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Towards Micro-History – New Look at the Family History¹

Abstract

The article is dedicated to the problems of history education in the early school years, a question which until now has been almost neglected in literature. Studies on constructing the historical senses of primary school pupils can help, if only partially, to fill in this gap. Two aspects are discussed: historical senses constructed in the context of educational situations (focusing on the content, developed around the teacher, concentrated on pupils' knowledge) and historical senses constructed by pupils via narration. By analyzing the research material, the author was able to distinguish the subjective senses and meanings which pupils participating in the study assigned to spheres of private life and to spheres which are manifestations of grand history in private stories.

Keywords: *micro-history, memory, history education, narration, children's historical senses*

1. Introductory issues – micro-history and memory

Progress in history research has influenced historical narration and enabled us to look for new research areas. Meta-narration and reflections which employ more profound notions (Topolski, 1996) have been replaced by other ways of writing

¹ Cf.: J.M. Garbula (2010), *Znaczenia historyczne w edukacji początkowej. Narracyjne konstruowanie historii rodzinnych*. Wyd. UWM, Olsztyn.

about history, e.g., the history of culture, feminist history, post-colonial history, multi-media history or micro-history.

Unlike 'grand history', micro-histories talk about matters less important on a macro-scale, but significant for specific social groups or individuals. E. Domańska calls them "pearls of contemporary historiography", as they describe "small events of everyday history, small worlds of 'other people,' who are brought closer to us by the researcher in order to reveal their uniqueness" (Domańska, 1999, p. 21). Micro-histories are stories presenting someone's memory about life, events, and values.

Contemporary historiography assigns a special role to memory. An interdisciplinary debate has been going on recently on relationships concerning the terms 'history' and 'memory'. "The assumption that history was separate from memory, i.e., the narration about what happened created by professional historians from the narration by non-professionals ('the man in the street', politicians, journalists, artists), was the essence of all reflection on references to the past ..." (Szpociński, 2010, p. 12). This approach is expressed by P. Nora (1992), who claims that history and memory are opposed to each other. A different stand is taken by P. Ricoeur (2007), who argues that there is no contradiction between the terms 'memory' and 'history'. Memory is situated before, around and after history. In his opinion, memory is the manifestation of the missing past.

Memory is re-read and re-defined, as it undergoes constant changes, transformations, reconstructions or valuation, which, e.g., gives precedence to sorrowful memory and memory about martyrdom over the memory of the times of glory. The representation of someone's memory about past time by rejecting the true or false criterion while accepting the subjectivity and prescriptivism of memory is another indicator of the scale of these transformations, whose advocates often assume a demanding tone.

Memory sometimes appears as 'a new categorical imperative of the secularized world (François, 2010, p. 18). In many parts of the world, we hear about the obligation to preserve memory and the aversion to forgetfulness (François, 2010), or about the need to ensure the right position to memory (Todorov, 1995). Scholars talk about individual and communal memory. Individual memory is investigated and described by representatives of different disciplines, from the most distant past, and refers to an individual biographical experience. Communal memory is not a sum of individual memories. Communal memory is created through an interaction between members of a given community, thus being their non-material heritage, which relates to the past, present time and future. Two types of communal memory are distinguishable: communicative memory, which seems to be the original one (a dialogue between generations), and cultural memory,

which strengthens the communal identity (J. Assmann, 1992; A. Assmann, 2006). Memory perceived as above creates the contemporary social, political and cultural reality.

2. Research Methodology

My intention is to demonstrate some substantial problems of contemporary history education at the early education level, which often pass unnoticed. An example is the approach which focuses on micro-history and memory, both individual and communal. Until recently, early education has not dealt with the narrative creation of micro-history, which includes the history of one's own family. These questions were perceived as expanding beyond the scope of capacities possessed by youngest pupils. Micro-history is therefore a novel type of reading history and a new way 'to invite' history to schools.

The subject matter of my investigation encompasses the historical senses constructed by pupils in different educational situations. This purpose is served by the category 'children's historical sense', which grows from the assumption that a child determines and understands reality with the help of meanings which they assign to the world by living in given cultural surroundings and from the negation of the concept that the human mind sees the world like a mirror reflection (Klus-Stańska, 2004). My main objective was to recognize historical meanings constructed by schoolchildren at the early education level.

Historical meanings are considered in two aspects:

- historical meanings constructed in the context of educational situations,
- historical meanings constructed through narratives by schoolchildren.

