

## **Memory-making Among Gentry in Poland**

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Forced into silence by the communist regime for half a century, the gentry in Poland had a powerful need to tell their story. Their rapid emergence on the public scene in 1989 was followed by a surge of reminiscences, admissions of social origins, disclosures of family histories. As life stories unfolded, they showed a distinct pattern whereby some aspects and some events were accentuated while others passed over. The story began at the end of World War II and recounted in detail the gentry's experience of expropriation and eviction from their landed estates mandated by the very first decree issued by the new regime.

This was Wednesday morning, January 31, 1945, about 9 o'clock, when we saw the emissaries of the Peoples' Poland walking down the park lane towards the manor. All employees were called to a meeting. Tactfully, they did not parade in front of our windows but approached the house from the side in small quiet groups. Somebody was sent to fetch me. I quickly took a few drops of Valeriana to calm my nerves.

The local deputies, estate workers, and some poor peasants gathered in the salon. Two land surveyors, members of the expropriation committee, and the assistant to the county secretary were already seated at the table. They rose to greet me. I forestalled the workers' greetings by saying firmly that there was no need for commotion. I sat on the chair they offered. Marcinkowski, the chair of the committee, began the official speech. He spoke of the Land Reform decree issued in Lublin, 'historic justice', 'Peoples' Poland', and such things. The estate workers stood silent herded in a tight group. Their support for the new regime was being bought by the magical word 'land'. Marcinkowski asked whether there were any grievances against the owner. I looked at the workers. They immediately denied having any. Only the old and decrepit Julian, who was already in my father's employ, spoke up. He demanded three quintals of grain, which he should have received during the German occupation. 'Be quiet,

the German overseers should have done it, not her ladyship' - whispered his fellow workers to him. Also Marcinkowski tried to explain to Julian that this was the Germans' responsibility, not mine, but the old man was only getting more confused. He believed that 'her ladyship' should be held responsible for everything.

Marcinkowski decided to bring the meeting to an end. 'Since there are no grievances against Lady Walewska' - he resumed - 'we will move the date by which she is required to leave by two weeks counting from tomorrow. Do you agree?' 'We agree' - responded the workers in unison.

Marcinkowski instructed me that we are not allowed to live on the estate grounds, nor in the neighbouring village, not even in the same county; that we may take all the furniture and personal belongings; that we are entitled to use estate carriages to transport them. Finally, he politely asked me to hand over the keys to all estate buildings. I put on the table the bunch of keys tied together with a leather strap - the symbol of rule over the estate. 'I believe we do not need you anymore' - said Marcinkowski. I rose and left. They stayed in my house.

I was raised in a class, which for generations believed to be solely responsible for all social and national actions. I was deeply hurt not only by my estate taken away from me but also by being treated like an enemy, by being discarded, made irrelevant, by not being able to voice my protest against the land reform which was conducted for political reasons with no concern for the well-being of Polish agriculture.<sup>1</sup>

This one gentry woman's account of expropriation strikes with precision and vividness of recollection. In listening to memories of land reform which took place 50 years ago, I was impressed by how fresh they appeared, how rich in minuscule details. This made me eager to believe that they were obviously authentic and accurate.

Memories inspire faith because we believe they were recorded at the time; they have an eyewitness status. Yet it has been shown through research into autobiographical memory that despite the vividness of our memory of momentous events, our recall of the actual facts of the event and the circumstances we were in at the time is often incorrect. Neither the vividness of a

memory nor the strength of our certainty in a memory can ensure its veracity (Pillemer 1998).

Generally, memory is taken to mean the process by which events are coded and recalled. The simplicity of this definition obscures the complexity of the problem. The rapidly accumulating psychological, sociological, and anthropological studies on memory emphasize its elusive, fragmentary nature and ever changing character. It becomes increasingly apparent that memory is not a record of the past but its reconstruction, and an act of retelling a complex work of interpretation. What is remembered is not only retrieval of stored information, but also a representation of the self then, and the self now, which occurs in a culturally contextualized social interaction (Barlett [1932]1995, Middleton & Edwards 1990).

Furthermore, ever since Halbwach's seminal work on collective memory ([1950] 1980), it has been stressed that individual memory is not simply personal. Typically, our memories are mixed, possessing both a personal and a social aspect. This presents us with a perplexing paradox that the memory of a person, precisely that which is taken to epitomize individuality, draws upon collective idioms and mechanisms. Our memories are nested in interpersonal settings, and these are in turn embedded in social, cultural, and historical contexts. Indeed, even the very process of remembering personally significant events and situations depends upon cultural and historical practices for remembering and creating meaning (Conway 1992).

The fundamental question in the study of memory is how does autobiographical memory become transformed into collective memory and collective representation of the past. How is the collective memory tableau created? Focusing on life histories of the Polish gentry in the post-war era, this article examines social mechanisms that shape the processes of memory-making. Using life story as a narrative, it examines the means through which a group establishes memory

of the collective past.

### **Memory and class identity**

While sharing many characteristics with their western counterparts, the Polish gentry, *szlachta*<sup>2</sup>, were in many respects exceptional. Like other European nobilities, they originated in the practice of granting land in exchange for military service to the kings, but unlike them, they converted these grants into inalienable possessions. Unique to European nobility was the complete absence of feudal hierarchy in Poland, which implied that there were no titles, no system of vassalage, and a near absence of a central court. The vast size of *szlachta* set them even further apart. While in Western Europe there were on average 1 to 2 nobles per 100 inhabitants, in Poland that proportion was about 10 in 100, or ten percent of the population.

