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## **From individual to collective identity: the case of autobiographical accounts from the Ukrainian- -Russian and Ukrainian-Romanian borderlands**

The present article offers a discussion of the problem of the cultural memory of Poles from two different regions of Ukraine, where the Polish minority has been present for a long time and keeps cultivating its traditions: the south-east of the country and Carpathian Bukovina.<sup>1</sup> While Poles in Bukovina speak the local dialect of Polish, those in Donetsk increasingly more often learn the language of their grandparents. The article is based mainly on materials collected in the course of field studies using the method of narrative interview. I conducted my research concerning linguistic identity among Poles living in south-eastern Ukraine in 2007–2012, and have been documenting the current state of spoken Polish in Carpathian Bukovina since 2015.<sup>2</sup>

Individual experience is the subject of ‘oral history’, which relies on information acquired in oral interviews. ‘The historical picture that emerges from these

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<sup>1</sup> For more on Carpathian Bukovina and Poles living in this region, see H. Krasowska, *Górale polscy na Bukowinie karpackiej: Studium socjolingwistyczne i leksykalne* (Krasowska, 2006); more information about south-eastern Ukraine and the Polish minority in the region can be found in H. Krasowska, *Mniejszość polska na południowo-wschodniej Ukrainie* (Krasowska, 2012).

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recollections and anecdotes is a “history of the everyday” or a “history from below” (J. Assmann, 2011, p. 37).<sup>3</sup>

Piotr Tadeusz Kwiatkowski observes that the list of subjects relating to the past confirms that family discourse incorporates two streams of memory: memory of ‘grand history’ and memory of family history (Kwiatkowski, 2008, p. 188). In the centre of the narrative there is always a particular individual who notices and selects particular persons or life events, thus constructing a particular autobiographical narrative.

Writing about the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Jacques Le Goff notes an increasingly important role of memory in the process of forming individual and collective identities. On the one hand, memory multiplies, becomes more individualised and democratic, on the other – it becomes more familial, largely as a result of autobiographical accounts, photography and video. Collective memory has become recognised as the key element of collective identity (Le Goff, 2007, p. 15).

Jan Assmann distinguishes two ‘modes of remembering’ or ‘uses of the past’ which are ‘largely connected in real historical culture. [...] The foundational mode always functions [...] through fixed objectifications [...], such as rituals, dances, myths, patterns, dress, jewellery [...], landscapes, and so on, all of which are kinds of sign systems and, because of their [...] function [of] supporting memory and identity, capable of being subsumed under the general heading of *memoria*’ (J. Assmann, 2011, p. 37). According to the author, ‘[t]he communicative memory comprises memories related to the recent past. These are what the individual shares with his contemporaries. A typical instance would be generational memory’ (J. Assmann, 2011, p. 36).

Aleida Assmann, in turn, observes that ‘memories are formed and consolidated in communication, i.e. in exchange with others. Consequently, like language, memory grows in people from the outside and there is no doubt that language is its most important foundation’ (A. Assmann, 2009, p. 158).<sup>4</sup> Considering their temporal dimension and degree of consolidation, the author makes a distinction between different ‘forms of memory’, including individual, collective and cultural memory. Individual memory concerns not only a particular environment of the individual, but also a particular timespan. Memories concerning one period are clearer than those relating to another, when they are more superficial and fragmentary. Another factor at play is a difference in experiencing the same events. Their assessment stems not only from individual experience, but also from social memory. ‘This means that

<sup>3</sup> For an extensive bibliography of works on ‘oral history’ see Szacka (2006).

<sup>4</sup> The original quotation in German: ‘Denn Erinnerungen werden stets in Kommunikation, d.h. im Austausch mit Mitmenschen aufgebaut und verfestigt. Das Gedächtnis wächst also ähnlich wie die Sprache von außen in den Menschen hinein, und es steht außer Frage, daß auch die Sprache seine wichtigste Stütze ist’ (A. Assmann, 1999, p. 36).

individual memory is determined not only by its timespan, but also by the forms of processing experience in the context of a broader horizon of generational memory' (A. Assmann, 2009, pp. 159–160).<sup>5</sup>

The accounts discussed below indicate similarities and differences between experiences of women living in different borderlands of the same state: Ukrainian–Russian and Ukrainian–Romanian. The following part of the article includes a comparative overview of the accounts of two Polish women (aged eighty-one and eighty-two) from the two regions under consideration. The analysis focuses on five topic areas: the Second World War, life after the war (including the problem of the Russians), the issue of the Roman Catholic religion, the language question and the problem of declaration of Polishness today. The fact that both informants paid particular attention to these subjects, which kept recurring in their accounts, indicates that these issues left a lasting imprint on their memory.

