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The (Non)Memory of “Ethnic Childhood” as a Dimension of Cultural Heritage

Abstract

Today, ethnic minorities have entered the second wave of emancipation. They are fighting for the right to cultural autonomy, the right to have their own past, history and social memory. The aim of the article is to learn how ethnic minorities “recover” lost social memory in the area of childhood memory and how they work to create ethnic identity again. The text is composed of four parts. The first presents selected aspects of childhood culture. The second is presents Pierre Nora’s concept of memory. The third is presents the results of research on selected ethnic literary texts (Kashubian and Silesian). The author’s conducted semantic and structural analyzes (in the approach of Roland Barthes and Paul Ricoeur). The analyzes allowed us to recognize ethnic childhood as a space of existential suffering and a time of loss of ethnic identity. The answer – in childhood and adulthood – are specific identity strategies. they are aids in constructing a new ethnic identity. The fourth part is Summary and reflection closing the text.

Keywords:

ethnic minorities, ethnic identity, social memory, cultural autonomy, childhood culture

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1. INTRODUCTION

Today, ethnic minorities in Poland enter a new stage of emancipation struggles, which can be described as the second ethnic wave. It aims to obtain the right to have its own, autonomous (in relation to Polish) culture. The first ethnic wave was an emancipatory struggle for civil rights and legalisation through entrenchment in the state law system, as well as obtaining the right to school education, language, and culture. A measurable achievement of the first wave is the Act of 6 January 2005 on National and Ethnic Minorities, which today requires further legal supplementation, if only because its protection was not extended to the Silesians as an ethnic group, and the Kashubians achieved the status of only a group with a regional language. The first ethnic wave characterises with antagonistic relations between the minority and the majority. On the other hand, the second wave focuses on activities aimed at regaining their own culture by ethnic groups. In this context, I would like to emphasise that the right to cultural autonomy also includes the right to have a different interpretation of the common past (cf. Kurcz, 2022, p. 13), including the right to have one's own "social memory", which in the case of minorities, is a different memory than the memory of the majority (Rokita, 2020; Budisz, 2023). Social memory is an important part of cultural heritage because it is important for the cultural survival of any community, and its special dimension is – which is of interest to me in this article – the memory of ethnic childhood.

This article aims to identify how ethnic minorities "secure" the communal existence in a situation where they have lost (sometimes irretrievably) their culture or its significant parts, such as – for example – language, literature, history, or social memory. The paper's formula does not allow for a broader reflection on this issue, so I focus my attention on social memory and reflect on how ethnic minorities (or rather their members) "recover" what has been lost in community memory. I exemplify the memory of my Kashubian and Silesian childhood. Childhood memory as a dimension of social memory is a matter of what has been forgotten – as Pierre Nora (2022) writes, but also of what has been reimagined/reinvented, and what takes the form of ethnic identity.

The paper consists of four parts. In the first part, I briefly discuss the aspects of childhood culturality related to socialisation and the production of what Jerzy Nikitorowicz calls the "child's microworld". In the second part, I present elements of Pierre Nora's concept of memory and places of remembrance. The third part is the result of my research on childhood memory (Koźyczkowska, 2020a; 2020b; 2022; 2023a; 2023b), which I conduct within literary texts written by authors who touch on the experiences of ethnic childhood and show how these childhood

(un)conscious ethnic experiences (re)construct identity experiences in adulthood. I researched the Kashubian-language texts of Stanisław Janke (2015; 2020; 2021; 2023) and texts in Silesian by Alojzy Lysko (2022), as well as works translated into Polish by Horst Bienek (1991; 1993; 1994; 1995; 2000), and biographical reportages by Zbigniew Rokita (2020) and Stasi Budzisz (2023), written in Polish. In the final part, I attempt at reflecting on the research problem that interests me.