The gentry's economic power was boosted by the great grain boom of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. The nobles' exclusive right to the grain trade eventually undercut the previously prospering cities as independent political entities. The 'republic of gentry' that formed in Poland fortified gentry's economic hegemony by enforcing serfdom and maintaining monopoly on land ownership, and, through instituting electoral monarchy, political hegemony as well. In effect, Poland was a state run by the nobles for the nobles.

The noble control over the executive, legislative, and judicial functions of the state, together with the gentry's relative economic prosperity and a subsequent tremendous gap, which has developed between them and the rest of the population, encouraged a belief in separate destiny and a corresponding myth of different origins. The myth held that the Polish gentry originated from an ancient tribe of Sarmatians, a warrior people from the Black Sea Steppe, who

had resisted the Roman Empire and conquered indigenous masses. The origins myth took on messianic dimensions. Nobility bestowed upon them by God, the gentry believed to be bound by a sacred covenant, destined to defend the frontiers of Christianity. Against the history of the wars with orthodox Muscovy, protestant Sweden, and Muslim Ottoman Empire, Sarmatian ideology converged with Catholicism. Progressive cultural integration diminished local variations and created a union of brotherhood the boundaries of which were marked by Polish language, Catholic faith, and an egalitarian code of conduct. Conveniently, the origins myth provided a convincing justification for political unity of nobles in the face of regional cultural differences and for their equality in law in spite of glaring economic disparities among them.

Foremost, all *szlachta*, whether rich or poor, shared the explicit understanding that the gentry constitute a nation, that the state must be subservient to the gentry because it exists in order to serve them. Indigenous bourgeoisie hardly present and peasantry excluded, the gentry indeed constituted a nation of equals with full citizenship rights. The paradigm, which had developed in 'gentry's golden ages', persevered through the next centuries amidst changed political and social realities. In the long run, the presence of a weak, contested kingship and the ensuing decentralization made the Polish state vulnerable to the expansionist policies of adjacent empires: Russia, Prussia, and Austria. At the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Poland disappeared except as a memory, a nationalist program, and a set of administrative subdivisions of enlarged neighbouring states.

The nationalist discourse born during the period of Partitions (1795-1918) gave a new booster to the gentry's *raison d'être*. Nobility became viewed as the repository of state tradition and the source of resistance to the occupying powers. Nobles played the leading role in the great

rebellions of 1830 and 1863. Both failed, largely due to the reluctance of their gentry's propertied leaders to appeal to peasants. Serfdom still intact, the latter had little motivation to join what they perceived was a gentry's cause.<sup>3</sup> The gentry paid heavy penalties for both uprisings in lives lost, imprisonments, denobilitations, forced emigration, confiscation and punitive sale of property.

Armed insurgency no longer an option, resistance efforts concentrated on the construction, preservation, and celebration of 'national' tradition. In cultural terms, the period coincided with the era of romanticism. The national imperative became disseminated through the medium of art and literature, which enshrined the noble cause of the struggle in pursuit of political freedom. In fact, the gentry were both the producers and the consumers of culture, its sole creators and audience. They exerted an ever-lasting mark on the Polish collective heritage by providing models of behaviour, ideals, heroes and martyrs. Glorified as the carriers of the Polish national-religious tradition, immortalized in historical novels, poetry, and paintings, the gentry's tradition became part and parcel of what constitutes the essence of the nation.

The process of Andersonian 'imagining' proceeded very slowly in Poland and, although in the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the definition of 'nation' was hesitantly extended to include non-gentry, modern national ideology retained earmarks of the noble estate. The nobility were gradually compelled to admit the budding bourgeoisie into the inner circle of the nation's elite. As Poland became independent in 1918, the state was restructured in line with democratic reforms sweeping Europe. The group's hegemonic power declined, but their position was not fundamentally affected. In spite of gradual changes in the society's structure, the gentry continued to dominate the country's intellectual, cultural, and bureaucratic life. Put differently,

the governing model of the Polish elite remained situated in a country manor lifestyle, which had been created and eulogized in the previous epochs. Its cultural genealogy, i.e. the system of values, practices, and objectives, was moulded by the historically accumulated noble heritage.

The politics of World War II left Poland in the Soviet sphere of influence. Still, according to the famous words of Stalin, introducing communism in Poland was like saddling a cow. The Soviet-backed government had little legitimacy. In an effort to secure peasant support in this largely agricultural country, it proclaimed a radical land reform on September 6, 1944. All landed estates larger than 50 hectares became nationalized and subsequently either allocated to landless and poor peasants or formed state agricultural farms. Since the presence of owners was suspected to inhibit peasants from participation in land distribution, a special ordinance banned them from the county of their expropriated estates.<sup>4</sup>

The land reform successfully removed the gentry from the countryside - its traditional stronghold, locus of power, sentiment, and identity. Manors became converted into schools, orphanages, workers' housing, or simply taken apart brick by brick. With few exceptions, most of them quickly deteriorated; decades later only ruins in a cluster of old trees give indication of their existence. Their former inhabitants migrated to urban centres where they forged new lives, established new careers, and chartered new ways of holding to the vestiges of their old status. Literate and educated in the largely illiterate at the time country, most swiftly converted their skills into professions. Education set them apart as an intellectual elite, just as before their incomes from landed property had set them apart from those obliged to earn their living in wages. The gentry became politically invisible and socially marginal but, although they were for some time barred from prominent positions, their cultural resources allowed them to maintain

higher standard of living than majority of the population.

Subsequently, the state and the gentry each produced their own representation of the past, representation connoting a specific form of reference, in which a sign at once reveals and conceals a reality beneath it. Although each could claim to give a true account of historical facts, their contested versions illuminate not as much the past as ideological construction of it, each illustrated by a set of historical myths (Jakubowska 1999).

