

# On “Reliving the Past”: An Anthropologist’s Perspective<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

The article presents a theoretical conceptualization of the metaphor of “reliving the past” for ethnographic fieldwork use. The following three issues are elaborated: (1) how the metaphor of “reliving the past” is present in the academic literature; (2) what anthropological theories inspire the proposed use of the notion of “reliving the past”; and (3) how the use of this kind of “theory” and “method” might affect the practice of ethnographic fieldwork. The article is based on the author’s experience gathered during the realization of research on the memory of the Second World War and the post-war period in the Podhale region.

**Keywords:** memory studies, Józef Kuraś “Ogień”, Cursed Soldiers, the Second World War, Podhale, ethnographic fieldwork, witness of history, reliving the past, life-story

*‘You don’t recall what my nom-de-guerre was, do you?’*

*Władysław directs the question to his wife, whom he had just called ‘Mummy!’, as he habitually does.*

*What?’*

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<sup>1</sup> Title in Polish: *O przeżywaniu przeszłości. Spojrzenie antropologa*. The present article is the result of the project *Józef Kuraś „Ogień” i jego podkomendni w wyobraźni społecznej. Antropologiczne studium przeżywania przeszłości* (National Science Centre, grant no. 2016/21/B/HS3/02921), completed at the Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Ethnography of the Jagiellonian University, under the supervision of Monika Golonka-Czajkowska PhD, professor of the Jagiellonian University (2017–2022). The work aims at providing a theoretical approach to the metaphor of “reliving the past” used in the conceptualisation of selected research issues throughout the project. It presents the author’s own perspective on the subject, not necessarily identical to that of other members of the research team.

*'What was my nom-de-guerre?'*

*Seeing a person struggle with their memory can be a painful experience. Particularly heart-rending, however, is the image of a veteran trying to remember his own nom-de-guerre – seemingly the most basic element of a partisan's identity. Władysław is one of the last living members of the Home Army in his region. When talking about his former comrades, he usually begins or ends by indicating when they passed away. He mentions that one of his office drawers contains a stack of funeral eulogies he delivered for his brothers-in-arms as the president of the local Veteran Association. He is 98 years old; with whom can he still discuss shared experiences? Who can remember the days of the Second Polish Republic and the wartime exile as clearly as he does? Time inexorably moves on, showing no mercy to the ageing, fading generation of those who witnessed the war.*

*Throughout our conversation, Władysław often struggles to remember things, trying to recall details, facts, data – such as the surname of a commanding officer or the year of a battle. Although, from my perspective, he manages admirably, each of such situations pains him and causes irritation, sometimes anger – only then do I hear him curse under his breath ('bloody heck!'). Sometimes he is helped by his wife, who is several years younger.*

*'Hmmm... It was some tree...'*

*'Pish, Mummy, don't go on about trees, the tree was that, well, the commander's,' Władysław says, disappointed.*

*Ultimately, I am the one who provides the nom-de-guerre of the former partisan. I know it could have been any of us; Władysław or his wife would sooner or later have remembered. My reaction seems to please the man.*

*'Ah, you see? But how did you know?' he asks, intrigued.*

*'I think I, I've read a work, um... because Mr. [name of a local historiographer] wrote a little about that part of history...'*

*This time it is my own knowledge, acquired elsewhere, that completes the witness account. After several hours of conversation I was sure that our meeting was special not only for myself, but also for my interlocutor. Władysław's daughter, aware of my arrival, had dressed him in his Sunday best; there was coffee and cake waiting on the table. The former soldier had thought about what to say, starting his account as one would a well-researched monograph, from describing the social context of the history of the village, his own childhood and family background. Throughout our conversation I asked only a handful of questions; mostly I was just listening to a story that abounded in laughter, tears, emotion and reflections on life:*

*'Such were the times that...that one reminisces. And, you know, today, as I got old, ninety eight years, but there were moments in my life marked with tragedy, I prefer not to think of them, not to recall them, but if someone were to wind it all back, then I would still like to live through all that I have lived.' These words moved me and made me ask myself: how many people would be brave enough to state with*

*conviction that they would like to have gone through the same life, without changing or improving anything?*

