

# Homo Explorens and Their Nostalgia. Cultural Contexts of Amateur Genealogy in Contemporary Poland

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PL ISSN 0071-1861; e-ISSN: 2719-6534

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.23858/EP68.2024.3877>

<https://rcin.org.pl/dlibra/publication/281127>

Jak cytować:

*Raczyńska-Kruk, M. (2024). Homo Explorens and Their Nostalgia. Cultural Contexts of Amateur Genealogy in Contemporary Poland. Etnografia Polska, 68(1-2).  
<https://doi.org/10.23858/EP68.2024.3877>*

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## *HOMO EXPLORENS* AND THEIR NOSTALGIA. CULTURAL CONTEXTS OF AMATEUR GENEALOGY IN CONTEMPORARY POLAND

### INTRODUCTION

Amateur genealogy is a phenomenon of Western culture that has emerged alongside a growing interest in memory. As noted by French historian Pierre Nora (1989, pp. 8, 15), genealogy was popularised on the back of a surge of interest in the family past due to the ‘acceleration of history’ in the second half of the twentieth century. Jacques Le Goff (1992), or David Loventhal (1989) adopt a similar position, pointing to the democratization of the phenomenon of nostalgia for the past in contemporary western nations.

The research on amateur genealogy that I have been conducting in Poland since 2018, and then since February 2020 as part of a project titled ‘Between the *Great History* and Small Histories. Popular Genealogy in Present-day Poland’<sup>1</sup> has enabled me to examine the socio-cultural contexts that have shaped this trend. I studied amateur genealogy in Poland on several levels using suitable ethnographic tools and methodologies. This included a wide range of research tasks, from discourse analysis to explore influences and trends that affect Polish genealogical searches, through participant observation in genealogical communities, including Poland’s largest genealogical Facebook discussion group (Genealodzy PL), to a series of case studies of individual genealogical searches and the resulting narratives. This article gathers reflections on the results of this research and attempts to answer the following questions: Where should we look for the sources of this trend? Is amateur genealogy, as practised in Poland, specific to Polish collective memory, or not? Or does it show signs of external influences? How to explore collective and individual genealogical practices and narratives? What aspects of case studies on genealogical practices and narratives (i.e., those created by individuals) are key to the formation of contemporary amateur genealogy in Poland?

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<sup>1</sup> The project is financed by the National Science Centre; grant No. 2019/33/N/HS3/02193.

## THE HISTORY OF AMATEUR GENEALOGY IN POLAND

The years 1945 and 1989 had a pivotal impact on the direction of change and the nature of the phenomenon that amateur genealogy had become. However, they do not mark clear-cut dividing lines. The first marks the twilight of Polish nobility traditions, along with the political border changes and associated collective memory transformations, that followed the Second World War. After the war, in a wave of cultural change, new models of practising genealogy emerged. These were skilfully built on the foundations of national mythology and could sustain national identity with the assistance of various symbolic figures – initially workers and peasants. The situation changed in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when cultural motifs pertaining to Polish nobility were implanted in the collective imagination of Poles and a kind of ‘plebeian’ and later ‘populist’ Sarmatism<sup>2</sup> developed (Czapliński 2015; Szacka 1979, pp. 256–257). The first grassroots, purely hobbyist attempts to build genealogical narratives (primarily based on materials from church archives) coincided with the birth of Solidarity (Tazbir 1978, pp. 228–229). The democratic zeitgeist fostered an increasing awareness of the right to claim and affirm one’s past (Korzeniewski 2013; Kwiatkowski 2012).

After 1989 Polish amateur genealogy became one of the components of the phenomenon of ‘little homelands’ (Sulima 2001, p. 139) and their local histories. The Genealogical-Heraldic Society in Poznań was founded in 1987, and then the first genealogy handbooks aimed at the ordinary Poles appeared on the market. *Poradnik genealoga amatora* [The Amateur Genealogist’s Handbook] by Rafał T. Prinke was published in 1992. While the 1990s saw advances in regional history, online genealogical resources were not available until after 2000. One of the first major projects to digitise and index birth certificates books was the *Poznań Project*<sup>3</sup> initiative of the ‘Gniazdo’ Wielkopolska Genealogical Society, although internet access and scans and microfilms of books were still limited in Poland. In the 2010s, however, digitisation and indexing projects were carried out by volunteers and members of genealogical societies (e.g., the Polish Genealogical Society’s *Geneteka. Genealogiczna kartoteka – baza urodzeń, małżeństw i zgonów* [Geneteka: Genealogical Register – Births, Deaths and Marriages Database])<sup>4</sup> or as part of larger initiatives (e.g., the annual National Genealogical Conference in Brzeg<sup>5</sup>). However, there were also numerous grassroots initiatives at the regional and local level. These included amateur genealogists visiting cemeteries and family sites within Poland’s contemporary and

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<sup>2</sup> Sarmatism – an ideology and cultural concept with which the Polish nobility identified from the 16th to 18th centuries, tracing its roots back to the ancient Sarmatians. Various reinterpretations of Sarmatism have appeared and continue to appear in contemporary Polish culture (e.g. in historical memory, literature, art, mass culture, etc.) (Czapliński 2011).

