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## Difficult Heritage of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century from the Perspective of the Biography of Things\*

### Introduction: Archaeologies of the Recent Past and Difficult Heritage

Studies into different aspects of the material heritage of the 20<sup>th</sup> century form a dynamically developing field of research and a broader theoretical reflection within archaeology. It is a fully recognised branch of archaeology, which already has its own textbooks and journals (for further details see: *The Oxford Handbook...* 2013). Archaeologies of the recent past include such specialisations as: archaeology of the First World War (Saunders 2007), archaeology of the Second World War (Moshenska 2013), archaeology of the Cold War (Hanson 2016) or, in more general terms, archaeologies of recent armed conflicts. Indeed, the archaeological work performed in relation to the heritage of the last few decades is dominated by the identification, documentation, and contextualisation of material relics from the recent armed conflicts (Schofield 2005). However, it is worth noting the characteristic shift in research and theoretical reflection that has taken place within the archaeology of the recent past. For example, the issue of the material dimension of conflicts forms a significant part of *Archaeologies of the Contemporary Past* (*Archaeologies...* 2001), which was a title of major significance to the development of archaeologies of the recent past. On the other hand, the latest publications that set the direction for contemporary research (*Contemporary Archaeologies...* 2009; Harrison, Schofield 2010) mention the archaeology of conflicts only occasionally.

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Such a shift of focus indicates the broadening of the archaeological field of interest. It emphasises the fact that archaeologies of the recent past as a term cover more than just the archaeology of recent armed conflicts, and that these terms are not synonymous. The situation is slightly different in the case of Polish science (cf. Zalewska 2016). In Poland, these terms are close synonyms, which leads to some considerable simplifications (see more in Kobiałka 2018).

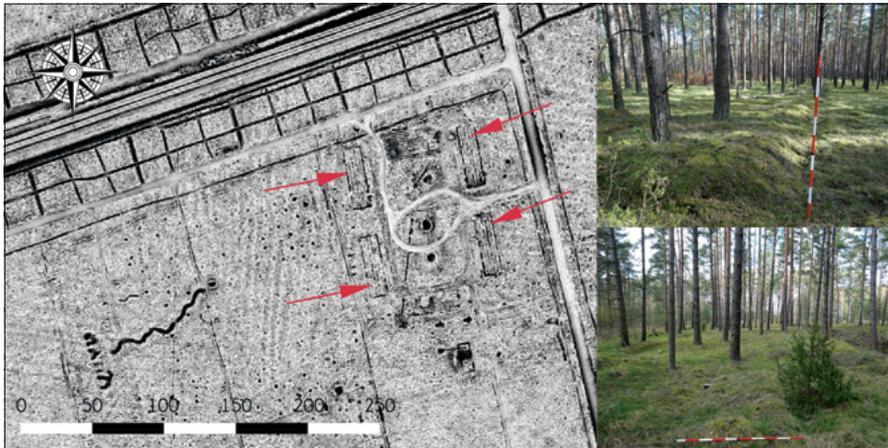
As early as in 1967, Jerzy Kruppé conducted archaeological research in Auschwitz II Birkenau (for further details see: Majorek, Grupa 2015). The archaeological activity was aimed at accurate identification and documentation of the camp relics. However, activities of fundamental and profound significance to the development of the archaeologies of the recent past in Poland were definitely the field studies of Andrzej Kola (e.g. 2000; 2005; 2016), Marian Głosek and Andrzej Nadolski (Głosek 2013; *Katyń w świetle...* 2003). In these cases, one can clearly see the cognitive dimension of archaeological field research into the recent past and its equally important social overtone (cf. Frąckowiak, Kajda 2015). The aim of the exhumation research was to find, document, and recover the memory and remains of Polish citizens murdered by the NKVD. Due to Kola, Głosek and Nadolski's interests, field research within the archaeology of the contemporary past mostly concerned locations related to the Second World War and, naturally, the places of genocide. Thus, archaeologists studied mass graves, concentration camps, forced labour camps etc. These places are described in greater detail in three recent monographs concerning the archaeology of the contemporary past (*Nekropolia...* 2010; *Archeologia totalitaryzmu...* 2015; *Archeologia współczesności...* 2016).