*During that single conversation I heard many things that went beyond information that interested me as an ethnographer focused on a specific research subject. It was an extraordinary meeting, yet I know that Władysław participates in several similar ones every year. When I spoke to his daughter earlier, she mentioned several potential interviewers that had been rejected by her father; people he had no time or willingness to talk to. Thus, I was not the only person allowed such visits. As one of the eldest residents of his village and a person with a remarkable life story, Władysław plays the role of the local "wise man", who is approached by history researchers eager to still catch a glimpse of the wartime generation, before it passes on. I was only one of many, which does not change the fact that I became a part of an extraordinary phenomenon of passing down personal history face to face. As a stranger, an outsider, I was offered a window into another person's biography, and I was able to join him in telling a story from the past and observe how it entwines with the present reality.<sup>2</sup>*

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I have recounted that ethnographic encounter because it provided one of the factors that motivated me to consider the issue that is the focus of the present work. In the course of fieldwork pertaining to the past and memory and based on meeting people and participating in various events, we encounter a network of emotions, experiences, thoughts and actions which our interlocutors consider important and which surround the information we are given in narratives about history. This network illustrates that the past is not, or at least not only, transmitted, but also "lived" [*przeżywana*] – owing to the deep involvement these people have in contemporary phenomena related to history, as well as the profound importance the past has in their everyday life. Depending on their personal feelings and the perspective adopted, scholars may wonder what is more important in the phenomenon under scrutiny: the historical events they hear about or the mentioned process of "reliving" [*przeżywanie*] which they witness and participate in.

The observations presented herein prompted me to reflect on the phenomenon of "reliving the past" [*przeżywanie przeszłości*] first and foremost from the standpoint of an ethnographer who regards them as an element of the method he employs. I would like to answer the question of whether the phrase "reliving the past" is merely a metaphor convenient in descriptions, or whether it could become a valuable element of the theory of ethnographic research. In itself, the concept of "reliving the past" does appear in Polish academic discourse. However, according to my observations, it has not yet been subjected to a broader process

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<sup>2</sup> All citations used in this part of the article come from an interview conducted in December 2018. The name of my interlocutor has been changed.

of theoretisation in the context of my own field of study.<sup>3</sup> The present article therefore aims at completing that task. I intend (1) to demonstrate how the metaphor of “reliving” is used in academic literature in the context of phenomena pertaining to the past; (2) to indentify the main frameworks of theory of anthropology that affect my proposed use of the concept; and finally (3) to present how employing such a “theory” and “method” could influence the practice of conducting ethnographic fieldwork.

The phenomena and methods described herein are present in anthropological and sociological studies on memory, albeit in a diffuse form. In my personal estimation, gathering them under the umbrella category of “reliving the past” has the potential to accentuate a certain research path ethnographers may adopt, and to put emphasis on the specific research subject. The present article ought to be regarded as an outline and an introduction to the discussion which, as I hope, will lead to further work on the possible use of the concept of “reliving the past” in ethnographic practice.

The instances of using the metaphor of “reliving” may be grouped into two essential conceptual areas. The first one is associated with the broad spectrum of humanist and social studies, most notably in history and sociology, and pertains to accentuating the particularly strong influence which issues rooted in history have on the (broadly understood) present – the life of individuals and communities. The latter seems to be the most discernible in anthropology, where the metaphor in question is employed in the context of describing and interpreting the multi-dimensional individual experience of memories, which may take different forms (recounting life stories, performance, etc.) through emotions and the body. This use is associated with the breakthrough in anthropology that came with the reflexive turn that directed scholars towards the anthropology of experience and performance studies. Since the 1970s, academics have developed and expanded these theories, working, among others, towards multisensorial anthropology (see e.g. Spitulnik Vidali 2016) and vulnerable anthropology (see Behar 1996). Dynamic changes have also taken place in the consideration of the relations between scholars and the participants of their field research (see e.g. Clifford, Marcus 1986).

