



TELLING THE GREAT CHANGE

EDITED BY
KAJA KAŹMIERSKA
KATARZYNA WANIEK

THE PROCESS OF THE SYSTEMIC TRANSFORMATION
IN POLAND IN BIOGRAPHICAL PERSPECTIVE

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For Professor Fritz Schütze

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In analyzing the experiences and attitudes of an individual we always reach data and elementary facts which are not exclusively limited to this individual's personality but can be treated as mere instances of more or less general classes of data or facts, and can thus be used for the determination of laws of social becoming. Whether we draw our materials for sociological analysis from detailed life-records of concrete individuals or from the observation of mass-phenomena, the problems of sociological analysis are the same. But even when we are searching for abstract laws life-records of concrete personalities have a marked superiority over any other kind of materials.

(Thomas, Znaniecki 1919: 6).

FOREWORD

The book presents results of the research project titled: *Experience of the Process of the Transformation in Poland. A Sociological Comparative Analysis Based on Biographical Perspective* funded by the National Science Center in Poland (No. UMO-2013/09/B/HS6/03100). The project was conducted in the Department of Sociology of Culture (University of Łódź) in 2014–2019. The research team included: Kaja Kaźmierska (principal investigator), Katarzyna Waniek, Jacek Burski, Joanna Wygnańska (from the University of Łódź), Piotr Filipkowski (IFiS PAN) and Maciej Melon.

The publication is a result of many years of collecting and studying the empirical material and developing our reflection on the issue of the great systemic transformation that we have intended to know from the perspective of individuals and analyze their biographical experiences told in autobiographical renderings. Its content is based on analysis of huge biographical data collected in 90 autobiographical narrative interviews. Thus we would like to thank our interlocutors for the effort of sharing with us their life histories. We were listening to them carefully in the hope that we could reconstruct the socio-biographical process of “the Great Change” from individual experiences. As a result we have got many biographical accounts from different parts of Poland in which the systemic transformation could be seen from various, but always bottom up, perspectives. As it happened in our other projects, the social process was more recognized in individuals’ life strategies, decisions, motivation than presented straightforwardly by articulating attitudes towards, evaluation of, referring to the process of the systemic transformation. Thus we aim here at presenting a wide spectrum of issues and phenomena that during the process of analysis attracted our attention. For sure we have not figured the problem out. On the contrary, we feel like just touching a complex matter. However, we hope that the findings presented in the book will complement and enrich the universe of the sociological, political and public discourse.

The majority of the applied material and chapters are based on the project implementation. Nevertheless, in order to fill in the gaps and show the multidimensionality of the process under investigation, we sometimes refer to collections of interviews gathered by our team members in other projects. We especially have in mind two of them: *Biography and National Identity* based on life stories of Poles who experienced WWII and the project *The People’s Republic of Poland and the German Democratic Republic in Memory and Biographical*

*Experiences of People Born between 1945–1955. Sociological comparison based on the biographical comparison.*¹ As a result of these projects, the Department of Sociology of Culture disposes of more than 200 narratives with people born in the following decades of the 20th century, beginning with the oldest narrator born in 1909 and the youngest in 1988. This rich empirical material, in relation to the past two projects, is used in the book only episodically, but it provides us with important empirical data and the analytical and theoretical inspirations that accompanied us as background knowledge while working on this book. Another project which we also refer to, but in a slightly narrower way, is *Euro Identities – the evolution of European identity: using biographical methods to study the development of European identity.*²

We also invited other authors who, using a biographical approach, studied these aspects of social reality that could very well complement the complex picture of transformation processes. Thus we invited Renata Dopierała whose text is based on the project materials, Agnieszka Golczyńska-Grondas who contributed to the analysis of “pre”-transformation period, Danuta Życzyńska-Ciołek implementing, so importantly for us, time and generation perspective and last but not least Agnieszka Golczyńska-Grondas and Małgorzata Potoczna who, referring to other biographical research and data, focused on the issue of poverty and lower class as these kind of data, what we regret, were not that easy to be collected in our project. Thus the authors of two texts analyze different materials yet representing biographical data. Our motivation to include these analyses did not stem from the desire to “fill” the book – which is very thick anyway – but from the idea of showing the most multi-threaded view of the transformations from a biographical research perspective. In our analysis we consequently try to apply the approach to biographical materials, which is based on the methodological and theoretical concept of autobiographical narrative interview developed by Fritz Schütze. Nevertheless, we left the invited authors free-hand to present their analytical approaches as we find it as one of the main assumptions in the process of analysis, believing that “the researcher is solely responsible for his or her own product, when acquiring descriptive writing