<sup>3</sup> [poznaj-project.psnc.pl/](http://poznaj-project.psnc.pl/) (accessed: 20.11.2023).

<sup>4</sup> [geneteka.genealodzy.pl/index.php](http://geneteka.genealodzy.pl/index.php) (accessed: 20.11.2023).

<sup>5</sup> [genealodzy.opole.pl/konferencja](http://genealodzy.opole.pl/konferencja) (accessed: 24.11.2023).

pre-war borders,<sup>6</sup> organising reunions with relatives, and writing down family sagas. Krzysztof Pomian mentions a phenomenon of amateur genealogy in his reflections on the democratisation of history in contemporary culture and the circumstances in which it is practised (Pomian 2014, p. 9). At approximately the same time, projects to digitize the public resources of archival institutions were initiated, and the Mormon Church began to make its microfilm scans of books of birth certificates available online (Family Search<sup>7</sup>). The number of people interested in genealogy has grown exponentially. A Centre for Public Opinion Research (CBOS) survey indicated that 44% of respondents claimed that a family member was compiling a family tree in 2018, compared with only 27% in 2007 (CBOS 2018, p. 8, Fig. 6). The survey also showed that 45% of respondents knew where their grandparents were born, and that more than a third knew where their great-grandparents were born (CBOS 2018, p. 7, and Fig. 5). More and more handbooks are appearing on the market that teach how to search for ancestors (e.g. Nowaczyk 2015). Genealogy is the most common form of public history in Poland (Wilkowski 2013, p. 22), and is manifested in the form of amateur practices and the engagement of professional genealogical companies.

#### TRENDS, INSPIRATIONS, AND ANALOGIES

Genealogy was one of the popular hobbies among middle-class Americans a few years after the TV miniseries *Roots* (1977) and the novel on which it was based, viz. *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (1976) by a Black American writer Alex Haley<sup>8</sup>. However, the state of self-identification which prevailed in that society at that time, and the shorter historical memory associated with it, differed considerably from the European experience. In Europe, for a long time, family trees were the domain primarily of noble families, possibly bourgeois and rich peasant families (Guelke, Timothy 2008). In contrast, the United States has, since the 19th century, cultivated a fully democratic tradition of 'family history' (Gerlach, Michael 1975, pp. 625–629). The two centres, however, mutually reinforced each other (Lowenthal 2016, pp. 16). For centuries, Europe has upheld the notion of fixity in space and has been strengthening territorial ties through genealogy, whereas the United States has always embraced genealogy as a means of discovering the sources of its own multiculturalism (Tyler 2005; Timothy 1997), now with the added assistance of genetic genealogy (Hauskeller 2004, pp. 286–287). However between these two entities, genealogical inspirations began to advance from another centre. The 1980s witnessed the rapid development of a Jewish genealogy that invoked the diaspora

<sup>6</sup> The latter mainly concerns the 'Eastern Borderlands'. This colloquial term denotes that territory that constituted the eastern regions of Poland prior to 1945, and which is now divided between Ukraine, Belarus and Lithuania.

<sup>7</sup> [familysearch.org/pl/](https://familysearch.org/pl/) (accessed: 03.11.2023).

<sup>8</sup> <https://prologue.blogs.archives.gov/2019/02/22/the-roots-of-genealogy-at-the-national-archives/> (accessed: 10.11.2024).

and implemented an ethno-religious identity project burdened with the trauma of the Holocaust (Abu El-Haj 2012; Atzmon 2010; Hirsch 2007). The driving force behind Jewish genealogy is the Internet (e.g. the *MyHeritage* portal founded by Israeli genealogist Gilad Japhet in 2003),<sup>9</sup> along with the same software techniques and tools used by genealogists the world over, including Poland, to find sources and distant relatives.

European genealogical memory runs deep and feeds into memory spaces (Gollac, Oese 2001, pp. 385–397). These can be personal places or public institutions within the broad meaning of the term (e.g., archives, repositories; these may be virtual [e.g., genealogical databases]) that have custody over data of ordinary people (Steedman 1998, pp. 67–68). This can be seen quite well in France or Italy. When Nora was still working on his *Realms of Memory (Les Lieux de mémoire, 1984)*, statistics<sup>10</sup> showed that up to 43% of all French national archive users were amateur genealogists, and only 38% were university researchers (Nora 1989, p. 15). However, digital archives did not function then as they do now, so people did not suddenly take an interest in their family histories because they had easier access to sources. It was more a reflection of social change and a gradually expanding tendency that mirrored local tendencies related to ways of perceiving the past. Amateur genealogies in France, as ethnologist Sylvie Sagnes points out, are firmly anchored in matter: space, places and objects; they feed on personal testimonies and they document evidence, thereby embedding family and ‘rooted’ memory (Sagnes 1995, pp. 21–51; 2004, p. 35). After studying the small town of Minervois in Occitania, Sagnes linked ‘genealogical memory’ to the depth of community feeling that determines attachment to place. The deeper the feeling, the more justified the attachment (2004, p. 37). In the 1990s, the mechanisms for compiling family histories during searches also attracted the attention of the Italian anthropologist Maria Minicuci. After studying the Calabrian town of Zaccanopoli (Vibo Valentia Commune), Minicuci presented ancestral memory as a kind of fluid and flexible story whose elements are subject to constant reconfiguration (Minicuci 1997).

