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## **Fading memories of the Second World War in a socio-educational and cultural perspective. A research report from Poland**

**Abstract:** Memories of World War II (WW2) have a deeply cultural dimension and therefore are interesting for intercultural studies. This paper is based on an interpretative analysis of some field and desk research data, carried out in Poland by an interdisciplinary team of social scientists, educators and historians in 2018–2020. It is focused on socio-educational factors in the transfer of knowledge and memory of WW2. The researchers try to distinguish socio-educational factors responsible for the preservation of this memory across a range of age cohorts. Sources of knowledge, school curricula and socio-demographic aspects are set against the measured levels of historic facts concerning WW2. The data sets derive from questionnaires, telephone interviews and in-depth interviews with diverse groups of respondents along with a review of teaching history curricula in 1946–2020. On the basis of the findings, it is argued that a successful transfer of memory and knowledge of WW2 goes beyond teaching history at schools and beyond the contemporary political agenda. This article is meant to serve as a barometer of social changes in respect to fading memories of WW2.

**Keywords:** teaching history, memory, WW2, schoolbooks, reconstruction, living history

### **Introduction**

According to Tappan (1998, pp. 141–160), Fivush and Widaad (2011, pp. 51–63) and Odrowąż-Coates (2019, pp. 55–70), family narratives (including war stories) have an impact on children’s moral attitudes. They help to form group identity and unite family members through shared memories and emotions

concerning historic events in family history. An emotional connection to family narratives may have a positive impact on the maintenance of living memory across generations. Individual and group memory is a part of the cultural memory of the nation, of the ethnic group, and may be also related to social classes and their distinctive cultures. The more one identifies with historic events, the more one remembers them and passes them on to the next generation (Luckmann, 1983), establishing continuity and forming a part of group culture. Wiesław Theiss distinguished 3 generations involved in the transfer of knowledge about WW2: “the generation of the apocalypse”, who witnessed and survived the war, “the generation after” – their children, and finally the “grandchildren with an excess of memory load” (Odrowąż-Coates, 2019, p. 58). Alexander Freund showed how the transfer of knowledge and memory about life in Nazi Germany worked within 3 generations of war survivors (Freund, 2009, pp. 1–26). Was the choice of only 3 generations considered because those who came after were too displaced in time? Does this mean that living memory ceased after the third generation? Our intention was to test this and to discover the situation regarding intergenerational transmission of knowledge about WW2, considering Assmann’s approach that collective memory, in its nature, belongs to a specific social group defined by a limited timeframe and limited space (Assmann, 2011). He claimed that it is difficult to distinguish pure historical facts because these are constantly reconstructed and processed in collective memory, in new emerging contexts, new events, and an access to more sources of information. Amongst these sources are the first-hand witnesses of past events, who interpret them in individualized ways, through their own perspectives. When the witnesses die, the memory persists in one form or another, in artefacts, souvenirs from the past, archival sources, personal diaries and finally in places of memory. There is also the ‘agreed’ collective memory, reflecting the negotiated, ideologically tainted version of history in encyclopedic textbooks (ibidem). As Laclau wrote: “History, is not the terrain on which a unified and coherent story would unfold” (ibidem, p. 146). The elements of historic heterogeneity are brought together by political reasoning contributing to the group identity. Our research team wanted to explore the sources of knowledge amongst our respondents to find out more about their sources’ importance and meaning, and how they keep the memory of WW2 alive across new generations. Another aim was to learn if collective memory in this respect is relevant for strong identity. According to Assmann (p. 109), “Memory is the faculty that enables us to form an awareness of selfhood (identity), both on the personal and on the collective level”

(Assmann, 2008, pp. 109–118). He distinguished 3 levels of memory connected with identity, memory and time: inner individual memory, communicative memory (social memory), and cultural memory. Our intention was to check if we would find connections between them in the study group. The initial phase of our research pushed us to explore in more depth the phenomenon of people who are reconstructionists of WW2. These people represent the field of public history, seen as participatory historical culture, where non-academic people, with some training or knowledge, work together for the preservation of history and memory (Ashton and Kean, 2009).