¹ The first research was conducted in the early 90s. The department of Sociology of Culture at the University of Łódź (Czyżewski, Piotrowski, Rokuszewska-Pawełek 1996, Dopierała, Waniek ed. 2016) and the second project was financed by the Polish-German Scientific Foundation (PNFN 2012-03) implemented in 2012–2015 by the Department of Sociology of Culture of the University of Łódź and the Otto-von-Guericke University in Magdeburg, funded by the Polish-German Foundation for Science (Każmierska, Schütze 2013).

² The project (2008–2011) was implemented as part of the 7th Research Framework Program of the European Commission (Nr 213998). Polish team: Andrzej Piotrowski, Kaja Każmierska, Katarzyna Waniek (Miller, Gray eds. 2012).

skills and developing one's own style of description" (Riemann, Schütze 1987: 9). In other words, he or she has a right to speak his/her own voice and we do not treat this as a kind of methodological inconsequence.

The book consists of four parts: the first one plays the role of introduction both to the project theoretical and methodological assumptions and the social background of described phenomena and processes. The second presents social and historical background and it is based on the conviction that the main character of social process is an emergent overlapping of phenomena and constant change, which assumes an evolutionary rather than revolutionary change of form. The third part examines different aspects and interpretation of opportunity structures that have appeared due to the systemic change in Poland. The fourth part refers to biographical resources which can be considered as stable, traditional, social frames. We intended to show if, how, and in what direction they have changed.

How to read the book? We are aware that it is a very extensive monograph – the following parts are subordinated to the logic of a holistic concept showing, first of all, the process-oriented approach to social phenomena. Thus we would be very satisfied if the reader would read the whole book. At the same time, we realize that he/she may be interested in some of its parts, threads, or themes. It is one of the reasons why we decided to precede each part with a preface, in which its main ideas coming from material analysis and its theoretical conceptualization are outlined. We also offer short introductory remarks to chapters included in each part of the book.

We would like to express our acknowledgements to many people. First of all once more we are grateful to our narrators. Since the biographical research demand seminar and workshop work over the last few years we invited many scholars experienced in qualitative research studies and biographical research in particular. We would like to thank here: Fritz Schütze, Gerhard Riemann, Lena Inowlocki, Anja Wildhagen, Markieta Domecka, Adam Mrozowicki, Mateusz Karolak, Rafael Mrówczyński, Ina Alber, Andrzej Piotrowski, Marcin Gońda, Kamila Biały, Agnieszka Golczyńska-Grondas, Patrycja Kruczkowska and Jakub Gałęziowski for their valuable criticism, inspiring comments, interesting reflections and any other kind of scientific support.

Jacek Burski, Joanna Wygnańska

PART 1

INTRODUCTION: “TELLING THE GREAT CHANGE...”

N(arrator): I came of age in 1987, so it was the decline of the system, but there was still a system, and then the whole issue of the systemic, socio-economic transformation, er, which on the one hand I missed as far as Polish ground is concerned, on the other, I became its kind of beneficiary because, because there were opportunities to go abroad and study and generally to pursue a career abroad. These days ... if I was to look at it, then... er... everything looks less optimistic than solely the question of my personal case, but/ but again, you know, considering the age group I belong to/

I(nterviewer): Ahem.

N: Well, 'cause in our generation it was quite easy in my opinion to be optimistic. And there was, there was this optimism at the beginning of the 1990s, it was such an enthusiasm for this new reality, that it often seemed to us that with entering, for example, with the enlargement of the European Union, that it was such a fulfilment, and here you are – history has mocked us and we are living in very turbulent times, and nothing is certain, I do not know if we are returning to the starting point.¹

Introductory remarks

At the beginning of our reflection, we quoted the above fragment of one of the interviews collected in our project. The narrator, Marcel,² in this passage of his biography indicates several dimensions of his biographical experience

¹ For transcription notation see: Appendix.