Polish amateur genealogy seems to be a complex phenomenon: both an ‘offshoot’ of a global trend and a reflection of a unique, tradition-bound practice of memory, reflecting Polish society’s attitude towards the past, along with a range of sentiments and social perceptions and the myths that sustain them. All this has been fuelled by an obsession with memory that is specific to the turn of the 21st century. The Polish context most closely corresponds with the concepts and categories proposed by French ethnologists and sociologists, e.g., the egalitarian *généalogie ordinaire* (popular/ordinary genealogy – genealogy of the lower social strata) of Joseph Valynseele (1991), or the *mémoire généalogique* (genealogical memory) of Sagnes (2004) (mentioned). After all, they reveal themes such as the mutual entanglement of family genealogies and political myths. The Anglo-Saxon model seems to be less suited to

<sup>9</sup> myheritage.pl/ (accessed: 20.11.2023).

<sup>10</sup> Data collected in 1982.

the Polish context, but provides significant categories for interpretation. It carries research proposals that generally employ democratising, sometimes postcolonial, optics. Outstanding work in this vein includes publications by anthropologist Fenella Cannell (2011) focusing on the phenomenon of amateur genealogy in the UK, and that of sociologists Anne Marie Kramer (2011; 2015) and Katharine Tyler (2005). Of interest in exploring strategies for discovering family history in the diaspora in the United States (using Irish genealogy as an example) are the publications of British geographer Catharine Nash (2008).

#### CYBER-GENEALOGY AS A MIRROR OF POLISH COLLECTIVE MEMORY

The development of the Internet at the beginning of the 21st century has contributed to the growing popularity of genealogy in Poland. The Polish 'genealogical internet' is both a repository of digitised archival collections and a place where sources of genealogical interest are copied, indexed and disseminated (Ebertowski 2017). It is a kind of forum where the voluntary sector, such as genealogical societies, collaborate with archivists, and in which local communities help to make government and church archive collections accessible. Genealogical traces in the digital world (church and government records, photographs as 'cyber ancestors') make it easier for genealogists to construct narratives about family history.

Nowadays the most important national genealogical information websites include [www.szukajwarchiwach.gov.pl](http://www.szukajwarchiwach.gov.pl) (*Search in Archives*<sup>11</sup>), which is administered by the National Digital Archives, and the aforementioned *Geneteka*, created and used by amateurs for almost twenty years as a database of indexes of metric data linking to scans of documents. Index search engines created by regional societies, e.g. *LubGens*<sup>12</sup> (Lublin region), *PomGenBaza*<sup>13</sup> (Pomerania), *Projekt Podlasie*<sup>14</sup> (Podlasie), or *BaSIA*<sup>15</sup> and *Projekt Poznań*<sup>16</sup> (Wielkopolskie Towarzystwo Genealogiczne Gniazdo), have local profiles but a large reach. In the case of regions such as Wielkopolska or Mazovia, the percentage of digitised birth certificates is so high that anyone with ancestors from there can do genealogy without visiting an archive. It is worth adding, however, that for the first two decades of the 21st century one of the fundamental tools of Polish amateur genealogists were surname databases and map-based search engines<sup>17</sup>.

In 1959, the historian Włodzimierz Dworzaczek published the academic textbook *Genealogia* [Genealogy], which contained genealogical tables of the rulers of Poland and the noble families of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Despite the passage

<sup>11</sup> [szukajwarchiwach.pl/](http://szukajwarchiwach.pl/) (accessed: 15.11.2023).

<sup>12</sup> [registry.lubgens.eu/](http://registry.lubgens.eu/) (accessed: 15.11.2023).

<sup>13</sup> [ptg.gda.pl/language/pl/pomgenbaza/](http://ptg.gda.pl/language/pl/pomgenbaza/) (accessed: 10.11.2023).

<sup>14</sup> [indeksy.projektpodlasie.pl/](http://indeksy.projektpodlasie.pl/) (accessed: 10.11.2023).

<sup>15</sup> [basia.famula.pl/](http://basia.famula.pl/) (accessed: 10.11.2023).

<sup>16</sup> [poznaj-projekt.psn.pl/page.php?page=about](http://poznaj-projekt.psn.pl/page.php?page=about) (accessed: 15.11.2023).

