




Marcelina Jakimowicz, *Świat, który już nie istnieje. Polskie i ukraińskie opowieści biograficzne (1918–1956)* [A world that no longer exists. Polish and Ukrainian biographical stories (1918–1956)], 'Remembrance and Future' Centre, Wrocław 2022, pp. 368

Magdalena Gibiec

[University of Wrocław]

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9217-7943>

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The myth of the Eastern Borderlands as part of Polish national identity appeared in the first half of the 19th century. Over the years, it only changed its character under the influence of subsequent breakthrough events. With the final loss of the Eastern Territories by Poland after the Second World War, it found itself on the margins of public awareness due to the policies of the Polish People's Republic. The breakthrough came in 1989. After the fall of communism, so-called borderland literature has become one of the dominant publishing propositions meeting the needs of readers. With the change in the political situation, a chaotic attempt began, on the one hand, to restore the memory of the Eastern Borderlands and, on the other hand, to save the memories of the still living witnesses to their turbulent history. The publishing market was flooded with memoirs, albums, studies, source editions and guides to lost cities. The responsibility for this lay not only with the witnesses to history and their families, but also with amateur historians and members of the increasingly numerous borderland associations. Professional researchers of the lowest level. The myth of the *Kresowa Atlantyda* (Borderland Atlantis)¹ was formed; a kind of canon of stories about the Borderlands preserved in the social consciousness. This trend changed over time; more and more works by professional historians have begun to appear, attempting to look at the idealised image of these lands as objectively and multi-sidedly as possible.² However, there are relatively few publications that critically reflect on the memory of the Eastern Borderlands.³ Marcelina Jakimowicz's⁴ book, published in 2023 by the 'Remembrance and Future' Centre, partially fills this gap. The author's research shows how much remains to be done in the field of memory studies; to be read and interpreted anew.

- 1 *Kresowa Atlantyda* (Borderland Atlantis) refers to a series of books by Stanisław Sławomir Niciejka.
- 2 For recent books that deal cross-sectionally with the subject of the Eastern Borderlands in the interwar period, see e.g.: W. Mędrzecki, *Kresowy kalejdoskop. Wędrówki przez Ziemię Wschodnie Drugiej Rzeczypospolitej 1918–1939*, Kraków 2018. However, strictly academic works on Eastern Galicia have been written for years, including books by Grzegorz Hryciuk (e.g. *Przemiany narodowościowe i ludnościowe w Galicji Wschodniej i na Wołyniu w latach 1931–1948*, Toruń 2005).
- 3 This does not mean, however, that they do not exist; see for example: A. Wylegała, *Przesiedlenia a pamięć. Studium (nie)pamięci społecznej na przykładzie ukraińskiej Galicji i polskich „ziem odzyskanych”*, Toruń 2014.
- 4 Marcelina Jakimowicz works at the Department of Cultural Studies at the University of Rzeszów. She is the author of numerous academic articles on issues related to memory research. She is co-editor of the book *Obertyn. Opowieści o życiu miasteczka*. She is also a participant in the project of the National Program for the Development of the Humanities regarding the publication of memories and accounts stored in the Kolekcja Sybiracka Polskiego Towarzystwa Ludoznawczego (the Siberian Collection of the Polish Ethnological Society).

In my opinion, the publication is a successful attempt to conduct research on memory in an interdisciplinary dimension – using the achievements of anthropology, history and psychology. The issue of identity is a key point of reference in the book. The author traces the process of its formation, which is influenced by both personal experiences and external factors (such as ‘reconciling’ the narrative during contacts with other witnesses through associations or literature) influencing the construction of a biographical story. An interesting issue that Marcelina Jakimowicz devotes a lot of space to is the influence that relationships with ‘others’ have on shaping identity. This is particularly important due to the specificity of the territory of the Eastern Borderlands – constituting a real melting pot of nationalities and an area of so-called fluid identity. Mutual influence and the positioning of oneself in the context of relationships with ‘strangers’ are of fundamental importance for shaping identity, and this the author clearly shows in the book.