When planning our study, the goal was to diagnose the state of knowledge about WW2 amongst various age cohorts, particularly (but not exclusively) the: X, Y and Z generation. The most interesting factors were the sources and reasons of diversity in the level of knowledge, which go beyond the demographic factor of birth date. Our interest was in the role that oral history may play in the transmission of knowledge about the war. Our team wanted to test if knowledge of WW2 is conditioned by environmental factors, including the socio-demographic dimension, but also the contact with people who survived the war or who were immersed in the first-hand stories of their parents and grandparents. The results of the study contributed to our understanding in which social layers the intergenerational oral transmission of knowledge goes together with the objective level of knowledge about the war and with the measurement of the state of knowledge among various age groups and diverse social groups. The research had an interdisciplinary character, bridging sociological, historical, and educational aspects. It may contribute to making pedagogical forecasts and may influence the direction of methods and contents of historical education, may serve to design educational and pedagogical activities, focused on maintaining a living memory of WW2. Therefore, our research results may have a practical application through their implications for the methodology of teaching history at various levels and for maintaining social memory. Although this study is treated as a pilot for further exploration in this area, a decision was made to share the results obtained so far.

### **The impact of school curricula. A desk-review of WW2 historical education in Poland in 1945–2020**

Before the field research phase, a review was made of the teaching of history in elementary and secondary schools in the past decades. The plan was

to confront it with different generations of respondents' level of historical knowledge. Although we were convinced the history curriculum would have an impact on people's knowledge, this did not bring any conclusive statistical confirmation in our sample. What seems interesting, however, is providing a review of the curricula to put our study in a specific socio-cultural and political context.

The Second World War (1939–1945) resulted in a change of Polish borders and in regaining previously lost territories in the West and losing a vast area of land in the East in favor of the Soviet Union. After the war, parliamentary democracy was replaced by a single party totalitarian regime, subordinated to the Soviet Union. Since 1947, Polish schools became a tool of indoctrination of the young generation, meant to support political aims, and to reject any western pedagogical ideas or pre-war traditions (Gorloff, Grzybowski and Kołakowski, 2010). Historical education regarding the war was focused on glorifying both the role of the Soviet Union in the liberation of Poland from Nazi occupation and the sacrifices of the Soviet nations during the war. The role of the Polish Home Army (AK), and Polish armies formed in the West, was marginalized in textbooks and limited to a small number of battles with large number of casualties e.g. the Battle of Monte Cassino. The syllabi were hermetic and schematic, based on the Marxist dialectical materialism (Kryńska and Mauersberg, 2003). A new periodization of history was introduced to highlight class struggle and 'social progress' perceived as socialist morality. The Soviet pedagogy of Kairow, Tieplow, and Makarenko gained dominance with complete negation of West – European contributions to educational theory and practice (Suchodolski, 1957). Teaching history was set to glorify masses, unskilled labourers and peasants, promoting secularization and anti-clericalism. Teachers were carefully selected on the basis of their political party alliance and were fully controlled by the government. Educational programs were linked to economic plans and subsequent party congresses. Under the rule of Władysław Gomułka, the quality of teaching was secondary to ideological messages, taking historical education to a new fall (Mauersberg and Walczak, 2005). On the 15<sup>th</sup> July, 1961, educational reforms introduced a new system. It was based on 8 years of obligatory primary school followed by 2–3 years of vocational education or 4 years of general secondary school or 5 years of technical secondary school. Children from the so-called proletariat and those of party members were given extra recruitment points when entering university. The history curriculum was coherent with political rhetoric. It was characterized by being silent about certain