<sup>17</sup> E.g. <https://www.mapanazwisk.eu> (accessed: 16.10.2024).

of time, the imagination of searchers continues to feed on noble genealogies. Spaces where exploratory practices develop and where genealogy is popularised may be a factor of change within the discourse of national identity and the symbolic figures that constitute it. On this level, the phenomenon of amateur genealogy is internally self-contradictory. After all, it combines the democratisation of tracing ancestors and having a right to history with a vital universe of signs and collective images derived from the culture of the former elite. However, amateur genealogy is not only influenced by concepts and structures with historical provenances (e.g., the meaning of patrilineality); it is also a tool of power that is building and implementing a project of national identity, supported by the power of such concepts as memory, family, roots, and sense of connection. A prime example is the narrative surrounding the *Genealogia Polaków – Program Odtwarzania Tożsamości Rzeczypospolitej* [Genealogy of Poles – Identity Playback Program of the Republic of Poland] project,<sup>18</sup> which functions as both a standalone website and a Facebook fan page. However, as any analysis of the collective discourse in the *Genealodzy PL* Facebook group reveals, genealogists sometimes unintentionally gravitate towards the nobility. An ancestor's noble ancestry recorded on the birth certificate is loaded with historical and cultural connotations, so it 'catches the eye'. I am not trying to generalise of the 'All Poles look for noble ancestors' type, but rather referring to an imaginative construct that is the result of having been taught a romantic predisposition and which is used by people who see themselves as Polish, regardless of how they do so and whether their standpoint is affirming or contesting (Niedźwiedz 2015). In this sense, Polish genealogy is the long duration of national myths and bottom-up strategies for conceptualising the past. Genealogical intuition is ruled by the Sarmatian phantasma – a constantly reinterpreted 'creation myth' that has been handed down through the ages. A post-Sarmatian imagination springs up every time noble connections are found or confirmed. The focal points of genealogical knowledge (index databases, document collections, etc.) can therefore be divided into two types, namely those democratised and those focused on the genealogy of noble families. Sometimes they intermingle, e.g. during important events in the history of the nation, and at other times they are clearly demarcated. One of the longest-running pages dedicated to the genealogy of the Polish nobility is the *Wielcy.pl* database.<sup>19</sup> The *DNA Szlachty* initiative of the Podlasie Genealogical Society also attests to the persistence of the Sarmatian myth.<sup>20</sup> This is addressed to the descendants of the nobility from Mazovia, Podlasie, and the Dobryń and Łuków lands. The website contains a database of names with information on the capabilities of genetic genealogy in legitimising noble lineage. 'Thanks to Y-DNA testing, we can now verify both the legendary connections, and those recorded in mediaeval documents, between particular knightly families', write the site creators, who go on to invite 'all descendants of the Polish nobility' to test the

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<sup>18</sup> [genealogia.okiem.pl/](http://genealogia.okiem.pl/) (accessed: 16.11.2023).

<sup>19</sup> [wielcy.pl/](http://wielcy.pl/) (accessed: 16.11.2023).

<sup>20</sup> [kapica.org.pl/dna-szlachty/](http://kapica.org.pl/dna-szlachty/) (accessed: 16.11.2023).

patrilineal genetic markers in their Y chromosomes. Biological evidence is advanced to legitimise identity in the guise of testing patrimony (Scholar 2020, pp. 1–12). On the other hand, also peasant genealogy has become increasingly popular in Poland in the last few years, which is part of a folk turn in Polish historiography, in this context a bottom-up one (Pająk 2015).

#### *GENEALODZY PL*, OR THE NEED TO TAKE PART IN HISTORY

Social media offers numerous examples of how collective memory determines genealogical practices, as illustrated by the discussions in the *Genealogy PL* Facebook group.<sup>21</sup> Having analyzed the collective discourse on this largest and most popular Polish genealogy discussion group, I noted that the legitimizing and identity functions of collective memory in Poland, as noted by e.g., Polish sociologists Barbara Szacka (1995, pp. 70–71) and Marian Golka (2009, p. 33), are manifested on three levels. Briefly, they meet the following needs: (1) to legitimise identity through the discovery a noble lineage; (2) to have ancestors/relatives involved in the area of knowledge and the historical imagination of the nation, i.e. the right of possession of a common fragment of a great history; and (3) to be part of a community that remembers the past by sharing the same fragments of history. The first two needs are connected with genealogical identity – they ennoble the novice and his/her family. The third has to do with the genealogical community as researchers/explorers of the past. Genealogists organise time and history in a symbolic way, which is, incidentally, fundamental to the functioning of the social imagination (Baczko 1984). Each of these three levels enables a certain imaginary order to be legitimised. This, in turn, enables the researcher to construct their identity. It is also noteworthy that the studied narratives of amateurs indicate an almost equal participation of both genders in genealogical practice. There are some differences in the emphasis of elements of the family past (e.g. an emphasis on oral transmission in women versus facts supported by evidence in men), although these are embedded in cultural gender characteristics and are not always confirmed in specific cases.

The narratives created by the online community were collected using the methods and tools of ‘netnography’ (virtual ethnography), mainly the observation of participants’ online communication and its outcomes (Kozinets 2010, pp. 53–78). Observational data were then collected (copied/downloaded directly from the social media channel), encoded, and analysed. Netnography is a retroactive method, so it provided insights into social activities over many years – the last decade was considered in this research project.