Difficult or dark heritage is a research problem that has been extensively discussed for at least a decade (cf. Macdonald 2009). This is an issue of interest to historians, cultural anthropologists, geographers, philosophers, and even the tourist industry (*Places of Pain and Shame...* 2009; Biran, Poria, Oren 2011). Archaeologists also pay much attention to it: relics of concentration camps, mass graves, and individual graves of civilians and soldiers are nothing else but examples of difficult heritage of the recent past. One can even get an impression that Polish archaeology of the contemporary past is nothing but research and reflection on the role and significance of this heritage (Kola 2000; 2005; *Nekropolia...* 2010; *Archeologia totalitaryzmu...* 2015; *Archeologia współczesności...* 2016).

Naturally, such a complex issue as difficult heritage, analysed from the perspective of different fields of study and theoretical traditions, has no single definition. However, for the purposes of this paper, I shall refer to the study of



**Fig. 1.** *Difficult heritage:* a destroyed war grave from the Second World War (photograph by D. Kobińska).



**Fig. 2.** Relics of a forced labour camp and other facilities from the Second World War located in the forest near Gutowiec based on aerial laser scanning data (sky-view factor visualisation, prepared by M. Kostyrko, D. Kobińska), and their present state of preservation. The arrows indicate the outlines of four barracks in which British, French, and Belgian prisoners of war were kept.

Sabina Owsianowska and Magdalena Banaszkiewicz, who sum up the discussion on the understanding of difficult heritage as follows:

[Difficult heritage – D.K.] is a legacy that we – as humanity, as a specific group, and as individuals – would prefer not to have inherited from our ancestors and that we would like to wipe out from our memory. Thus, there is no interpretation that would give difficult heritage, understood in this way, fully harmonious consonance: it is a legacy which no one wants to identify themselves with, imposing on the living a sacrosanct obligation to express it in the present, and to preserve it for the future. This obligation is homage paid to the victims and a warning for the generations to come (Owsianowska, Banaszkiewicz 2015: 15).

The above approach to the understanding of archaeologies of the recent past as a form of studying complicated past through the narratives concerning death, martyrdom, suffering, commemoration of the victims, the ‘obligation to remember’, and martyrology is a narrowing and simplifying understanding of archaeological research into the difficult twentieth-century heritage. As it was accurately said by Kornelia Kajda:

I have had enough of all the talking about the need to remember because there is no point in simple, unreflective remembrance. There have been enough national discourses on what and how to remember, discourses in which local history and regional remembrance are insignificant and omitted in order to artificially create memory of a homogeneous nation. It is time to show that the past can also positively design the future, while the sciences concerning the past can become space for the creation of new stories based on empathy and understanding, space for transformation and detachment from reality (Kajda 2016: 10).

Thus, archaeological work on difficult heritage is potentially not only a narrative of death, suffering, passage of time and the ‘duty to remember’ these tragedies today. Archaeologies of the recent past are not merely – as Kola would like it (2016) – ‘the archaeology of martyrology’. They can be narratives with an affirmative, creative and positive undertone; narratives showing the lives of people and things as well as their complex and multidimensional relationships/stories even in places that are not perceived as problematic/inconvenient/difficult (cf. Kobiałka 2018). The theoretical approach referred to as the biography of things can help to extend the archaeological way of studying difficult heritage. The case studies will present three archaeological artefacts connected with soldiers imprisoned in a German prisoner-of-war camp that operated in Czersk (Pomerania Province) during the First World War.

## Biography of Things: *Cultural and Social Life of Matter*

The biography of things as a way of describing material culture has already been exhaustively discussed and found many applications. Its assumptions have been described in both English (Roymans 1995; Shanks 1998; Holtorf 2002) and Polish literature (Kobiałka 2008). This is why I will only indicate a few crucial aspects of the biographical approach to the study of material culture.

It was an American social anthropologist Igor Kopytoff (2005) who first clearly suggested (in 1987) that things, buildings, and places can be viewed and studied similarly to people. Things, places and whole landscapes can have their own biographies as well as complex and multi-layered stories. The American scholar meant telling the story about the use/life and the variability of meanings of a given thing from the perspective of the object itself; and that people can be stages in the history of a given artefact.

As an anthropologist, Kopytoff was less interested in the technological aspects of the life of a given object, while these were the issues that were mostly addressed by archaeologists in the past. For example, the concept of the so-called operation chain (*chaîne opératoire*) can be understood as a specific way of telling and studying the history of a given object and its creation (Minta-Tworzowska 2012). Emphasis on the social dimension of the use/life of things was the key element in the application of the biographical approach to artefacts mostly among post-processual archaeologists (e.g. Karlsson 2001). This was the way of thinking in the case of which the causative power of things and the variability of meanings of material culture mattered. For more than a decade, the biography of things was one of the most important ways of studying material culture (e.g. Burström 1996; Gosden, Marshall 1999).