In the 1920s sociologist Maurice Halbwachs presented his theories on collective memory, which made the concept a permanent feature in the field of humanist and social science. His analysis also included a distinction that aptly illustrates the first of the two aforementioned uses of the metaphor of “reliving the past”. Halbwachs defined the relation between “memory” and “history”, and presented it in the form of a sequence: memory is “reliving the past”, and when this “reliving” no longer occurs, memory is replaced by history. History, in turn, may be understood

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. e.g. Kowalski 2013: 5. Andrzej Szpociński (2013: 15), for instance, offers only the laconic statement that “reliving” the past is distinguishable from other forms of sensitivity to history by the prominence it gives to the senses, as opposed to its other variants which prioritise the role of intellect.

as “abstract knowledge of the past”, in contrast with “living history”, or knowledge of the past that is suffused with emotion and remains in social circulation – or collective memory (see Halbwachs 1992). Similar remarks were made many years later by historian Pierre Nora. He presented the differences between “memory” and “history” as “fundamental” opposites. A contemporary individual does not live “within memory” and does not have the “living”, “true” memory a person from a traditional community possessed. In the course of historical changes, following the wave of secularisation that has transformed history as a form of memory into self-knowledge of society, and the development of critical history – the “history of history” – memory and history have become equivalent concepts (see Nora 1989). According to Nora (1989: 8), memory is a living thing in constant motion, and is associated with the realm of emotions, or even magic – it sacralises the images remembered. It is “a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present.”

Similar issues were also considered in Polish academic discourse. The concept of “living history” [*historia żywa*] was used in a 1963 work by sociologist Nina Assorodobraj-Kula to denote those issues from the past that are actively present in contemporary social life. According to Assorodobraj-Kula, they included a broad selection of topics, e.g. hero myths and the cult of monuments (Assorodobraj-Kula 1963). To an extent, Assorodobraj-Kula’s work has been continued by her student Barbara Szacka, who is now a leading authority in the study of collective memory. In general terms, the phenomena Assorodobraj-Kula defined as “living history” are included in Szacka’s theory of collective memory. In her view, collective memory is an amalgam of “the perceptions members of a given community have about its past” – knowledge that is not only available in the present but is regarded as “obligatory for a member of that community.”<sup>4</sup> A member of a community is aware not only of the images of its past, but also of how to transmit and commemorate that knowledge (Szacka 2006: 19).

In the definitions presented above, “reliving” is first and foremost a metaphor for intense involvement and presence that issues from the past have in the present. It is the opposite of “lifeless” facts found only in history books, but never having any noticeable impact on the lives of contemporary groups and individuals.<sup>5</sup>

The second of the aforementioned uses of the metaphor of “reliving” may be illustrated on the example of two research projects that employed ethnographic methods. One comes from field of anthropology of religion and has certainly been a source of inspiration for me. It is the concept of “lived religion”, introduced to the Polish academia and developed by Anna Niedźwiedź (2015). In her works, the notion is used at least in two contexts, which indicate that the metaphor of reliving may also be useful in analysing the presence of the past in contemporary

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<sup>4</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all citations from non-English-language sources have been translated solely for the purpose of the present article (translator’s note).

<sup>5</sup> For an example of contemporary studies employing a similar approach see e.g. Orta 2002.

reality. The theory of lived religion focuses not on the “canon” of religion, but on studying how religion is experienced by individuals and communities. This interest in the practice of religious experiences is easily translatable into the theory of “reliving the past”. In both cases the analysis is focused on the factual manifestations of experience rather than on models of behaviour (present e.g. in educational programs and historical policy plans). The theory of “lived religion” is also an example of the aforementioned trend of research accentuating phenomena associated with embodiment and emotions. In her work, Niedźwiedz (2015: 369) aimed to present “how meaning can be constituted within the human body, how rituals are performed through participation therein and how the feelings and experiences associated with these rituals form communities and perpetuate the existence of various collectives”. In this case the crucial concept is ritual, which is a type of performance constitutive for reality, in which the “participation, emotion, energy and involvement” of the people taking part in it is of key importance (Niedźwiedz 2015: 432).

Anna Witeska-Młynarczyk, in turn, undertook to answer the question of how the “processes of objectification of the past” interacts with “individual body” (Witeska-Młynarczyk 2014: 47). The “field” of her study were experiences and memories of members of the Polish anti-Communist underground from the post-war years and the decades of the Polish People’s Republic, as well as the experiences and memories of the officials and enforcers of that system. The work constitutes an excellent example of a study that combines anthropological reflection on memory with issues related to the body and embodiment, which is one of the key components in the analysis of “reliving the past”. Presenting various rituals, practices and actions of the carriers of the memory of the anti-Communist underground, Witeska-Młynarczyk demonstrates how similar behaviour may be interpreted in practice. One of the main theoretical inspirations for that project came from Paul Connerton’s works (see e.g. Connerton 2014). He mentions two types of embodiments and emphasises the significance of ritual and ceremonial performances as commemorative actions which allow communities to reconstitute themselves. The latter aspect is called habitual memory, which refers to the body’s “mnemonics”. Thus, Connerton combines what Marcel Mauss defined as “bodily techniques” with Pierre Bourdieu’s “habitus” (after Argenti, Schramm 2010: 8).