The research on micro-history presented in this paper belongs to the current of qualitative studies. In studies on the child and the child's history education, a quality case study has proved to be an extremely useful research strategy (Stake, 2005). Because of the specific nature of the research object, such as the recognition of historical meanings constructed by pupils at the early education levels, an instrumental type of case study was adopted. The analyzed cases were specific types of teaching situations, which were markedly different from one another because they were created on the basis of different educational ideologies. These situations focused on:

- the teaching content - behavioural style – concentrating on behaviours,
- the teacher - romantic style – emotional atmosphere,
- the knowledge of a pupil – progressive styles – notions,

they were used to generate three types of educational projects, *including a few* phases: initiation of a project, doing the project and the climax.

Whichever the situations, the essence was always to explore the historical knowledge which belonged to the children's private world, representing a variety of backgrounds, e.g., cities, towns or villages. The study covered the first three forms of primary school. The following steps were performed: nine-day historical experience projects, rooted in the different types of educational situations, with an intrinsic quasi-scientific research effort undertaken by the child (talks, interviews, watching photographs and documents, drawing family trees, trips to places important for the child's family) and analysis of texts created by children according to the author's own model of the interpretation of children's narratives.

3. Research Results

Narratives about the history of one's own families which had been produced in the course of three types of educational situations were submitted to analysis. Having analyzed the content of the children's narratives, the author distinguished the social life contexts which the pupils' ancestors had entered during their everyday lives, and the memory of which they transmitted to their grandchildren. The schoolchildren talked about their great-grandparents, grandparents, parents and sometimes about more distant relatives. Sporadically, they mentioned strangers. They recounted stories about living persons and those who had passed away. We can learn about them in the context of family home, everyday life, work, education, entertainment, but also during the war, death and natural disasters. We find little about their physical characteristics because these seemed unimportant to the children. What we *do* find out, however, is what those people's lives looked like when they were children and adolescents, what kind of people they were, how they struggled with adversities of fate and what made them happy or sad.

In their narratives, the schoolchildren showed a wide array of things their ancestors had occupied themselves with. They talked about the things which people had been doing for ever, ordinary activities, associated with work, education and leisure, but also about festive customs, ceremonies, holidays and family celebrations. An example was the tradition started by an Italian grandmother, who decided that every child born in her family was treated to spaghetti to celebrate the day of her patron saint.

Another aspect of the social life emerging from the pupils' family stories comprised interactions, i.e., as P. Sztompka (2005, p. 39) explains, "mutually orientated

actions of at least two persons.” The children presented family members collaborating with others (e.g., during work in a coal mine, on a field), talking (with wife, mother-in-law, children), communicating (passing good or bad news in family, expressing sympathy), examining or being examined (teachers and learners), contending with persecution and cruelty (forced labour), undertaking fight with the enemy (battle fields) or helping one another (natural disasters).

The narratives also contain references to culture, mainly the material one, and to tradition understood as a cultural process. The material culture means mostly work tools, household utensils and furnishing, everyday and festive clothing. Tradition is always associated with some lasting social group, which passes traditional artifacts and customs to new generations, who are just entering the world. This symbolic transmission of heritage takes place while celebrating holidays, paying respect to the old customs and habits. For adults and children, such celebrations are an expression of the natural educational surroundings.

Below, there are examples of the subjective sense and meanings which the pupils participating in the study assigned to family histories. Table 1 contains the meanings related to various spheres of everyday life, i.e., things done every day and activities undertaken to celebrate holidays, childhood and school life.

Table 1. Children’s meanings attached to private life spheres

Types of senses	Examples of pupils’ utterances
Everyday life as time of hard work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – <i>Earlier, everyone had to work, grandma, grandpa and mom, and they had no money.</i> – <i>It was a difficult time, but people had to manage somehow.</i> – <i>I respect my grandmother for what she has done for her family.</i> – <i>I think I have a much better life than my grandmother because life today is much different, people don’t have to work as hard as they used to.</i>
Work without modern appliances	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – <i>Today a combine harvester will do everything that took many days before, so people now can look after their children and have more fun.</i> – <i>I’m glad I have learnt about all these things, because now I know I live in better times and don’t have to work so hard.</i> – <i>In the past, people had to make everything by themselves, but now there are many ready-made things. You can buy cooked pizza.</i>
Holidays as a time for spiritual and material preparations, time for symbolic meanings and traditions, time to be together	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – <i>My grandpa had to observe Lent and to go to Advent Masses and the Resurrection Mass in the early morning.</i> – <i>I liked the atmosphere which was then at home, while everyone was getting ready to celebrate holiday.</i> – <i>My grandma said that there were many people coming on holiday from other villages and they slept on the floor, on straw.</i> – <i>We should respect and preserve such traditions and holidays.</i> – <i>Now I often ask my grandma what traditions we had in our family.</i>