Kopytoff's emphasis on the change of meaning and constant reinterpretation of things turned out to be particularly close to the archaeological approach. Kopytoff also paid attention to the use/life, and the history of the use/life of a given object or building (cf. Smykowski 2011). This is where functional analysis gets combined with the cultural process of changing meanings. As Kopytoff noted:

[...] For example, 'among the Suku of Zaire, among whom I worked, the life expectancy of a hut is about ten years. The typical biography of a hut begins with its housing a couple or, in a polygynous household, a wife with her children. As the hut ages, it is successively turned into a guest house or a house for a widow, a teenagers' hangout, kitchen, and, finally, goat or chicken house – until at last the termites win and the structure collapses (Kopytoff 2005: 252).

Such a perception and understanding of material culture attracted the interest of archaeologists. However, the biography of things is full of paradoxes. More importantly, the term ‘biography of things’ does not simply concern the way of reaching the artefact; it does not lead to a physical description of an object or to discovering its essence. This approach has a historical dimension. This means that it studies the relationships between people, things and places, and it emphasises their variability in time. It shows that these beings constitute one another and happen to one another; it examines how things become and not just are. Thus, this is an approach that historicises the story of a given object. And finally, the biographical approach to things in archaeology is not limited to the study of the past of a given phenomenon. Quite the opposite, one of its basic premises is that things continue to live – so to speak – after their death, which means that taking a given artefact out of its original cultural context (e.g. burying a deposit of bronze objects four thousand years ago) does not mean its biography comes to an end. The act of discovering such a treasure in modern times is also a part of its history (e.g. Kobiółka 2008). In this sense, many archaeological analyses of biographies of such things can be interpreted as examples of the archaeologies of the recent past. Here, the contemporary history of prehistoric things is an equally important element of their existence (Holtorf 2002).



**Fig. 3.** The biography of things emphasises the variability and fluidity of meanings: the First World War *garbage* becomes today valuable *archaeological heritage* (photograph by D. Kobiółka).

Examples can be rusted enamel bowls I documented during the research conducted in the prisoner-of-war camp in Czersk. They are things that were used by the camp prisoners every day, and then left there. The prisoners used these dishes for eating and drinking; bowls of this kind were also used for washing. And after a hundred years, these seemingly useless pieces of garbage experience new stages of their biography. To archaeologists, rusted artefacts are valuable remains connected with the everyday life of prisoners of war. Or, to put it differently, such garbage becomes valuable archaeological heritage. In a word, there are potentially many interpretations of seemingly identical dishes. In the end, these everyday items were taken to Czarna Woda, where you can now see them in a regional memorial room.

The concept of the biography of things developed creatively by archaeologists has provided a framework for the opening to the contemporary fate of archaeological artefacts. According to this concept, today's functioning of prehistoric material culture is just another stage in the biography of each of the objects. The past is a part of the present, while a fuller understanding of the role and significance of material culture has to symmetrically take into consideration both their past and contemporary fate.

It should thus not come as a surprise that the biography of things has most frequently been applied to long-lasting objects; to places the functions and interpretations of which have undergone dynamic changes over the years, decades, centuries, or even millennia. The biographical framework turned out to be particularly useful for studying Neolithic megaliths. As monumental complexes, they were usually very prominent in the local landscapes, with their functions and meanings changing over time. Initially, they were tombs, but throughout the course of history their functions were reinterpreted. For example, according to some local tales, they were tombs for giants or meeting places of witches. They sometimes became sources of construction material used to build the foundations of churches. They were also places of burial in the early Bronze Age (for further details see: Roymans 1995).

An interesting and valuable example of such a study into the past and the present of megaliths was the doctoral thesis of Cornelius Holtorf (2000–2008). In this case, Holtorf's view is virtually paradigmatic. Using the biography of things, the German scholar demonstrated the multitude, complexity, and fluidity of the roles and functions of prehistoric objects. In this sense, things, places and whole landscapes live: they live in social terms along with people who use them in various ways and who grant them different meanings. From this perspective, archaeological interpretation of a given item (e.g. a bronze necklace as a valuable archaeological artefact) is only one of a few equally important ways of understanding it (cf. Kobińska 2008).

