>18</sup> For more analysis of the Sarmatian myth in contemporary contexts of Polish culture see Ulewicz 1963; Beauvois 1994; Sowa 2011; Bohuszewicz 2014; Czapliński 2015; Niedźwiedź 2015 and others.

to most researchers writing about Polish history” (Niedźwiedz 2015: 46). However, it turns out that it is not only for academics but also for any person dealing with the national past, such as those searching for their family roots. Finally, it also applies to the ethnographer, who in the process decides to look into them. In popular, media discourse, the stereotype that “all Poles are looking for noble ancestors” is common. This is, of course, a simplification. Rather, the growing popularity of genealogy in Poland in recent years is due to the overlap of several phenomena: the realization of the idea of open archives and grassroots archival practices that emulate the popular genealogy born in the US and Western Europe in the 1980s, on the one hand (Lowenthal 2016: 16), and only on the other hand, the longevity of national myths, including the Sarmatian myth. In fact, many of the concepts, narrative schemes (such as the spear-based family tree) and motifs with which Polish genealogists construct their ancestor stories derive from the Sarmatian genealogical myth<sup>19</sup>.

Iwona Sudnik’s genealogy is post-Sarmatian as a contemporary narrative. Its post-Sarmatian foundation is distinguished by the fact that this story negotiates with collective memory. Intuitively or consciously, genealogist Iwona uses or rejects in this case certain images, traditions, and methods invented on the ground of noble culture as a kind of symbolic heritage and adapt them to her current expectations, needs, and perceptions. She constantly moves in the symbolic universe that she inherited from her father and grandparents and which she cannot abandon because she is entangled in it. Thus, it can be said that the practice of genealogy here is a manifestation of cultural intimacy (Herzfeld 2016). The genealogist verifies traces, tries to be objective, and negotiates with them, but is herself influenced by them. “My mother – as genealogist recalls – said that when my father introduced her to his relatives after her marriage, these relatives called him «benefactor», «he is our benefactor», they said”<sup>20</sup>. The genealogist’s story seems to prove her father’s nobility. The nobility as a “collective ancestor” in genealogist Iwona’s family narrative seems to be a kind of nostalgic figure. At first glance, we do not see this nostalgia. The genealogist expresses with detachment and a dose of criticism about people who go to the Eastern Borderlands, to Belarus, Ukraine or Lithuania, to look for their ancestors (“we [Poles] go there with great pretensions, like great lords”<sup>21</sup>) – in her words and gestures there is a noticeable distance from the symbols of noble culture or the so-called “noble ethos”. She declares: “My ancestors were nobility, I am not one”<sup>22</sup>. Let’s note that for some time genealogist Iwona belonged to the discussion group of the Union of Polish Nobility

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<sup>19</sup> It can be said to be part of the post-school habitus, or, according to Pierre Bourdieu, a certain inherited pattern of thought and behavior that serves as an organizing principle for the individual’s practices (Bourdieu 1977).

<sup>20</sup> Pęgow, February 27, 2019.

<sup>21</sup> Pęgow, February 27, 2019.

<sup>22</sup> Mir, April 9, 2019.

on Facebook, but was not an official member of this organization. On the other hand, there are elements of romantic Sarmatian imagination in her stories (the family estate in her father's memories, the landscape of Belarusian villages and cemeteries visited, etc.). As she stresses, she avoids nostalgia for the past as much as possible and does not want to mythologize the past. But in the introduction to her public speech at the 7<sup>th</sup> National Genealogical Conference in Brzeg, she describes her recent trips to the villages and towns of her ancestors in Belarus in the following words:

[I wanted] to stand my ground in the places my father missed. It is surprising how a little boy, forcibly taken from this world, missed [this world] for so many years. He remembered the smell of herbs, bread, cheese, the sound of the Nemunas and Ears, and the color of the sky – it was bluer (Brzeg, September 26, 2020).

The idea of Sarmatism manifests itself most strongly when the genealogist highlights ambiguities, gaps, and emotional issues in the family history. Therefore – following Paweł Czapliński (2015: 41) – we can identify this particular genealogy with the idea of post-Sarmatism, which is emotional and pre-rational. Since the genealogist is an individual immersed in liquid postmodernity, he is exposed to the crises, and doubts associated with it. As Paweł Bohuszewicz (2014: 105) writes, such a post-Sarmatian genealogy allows for the simultaneous realization of two opposing memory projects: neo- and anti-Sarmatian. As a genealogist, Iwona Sudnik thus reconstructs the mythological structure typical of Sarmatian genealogies, drawing much from collective memories, while at the same time critiquing their foundations and going beyond historically fixed, rigid patterns of meaning.

## Conclusions

All the images and memories, as well as the oppositions on which Iwona Sudnik's genealogy is based (tradition and modernity, internal and external, private and public, interior and mask, blood, and name, etc.) complement each other, creating a field for the development of genealogical imagination. This process is dynamic, as well as unpredictable, because, as Kristen Hastrup reminds us in her article *Presenting the Past: Reflections on Myth and History*, remembering takes place over time. We constantly recall memories, tell stories, reinterpret them, add to or discard certain images, and often simply forget (Hastrup 1987: 30). Roland Barthes (1972) stresses that myths serve to tame reality: they help to make sense of it and understand it when it proves too difficult and conflicting, full of contradictions or understatements. In the case described, the image of the past appears to the genealogist as something complex and distorted, which was and is constantly subjected to numerous processes within the family circle: denial and negation

(by the father), as well as exclusion and stereotyping (by relatives). Genealogy as a practice of memory can be seen in this context as an area that sometimes legitimizes, at other times demystifies, the identity being discovered. Once again, we are dealing with a phenomenon through the prism of which we can see how the past remains at the service of the present.

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