### **Master narratives and scripted lives**

Memory-making is a powerful agent in mediating identity. Recalled past experience and shared images of the historical past have particular importance for the (re)construction of social groups in the present. Collective memory often constructs certain events as symbolic markers of historical transitions. These turning points can, and often do, assume mythical dimensions, emerging as hegemonic representations of the group's past (Zerubavel 1994). Kakar refers to them as "chosen traumas", not in the sense that people chose to become victims but in the sense that they have chosen to mythologize, psychologically internalise, and reactivate that particular event from their history (1996:50). Expropriation appears to be such a milestone in the experience of the Polish gentry and its memory embedded in the group's collective identity. Therefore the collective narrative of the event dictates a paradigmatic form.

After the land reform and the traumatic circumstances attending it, the gentry were socially displaced and fragmented. Their identity as nobles was sustained through the repetitive telling of the stories of expropriation. While each story was different, they eventually merged into a master narrative. Hence they are all extraordinary and yet strangely typical, gripping and



yet predictable. Conventionalised by privileging a particular narrative form, the life course of their protagonists assumed similarity. They resemble each other and appear scripted.

In essence, the narration of others provides us with a script with which to formulate our own stories. The kind of association that makes possible retention in the memory is not so much of resemblance or contiguity but rather a community of interests and thoughts. It is not because thoughts are similar that we can evoke them; it is rather because the same group is interested in those memories and is able to evoke them, that they are assembled together in our minds (Connerton 1989:36). Under those circumstances the desire to meet the expectation of the group is so strong that we incorporate the stories of others into our own memory, a process called transformative memory (Haaken 1998, Silverman 1996). And yet at other times the 'shared memory' provides merely a reference against which we remember personal experiences.

In the process, personal memories become contaminated with information from similar events and so change over the years as we encounter new experiences. They remain vivid at least partially because they are told, re-told, and affirmed by the similarity of stories told by other people whose experiences - while they could not have been identical - were comparable. Shared memories, and the sharing process itself, or the production of spoken or written narratives about the past, take form within the framework of meaning assigned by the group within which they are told (Fentress & Wickham 1992).

Social groups construct their own images of the world by establishing an agreed version of the past, a version that is established not by private remembrance but by communication (Halbwachs *ibid*). The gentry, largely isolated from social others both by the bureaucratic practices of the socialist state and their own politics of exclusion, oriented themselves inwards.

Socializing mainly in their own milieu, they told and re-told accounts of their experiences identifying with parts of the story of others and eventually appropriating those fragments which were likely to have happened to them. Frequent repetition of the story of expropriation helped produce a largely uniform version of ‘the event’. The memory of expropriation became a time-frozen frame prompting instantaneous recall against the background of the collective script. Persecution ‘experienced’ and ‘remembered’ provided the overarching framework of collective identity. Within a present clouded by war, displacement, and insecurity, the memory of their recent past was the connective tissue, the ubiquitous bond that bridged distinctions among them. It also added a distinctly political dimension to the community they developed in becoming guardians of Polishness and depositories of oppositional history. Internal hierarchy momentarily suspended, the group became flattened, while shared discourse and experiences made it more cohesive and unified, and hence able to reproduce itself physically and culturally. Paradoxically, the practices of the regime intended to undermine the gentry produced a contrary effect of reinforcing the group’s ethos and boundaries. The similarity in biographical accounts, and cumulatively conventionalisation of collective memory, is shaped by thematic borrowing and idiomatic memory recall.

The ‘one suitcase’ story is such a recurring motif. The gentry commonly claim that at the time of expropriation they were allowed to leave their estates with *only one suitcase* or *nothing*. This story however is historically substantiated only in a few cases as is also evident in the opening narrative of this article. As interviews unfolded, it became clear that most landlords managed, or were allowed to, take with them many of their personal possessions. Their economic base, i.e. landed estates, indeed vanished but they were able to keep, legally or

illegally, substantial assets. The following recollection is personal yet exemplary of the collective narrative.

We were left with *nothing* (italics mine). We only took what was absolutely necessary – furniture, china, clothes (especially fur coats, because the winter of 1944/45 was severely cold). We took paintings and portraits. We had to leave the books – the commissars sealed the library. We took silverware. Two trunks of silver and jewellery were hidden at another estate.<sup>5</sup>

Having lived through the German and/or the Soviet wartime occupation, the gentry acquired considerable experience in concealing property from the various administrations intent on seizing it. In crisis situations yet another family jewel was sold, a crate of crested china dug out of hiding, or ancestor's portrait put on the art market. These material resources allowed members of the gentry to maintain a standard of living significantly higher than the majority of the population at any given time after the war. Nonetheless the 'one suitcase' story is widely circulated and believed to be accurate. The apparent contradiction between self-reported facts and the narrative does not break the logic of the story, primarily because it serves as a metaphor that captures the drama of dispossession and expulsion and allows to establish and to assert commonality of experience. Yet that experience was not common at all but ruled by the local power relations and loyalties embedded in the patriarchal structures of dependency and hence located at conjunction of particular social situations, individual personalities, chance, and historical developments. Not everyone suffered the same loss; while some gentry were aided by their trusty employees, other had to face their hostility; some manors were left unscathed and some were robbed by the villagers themselves; some landlords departed amidst friendly goodbyes while others had to flee in the dead of a night; and some estates were not even

expropriated until years later. The ‘truth’ of the ‘one suitcase’ story lies not in the factual veracity of particular details but rather in the archetypal material it contains. Recollections of own and others experiences haste to make the unique personal event part of a category, with the dulling of individual detail, and highlighting of similarities.