The biography of things was such a popular concept among archaeologists for years not because it offered a new research perspective. I would suggest just the opposite: the biography of things only systematised or, even better, constituted a concise interpretative framework for the archaeological thinking about material culture, places, and their relationships with people. As early as in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, by creating new typologies of ceramic dishes and bronze or iron artefacts, archaeologists treated objects as if they were living organisms that evolved over the timeline (cf. Minta-Tworzowska 1994). I believe that this is also one of the reasons why this concept was so well received and commonly accepted in the archaeological circles. Within the anthropological discourse, this approach has not been recognised by such a wide group as in the case of archaeologists, even though the author of the concept was a social anthropologist (cf. Smykowski 2011).

Recently, some researchers started to indicate the limitations of such an understanding of material culture. The biography of things supposedly anthropomorphises matter and emphasises not artefacts as such but rather their relationships with people (Domańska 2006). Also problems arising out of the valorisation of interpretation at the cost of matter have been pointed out (e.g. Olsen 2003). Even Holtorf (2008), one of the main supporters of the value of the biographical approach to things, entitled one of his papers *The Life-History Approach to Monuments: an Obituary*.

Still, considering the criticism of such an understanding and study of the relationships between people, things and places, it can be said that despite the thirty years that have passed since Kopytoff's work was published, the biography of things remains an interesting and important way of thinking about material culture, its role, meanings, and relationships with people and places. It also allows to go beyond *martyrology* in the context of archaeological research in the field of difficult heritage. A biography emphasises life, and it can stress the creativity of POWs behind a barbed-wire fence (cf. *Cultural Heritage...* 2012; *Prisoners of War...* 2013).

### **Beyond Martyrology: Creativity Behind a Barbed-Wire Fence**

During the First World War, Germans established a few POW camps in Pomerania (as Royal Prussia was referred to at the time), where mostly tsarist and Romanian prisoners of war were imprisoned (Marcinkiewicz 2016). One of the camps was located near Czernik. The history and archaeology of the camp has already been discussed in detail (Kajda et al. 2017; Kobiółka et al. 2017; Kobiółka 2018).

Why is the camp in Czernik an example of difficult heritage? Naturally, the local population saw and knew – as one of the inhabitants of Czernik told me recalling his mother's stories (Henryk Sikorski, an interview, March 21, 2017) – what happened in the camp; that the conditions were harsh, with hunger

and epidemics. The POWs were cheap labour used/hired by the inhabitants of Czersk and nearby villages. The prisoners claimed they were beaten (Milewski 1993). One has to also bear in mind that the guards (*Wachmans*) in the camp included the inhabitants of Czersk and nearby villages. Thus, Czersk can be seen as an example of difficult heritage. The camp was closed a few weeks after November 11, 1918. The camp facilities were either filled in or pulled down. After a hundred years, the camp grounds are mostly forested land and, in some part, a pasture and farmland.

The local population had also problems with the POW cemetery, the most heartbreaking and telling camp heritage. Allegedly, more than five thousand people were buried there (cf. Karpus, Rezmer 1997; Marcinkiewicz 2016). However, they were 'the others', 'strange soldiers': tsarist, Romanian, British, French and other POWs. As a regional expert Marek Piechocki said (an interview, April 21, 2017), after the war: "no one wanted to speak loudly about the camp and its horror". Naturally, the cemetery sank into oblivion and gradually deteriorated. The history of the camp is a story of human suffering and forced labour: weeks, months, and years spent behind a barbed-wire fence. This is a story of the death of thousands of POWs. I do not ignore this. However, such a narrative is only one way of thinking about the camp and its prisoners; about difficult heritage as such. My thesis is that archaeology can change/enrich the understanding of the camp's past by analysing the camp's material culture: all the destroyed, broken and rusted items connected with the everyday life of prisoners of war (e.g. Olsen, Witmore 2014). Below, I discuss biographies of three such artefacts (see more in Kobińska 2019).

### Example 1: A Mug

The few known memories of POWs imprisoned in Czersk present an image of permanent hunger. This is what one of them said after the war:

On the day after we had been unloaded from cattle wagons, we were driven to clear a large stretch of forest. Exhausted from hunger, as we had been starved from the very first day of imprisonment, we had to work beyond our strength. 'If you want to have a roof over your heads', the guards would shout, 'you have to work really hard. After this stretch of forest has been cleared, you will build some dugouts for yourselves. No one is going to do it for you' (as cited in Milewski 1993: 9).

