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EYEWITNESSES' ACCOUNTS AS AN HISTORICAL SOURCE. RESEARCH EXPERIENCES

A historian conducting research on a 20th century question as a rule gets into trouble because the source materials are so abundant that he is unable to take all of them into account. But there is no need to do so¹. What is necessary is a competent selection of the available material, which will enable us to elucidate the question we are discussing in the most objective (solid) way. The selection cannot, of course, consist in accepting only one point of view, for instance, in showing only the positive sides while ignoring the negative ones, or *vice versa*. I assume at the very outset that an honest historian (and only such historians should conduct research) will not tendentiously select materials which confirm his theses and opinions, but will strive after the greatest possible objectivity, for this is what scientific honesty means.

In accordance with the standing canons we cannot, however, base our research on only one kind of sources. It would be difficult, for example, to show recent everyday life only on the basis of archival sources. What kind of everyday life would that be? Similarly, without considering witnesses' accounts we cannot discuss the history of the political opposition in the Polish People's Republic, in any case this would not be advisable. I have in mind not only representatives of the opposition but

¹ We are in a comfortable situation in this respect, especially compared with scholars conducting research on earlier epochs (e.g. on Antiquity or the Middle Ages), who have to build their theories on the basis of scarce sources. For example, when we conduct research on the organisation and functioning of the administrative authorities in the Second Republic we do not have to study all the available source materials concerning, for instance, the starosts' offices to learn the specific character of this question. We may confine ourselves to an honest selection of the material.

also supporters of the government. If we base our research on what only one of these groups has to say, the picture will not be complete. If we show the question only through the prism of materials produced by the Security Service, this will distort the whole research process.

Witnesses' accounts can be regarded as an essential, specific historical source. The most valuable will be the accounts given by a direct participant, that is, a person who on the basis of his/her own observations can report on a fact or event which is a subject of historical research. We will distinguish facts from events and will strive to stress the difference between individual and complex facts², for instance, between the conclusion that Stepan Fedak, an activist of the Ukrainian Military Organisation, was arrested after his attempt in Lwów on Józef Piłsudski's life, and a presentation of the genesis, circumstances and consequences of this fact³.

The value of witnesses' accounts will differ depending on their position with regard to the facts and events which they relate. The value of the information we obtain will depend first and foremost on the witness's competence, on whether he/she is entitled to give an account⁴. A witness could take part in an event or fact. In this case it will be necessary to establish the kind of his participation. Did he have an essential influence on the decisions which were taken or did he only carry them out? He may have only been a passive observer who did not get an insight into the mechanism of the whole problem. The degree of

² Z. Zieliński, *Rola historyka w gromadzeniu relacji świadków (Historian's Role in Gathering Witnesses' Accounts)*, "Archiwa, Biblioteki i Muzea Kościelne", 1974, vol. 28, p. 21.

³ The assault on the Chief of State, carried out by the Ukrainian Military Organisation on 25.9.1921, is regarded as one of the most spectacular steps taken by this organisation. It was Stepan Fedak who shot at Piłsudski. The voivode of Lwów, K. Grabowski, was wounded in the shooting. For more details see: G. Mazur, *Zamach na marszałka Józefa Piłsudskiego (The Attempt on Marshal Józef Piłsudski's Life)*, in: *Losy Polaków wśród swoich i obcych*, ed. by T. Radzik and R. Litwiński, Lublin 2005, pp. 407–417.

⁴ While gathering accounts, I met a person who said she had a great deal of information based on her own observation on the activity of the State Police in the Second Republic. When I asked about her birth date, it turned out she was born at the end of the 1930s. All the items of information she gave me came from generally accessible literature. Being a policeman's descendant, she felt it was her duty to give what, in her opinion, was valuable information.

the witness's personal engagement will be important too. For instance, in the accounts given by family members of the Polish Army officers and soldiers, functionaries of the Frontier Protection Corps, the State Police and the Police of the Silesian Voivodship it is difficult to find any negative information about these formations⁵.

As Zygmunt Zieliński has rightly pointed out, a competent witness can supply a researcher of recent times with two kinds of source materials. The material may be in the form of a relation which the historian did not control when it was made. This may be, for instance, a spontaneously written recollection, thematically and chronologically restricted by the witness, or one written under the influence of some outward encouragement. Secondly, the material may be in the form of a previously prepared interview or questionnaire. In this case all a researcher has to do is to formulate a set of questions in order to obtain the information he is interested in and which can be used for his analysis⁶.