The publication was written as a result of interviews conducted with fifty witnesses to history in the years 2011–2017. The author adopted several criteria that are necessary to understand the assumptions of the work. The interviews were conducted in Poland and Ukraine – 25 memories come from people who, as a result of mass resettlements after the Second World War, found themselves in Lower Silesia, and 25 from residents of present-day Ukraine who, due to their mixed Polish–Ukrainian roots, decided to emigrate after 1945 to remain in their homes and accept citizenship of the Soviet Union. This division is a key point of reference and distinguishes the book from other works.⁵ In the chapters on the common residence of the Eastern Borderlands in the years 1918–1945, the author interweaves the stories of both groups, paying attention to the differences and similarities in the narrative, while in the last part about the post-war period, she conducts two separate analyses. This procedure allows us to understand to what extent later experiences influence memory of the past. This applies, for example, to the assessment of the Second Polish Republic or the post-war activities of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA).

Another issue is the choice of the towns where the author conducted the interviews. The main criteria were villages and towns with a population of up to 100,000 inhabitants in Lower Silesia in Poland and in three oblasts of Western Ukraine: Lviv, Ternopil and Ivano-Frankivsk. The author’s intention was to conduct conversations in areas where residents had fewer opportunities than residents of large cities to tell their stories, and thus their memory was not processed to such a significant extent under the influence of applicable canons or processed and unified within larger groups. In this respect, there is a significant difference between the Polish and Ukrainian experiences. The memory of

5 However, it is worth noting the use of a similar convention in the book: A. Wylegała, *op. cit.*

the interlocutors from Ukraine was and is cherished primarily in the private sphere; it was not structured and thought out under the influence of external factors. These memories are particularly valuable from the point of view of research, but at the same time more difficult to analyse due to the chaotic nature of the stories. The third criterion was age – the interlocutors' birth dates had to fall in the 1920s or the first half of the 1930s, so that their first memories began in the interwar period.

The book is divided into two main parts. The first part begins with an extensive methodological introduction and then introduces the reader to the historical context. The second part consists of the actual narrative constructed on the basis of conversations and their analyses. It has been divided chronologically into three periods, within which individual issues are arranged on a problem-by-problem basis.

The author pays significant attention to methodological aspects. She clarifies her approach and understanding of key concepts with great erudition and insight. Her research is situated on the intersection of history, ethnography and psychology, creating a multi-dimensional narrative taking into account various points of view. She explains in detail what the narrative interview model she used during her research was. The only element missing for me was that more attention could have been paid to the conversations – their course in practice and the reactions of the interlocutors. My second comment concerns the following sentence: “The issue of historical truth is similarly approached by postmodernist postulates: there is no objective past, and every trace or expression of it is an interpretation of events” (p. 23). Even though the author refers readers to sources relating to the concept of truth, she leaves us only with the postmodern approach, which can be read as the dominant discourse. In fact, this is just one approach, that is risky and controversial from the point of view of historical research.⁶

Another element of the first part is an approximately thirty-page historical outline, which is an introduction to biographical stories, allowing readers to place the memories in a broader context. This is divided into three parts of almost equal length – the interwar period, the Second World War and the first post-war years. Below, I will focus solely on the discussion of the Second Polish Republic, due to both my own academic interests and the fact that, contrary to appearances, this period is the most problematic in terms of the construction of a coherent narrative acceptable to most researchers. Observing the publishing market, one can conclude that for some this period presents an idealised image associated with the joy of regaining independence and nostalgia for the local social reality, while for others it is a failed experiment, dominated by the incompetent governments of subsequent

6 Besides the works mentioned by the author see e.g.: E. Domańska, J. Pomorski (eds.), *Wprowadzenie do metodologii historii*, Warszawa 2022.

politicians and the failure of nationality policy. Between the ‘sacralisation’ and ‘demonization’ of the interwar period, there is a whole spectrum of approaches that allow for critical reflection and multilateral analysis. However, this requires further research.⁷ For this reason, it is easy to overgeneralise or distort certain issues, a shortcoming which, in my opinion, the author does not avoid. Below are some examples:

