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The fate of ancestors living in the countryside in family accounts and in-home archives The “My Family” Project implemented in 2022 by students of the Institute of History of the Jan Kochanowski University in Kielce

Losy przodków mieszkających na wsi w relacjach rodzin
i w domowych archiwach. Projekt „Moja rodzina”
zrealizowany w 2022 r. przez studentów Instytutu Historii
Uniwersytetu Jana Kochanowskiego w Kielcach

Summary: The present article contains an introduction (describing problems in the study of microhistory and distinguishing groups interested in these types of considerations), the characteristics of interviews and written papers and the conclusions drawn from them. The basis for its creation was the “My Family” Project, consisting of three elements: students’ written papers, a recording of an interview with a family member (preferably a grandmother or grandfather) and a presentation at a conference. The project was carried out in the summer semester of 2022 with second-year B.A. students at

the Institute of History of the Jan Kochanowski University in Kielce as part of “The historian’s research methods” classes. Students involved in this initiative also took part in a conference entitled “My Family as an Archival Source” (as part of the “Meetings with an Archival Source” series), which took place on September 28, 2022. A report on this event was written by one of the students participating in the project. The first part of the project consisted of student interviews with family members. Parents and grandparents discussed topics such as the history of their ancestors, the years of German and Soviet occupation, and everyday life. The representatives of the older generation focused on telling about their experience of World War II in small towns of today’s Świętokrzyskie province, while the students’ parents discussed the dull reality of the Polish People’s Republic. The interviews concerning the occupation period were emotional; they show the savagery of the Germans murdering Polish civilians and indicate that historians have not yet worked through this issue. Students’ papers deal with the unique history of their ancestors. The topics discussed in them mainly concern the fate of the authors’ great-grandparents and grandparents. The texts describe the realities of Kielce villages during World War II, as well as the hardships of everyday life. The overwhelming majority of the ancestors of the students participating in the project lived in the countryside, having peasant or landowning origins. The article ends with conclusions presented by students during the discussion summarizing the project. Student papers can encourage readers to research their family’s past. Every history student should know the history of their family.

Keywords: family, project, village, microhistory

Streszczenie: Powyższy artykuł zawiera wstęp (opisujący problemy związane z badaniem mikrohistorii oraz wyróżniający grupy zainteresowane tego typu rozważaniami), charakterystykę wywiadów i prac pisemnych oraz płynące z nich wnioski. Bazą dla jego powstania był projekt „Moja rodzina” składający się z trzech elementów: pracy pisemnej studentów, nagrania wywiadu z członkiem rodziny (najlepiej babcią lub dziadkiem) oraz wystąpienia podczas konferencji. Projekt został zrealizowany w semestrze letnim 2022 r. Jego uczestnikami byli studenci II roku historii studiów I stopnia w Instytucie Historii Uniwersytetu Jana Kochanowskiego w Kielcach w ramach przedmiotu „Warsztat naukowy historyka”. Studenci zaangażowani w tę inicjatywę wzięli również udział w konferencji pt. „Moja rodzina w źródle archiwalnym” zorganizowanej w ramach cyklu „Spotkania ze źródłem archiwalnym”, która odbyła się 28 IX 2022 r. Sprawozdanie z tego wydarzenia napisał jeden ze studentów biorący udział w przedsięwzięciu. Na pierwszą część projektu złożyły się wywiady studentów przeprowadzone z członkami rodzin. Rodzice i dziadkowie poruszali w nich takie tematy jak: dzieje przodków, lata okupacji niemieckiej i radzieckiej oraz życie codzienne. Przedstawiciele starszego pokolenia skupili się na opowiadaniu o doświadczeniu II wojny światowej na terenie małych miejscowości obecnego woj. świętokrzyskiego, podczas gdy rodzice studentów poruszali tematykę życia codziennego w szarej rzeczywistości PRL-u.