Every piece of bread was priceless, particularly in the case of Russian and Romanian POWs, who did not receive any food parcels (Marcinkiewicz 2016). An archaeological review of the camp's material culture suggests that



**Fig. 4.** An empty food tin or a mug?  
(photograph by D. Kobiałka).



**Fig. 5.** A close-up of the way the wire is attached around the empty food tin  
(photograph by D. Kobiałka).

every bit of such culture could have its value and significance. Even empty food tins were not always simply thrown away. Thus, their biographies were, so to speak, extended. The artefact shown in Figures 4 and 5 provides a perfect example. It is 7,5 cm in diameter, and 5,3 cm high. According to historical documents, the Danish Red Cross organised food relief for, among others, POWs from Czersk (Palmieri 2014). Thus, the tin could have been a part of such relief. Such tins were used for storing, for example, meat, bean, cabbage.

Biographical thinking means emphasising and analysing subsequent stages of life of a given artefact. This artefact got into the ground in a forest near Czersk thanks to the activity of the Red Cross. The contents of this particular tin was most probably eaten by a prisoner of war between 1914 and 1918. However, the empty food tin was not thrown into a garbage pit, as one could expect. An anonymous prisoner used two identical pieces of hard, heavy-duty copper wire (characteristic

green patina has been preserved) to create a dish for drinking coffee, tea, water, or other drinks. A mug was an indispensable element of each POW's equipment. Without a dish into which water, coffee, tea or watery soup could be poured, one would die. This object is an example of how prisoners of war tried to survive in extreme conditions prevailing in POW camps. This is a story about the life of an object and its owner rather than about their death.

The pieces of wire are connected, which required the use of special tools (pliers?, pincers?). The artefact bears traces suggesting that the wire was cut with a sharp object. This provides new information, new stages of its biography. Then, the prisoner wrapped the tin so that a handle was created. And finally, two pieces of wire were wrapped around the tin near its lower edge in the exact

same way and twisted together. The excess wire was cut off with a sharp tool. The mug is so solid that it seems it could be still used today.

Ultimately, the artefact found its way into a garbage pit. At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it was excavated by Piotr Szulc and displayed on the Exhibition of the Nature of the Tuchola Forest and the Wda River Valley in Czarna Woda. The life of the object continues. Today, it is an archaeological artefact, offering an insight into the material dimension of the everyday life of prisoners of war behind a barbed-wire fence in Czersk.

### Example 2: A Shaving Brush

Few iconographic materials from the camp in Czersk have been preserved. They include German propaganda postcards and photographs from a private collection of Bronisław Zieliński, MD, who worked as a camp doctor. Copies of these documents are now kept in the archive of the Town Hall in Czersk.



**Fig. 6.** Prisoners of war in Czersk (from the archive of the Town Hall in Czersk).

From the archaeological perspective, it has to be noted that these materials constitute important and valuable sources for studies into the spatial arrangement of the camp, at the same time offering an insight into the material culture used by the prisoners and the German administrative staff. An example can be seen



**Fig. 7.** A shaving brush made of an empty Mannlicher M1895 cartridge case, calibre 8 x 50 mm (photograph by D. Kobińska).



**Fig. 8.** A close-up of the number of the cartridge case (photograph by D. Kobińska).

case. However, a closer analysis allows to uncover a few more stages of its life. For example, on the bottom of the case, there are no characteristic marks that appear when a cartridge is fired. This means that the cartridge was never used.

in Figure 6. The photograph shows a group of prisoners of war. One can see the coats and hats they were wearing, what their boots looked like, how they wore belts with characteristic buckles etc. However, there is also another reason why this iconographic material is so interesting: it shows a group of clean-shaven prisoners. There have been some relics of such personal or even intimate activities as shaving found in the camp. Biographies of such items can also be extremely interesting and multi-layered.

The item shown in Figure 7 is a hand-made shaving brush. The cartridge case is 1 cm in diameter, and 5 cm high. Its numbers have been preserved on the bottom. According to them, the cartridge was manufactured in January 1915. The letter W indicates the manufacturer: Manfred Weiss Patronenfabrik in Budapest. The cartridge was meant to be used in the Mannlicher M1895 rifle, 8 x 50 mm calibre. Such rifles were used by the Austro-Hungarian Army during the First World War (Matuszewski, Wojciechowski 1986).