- 1) “[...] multiculturalism before the period of increasingly stronger nationalism in the 1930s was not a problem – Polish, Ukrainian and Jewish neighbours were able to communicate with each other, and lived next to each other in cities, towns and villages” (p. 43). In my opinion, this is an oversimplification. It is sufficient to note the period of the Polish–Ukrainian war of 1918 and the failure of the creation of the Ukrainian state, which left a mark on the attitudes of the inhabitants. It is true that the 1930s represented the period of the greatest ethnic conflicts, but their foundations had already been formed earlier and influenced the everyday lives of ordinary people, in both cities and villages. The situation was complex and depended on many factors occurring in specific territories – family ties, local politicians, influence of the intelligentsia, etc. This is indicated by administrative documents in which the image of social relations is far from the projected idyll of the 1920s.
- 2) “Social inequalities were deepened by the education system, which in the area of Eastern Galicia was Polish [...]” (p. 46) – in the 1920s and early 1930s, there were several thousand schools with Ukrainian as the language of instruction (the author herself cites the number of 3,662 such establishments). On the same page we read: “According to Jarosław Hrycak, during the 20 years of the Second Polish Republic, the number of Ukrainian schools decreased from 3,662 to 144” – this did not happen over 20 years, but only over a few due to the change in school policy and the introduction of the so-called *utraquistic* (bilingual) schools. The number of 144 was not final and increased to over 400 due to declarations made by the Ukrainian population.⁸
- 3) On minor issues, the author writes disproportionately about “activities harassing the Ukrainian population” (p. 48), but for balance there is no presentation of the Polish perspective in this conflict. Of course, it is not about symmetry or belittling the injustices suffered by national minorities, but about presenting different points of view. Moreover, it should be clarified that Dontsov was

7 See e.g.: W. Mędrzecki, *Odzyskany śmietnik. Jak radziliśmy sobie z niepodległością w II Rzeczypospolitej?*, Kraków 2022.

8 See K. Sanojca, *Relacje polsko-ukraińskie w szkolnictwie państwowym południowo-wschodnich województw Drugiej Rzeczypospolitej*, Kraków 2012; M. Gibiec, *Wokół akcji plebiscytowej i antyszkolnej. Spór o język i tożsamość ukraińską na terenie Okręgu Szkolnego Lwowskiego w latach 1932–1935*, ‘Przegląd Historyczno-Oświatowy,’ no. 1–2, 2019, pp. 224–246.

an important figure for Ukrainian nationalists but was not one of them, while UNDO was established only in 1925, and not immediately after the war (p. 49). The division into OUN-B and OUN-M occurred only during the Second World War, so this split had no impact on the politics of the 1930s (pp. 49–50). In the narrative about the Second Polish Republic, the emphasis is almost exclusively on the nationality aspect, which is understandable due to the desire to delve into identity issues, but the memory of the inhabitants of the Second Polish Republic, as shown in the following parts, goes beyond these issues.

The above comments do not affect my overall positive assessment of the historical outline provided in the book. The author undertook a considerable effort by selecting representative items from the available literature and creating a coherent and understandable narrative about the past.

The most extensive part (Part II) is an analysis of the interviews and is divided into four chronological chapters and a summary. The first chapter entitled *Memory of childhood in the Second Polish Republic* is actually only to a small extent based on personal experiences. Memory of this period seems to be the most mythologised due to the fragmentary nature of memories. The interlocutors build memories of their childhood on the basis of family lore, and also on images grounded in academic and popular literature. The memory of life in the Second Polish Republic is also distorted due to later events. It appears as a lost paradise where, despite often difficult living conditions, there was peace and security, strengthened by family and neighbourly ties. The Borderlands function in memory as a microcosm, standing out from the rest of the lands of the Second Polish Republic; a multi-ethnic mosaic in which various nationalities and religions co-exist peacefully despite the difficult economic and political situation. The author skilfully analyses the memories, dividing them into various thematic categories such as school, national relations and the economic situation. She points to both similarities and differences in the narratives of residents from Poland and Ukraine. The interlocutors from Poland emphasised their attachment to patriotic symbols, such as the Eagles of Lwów or the figure of Józef Piłsudski. They mentioned the hardships of everyday life much less often, and if they did, they compared them with a later period. Usually, it was only during additional questioning that cracks in this idealised picture appeared, mainly regarding the economic situation. The same applies to relations with other nations. The narratives of people from Ukraine are dominated by the lack of prospects, poverty and the unfair policies of the authorities of the Second Polish Republic. As the author points out, this could have been influenced by post-war Soviet propaganda. A particularly interesting aspect of both this chapter and the entire book is the emphasis on the differences in the memories of people who stayed in Ukraine and those living in Lower Silesia. The differences between the two groups are manifested not only in different interpretations of