² The interview was conducted in 2016. The narrator, born in 1969, comes from an intellectual family. He has experience of living and working abroad connected with his career course (he is a researcher in the field of humanities). At the time of recording the interview, he had been living with his wife and son abroad for three years. What's important, at the moment of the interview he is looking for a job and in his narrative,

related to the social processes involved in the dynamics of economic, social, and cultural changes which happened in Poland after the year 1989. Therefore, the reference framework for the threads discussed in the above fragment is, on the one hand, the process of the economic and political change in Poland. On the other, it also refers to the process of Poland's integration with the European Union, presented from the perspective of the opportunities which it opened for the representatives of, among others, Marcel's generation.

In this short quote, we can also hear references to the phenomenon of transition from socialism to capitalism and to the democratization process, which in Marcel's argument were associated with optimism and waiting for the final shape of the changes initiated with the fall of socialism. Finally, the narrator also refers to the processes characteristic of late modernity. The quoted passage also resonates with a certain duality of Marcel's biographical experience. Placing himself on the one hand as the beneficiary of the transformation process, he sees a palette of opportunities which the changes taking place in Poland in the 1990s and 2000s created for the formation of his biographical identity. However, at the same time, he points to, as he says, a kind of trap of history and the troubling reality of modern times. He then shows the difficulty of considering the transformation process in Poland without referring to this period from the contemporary perspective. From the biographical "now" and with this comparative reference it is possible to see the influence of the great change which happened in Poland on the individual biographical experience. Thus, with the reference to the contemporary reflection, Marcel is asking himself, in terms of our study, an important question concerning the dynamics of the transformational and post-transformational processes. Therefore, this short fragment touches the issues of the wider perspective connected with the social processes, as well as the phenomena allocated in contemporary social realities. Going beyond Marcel's words, we can indicate here the social phenomena as the globalization process, the development of capitalism and the neoliberal way of thinking.

Thus, we quoted this fragment of the interview with Marcel also in order to briefly outline the possibilities of connecting the individual biographical experience with the collective mechanisms of impact, which is an important assumption of the biographical methodology used in our study. Even such a short passage from an autobiographical narrative interview allows us to capture many threads in which the narrator's biography is involved. It also

he's also taking up the reflection on his life regarding the situation where he sees himself as the "product" of those chances given to Polish society after 1989. At the same time, despite being well educated and experienced he still cannot feel the stability on the current labor market. So, those "turbulent times" he is talking about in the quoted fragment are also the frame for his current (time of the interview) situation.

enables us to reconstruct the way one is talking about the great change and the attitudes towards it presented in collected biographies. In Marcel's case, from this short quote from his autobiographical narrative and in relation to his whole story, we can see that his narration is "rooted in history."³ This means that when referring to, interpreting, and reconstructing his biographical experience, he often relates it to specific phenomena within a broader historical and social context. In such a narrative, thus, the descriptions of the interlocutor's experiences appear "in relation to argumentative structures of a historical nature (but also macro-social or ideological)" (Piotrowski 2016: 241). To support this assumption and to bring to this short discussion of the quoted fragment of Marcel's interview, one more context is worth mentioning that in his biography he presents a long story of his grandfather who was born at the end of the 19th century. Thus, he experienced both the First and Second World War and the period of communism. From Marcel's perspective, it is an extremely important thread for shaping his biographical identity.

However, returning to the quoted passage, it shows many aspects of our perception of the transformation process in Poland. As researchers analyzing the biographical experience of that time, like Marcel in the cited piece of his life story, we wonder whether the transformational and post-transformational reality can be treated as a separate time frame. We assume that the analysis of the biographical experience of the transformation process does not overlap with certain more or less specific temporal caesuras. In other words, besides the conventional date of the year 1989, our reflection concerns the course of the transformation reconstructed and interpreted in the biographical experiences of our narrators. Additionally, the study of the 90⁴ collected interviews point to the analysis of the time of transformation in relation to the contemporary perspective and the perspective of the experience of the Polish People's

³ The other type of analytical category is called: "rootedness in *milieu*," where more important for building one's biographical narrative are comments and argumentative constructions which are referring to the local community and local environment context in which the narrator is framing his or her biographical experience (Piotrowski 2016). We decided to translate a Polish word "zakorzenie" as "rooted" rather than "embedded" since we refer here to existing tradition of thinking still alive in the Department of Sociology of Culture, University of Łódź. For instance, the title of Antonina Kłoskowska's book *Kultury narodowe u korzeni* was translated into English as *National Cultures at the Grass-root Level*. We believe that defining "rooted in *milieu*" or "rooted in history" as "developed from..." and "strongly influenced by" (<https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/rooted>) either *milieu* or history better reflects our way of reasoning.

