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Silesian-Texans' Memories as Recorded in Autobiographical Accounts

Abstract: The paper discusses the significance of immigrants' memory in exile as well as its influence on the new lifestyle people have to adjust to in unknown surroundings. The author concentrates on a group of Silesian-Texans who left their homeland in Upper Silesia in the 19th century and found their first settlement in Panna Maria, Texas, USA. That emigration was a challenge for those migrants, and they had to go through difficult cultural, social and economic changes in the remote area. However, they never wanted to forget about their Silesian home. That is why they tried to preserve contact with their Polish families in the form of letters, short notes and stories. This paper analyses the unique autobiographical accounts which were used as the correspondence between the old homeland and new homeland for Silesian migrants. They were written mainly in the forms of letters, but there could also be found diaries and stories which depict their life

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in the USA. Those autobiographical accounts are based on migrant reality, without distorting it, thus presenting the devotion towards Polish and American culture, religion and society. The author of this paper explores the most crucial aspects of life for Silesian migrants which shaped their identity in the USA on the basis of the preserved materials and interviews.

Key words: memory, autobiography, Silesian-Texans, adaptation, homeland.

Introduction and Literature Review

What is memory? Is memory significant? Do we need it? What does memory mean to an emigrant who leaves their homeland? Those questions have been crucial in the life of emigrants in every decade and century. Certainly, there are various definitions of the concept of memory. For Aristotle:

Memory is neither Perception nor Conception, but a state or affection for one of these, conditioned by lapse of time. It is a fixed image analysed as a picture of the object from which it derives. It is moreover remembering about something a man has learned, seen, heard or [sth] that he has experienced¹.

Paul Ricoeur points out that “recollection has the character of a print on human consciousness, so the act of remembering is realized due to the lapse of time”². One of the most beautiful and valuable definitions of memory is presented by St. Augustine in his *Confessions*, where the author says:

Great is the power of memory. It is a true marvel, O my God, a profound and infinite multiplicity! And this is the mind, and this I myself am. What, then,

¹ <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/memory.html> [accessed on: February 18th, 2017].

² P. Ricoeur, *Pamięć, historia zapomnienie*, Kraków 2012, pp. 31-32. [all quotations from Polish sources translated in this article by P. Nosiadek]

am I, O my God? Of what nature am I? A life various, and manifold, and exceedingly vast. Behold in the numberless halls and caves, in the innumerable fields and dens and caverns of my memory, full without measure of numberless kinds of things -- present there either through images as all bodies are; or present in the things themselves as are our thoughts; or by some notion or observation as our emotions are, which the memory retains even though the mind feels them no longer, as long as whatever is in the memory is also in the mind. So great is the power of memory, so great the power of life in man, whose life is mortal!³.

Herodotus, the Greek historian and the so called “father of history and geography” on the other hand, was overwhelmed by the idea of memory. He was aware of the fact that memory is something defective, fragile and ephemeral – even illusive. One may not live without memory, as it raises man above the world of animals, it constitutes his soul, intangible and untraceable⁴.

Therefore, memory is the power which constructs human identity on both an individual and a social level. It has influence on the human psyche and shapes one’s identity. For the migrants from Silesia, memory has been strongly merged with their concept of the Church. The Eucharist for Catholics is something very deep, universal, and becomes the source of various dimensions of human memory and communities, as John Paul II states in his book entitled: *Memory and Identity*⁵. It allows a man to understand himself deeply and at the same time to analyse his humanity. Moreover, it facilitates the understanding of other minorities: their history, heritage and nationhood. It enables us to look deeply into their language and culture.

This paper concentrates on *autobiographical memory*, which is a “memory system consisting of episodes recollected from an individual’s life, based on a combination of *episodic memory* (personal experiences and specific objects, people and events experienced at a particular time and place) and *semantic*

³ <https://www.ourladyswarriors.org/saints/augcon10.htm#chap17> [accessed on: March 24th 2017]

⁴ R. Kapuściński, *Podróże z Herodotem*, Warszawa 2008, p. 62.