individual events, but also in terms of names, for example the designation of the areas in which they were born: Galicia/Western Ukraine versus the Borderlands/Eastern Lesser Poland/Red Ruthenia (pp. 77–78).

A more or less happy, but relatively peaceful childhood was drastically interrupted by the outbreak of the Second World War, to which the author devotes the next chapter, constituting almost one third of the book. This presents a shocking record of violence and suffering. The issues raised, such as the extermination of Jews, ethnic cleansing in Volhynia, the terror of both occupiers, deportations to Siberia and the hardships of everyday life, directly or indirectly affected all the interlocutors and left an impact on their entire lives, as well as the constructed narrative. These stories are accompanied by difficult emotions, which the reader finds in both the author's analysis and the quotes. The period of the Second World War was also the moment when the most far-reaching changes took place in the identity of the interlocutors. The author had the most difficult conversations about the Holocaust and ethnic cleansing carried out by Ukrainian nationalists. She showed the multitude of attitudes of people in extreme situations where their lives or existence were threatened, trying to understand their experiences and actions.

The decisions of the Great Powers and the resulting changes in borders were another turning point in the lives of the author's interlocutors. In most cases, they did not remember the end of the war. For some, the breakthrough event was the departure and separation from family and neighbours, and for others, remaining in the Soviet Ukraine and the continuation of the occupation. The author describes post-war migrations in Europe as a "sociodemographic experiment" (p. 217). An experiment that influenced the lives of millions of people and changed the landscape of many territories, including Lower Silesia, where an almost complete population exchange took place, and Eastern Galicia, which became part of Soviet Ukraine.

Although people living in Lower Silesia did not want to return to the Borderlands, they felt sorry for their being uprooted from their 'little homeland.' The interlocutors understood that they were one of the groups resettled throughout Europe and pointed to a certain shared experience, which allowed them, despite the fresh memories of the Second World War, to sympathise with the Germans. Motifs well known from other resettlement stories appear, such as the uncertainty of border changes or the now famous hot soup left by a German family.

Stereotyping 'others' and the sense of separateness are part of organising reality and shaping one's own identity: both individual and group. The image of one's own group and 'outsiders' is built both within the region and on the basis of broader national contexts. In the area of Lower Silesia, groups coming from different places ('Russkies,' Lemkos, Boykos, Ukrainians, Jews) came into contact not only with each other, but also with the remaining indigenous people.

This led to stronger identification with one's own circle and the maintenance of stereotypes. The Jewish population was almost absent from narratives about the post-war experience. Interestingly, the most difficult relations were between the newcomers from the Borderlands and the populations from central Poland and Greater Poland; these were marked by economic differences and the latter's sense of superiority.

The fate of those remaining in Ukraine was different. Formally, they had the opportunity to leave the country, but due to their mixed origins, they decided to stay in the 'small homeland' and took citizenship of the Soviet Union. Even though these people stayed, they were also affected by the breakdown of neighbourhood and family ties. They had no chance to start over. In this part, the author focuses on several key problems, such as the decision to stay, the issue of collectivisation and famine in 1946–1947, and top-down attempts to atheise society. However, what emerges from the memories is an image of resignation. The interlocutors recalled this period as the worst in their lives; probably also because it was the time of their early adulthood and, consequently, greater awareness. Stalin's death in 1953 marks the turning point after which "lighter times came" (p. 292). Their narrative loses its dynamics – compared to the earlier period, it seems that life flowed monotonously, even despite the drastic change in the political situation at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s.