2. CHILDHOOD CULTURALISM: METHODOLOGICAL REMARKS

The thesis about the cultural dimension of childhood is well established in the literature on the subject. For example, Romana Miller (1981, p. 21) writes that: “(...) It is not indifferent to the world into which the child is introduced, how it separates itself from it and what image of itself it creates in itself”. A child is always brought up in a particular social world, which means that he or she must be culturally formed to participate in the social life of his or her own ethnic community (cf. Benedict, 2005, p. 117). Childhood as a biographical period of a child’s life is nothing more than learning about culture, and the purpose of such education is to create in its consciousness images of the world, social order, and itself (Miller, 1981, p. 73). The hidden driving force behind this cultural activity is the conviction that children are incapable of independent community life. It means that the imperative of kindness is to provide the child with “culture” (Miller, 1981, p. 76). Therefore, adults may feel the need to impose cultural rules and values on the child (Nikitorowicz, 2007, p. 82), which imprints a cultural trait on the child’s personality (Miller, 1981, p. 76) and causes the child to become a product of the culture of its own community before it learns to speak (Benedict, 2005, pp. 79–80).

Romana Miller (1981) writes: “[T]he children always have ancestors and are themselves descendants” (p. 76). It is a socially weighted “truth” that forces adults to create a world for their children that will create specific conditions of existence for them, which – in one way or another – will determine their identity. Moreover, each culture produces its own models of the successive stages of human life/biography, including the model of childhood, which does not necessarily conform to scientific knowledge (Miller, 1981, p. 48). Childhood is socially produced from what is inherited from ancestors and from what is new.

There is no need to convince anyone that the first and most important process of learning culture is socialisation. As Miller (1981, p. 108) argues, it is an educational process responsible for the generational transmission of culture and results from the concern of the old to preserve the communal world for future generations. This

cultural approach to socialisation is visible in the thinking of Jerzy Nikitorowicz, who develops it by recognising the importance of socialisation as a space for creating the so-called “microworld of the child”. More generally, it is a process concerning the grounding of the child’s present life in the past life of its community, which determines his or her first, cultural identity (Nikitorowicz, 2005, p. 28). The concept of the “child’s microworld” allows us to better understand the essence of the relationship between childhood and the child’s cultural identity. Childhood must be organised in such a way that the child’s consciousness is imbued with the cultural content of its community, for this is the only way for it to become a walking (practical) “product of culture”. That, in turn, means that the child brings its community/socio-cultural world into all social relations, which allows the child to see itself as someone who is similar to its own and, at the same time, different from others.

Nikitorowicz (2005, p. 23) writes, a child’s microworld is the “ability of certain ideas, objects, and behaviours to persist, their objectification, inter-generational transmission, and influence on the behaviour of others. In other words, it is the part of culture that is passed on to the next generations and has passed the test of permanence over time”. The author particularly emphasises three functional aspects of the child’s microworld: 1) Its culturality, which symbolically – as I mentioned – links the child’s present with the past of its community and inscribes it in the historicity of its ethnic group. This creates an “immanent guarantee of permanence” for the community, and also creates in the child respect for the axioms of the community (Nikitorowicz, 2005, p. 23). 2) Its power to produce personal and communal identity through the construction of the I–We relationship. It turns out that this relationship is necessary for the child’s culture, as it gives it a chance to benefit from the culture of its community and to make appropriate choices (from the perspective of the community – A.K.) (Nikitorowicz, 2005, p. 24). 3) Its presence in the child’s biography, which is significant for its identity. That gives the child the opportunity not only to access the cultural knowledge of its community, but also significantly determines the cultural shape of its relations with other members of its ethnic group. As a result, the child begins to experience his or her relationship with the cultural community as close and personal (Nikitorowicz, 2005, p. 28).

3. THE CULTURENESS OF MEMORY: CONSIDERATIONS OF A METHODOLOGICAL NATURE

Pierre Nora (2020) writes that memory – especially the so-called “true memory” – is hidden in gestures and customs, silence, bodies, and their actions. Such a memory is deeply rooted in memories, and it is a direct memory. The author also distinguishes between new memory, which is a transformed memory and constructs self-consciousness by taking the form of a written one. Importantly, this kind of memory can no longer be experienced “from within” because it is only available “outside” the human mind. In order to last, this memory establishes itself (Nora, 2020, pp. 104–106), and as such, it is experienced as a compulsion (Nora, 2020, p. 109).