Wywiady dotyczące okresu okupacji były emocjonalne, ukazywały bestialstwo Niemców mordujących polską ludność cywilną i wskazują na brak przepracowania tego zagadnienia przez historyków. Pisemne prace studentów dotyczą unikatowej i nieopowtarzalnej historii ich przodków. Poruszana w nich tematyka dotyczy głównie losów pradziadków i dziadków autorów prac. Teksty opisują realia kieleckich wsi w okresie II wojny światowej, jak również trudy ówczesnego życia codziennego. Dominująca większość przodków studentów biorących udział w projekcie mieszkała na wsi, mając pochodzenie włościańskie lub ziemiańskie. Artykuł kończą wnioski przedstawione przez studentów podczas dyskusji podsumowującej projekt. Prace studentów mogą zachęcić czytelników do badań nad przeszłością swojej rodziny. Każdy student studiujący historię powinien znać historię swojej rodziny.

Słowa klucze: rodzina, projekt, wieś, mikrohistoria

Introduction

Curiosity about the fate of one's family, the history of one's locality, or generally, about the environment in which one resides is a natural trait of inquisitive people regardless of age, gender or background. Regional studies are a good example of this kind of inspiration. In the Polish lands, they were popular in the interwar period and were then recognized as an independent historical discipline. At that time, the past on a micro-scale was researched by professional historians using dedicated scientific methods, but also by enthusiasts and local cultural activists. After World War II, regional historical studies continued to thrive.¹ It seems that although microhistory is a part of regional studies, it is veering as a genre toward emancipation.² It can be understood in the simplest terms as history on a small scale, the history of "ordinary" (but also important) people, while in terms of time, it covers the life span of one or several generations (short-duration history). Andrzej Stępnik presented three models of regional history, where he paid particular attention to microhistory. He claimed: "The subject of microhistory is most often a single person, their life and their unique way of perceiving reality."³ Thus, he means an "ordinary"

1 H. Samsonowicz, "Historiografia regionalna w Polsce po II wojnie światowej," *Kwartalnik Historyczny* 1987, no. 1.

2 E. Domańska, *Mikrohistorie. Spotkania w międzywsiach*, Poznań 2005; *Historia społeczna, historia codzienności, mikrohistoria*, trans. A. Kopacki, Warszawa 1996; J. Paradysz, "Współczesna demografia regionalna i kilka wniosków z niej wypływających dla innych badań w mikroskali," *Przeszłość Demograficzna Polski* 2005, vol. 26, pp. 167–189.

3 A. Stępnik, "Trzy modele historii regionalnej w nauczaniu szkolnym," *Kultura i Historia* 2002, no. 3, p. 93.

person, most often coming from the “subservient” strata, so far described only by representatives of the “dominant culture.”⁴

Let us consider who is involved in microhistory and what problems are typically encountered. It can be said that every historian has at least once researched a small slice of history hiding behind the term “microhistory.” Few, however, have based their research on vital records⁵ and parish registers.⁶ This is time-consuming and tedious research, but the conclusions drawn from these sources are interesting and important, especially those relating to social groups whose histories lack other sources (e.g., peasants, petty bourgeoisie). Research on the history of families is also crucial.⁷ Many works, minor and major, on the authors’ ancestors have been published.⁸ Some of them have been written by family members with no historical training, which does not detract from their value. Also noteworthy are detailed censuses compiled by officials, containing personal data and descriptions of, for example, their estates, living situations, and concerning the local community. Some of them have been published.⁹

4 Ibidem. Nevertheless, it seems necessary to refine the details relating to both the subject matter and the people involved in microhistory. For example, “ordinary” people are still described by representatives of intellectual elites coming from the “dominant culture.” If we were to satisfy this demand, historians from a peasant background would be given a monopoly to study village history, while those with a petty bourgeois background could examine the history of crafts or guilds. Another question is whether a village chief occupying a privileged place in the village is an “ordinary” person or already has a higher status.

5 For example: L. Frączek, *Ludność parafii szczekocińskiej w latach 1808–1914 w świetle ksiąg metrykalnych*, Kraków 2012; idem, “Śluby Żydów w Lelowie w latach 1872–1938,” *Świętokrzyskie Studia Archiwalno-Historyczne* 2019, vol. VIII, pp. 13–29; P. Kwapulińska, “Śluby w parafii kochłowskiej w XIX wieku,” *Śląskie Studia Demograficzne* 1995, vol. 1, pp. 111–164; J. Skierska, *Ludność Zielonej Góry w latach 1652–1766 w świetle ksiąg metrykalnych*, Zielona Góra 2015; T. Ceynowa, “Katolickie księgi metrykalne diecezji koszalińsko-kołobrzesckiej,” *Archiwa, Biblioteki i Muzea Kościelne* 2020, vol. 113, pp. 49–78.