events and by the falsification of history, promoting internationalism, glorifying the communist party and demonstrating the power and progress of the USSR. Despite ideological programming, illegal leaflets, books and information, secret meetings and lectures took place underground. Polish workers fed up with party corruption, food shortages, poverty and lack of freedom, carried out protests – the biggest in 1980–1981. This led to the introduction of martial law by the alarmed authorities (Styk and Dziekanowska, 2012). In the first history curriculum introduced after the war in 1947 (Mauersberg and Walczak, 2005), there was no information promoting communist ideology. The updated program in 1959 introduced these factors at all levels of education, including the elementary one (Walewander, 2002). In the 1960s, under the rule of Gomulka, a consolidation of the socialist model of teaching was introduced alongside the Marxist semantics and interpretation of history. This prevailed until the 1980s, when the focus was shifted towards shaping patriotic and emotional attitudes to the working people of homeland (Osiński, 2010). This caused a softening of the ideological significance of teaching goals, leading to the introduction of new goals of historical education: shaping historical awareness, knowledge of macro and micro history and the regularities of life. The representatives of the Solidarity movement were lobbying for a concentric rather than linear curriculum and were demanding a complete reconstruction of the teaching content in line with the latest research findings and the historical truth (Kupisiewicz, 1996). A study of learners by Jerzy Rulka (Bogdańska-Zarembina, 1980) in 1980 showed that children and youth declared that their history knowledge was acquired at school (80%), from TV (60%), from parents at family home (55%). 40% listed grandparents as their source of knowledge of history, 33% radio, 29% – journals and 25% – newspapers. This information must be confronted with Zbigniew Kwiecinski's (1991–97) survey of school knowledge of Polish people aged 16–65 carried out in 1989/1990, which showed that a staggering percentage (77%) experienced great difficulties in understanding simple written texts. They could read but they could not understand, critically assess or combine facts they read, which indicates that despite granting universal access, communist schools were highly inefficient in their teaching programmes – unless this was an aim of the hidden program. This claim may be confirmed by Janusz Reykowski's comprehensive survey of the mentality of Poles (Reykowski, 1988), carried out on a randomized national sample in 1988. It showed that the role of the individual was perceived as a component of society – a cog in a machine – reflected in social passivity, conformity

towards authority, consumerism and a feeling of entitlement. A review of historical education carried out after the change from communism to democracy in 1989, revealed poor knowledge of contemporary history of Poland (Kupisiewicz, 1989). The historical events that were absent from schools were introduced into the curricula at that time. These included: some events on the Eastern border of Poland, the Ukraine famine, the social effects of Stalinism and the massacre of Polish officers in Katyn, carried out by the Soviets in 1940.

The political transformation and the massive changes it caused have proved that the years of manipulation, intrusive political indoctrination and the many difficulties of living in a society governed by the party apparatus, did not destroy the collective (Halbwachs, 2008) and cultural memory (Assmann, 2015). The past became one of the mechanisms of social self-identification after 1989 (Sztompka, 2002).

The essence of identity in individual and collective life is reflectivity and awareness of past times – what is discussed in this context is social, collective, historical or generational memory (Szacka, 2006). The events of the past decades prove that in the process of constructing collective memory, the past and the present interpenetrate each other and constitute an important bond-forming element in relation to “what must not be forgotten” (Assmann, 2013).

## **Field research procedure**

For the field research, a qualitative questionnaire was constructed to measure the knowledge of WW2 facts amongst participants. Depending on the ability to provide dates, details, in-depth explanation of events and ability to identify facts, we assessed and rated respondents’ knowledge. To do this, specially trained assessors were used who graded respondents knowledge on a 0–5 point scale. Some questions were also formulated about personal experiences, attitudes, and finally – about demographic qualities. The questionnaire had to be filled with a researcher present in situ to eradicate any external aid or consultation concerning the knowledge component in the questionnaire. It was quite lengthy and filling it took approximately 30 minutes. The questionnaires were handed to diverse groups of people at community events, in educational facilities and workplaces, in a large city, a town and a small village. 1000 questionnaires were distributed but only 200 returned complete, which may indicate that people who did not complete them had insufficient knowledge and did not want to reveal it to the researchers despite the ano-

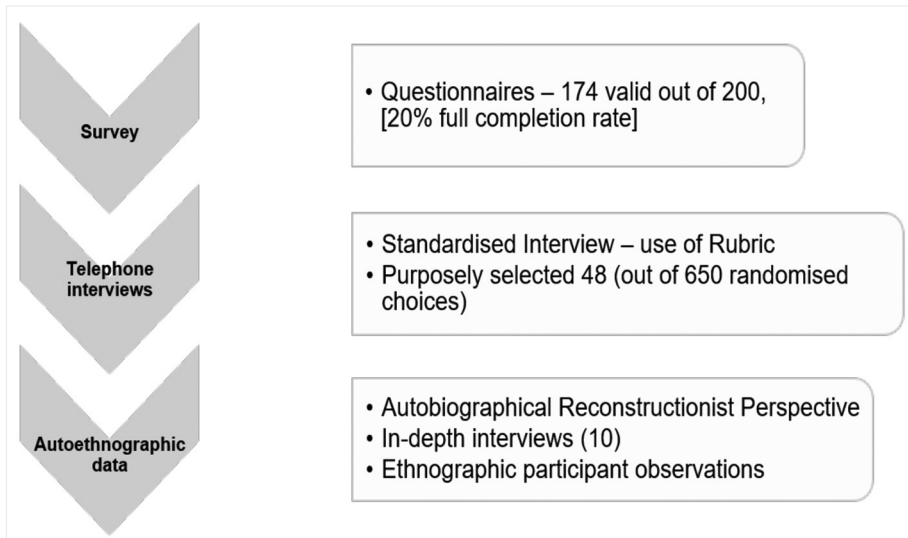
nymity of the forms. Our focus was on the second and third generation after the war – grandchildren and great grandchildren of war witnesses. When the questionnaires were distributed (2018/2019), all the respondents were aged 17–65 and the largest group was between 24–46. They were diversified not only by age but also by residing in a large city, town or village, by various educational attainments, professions, by the employment status and gender. Experiencing the material heritage of destruction might have been different for different age cohorts in our study, yet many of the ruins are still present in the local surroundings today and therefore one could take them for granted in one's neighbourhood and did not consider them in this study.