Such memory forces a person to remember, to remember continuously, and also forces her to re-recover memories. This, Nora notes, stems from a deep-seated need to “regain belonging” and “identify with oneself”. Man must remember, for the simple reason that he needs to know, “What is it?” and what community he belongs to (Nora, 2020, pp. 111–112). Hence, perhaps, the pressure in today’s man to archive memory in all possible ways and, at the same time, the same man is troubled by the fear of losing his memory. On the one hand, man has the need to meticulously record traces, and, on the other hand, the need to reconstruct everything anew, because memory is fleeting and easy to forget (Nora, 2020, pp. 107–108). Pierre Nora draws attention to an important issue for my reflections, namely that memory is not a reminiscence. Memory is the management of the past in the present (Nora, 2020, p. 137).

Therefore, as Nora (2020, p. 104) writes, people have created places of remembrance. However, they are not the result of a natural and spontaneous action, because there is no such thing as spontaneous memory. Memorial sites are particularly important for minorities, whose memory is appropriated by the culture of majority groups. Minorities must create their own, autonomous places of their own memory. They must be guarded and closed against those who, through their culture, appropriate the memory of minorities, deform it and shape it in their own way (Nora, 2020, p. 125). Such places allow for a different understanding of the common history (of minorities and majorities) and become an impulse to (re)construct contemporary history (Nora, 2020, p. 150). Reading Pierre Nora’s text leads to the thesis that working through history/remembering minorities (e.g., ethnic) is an opportunity to decolonise subordinated/appropriated minority groups (e.g., ethnic) and with an identity appropriated/colonised by them. The problem, however, is that memory retrieval is a process in which, in addition to what is

re-remembered, there is also what is invented, imagined, or even fabricated (Nora, 2020, p. 157).

4. IDENTITY WORK: REWORKING/RECLAIMING MEMORY

Reaching out to the knowledge or experiences of people from ethnic groups forces us to go beyond the procedures of positivist-oriented social research, which requires, e.g., the search for methodologies that take a very broad view of culture. In order to better understand what ethnicity is and how it (re)constructs the life and biographies of ethnics, it is necessary – as Zbigniew Kurcz (2022, p. 9) notes – to study the language, literature, customs, religion, social and axiological normatives, and the social memory of ethnic groups. In this text – as I wrote in the introduction – the subject of my research exploration is literature written by representatives of ethnic communities, by Kashubians and Silesians.

The works of the authors – Stanisław Janke, Stasia Budzisz, Horst Bienek, Alojzy Łysko, and Zbigniew Rokita – have been treated by me as cultural texts and, at the same time, as “returns” to the memory of the authors’ childhood and people from their close socio-cultural environment. I have subjected the texts to a semantic and structural analysis using the approaches proposed by Roland Barthes (1968) and Paul Ricoeur (1985; 1992).

Barthes notes that the research challenge is the autonomy and “layered complexity” of the text, which means that structural analysis must be preceded by semantic analysis. As Barthes writes, the study of the literary text is not about “tracing history”, but about recognising – precisely through semantic analysis – the complexity of each of its “floors”. This is the only way to recognise, understand, and explain the meaning of the text. However, it is important for the scholar to remember that this meaning is not hidden in the last pages but in the complex and multi-layered, or – as Barthes proposes – multi-layered structure of the work. Therefore, if the aim of a research paper is to recognise, understand, and explain the meaning of a literary work, then the researcher cannot reduce the analysis to the study of relationships between words (Barthes, 1968, pp. 332–333). Its purpose is to recognise signs/categories and the meanings assigned to them by the author. These, in turn, construct the so-called smallest narrative units in the text and are functional and decide on a specific element of the text, but it is not about the linguistic unit (Barthes, 1968, p. 334). Semantic analysis – as the first phase of textual research – allows us to recognise the semantic content of a work, which requires repeated and multifaceted reading. However, this is the only way