6 G. Liczbińska, “Księgi parafialne jako źródło informacji o populacjach historycznych,” *Przegląd Historyczny* 2011, vol. 102, issue 2, pp. 267–282.

7 C. Kukło, “O potrzebie intensyfikacji badań nad strukturami demograficznymi rodzin na ziemiach polskich do początku XX wieku,” *Przeszłość Demograficzna Polski* 2015, vol. 37, no. 1, pp. 7–36.

8 For example: B. Jastrzębski, *Opowieści rodzinne...*, Częstochowa 2002; E. Majcher-Ociesa, O. Sidel, “Losy chłopskiej rodziny Szczereków z Jaworzni-Gniewiec koło Kielc na emigracji we Francji (1927–1933),” *Zeszyty Suchedniowskie Historia* 2021, no. 6, pp. 105–123.

9 E. Majcher-Ociesa, “Wykaz repatriantów z Zachodu, członków armii Maczka i Andersa oraz byłych policjantów granatowych w powiecie kieleckim z 1950 roku,” [in:] *Polska w nowej rzeczywistości. Rok 1945 z perspektywy gospodarczej i społecznej*, ed. R. Klementowski,

It is also worth emphasizing the important role of archives, without which research into the past of families would be impossible. The State Archives have been running the “Family Archives” Project (“Archiwa Rodzinne”) since 2013, part of which was the competition “Without roots you won’t blossom. My great and small homeland,” consisting in the construction of a family tree and intended for kindergarten and elementary school students, grades 1 through 4 (participants also took part in archival lessons). Launched in 2019, the “Family Archives of the Independent” Project (“Archiwa Rodzinne Niepodległe”) aims to “link national and private history, and to highlight the role of more widely unknown individuals, families, and local communities in the restoration of an independent Poland.”¹⁰ Noteworthy exhibitions that are being created as part of this project include “Family Archives of the Independent. A Collective Portrait of the Families of the Second Republic.” Archivists provide assistance to those seeking information and support them with their knowledge, for example, in preserving and organizing family collections. They negotiate the transfer of part or all of the collections to the archives on terms that satisfy the owners of these materials. An expression of gratitude to those who donate their collections or documents is the “Granter Day” solemnly celebrated on December 6. In state or church archives, there is a wealth of information waiting for families who are eager to learn about the history of both their great and ordinary ancestors. Genealogical associations are also being established.¹¹ They organize open meetings, during which genealogists with considerable search experience share their insights with younger students of this art. One can also turn to websites that provide important information or specialize in ancestral searches, such as geneszukacz.genealodzy.pl. Finally, some local government officials also participate in local history initiatives.

Groups engaged in cultivating the memory of ancestors include societies (e.g., Polskie Towarzystwo Ziemiańskie – the Polish Landowners’ Associations), collectors’ clubs (e.g., Kielecki Klub Kolekcjonerski – the Kielce Collectors’ Club) and reconstruction groups that specialize in recreating battles (e.g., Grupa Rekonstrukcji Historycznej “Pułk Żuawów Śmierci” – the Historical Reconstruction Group “Regiment of the Zouaves of Death” from Busko-Zdrój) as well everyday life and patriotic-religious anniversaries (e.g., Grupa Teatralno-Rekonstrukcyjna “Pegaz” – the Theater and Reconstruction Group “Pegasus” from Busko-Zdrój). Members of the groups

Wrocław 2020, pp. 107–139; *Dobra ziemska w województwie kieleckim według spisów z roku 1923 i 1925*, compiled by E. Majcher-Ociesa, M.B. Markowski, Kielce 2014.

¹⁰ For an excerpt from the description of the “Family Archives of the Independent” Project by Dr. P. Pietrzyk, Chief Director of the State Archives, see: <https://archiwarodzinne.gov.pl/o-projekcie> [accessed on February 17, 2023].