There was a question about direct close contact with a family member who witnessed the war and also about whether the war was a topic of conversations in the family home and whether any of the respondents' ancestors were in the resistance movement, suffered repressions or died. Furthermore, the questions pertained to the sources of information about WW2 and to which ones were, in their opinion, the most efficient in passing on the history of the war. Other inquiries concerned the remaining tensions and the most traumatic events during the war from their personal perspective. If their family discussed the war at home, another question was what the main subject areas of these conversations were. There was also free space left for additional comments. Most questions were open-ended and required short written narration. For the data analysis, MAXQDA 2020 software was used to code, cross analyze and interpret the obtained data.

The second phase of our study was based on telephone interviews. Our team wanted to know if our initial results could be verified in a randomized sample. The procedure used consisted in calling random telephone numbers. The interviews were standardized, with simple questions that allowed the interviewer to use a rubric to simply tick in order to grade their answers. The first 3 questions asked in the interview were the decisive ones – whether the interviewees had contact with a member of family who was a witness of the war, had higher education, or passion for war as a topic of interest. Only those who fitted the above criteria were further tested for their knowledge of events and places related to WW2. 650 phone calls were made and 48 people that fitted our criteria were interviewed.

In the final phase of study, in order to go deeper into the field, autoethnographic narrative interviews were used to reach out to a special group of respondents that emerged from the data obtained during the initial stages of our study, the active WW2 reconstructionists.

Figure 1. Methodology of data collection



## Research outcomes phase 1

Our objective was to check if there is a relationship between live contact with the witnesses of WW2, conversations in the family home about WW2 and the state of individual knowledge about the war. It was discovered that a positive connection was indeed found, but only in the cases of families where the respondent obtained higher education and at least one of their parents had higher education as well. Therefore, in the group of 174 participants, it was possible to identify 37 people with the high level of knowledge. 33 of them fulfilled the criteria for contact, conversation in the family, and finally, for the higher education.

Additionally, this connection was tested on a wider scale and our team was able to confirm it. The results showed that in families with a higher level of education, more conversations about WW2 took place and there was a more productive contact between the witnesses and respondents, which influenced their interest in WW2 and increased their level of knowledge about it. This reflects Bourdieu's view on social reproduction through an education component, where the habitus of families with higher education enables family members to promote family conversations, philosophical reflection and the use of elaborated language codes and facts. This is then reflected in bet-



ter school results and favorable conditions for the development of a wider spectrum of interests, favorable to our case.

The people in the age group 19–21 displayed the lowest level of knowledge about WW2 and the lowest interest in progressing that knowledge, although there were 2 cases where the respondent was studying as a historian. In fact, some participants in the 20–24 years bracket declare that the war topic makes them feel anxious, that they are fed up with it, do not want to think about it, as it was horrifying and they feel traumatized by the topic. This declaration was more strongly expressed amongst 20-year-olds and amongst participants who did not have contact with living relatives and whose family did not converse about the war at home. The following quote reflects this sentiment: “Generally, I do not like remembering these events and thinking about them, because I react badly to them. I feel them too much.” (APSII, 8) and “Why should I think about it? It was so awful. Why would I torment my children with images of death and suffering? It is enough that I cannot sleep at night when I think about it. I do not want to go deeply into this topic” (I 39).