⁵ Jan Paweł II, *Pamięć i tożsamość*, Kraków 2011, p. 151.

memory (general knowledge and facts about the world)"⁶. Episodic memory is always referred to by Silesians while showing the valuable objects which were brought to America from the old homeland by their descendants. These include holy books, rosaries, pictures of Saints, and kerosene lamps. They also reference historical artifacts from America, including the first-built houses in Texas and agricultural tools. The descendants of the first Silesians pay substantial attention to the traditions that they brought from their homeland, and successfully cultivated in America, as well as various customs, such as singing Polish Christmas carols at weddings and funerals till this day. With regards to semantic memory, the first settlers from Silesia receive much of their knowledge about America from their spiritual guide, Fr. Leopold Moczygemba, who used to describe the Texan life and its good sides for the people from Upper Silesia.

Methodology

This paper examines the lived experiences of the Silesian Texans in their early years of settlement during the second half of the 19th century. The analysis of letters exchanged between them and their relatives in their native land can help us understand the significance of memory among people who leave their homeland. These letters were accessed by me during a six-month stay in Texas among the descendants of the third, fourth and fifth generation. Those letters and other personal documents are still kept in the houses of the descendants and for that reason I felt privileged to be granted access to them. I was able to read the original letters dated back to the 19th century. I do have a copy of a great number of those epistolary forms brought from Texas. It is vital to mention that the descendants decided to hand them to me firstly because they trusted me and secondly because I am a researcher from Silesia, which is crucial for them. The Silesian Texans were chosen as a case study because I have been interested in Polish migration to the United States for many years and most of all as I am Silesian myself, which helps me to understand the identity of this groups of people. I have met and was a guide for a number of groups and individuals from Texas who visit Silesia searching for their roots. I get to know those people, spend a lot of time with

⁶ H. William, M. A. Conway, & G. Cohen, *Autobiographical Memory*, [in] G. Cohen & M. A. Conway (Eds.), *Memory in the Real World*, Hove, UK: Psychology Press, 2008.

them, we visit their long-distance relatives in small villages in Opole province, visit cemeteries where they find the graves of their relatives or National Archive in Opole where they can see the old documents that are stored in that location. Narrative analysis was applied to over one hundred letters and other personal documents whose authors were the first and second generation migrants, simple peasant people who settled in the remote and vast Texas area having left their families and relatives in Silesia. For the analysis, I selected letters which describe the migrants' very first impressions after their arrival to America as well as the reaction of their families who still lived in Silesia at that time. That analysis was undertaken in order to examine the significance of personal correspondence which was at that time the only way of communication and the only possibility to express their emotions that both sides felt, observations concerning both the surrounding world as well as the psychological changes they had to go through. In my view, the autobiographical accounts help to analyse the unique knowledge we gain from those forms concerning Silesian tradition, attachment to religion as well as what can be described as typical Silesian features such as stubbornness and perseverance. They also allow us to answer questions about the importance of memory for migrants who left for America in the 19th century.

This paper begins with a historical context section with situates the Silesian Texans. The results of analyses of the letters are then presented in three sections: the intersections of memory, identity and resettlement processes in the initial phases of their migration, the roles of documenting and communicating daily life through letters as messengers to large audiences, and their experience of ultimately creating their own place in America. Detailed excerpts are presented throughout the paper to give voice to the lived experiences and reflections of the authors. An understanding of the significance of cultivating the remembrance of descendants enables the shaping of an individual's life and future, no matter where their place on earth is.

Historical Context: Situating the Silesian Texans

If one looks at the map of Texas in the USA, one can notice a little town situated not far from San Antonio called Panna Maria which is the oldest Polish settlement in America. It has been mentioned and described by writers, researchers and travelers including Stefan Nesterowicz:

The little town of Panna Maria, [as it was depicted by Polish traveler and journalist Stefan Nesterowicz at the turn of the 20th century] is surrounded on all sides by a thick forest. It makes both a pleasant and, at the same time, a sad impression. There is a monastic-like silence here. From the walls of a place of worship, surrounded by old oak trees, a stone school building and empty houses, exudes a serene feeling. On weekdays people seldom stop here [...] On holy days when many people come for divine service, noise is not heard. When one is present in this quiet remote place, you cannot help but imagine the faces and think of those first Polish pioneers of settlements in America⁷.