Beginning their accounts from the war years, the informants provide details which they can best remember from the period and the most tragic elements of their everyday life experience, including fear of losing their loved ones:

Bukovina:

*I remember the war; they took our dad away and he fought in it; we were evacuated beyond Bobieszty [Ukr. Bobivtsi, Rom. Bobești]; the whole family. Well, not the whole, really, because there were no men with us. There was our granny, mum and us, nine kids. We had two cows; there was enough food. We sold milk, or mum swapped it for bread, and there was always something to eat. We also had enough clothes; there was no great poverty, but there was fear. There was fear because old people told us about war; us, kids, all we knew about war was that people get killed. But no one said that we would be killed; only those who'd gone to war were in danger. Our place was quiet. Well, there were bands around, but if they got food and drink they didn't do any harm. They went somewhere else or went into hiding in the forest. (Female, 82, Bukovina)<sup>6</sup>*

Donetsk:

*It was really hard during the war. There was no food, there was nothing at all; hunger and cold everywhere. Everyone was scared, the young, the old and the children. People got shot*

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<sup>5</sup> The original quotation in German: 'Das bedeutet, daß das individuelle Gedächtnis nicht nur in seiner zeitlichen Erstreckung, sondern auch in den Formen seiner Erfahrungsverarbeitung vom weiteren Horizont des Generationsgedächtnisses bestimmt wird' (A. Assmann, 1999, p. 37).

<sup>6</sup> Original transcript: 'Pamiętam te wojne, zabrali tatkę naszego i wojował, nas wakowali za Bobieszty. Cała rodzina, no cała nie, bo chłopów nie było. Babcia, mamka no i nas było dziewięć dzieci. Z nami były dwie krowy. Jeść mieli my co. Mliko się sprzedawało, czy tam mamka wymieniali na chleb i zawsze coś było. Ubrać też było, nie było takiej biedy, ale strach był. Strach był, bo mówili starsi ludzie o wojnie, a my dzieci co widzieli o wojnie, tyle, że zabijają. Ale nikt nie mówił, że nas zabijom, tylko ci co na wojni to byli zagrożeni. U nas tam był spokój, no bandy grasowali, ale to jak dawali jim jeść pić, to nic złego nie robili. Szli dali, a może chowali się w lesie' (Female, 82, Bukovina).

*and killed; those who did it didn't care about anything. I saw a lot of little kids in the streets, they lay there dead. Their mothers cried over them, and they were also killed. I can understand the war with the Germans, but they killed their own people; I don't know why. I can well remember one night; we didn't sleep at all, there was fighting all night. And, you know, that's when my father was killed. It's hard for me to go back to those times. I can remember everything, but it's hard to talk about it. It was a nightmare; and the whole life was a nightmare. I remember there was no joy any day at all. And today, everything is allowed, but I don't tell anything to my grandchildren; why would they need to know about such a bad life? (Female, 81, Donetsk)<sup>7</sup>*

Both of the above accounts concerning the Second World War focus on particular experiences. However, their nature is different: the informant from Bukovina talks about the change of the environment and distance from the family home, while the picture of the war in Donetsk is dominated by the motif of the loss of the father and the sight of dead children in the streets. Considering that both interviews are extensive, the quoted fragments are taken out of their context. Before describing her war years, the informant from Donetsk talked about her mother. On the other hand, the informant from Bukovina quickly proceeded to the main subject. Her wartime experience was certainly not as difficult, which was reflected in her tone: looking back at her past, she sometimes sounded light-hearted.

The above examples from both interviews illustrate the everyday life of the informants, who were twelve or thirteen years old at the time. They experienced dramatic events, such as the evacuation of the entire village in Bukovina, which involved fear of the change of place of residence and uncertainty whether the villagers would ever return to their own space, and, if so, whether it would still be the same. The informant from Donetsk talks about her fear of death which could come every single day, there and then, and take her, her loved ones or her neighbours away; there was nowhere to run. Cruelty was an inescapable part of the time and space of her everyday experience.