Members of *Genealogy PL* Facebook group collectively contribute to their personal representations of the ancestral past. The initial purpose is expressed in threads that

<sup>21</sup> facebook.com/groups/170731399628806 (accessed: 20.042024). *Genealodzy PL* is a private group. It numbered approx. 4,700 members after 13 months.



usually boil down to requests for help in deciphering illegible and unclear register entries or details in photographs. But the dominant need of group members seems to be to know the social status and/or occupation of their ancestors. A question about this can also be formulated on the basis of the presumed etymology of the surname ('I suspect noble roots'), a set of presumptions about the person, or even details of the outfit in the photo, as this confirms 'what they [ancestors] looked like' [K10122017, K8122018]. This often pertains to belonging to a higher social stratum:

*Can anyone tell whether Wawrzyniec's 'social status' has been recorded?* [M16022019<sup>22</sup>]

*Hey, please help me correctly assign countries/origins, I'm reviewing 19th-century books from Volhynia (Velydnyky) in Polish, and I am not sure how to understand the social status hierarchy.* [K10012020]

*Can sons of the same father have different social statuses? One is a nobleman, poor but a nobleman, and the other is sometimes registered as a peasant.* [K7052020]

The awareness of an ancestor's noble connections as a significant socio-property stratum in the past entails several key factors. First, the status of the ancestor translates into the search methodology in a tangible way. As a rule, searches for people lower down the scale (peasants, burghers) are inherently constrained to the most inclusive categories of registers and censuses. Searching for 'blue bloods', by contrast, is a completely different matter, mainly on account of the economic and political importance of the nobility. The query methodology and the range of possibilities presented to the genealogist are strongly linked with the social status of family being searched (Domański 2019, pp. 187–208).

*You have to have the right roots [...] to have a tree like that'* [K11022018], notes a female group member in response to a post in which another genealogist describes findings dating back to the Middle Ages. Elsewhere we read 'The nobility has many more opportunities here'. [M13032019]

However, while preserving and consolidating an imaginary order by using genealogy to legitimise a noble origin has been known for centuries (Tazbir 1978), from an anthropological standpoint, the relations among genealogists (mainly beginners) from the moment they discover heraldic roots are of greater interest. The proband is characteristically dislocated within the framework of meanings determined by collective memory. Entitlement to these idiosyncratically exclusive areas of the national imagination can impact the manner of genealogical identification. Opening new gateways determines further ways of profiling interests ('I'm most interested in learning about the details of noble connections' [M19062018]) and bestows the privilege of studying elite sources, e.g. armorials, or lineage files containing legitimation of noble birth. In some cases, having a noble ancestor additionally increases the likelihood of

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<sup>22</sup> The source material from 2010–2020, stored in the form of textual narratives (originally in Polish), was accordingly coded [gender, date of publication of the statement/image] and interpreted.

getting information about him/her when querying library and online resources using a search engine (e.g., Google) – the ancestor turns out to be significant figure, and so his/her past loses its anonymity. The discovery and assimilation of such a genealogical trace and any content implied by its symbols and signs (a coat-of-arms, terms such as *nobilis*, *generosus*, *miles*, i.e., ‘[noble] born’, ‘honourable’, knight) illustrates the mechanisms of ennobling an individual’s genealogical identity. However, confirming noble roots do not always imply an extraordinary expansion of the field of genealogical exploration, as group participants point out. Adding members of the minor landed gentry of north-eastern Mazovia or the Łomża Land to the family tree does not actually change much. ‘If I find any nobility at all,’ writes one user, ‘it is rather Mazovian, with 17 goats in one cottage and with people...’ [M14042014]. In general, the 19th century and the days of the Partitions problematise the issue of nobility. A given person sometimes appears in the sources as a nobleman; at other times the title is omitted. A misalliance or an illegitimate child in the family could cause nobility to be lost or gained. It is not always apparent and easy to interpret. As a rule, however, due to a whole host of cultural contexts, even the slightest hint of noble roots assumes a distinct power of influence. It seldom remains indifferent to the person who uncovered it. It can ennoble, arouse curiosity, or trigger dissonance. ‘I don’t care about noble origins, but...’, is a recurring phrase on many discussion threads [e.g., K5052018, M7052019, K5072016, K26112016].

*I also found the siblings of a presumed great-grandmother [...] I came across a few pages [...] where ‘parents’ turned out to have a noble origin. Except that my great-grandmother was not one of their children. What now? How can I be sure that it really is her and her parents? [M17032018]*

*Could the impoverished nobility have been employed in milling? I don’t care about noble origins, but while I have so many pieces of information, these are dry facts and I wanted to consult. [...] Comment: Noble origin is not laziness but work. It was very often possible to come across people of noble birth working in various professions. [...] Being noble is not property wealth. [KM5052018]*

Interest in a family’s history can sometimes be motivated by verbal information about a coat-of-arms, property lost in cards or dissipated through wine, women and song, and other situations that, in the minds of the descendants, conceal a lost or forgotten nobility. Genealogy enables identity to be ‘found’ (or ‘invented’; this is really all about selectively processing knowledge):

*I’m especially [looking for] [...] information about the coat-of-arms, because he was ennobled. The claim about [my ancestor] has been repeated for generations. Although I have not found any papers on him, certain circumstances might point to him. [M7042018]*

A request or help in analysing testimonies, or even presumptions, about a supposed noble past often elicits responses from group members who specialize in noble genealogy and heraldry, and whose education and/or experience often predates the digital age (some are even long-term members of the Polish Nobility Association).