⁴ See *Methodological note* (Chapter I).

Republic socialistic reality.⁵ Those mentioned social realities are important for understanding the multifacetedness of our approach to telling the great change.

Marcel also speaks about "living in turbulent times" and refers here to a very current, as we can say post-transformational perspective. Yet, his considerations about "going back to the starting point" evoke the past perspectives as well. In this optics, our analysis aims to reconstruct the links between telling the end of one era (socialist one) and the beginning of a new political, economic, and cultural social reality from the bottom-up perspective of individual biographical experiences and their interplay with collective processes (Schütze 1989, 1992a: 192), not from the top-down point of view or a normative perspective in which people act determined by their social "equipment" acquired in the socialization process and their position within the division of labor manifesting itself in their roles and statuses (Piotrowski 1998: 132). Moreover, what should be stressed at the beginning of this book, not each of our narrators used the terms: "systemic transformation," "political transformation," "economic transformation," or "social transformation" when they were telling us their biographical experiences. To the contrary, the majority of them were referring to the general concepts, such as "change" or "transformation" (or have not referred to them at all), being less specific, yet much more described by their biographical experiences and this also influenced our understanding of this phenomenon.

We would like to refer at this point to the distinction functioning in social sciences, which refers to the division into *emic* and *etic* categories (Pike 1967).⁶ We treat the former as generated by the narrators themselves, derived from their experience and based on their knowledge. The latter would have external character and as such would be "imposed" on the individuals. In this sense, an analysis of the transformation from *etic* positions would generate a specific understanding of its course and an assessment of its effects. For the introduction, we will try to reconstruct this "etic" history of the transformation to a limited extent.

First, let us start from 1989 and the first partially free elections on June 4. One could go back to the Martial Law or the founding of "Solidarity," but it was only at the end of the 1980s that the last breakthrough took place. While the detailed direction of the changes was still unknown at that time, the 1990s became a period in which a specific vision of political and economic order prevailed. In this period, the main role was played by the mission to implement

⁵ See the chapters in the second part of the book, *From PPR to systemic transformation*.

⁶ We use Kenneth Pike's terms, well-established in contemporary anthropological, as well as sociological reflection: "etic viewpoint studies behavior as from outside of a particular system," while the "emic viewpoint results from studying behavior as from inside the system" (Pike 1967: 37) also see Chapter II.

free-market economy, the main symbol of which was the so-called Balcerowicz Plan. While the Plan itself was a package of privatization laws, it entered the public debate as a symbol of choosing the path of social and economic transformation.

While at the macroeconomic level, the success of the reforms of the 1990s should be recognised (e.g., curbing inflation and stabilising the budget), the enormous social cost of their introduction needs to be emphasized as well. The first decade of functioning of the Third Republic of Poland was primarily a rapid increase in unemployment (up to 20% at the end of the decade), but also a collapse of other sectors of industry (e.g., textile industry in the case of Łódź).

The political closure of the 1990s was an attempt at the second wave of reforms, the so-called four reforms of Jerzy Buzek's government. They focused on the following fields of social life: education (e.g., introduction of junior high schools), pensions (e.g., introduction of open pension funds), administration (reducing the number of voivodeships from 49 to 16) and health (new organization of the system, i.e., implementation of health insurance funds). Leaving aside a detailed description of all the changes, it should be stressed that they were not only introduced partially, but often suspended or abandoned and those concerning health care, education, and the pension system did not bring the expected results. In the following years, they were modified many times in the course of legislative work and changes in the government, that they stopped providing a sense of stability or personal security. The dissatisfaction with the process of the implemented reforms and the still unstable economic situation of the majority of society had become the reason for re-assuming the power by SLD, the post-PPR party. The paradox was that, in contrast to the previous period when SLD ruled (1993–1997), this leftist party was implementing the most free market program in the history of the Polish transformation. It should also be emphasized that the nostalgia for the PPR era felt by part of the Polish society and expressed through their electoral preferences was not an isolated reaction. In fact, in all the post-communist countries of Europe which entered the path of economic reforms the post-communist parties came to power in a relatively short time, that is, not so much (not only) of a leftist character, but built on the basis of human resources and assets rooted in the old system.