Writing about collective and biographical memory, Kaja Kaźmierska stresses a particular sense of the need to share one's own war experience with others. The author observes that biographical accounts reveal the importance of the history of the informants' space, especially in the case of those from the former Polish eastern bor-

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<sup>7</sup> Original transcript: 'U vainu nam bylo ochen' tiazhelo. Ne bylo chto kushat', ne bylo nichego. Golod i kholod vezde. Baialis' vse starshye liudi i molodye i deti. Strieliali, ubivali, ne smotreli ni na chto. Ochen' mnogo malykh detei ia videla na ulitsakh – lezhali mertvye. Mamy nad nimi plakali, etikh zhenshchin tozhe izbivali. Ia ponimaiu voina c nemtsami, no ubivali svoikh. Ne znaiu pochemu. Pomniu khorosho odnu noch'. My ne spali, tseluiu noch' shli boi. No i znaete, otets moi togda pogib. Mne tiazhelo vozvroschchatsia v to vremia. Ia vse pomniu, no tiazhelo ob etom rasskazyvat'. Eto byl koshmar, i voobshchie tselaiia zhizn' to koshmar. Kazhdyi den' pomniu radosti ne bylo. A seichas, vse mozhno, no i vnukam nichego ne rasskazyvaiu, zachem im takaia plokhiaia zhizn' (Female, 81, Donetsk).

derlands: they feel the need to talk about their life story to pass on the picture of the world to which they belonged and with which they strongly identify (Kaźmierska, 2009 p. 44). This is also the case of the two informants from Bukovina and Donetsk, whose accounts of the war years are set in a particular time and space and describe their involvement in particular events. In addition, the account from Donetsk also suggests the need to share the story, although it involves telling it to a stranger rather than family transmission.

The accounts under discussion also include subjects connected with the post-war reality, which brought a dramatic change in the situation of both informants. Indeed, they felt lost in the new administrative and political situation:

Bukovina:

*The war was over, that was good news. But I experienced a shock: I had been a Romanian citizen, and here you suddenly had to become a Soviet person. They gave us these [internal] passports and all Soviet documents with our place of birth marked as the Soviet Union. After all this, we were afraid; you need to be afraid of Russians even today. They take you by surprise and turn people into nothing. People meant nothing to them. Just orders and orders, that's all I can remember. Orders everywhere; we lived by the orders. One good thing was that Poles helped one another; Ukrainians were also good people, and Romanians as well. The worst kind of scum were those who came over from somewhere in Russia and gave orders; orders to go to work, orders to get up, orders and orders everywhere. It had been different in Romania, it was our own place, and we never felt good under Russians. Well, maybe it's a bit better now, but I don't know. (Female, 82, Bukovina)<sup>8</sup>*

Donetsk:

*Well, life after the war was really hard. There were 'alien' Russians [who came from other places]; they were in charge of everything. Russians took all the good posts and they were in charge. It was terrible; they treated us like animals. I don't even know how to say this. Every day was hard and terrible. After the war, everything was destroyed, all the people were angry and there were lots of 'alien' Russians and, you know, they were bad people, they bullied us here. If they'd known I was Polish, they might have even killed me. We spoke only Russian at home, just like everyone around. We became Russians just like all the people in the city. They turned us into the Soviet people to make us all the same. And so we're*

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<sup>8</sup> Original transcript: 'Wojna się skończyła. To było pocieszające. Ale przeżyłam szok, byłam hromadziąnką Rumunii, a tu nagle już musisz stać się sowieckim człowiekiem i dajom te paszporty i wszystkie dokumenty sowieckie i miejsce urodzenia Sowieckij Sojuz. Jak to się stało. Wszyscy baliśmy się, bo ruskich i do dziś trzeba się bać. Oni robiom niespodzianki i z człowieka robiom nic. Człowiek dla nich się nie cenił. Rozkaz, rozkaz tyle pamiętam. Wszystko było rozkaz. Żyliśmy na rozkaz. Jedno dobrze, że pomagaliśmy sobie Polacy, też Ukraińcy byli dobre ludzie i Rumuni. Najbardziej parszywi to byli ci, co przyjechali gdzieś z Rosji i dawali rozkazy. Na rozkaz do pracy, na rozkaz się wstawało, na rozkaz tylko na rozkaz. W Rumunii było inaczej, byliśmy u siebie, a u ruskich nigdy nie czuliśmy się dobrze. No może teraz trochę lepiej, ale nie wiem' (Female, 82, Bukovina).

