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INTRODUCTION

We present the reader with the newest volume of “Prace Etnograficzne” (*Ethnographies*), this time focusing on the broad issue of contemporary disputes about the PAST.¹ While the topic has long been explored by many scholars of social and cultural studies, it still requires more theoretical consideration and continued in-depth observation. It is precisely the area that reveals not only the loudly manifested, but also the intentionally concealed issues of problematic interpersonal relations, which – in the right conditions – may become an impulse for changes in the lives of individuals and communities, sometimes very substantial in nature. The ways in which participants in social life interpret the past are an important field of intergroup conflict dynamics (Wagoner, Brescó 2016) and a sensitive gauge of the current social mood (Irwin-Zarecka 2020). Venturing into the field of social conflicts revolving around past events therefore requires a lot of scholarly diligence, which in practice means closely examining the situation in which these conflicts take place (Clarke 2005; Kurkowska-Budzan 2009), listening to the voices of the participants carefully (Golonka-Czajkowska, Nikiel 2021) and considering the ethics of what to do with the knowledge acquired (Golonka-Czajkowska, Staszal-Trebunia 2022).

Important aspects of the study of the so-called conflicts of memory also include reconstructing the relevant historical context. If necessary, researchers need to analyse archival sources related to the subject of the dispute, wherein dates, places, names and verbs that designate actions or states are expressed in, as Paul

¹ The volume is the result of the work of the team conducting the project entitled *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 team comprised: Monika Golonka-Czajkowska, Kaja Kajder, Łukasz Łoziński, Dariusz Nikiel and Wojtech Bagin.

Ricoeur put it, “singular, discrete propositions” (Ricoeur 2004: 178). When doing so, however, one needs to be mindful of two fundamental issues. Firstly, as Ricoeur cautions in *Memory, History, Forgetting*, historical facts should not be confused with events that begin to live in the memory of the witness, and thus also in various types of archival documents – which invariably have an author. “In this sense [notes Ricoeur] we should always write: the fact that this occurred. So understood, the fact can be said to be constructed through the procedure that disengages it from a series of documents concerning which we may say in return that they establish it” (Ricoeur 2004: 179). Secondly, in the case of conducting anthropological research in archives, one must remember to consider the material from an ethnographer’s perspective, i.e. interpret it in the local context, following the traces of actions undertaken by individual people in specific situations; to reveal the discontinuities, paradoxes and inconsistencies such documents contain (Lennartsson 2012: 13). While not all experts in memory studies attach the same importance to archival queries, the case studies presented in this volume demonstrate that historical context is essential in the quest to understand the tactics used in creating representations of the past. After all, each image of the past is the result of more or less conscious choices based on the interplay of recollection and forgetting (Ricoeur 2004; Harrison 2013). First and foremost, however, as Marc Bloch aptly observes, “Misunderstanding of the present is the inevitable consequence of ignorance of the past. But a man may wear himself down just as fruitlessly in seeking to understand the past, if he is totally ignorant of the present” (Bloch 2004: 36).

Conflicts about the past have a characteristically emotional nature. This comes as no surprise, since what we call the struggle for remembrance may, for some, become a battle to be redressed for the suffering endured, and a struggle against social forgetting (Hirszowicz, Neyman 2001: 24; Sendyka 2022). As Irwin-Zarecka notes “[...] it is no coincidence that the need for justice plays such an important role in conflicts of memory [...] when tragedies are forgotten, the wounds do not close (2020: 441)”.² For others, involvement in the conflict is an attempt to defend the authority of their group – undermined by its opponents – especially if troubling cracks and shadows start to appear on the idealised collective image (Łoziński 2019). Conflicts around past events may appear on essentially all levels of reliving the past, from autobiographic memory (Maruszewski 2005), through the memory of social groups that directly witnessed the past events, to what memory studies labels as social memory (Szacka 2006), collective memory (Olick 2007) or cultural memory (Assmann 2006). In practice, that last category focuses on the study of collective notions on the past (Baczko 1994), and as such belongs in the realm of social imagination, which has been studied by ethnographers and anthropologists since the disciplines emerged.

² Unless otherwise stated, all citations from non-English-language sources have been translated solely for the purpose of the present publication (translator’s note).

Although the topics of the articles published in the present volume may seem a little disjointed, in fact they constitute a well-considered whole. Imagine the circles that appear on water when a stone is thrown into it – their outlines become blurrier the further they get from the epicentre. The same thing happens to the memory of a difficult experience; its dynamics changes with time and with every generation. From an individual experience of a specific person, often remembered in painful detail (it is no coincidence that psychologists call this type of registering events “flashbulb memory”), it becomes an account passed to the next generation, to eventually turn into one of the many elements of an image of the past, properly processed and edited to fit the current intentions of authors of entire works.