In a similar fashion, people ‘remember’ discrimination in the following period. Although they might have not experienced it personally, the theme is appropriated from the experience of others and incorporated into personal story as part of a collective discourse. This allows every gentry to claim discrimination without actually experiencing it.

Reminiscences about the bias in university admissions offer one example of the logic of collective memory formation. In the early 1950s, the State instituted affirmative action program privileging children of working class and peasant background in access to institutions of post-secondary education. In spite of diligent bureaucratic selection procedures, the policy did not radically alter the social ratio of the student body.<sup>6</sup> *Life histories* of the post-war gentry generations reveal that almost all of them received professional and university education. Their *life stories*, on the other hand, buttress discriminatory practices of the regime in admissions to institutions of higher education. Most narratives invoke the same case of Ferdinand Radziwiłł of an eminent aristocratic family who was denied admission to a medical school five years in a row in spite of excellent test scores. It is said that his intellectual ability, determination, and ultimately personal acquaintance with the Prime Minister at the time eventually – this was to be a story of transcendence -secured him the desired place giving a beginning to a distinguished career. Although few gentry could directly claim such personal experience, and most suffered minor difficulties in university admission, if they suffered them at all, the Radziwiłł case

encapsulated the ‘common’ experience. Invoking this and similar stories, i.e. the experiences of others, made discrimination part of the collective experience of the entire group, or the personal histories have been reinterpreted in the light of collective trauma.

How valid is, then, the notion of ‘experience’? Challenging the common sense concept of experience as direct, unmediated, subjectively lived account of reality, some scholars argue that it is fundamentally discursive (de Lauretis 1984, Scott 1992, van Alphen 1999). Events do not stand on their own and we experience them not as isolated happenings but from a perspective of narrative frameworks in terms of which these events can be understood as meaningful. This implies that discourse and experience cannot be separated and that discourse plays an essential role in the process that allows experience to come about and in shaping its form and content. People’s memories are clearly shaped by dominant historical narratives, popular tropes, and by contemporary concerns. For example, the panic that swept through the gentry and their subsequent flight upon the news of the advancing Soviet armies, who were to liberate them from under the German occupation, was doubtlessly bound with the obsession with the danger of ‘the red plague’. Accompanied by rumours of atrocities committed by soldiers, revolutionaries, and peasants, the stories generated a real fear because they were grafted upon a loom of historical familiarity<sup>7</sup>. The Red Army invaded Poland three times before (in 1918, 1920, and 1939) and the gentry were frightened that they would suffer the brunt of the communists’ condemnation of the hierarchical social order in the Polish countryside. Although the Soviet military advance proceeded rather peacefully on the local level and few among the gentry ‘experienced’ bloodshed, their expectations and subsequently behaviours were ordered by a particular culturally shared trope of blood-thirsty barbarians invading the most eastern bulwark of Western

civilization. In the process, their own memories become substituted by the recollections of those exceptional few, who did indeed witness the brutality of invasion of the Soviet troops.

### **Memory fragments**

Remembering and forgetting constitute processes that mutually pattern memory. However, what is remembered and what is forgotten is not arbitrary. In one way, it appears that the gentry privilege remembering over forgetting in the belief of reclaiming history. For centuries history-makers as well as history-writers, they were brusquely left out or removed by the communist regime from the official national collective theatre appearing sporadically in the role of villains and traitors. In periods of repression, the gentry took upon themselves to be the keepers of the unofficial history. In the post-1989 political climate, their memories serve to fill blanks, to counteract what was written about them but without them, and to vindicate 'the truth' and ultimately their own image. The commitment to writing counter-histories of the nation has, of course, privileged some memories over others and the oppositional version does not make the history more complete but merely presents us with a picture of fractured social reality derived from fragmented knowledge and competing hierarchies of credibility (Stoler 1992). The gentry's memory recall (that is, what is remembered, what is silenced, and what is forgotten) is forcefully shaped by social difference. Hence they remember only a fraction of the reality of the manorial life and selectively assimilate from their immediate surroundings. Its grim aspects, those dealing with peasant hardship, poverty, illiteracy, and in many cases appalling living conditions of estate workers, which all had been part of the gentry's experience, vanish into oblivion. If absorbed by memory, they rarely appear in the act of retelling, and when they do, they do so in a relativized and historicized form. Village impoverishment and the destitution of

farm workers emerge as an inherent feature of the manorial economy. As an exception to the embarrassed silence/forgetting, or “strategic refusal” to remember (Sommer 1999), which surrounds the subject, Helena Stankiewicz presented a rare glimpse of reflection in remembering a scene from life on an estate in eastern Poland. Once her two little daughters wandered off to the workers’ quarters. A peasant woman offered each a slice of bread. Assuming that the white substance on top was sugar, the girls asked for a bit more. But it was salt, not sugar, for estate workers could not afford sugar at all. Recalling this episode from over half a century ago, Helena Stankiewicz wonders why was she not conscious of the circumstances of her employees’ life, why didn’t she attempt to help them, why didn’t she send sugar to the woman, why didn’t she ever offer workers apples from the estate orchard although the owners could neither eat nor sell them all (Wiśniewski 1991:150).

While many gentry nowadays admit inadequacy of the manorial system, they also skirt over the endemic problems of dire poverty and shortage of land. Instead, they inevitably mention their own and their forefathers decent conduct towards estate employees. Each narrative speaks of charitable deeds performed by ancestors such as funding orphanages, endowing churches, literacy campaigns. They are all presented as an integral part of the gentry code of behaviour yet disclose the paradox of memory play: making necessity a virtue developed into a double morality whereby nobles could be praised for assistance to the destitute whom they had created in the first place.