*all Soviet people here. Even today I'm afraid to say I'm Polish; I'm scared.* (Female, 81, Donetsk)<sup>9</sup>

These statements indicate that the everyday life of both informants involved a similar experience of post-war Soviet rule. They clearly express their sense of alienation in the new reality, which remained in sharp contrast to their pre-war world. Their lives changed under the impact of the same 'stranger' or enemy. The informant from Bukovina distinctly identifies the unexpected advent of Soviet rule as evil. Not only was new citizenship and language imposed on her, but she was also forced to give up her identification with the Romanian state in which she was born. Importantly, she stresses that even her official identity documents falsified the truth.

Both informants had to become accustomed to living by the harsh rules of this new, alien world, which required them to forget their entire pre-war experience. In Bukovina, the Soviets imposed the policy of forced homogenisation of the multicultural environment of the region. Although the informant from Donetsk lived in the Russian-speaking environment, the patterns of social interaction after the war became different following the introduction of the model of the 'Soviet' nation, which brought subordination and homogenisation of the entire population of the country.

The informant from Bukovina refers to Romania as her 'own place', the country where she was born. The new, completely alien reality came to her as a shock. The account from Donetsk explains that the 'alien' (*chuzhie*) Russians who arrived in the province from other parts of the Soviet Union were malicious towards the local population of the city. As designed by the Kremlin, Soviet society was to be reduced to easily manipulated working masses without a historically formed structure.

Another issue present in both accounts is that of the Roman Catholic religion. Although the informants have a different level of knowledge about it and were raised in different ways, religion plays a major role in their everyday life today:

Donetsk:

*My mum taught me how to pray. I still remember 'Ojczy Nasz' [Pol. 'Our Father'] and 'Zdrowaśka' [Pol. colloq. 'Hail Mary'] and all the prayers in Polish. My mum was a believer and so was my dad, from a [Roman] Catholic family. I was baptised in Lvov [Ukr. Lviv]. They told me there had been a church here in Makeevka [Ukr. Makiivka], but I've never*

<sup>9</sup> Original transcript: 'Nu posle voïny bylo ochen' tiazhelo zhit'. Chuzhikh russkikh naekhhalo. Tol'ko oni komandovali. Vse mesta khoroshye to zanimali russkie i kamandovali. Strashno, nas imeli za zverei. Ia dazhe ne znaiu kak rasskazat'. Kazhdyi den' byl strashnyi i tiazholyi. Posle voïny vse rozrusheno, vse liudi zlye i mnogo naekhhalo chuzhikh russkikh i ponimaete oni byli plokhie liudi, oni nad nami iznushchalis'. Esli oni by znali chto ia pol'ka, mogli i ubit'. My doma tol'ko na russkom iazyke, kak i vse vokrug. Stalis' my takimi russkimi kak i vse zhiteli goroda. No ne znaiu s nas sdelali sovetskikh liudei, chtob my vse byli odinakovy. I tak vot my vse zdes' sovetskie. Ia i segodnia boius' skazat' chto ia pol'ka, eto strashno dla menia' (Female, 81, Donetsk).

*seen it, so I don't know. There is no God and that's it: there was no God at school; at home, they told me to stop asking, they told me there is no God. I felt as if someone had gone missing, as if someone close had died and wasn't there anymore. My dad told me they had taken Him away, He escaped; I didn't know where they had taken Him. There was an empty space, as if someone close had died. When my mum was dying in 1974, she told me 'Look for God; you're a Catholic and a Pole; never forget it and teach your children, but not just yet.'* (Female, 81, Donetsk)<sup>10</sup>

Bukovina:

*We had a [Roman Catholic] church; in Czerniowce [Ukr. Chernivtsi] it was never sealed; we went there every Sunday. The communists wanted to destroy it; they ordered the priest to go to work, but we survived somehow. So, we've always had a church, there were prayers and children got baptised. My father was Polish, my mother was Rusyn, but we all went to the [Roman] Catholic church and I brought up my children and grandchildren the same; my conscience is clear. Well, the communists wouldn't let us, but we had to deal with this somehow so that we could live with God. It was something you learnt at home, something important. We always helped our church when there was some need. The [Roman] Catholic religion was always thought to be better than Orthodox, so we weren't really afraid so much. Well, they tried to persuade us to join the [communist] party, but we lived our lives in such a way so that we wouldn't have anything to do with them.* (Female, 82, Bukovina)<sup>11</sup>