It was 1854 when around one hundred families from Upper Silesia⁸ (which was under Prussian rule at that time) set off on a journey to the United States. They decided to leave their homeland, sell their farms, leave their families, take all their belongings, and leave for an unknown country. After nine weeks spent on the ship “Weser” they finally reached the United States. It was a time when they started their battle with nature in the remote area. They had to start their life from scratch, not knowing the language, culture or customs of the new land. Not only did nature and the harsh conditions become obstacles in the everyday life of the first immigrants, but also encounters with Native Americans, which evoked danger and fear at that time. Nevertheless, they tried to find a common language with the local people, as “dialog – although not impossible – demands a great effort, patient tolerance and the will of understanding of its participants”⁹ as Ryszard Kapuściński, a Polish reporter and columnist points out. He adds that:

Being conscious of the fact that communication with the Other, who has a different vision of the surrounding world at that very moment, is significant in order to

⁷ S. Nesterowicz, *Travel Notes*, translated by E. Szczepaniak Mc Neilly, Houston, Texas 2007, p. 119.

⁸ The number of emigrants given in the text may not be entirely consistent with those collected by special agents paid by the authorities of the Opole Regency, whose duties were to conclude written emigration contracts on behalf of shipping companies. See K. Jońca, *Emigration from Opole Silesia to Texas (1853–1857)*, “*Studia Śląskie*”, 57: (1998), p. 45. Data from the State Archives in Opole allows to suppose the number of people who emigrated to America between September 30, 1853 and September 30, 1854, and between September 30, 1854 and December 30, 1854, was 542. Compare AP Opole.

⁹ R. Kapuściński, *Ten Inny*, Kraków 2007, p. 35.

create the atmosphere of positive dialog [...] every human being needs another one, looks for him and is aware that he cannot live without others. At the same time, at the first meeting the impulse could lead a person naturally to the feeling of mistrust, lack of self-confidence and fear. But all those feelings are impossible to control, no matter how hard one tries¹⁰.

Memory, Identity and Resettlement

It is vital to state that beginning a life in an unknown world has been inextricably linked with changes in one's identity, perseverance, hopes and possibilities. For the Upper Silesians in the 19th century it was a great challenge to overcome the uncertainty, to listen to the "other-different" and to oneself, as well as to build mutual relationships which might help in their adaptation to the new society. Moreover, they remembered that:

The Father of success is called hard work, the Mother of success is called ambition. The oldest son is called Common Sense. Some of the other boys are called Stability, Perseverance, Honesty, Thoroughness, Foresight, Enthusiasm and Cooperation. The oldest daughter is called Character, and some of the sisters are called Cheerfulness, Loyalty, Courtesy, Care, Harmony and Sincerity¹¹.

All those features describe the Silesians who came with nothing but great hope to the unknown American world. It seems that common sense did not allow them to give up, and perseverance and enthusiasm enabled them to make Texas their new home and accept their harsh reality. That is why, with the help of their spiritual guide, Father Leopold Moczygemba (a monk born in a small village in Upper Silesia who already worked there), the immigrants managed to settle down in Texas, trying to find for themselves a new place on earth. However, it is significant to point out that immigrants from Upper Silesia lived on the border of two cultures and traditions: the one they brought with them from their homeland and the new American one they were exposed to from the beginning of their settlement. They had to face the harsh reality, and build not only their houses and churches, but also the relationships with local people.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 35-36.

¹¹ M. Mika, *Welcome to Panna Maria!* (October 11), 1981, p. 11.

In order to go through the assimilation process successfully, they had to find a “golden mean” between the old and the new tradition. The immigrants did not give up. On the contrary, they organized new towns and parishes, giving them Polish names such as: St. Hedwig, Cestohowa and Kosciuszko.