Peasant collective memory drastically deviates in its evaluation of the practices of manorial life. A village mayor reported,

Every farmer had first to do his dues to the manor house, whether with team, or on foot. Only then could

he work his own land, sowing and reaping at night. No excuse as to pressing needs at home. If one did not appear as ordered, at once the overseer would come. If he found his wife busy cooking, he would throw a pail of water on the fire, or in winter he would carry off the windows or the doors. In case that didn't work, and men were needed for service, the overseer would come with his foreman and eject the farmer from home and homestead. Another would be put in his place. Nor was there any appeal anywhere, since that was the usage and at the bottom, the lord of the manor was owner of everything. His was both land and water, yes, even the wind since only he was allowed to build a windmill to grind corn.<sup>8</sup>

These contrasting accounts make it evident that collective memory is structured by class and class interest. In each instance the nature of the bond between the past and the present assumes considerable political significance. The gentry manoeuvre between the various aspects of the past compelled to defend their historical legacy, seeking moral redemption for the injustices they had committed, and insisting on a recognition of wrongs inflicted upon them. Engaging in a sort of mnemonic engineering, they currently attempt to re-write the history of estate economy and manor-peasant relations in particular. To counteract the memories from below, i.e. the memories of the disadvantaged privileged by the socialist state, they present the role of the manor in a different light – as a progressive, not oppressive, element in the village life, as a precursor of a civil society, and a possible model for the future of agriculture in Poland, a model enlightened by lessons learned from the past errors.

Yet there is inconsistency, even dissonance in their memory of estate economy. In the process of remembering, they fashion three portraits of peasantry; the first features the faithful dedicated domestic servant, the second, the docile but cunning estate worker, the third, the disgruntled labourer infected by political radicalism. It is the first and the third, which occupy most memory space in the act of story-telling. Gentry's stories of former domestic servants are



filled with demonstrations of affection, loyalty and mutual recognition. While the devoted domestic servant provides the proof for the moral and decent rule of the landowner, the radical rural proletariat is ascribed a personal motive for standing against their employer. They are portrayed as lazy, thieving, and disobedient individuals who are refused employment because of their misconduct and hence hold a personal grudge. Political motivation is denied them but personalized as an act of revenge. This portrait is perhaps most telling because these were the very same people who saw to it that the land reform was implemented on the ground, who evicted the gentry from their estates thus irrevocably changing their lives. The conduct of the second category – the numerous estate workers – which appear in the memory as unindividuated peasant masses, is more problematic. Why did the docile peasant turn revolutionary, why did he take part in the plunder, as in the following narrative?

I arrived in Jarantowice [estate] three days after the Germans withdrew. The mansion was already looted and so was the farm-yard. One bull in the stable, a pile of dying lambs in the shed. The entrance to the mansion stood wide open in spite of freezing temperatures. Most furniture was already gone. Only a huge painting of an elk crossing a swamp with a village in flames in the background stayed on the wall. The grim theme and the large size saved it from plunder. Only the heaviest pieces of furniture remained – the dining table, the grand piano, the large linen cupboards, the hefty desk of my grandfather. Everywhere traces of looting and destruction: the bathroom fixtures ripped out, the toilet crushed. I saw a peasant woman dragging a precious inlaid tea table, the space between its carved legs packed with pillows, quilts, and other bedding. She pulled it through snow with a rope, like a sled. Such disgust overcame me that I left immediately. The PKWN Manifesto [the text of Land Reform Decree] was posted at the gate. Dusk approaching, a crowd of farm-hands gathered to read it in the light of a matchstick. They already knew that landowners are the enemy of the people, that their pillage was legal, and that they will get even more - in land and in pastures.<sup>9</sup>

More often than not, the cause for peasant plunder and acts of destruction is sought and found in

the outside forces, the contagion of the red plague, the Soviet domination, even the Jewish infiltration all of which allows the gentry to displace responsibility for peasant discontent, deny local agency, and dispense with the thought of insurgency.

### **Mnemonics of places and objects**

It needs to be noted that personal as well as collective memories of the gentry are coloured by an intense sense of tragic and irretrievable loss. Through the act of remembering, they mourn the passing of an era of history and their own childhood and youth. Yearnings for a lost home, cultural milieu, and past existence are mixed with the bitterness of rejection and expulsion. Memory is a substitute, a surrogate for something that is missing, explicitly preoccupied with rupture and loss (Davis & Starn 1989). This makes recollection problematic. Memory, and memory of childhood in particular, is a trickster which twists reality and dupes us into certainly of believing in vague, distant, and yet comforting images of home which then seemed large, family happy, and life uncomplicated. Home, which in the eyes of a child appeared as the source of ultimate good, warmth, and security, becomes idealized in the memory of an adult and mythologized in the memory of the next generation. Nostalgia plays enlargement tricks, which convert a cottage into a manor, a manor into a palace creating a myth of splendour. Memories twice removed are capable of playing even more dangerous tricks. The next generation is brought up with secondary memories, memories conveyed through and by their parents. And yet these can be so potent that even confrontation with reality may not necessarily change the vision of the past. The following episode may help to illustrate my point.