We must remember, of course, that memory can be deceptive. This is why our approach to reminiscences which were written after a lapse of time will be different from the way we treat diaries, in which authors put their remarks straightaway, frequently on the spur of the moment. Another approach is necessary in case of oral accounts obtained in interviews with the participants and witnesses of an event. A critical evaluation of all kinds of accounts is one of the basic canons of a historian. This means that we must keep several important rules in mind. Let us stress that a witness usually presents his own version of the experiences he went through, which does not detract from its value as an historical source. But it means that the researcher

⁵ To make this question clearer let us point out that during the interwar period, when the national model of police formation had been established, we had two civilian state security organisations: the State Police which functioned in fifteen voivodships (those of Białystok, Kielce, Lublin, Lwów, Łódź, Cracow, Nowogródek, Polesie, Pomerania, Poznań, Stanisławów, Tarnopol, Warsaw, Wilno and Volhynia) and in the capital city of Warsaw, as well as the Police of the Silesian Voivodship which functioned in the autonomous Silesian voivodship. For more details see R. Litwiński, *Korpus policji w II Rzeczypospolitej. Służba i życie prywatne (The Police Corps in the Second Republic. The Service and Private Life)*, Lublin 2007.

⁶ Z. Zieliński, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

must submit the information he has received to a solid research process to get the objective truth.

To sum up let us point out that a witness's account can be weakened by several factors:

1. by mnemonic modifications (elimination of some details, modification of the message under the influence of information the witness has read or heard);
2. by emotional factors; the accounts given, e.g., by policemen's family members are frequently imbued with the tragedy of the war years and the time of repression in People's Poland. Due to earlier persecutions, all information which might cast unfavourable light on the person a witness describes is consciously or unconsciously eliminated⁷. For instance, the daughter of a policeman stated that her father had left the police in the 1930s for health reasons, but the man's personal documents kept in the State Archives of the Tarnopol Region in Tarnopol in Ukraine show that he was dismissed after disciplinary proceedings for abuse of power. The daughter may not have known about it for one can hardly expect a father to tell a teenage daughter the true reason why he left the service.
3. by a witness's personal convictions or political opinions; the reminiscences written by the Second Republic's last prime minister, Sławoj Felicjan Składkowski, *Administrative and Other Stories* and *This Is Not the Defendant's Last Word* were an attempt to defend the decisions taken by the government on the eve of the war⁸. If we consider such factors as Poland's economic capacity at that time and the international situation, we must admit that Składkowski is right

⁷ On the whole one can say that as a result of the tragic war years (the Katyń crime, the hell of the deportations) recollections of a ghastly past dominate in the consciousness of these people. In this respect they can be compared with the traumatic memory caused by the Holocaust. They cast a shadow on all recollections concerning the past of the prewar policemen killed by Soviet occupiers. For the relationship between memory and history see E. Domańska, *Wprowadzenie: Pamięć, etyka i historia (Introduction: Memory, Ethics and History)* in: *Pamięć, etyka i historia. Anglo-amerykańska teoria historiografii lat dziewięćdziesiątych*, ed. E. Domańska, Poznań 2002, pp. 13–18.

⁸ S. Składkowski, *Kwiatuszki administracyjne i inne (Administrative and Other Stories)*, Warszawa 2005; idem, *Nie ostatnie słowo oskarżonego (This Is Not the Defendant's Last Word)*, Warszawa 2003.

on many points. If a witness relates events which took place in the political or world-view group with which he is linked, his account is usually modified and the facts are selected to suit the interests of that group⁹. For instance, it would be pointless to look for essential, critical information on Józef Piłsudski in the reminiscences of the Piłsudskiites. This would not give us a full picture. This is why in an evaluation of the historical value of an account the basic criteria are: the author, the time, the place and the circumstances in which an account was made.

The most valuable will be accounts written straightaway by a direct participant in an event, supplemented by spontaneous reflections. Let us take as an example the diary written by Kordian Zamorski, a lieutenant-general of the Polish Army, who at the request of Józef Piłsudski became chief of the State Police in 1935. Thanks to the fact that the general kept the diary day by day, we can learn his feelings and opinions. For instance, on January 17th, 1935 he noted: "The Marshal signed a decree which put me at the disposal of the Min(istry) of Int(ernal) A(ffairs) and relieved me of duty. So it has happened. He does not want me in the Army, let him go to the devil." On February 12th, evaluating the police corps, he noted: "Good God! What an atmosphere! The officers are churls, mostly with only home education, just refuse from the army or people who have never served in any army. People with no moral backbone, flunkies, mean and guileful. ...Every day brings some new revelations: a favourite of voivode Jaroszewicz, commissioner Jurczak, a highlander from the region of N(owy) Sącz, a former Austrian lieutenant torments soldiers to such an extent that two have committed suicide." He calls others sluggards and drunkards¹⁰. The author probably did not foresee that his diary would ever be published. Otherwise he would not have included such severe judgments. This is a very interesting account for it reveals the author's true feelings; Zamorski's negative impression was undoubtedly aggravated by his transfer from the army to the police.