for the researcher to understand the relationships between signs contained in the work (Barthes, 1968, pp. 336, 342–343). At the same time, as Paul Ricoeur (1985, p. 261) writes, semantic analysis allows us to recognise and understand the reality represented by means of a sign, which allows us to see and understand the narrative codes that guide understanding. The reconstruction and explanation of these narrative codes is one of the tasks of structural analysis. It is dangerous for the so-called intersubjective understanding of the text, because it consists in externalising the text and constitutes a comprehensive codification. It is undoubtedly – and we must agree with Ricoeur (1992, p. 19) – a discursive work, because the comprehensive codification of literary work not only externalises it, but by externalising it, makes the work visible and understandable in a specific, cultural way. It is a matter of “reading” the text within a certain cultural framework, which is sheer the necessary mediation of understanding through explanation (and this is always of a cultural nature). If, then, a literary text – from a structural perspective – is an element of a “chain of utterances”, it can exist as something that contributes to the cultural production of a community. That, in turn, means the literary text allows the community to explain itself in a narrative way (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 20).

The research allowed me to recognise and reconstruct a model of the biography of a non-ethnic child in a culture constructed by an ethnic majority group. The model shows possible areas of work in reconstructing the answer to the question “Who am I?”. This identity work begins relatively early (in childhood) and continues in adulthood. In the model, I distinguished the areas of ethnic childhood and ethnic adulthood. Their specificity results directly from the fact that a person is marked with ethnic stigma in childhood.

The model of biography presented in Table 1 seems to be typical for the members of those ethnic groups that have been subordinated to the power that produces the state based on the culture of the dominant group. It is about the power that politically takes as its starting point the domination of the culture of the strongest group and builds a culturally homogeneous state. One of the strategies that legitimises this political state of affairs is the creation of antagonistic relations between the minority and the majority, which amounts not only to the appropriation of the civil rights of minorities, but also to the colonisation of the minority culture by the culture of the majority group. One of the political techniques is to create the conviction that the most important and best culture is the culture of power, and that all minority cultures are colonised in such a way, i.e., transformed, that they can be recognised as inferior variants of the majority culture. Hence, the drama of the ethnic child begins when, in the public space, he or she is “forced” to enter into a relationship with the “children-products-of-the majority culture”.

Table 1. The experience of ethnic childhood: from stigma to a new identity

CHILDHOOD	
Ethnicity as a stigma	
Existential task:	Psychosocial response to ethnic stigma:
Recognising the ethnicity of one's own cultural community as a source of supra-normative suffering.	Expulsion from ethnicity. Escape from ethnicity.
The reason is the confrontation of the culture of the home (as the culture of one's own ethnic community) with the culture of the school (as the culture of another ethnic group).	Rejection of ethnicity. Rejection of ethnicity.
Trauma	
Existential task:	Sociocultural effects of trauma:
The necessity to cope with over-the-top suffering: rejecting/questioning one's own cultural group.	Severing social relations with the ethnic community. Severing cultural relations with the ethnic community.
Emotional, cognitive, and behavioural experiences of a child's loss of ethnicity.	Lack of access to the cultural heritage of the ethnic community. Severing symbolic relations with ethnic ancestors.
Ethnic descendants and their culture (loss of ethnic future).	Preventing generational involvement in the future of the ethnic community. Loss of opportunities for generational creation of the cultural and social identity of the ethnic community.