¹¹ For example: Świętokrzyskie Towarzystwo Genealogiczne „Światogen” – Świętokrzyskie Genealogical Society “Światogen.”

pay attention to a very important element of everyday life, which is clothing, and try to recreate every last detail of it. Also worth mentioning are targeted collections of garments or clothing elements (e.g., the jewelry collection of Jolanta Michniewska from Kielce¹²). Furthermore, there are attempts to recreate workplaces, such as a dentist's office from the Second Polish Republic at the Museum of the History of Kielce; workshops of a carpenter, shoemaker, and blacksmith or an oil mill in the permanent exhibition at the Ethnographic Park in Tokarnia – a branch of the Kielce Village Museum, or a State Police station on display at the Kielce Village Museum.¹³

Another group of people who find microhistory attractive are teachers. Regional history is an important part of school education. In class, it can be used in different ways: as a main or secondary topic, as well as homework – the decision usually depends on the teacher's approach to regional history, their knowledge and teaching skills.¹⁴ The history of a locality can also be learned through a trip/excursion or in extracurricular activities, such as a history club. Educators can print publications and teaching materials to facilitate work with students.¹⁵ Finally, there are thematic competitions, whose supervisors are teachers (e.g., the nationwide competition "Our neighbors – the Jews"¹⁶).

What is the teaching method which partly consisted of students preparing interviews and writing papers about their families? Activation methods, so popular in

12 J. Michniewska, "Póki łańcuch niewoli karki wolnych krwi: Polska żałoba narodowa 1861–1866," *Świętokrzyskie – Środowisko, Dziedzictwo Kulturowe, Edukacja Regionalna* 2013, no. 11(15), pp. 10–14.

13 G. Szkonter, "Sprawozdanie z otwarcia wystawy 'Policja w stylu retro,' Tokarnia, 29 czerwca 2014 roku," *Świętokrzyskie Studia Archiwalno-Historyczne* 2015, vol. IV, pp. 345–347.

14 For example: in 2015, Zbigniew Tomczyk, teaching at the Public Middle School in Jastrzęb, implemented a number of educational initiatives in the field of local heritage and pedagogical innovation: "You praise others not knowing your own – innovative activities of the Historical Club "To save from oblivion,"" which resulted in the creation of a tourist folder "Crosses and shrines of localities in the municipality of Jastrzęb," a "Guide to local places of national memory," and staged films reconstructing the daily life of the residents of the municipality of Jastrzęb in the past.

15 For example: *Mala Ojczyzna Świętokrzyskie. Dziedzictwo kulturowe*, ed. G. Okła, Kielce 2002; N. Krzystanek, M. Małek, S. Wojtan, *Śladami Podziemnej Armii. Walki na Kielecczyźnie 1939–1945. Scenariusze lekcji historii dla gimnazjów i szkół ponadgimnazjalnych*, Kielce 2010.

16 The contest, held since 2013, includes recording an interview with a person who remembers Jewish people. The works submitted for the first five editions were published in a book: *Nasi sąsiedzi Żydzi. Z dziejów relacji polsko-żydowskich na Kielecczyźnie w XX wieku*, eds. A. Dziarmaga, D. Koczwańska-Kalita, E. Majcher-Ociesa, Warszawa 2018.

didactics nowadays, build an active and creative student, open to the challenges of modern times.¹⁷ Recently, there has been a plethora of works encouraging aspiring teacher to use activation methods in class.¹⁸ These methods have many advantages (from diversifying the monotony of traditional lessons, combining different skills of the student, through teaching the difficult art of teamwork and presenting research results, to discovering one's strengths) and one disadvantage – they are time-consuming. The project method was used in Poland as early as the interwar period and is experiencing its renaissance in the first decade of the 21st century. Modern media can be used in its implementation.¹⁹