When analyzing which sources of information were mentioned most often amongst the respondents, the high scoring group chose almost 50% more sources of information than the overall average. Students of pedagogical and language studies as well as teachers, regardless of their specialty, pointed to school lessons as the primary source of information. Teachers, regardless their specialty, displayed a very good knowledge of WW2, in contrary to students. Perhaps the regular patriotic assemblies at schools have had an impact on teachers’ enhanced knowledge of WW2. However, the combination of 3 the three identified factors is a more probable cause, since all our respondents have been exposed to Polish patriotic schools’ assemblies.

The majority of respondents – 68%, (52% low knowledge scoring and 78% high scoring participants), declared that their family members took part in resistance, were prosecuted, suffered repressions, or were killed during WW2. However, these factors had no clear data-derived connection with the level of knowledge about WW2.

Moreover, a group of 17 respondents who take part in reconstruction of WW2 events were identified. In 15 cases out of 17, those participants were characterized by the highest level of historical knowledge of WW2. Most of this group were men and came from educated families. Interestingly, 3 of them, 2 male and 1 female were very young people who did not have direct contact with a family member who survived the war, but the war was a topic

of conversation in their family home and their high level of knowledge contrasted with the average for their age group in our sample. This may indicate that participation in reconstruction associations and clubs enhances a transfer of knowledge and instigates increased interest in the war.

Neither gender nor city/town/village were a statistically significant factors for the level of knowledge about the war. However, younger people and people with a lower level of education, especially those from villages and small towns, were more likely to declare a level of distrust and anxiety, based on the memory of WW2, towards neighboring countries (Germany and Russia). This was observed in 30 cases. In 3 questionnaires, positive attitudes towards Ukrainian immigrants were expressed, despite the first referring to Volhynia (Pol. *Wołyń*) massacre (Institute of National Remembrance, Wolhynia Massacre) and mentioning the ongoing sentiment of unease concerning border atrocities on both sides.

Only 6 out of 174 participants listed YouTube and the Internet as their personal sources of knowledge about the war. There were significant differences in information sources between the high scoring group and the medium and low scoring ones. The high scoring groups pointed to 4 or more sources of knowledge that they considered the most important about WW2, listed in order of importance: books (86%), live history (storytelling, meeting with witnesses and their children) (81%), places of memory (73%), owning and handling artefacts (e.g. photos) (73%), reconstructions of real events (71%) and school lessons (68%). These were followed by films and documentaries (63%). Yet, the medium and low scoring groups most often chose 3 sources or less: books (68%), artefacts (62%), places of memory (58%), contact with live storytelling etc. (57%), films (51%), school lessons (47%) and only 36% chose participation in reconstructing some events. This is an interesting choice, keeping in mind that the reading of books in Poland is on a low level (National Library Reports 2012–2019).

Amongst the war events discussed in family homes, the participants mentioned: the Battle of Monte Cassino, Home Army – Polish Army in the West, the occupation of Poland, resistance and uprisings, personal accounts of forced labor, labor camps, extermination camps, relocation to labor camps, rapes and killings, operation Barbarossa, the Gibraltar disaster, battles on the Eastern front: Kursk, Stalingrad, Leningrad, the Allied Landings in Normandy, the history of Romania, General Anders, the Red Army, Soviets, Stalin, Cursed Soldiers (Pol. *Żołnierze Wyklęci*), key dates in the first months of the invasion of Poland and the eventual victory over Nazi Germany, Wolhynia,

Katyn, victories overseas, hunger and fear, loss of family members, communism after WW2, the phenomenon of Kamikaze pilots, the Warsaw and London blitzes, the resistance movement and the underground press.

Many focused on local events, linked to their current place of residence: the defense of Westerplatte, the Battle of the Bzura River, the Warsaw Uprising, the Nazi occupation of the Kashubian area, the defense of the Hel Peninsula, Palmiry, the Battle of Wizna, the explosive destruction of bridges e.g. in Tczew, which all showed a connection between WW2 memory and the contact with memory sites.

When considering the most traumatic events, research participants chose: the Holocaust, concentration camps, Auschwitz, the massacre of Polish officers in Katyn, the mass murder of civilians, the political allies' betrayal, forced displacement, retaliations against the innocent, the Warsaw ghetto uprising, the Warsaw Uprising, the NKVD, the Yalta agreements and the Wolhynia massacre. The majority of these traumatic events that they referred to happened in Poland and were therefore related to their Polish identity.