These members provide information on legal and economic regulations, clarify ambiguities, help interpret coats-of-arms, and decipher difficult Latin transcriptions. Subtle threads of connections can be observed being formed in this manner in the *Genealogy PL* community. Right next to these voices come others critically disposed towards the nobility. These circles see post-noble genealogy as a vestige of former social relationships. The idea of searching for heraldic roots arouses a variety of controversies, and is often perceived as a fad for beginners: The third of the Genealogical Ten Commandments, posted on the *More Maiorum*<sup>23</sup> magazine website, reads ‘you shalt not ennoble thy family by force.’ It is cited here by a user [M15032014]. There are sceptical remarks under entries from beginners, e.g., ‘Is looking for your ancestors the only reason you supposedly have a noble origin?’, ‘Without wishing to undermine your nobility, I suggest you focus on a detailed analysis of specific documents from a given period [...]’ etc. [M3112016, K04072018, MK7062019].

Nevertheless, it would be an oversimplification to reduce the entire circulation of meanings in Polish genealogies to a noble-peasant dichotomy. With genealogy, any traces that refer to the ‘great figures’ and ‘major events’ that constitute the common knowledge of the past can ensure a symbolic ‘advance or bestow a sense of pride. This evinces a universal need to have one’s own ‘bit of history’ (Edwards, Lovell 1998). Democratizing memory requires names or dates that have already resounded in history. As Joanna Kurczewska and Paweł Kosicki note, since the political transformation and the emergence of civil society in 1989 in Poland, family history has had to be placed in an intelligible framework; one that gives meaning to ‘small, personal stories (Kosicki, Kurczewska 2006, p. 74).

The mechanism of legitimacy is also revealed in discussion threads, which ultimately devolve into requests to identify a uniform, an order pinned on the chest, a cap or button (and other ‘special marks’) in a photograph of an ancestor attached to a post. Members create reference points by inserting links, graphics found on the internet or photographs from their own collections, retouching details to make them more visible. Deciphering the code may also reveal additional meanings, such as attachment to a particular formation, rank, participation in a famous event or battle in an armed conflict or uprising. This kind of trace does not so much sort out the scattered elements of the family narrative as link it to other national and global channels of history (Holland 1991, p. 3). Moreover, group members post queries because of the need to confirm identity, e.g. ‘I am looking for [my great-grandfather] in some military documents [...], can you help?’, ‘I am looking for information about my grandfather, i.e. where he served and for how long’, ‘I have a family history that I would like to verify; [...] where can I find a reference to [my great-grandmother’s brother] in the Tsarist army?’ [M20072010, M12082012, K24062014]. The phrases ‘I am looking for’ and ‘I want to verify/confirm’ appear at every turn. The Internet supports memory by enabling genealogists to navigate the past through the

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<sup>23</sup> *More Maiorum* – the Polish Genealogical online journal created by professional and amateur family historians.

mediation of signs, traces and meanings (Ricoeur 1982, p. 15). Traces found online then anchor family and personal histories 'outward', in larger historical narratives. The focal points of historical memory, e.g. the two world wars, uprisings and battles, in which ancestors participated, begin to serve as centres of imagination and points of reference for genealogists. As William Warner points out, the fact that members share these symbols only among themselves and cannot do so with others simultaneously generates inclusivity and exclusivity that reinforce group solidarity (Warner 1959, p. 239). Therefore, it is not without reason that registers, censuses and lists of names are the natural environment of amateur genealogists, and that for many of them, these are their initial point of contact with the past.

In the present context, a genealogical query is no longer limited to the examination of personal records but also books, magazines, and newspapers stored in digital libraries (in which case, automatic indexing programs enable searches of specific keywords, even names). The forum confirms this: 'that I found a mention of my 2x great-grandfather in this book' [M10102017], 'but I am excited to have found a whole file about my grandmother's niece in the Kujawsko-Pomorska Digital Library' [K19032019]. When exploring these kinds of resources, the exclusionary tension between the private and the public in how the past is remembered is swept away. The *Polish Declarations of Friendship and Admiration for the United States*<sup>24</sup> is a vivid example of how 'common' fragments of genealogy can come about. In 1926, approximately 5.5 million Polish teachers and school pupils placed their signatures under their wishes for the American people on the 150th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. Hyperlinks to the 111 volumes of the manuscript, stored and made available in digital format by the U.S. Library of Congress, appeared online in Polish in the autumn of 2017 (although the first few volumes had been obtained by Polish genealogists in 2006). The publication of the collection initiated several indexing projects, led by the *Poland 1926* website<sup>25</sup>. The Polish Genealogical Society search engine was used to create the Collective Portrait of the Second Polish Republic, with input from libraries, associations and local communities. Links to the database of signatures (divided into regions and towns), and entries encouraging others to search, soon began to appear on the forum. The signature ('Look, I found my great-grandfather's signature' [K19062018]), like the birth certificate or the photograph, became an epiphenomenon (an attribute, as it were) of the absent person, and ultimately his/her representation.