The 1930's, when the informants were born, was a tragic decade for ethnic Poles and all Roman Catholics in Ukraine. It should be noted that the informant from Bukovina was not affected by the situation, as the region was part of Romania at the time. In Soviet Ukraine, churches were sealed and the clergy arrested or deported. In 1928, Bishop Pie-Éugène Neveu reported from Makiivka that 'arrests among our Orthodox brethren have multiplied to an alarming extent'. In 1929, he wrote that 'even families

<sup>10</sup> Original transcript: 'Mama mne nauchila molit'sia. Ja do dzisiaj [Pol.] znaiu 'Ojczy Nasz' [Pol.] i 'Zdrowašku' [Pol.] i vse molitvy po polski. No moia mama byla veruuiushchaia i papa tozhe, s katolicheskoi semii. Krestili menia vo Lvove. Govorili chto u nas tut byl kostiol, v Makeevke, no ia ego ne videla, ne znaiu. Net Boga i vsë. V shkole, net Boga, doma perestali, skazali bolshe ne sprashivaï, Boga net. Mne kazhetsia chto kogda vse vezde skazali Boga net, ia chuvstvovala chto-to tak, kakby kogo-to ne stalo. Kakby kto-to blizkii umer. I ego net. Tato opowiadał, że [Pol.] ego zaberali, on ubegal, ia ne znaiu kuda ego zabierali. No pustoe mesto, éto tak, kakby blizkii chelovek umer. Mama umirala i skazala mne v 1974 godu, ishchi Boga, ty katolichka i pol'ka, pomni éto navsegda. I uchi svoikh detei, no ne srazu' (Female, 81, Donetsk).

<sup>11</sup> Original transcript: 'Kościół u nas był. W Czerniowcach nigdy nie był zamknięty. W każdym niedzielę my chodzili. Komuniści chcieli zniszczyć, księza do pracy posłali, ale jakoś to my przetrwali. I zawsze u nas był kościół i molitwy i dzieci się krestyło. Ojciec był Polakom, mama Rusinka, ale wszyscy my do kościoła i dzieci ja także nauczyłam i wnuki i mam czyste sumnienie. Nu komunisty nie zezwolali nam, ale trzeba było jakoś tak robić, aby z Bogiem być. No bo to się wyniosło z domu i było ważne. I tak jakoś my wszystko co trzeba zawsze w kościele pomagaliśmy i tego. Zawsze było tak, że katolicka wiara była mai [Rom.] dobra od tej prawosławnej. I jakoś tak bardzo my się nie bali. No namawiali do partii, ale człowiek jakoś tak żył, aby nic nie mieć z nimi do czynienia' (Female, 82, Bukovina).

with whom I used to be very friendly were afraid to show their faces in church in case they should lose their daily bread' (after Kuromiya, 1998, p. 156). In 1930, the Catholic church in Makiivka was closed down pending plans of turning it into a cinema, and the crosses and graves in the cemetery had been destroyed in preparation for works on a public park on the site. 'Ethnic Germans and Poles became politically suspect as potential fifth columns. In 1933, the Soviet secret police uncovered a German espionage organisation'; in the same year, the Polish Military Organisation (Polska Organizacja Wojskowa, POW) was liquidated on charges of remaining 'in the service of Polish landowners and Ukrainian nationalists scheming to invade and destroy the Soviet Union' (after Kuromiya, 1998, p. 175).

The above quotations from the informants reveal considerable differences in the sphere of religion. The informant from Donetsk was baptised, but later had to forget about God and religion altogether. In another fragment of her account (not quoted in the article), she talks how she abandoned everything that was Catholic and Polish, which included naming her children Liudmila and Igor 'so that no one would know who we were', (*chtoby nikto ne znal kem my*). Indeed, in order to protect the life of their children, Polish parents gave them 'the best Soviet' (*naiłuchshie sovetskie*) names to conceal their ethnic origin and made an effort to raise them in the same way as everyone else around to conform to the general pattern of life, culture, language and behaviour of the so-called Soviet nation ('we had to do what everyone did', *nado bylo kak vse*). As an adolescent, the informant could not understand why her life was deprived of God and religion. She faced the next question concerning religion in her life when her dying mother asked her to find religion and language she had once lost.