The text that provides an introduction into the topic of conflicts over the past is the article by **Dariusz Nikiel**, which discusses a number of theoretical issues associated with the individual aspect of memory, primarily pertaining to witnesses of history. These considerations are rooted in the author’s own experience as a field researcher, which has made him attuned to paradoxes and emotional facets of memory. The key term Nikiel introduces and puts at the centre of his analysis of the role of a witness of history is reliving the past (*przeżywanie przeszłości*). The concept emphasises the central role of the interlocutor in the research process, as in the act of remembering he or she balances between lived experience and the present moment of recounting/reliving it.

Marta Raczyńska-Król discusses conflicts that arise in the process of creating family memory. In her research on family genealogy, pioneering in Polish anthropology, she points to the polyphonic nature of the narrative about family past. Memories collected by amateur genealogists and data found in archives often form compositions full of paradoxes, gaps and contradictions. In the case of the female genealogist studied by Raczyńska-Król, the reconstruction of her own family tree proves to be a complex process of negotiating the history of her family amidst mutually exclusive family accounts and established notions rooted in “the symbolic universe that she inherited from her father and grandparents and which she cannot abandon because she is entangled in it”. The text by **Janusz Barański** is the first part of a larger study pertaining to the emergence of regional heritage in the subregion of Zamagurie (Zamagórze) in Spiš. Although the author himself avoids terminology developed within the field of memory studies, choosing instead the terminological apparatus known from critical heritage studies, he focuses on an issue that appears in both of these disciplines, namely images of the past persisting within the society. His detailed theoretical considerations on the “affirmation” of elements of local culture and the conflicts over which of these should be regarded as original and authentic are illustrated with examples taken from his own ethnographic research. Thus, the reader is able to see how the titular “practice of Spiš-ness” works as a process of negotiating messages, meanings and values important for the region’s inhabitants. Analysing the dialectics of continuity and change in this context, Barański describes “collective idioms and individual

stylisations, official heritage policies and unofficial creative acts”, which translate into “central structures of imposition” and “grassroots practices of resistance”.

Łukasz Łoziński presents the context of the activities undertaken by the Polish underground in Spiš and Orava, discussing the dynamic changes in the situation on the border between Poland and Czechoslovakia that took place during the Nazi occupation and in the first few years after it ended. He not only provides a detailed description of historical events, skilfully combining archival material with accounts gathered in the field, but also presents a critical analysis of the discourses that currently mention these events. Remaining impartial towards both these lines of narration, Łoziński demonstrates that the actions of Józef Kuraś “Ogień” and his men may be regarded as justifiable ‘requisitions’, or as ‘theft’ and ‘assaults’, depending on the axiological perspective used to reinterpret the past.

Conflicts of memory often provoked by the actions of local political and cultural institutions are the focus of **Jan Kajfosz**’s article. The author uses the example of the disputes over the unveiling of one monument in Cieszyn (the one commemorating the delineation of the Polish-Czechoslovak border in 1920) to identify differences in the perception of the past stemming from operating in different symbolical universes. He introduces the concept of demarcation logic, which aptly captures the essence of the process of “naturalisation of borders” – a derivative of the mechanism of banal nationalism described by Michael Billig. As Kajfosz notes, “[...] the border divided not only a territory. At the same time, it divided the space of historical imagination in the sense that each side of the border assumes for some time the existence of its own ancestors – incompatible with those from behind Olza river, regardless of which side to look at the river”.

Grzegorz Studnicki’s article reveals the diversity of notions about the past persisting in his own region, presenting the controversies around the planned reconstruction of the flag of the Duchy of Teschen (Księstwo Cieszyńskie). It demonstrates how actions originally aimed at promoting the region became the source of conflicts rooted in different interpretations of the history of Teschen Silesia, and the subject of intense identity negotiations in the region. The statements Studnicki analysed indicate that the past is a reservoir that feeds initiatives connected with local politics, economy and tourism.

The selection of texts presented herein and discussing various practices of coping with the past ends with **Dariusz Piwowarczyk**’s article focusing on the consequences of brutal racial biopolitics used against the inhabitants of Togo during the period of German colonisation. Starting from the problem of intimate relations between the colonisers and the native women, in which the violent behaviours of men raised in accordance with the strict moral code of Prussia intermingled with naïve romanticisation of Africa and its perception as the land of unbridled sexuality, Piwowarczyk focuses on the progeny born of such relationships. He cites a statement made in 1899 by the prefect apostolic of Togo, Hermann Bücking, which in that context sounds ominous, but frightfully familiar: “Wherever you go now, you can see harlots and concubines (in service of colonial officials), and the

generation of mixed-bloods sprouts like weeds”. The so-called *Mischlinge*, as individuals incongruent with the rigid distinction between the “white Master race” and the “black slave race”, were officially ostracised when Togo was under German rule. After its fall, however, they not only emphasised their “mixed” roots, but became one of the more influential groups on the local political scene.

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