About the project

The “My Family” Project consisted of three elements: a paper written by students, a recorded interview with a family member (preferably a grandmother or grandfather) and a presentation at a conference. The project was carried out in the summer semester of 2022 with second-year undergraduate history students at the Institute of History at the Jan Kochanowski University in Kielce as part of the course “The historian’s research methods.” During the class, the instructor presented the assumptions of the project and the planned method of implementation. Next, the deadlines for the various stages of work were set. By May 31, 2022, students recorded interviews, and by June 30, 2022, they completed their papers. During the last class of the semester, the instructor and the participants jointly discussed the advantages and disadvantages of the project and the problems that the students encountered during its implementation. The results of the discussion were included in the conclusions. Students participating in the project took part in a conference entitled “My Family as an Archival Source,” which was held on September 28, 2022. The conference was organized by the Jan Kochanowski University in Kielce and the State Archives in Kielce as part of the “Meetings with an Archival Source” series. A report on the event was written by one of the students participating in the project – Eryk

17 *Aktywizacja uczniów w nauczaniu historii*, collective work edited by A. Zielecki, Rzeszów 1989.

18 For example: Z. Okraj, “By im się to do czegoś przydało...? Użyteczność jako wartość rozwiązań innowacyjnych w twórczej pracy dydaktycznej nauczycieli akademickich,” [in:] *Edukacja wobec wyzwań XXI wieku*, ed. J. Dobrołowicz, Kielce 2021, pp. 43–65; eadem, *Bez szablonu. Twórcza praca dydaktyczna w doświadczeniach nauczycieli akademickich*, Warszawa 2019; J. Strykowska-Nowakowska, “Kompetencje współczesnego nauczyciela historii,” *Wiadomości Historyczne* 2021, no. 2; *Nauczyciel historii. Ku nowej formacji dydaktycznej*, ed. M. Kujawska, Poznań 1996.

19 M. Bieniek, *Dydaktyka historii. Wybrane zagadnienia*, Olsztyn 2007, p. 188.

Prześlak.²⁰ A recording of the conference is available on the website of the State Archives in Kielce. At the end of the event, two of the students participating in the project, Hubert Czerw and Krzysztof Pierściński, together with their instructor Edyta Majcher-Ociesa, wrote the following text. The article uses excerpts from the interviews and papers, including the names of the interviewees and authors (all the persons mentioned gave written permission to publish the data).

The article consists of three parts: analysis of papers and interviews conducted by students, and conclusions. The purpose of this article is to present the project carried out in the Kielce student community and to encourage others to take up a similar challenge.

Characteristics of the interviews

Students participating in the “My Family” Project conducted a series of interviews. Their interviewees were family members, mostly grandmothers (one grandfather was assisted by a grandmother), but also parents. The interviews lasted from 10 to 33 minutes. The interviewers introduced their guests. Each interview began with an opening and ended with a thank you to the interviewee. The main themes appearing in the recordings were: 1) the family – its history, description of the family home, the introduction of individual characters or themes related to the history of the locality affecting the lives of its residents; 2) the war – the tragic fate of family members, the experience of occupation and terror, life during the war, perception of Germans and Soviets, and 3) everyday life – childhood, school, household chores, leisure activities, traditions and customs.

The most common topic starting most of the conversations was family history. The interviewees talked about the origins of their family members and stories related to them, their professions, family relationships, siblings or more prominent ancestors. They also described the changes that took place in their villages and towns. In their family trees, students traced noble lineage, military service, athletes or folk poets, among others. However, this does not change the fact that the overwhelming majority of their ancestors were peasants or craftsmen, and almost all of them lived in the countryside. It was interesting to hear the grandparents’ stories about their parents, and descriptions of the relationship between the spouses; one interviewee [Eugenia Sajecka, interview #9] noted that her father was a bit stubborn, but “mother still ended up getting her way.” Opinions about the parents were very complimentary, and their hard work for the good of the family was stressed. However, there was also the other side of the coin: [Zofia Bugajniak, interview #12] “if you did

²⁰ E. Prześlak, “Sprawozdanie z konferencji ‘Moja rodzina w źródle archiwalnym,’ Kielce, 28 września 2022 roku,” *Świętokrzyskie Studia Archiwalno-Historyczne* [forthcoming].

something [wrong – E.M-O], you got the stick [...] mom was more strict like that, dad was more lenient, better.” It was particularly challenging for widowed women to live in the countryside. One of the interviewees [Marianna Czerw, interview #2] recounted that her father had died shortly after the war (he was buried far from home, as the family had no money to bring his body to their hometown) and her mother had to take care of raising five children alone. Parents had an equally difficult task during and right after World War II. “To get anything at that time was a struggle,” said one of the interviewees [Eugenia Sajecka, interview #9].