Leopold Tyrmand's earlier notes were touched up in his *Diary of 1954*. In 1973–1978 Tyrmand published extensive

⁹ Z. Zieliński, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

¹⁰ Józef Piłsudski Institute in London, K. Zamorski's diary.

fragments of his *Diary* in the London periodical "Wiadomości" ("News"). When the whole diary was published in book form in 1980, Tyrmand was accused of having made changes during his stay abroad. Some people even maintained that the diary was written after he left the country. In fact, the author made changes before the publication of the diary. The surviving fragments of the manuscript show that the author edited it three times. The stylistic modifications he made in the 1970s allowed specialists to point out changes in language, compared with the text he wrote between January 1 and April 2, 1954; the result was that the "juicy freshness of impressions and the authenticity of events described on the spur of the moment" were lost. The content of the book was also subjected to modifications of a political character. In this way the diary matured together with its author, but it lost its original character. However, the original version of the diary with its unique atmosphere was finally published in 1999¹¹.

The main task of researchers specialising in most recent times is to help the eyewitness to reveal the actual state; this is sometimes very difficult. I assume, of course, as has already been mentioned, that we conduct our research in a solid way, striving for objectivity. I reject any manipulation or stretching of facts. It is also impermissible to adopt a thesis at the outset and select only the information that fits it, with the exclusion of other kinds of information. By "helping the witness" I mean endeavours to steer him so that he should give us, in a concrete and precise way, all items of information (positive as well as negative ones) on the question we are interested in. It is impermissible to suggest replies. The questions which we prepare are to fill the gaps in source materials. The steering of the witness is all the more advisable as we shall have to count with "deceptive memory", a fact which has already been mentioned, or with ignorance of general events. For instance, during my conversation with the daughter of the State Police inspector, Bronisław Ludwikowski, I tried for a long time to explain it to her that her father could not have been arrested in Kielce by the NKVD on September 3, 1939, but that he left the town on that day on the order of the State Police Headquarters in Warsaw. The NKVD

¹¹ L. Tyrmand, *Dziennik 1954 — wersja oryginalna (Diary 1954 — original version)*, ed. H. Dąbko, Warszawa 1999.

arrested him in Równe after September 17, a fact confirmed by Soviet documents.

Evan McGilvray's book *The Black Devils' March. A Doomed Odyssey. The 1st Polish Armoured Division 1939–45* (Polish translation Poznań 2006) can be mentioned as an example of an improper (not to say tendentious) use of accounts. The author says in the preface that the book is a history of a Polish armoured unit commanded by General Maczek. He stresses that he is deeply grateful to many persons, in particular to his deceased neighbour, Antoni Połczyński, who was the first to tell him the story of this unit, about which he had never heard before¹². A praiseworthy initiative. Polish participation in World War II is seldom shown in such favourable light in the West as it is in McGilvray's book. So is it worth to take up the cudgels? The greatest number of reservations can be raised about the first chapter in which the author frequently bases the story on accounts. The result is that the picture of relations in the Second Republic is distorted. The Polish Legions' officers are called amateurs by the author. According to him, Warsaw was saved in August 1920 by General Maxime Weygand. He says point-blank that interwar Poland "ignored not only technological development but also talented officers who were not Piłsudskiites, their opinions were not taken into consideration and they were not promoted"¹³. These conclusions remind one of the opinions expressed during the work of the commission which investigated the reasons for Poland's September defeat. The author completely ignores the capability of a state which was resurrected after 123 years of foreign rule. He does not take into account the economic and social problems of the Polish state. If he found so many faults with "the authors of the September defeat", why did he not evaluate the 1940 campaign in France? Let us remember that the Polish war doctrine was, to a large extent, based on French experiences. Poland followed the example of a state which was one of the victors in World War I and was regarded as a military power. Moreover, the author has failed to confront the accounts he had gathered with the archival materials in Poland, even though he spent several years in this country.

¹² E. McGilvray, *The Black Devils' March. A Doomed Odyssey. The 1st Polish Armoured Division 1939–45*, Solihull 2005, p. VI.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 16.

As has already been mentioned, we can get a witness's account in the form of a spontaneous relation or in the form of an interview for which the researcher has prepared a set of questions. While I was gathering material for my monograph *Korpus Policji w II Rzeczypospolitej. Służba i życie prywatne (The Police Corps in the Second Republic. The Service and Private Life)* I did my best to get information on those elements of the policemen's everyday life which cannot be found in archival sources, printed materials, the press and literature dealing with this subject. I was interested mainly in information on the policemen's private life, their financial situation, their families, the relationship between their service and family life, what their family members thought of them, their participation in festivities and ceremonies, the way they spent their free time. I realised therefore that accounts by participants and witnesses of events would be indispensable in my research.