Working with the effects of the loss of the ethnic community	
Existential task:	Selection as an area of identity work:
Regaining belonging to any ethnic community.	Identity
Emotional, cognitive, and behavioural coping with the resulting identity void. The need to reconstruct the answers to the question: “Who am I?”	Identity work methodology:
	Prosthetic one’s own lost identity with the identity of an other-ethnic group.
ADULTHOOD	
Working with the effects of the loss of the ethnic community	
Existential task:	Recovery as an area of identity work:
Identity-reclaiming-of-oneself within an ethnic ancestral community.	Ethnic community (reconstruction of the ethnic present).
Emotional, cognitive, and behavioural coping with the resulting identity void. Rejection of ethnically false identity. The need to reconstruct the answers to the question: “Who am I?”	Identity work methodology:
	Searching for the truth about one’s own ancestors and one’s own ethnic community.
	Reinventing/reimagining one’s identity within one’s own ethnic community.
	Grounding one’s own identity in the rudimentary memory of ethnic childhood.
	Searching for the truth about one’s own ethnic ancestors.
	Searching for the truth about the past of one’s own ethnic community.
	Remembering the social memory of one’s own ethnic community (including areas of stigma and trauma).
	Constructing a utopia of ethnic childhood.

Author’s own elaboration based on literary texts by: Stanisław Janke, Alojzy Lysko, Horst Bienek, Stasia Budzisz, Zbigniew Rokita.

The paper's formula does not allow for broader considerations, so here I share a brief reflection. An ethnic child from a minority group experiences the drama of his or her ethnic childhood at the moment when he or she is properly socialised to enter the next educational processes (Drzeżdżon, 1992; Miller, 1981). Its cultural drama stems from the fact that it "goes" to a school that has been organised by a government that represents the culture of the majority group and its typical social practices. Moreover, one of the elements of this school majority culture is the social practice of depreciating any ethnic difference, which in effect causes non-ethnic people to experience – cognitively, emotionally, and behaviourally – their ethnicity as a stigma (Janke, 2015, 2020, 2021, 2023; Budzisz, 2023; Rokita 2020). I mentioned the school because it is a perfect representation of how the authorities reorganise the public space in the state in general. And the state convinces – as evidenced by the texts I have studied – that only the German-Silesian ethnicity has been worse than the Kashubian or Silesian ethnicity. Texts by Horst Bienek (1991; 1993; 1994; 1995; 2000) and Alojzy Lysko (2022) argue that children affected by such an extremely unacceptable stigma after the Second World War were either expelled from Poland, ran away from Poland, or experienced an extremely difficult ethnic drama in schools and care facilities.

The situation is well explained by Erving Goffman (2007), who, in his theory of stigma, draws attention to the exceptional social discrediting of the one who has been affected by the stigma. Therefore, it is a question of social consequences, which indicate the incompatibility between the identity of the holder of the stigma and the identity project in force in society. Thus, the social perspective of seeing a person affected by stigma and the necessity to reassign her to a different/worse/hostile/alien category of people is changing. The matter becomes even more complicated when a person is affected by the stigma of race or ethnicity, because such stigmas are a matter of blood. Which means that they are generationally inherited, and this socially (and culturally) discredits not only the one who is recognised as the one who is affected by the stigma, but also his entire family and distant relatives (Goffman, 2007, pp. 30–35).

Therefore, ethnicity can be socially defined as what is criminal as well as what is socially and psychologically inferior. Thus, such experiences of ethnic stigma must give rise to defensive reactions (Goffman, 2007, p. 36), which stems from the need to cope with unbearable existential suffering. In such a situation, it is not surprising to reject or ethically question one's own cultural group. This results in an existential crisis, as the child is precipitated/expelled/uprooted from what Jerzy Nikitorowicz calls the "child's microworld", which has been created based on the value system of its ethnic community. The loss of one's previous identity – as

a result of the loss of the previous cultural microworld – forces everyone, regardless of age, to prosthetic such a loss. A school organised based on a different system of values will always give the child a ready-made model of an other-ethnic identity. In the case of the Polish school, such a ready-made offer is the Polish borderland identity, which is so coherent, expressive, and externalised by such extraordinary figures as Adam Mickiewicz and Juliusz Słowacki, that it is difficult not to take advantage of this identity product. However, sooner or later, it turns out that such an identity prosthesis may work, but not for all those who have been ethnically mutilated (Budzisz 2023; Rokita 2020).