On the other hand, the account from Bukovina reveals an entirely different picture as regards religion. The informant was born when the province was part of Romania, a country where religion was not persecuted. The situation changed when the region was taken over by the Soviet Union. In spite of the official ban on religious services, the Roman Catholic church in Chernivtsi remained open throughout the period of Soviet rule. She recalls that although people were afraid to openly declare themselves as believers, they 'quietly did their own thing' (*pocichońku my sobie tam swoje robili*). They baptised their children, celebrated Easter, Christmas and other religious occasions in their families and in the church in Chernivtsi. It is also worth noting that the informant devoted a lot of time to working at the church, secretly helped the priests and taught religion.

The accounts also include comments on the command and use of language, as both informants are multilingual and use different languages in different spheres of their lives:

Donetsk:

*You know, it's really important for me to pray in Polish. I can understand Polish, but I can't speak it. My mum had good Polish, but she never spoke it; 'the walls have ears', she said.*



*I like Polish because my mum told me we were Poles. She didn't teach us [Polish]; when she was dying, she said 'teach your children'. And how can I teach them? One is an executive (nachalnik), my daughter also has a good job, how can I tell them? I can't tell them anything. I don't know, I might tell them when I'm dying, just like my mother told me. We speak Russian every day, and its Ukrainian with the neighbour; I pray quietly in Polish and that's how I live. (Female, 81, Donetsk)<sup>12</sup>*

Bukovina:

*My language is Polish; I'm Polish, so I speak it. We've always tried to speak Polish at home. It was Russian at work, you know, there were the new Soviet authorities, so it was Russian. In the street, it's Ukrainian; and I speak Romanian with Romanians. I went to a Romanian school, you know, so I can speak Romanian with Romanians just like I'm speaking Polish to you now. And later I had to learn Russian because it was ordered by the authorities; alright, so be it. Today, in the old age, Polish and Romanian are enough for me. (Female, 82, Bukovina)<sup>13</sup>*

The accounts reveal similarities and differences in the patterns of language use in different domains, depending on the neighbourhood, work and family environment. Other important factors include social involvement and membership in the Roman Catholic community. While in the case of both informants the language of private prayers is Polish, the one from Donetsk attends religious services in Russian. On the other hand, the informant from Bukovina uses Polish in the entire sphere of religion, including private prayers, confession and the Mass. She speaks Polish in the family and with friends, Ukrainian – mainly in public institutions, Romanian – with friends and neighbours, as most of them are Romanians and Ukrainians speaking the local dialects.

Both informants comment on the factors which have had an impact on their Polish identity:

Donetsk:

*Yes, I'm Polish in my heart, I have a Polish soul and Polish blood; very few people know about that. These days, nobody asks me who I am. I put myself down as Russian in my*

<sup>12</sup> Original transcript: 'Znaete, ochen' vazhno dla menia molit'sia po pol'ski. Ia tak pol'skii panimaiu, no ne razgovarivaiu. Mama moia znala dobre pol'skii, no ona molchala i govorila 'steny slyshut'. Ia pol'skii liubliu, potomu chto mne mama skazala, chto my paliaki. Ne uchila nas, kogda umirala skazala 'uchi detei,' a chto ia budu ucit': odin nachal'nik, doch' tozhe posada, kak ia im skazhu, nichego ia im ne mogu skazat'. Mozhet kak umru, tak zhe skazhu kak moia mat' mne, ne znaiu. Kazhdyi den' my pa russki razgavarivaem, a tam z sosedkoj pa ukrainski, pa pol'ski mol'us' sebe tikhon'ko i tak zhivu' (Female, 81, Donetsk).

<sup>13</sup> Original transcript: 'Polski to język mój, ja Polka, to i po polski mówiem. Nu w domu my staraliś zawsze mówić pa polski. Na rabotie pa ruski, nu znajetie nowa władza sowiecka, to pa ruski, na ulicy u nas po ukraiński, a jak z Rumunami to ja po rumuńsku mówię. Ja chodziła do szkoły rumuńskiej wiecie, to ja z Rumunami tak jak z wami tu po polsku, tak z Rumunami po rumuńsku gadam. I tak potem musiała ja się nauczyć tego ruskiego, bo władza kazała, dobrze, to niech im będzie, na starość teraz mi wystarczy tylko polski i rumuński' (Female, 82, Bukovina).