## **Research outcomes phase 2**

In the second field research phase of our study 48 participants aged 23–60 were selected: 28 men and 20 women. The disparity in number between men and women may be coincidental, although men in general showed more enthusiasm to join when the topic was revealed. 44 out of the 48 purposely selected participants displayed high or at least medium high level of knowledge about WW2. Medium high was more frequent amongst younger participants (aged 23–35). 4 participants – 3 women (aged 33, 36, 41) and 1 man (23) displayed medium low level of knowledge, which is a low percentage for this group and therefore is not significant for the overall outcome of the study. Most cases confirmed our hypothesis that the combination of 3 factors: higher education, family contact with live witnesses of the war and family conversations about WW2, contributed to an increased interest and therefore increased the level of knowledge. Amongst this group, we found 2 active reconstructionists aged 46 and 55, who scored amongst the highest scores for knowledge of WW2. The participants choices of the sources of knowledge concerning the war were similar to the ones in the initial sample, with books and storytelling being the most popular, followed by memory sites, artefacts and the reconstructions of events. 70% mentioned school lessons as an efficient source of knowledge, with only 60% pointing to films in

general and 4 participants to films on the internet in particular. Summarizing the second phase of our enquiry, our initial findings were verified in regards to the educational level and its relevance when confronted with 2 other factors (family conversations and contact with the witness) and that this contributes to an increased knowledge about WW2. Although it is a small-scale study, it may contribute to the preservation of WW2 memory both in the Polish society and outside it.

### **Living history. An autoethnographic perspective**

Historical reconstruction refers to period costumes and artifacts (original or recreated) used to reconstruct specific events from the past. Therefore, the activity of reconstruction groups consists mainly of historical re-enactment and the preservation of or making the copies of items from the period such as clothes and weapons, in order to reproduce and to popularize knowledge of the past. Although there are many controversies surrounding the moral issues related to the topics of re-enactment, such as the instances of re-enacting executions, the details of the Holocaust or wearing Nazi uniforms by reconstructors, our goal is not to promote the activities of these groups but to give them a voice about their motivation in the context of preserving the memory of the war. Controversies such as militarism or possibility activating a trauma were not mentioned by our respondents but were also not prompted during the interviews.

Despite wide criticism, there are also some proponents of historical reconstruction and re-enactment classed as living history (Bogacki, 2006, p. 34). It can be defined either as living archaeology that recreates the ways in which people lived in the past and recreates some aspects of material culture, everyday life and includes the ideological issues, or as combat re-enactment, which focuses on military operations – in some cases of re-constructionist groups, it can be both. It is indeed both in the case of the group of Polish WW2 reconstructionists that was encountered. Using their autobiographical narratives obtained during participant observations and the ad-hoc in-vivo interviews (Odrowąż-Coates, 2016) served to find out their motivation to become reconstructionists and how they defined living history and its role for preservation of the memory of WW2. Our intention was to use their personal experiences to pursue the role of reconstruction in forming collective memory amongst new generations. A positive educational link was found by Markowski (2009, pp. 68–89) and by Skotnicka-Palka (2014, pp. 62–69)

between participation in historical reconstructions and the interest of young people in the preservation of history. The collected information is based on participant observation and several in-vivo interviews with the coordinators and self-identified leaders of reconstructionist groups SRH Garnizon Toruń (SRH Garrison Torun), Fundacja Polskiej Broni Panczernej (Polish Armoured Weapons Foundation), SRH Fort z Gdańska (SRH Fort from Gdansk), Heel on Wheel – USA military reconstructionists and the Leib-Husaren (Hussars) Regiment No 1& Nr. 2 Danzig.

Our focus was on the personal experiences of people involved in historical re-constructivism. Their views were analyzed pertaining to the definition and the purpose of the movements and the types of activities carried out by the members. Our team was also interested in members' profiles, their personal motivation, aspirations and family circumstances connected with their active participation. The 10 interviews were carried out in Polish and took place in 2018–2020. The information collected during the interviews was grouped into themes and is consolidated in the following paragraphs.

The term living history was associated by respondents with the quasi-military environment and the historic re-enactment understood as a wide range of activities. The most common were identified as staging historic plays, building dioramas and the individual reconstructing of historical characters. These can pertain to historical figures, but most commonly to anonymous figures of soldiers, non-commissioned officers and commission officers of a given military formation. It can also include playing the role of a civilian figure from the times of historic events. When taking a role of a historical figure, there is a necessity to not only know and understand the historic events, but also the general context, the physique, and the behavior of such a figure.