It is my belief that the use of the metaphor of “reliving the past” brings us closer to those trends in anthropology that value the “local-ness” of research and focus on understanding and interpreting individual, personal matters. Noteworthy in this context is the broad category known in anthropology as the life-story. Life stories have been within the scope of classic anthropological research since the 1920s, yet the methods and aims of conducting such research have undergone profound transformations.<sup>6</sup> What contemporary scholars seek to find in life sto-

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<sup>6</sup> See Langness, Frank 1981; Plummer 2007. Issues known from ethnographic life-stories are also present in related research approaches such as oral history, lived history, and biographical

ries are phenomena characteristic for the most important aspects of existence for individuals and groups: the development of a cohesive identity, meanings and significance, and morality standards. Such analysis pertains to both the physical and emotional aspects of life, and to rational and irrational attempts at "self-discovery". Individual biographies are used in the search for cultural and social phenomena that have shaped the lives of people from the interlocutors' generation (see Plummer 2007). The framework of the life-story puts particular emphasis on the relation between the researcher and their interlocutor, the deep, valuable incursion into the "field" of someone's life and biography which requires empathy and a certain kind of sensitivity and involves long hours of conversation over many meetings. Perhaps it is these two qualities – sensitivity and empathy – that constitute the most important tools for such tasks.<sup>7</sup> Works by the leading proponents of this approach include, for instance, the nuanced, sympathetic portrayal of the lives of the "fading" community of Californian Jews authored by Barbara Myerhoff (1980). Ruth Behar's (1993) book, recounting meetings with only a single interlocutor, traces the development of the relations between the researcher and the Mexican street vendor she was interviewing. In both cases, the studies reflect not only the phenomena pertaining to the biographies of the interlocutors, but also the scholar's own self-reflection on their personal stories, and the past which the meetings they were describing made them remember. This trend brings anthropology in close contact with other disciplines, most notably oral history. One scholar who is an expert at combining the methods of both anthropology and oral history is Daniel James. Thanks to James' (2000) skilful use of the two, the reader gains insight not only into the biography of one female factory worker in Argentina (to which the main part of the book is dedicated), but also into the broad context of the community she was a part of, and which James reached in the course of his field research.

If one wishes to understand and describe the ways of "reliving the past", interviews need to be combined with ethnographic observation. The most interesting

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interviews used in sociology. What Susan E. Chase (2005: 659) identifies as the distinguishing factor of the anthropological perspective is involvement in "the culture or community" and, following Barbara Tedlock, presenting both the researcher and the researched as "a single multivocal text", focused on the encounter with another person and the consideration of that phenomenon. In this context, Chase also points to autoethnographic experience. As regards Polish academia, particularly valuable studies combining history with biographical interview were offered by: Filipkowski 2010; Kurkowska-Budzan 2009.

<sup>7</sup> On the role of empathy in ethnographic research see e.g. Murchison 2010: 85. The issue of the boundaries of empathy in ethnographic research is a significant yet difficult aspect of methodological considerations. This becomes particularly prominent if one's interlocutors are responsible for unethical actions, or present views that could lead to such conduct. In such situations, the ethnographer is at risk of extreme moral relativism, which casts doubts as to the ethicality of the research they are conducting. This problem is only mentioned herein in the form of a question since I consider it highly dependent on the specificity of the given research project and the decisions taken by specific anthropologists. Thus, an unequivocal assessment or solution is not feasible. Cf. e.g. Scheper-Hughes 1992.