*[internal] passport, so that I wouldn't have any problems, you know, and I put my children down as Russians as well. But I know I'm Polish; I'm trying to fulfil my mother's last will. I think she's proud up there in heaven when she can see me and hear me say that I'm Polish. It's all of her making. I don't think you have to know the language to be Polish; and I'm of Polish faith, as they used to say; we've got a Polish [Roman] Catholic priest here. And I know it for sure that I have a Polish soul; the Russian soul is different. (Female, 81, Donetsk)<sup>14</sup>*

Bukovina:

*I'm Polish because I can speak and read Polish and I'm from a Polish family, so who else would I be? It's normal here, everyone knows who they are. It's the same with Romanians, they wouldn't say they are Ukrainians; no one would do that just to please the authorities. We know our ethnicity around here; everyone knows their origin, everyone holds on to theirs, but we all respect the neighbours. We invite one another; on religious holidays, they visit us and we visit them. Young people change their religion when they get married; even so, everyone here knows their origin and holds on to it. That's what it's like. (Female, 82, Bukovina)<sup>15</sup>*

The account from Donetsk indicates that although the informant realises that Polish ethnic origin can already be openly declared and she is ready to do so, there is no one to whom she could talk about it. Amidst the mass of the 'Soviet nation', she keeps her Polish identity in her heart and talks about it only with visitors from Poland, if they comment that she is Polish. She was so deeply touched by her mother's last words that she finds it difficult to cope with her revelation even today, but declares that her 'mum's last will has to be fulfilled' (*zaveshchaniie mamy nado ispolnit'*).

Such situations are not uncommon in south-eastern Ukraine. A survey of the Polish minority in Donetsk reveals that 63% of the respondents consider themselves Polish because at least one of their parents is/was of Polish extraction, 20% because they are Roman Catholic, 10% because one of their relatives was Polish, and 4% because they know the Polish language (i.e., they have learned it) (Krasowska, 2012, p. 293).

<sup>14</sup> Original transcript: 'Da, ia v sertse pol'ka i dusha u menia pol'skaia, krov' u menia pol'skaia, eto znaiut nemnogie liudi. Nikt one sprashivaet seichas kto ia. V pasporte ia zapisalas' russkaia, chtoby ne bylo tam znaete problem i detei pozapisyvala russkikh. No ia znaiu chto ia pol'ka, staraius' zaveshchaniie materii ispolnit'. Dumaiu ona gordaia tam v nebe smotrit i slyshit chto ia govoriu chto ia pol'ka. Vse ono iza materii. Ia dumaiu ne nado znat' iazyka chtob byt' pol'koï, nu i vera u menia kak govoreli pol'skaia i ksëndz u nas pol'skii i tak. A dusha ia znaiu tochno pol'skaia, u russkikh drugaia dusha' (Female, 81, Donetsk).

<sup>15</sup> Original transcript: 'Polka, ja Polka, bo mówiem po polsku i czytam i z rodziny polskiej, to kto ja mogę być, jak nie Polka. To normalne u nas każdy swoje wie. Rumun to też wie, że Rumun, on nie powie, że Ukrainiec, nikt nie chce się podobać władzy. My tutaj wiemy jakiej my nacjonalności. Każdy zna swoje pochodzenie. Każdy trzyma swoje, ale i szanujemy się z sąsiadami. Zapraszamy się, jak święta to chodzą oni do nas my do nich. Żeniom się młodzi to biorom już inne wiare, ale to i tak każdy u nas wie z czego pochodzi i swojego się trzyma – to jest tak' (Female, 82, Bukovina).

In the case of the informant from Bukovina, the criteria of Polishness involve religion, tradition and ethnic origin of the parents. The account indicates that she has a clearly defined sense of ethnicity and finds it easy to declare it: 'everyone knows I'm Polish, I've never made a secret of it' (*przecież wszyscy wiedzą, że jestem Polką, nigdy tego nie ukrywałam*). What played a considerable role in her case was membership in the Roman Catholic Church and attending religious services, as the Church has always been considered the stronghold of Polish identity.

The accounts presented above are not an exception. Indeed, all similar autobiographical interviews include the topics of war, life in the Soviet Union, religion, language, and Polish identity.

Kaja Kaźmierska suggests that 'although today it is merely a sociological banality to observe the mutual dependence between these two dimensions of memory (biographical and collective, as well as their interactions), demonstrating the dynamics of their relation on a particular example illustrates its social, cultural and biographical consequences' (Kaźmierska, 2009, p. 44).