The contemporary reconstruction movements, especially those set in the realities of the interwar period or during WW2, require a very high level of accuracy. This applies to both uniforms (uniforms sewn exactly as museum originals from the same woven materials), equipment – in this case very often original (helmets, gas masks, badges, original weapons without combat features) and also the manners and the ways of behavior. A good re-constructivist not only knows the drill, garrison and uniform regulations, but also cultivates patterns of behavior typical of the era that they recreate. Groups recreating foreign units must be able to communicate commands in the appropriate foreign language. This attention to details requires constant study and self-improvement both of a group and of an individual. It also requires significant financial resources. Apart from equipment, uniforms and

individual weapons, more and more groups invest in either original or faithfully replicated heavy machinery (machine guns, mortars, cars and tracks, field hospitals, etc). According to our respondents, it is the synthesis of all these elements – with individual knowledge, specific sets of skills and the ability to pass it on – that enables the transfer of memory.

Preservation of memory for many re-constructivists is not only based on historical enactment but also pertains to taking part in national and local commemoration events and lectures. The local dimension is very important because groups that re-enact certain units, seated in their local area, inspire others to immerse themselves deeply in the history of the local area. It is a common practice to actively seek contact with living witnesses of events or at least with their family. They also try to pursue their own family history in search of memoirs, photos and other memorabilia to pass them on to the next generation, together with the oral history associated with their life-story.

If one was to create a profile of an average re-constructivist of Polish military formations, from both before WW2 and from the war period, based on the narratives of our respondents, one can find people motivated by several factors. The first group is considered the most valuable by the leaders, it consists of energetic young people who were involved in scouting or Airsoft and became interested in history. They perceive joining reconstruction groups as a natural progression and development of their passions. Every group leader reported that they had at least a handful of such new members every year and they classed them as a 'pure and ready product of living history'. There are multiple instances where their parents acted as the initiator or joined with their children. The second largest group consists of historians, whose educational background and passion meet with the active lifestyle offered by the group. The third brings together retired, semi-retired or serving military personnel who extend their professional experiences (military drill, procedures, tactics, military customs) to engage young people attached to this kind of experience. Furthermore, several reconstructionists became inspired by their own family history or by stories told in their family about the war. Some found their inspiration in computer games and wanted to take their virtual reality experiences into real-life.

In many cases, the respondents informed that living history became a lifestyle for the whole family. For instance, when men recreated uniformed formations, sisters, daughters and wives, decided to either wear female auxiliary service uniforms or recreate civilian formations of the times. Family participation in reconstruction came to Poland in the 1990s, starting with

interest in the medieval period, followed by interest in the Napoleonic era and eventually in the Second World War. The respondents claimed that women created a lively networks of trade in original fashion and accessories, purchasing necessary items overseas in the UK, USA and Australia. They embrace opportunities to create vintage events, fashion shows, dance lessons and lectures about everyday life in particular periods. They managed to create a network of vintage dance schools and are renowned in the community for their ability to transform an ordinary gym into an RAF canteen from 1944, with the use of original artefacts.

Participants of the re-constructivism movement mentioned a phenomenon of military archaeological event tourism. They embraced it with enthusiasm, having an opportunity to travel from place to place, event to event, sharing their talents, skills and knowledge and learning from one another. They take part in events, rallies, shows, flea markets and military equipment expositions. They feel that these events give them opportunities of recreation, of being a tourist and also being a tour operator taking an active part in these events. Some highlighted the opportunities to earn money for their hobbies (Jędrysiak and von Rohrscheidt, 2011, p. 232) thanks to being part of the organizing crew or displaying their skills or equipment. Military tourism or archaeological tourism is a significant part of historic tourism and an integral part of cultural tourism (Žuromskaite, 2009, p. 4).

Many reconstructionists co-produce local tourist attractions. The respondents valued their contribution to local area development and the promotion of its history. Amongst co-produced, open-air museums, respondents mentioned an exhibition of police and military vehicles from the communist era of the People's Republic of Poland. Every year in the Museums of Coast Defense in Hel and in Jastarnia, reconstructionists of 1939 display for the public. In their camp, the respondents find not only thematic exhibitions, photographs, correspondence, and documents from the epoch but also a collection of cans and metal containers. Many other artefacts brought by the reconstructionists often have higher value than the entire collections presented in the museums. The respondents mentioned their international exposure during friendly reunions with units from other countries. They follow a Spanish reconstructionist group that focuses on Polish military of the WW2 period and Sabaton music group from Sweden that became interested in Polish history through their contact with the reconstructionists and released a number of songs presenting the WW2 events, such as Warsaw Uprising 1944.