feature of participant observation is that it constitutes a paradoxical amalgam of observation and participation, or emotional detachment and attempts at eliminating it, involvement and reserve (DeWalt, DeWalt 2011: 28–29). We can distinguish between participant observation or observant participation (cf. Niedźwiedz 2015), yet in practice the elements of that dichotomy blend and appear in varying concentration, depending on the given case and the situation “in the field”. An ethnographer may notice issues associated with “reliving the past” among the participants of many different rituals that surround history, as well as in the everyday life of people connected with it, and their family circles. Anniversaries, funerals, holiday gatherings, the writing of memoirs and chronicles, the act of collecting press clippings (cf. e.g. Irwin-Zarecka 2009; Witeska-Młynarczyk 2014) all inspire the following questions: What are the people participating in these activities feeling? Why do they do it? What role does this play in their lives? In many cases the researcher’s approach would comprise empathy-based understanding of the person involved in practicing the past, grounded in the readiness to trust that the person’s actions are motivated by values they declare to consider important.<sup>8</sup> The researcher’s emotional involvement and readiness for personal contact correspond to postulates made by Behar (1996), encouraging anthropologists not to conceal themselves or their feelings and experiences in their ethnography. According to Behar, anthropology ought to be “vulnerable”, not devoid of the human aspect of the researcher’s attitude, and not detaching the interlocutor’s experiences from their humanity (cf. Behar 1996).

Adopting a “local” perspective is not tantamount to foregoing any reflection on the social. Assuming that a community is more than the sum of its parts, groups may also “relive” various historical events. They often become the focus of discussions, emotions and actions crucial for contemporary relations between the residents of a community and their identity (as is the case with the memory of Józef Kuraś “Ogień” and his men). On the other hand, it should be emphasised that the social and the cultural (or political) creates the framework for how of past events are relieved by contemporary individuals (cf. Halbwachs 1992; Kaźmierska 2008). This pertains to, among other things, successive models of historical policy which put more or less rigid restraints and form a specific kind of ecosystem of power re-

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<sup>8</sup> This is, on my part, an expression of far-reaching trust towards the information provided by my interlocutors, which may understandably seem controversial. However, in this case the aim is to arrive at the “truth of experience” rather than ‘historical truth’ (cf. Kaniowska 2003), which makes a similar research approach applicable. This should not, however, be tantamount to ignoring knowledge about the historical context or political relations (e.g. the role a given interlocutor has played in the community under scrutiny; cf. e.g. Berlinerblau 2001; Witeska-Młynarczyk 2014), even though the scale for comparing the realities that differ from individual, personal experiences seem ambiguous. Situations in which the researcher’s trust is tested ought to be assessed on a case by case basis in the field. In the context of more strongly historically-oriented research of a related nature, interesting comments may be found in the work of Marcin Jarząbek (2020), who presents his proposal to use the category of experience in the interpretation of oral history recordings.



lations and relations of violence shaping the space for individual "reliving" of the past (cf. e.g. Golonka-Czajkowska, Nikiel 2021; Kajder 2019). The reconstruction and analysis of that frame is also a significant part of the anthropologist's work.

As regards issues discussed in the project *Józef Kuraś „Ogień” i jego podkomendni w wyobraźni społecznej. Antropologiczne studium przeżywania przeszłości* [Józef Kuraś "Ogień" and his men in social imagery: An anthropological study of reliving the past], I would define the term "reliving the past" as a spectrum of phenomena currently appearing in the everyday life of individuals or communities and associated with the strong influence of selected events from their past. These phenomena have the potential to affect everyday behaviour, emotions, bodies, and interpersonal relations; they shape aspects of identities and – in the context of groups – the development of amicable or inimical relations between members.

Although this perspective seems best suited to individual experiences and its description, it may also be applied to the corresponding phenomena inherent for groups whose members are connected with special bonds stemming from past events.

Anthropological research – a combination of intense contact with another person and participation in (and observation of) the activities of individuals and communities – provides unique, in-depth insight into these phenomena, and the opportunity to interpret and try to understand them.