Definitely, the most important political event affecting all aspects of social life of the Polish society was the accession to the European Union in 2004, which was connected, among others, with the opening of labor markets (at the beginning of only a part of the Community countries) for Polish citizens, which in turn resulted in massive economic emigration, often visible in biographical materials. Again, due to the lack of space, we will not analyze here the different achievements and failures of the sixteen years in the EU structures. It should be

stressed, however, that a significant part of this period coincided with two other issues. Firstly, in the years 2008–2013, Poland, like the rest of the world, faced an economic crisis and like a few countries in the EU went through it relatively well (referring, of course, first of all, to macroeconomic indicators, including the GDP growth). What is interesting, this period was also a period of political stabilization of the country governed by the coalition of the Civic Platform and the Polish People’s Party. The political and symbolic end of this phase would be the parliamentary and presidential elections of 2015, which were won by the majority of the Law and Justice party. The results of the election were a big surprise for the Polish establishment, and their evaluation often entailed a return to the debate on the end and the costs of the transformation. Some analysts pointed out that the success of Jarosław Kaczyński’s party was possible thanks to the use of the voice of those who never felt they were the winners of the transformation.⁷

Thus, we decided to study the process of the transformation within the frame of the emic categories derived from our collected material. However, we do not intend to remain only on the level of meanings and interpretations of the narrators themselves. To put it differently – following Alfred Schütz (1976b) – one may say that the analytical layer of our considerations does not stop on the level of first-order constructs, but goes further “towards empirical relationships expressed in qualitative categories and towards theoretical models and assumptions” (Piotrowski 1998: 125). As a result, we are focused on following the social processes and opportunity structures⁸ that are organizing the biographical experience of our narrators. Moreover, in relation to macro-structural, collective mechanisms of impact and public discourse rhetorical figures we concentrate on the reconstruction of the process of the transformation in a way people are talking about it in their biographies.

As we can see in the above-quoted passage from Marcel’s interview when one tells the whole of her/his life history from the biographical narrative can stimulate the self-reflection of the narrators. However, this is not the case of each autobiographical narrative. It is evident in a few of the cases analyzed in our study that people telling their biographical experience sometimes are not able to take up certain self-reflections. Therefore, in this book, we also look at such biographies, showing the reasons behind the difficulties understood in this way.

What’s important in our analyses attempt is to show the essence of the biographical experience of the process of the transformation in Poland by

⁷ For more about winners and losers see Chapter II by Kaja Kaźmierska.

⁸ *Transforming opportunity structures: biographical chances, hopes, illusions, and dead-ends* in Part 3.

reconstructing the experiences of the ordinary people Schütz (1946).⁹ The ways they are dealing with talking about this systemic transition symbolically located in the year 1989 are rooted in both the transformational and post-transformational realities. The studied biographical experiences are thus, in the wider perspective, intertwined with the processes of the intensive modernization, Europeanization and those characteristic for the late modernity. Research, understood in such a way, inscribes the following book's deliberations into the analyses of the orientation schemes and cognitive schemes of talking about the great change in the Polish context. The conducted study is thus held in relation to the individual biographical experiences of our narrators and macrostructural perspective of the social reality/realities they are interpreting and acting towards them in their biographies.

The overview of the approaches of studying the Polish transformation in recent years

Before we present our approach and structure of this book in a much deeper way, it is important to locate our analysis on the wide map of sociological studies on the topic of the transformation in Poland. In this part of the text, we would like to present a review of sociological literature on this subject. It is not our attempt to reconstruct the public debate on the course of the transformation or its evaluation. Rather, we are trying to refer to those works which are part of the academic debate on the transformation in both quantitative and qualitative approaches which touch upon collective and individual social perceptions at that time.

Therefore, we are aware that the overview of various theoretical and empirical positions listed here may not be complete. Our criterion was not to present the most influential or ground-breaking works related to this subject. We rather try to list here those texts and scientific positions which, in our opinion, clearly accompanied the phenomena and processes characteristic for the time of the transformation in Poland. We also refer here to the works written from the post-transformational perspective, which are the attempts of showing the costs of this process and its impact on contemporary Polish reality. We treat the texts mentioned here as important ones for the formation of a scientific discourse on the transformation phenomenon. In other words, in this part of the text, we focus on presenting a certain analytical background for our deliberations, which is necessary to understand how our approach differs from the aforementioned, varied analyses on the subject of the great change in Poland.

⁹ See *Methodological note* (Chapter I).