The life of things was inextricably linked with the fate of their owners; a social biography of a thing is the history of its use and re-use. The preserved and legible numbers provide the exact date and place of manufacture ('birth') of this specific cartridge

There are certain limitations to archaeological analysis and the biography of things. It is impossible to reconstruct the exact circumstances in which the prisoner of war from Czersk received/purchased this particular cartridge. However, equally importantly, it allows to fully understand the complexity of the biography of the material culture analysed: how multi-layered the history of the item had to be if it was produced in January 1915 in Budapest and then thrown away/lost in the camp in Czersk. There are nearly a thousand kilometres between Budapest and Czersk.

The Mannlicher M1895 cartridge was never fired. The prisoner had to dismantle it. The bullet and the gunpowder had to be removed. The cartridge case was then used as a container for a bunch of hair. This is how an anonymous soldier from the camp in Czersk made a shaving brush which he then used, as it can be assumed, for many weeks, months or even years of his imprisonment. Only a few hairs from this artefact have been preserved. On the one hand this may result from the fact that a hundred years ago the artefact was used on a regular basis, but on the other hand post-depositional processes also contributed to damaging the brush and its hair.

This example clearly shows that trivial items can also have non-trivial biographies and that the life of things can be linked with the fate of individuals. The biography of this inconspicuous brush is even more complex. Its inherent element is the hair used to create it. It has been established that the item included tail horsehair (Beata Babińska, an interview, April 13, 2017). Of course, prisoners of the camp in Czersk had no horses. The animals were only owned by the German administrative staff of the camp. In this case, an archaeologist is not able to reconstruct the exact circumstances in which the prisoner obtained (stole?, exchanged?) a tuft of horsehair. However, the biography of things, as a kind of an interpretative framework, allows to think about the incredible complexity of the history of use/life of most of the material culture.

Today, in 2019, the brush still gets reinterpreted. It used to be an everyday item, an element of intimate and private practices such as shaving, and now it has become an archaeological artefact. It is precious and valuable heritage from the First World War, displayed in the local memorial room in Czarna Woda.

### **Example 3: 20 Kopecks**

Despite the difficult or even tragic living conditions in the Czersk camp, prisoners would not only make items necessary for them to survive. They used and transformed the material culture in many different ways. The functional purpose was not always the aim, which is indicated by all kinds of ornaments from Czersk.

Figure 9 shows one of the most interesting examples of the re-use and re-interpretation of the biography of a thing. The artefact is one of the links of a bracelet made of coins. This is a silver coin of 20 kopecks, 22 mm in diameter. The year 1908 on its reverse clearly indicates the date of manufacture ('birth') of the artefact. The coin had a specific market value. The initial stages of its biography most probably involved circulation on the market of the former Russian Empire. It can be assumed that it was used as currency by many people between 1908 and the time of the Great War.



**Fig. 9.** The obverse and the reverse of a bracelet link made of a twenty-kopeck coin (photograph by D. Kobiałka).

Ultimately, the twenty-kopeck coin and its owner, most probably a tsarist soldier taken prisoner during the Great War, ended up in Czersk. The coin was of no great value in the camp. During the First World War, there were special tokens prisoners could use to buy products in the camp canteen (cf. Karpus, Rezmer 1997). This could have been one of the reasons why the coin was used as an ornament. It could be exchanged for food, cigarettes, alcohol etc. The precision with which the ornament was created shows that its author was a talented man with considerable experience in producing such items. Moreover, it seems that the reverse of the coin was more significant to the creator. Using proper tools, the artist carved a tsarist eagle, thus getting rid of any empty space. It can be said that the reverse of the coin became the obverse of the ornament. Another stage in the history of the use/life of the object was the soldering of

four symmetrical eyes to it. Thus a few coins were joined together, becoming links of a bracelet.

Similarly to the two other artefacts discussed above, also this item was lost/buried/thrown away in the camp, and it spent nearly a hundred years in the ground. Today, this fragment of an ornament is an archaeological artefact, which marks yet another stage in its history. It is a beautiful example of masterful skills and resourcefulness of people living a century ago.