Types of senses	Examples of pupils' utterances
Image of childhood as a time of responsibilities and work, passions and dreams, traumatic events.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>I feel sorry for my grandma because when she was a child there was a war.</i> - <i>Actually, my grandma, when she was a child, worked from morning till night.</i> - <i>Children could play only when they didn't have to help grown-ups, and they had to most of the time.</i> - <i>when I found out how difficult my grandpa's life was I promised him I would learn harder and do my homework more carefully.</i> - <i>I have always told my mom when I have got an A at school that she should buy me a handbag or something else. Now I won't tell her such things.</i> - <i>My grandpa's dream was to fly like birds.</i>
Image of school as school duty; place where teachers and pupils work, few teaching aids; punishment at school; the way to school.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>I think I am far better off than my grandma, because now we have everything, like buses, and that is different from what it used to be like.</i> - <i>They had few books and notebooks. We have many nice books and dictionaries, but we also have computers.</i> - <i>In the past school was different from what it is today. They often used a cane at school.</i> - <i>I wouldn't like to go to school in those days because it was far away and teachers hit children, but I still like listening to my grandma's stories about her school because they teach me things.</i>
Family history as a source of identity for a person and family	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Family histories are very important. They are part of one's family and this is why I want to remember this story all my life.</i> - <i>It is important to remember about such events and tell our children.</i> - <i>It is a pity I know my grandpa only from stories and documents, but such stories are worth listening to.</i>
Family as a source of strength and survival in extreme situations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>When there is love in a family, it is possible to go through difficult moments and unfortunate events.</i> - <i>There was love and harmony in my grandpa's family, which is why they survived, because they all loved each other.</i> - <i>When there is love in a family, life is better.</i> - <i>I know why all my family members like to stay at grandpa and grandma's. There is harmony in their home, no-one fights and we talk with one another a lot, and help each other.</i>

Whatever seems personal and subjective has always been kept away from mainstream history. However, for an individual person or a family, their private entanglement in 'grand history' is what matters the most. And this is what the pupils talked about in their narratives. Micro-history means looking at the past from the perspective of an individual and showing the life of an ordinary person inscribed in general history. The schoolchildren mentioned several aspects of 'grand

history' which had affected the private histories of the individuals they talked to, such as: fight to defend the motherland, wartime tragedies, loss of family home, loss of homeland, magic objects saving lives of family members at moments of the gravest danger, but also post-war history of homecoming after World War Two or stories connected with the time of martial law in Poland (Table 2) (Garbula, 2010, pp. 318–320).

Table 2. Meanings assigned by children to private history entangled in 'grand history'

Types of senses	Examples of pupils' utterances
Ancestors, history eyewitnesses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – <i>I can learn about important events from my great-grandfather because he lived through those times</i> – <i>Because my grandfather was at war he can tell me all about it.</i>
War as a time of hardship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – <i>My great-grandmother had a difficult life. She had to work hard and was often hungry.</i> – <i>My great-grandfather's family had nowhere to live. Their house had been bombarded by Germans.</i> – <i>My great-grandmother's family were expelled from their own house and told to go away.</i> – <i>My grandfather had a difficult life during the war.</i>
War as a time of suffering and death	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – <i>I understood that those days were very bad for people.</i> – <i>Now I know that war is something more than guns and tanks, it also means pain.</i> – <i>I've learned about my grandfather's life and I know it was not a bed of roses. People were grateful to God when the war was over.</i> – <i>After her experiences my great-grandmother was careful. She had suffered because of other people.</i>
Family history as a source of emotions towards family members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – <i>I'm sorry he had to go through all this.</i> – <i>When I listened to my grandfather's story I felt terribly sad.</i> – <i>It must have been awful for my grandmother when she was separated from her family.</i> – <i>I feel very sorry for my grandmother and I love her even more.</i> – <i>I am sad when I think how much he suffered. But now he is safe and I love him a lot.</i> – <i>I like this story because my grandma told me that despite the war people were kinder to one another, not like today.</i> – <i>When I listen to this story I feel sad. I have always thought that people are good. But now I see some aren't.</i> – <i>I think they had sad lives, and I have a good one. My great grandfather says that today children have better lives because they don't have to be afraid.</i>