Ethnic identity – as evidenced by the literary works I have studied – can thus become a lifelong task and a biographical need for those who experienced their ethnicity as a stigma in childhood. Existence – at least temporarily – changes into an identity re-reclaiming oneself in the ethnic spaces of one's own community. However, such identity work is neither easy nor ordinary, as the loss of ethnicity often took place in childhood, where the child's first cultural identity is formed, as Nikitorowicz writes. In the case of those children from minority ethnic groups who lose their ethnicity, there is a loss of cultural childhood, as well as cultural community, and even cultural homeland – as Horst Bienek (1993) writes. The recovery of the first cultural identity thus lost in a special way requires the remembrance of childhood and thus the recovery of the first cultural identity of man. Memory, however, does not store much, witnesses of lost childhood are usually irretrievably lost, and the identity method demands the truth about one's own ethnic family, as well as the truth about one's own ethnic community. Hence, in this type of methodology, one can recognise many techniques of recovering lost elements of memory by imagining or inventing them. The problem, however, is that the ethnic identity regained after many years is no longer the same identity that could have been formed as a result of subsequent reconstructions of the child's first cultural identity. Perhaps this is another instalment of the drama of an adult ethnic child, who – as it turns out – is no longer culturally similar to its ancestors. Perhaps that is why, as a warning to others, the testimonies of such identity work are made public in the form of literary works, and even – as is the case in the works of Stanisław Janke (2021) – a pedagogical utopia of ethnic (here: Kashubian) childhood appears, because today, few Kashubians know what Kashubian or ethnic childhood is and what it should be.

5. THE CONCLUSION, OR RATHER THE MOMENTARY CLOSURE OF THE REFLECTION

The right to have cultural autonomy is also, and perhaps above all, the right to have a different interpretation of the past, including the interpretation of social memory and childhood memory. Such areas of remembrance are an integral part of the cultural heritage of ethnic communities. Therefore, it is not surprising that today, ethnic minorities, concerned about their cultural existence, seek to protect what constructs their identity, and one of such factors is the memory of childhood. Therefore, those social activities aimed at restoring the memory of this particular stage of life, as well as reconstructing (imagining/inventing) what is no longer in the individual and community memory, because witnesses who could remember have passed away, turn out to be important. Therefore, the search for knowledge-truth about one's own life, about the life of one's own family, or knowledge-truth about ethnic community becomes an existential task of many people who need – today – not only to ask the question “Who am I?”, but even atavistically need to reconstruct the answer to it to be able to return to the culture of their ancestors, to be able to say: “I am a Silesian”, “I am a Kashubian”, and I know what it means for my ethnic identity. Although such identity reconstructions and ethnic returns certainly do not mean that a person is such a Kashubian/Silesian as she would be if she had not been expelled/uprooted from her ethnicity in childhood, she still gains this special kind of certainty that she is among those with whom she is connected by ethnic blood and ethnic land.

What is important to a person is their social and cultural background. It is the determination of the place of birth and the time in which a person happens to live that makes her unique, sometimes very painfully, as evidenced by the reading of the literary texts I have studied, but after all – like the letter from Sándor Márai (2016): “(...) It is not accidental where a man starts from” (p. 8). The author makes his reader aware that this particular determination of the time and place of birth makes man gain the opportunity to reflect on the meaning of his – no longer individual, but communal – life. Only communality makes it possible to have a past shared with others, that is, with those who have been, are and are yet to come. As Hannah Arendt (1994, p. 116) points out, the common past understood in this way gives depth to human life.

Man will do much to gain ancestors and to have a communal past. The content presented in this text proves that there are social practices that deprive a person of her ethnicity already in childhood, perhaps because it is then that a person is most defenceless in terms of identity. There are also social practices whose purpose

is to (re)give back to man what he has lost. Sometimes a person is deceived by easy identity projects pushed by power through its institutions. But man is able to recognise in an astonishing way the delusion of such projects. Therefore, man is looking for a way to regain what he has lost until he finds those that he feels will allow him to regain his ancestors, history, knowledge-truth about himself, and his community, as well as the memory of the past. Only by regaining one’s own ethnicity/culture can one regain the chance to find meaning and depth in one’s life.

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