Difficult heritage of the First World War does not only include stories about death, diseases, and work of the captured soldiers. The material culture of prisoners of war allows to emphasise and analyse the creative dimension of this difficult heritage. The biographies of things (a mug, a shaving brush, and a bracelet link) are social histories of the use/life as well as complex and multi-layered stories of the relationships between people, things and places. Difficult heritage has its bright, positive side, showing the complicated nature of the relationships between people and things.

## Conclusions

A point of departure for the paper was an outline of the specific character of Polish studies with regard to archaeologies of the recent past. In the context of the twentieth-century heritage, archaeological field research is indeed research *with* and *into* difficult heritage. Thanks to such initiatives, the archaeology of the contemporary past joins in a more general discussion on the role and significance of painful remnants of the recent past. However, archaeologies of the recent past are not the only forms of narratives of death, pain, passage of time, and the 'duty to remember'. In other words, archaeologies of the recent past are not just the archaeology of martyrology. Thus, I have discussed the theoretical concept referred to as the biography of things as an interesting interpretation framework that allows to slightly shift the focus of the archaeological analysis of material culture related to places constituting the difficult heritage of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

My case studies, showing the creative dimension of difficult heritage, were based on the relics from the First World War found in the grounds of a former POW camp in Czersk. Naturally, the history of the camp is a story of human suffering and forced labour: weeks, months, and years spent behind a barbed-wire fence. It is also a story of death of a few thousand prisoners (Marcinkiewicz 2016). Such a narrative could become a part of wider research trends within the archaeology of the contemporary past in Poland.

Material culture can broaden the understanding of the recent past and difficult heritage. A metal mug, a shaving brush or a bracelet link made of a

twenty-kopeck coin allow us to view the history of the camp from a different perspective. The biographies of these artefacts are connected with specific individuals: prisoners who used them every day and every month they spent in Czersk; this is a story of how the roles and functions of these artefacts changed over time. Biographies of things are stories of life as well as complex and multi-layered relationships between people and material culture. And finally, the artefacts are manifestations of great creativity prisoners of war displayed behind a barbed-wire fence (cf. Kobiałka 2018). These simple artefacts allow us to see and, in a way, touch this material dimension of the prisoners' lives. This is a perspective one cannot find in archival documents. Seemingly trivial items sometimes have remarkable biographies, and so, after a hundred years, an abandoned/lost/buried piece of rubbish becomes a part of archaeological heritage.

To sum up, despite its limitations, the biography of things can offer an important interpretative framework for reflection on the role and significance of the twentieth-century difficult heritage in the present times.

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## Summary

### Difficult Heritage of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century from the Perspective of the Biography of Things

This paper discusses the concept of difficult/dark heritage from a theoretical perspective known as the biography of things. First, I analyse Polish archaeological research on difficult/dark heritage. Second, I describe in greater detail the biography of things as a tool for studying relationships between people, things and places. The last part of the paper is a case study presenting the biographies of three objects found in the grounds of a prisoner-of-war camp in Czersk. I aim to prove the following theses: 1) archaeologies of the recent past cannot be understood simply as the *archaeology of martyrdom*; 2) material culture from the recent past allows us to create different kinds of narratives connected with dark heritage.

**Keywords:** difficult heritage, biography of things, archaeologies of the recent past, material culture, martyrology

## Streszczenie

### Trudne dwudziestowieczne dziedzictwo z perspektywy biografii rzeczy

Artykuł podejmuje problematykę tzw. trudnego dziedzictwa z perspektywy koncepcji teoretycznej określanej w literaturze mianem biografii rzeczy. W pierwszej części tekstu omawiam polskie badania w ramach archeologii współczesności nad trudnym dziedzictwem. Następnie szkicuję bliżej założenia biograficznego podejścia do badania relacji między ludźmi, rzeczami i miejscami. Ostatnia część pracy to studium przypadku, w którym krótko prezentuję biografie trzech przedmiotów pochodzących z terenu pierwszowojennego

obożu jenieckiego w Czersku – obiekcie niewątpliwie będącego przykładem trudnego dziedzictwa. Celem pracy jest próba prezentacji tezy mówiącej, że archeologie współczesności nie mogą być sprowadzane jedynie do *archeologii martyrologii* i że kultura materialna z niedawnej przeszłości pozwala na szkicowanie różnego rodzaju narracji związanych z trudnym dziedzictwem.

**Słowa kluczowe:** trudne dziedzictwo, biografia rzeczy, archeologie współczesności, kultura materialna, martyrologia

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