The above-presented approach to the problem is certainly built on the foundation of anthropological and social theories pertaining to individual and collective memory (cf. e.g. Kaniowska 2003; Argenti, Schramm 2010), as well as different variations of methods of collecting "life stories." Nevertheless, the particular benefits of using the concept of "reliving the past" are still worth considering. First of all, the category of the past is given central focus. The past, in my view, is the broadest and most neutral of all categories pertaining to the time gone by. Taking a step further in this analysis, we enter the realm of such terms as memory, history and tradition (see e.g. Robotycki 1992, 1997; Kowalewski 2012). Each of these has its own definitions and its own confines and defines the relation between the past and the present to a different degree. This issue is of methodological significance – the use of the category of the "past" helps characterise phenomena without putting them into more detailed categories arbitrarily chosen by the researcher. Thus, for the issue under scrutiny, it is the research opening that comes with the fewest initial assumptions possible. What is more, concepts such as memory, history or tradition are (to a differing degree and depending on the context) burdened with political and ideological connotations. For instance, the analysis of "collective memory" (understood as a metaphor) undertaken in social and cultural studies may reinforce the "use" of that category by scholars working on the memory of a specific group, and bolster its colloquial, essential understanding (cf. Lee Klein 2003; Argenti, Schramm 2010: 2–3). The category of the "past" seems the closest to avoiding the mentioned problems, if not entirely free of that risk.

Particularly interesting are the benefits of using the concept of “reliving”. This seems to be the best term to denote the holistic, multi-directional involvement of persons currently absorbed in past events. It implies such aspects of the issue as sensuality, physicality, and emotion. The concept of “reliving” is connected to the category of experience, whose theory in the field of philosophy and social sciences is formulated by phenomenologists (see Bruner 1986). In the process of interpreting and describing the phenomenon of “reliving the past”, phenomenology may provide not only the theoretical backdrop for the conceptualisation of the categories of “reliving” and experience, but also noteworthy directions for the research procedure. In anthropological frameworks, the classical suspension of social and cultural presumptions – the *epoché* – may acquire a parallel understanding as the use of empathy in attempts at confronting the world of the other (Maso 2001: 139). The desired benefit of marrying phenomenology with anthropology is the set of methods and concepts for describing subjective experience, the different types of “felt life”, as Clifford Geertz defines experience (Migasiński, Prokopski 2017: 17; cf. Geertz 1986: 374).

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Our interlocutors are people who have, in different ways, been affected by the past. Among them are individuals who witnessed the Second World War and its aftermath, the younger generation of families who suffered at the time, as well as people fascinated by the subject due to their interests or beliefs. Their stories and practices function in a given context of social life and affect it. Very often, “reliving the past” leads to direct involvement in the ongoing conflicts of memory (cf. Irwin-Zarecka 2009). Seventy five years after the death of Józef Kuraś “Ogień”, the crimes and atrocities committed against civilian population (often neighbours and fellow villagers) of which he and his men have been accused, still arouse strong emotions in residents of Podhale, Spiš and the neighbouring regions. There is no end to disputes around the partisans’ operations against ethnic and national minorities: Jews and the Slovak inhabitants of Spiš.<sup>9</sup> Anthropologists in the field not only collect memories awakened by their presence, but also observe specific initiatives aimed at establishing the desired image of the history of that period. To present this situation, I shall only use the example of people who personally witnessed history. They are the key figures in conflicts over memory and relive the past in the present both passively and actively. The latter type of experience deserves particular analysis, as it is the only thing that reveals the hardship and emotions triggered in the eldest residents of the Podtatrze region by issues from the past. The next step is attempting to understand the ideological and ethical basis for their actions. This perspective adds to the description of how witnesses of history function as

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<sup>9</sup> Naturally, the controversies that have emerged over this historical figure have a much broader and more complex dimension, including e.g. the dispute over the concept of the so-called “Cursed Soldiers”, among whom “Ogień” is counted, see Golonka-Czajkowska, Nikiel 2021.