The basic task was to work out a questionnaire which would inspire the respondents to give me the information which I most needed. I found this indispensable after the experiences which I acquired in the course of my first conversations with the family members of the policemen who had been murdered in Tver and buried at Mednoye. It was difficult during these conversations to switch to other subjects than the policemen's stay in Soviet captivity (until their murder in Tver), the fate of their families in exile and the repressive measures in People's Poland. But these tragic and frequently very interesting relations were not the main subject of my interests. This is why I decided to work out a specific questionnaire, laying the main stress on private life and information of a personal character¹⁴.

I tried above all to obtain information on the witnesses themselves (in many cases they were only indirect witnesses, being members of a policeman's family). This is why each person who supplied me with information on a police functionary had to answer the following questions: 1) first name and surname, 2) date and place of birth, 3) education, 4) degree of relationship, 5) recollections about the person referred to. In this way I obtained the basic information about the respondents and their relations with prewar policemen.

¹⁴ This was important for the interviews I held have shown that my interlocutors base their knowledge of political life in the Second Republic mainly on generally accessible literature.

As regards the police functionaries themselves I was interested in the following questions: 1) first name and surname, 2) date and place of birth, 3) father's first name, 4) mother's first name, 5) social background, 6) nationality background, 7) education (schools and courses completed), 8) course of military service, 9) occupational career before the respondent joined the police, 10) the date of joining the police, 11) course of service in the police, 12) marital status, 13) first name and surname of wife (or husband, for women were also employed in the police), 14) social origin of wife (husband), 15) nationality background of wife (husband), 16) education of wife (husband), 17) number of children, 18) childrens' education, 19) the material situation of the functionary's family during his service, 20) housing conditions of the functionary's family during his service, 21) influence of police service on family life, 22) the way the functionary spent his free time, 23) the functionary's social contacts, 24) family celebrations, 25) neighbours' attitude to the policeman and his family, 26) the functionary's fate during World War II, 27) the functionary's fate after World War II.

When the questionnaire was ready, the basic task was to reach people who in one way or another were linked with the prewar police. I realised that I could carry out my search in two directions. The first was to establish contact with the voivodship centres of the "Katyń Family" Association, which included family members of persons who were murdered in the Soviet Union in the spring of 1940. I must admit that this way turned out to be very fruitful. In many cases I was very kindly received by the Association's representatives, who did their best to help me. The other way was to publish announcements about the research work I was conducting in the national and regional press (both in dailies and periodicals). The result was that I established personal or written contacts with many persons who agreed to fill in my questionnaire, supplementing it with materials (originals or photocopies) which had for long been hidden in domestic archives.

In the majority of cases both the prewar functionaries and members of their families welcomed the fact that this kind of research work had been undertaken and gave me far-reaching assistance. But in some cases my request was rejected or was accepted on condition that I would not publish that person's surname. Though this surprised me at first, I came to fully under-

stand that attitude. After many years of persecutions in postwar Poland, when it was sometimes better to conceal one's origin, people were still afraid of revealing what in many cases was a glorious past. What is significant is that the greatest number of reservations of this kind was made during Leszek Miller's premiership. The respondents stressed that they were frightened by the post-communist roots of the authorities then in power in Poland.

Thanks to my questionnaire I managed to gather over 100 accounts, most of them being indirect accounts, made by members of policemen's families. They vary greatly in value but they provide a great deal of interesting information on the relationship between family life and the policemen's daily service, that is questions which cannot be elucidated by a search in archives and libraries. What makes these accounts valuable is also the fact that the indirect witnesses who gave detailed information on, for instance, the course of a policeman's service, did this on the basis of personal materials gathered in family collections. For instance, in Cracow I managed to get in touch with the son of a prewar State Police candidate who was a lecturer at the police school at Mosty Wielkie. He gave me access to the family archives which comprise materials on his father's school education and the course of his service in the army and police. I was also allowed to copy several score photographs showing the everyday life of policemen. The son of a policeman who had served in the Wilno region has similarly rich archives at Międzychód. I succeeded in establishing many contacts of this kind. Thanks to this I have gathered about 500 photographs which are an excellent documentary material.

To sum up let us stress that accounts are an indispensable source for researchers specialising in most recent times. Their lack cannot be compensated by anything else. But they must be subjected to a proper, critical systematic research which will determine their actual value. As has been stated at the outset, any manipulation with the collected material is out of the question, nor can the researcher suggest to the witness what reply he should give. The above-mentioned "help to the witness" must be an element in an honest research process which will lead to the greatest possible objectivity, a process understood as elucidation of a fact or event from all possible sides which will reveal its positive as well as negative elements.

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