Thanks to biographical narratives, it is possible not only to learn about the interlocutors' memories, but also what meaning they attribute to past events and how they influence their identity. Narrative is a kind of construction and interpretation of stories about the past from the perspective of the present. A story about the past is not formed in a vacuum – it depends on the broader historical context, as well as other narratives available to the interlocutor. It is subject to change depending on contemporary conditions. These events were a reference point for constructing stories about the past and influenced the story. Knowledge acquired after the war, political or historical awareness developed in adult life influence the construction of stories about one's own past. The author conducted conversations with Ukrainians at a significant time for them – the Euromaidan period. Also from my experience, the change in both the identity of the inhabitants of Ukraine and their interpretation of the past was almost palpable. This is visible in the book, for example, in the presentation of the conflict of memory between people who had Ukrainian partisans in their family and those whose relatives had participated in the 'Great Patriotic War.' The division into traitors and heroes weakened with the beginning of the conflict between Ukraine and the Russian Federation, and now, during a full-scale war, it is undergoing further transformation (p. 278).

The publication in question is refined not only in terms of content. The composition and editorial work also deserve recognition. The language of the publication is

understandable and engaging for the reader. The author expresses the emotions of her interlocutors in a balanced and at the same time direct manner. She addresses the most difficult issues in an empathetic and understanding way, taking into account various assessments and points of view. I did not notice any significant errors in the footnotes or the language. The only note regarding references concerns two-part publication titles. Sometimes they are created using a colon (lower or upper case) and sometimes a full stop. This issue should be harmonised within one book, regardless of different entries in bibliographic databases. Other shortcomings include the list of abbreviations, which reads 'Soviet Socialist Republic' in lowercase letters. Moreover, English proper names are written in italics, even though in foreign languages only common words are written this way. The work also includes well-developed indexes: personal and geographical. However, considering the content of the book, a subject index would seem much more useful to me.

It is also worth mentioning the graphic design. The 'Remembrance and Future' Centre published the book as part of a coherent series, with minimalist graphics on the cover. The publication looks very aesthetic, and the good quality paper and colourful interior attract the reader. The book has been enriched with several photographs, mainly by Marcelina Jakimowicz, the combination of which may seem a bit surprising at first glance. Side-by-side, there are photos from behind the scenes of the talks and about the contemporary situation in Ukraine. In reality, however, this procedure is successful. First, the photographs show experiences from her travels in Ukraine. Secondly, as I mentioned above, the specific situation in which the talks in Ukraine took place (2013 and 2014) had a significant impact on shaping the narrative about historical events.

Marcelina Jakimowicz's publication is worth attention primarily due to the importance of the issues raised, such as the issue of identity, which was subject to changes under the influence of personal experiences, but also external events and relationships with 'others'. The author has made a successful attempt to capture this evolution. Another advantage of the book is its efficient analysis, which allows the reader to understand not only the functioning of memory, but also the impact of great history on the consciousness and identity transformations of ordinary people and their differentiation depending on the socio-political situation. The book is worth recommending to both researchers and anyone interested in the story of the Eastern Borderlands and the personal experiences of individuals. The combination of historical and anthropological research allows us to more fully penetrate the world of experiences of witnesses to history and analyse them, creating a multidimensional picture of history. Marcelina Jakimowicz touches upon a whole range of events from the past that directly or indirectly affected her interlocutors. For this reason, she had to present many issues briefly. Despite some reservations, her analysis is coherent, nuanced and understandable

to the so-called general reader. In the main parts of the work, the author does not limit herself only to an analysis of the conversations and the issue of memory, but also uses historical research, placing the memory of the interlocutors and their memories in a broader historical context. To sum up, the work will certainly be appreciated and will take a place in the canon of works on the Borderlands. It enables an understanding of not only the perspective of people living in the turbulent period of the 20th century, but also the universal mechanisms of memory. It is both a valuable scholarly contribution, but also allows the reader to experience various emotions and reflect on the titular world, which no longer exists.