## Discussion

It was only possible to ask about declared sources of historical knowledge whilst people are not always fully aware of them. Seixas (1993) and Seixas et al. (2000) proved that they often unconsciously repeat the clichés from popular non-documentary cinematography. Although our respondents pointed to school as one of the main sources of their historic knowledge, the school history curricula did not reflect in any way on the personal knowledge. Some groups that attended school in different periods were tested and there were no significant differences in remembering objectively recognized facts, battle fields or dates that could be directly associated with their school experience.

According to the theory of learning by Illeris (2004: 95), learning should be analyzed in 3 interlinked dimensions – the cognitive, emotional, and social. Our study demonstrates how these dimensions are activated in the stimulating family environment with storytelling in direct contact with witnesses of war or their children (emotional aspect), conversations during family reunions (social aspect), actively seeking knowledge in result of the latter (cognitive aspect) and the identification with witnesses and their children (emotional aspect). The groups of reconstruction may work in a similar fashion, instigating emotional attachment to places of memory and the personal role played in the reconstruction, leading to stronger identification with past events, providing positive social environment for discussing and re-living of historic moments, encouraging the thirst for knowledge about them. The outcomes of the interviews with the reconstructionists contribute to the international debates on public history and its definition, taking the ‘naive’ but genuine perspective of an insider (c.f. Dean, 2018; de Groot, 2016; Sayer, 2019; Cauvin, 2016; Demantowsky, 2019; Kean and Martin, 2013). However critical we may be about reconstructionists, it must be said that they are able to create an activating learning environment, which may increase the cognitive effects (Zepke, 2013, pp. 97–107).

It is also interesting to look at our results in the context of other studies related to memory carried out in Poland. For instance, a representative random sample of the adult population of Poland (N = 1111) was tested by a public opinion research center (CBOS) in 1999 to assess family history in living memory. 61% of respondents declared that the fate of their grandparents and parents is discussed in their family, in 17% of cases very often, in 44% frequently, and that these discussions most often pertain to the period



of WW2. 37% believed that their family members had participated in important historical events during WW2. 38% of respondents still have relics and photographs from that period (CBOS, 2000). The same research center tested the general historical awareness of Polish people in 2016 (CBOS, 2016). In this representative sample 87% of respondents believed that knowledge about the past is needed in modern times. Only 11% deemed such knowledge completely unnecessary. 25% assessed their interest in history as very high. However, the level of knowledge of Polish history tested in this regular survey has been in decline and this includes memory of WW2. Therefore, the respondents were asked about their predecessors and their exposure to this subject in their family homes. Our findings confirmed, as mentioned before, that there is a link between family history, direct contact with witnesses or their children and the living memory of the war, but it is more pronounced among the highly educated.

## Conclusions

Preservation of memory is at stake for a strong national identity. E. Laclau (2005, p. 140) writes about a specific category of people: 'people without history', people living outside of historicity, who are not involved in popular identities, built on dialectic oppositions of shared memory. It seems that these people are not fully integrated in their society through the lack of common memory. For our generation, the third generation after the war, the subject of WW2 may be perceived as the uniting factor. Perhaps future generations will find commonality in emotional attachment to different events. It is important to know how the memory of the war was successfully intergenerationally transmitted and what the conditions and factors responsible for the memory to survive are. The factors identified in our study were: higher education combined with close contact with eyewitnesses or their children.

Personal inspiration occurs by preserving family artefacts and memoirs or controversially, by an active involvement in the reconstruction movements. School curricula appear to play a limited role in looking for causes of reduced knowledge amongst the youngest of our respondents. To our surprise, highly problematic, ideologically tainted teaching of history during communism, cannot be clearly linked to the knowledge of WW2 history amongst our respondents (Topolski, 1981). Some researchers of Holocaust studies question whether the detailed factual knowledge is crucial for the presence of historical events in the collective memory, especially when Internet sources

are readily available (c.f. Wineburg, 2018), yet such knowledge may be an indication of living memory (Odroważ-Coates, 2019). Our study indicates that emotional attachment to historical events may aid learning and remembering historic facts.

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