The theme of war was another issue that appeared in the interviews. It was often inextricably linked to the theme of family. Most of the interviewees touching on this topic lived in small villages in what is now Świętokrzyskie voivodeship. Individual stories were very interesting, concerning events from World War II. The Great War left its mark on the fate of Polish families. Some fled from the front, and then returned to their homes and had to deal with the aftermath of warfare. “In her apron, my great-grandmother moved grenades and bombs that were left on the property,” recalled Modest Gąsiorek [interview #5]. There were also displacements of the Polish population. When the eastern front stabilized more or less on the line of the Vistula River between July 1944 and January 1945 (the Russians had fortified bridgeheads on the left bank of the Vistula, including near Sandomierz), many Polish families had to leave their previous places of residence. One interviewee [Marianna Nowak, interview #7] recalled that already after liberation, the family returned to “an empty field, with nothing but tree stumps. There were no buildings, nothing, only burned fields after the operations.” The family initially lived in a bunker belonging to a neighbor. Only later did the father bring materials from a nearby manor house and build a 5 x 5 meter house. Others recounted tragic stories of family members, which, despite 80 years passing since the events described, were still vivid, painful and distressing to them. This was the case of a grandmother [Helena Stefanczyk, interview #14] recounting the death of her father in a camp in Austria at the end of the war. Wishing to know his fate, the family asked a priest for help. The priest, through the Red Cross, found information about his death. The family also sought out fellow prisoners to help determine how their father’s life ended. They heard from a man living 20 kilometers from their home that their father was very weak and could not walk during the evacuation of the camp. The Germans were rushing them to march faster, while the grandmother’s dad sat in a ditch. His companion could not look back, but “only heard a shot and didn’t see my dad again.”

Another important theme appearing during the interviews, related to the World War II period, was the pacifications of Polish villages carried out by the German occupiers. One interview mentioned such an action conducted in Krajno in the municipality of Górnó. The grandmother of one of the students [Janina Grzegorzcyk, interview #4] described the arrival of the Germans in the village, who herded the

women and children to school. The men fled into the woods and fields, wanting to hide from the occupiers. At the school where she found herself, “everyone thought they were going to burn us.”²¹ The reason for this action, like many others in the Świętokrzyskie region, was partisan activity. The Germans’ goal was to find three partisans who, according to her grandmother, were stationed near Łysica. One of them was believed to have gained information on positions held by German troops and passed it on to his comrades. After capturing the partisan, the Germans tied him to a horse, which dragged him behind it uphill all the way to Święta Katarzyna. The grandmother recalled that all the people cried and were horrified by what was happening. The partisan died, while the soldiers let the people out of the school and allowed them to disperse. The event is commemorated by a monument next to the school, near the grandmother’s house.

World War II was perceived differently by urban residents. Eugenia Sajecka, who came from Chełm [interview #9], associated the war with bombing raids and their aftermath, which she could observe during walks with her mother. Her father was a sapper, building a pontoon bridge over the Vistula, among other things. He also took part in the Battle of the Bzura, after which he was taken prisoner. He spent the entire war in various *stalags* and worked for German hosts, where he learned German. After the war, he ended up in the English occupation zone, from where he returned to Poland.

In the course of discussions about World War II, students often asked their interviewees to compare the German and Soviet occupations. The respondents were not unanimous in specifying which invaders were worse and more oppressive. One interlocutor [Eugenia Sajecka, interview #9] noted, quite reasonably, that there was a whole spectrum of people on both sides of the conflict: “It takes all kinds.” From her own experience, she spoke of one Russian soldier who warned her family about his comrades. Another person [Janina Grzegorzcyk, interview #4] recalled the story of her father, who, on labor in Germany, was even kissed out of gratitude after he found a piece of bread, “because the German wouldn’t give any.” She also recounted the moment of the “liberation” of her hometown by Soviet troops. One by one, the soldiers entered Polish homes and shouted “Freedom!” in Russian. Many a Pole initially rejoiced greatly at the news. In one story, Polish hosts showed kindness