For Silesian Texans, memory was strongly connected with the homeland they left and its people. They did not want to lose contact with the people they had left in Upper Silesia. They yearned to know everything about their families, friends and the situation in their country. That is why, the only way for the 19th-century migrants was to stay in touch with their relatives through epistolary forms. They started to write letters from Texas to Upper Silesia in their Silesian dialect, as this was the only language they knew. Certainly, those simple people wanted to share their experience about the new, unknown world, and at the same time to receive information about the difficult situation in their country. It is important to state that those early experiences were very hard for the Polish migrants. In one of the articles from that time we find such a description:

For this reason, year after year, I waited for the time when I could somehow head out for that paradise. So, in the years 1854 and 1855, when a large number of Upper Silesian folk were leaving their Polish land for paradise in Texas, my personal desire was also fulfilled.[...] Oh my God, what a disillusionment when, upon our arrival at the site of present Panna Maria, we found ourselves in the middle of wilderness covered with brush, some trees, bushes, stones and the sky over our heads. Left alone to fend for ourselves without a leader, without any knowledge of the English language, we felt utterly abandoned. Rivers were flowing from our eyes melting the diamond pears and golden apples in our tears. Suddenly, the Polish landscape seemed more and more like a paradise¹².

This passage demonstrates that the first years in the new world were extremely harsh for the migrants, although they were lured by Fr. Leopold Moczygemba, who used to write vividly in his letters to Upper Silesia about the opportunities in America. They simply did not know what they were to expect in the remote land so far away from their homeland. In their letters we face

¹² *From America*, “Katolik”, Krolewska Huta, September 10, 1870, p. 2. (unknown author).

two types of memory: one concerning the beloved Upper Silesian region, and the other depicting the 'promised land', which is presented in the following fragment:

What to do? God was high up, home was far away, and there was no way out. We had to settle where we landed, under the sky at the mercy of the capricious and often inclement Texas weather, constantly watchful for predators, venomous snakes and all kinds of unfamiliar critters. We were running out of food, and even though a few of us still had some money, where could we go to buy food? It was easy to walk out one or two miles but to find your way back was next to impossible. When all of our supplies were gone, we had to find work, but where? It was necessary for us to go out and try to find employment with the Americans. After months of hard work we were paid nothing, and if we claimed what was due us, we were threatened with a pistol. We were forced to return to our families empty-handed¹³.

This fragment from the personal correspondence clearly presents what the Silesians' lives looked like after having reached America. Instead of the awaited paradise, they had to cope with obstacles and difficulties. The unusual fact is that they wrote about their first encounters in a serious and honest way. Those autobiographical accounts were sent to their homeland to depict their life in America, but they also longed for the letters of their relatives who had stayed in Poland. However, there is one feature that has to be mentioned – their resilience. The Silesians did not give up. From the very beginning they displayed stamina and inner strength in order to achieve their goals in the New Land, which is expressed in the following letter written by Valentine Kosub in Panna Maria in August 1856:

How golden, despite our hardships, was life in our Silesia! This America, while open and large, is not the land of milk and honey we dreamed about before we came. It is a dry, barren land, with danger at every turn. Finally, we are beginning to build shelter for ourselves. When we arrived there was nothing here. The Lord blessed us with a mild winter. If it had been as cold here as it is back home,

¹³ Ibid.

I know we would not have lived. We had no shelter whatsoever till winter was over. Under trees, or near the streams in caves with brush for protection, was our shelter from storms. But now we are gathering stones to build our first house¹⁴.

This fragment clearly presents much of the hardship that the first generation of Silesian migrants had to go through in America. Life in Texas was not as they were told and as they expected at the beginning, but they did not give up as they still remembered the harsh conditions in their homeland as well as poverty they faced there. Resettlement was not quite a blessing for Silesians, but they tried hard to find their own place concentrating on “social and cultural identification”¹⁵, which seemed to be the only way to adapt to the already existing reality.