As soon as the borders of the post-Soviet states opened, and like many of the younger gentry generation, an acquaintance of mine went in search of his family home in the current territory of Ukraine. Western Ukraine came under the dominance of the Soviet Union as the result of the border shift in 1945 but previous to that had been long part of the Polish state. Polish nobility used to own vast tracts of land in Ukrainian borderlands and over the centuries any large landowner became coterminous with a Polish gentry man while the term Ukrainian was reserved for peasants. All my acquaintance had to go by was an old black-and-white photograph displayed on his grandparents' mantelpiece ever since he could remember and the name of the place the house once stood. It featured a typically Polish gentry mansion built in classicist style with two sets of columns supporting the frontal porch; shrouded in the leafage of old oak trees, it looked prosperous and endearing. What seemed like a reasonably easy task became a chase after an illusion. For one, the Soviet era altered toponymy. It eradicated old (Polish) names of districts, towns, even hamlets; old villages were razed and new ones erected in their places. Secondly, indications passed on through the memory chain were far from specific; correlating memory fragments with modern geography proved difficult and few local inhabitants volunteered to help. He spent days pursuing false clues, convincing local officials to open population registries, searching cemeteries for the family name etched on gravestones. Eventually he did find the 'mansion': it was a rather small house at the edge of town, neither grand nor pretty, which stripped of columns and porch, with dilapidated walls and a leaking roof, utterly lacked charm. There was no correspondence between this house and its image preserved in a black-and-white photograph. His reaction to this not an unusual in itself discovery was symptomatic of the manner in which past is interpreted. Finding it too painful to reconcile the

image of the past with the reality of the present, my acquaintance concluded that the building must have been one of minor structures erected on the estate grounds although no record of such existed. This example is rather typical of the impressionistic memory of the younger gentry generation many of whom were raised in the shadow of the stories of the manorial life.

According to Halbwachs and others who followed, physical environment, historically saturated landscapes and objects, serve as a mnemonic for memory. Topography infused with history triggers recollection and facilitates re-experiencing (Bloch 1998). For the older and the younger gentry generation alike, memory is rooted in a land alive with geographical mnemonics. Journeys to the places from the past provide connecting links between who they have been and who they are, then and now. Mansions and graveyards are something tangible and because of it serve as mnemonic benchmarks. Periodical visits to the places of ancestry, manors, estates, or what was left of them, give a fresh breath to the fading images of the past and assert their relevance in the present. They provide existential continuity for an individual as well as a foundation, a mental and social schemata, for subsequent generations which, having neither memory nor experience of the manorial way of life, become socialized into the particular personal and collective identity. Thus the pilgrimage to the ancestral manor, although seemingly unsuccessful, was of tremendous importance to my acquaintance. Like him, hundreds of gentry who had been expatriated from the Polish borderlands in 1944/45, the territories that were subsequently annexed to Lithuania, Ukraine, and Byelorussia, made pilgrimages to their family estates after the liberalization of travel regulations following the collapse of the Soviet Union. For the older generation, the visits reaffirmed the memory by giving it physical corporeality while making the ‘memories’ of the younger generation more substantiated and real.

Geographical mnemonics is closely linked with genealogical memory. A mass celebrated on anniversary of death of a kin and visits to relatives' graves on All Souls' Day is a common commemorative rite in Catholic Poland. Apparently private family matters, such practices perpetuate historical and genealogical memory of their practitioners because the memory of ancestors cannot be disconnected from the milieu that had produced them. Celebrating the dead, the rites regenerate memories of cultural and social context in which they had existed. So the mass in honour of the grandfather, or a visit to his grave or a family crypt—often located near the manor in which he had lived – is an occasion for memory-work, story telling, anecdotes, and history lessons. Such rites provide an opportunity for a gathering of numerous relatives cementing the ties among them and affirming the distinct identity of the family and the larger social group to which it belongs. They also persistently locate the gentry in the community of their former estates – distant yet present, equal in the new social order and yet superior. Disregarding the ordinance forbidding visits to the locality in which they previously owned property, among many gentry also Teresa Konarska and her family routinely came see “their” village, “their” church, “their” graveyard.

The first time we visited my father's grave we also stopped at our village church. The priest was so stupefied that he forgot about the consecration. Everybody rushed to give us chairs. May be they were afraid that we came to take our china back! You see, the peasants took everything we had. Were you to take a walk around the village, you would find our china in every cupboard. Even my grand piano, if they don't use it as a chicken feeder. And why did my father have beds made for the farm-hands? Everybody says that he must have been a peasant-lover. He cared about people, much more than my uncle who would routinely beat them. And there [on uncle's estate] they behaved as they should. There they didn't steal. Well, we made sure to give a generous offering; actually, we gave all the cash we had on us so peasants wouldn't think that we are driven to poverty.<sup>10</sup>

In such a fashion, the younger gentry generation was taught to ‘remember’ the past, or rather particular fragments of it. Typically, parents mark and contextualize what is important for children to remember, identify important elements and elaborate on the information what is missing but implied. In looking at the family album, a portrait gallery, or visiting a graveyard, children become aware of how their own private past converges with that of the family, the country, and bygone times in general (Lesy 1980, Middleton & Edwards 1990). This is not, nor can be, more than approximation because for those generations, which inherited memories encoded by their parents, conjured images become idealized abstracted from the contextual emotional field at the time that the encoding transpired. Just as the black-and-white photograph is merely an abstracted image of reality, their memories are not more than renditions of an already imperfect reconstruction.