“loci of memory” in commemorative practices, materialising the past in the present through their very attendance.<sup>10</sup> The voices of people who experienced the past shape the forms of memory practiced locally and within specific families, and influence views and opinions on controversial issues circulating among residents of specific villages and towns.<sup>11</sup> They also gain broader recognition as they move from the private to the public sphere, primarily through the efforts of journalists, documentary filmmakers and history aficionados. One of the many examples of the phenomenon comes from the memories of one female interlocutor – a strong, critical voice against “Ogień” which has been profoundly influential in the collective memory of the local community. Her account was compiled by the editors of a Polish weekly and published on its website in a visually attractive form. Eyewitness accounts form the basis of academic works produced by historians, sociologists and (us) anthropologists.<sup>12</sup> Persons who experienced the war and the difficulties of its aftermath often take proactive action to preserve and popularise their memories. The most characteristic example in this context is the monograph entitled *Wspomnienia o mojej wsi Waksmund oraz własne od czasów zamierzchłych aż do dnia dzisiejszego* [Memories of my village Waksmund from ancient times to this day] authored by “Ogień’s” brother Wojciech Kuraś. Although unpublished, the work is used as source material by researchers studying the history of the village and is referenced by the local population in discussions and disputes concerning the village’s past. How to explain the motivation for such actions, and the continued efforts to preserve memory? In part, they evoke images of the struggle against the inexorable passing of time, which, in the case of the generation of people who experienced the Second World War and the post-war period, acquires a particular, nearly civilisational significance.<sup>13</sup> It contains traces of what Ernst Cassirer (1992: 184) described as “challenging the power of time”, in which man, with the aid of history, “begins to detect in himself a new power”, “emerges from the mere flux of things, striving to eternize and immortalize human life”. Ways of “reliving the past” associated with conflicts of memory also reveal the will to fight for justice for oneself or one’s ancestors, or simply for a fair assessment of the history of one’s region (cf. Irwin-Zarecka 2009). In the context of our research, we

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<sup>10</sup> Often, they passively “testify” for external ideological and political concepts such as nationalism, see Nikiel 2016. One example of such events observable “in the field” are the annual Galas of the quarterly *Wyklęci* organised in Kraków. Introducing the witnesses of history invited to that event is a recurring element of the ceremony. As the presentations are made, the gathered audience greets every successive guest with a standing ovation, yet the guests do not get any opportunity to speak on stage.

<sup>11</sup> On the power of witness accounts in the context of narratives presented in public discourse see Welzer 2005.

<sup>12</sup> For more on that subject see Kajder, Nikiel 2015.

<sup>13</sup> In the field of theory of culture, we are now witnessing an event which Jan Assman described as a “floating gap”, the moment when memory directly communicated by participants of a given event is replaced by various media that shape cultural memory, see Assman 2009.

tend to use abstract categories such as history or memory, yet the accounts of our interlocutors often describe specific atrocities that were committed in the past, at a particular place and time, and to particular people. The voices of those who participate in the disputes over these events call for the actual perpetrators and victims to be named. As noted by Paul Ricoeur, “the duty of memory is the duty to do justice” (2004: 89).

The aim of this article was to inspire a methodological conversation on the potential benefits of using the term “reliving the past” in ethnographic research. In the course of the field research for the project pertaining to the figure of Józef Kuraś “Ogień” and his men in contemporary social imagery, each member of the research team encountered remarkable examples of how relatively distant past may entice people to act in their own personal life and in their community. Aside from poignant narratives of individuals who remember the Second World War, we witnessed many events motivated by the memory of Kuraś. We heard how conflicts emerged in specific localities because of certain episodes in history, we observed the development and functioning of communities focused around shared visions of the past. Each year, we kept track of several dozen events associated with the memory of Kuraś and, more broadly, with the partisan soldiers of the anti-Communist underground in the post-war period (the so-called Cursed Soldiers). In the Podtatrze region, partisans are commemorated not only by several monuments (erected amidst controversy), but also by a recreated partisan camp, historical reenactment events involving students and schoolchildren, poems, and patriotic rap songs. The partisan commander Józef Kuraś, in turn, has been immortalised in painted glass, plaster sculptures hidden away in a memorial room, and likenesses sprayed in paint on various walls. Over one year, the same church may hold a Mass to commemorate Józef Kuraś and a service for the souls of his victims. The same building may simultaneously host two conferences – one presenting a heroic image of the commander; the other listing the crimes he and his men allegedly committed. And in a village of six hundred inhabitants, there is still need for a lecture that answers the ever-burning question: “Józef Kuraś «Ogień» – a hero or a bandit?”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Józef Kuraś „Ogień” – bohater czy bandyta! Original phrasing found on the leaflet promoting the meeting. The subjects mentioned in this paragraph are presented in detail (along with photographic material) in the exhibition created by the research team, entitled „Życie ludzkie jest coraz tańsze...” *Długa wojna światowa na Nowotarszczyźnie 1939–...* [“Human life is becoming ever cheaper”. The long World War in the Nowy Targ region: 1939–...] (Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, Jagiellonian University, 2022).

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