Cultural communication in the virtual community investigated by the present author occurs through the clash of the opposing, but on many levels complementary, needs of legitimacy/prestige (exceptionality) and belonging to a community of practices and ideas. Moreover, the *Genealodzy PL* group presents genealogy as a social game of meanings with a collective imagination, where a gravitation towards great

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<sup>24</sup> [culture.pl/pl/artykul/sto-lat-usa-polska-deklaracja-o-podziwie-i-przyjazni-dla-stanow-zjednoczonych-dostepna-online](http://culture.pl/pl/artykul/sto-lat-usa-polska-deklaracja-o-podziwie-i-przyjazni-dla-stanow-zjednoczonych-dostepna-online) (accessed: 27.11.2023).

<sup>25</sup> [polska1926.pl/blog/15](http://polska1926.pl/blog/15) (accessed: 27.11.2023). It is administered by the KARTA Centre.

myths can be observed on the one hand, and a desire to tell an intimate personal story from the bottom up on the other.

GENEALOGY AGAINST THE BACKGROUND OF FAMILY HISTORY:  
HOW TO INVESTIGATE INDIVIDUAL CASES

In addition to collective genealogical practices (described above), ethnography also makes it possible to explore individual ways of constructing genealogical narratives and shaping identities from family histories. My ethnographic encounters with genealogists have allowed me to look at the phenomenon of genealogy as a space of memory practices using appropriate tools and methods specific to the field, as well as genealogy as memory/imagination itself – the narrative that is produced in this way. In the course of my participation in the genealogy community and observing their practices, I made a selection of case studies (based on the criteria of differences in approaches to genealogy) that I decided to explore in more depth during 2018–2021. The central characters of the case studies had to answer a few initial questions. Two basic questions concerned whether, to what extent, and why the subject felt like an amateur genealogist (‘Do you feel like an amateur genealogist, and if so, why?’) and determined the purpose and meaning of genealogy in their lives (‘Why are you doing this?’). Everyone answered the first question similarly. They defined themselves as amateurs, who were constantly learning the craft (Interviewee 1: ‘I’m constantly learning what I need at any given moment’, I2: ‘I feel like an amateur in terms of searching, including information about places associated with ancestors’, I3: ‘I still feel like an amateur genealogist, perhaps with years of experience with a slightly wider horizon’). By contrast, answers to the question about the meaning of the research in the light of all the collected material showed different approaches to genealogy. The following issues emerged here: (IR1) a focus on preserving the memory of the past for posterity, (IR2) a focus on the genealogist as the proband and the ties linking to her (mainly female) ancestors; and (IR3) an approach exposing the autotelic value of genealogy, i.e. making it an end in itself.

*I1: [My grandchildren] should know where they came from. Where they came from and what their roots are. Not wealth, titles, coats of arms, estates, farms ... these are all acquisitions. But knowledge about your family, [...] should be preserved. [...] I do it to leave a memory.*

*I2: I feel a connection with my ancestors and my ancestor system, I feel a need to learn about the people who brought me into the world.*

*I3: Genealogy is an inseparable part of me, it has been with me since early adolescence, when, as I remember, it bore the hallmarks of detective mysteries, [...] a game in which I uncovered more and more fragments of family history and the old days. This feeling is still with me.*

Conversations with genealogists about the family’s past and its discovery were enriched by the presence of photographs and other family memorabilia, journeys to places where ancestors lived – those near and those far away, as well as wandering

through cemeteries and visits to archives. Such research experiences were complemented by joint immersion in genealogical cyberspace and virtual contacts maintained through instant messaging (IM).<sup>26</sup> I assumed the position of an internal, largely engaged observer, who ‘followed’ the subjects carefully and deliberately. Multi-sited ethnography was employed. This assumes that the researcher is mobile and follows the subject. I was interested in two fundamental areas: (1) genealogy as a practice (I asked: ‘How did it start?’, ‘What methods and tools do you use to find information?’, ‘What sources do you use?’, ‘What do you feel when you are in an archive?’, ‘Why do you do this? What’s the point?’); and (2) genealogy as a story about the past (‘Please tell me about your ancestors,’ ‘Tell me the family story that is most important to you,’ ‘Who is in this photo?’, ‘Take me to X’s grave and tell me about him/her’). My basic methodology for collecting materials in the field were an in-depth, ethnographic narrative interview, to a minor extent inspired by a questionnaire (only partially; it was episodically structured and departed from a rigid question-answer framework over time), and an observation of the subjects based on the dialectic of experience and interpretation. The methodology supporting the interview and observation was an analysis of existing qualitative data, mainly data on the structure and content of family trees (which were prepared by genealogists using various traditional and digital tools), and strategies for handling textual narratives about genealogy, e.g., original publications and notes accompanying family trees. Another important task involved reviewing recordings of genealogical interviews conducted by genealogists with both close and distant relatives. Using applicable netnographic techniques, I also documented and analysed selected kinds of activity in genealogical cyberspace: in special forums, in discussion groups and on Facebook profiles. This was long-term fieldwork immersion – a kind of total experience that requires the anthropologist to share all his/her intellectual, physical, emotional, political or intuitive resources (Okely 1992, p. 8). These case studies provided an insight into the diversity of approaches to ancestral pursuits, also illustrating the clash between the two trends mentioned above, namely those based on rootedness and nobility, and the global, democratising ones.