The gentry’s longing for the past is evident in the interiors of their houses, which emphasize distinction and set them apart. The gentry surround themselves with objects from the past, a bricolage of anything and everything that is reminiscent of life in a manor. It appears that as the past seems to recede, they seek to re-evoke it by accumulating historical paraphernalia and by preserving its relics. Antique furniture of all styles, ancestors’ portraits no matter what their artistic merit, grandmother’s trousseau china, sepia-coloured photographs, and chandeliers rescued from the family mansion crowd the modest urban living spaces. They all bear unmistakable marks of gentry habitus. More than memory objects of youth foregone, or a vanished era, it is a style that features in dwellings of older and younger generations alike. The meaning of any such article is inscribed in its form, uses, trajectories and life histories. Fragments of the past, reminders of by-gone ways, memorabilia, if you will, they are also

signifiers of the gentry identity, statements of status, material manifestations of intrinsic value which link the personal, the familial-genealogical, and the class with the making of the Polish history. The value of these objects is not located in their monetary worth but in their origin from the family seat. The manor, as the locus of gentry's identity, endows them with exceptional attributes. They are locked in the life histories (and therefore memories) of their owners and simultaneously provide continuity bridging the past and the present. Of these, portraits of ancestors are of particular significance because they express that link most vividly. They are the transmitters of family memory nesting every consecutive generation in its historical chain.

As expressed by Di Lampedusa (1991:189), the significance of a noble family lies entirely in their tradition, that is in its vital memories. Family records, some centuries old (land grants, letters, diaries, photographs), have been meticulously collected, salvaged through the ravages of war and the plunder of peasants, and saved for the future generations in a desk drawer as a tangible proof of historicity of being. So are genealogical charts, which record every birth, marriage, and death thereby recognizing the existence of each and every person and giving him or her a place beyond their immediate life. Each one of them has a life story, a distinct personality with flaws, virtues, and idiosyncrasies, and a face immortalized in a portrait, which makes them ever so more real. Commissioned in private pursuit of perpetuation of family memory, such portraits are often of artistic excellence forming part of national heritage as well. And so not only an individual coalesces with a group but also a group with a nation as an historical unit. The performative power of portraits lies in their inherent ability to express these linkages.

In contrast to the poor, elites have a recorded life. The annals of the underclasses are

short and simple because they leave little documentation. No family trees, obituaries, heirlooms, or even wills worth mentioning. Their ancestors had become lost in historical anonymity, their names have vanished from records and memory, and hence they appear as if they had not existed at all. The gentry, on the other hand, are prolific memoirists and meticulous record-keepers. Hence their collective memory is transmitted and shaped by historically documented existence.

### **Mnemonics of the body**

As Connerton convincingly argues (1989), collective memory is also perpetuated by culturally specific bodily practices. Just as a habit of servitude is incorporated in the behaviour of a servile group by way of their own habits of body deportment, so is the habit of superiority among the elite. A noble incarnates embodied authority and, more importantly, does it not by mechanically executing codes but by the prestigious ease of practiced performance. This sets him apart from a social climber, who, as hard as he may try, is unable to embody the acknowledged model effortlessly and gracefully. Cultural specific postural performance provides people with a mnemonic of the body, habitually observed rules of decorum. The past becomes sedimented in the body, which exudes the cultural substance of one's personal and collective history. The natural ease Connerton spoke of is so thoroughly incorporated that difficult to alter or suppress.

Distinct by their grooming habits, manners, speech patterns, the total way of presentation of self, the gentry stood apart from the 'common folk'. Consider, for example, differences in the etiquette of a handshake. A nobleman was introduced to his non-gentry female office co-workers. The women rose from their seats. He made a deep bow and waited for each of them to



extend her hand to him. None did so he bowed again but they sat down and so he left the room.

The women were surprised that he did not shake their hands while he wondered why they did not stretch theirs.<sup>11</sup> Gentry women seemed particularly easy to identify, perhaps because they found it harder to shed, or hide, the numerous traces of cultivated distinction inscribed onto their bodies by centuries of tradition and lifelong practice. Their past, as it were, was locked in habitual memory. Mnemonic of the body manifested itself in practices of everyday life: in the hats women wore, in the manner they sipped their tea, in the gentility of their vocabulary, in the fact that they kept nannies. Just as the gentry can instantaneously recognize each other, so are the non-gentry alert to distinction manifest in body deportment. My question whether such-and-such was of gentry origin often elicited the answer that he must be so because he looks the part. The explanation that followed was as vague as the image itself but included a firm glance, an upright posture, a resounding voice, a polite but arrogant air, a confident grace and a sense of his authority.

This 'something' so difficult to define is what distinguishes many gentry from among others - a total look, a demeanour, a bearing worn as if a second skin - what Bourdieu (1984) calls *habitus*, and the gentry 'race' (pol. *rasa*).

There is a vague relation between the common definition of the term and the gentry's usage of it. One can speculate that 'race' refers to the myth of Sarmatian origins, the belief of the Polish gentry as descendants of eastern warriors conquering indigenous peasant populations, genetically separate and inferior. Remnants of this eastern tradition could be found in male clothing worn on ritual occasions, in the popularity of oriental carpets adorning mansion walls and curved swords hang on top of them. 'Race' connotes a demeanour and an attitude but most

significantly the physical appearance, separate and yet inseparable from the sanguine poise generated from within. Although all gentry are supposed to 'have race', not all of them 'have it' to the same degree. In no way does the concept refer to physical anthropometrical features whichever way one conceives of them, such as a darker skin colour, or slanted eyes. None of such can be spotted. To the contrary, 'having race' implies a very 'European', Caucasian appearance. Just what precisely this idealized purity embodies is difficult to pinpoint but 'race' certainly included regular facial features, well-formed body, a clear skin, a firm glance, an upright posture, a resounding voice, a vigorous stride, in brief, an entire habitus, which marks the contrast between the appearances of the mighty and the lowly and which do not originate in different genetic stock, but in socially inherited differences in wealth, prestige, and power.