Messengers of Harsh Realities

When writing the letters, immigrants from Upper Silesia were aware of the fact that their correspondence would be read by a larger audience. At that time they did not know whether they would stay forever in the remote and vast area of Texas. They wanted to share their harsh experience not only with members of their family but also with friends and acquaintances who were thinking of coming to Texas as well. It has to be mentioned that their Catholic faith was always very strong, as well as their memories concerning the homeland they left. They often used religious phrases in their letters, such as: “Praised be Jesus Christ”, “We thank God that we are all in good health” or “Our Lord has brought us here for a reason, and we must persevere”¹⁶. Similar expressions can be found in the letters sent from Upper Silesia to Texas. People who stayed in Silesia tried to give them support and strength, as we read in one of such accounts written in 1855 in Szimiszów:

We were waiting for this letter because we didn't know what is happening to you. From your letter we learn that sea waves wanted to drown you but the good

¹⁴ Valentine Kosub, Panna Maria, 23 August 1856, Texas, [in] *The Faith of Our Fathers – The History of the Oldest Polish Settlement in the United States*, Texas. Through Its Own Words. Eric Christopher Opieła. Proseminar in Historical Writing, University of Texas at Austin, p.17.

¹⁵ A. Kłosowska, *Kultury narodowe u korzeni*, Warszawa 2005, p. 106.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Lord happily took you to America. [...] At the beginning you are sad and worry a lot, but with time your situation will improve. Your mother was very happy that she received a message from you but was sad that you have so many difficulties over there¹⁷.

They also told their families about the hard times and extreme conditions in their homeland, as in the following letter written in Walce in April, 1877:

The poverty over here is so unbelievable that it is even impossible to say how big it is. Last year, we didn't have any income, and therefore we couldn't save anything for the winter. The harvest was also very bad. It is very tough; there is no money. Everyone wants to buy something from my store on credit. They don't even think to pay¹⁸.

These are just some excerpts from numerous letters written in the 19th century both to Poland and back to America, filled with opposing emotions, such as anger, fear, sadness and despair, but also love and hope for a better life. They are very emotional at times, as might be noticed in the following letter written in Jemielnica (Opole province) in 1855:

We would like to greet you all from Jemielnica, and especially me, the one who is writing this letter, Stephan Konietzny, and we wish you from the bottom of our hearts all the best there, and could you describe how your life there looks please? [...] and if it is hard for you to accept it there, come back home right away as we will welcome you warmly; and if you like it there, let us know promptly as I, your mother, your sister Rozalia, and others will leave for America¹⁹.

On the example of the following quote one should pay attention to the special bond that the migrants had with their relatives in their old homeland. There was always one person in the family (sometimes in the whole village) who was responsible for writing the letters. Although they did not have the slightest idea

¹⁷ Schlapa, Szimiszów, February 20th, 1855, p.1 (personal correspondence).

¹⁸ D. Schickelms, Walce, April 3rd, 1877, p.1 (personal correspondence).

¹⁹ S. Konietzny, Jemielnica, February 25th, 1855, p.1 (personal correspondence).

of how life in America was like, they wished those who left the best of luck. It is significant to point out that this information was usually read aloud in one of the homes, and other people from the village used to gather there to listen to this news. They wanted to know how their relatives or friends adapted in the new world and what decision they themselves should make in the near future. As one might notice, this piece is very emotional as they do not show any envy but rather support and love towards those who settled in America.

Creating a place in America

All those feelings were mixed as the immigrants were trying to find their own way of assimilating within the new land, despite considerable difficulties, such as encounters with Native Americans, which evoked feelings of danger and fear at that time, which resulted in the Silesians settling in places which were less favorable as far as farming was concerned, but safer. What is interesting is that even non-Americans admired the immigrants from Upper Silesia for what they achieved. Thomas Ruckman, a descendant of one of the original settlers of Karnes County, belonged to one of the well-off families of that area, and grew up in the county seat of Helena, situated just a few miles to the southeast of the Silesian settlement of Panna Maria. In his descriptive report he wrote:

These people began life in this country with comparatively nothing. No capital but their strong arms. They have turned their wilderness into large and well stocked farms in their own names, on which you can find no mortgage. From these farms they fed and clothed themselves with the best the country affords [...] We hold up these facts before the world, a true history of these Poles to prove that farming in Karnes County will pay. From poverty they become thrifty, rich and independent. A moral industrious, Religious Catholic community that any county might be proud of – And look at it – there are lands enough in our county growing nothing but brush and grass²⁰.