#### CONCLUSION

In the course of my research, I have observed two types of search practices in which the genealogist implements the theme of *homo explorens*, reformulating the components of his/her identity. Over time, these insights have made it possible to create two basic categories for ordering the observable strategies of identification through genealogy. The first is genealogical identification, derived from traces and the cultural meanings behind them, and the contexts of the similarities and

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<sup>26</sup> The use of IM was necessitated by the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic (The Internet became an indispensable medium).

differences between family members and generational experiences, through a specific genealogical narrative. This is what Minicuci (1986, p. 338) recognises in terms of processability and 'conjunctural identity'. The second responds to identification with the genealogist-researcher model, and is formed in the course of participating in the collective discourse of genealogical knowledge.

The revalidation of traces of the past using genealogy can have the appearance of compensating for what has suddenly ceased to be present, but has communicated its absence through an evocative medium such as an ancestor's name on the Internet. 'Acts of remembrance are significant, symbolically and practically, to each of us,' says Daniel H. Wagner (2006, p. 3) and continues 'most certainly because we are mortal'. Contact with a trace seems to be a contact with death, which Western culture has hastily erased from the natural order of things. Furthermore, we are at a moment in history where the tropes of history are being resurrected by machines. A few decades ago, machines began to be used to scan signed documents. Over time, they were programmed to revive images of ancestors using artificial intelligence. 'Resurrected' ancestors give family genealogy enthusiasts the illusion of being in the here and now, transporting them (genealogists) to 'that time' for a moment. The past releases layers of nostalgia and activates resentments, which then influence how people perceive the world (Lowenthal 1989, pp. 18–32). In this sense, genealogy is a kind of phantom pain; the place where *retrotopias* are created, that is, as Zygmunt Baumann writes, 'visions located in the lost/stolen/abandoned but undead past' (Baumann 2017, p. 5). This is perfectly apparent in post-Sarmatian (for more about 'post-historical Sarmatism' see: Czapliński 2015, p. 33) threads on Polish genealogical websites. However, contrary to Baumann (2017, pp. 8–9), who claims that 'retrotopian' identities are characterised by a lack of attachment to what is yet to come, I believe that this issue is not so simple in the case of genealogy. On the one hand, genealogy is a process of commemoration, but on the other, it bears testimony to the fact that inherited memory resources not only govern the present. Their administrator, guardian and interpreter affect the future and have agency, i.e., the ability to create and transform reality. It can even be said that mere digitally processed material traces of ancestors themselves cease to exist for genealogists today. It is rather the genealogists who exist for them.

Each added level of the tree is a repetitive rhythm of biographies that lend themselves to various treatments, e.g., negotiating old polyphonic family narratives, written from the perspective of elites and seniors, and constructing new ones from the bottom up. 'Searching for an ancestor' means to pass from one myth to another or to completely subconsciously perpetuate these mythical narratives, from which the yoke cannot be broken (e.g., the Sarmatian myth). The condition of the genealogical imagination in Poland is postmodern, as it was established in a wave of changes in the ways of understanding history. Genealogists prefer to deconstruct the official historical narrative, but nevertheless are themselves constantly on the lookout for dates, places, names and links to the so-called 'Great History'.

Genealogy is a more or less conscious endeavour to maintain a certain *status quo* – the state of ‘being a searcher’ as the preferred strategy of moving among the traces of one’s ancestors. The genealogist, the titular *homo explorens*, plays a game based on a string of discoveries that he/she expects will never end. Genealogical research entails oscillating between the present and the past, fact and myth, nostalgia and restraint, the euphoria of discovery and the reflecting on what requires further enquiry. The heuristic nature of genealogy, which results from a creative approach to the traces of one’s family history, emphasises this context even more. ‘Genealogy’ as a project is infinite and being faced with the infinity of the family tree induces a kind of humility with respect to the past. The dialectic of searching and finding gives the practice of genealogy a borderline status. In this sense, it is not so much the object of interest and search that seduces the genealogist as the path travelled while following, collecting and deciphering obliterated traces. This becomes an end in itself.

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MARTA RACZYŃSKA-KRUK

*HOMO EXPLORENS* AND HIS NOSTALGIA.  
CULTURAL CONTEXTS OF AMATEUR GENEALOGY  
IN CONTEMPORARY POLAND

**Keywords:** genealogy, family history, Poland, collective memory, memory studies

The article deals with the cultural contexts of the phenomenon of popular genealogy in contemporary Poland. The author looks at the external and internal factors shaping the phenomenon of Polish genealogical research and discusses the results of her research conducted as part of the project 'Between the Great History and Small Histories. Popular Genealogy in Present-day Poland'. As an introduction to the issue, the author gave an overview of the history of amateur genealogy in Poland against the background of social and cultural changes. She also drew attention to the phenomenon of so-called cybergenealogy, i.e. the effect of the development of information technologies and social media on the popularity of genealogy and the ways in which Poles practice it, paying attention to the problem of memory and collective imagination. The main question posed by the author is: what can we deduce about the condition of contemporary Polish collective memory from community genealogical practices? This is illustrated by an analysis of the discourse in the Genealodzy PL discussion group on Facebook. The article also includes reflections from case study research on individual genealogical practices.

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