Although the past is continually and involuntarily re-enacted in the present conduct, that conduct is also purposefully kept up, even cultivated. In the absence of property to transmit, a code of conduct, firmly regulated behaviours, and strict manners become the social badge that distinguishes the gentry from the 'common people'. In the midst of a changed and at times hostile environment, maintaining that conduct became ever more important. Impeccably dressed with pressed shirts and polished shoes, the gentry would sit down to a table decked with crested china even if they were to be served a simple dish of potatoes. The self-imposed discipline and the insistence on preserving standards of behaviour and proper habits reminded them about whom they once were and informed the younger generation about how to be, ultimately helping to assert and safeguard their social superiority. These inherited and inculcated bodily practices of distinction perpetuated class differences and challenged the overtly democratic and egalitarian social order.

## **Agendas in memory-making**

Like reconstructing personal past in the present, collective remembering is also done for certain purposes. Memory is a signifying practice, a part of a moral discourse taken by individuals and groups, often not consciously, as a means to articulate, legitimate, and even constitute their selfhood and relationships to others (Antze & Lambek 1996). Social memory is often selective, distorted, and inaccurate. As phrased by Lowenthal (1985:210), ‘the prime function of memory is not to preserve the past but to adapt it so to enrich and manipulate the present.’

Collective memory of the gentry in contemporary Poland presents an instance in which the nature of the bond between the present and the past has assumed considerable political significance. The personal histories of members of the gentry have been reinterpreted in the light of the collective trauma and the meaning of their individual experiences transformed by making it the basis for social action. Their collective memory is at least partially structured by strive for justice, public exoneration, and recognition. However, regaining voice is not their only concern. Reprivatization high on the national agenda, the gentry lobby for the return of the property unlawfully, or so argued, seized from them in the course of the land reform. As expected, their request met a vehement opposition from peasants and parties that represent them. Neither did it receive support from the government nor the populace. In an effort to manage the overwhelmingly negative public response, the gentry lobby quickly restated the issue requesting not the return of the entire nationalized property but of what in the land reform parlour became known as ‘residuaries’, i.e. manors and parks which surround them. Public discussions about reprivatization exasperated emotions, heightened the nostalgic aura shrouding the ‘family home’,

boosted memories of expropriation, and in consequence, focused the act of re-telling on the very 'event' of eviction. To underscore the point that injustice was inflicted on the entire group, the group's collective memory had to assume uniformity.

The gentry's life history narratives are constructed as political dramas. Accentuating politically poignant moments in the nation's history, they start with the experience of expropriation and eviction followed by accounts of victimization endured during the Stalinist years of 1948-56. The year, which marked the beginning of de-stalinization, commonly referred to in the history of communism as 'normalization', draws the life story to an end stopping in mid-life of their protagonists. Thus the story line follows political periodization in Polish history. The sequencing and the space-time allotted to the narration of particular periods suggest that the gentry conceive their lives as quintessentially political in nature. When great political events ceased punctuating their lives and life assumed an ordinary social course, the political drama subsided and so did the life story of its *dramatis personae*.

So what Barlett (*ibid*) discovered for individual memory, which is that the form in which memory is sequenced is not only a reflection of content but is also determined by the intentions and predispositions of the remembering individuals, holds for collective memory as well. Just as individuals use different aspects of reality as their governing ideas and strategies to memorize them, so are group's experiences ordered in such a fashion as to become important sites in the struggle for its place in history as well as its position in the future.

The memory the group constructs is structured by and transferred through a variety of means that range from practices of everyday life, staged rituals, purposeful and unintentional invocations of the past, and collective acts of remembrance performed in private and semi-public

spaces. All memory is essentially an ever-changing reconstruction of the past and memory itself continually reprocessed as contexts and perceptions change. And so collective memory continuously negotiates between available historical records, remembered experience, and current social and political agendas, selectively emphasizing, suppressing, and elaborating different aspects in the process. For the researcher, the memory 'management' poses a problem of interpretation. In the extreme, the narrative may be overly determined by a conscious or unconscious agenda, or so biased that it obliterates complexities of the social and political context in which events occurred.

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<sup>1</sup> Walewska, Maria, W Cieniu Reformy Rolnej (In the Shadow of Land Reform), unpublished manuscript

<sup>2</sup> The Polish language does not discriminate between 'gentry' and 'nobility' using the term *szlachta* for both. I follow the Polish practice and use the terms interchangeably.

<sup>3</sup> Serfdom was abolished in Prussia in 1807, in Austria in 1848, and in Russia in 1864.

<sup>4</sup> In all, 9,707 landed estates with the total area of 3,5 million hectares were nationalized. One-third was divided among landless and poor peasants while the rest became part of the state collective agricultural system (Rocznik Statystyczny 1949).

<sup>5</sup> Interview, Aleksandra Żaryn, 1995

<sup>6</sup> According to the official statistics, the greatest number of traditionally underprivileged students was enrolled in universities in the academic year 1950/51 when they constituted 62% of all students. The figures fluctuated slightly during the Stalinist period but dropped sharply afterwards almost reversing the trend. In 1958/59, only 44% of the student body came from working class and peasant families.

<sup>7</sup> Kakar (1996) noted that the rhetoric of violence derives its potency not as much from that that it illuminates actual action but that it substitutes for it.

<sup>8</sup> Słomka, Jan, From Serfdom to Self-Government: Memoirs of a Polish Village Mayor, Minerva Publishing, 1941:14-15

<sup>9</sup> Czaplicki, Jerzy, unpublished manuscript:302

<sup>10</sup> Interview, Teresa Konarska, 1995

<sup>11</sup> Andrzej Szypowski, Szlachcic w Peerelu (A Gentryman in the Polish Peoples' Republic), Oficyna IN Plus, 1997:64

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