²⁰ T. Ruckman, *The Census Taker: A complete description of the County of Karnes – in the South West Texas – by Thos. Ruckman June 1890, Thomas Ruckman Papers, [in] The Faith of Our Fathers – The History of the Oldest Polish Settlement in the United States, Texas*, op. cit., p. 24.

This quote demonstrates that the Silesians' hard work, stubbornness and perseverance were acknowledged not only by their relatives who learned about their life from letters, but also by other members of American society. The principles and work ethic they brought with them from their country allowed them to fight for themselves and overcome the hardships they had to face in Texas. The epistolary legacy is of great importance for current generations of Silesian immigrants who eagerly search for their heritage. Moreover, it enables us to understand and analyse their whole process of assimilation within a demanding 19th century American society: the feelings and emotions both of those who decided to leave for the unknown world across the ocean and those who stayed in Upper Silesia. We learn from the letters that the culture which the settlers brought with them from Poland helped the next generations overcome difficult moments and strengthen their feelings of stability, affiliation and dignity, despite the lack of direct contact with the old homeland. Silesians, building their future in Texas, cultivated the Silesian traditions they remembered with great care. Immigration enabled them to gain the land they lacked in Silesia. Arguably, in part due to their incredible fortitude and endurance, they improved their life expectancy. Since 1854 there has always been a bridge between Silesia and Texas, due to the letters sent to their homeland and the contacts which have been built and developed. They encouraged the next generations of Silesian migrants to visit their ancestors' land and to learn about their history and culture.

Conclusion

Migration for every person is inevitably connected with the feeling of uncertainty, fear of being rejected by the society and successful adaptation in the chosen country. Every migrant takes with them a baggage of individual experience which shapes their future fate in the new country. The first generation of Silesians did not forget about their roots and tradition. They used autobiographical accounts to preserve their memory, the memory of their homeland, friends, places and culture they left in their homeland. The letters sent and received show the unusual, strong bond between the families. Till this day, their memories are cultivated and preserved by the generations that followed them. It has been over thirty years that groups of their descendants come to visit the land of their ancestors, especially Silesia. This is the heritage that has been

passed to the next generations among Silesian Texans. It is vital to point out that memory which was cultivated in the 19th century in the form of epistolary forms, nowadays has taken form as visits to Poland, regular contacts with relatives in Silesia and preserving the customs and tradition of their ancestors in their everyday life.

Summing up, the stories about Silesia have been told for centuries. The letters written to families, and the traditions and culture which the first immigrants were able to pass on to the next generations, constitute an individual's memory. This is the memory of Silesian ancestors, roots, heritage, language and homeland. According to the old saying: "Without memory, there is no culture. Without memory, there would be no civilization, no society, no future"²¹. An understanding of the significance of cultivating the remembrance of descendants enables the shaping of an individual's life and future, no matter where their place on earth is. Memories which are valued do not fade. It is worth finishing with a quotation by Carl Sandburg, an American poet, historian and an author of autobiographies, whose words are meaningful and could become the voice of migrants: "I see America, not in the setting sun of a black night of despair ahead of us, I see America in the crimson light of a rising sun fresh from the burning, creative hand of God. I see great days ahead, great days possible to men and women of will and vision"²².

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²¹ https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/e/elie_wiesel.html [accessed on: April 5th, 2017].

²² C. Sandburg, [in] *Respectfully Quoted. A Dictionary of Quotations. The Essential Reference Guide for Writers and Speechmakers*. Compiled by the Library of Congress. With a preface by J. H. Billington, The Librarian of Congress, New York, 2010, p. 13.

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