The accounts of the everyday life of Poles in the Ukrainian-Russian and Ukrainian-Romanian borderlands show important differences concerning their experience of war. In Bukovina, which used to be part of Romania, Poles display a much more consolidated sense of national identity. Despite the restrictions of Soviet authorities, they gathered around the Roman Catholic Church and the institution of family, and taught the Polish language in private homes. This explains a continuity of their traditions, language, culture and memory.

On the other hand, Poles in Eastern Ukraine were cut off from contact with Poland, the Roman Catholic Church and Polish organisations throughout the Soviet period. Geographically dispersed and living in fear of their social environment, Polish families experienced the loss of loved ones and faced severe punishment for declaring identity other than 'Soviet'. Another factor at play was a relatively high rate of mixed marriages.

The memory of contact with the Soviets is similar in both borderlands. The conduct of the new authorities was the same everywhere and the examples quoted in the article represent a broader issue which is worthy of a separate study.

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**From individual to collective identity:  
the case of autobiographical accounts from the Ukrainian-  
-Russian and Ukrainian-Romanian borderlands**

**Abstract**

The article presents the problem of cultural memory of Poles from two different regions of Ukraine, the south-east of the country and Carpathian Bukovina. It examines the following five main topic areas: the Second World War, life after the war (including the problem of the Russians), the issue of the Roman Catholic religion, the language question, and the problem of declaration of Polishness today. The accounts of the everyday life of Poles in the Ukrainian-Russian and Ukrainian-Romanian borderlands show important differences concerning their experience of war. In Bukovina, which used to be part of Romania, Poles display a much more consolidated sense of national identity. Despite the restrictions imposed by Soviet authorities, they gathered around the Roman Catholic Church as well as the institution of family, and taught the Polish language in private homes. This explains a continuity of their traditions, language, culture, and memory.

On the other hand, throughout the Soviet period the Poles in Eastern Ukraine were cut off from contacts with Poland, the Roman Catholic Church and Polish organisations. Geographically dispersed and living in fear in their social environment, Polish families experienced a loss of their loved ones and faced severe punishment for declaring identity other than 'Soviet'. Another factor at play was a relatively high rate of mixed marriages.

The memory of contact with the Soviets is similar in both borderlands. The conduct of the new authorities was the same everywhere, and the examples quoted in the article represent a broader issue which would merit a separate study.

**Keywords:** cultural memory; oral history; Donbas; Bukovina; Poles in the East

## **Od tożsamości indywidualnej do tożsamości zbiorowej. Na przykładzie narracji z pogranicza ukraińsko-rosyjskiego i ukraińsko-rumuńskiego**

### **Streszczenie**

W artykule przedstawiono problem tożsamości kulturowej Polaków z dwóch różnych obszarów Ukrainy: Ukrainy południowo-wschodniej oraz Bukowiny Karpackiej. Omówieniu podlega pięć kręgów tematycznych: II wojna światowa, życie po II wojnie światowej i problem Rosjan, kwestia religii katolickiej, zagadnienie języka oraz problem współczesnej deklaracji polskości. W narracjach na temat codzienności u Polaków na pograniczu ukraińsko-rosyjskim i ukraińsko-rumuńskim pojawiają się istotne różnice. Polegają one między innymi na tym, że w innej sytuacji znajdowali się podczas II wojny światowej Polacy w Doniecku, a w innej Polacy na Bukowinie, będącej częścią państwa rumuńskiego. Ponadto stopień poczucia tożsamości narodowej u Polaków na Bukowinie jest znacznie wyższy. Pomimo zakazów ze strony władz sowieckich, Polacy skupiali się wokół Kościoła i rodziny, w domach prywatnych uczono języka polskiego. Na Bukowinie istnieje zatem ciągłość tradycji, języka, kultury i pamięci.

Polacy na Ukrainie Wschodniej przeżyli okres władzy sowieckiej w oddaleniu od Polski, od Kościoła katolickiego i od polskich organizacji. Żyli w dużym rozproszeniu, obawiając się społeczności, wśród której mieszkali. Rodziny przeżywały utratę bliskich, za przyznawanie się do narodowości innej niż „sowiecka” groziły srogie kary dla całej rodziny. Wchodzili też w związki małżeńskie z osobami niepolskiego pochodzenia.

Pamięć o styczności z władzą sowiecką jest podobna na obu pograniczach, a przytoczone przykłady stanowią szerszy problem, któremu warto by poświęcić osobne opracowanie.

**Słowa kluczowe:** pamięć kulturowa; historia mówiona; Donbas; Bukowina; Polacy na Wschodzie

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