Types of senses	Examples of pupils' utterances
History as the teacher of life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – <i>Owing to this story I understood how much we have to sacrifice to make our dreams come true.</i> – <i>My granddad used to say that we should eat everything, that people didn't have so much food in the past, that they were hungry and would give anything for a piece of bread.</i> – <i>My grandpa couldn't play as much as I can, with no worries. I often complain that I do not have a dream toy but my Grandpa Mietek, when he was child, had to worry about getting food to eat.</i> – <i>It is important to tell good from evil, and to respect other people's property.</i>
History as an inspiration to respect the elderly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – <i>This story will change my behaviour and will teach me to respect older people.</i> – <i>When my grandma was telling me about her past, she had tears in her eyes, but normally she is so cheerful. This is why I respect her.</i> – <i>Elderly people deserve respect because they have gone through so much.</i>
Ancestors as heroes and role models	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – <i>My great-grandfather was a hero. He conquered Berlin. I often look at his medals and talk about him during family get-togethers.</i> – <i>I wish I could be as brave as my grandfather. I admire him for withstanding so much pain. I would like to have at least half the courage he had.</i> – <i>I think I could not survive what my grandfather had lived through. When I think how much pain he felt I quiver. When I fall down and hurt myself, I start crying, but he was able to stand so much pain.</i> – <i>I admire my grandfather because he survived and did not give up. I will follow his example.</i> – <i>I wish I was as courageous as my grandma.</i>
History as a source of wisdom for the future	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – <i>We should never let another war break out. When I'm older I will defend my town from bad people so that we will never have a war again.</i> – <i>I think we should enjoy the life we have and not grumble.</i> – <i>It makes me feel sad when I think about these children who now live in wartime. They go around hungry. This must be changed.</i> – <i>Now I know we mustn't have another war ever.</i>
Family history as an additional source of knowledge about family	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – <i>By researching my family history I discovered that our surname is completely different.</i> – <i>When we found out that my great grandfather was in a concentration camp my mom contacted the Museum. We are now waiting for their reply.</i>

Conclusions

This article discusses the ways in which the youngest schoolchildren can be reached and made to uncover the inner depths of narrative understanding of the world, because history and memory can be experienced not only through the

channel of knowledge transmission from teachers to children, but also by children themselves, who are aided by teachers to construct their own historical knowledge. The latter method will enable everyone to think creatively and open up to other realms in early education. It is worth educating children in a different manner, so that their understanding of history and family histories arises from the process of constructing stories in which the children participate. Telling stories and creating plots help children to achieve mental comprehension of the matters discussed at school. This technique also promotes children's creative thinking. It is a different, constructivist approach to discussing the past in the educational context.

The results of the study presented in this paper make it possible to draw several general conclusions.

1. Children's studies on the past of their own families, learning about memories of family members and narrative representation of the findings are possible, useful and inspiring to young researchers themselves. By searching through private history, young researchers discover their family roots, as well as learn to respect and preserve family history. The schoolchildren constructed stories of their families, women, men and children; they built their own 'memory tables' and discovered history composed of the lives of ordinary people, which are important, interesting and fascinating.
2. The research suggests a different approach to history education in early teaching. The research has demonstrated ways in which different education situations are created: focused on the subject, developed around the teacher, concentrated on pupils' knowledge. The third approach, when the pupils' knowledge is in the centre of attention, has proven to be especially inspiring for the young researchers. This model of education encourages pupils to be active subjects, constructing and reconstructing meanings.
3. The children researching the history of their families ascribed some senses to it. They realized how unique and integral each family was. The family traditions they observed, the memories of important events in the family, their attitude to work and duties, the way they spent free time, but also favourite dishes contributing to the specific family atmosphere – they all helped to integrate the family. The stories dedicated to the sphere which the schoolchildren recounted extended beyond the circle of immediate family, touching on matters related to culture or social environment. The search pursued by the schoolchildren to study family history enabled them to discover the fact that life stories of individual people conceal a large share of general history knowledge. In their narratives, the pupils pointed to their ancestors as history eyewitnesses, sometimes heroes who are worth follow-

ing. For many schoolchildren, family history turned into the teacher of life, and searching one's roots became an exciting adventure.

4. In their narratives, the pupils mentioned issues commonly thought of as difficult, unsuitable for children. However, the constructed histories prove that, despite 'efforts' made by adults, children do not live in an isolated reality, but to various degrees come in contact with everything which concerns their families. It is therefore wrong for schools and home to infantilize the subject matters discussed during lessons and reduce everything to safe and appropriate questions.

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