21 This happened in nearby Michniów, where the Germans murdered over 200 Poles on July 12–13, 1943. On the first day of the pacification, over 100 Poles – local peasants – were burned alive in four barns by the occupiers. *Rejestr miejsc i faktów zbrodni popełnionych przez okupanta hitlerowskiego na ziemiach polskich w latach 1939–1945: województwo kieleckie*, compiled by the Main Commission for the Investigation of Nazi Crimes in Poland, in cooperation with the District Commission for the Investigation of Nazi Crimes in Kielce, Warszawa 1980, p. 120; L. Kaczanowski, *Zagłada Michniowa*, Warszawa 2021; E. Kołomańska, A. Domagalski, S. Krogulec, *Michniów. Historia, pamięć i pojednanie*, Kielce 2006.

to a Russian seeking shelter in the area of the current nature reserve in Skoro-cice, as mentioned by one of the interviewees [Marianna Czerw, interview #2]. He used to hide in a cave, into which he had to crawl. In the evenings, he would go to houses in the village to ask the residents for food. Among the interlocutors, some voices put the Germans in a more favorable light than the Russians. One respondent [Modest Gąsior, interview #5] recalled a story about a fire in the cellar at his village. A German soldier, with his clothes, began to extinguish the burning door, thus saving the people gathered there. The Germans were also said to have warned the local population about the approaching front. The Russians, on the other hand, went down in his memory as looters: "Whatever the farmer had, they took away." One of the grandmothers [Stanisława Wójcicka, interview #15] told the story of her father. He was mobilized in September 1939 and was seriously injured during the fighting. He had been shot through his lung and leg, and was in a German hospital in Modlin. The grandmother stated that "they took pretty good care of him." Another interviewee [Rozalia Pierścińska, interview #11] remembered the Germans as "good people," who, among other things, shared the food they prepared or promised to help her household members after the end of hostilities.

The next theme recurring throughout the interviews was daily life. Interviewees talked about their childhood, household chores, school days, parties and games, and later work. The respondents helped their parents around the house (preparing food, grazing animals and working in the fields), and took care of their younger siblings. One of the interviewees [Bernarda Lech, interview #6] noted the civilizational development of the Polish countryside, which manifested itself through such amenities as electrification (which took place on a large scale in the 1950s and 1960s), the replacement of thatch with eternit, or the mechanization of agriculture in the late 1970s. Stanisława Wójcicka [interview #15] described the harvest period before the spread of agricultural machinery. Mowing grain with a scythe (her parents used a sickle, but her grandmother no longer did) on a farm of 4 hectares took her family three weeks. Memories of old village housing were also interesting. The grandmother of a project participant [Danuta Fijałkowska, interview #3] described her family's wooden house, which consisted of a hallway and one room, where the grandparents, parents and two children lived. There was neither electricity nor plumbing – the house was lit by a kerosene lamp, and the water source was a well located in the backyard. The floor in the house was clay, and holes were easily punched in it. A stone stove was used for cooking.

Obtaining education in the post-World War II era took place under highly improvised conditions. Shortly after the war ended, the state and local governments struggled to provide adequate infrastructure in this regard. Therefore, various facilities were used in different localities – teaching was done in a nearby palace or mansion; in a building that also housed the municipal office; in wooden barracks;

and in ordinary houses. Heating the schools was a problem: [Helena Stefanczyk, interview #14] “We were cold, there was nothing to heat with, [...] sometimes the water in the classrooms froze in the buckets.” One of the interviewees [Danuta Fijałkowska, interview #3] also touched on the subject of relations between students. Boys teased girls a lot: “They made us do their homework, we wouldn’t do it, so they poured water on our heads.” It was also noted that after the war, school was also attended on Saturdays, and over time, uniforms became mandatory – a navy blue outfit with a white collar.

During the interviews, comparisons of the present times to the past were often made. The students’ grandparents mainly pointed out the higher standard of living today than in the days of their youth. There were opinions that [Zofia Bugajniak, interview #12] “life is much better now, there’s no comparison with before” or [Janina Grzegorzczak, interview #4] “now the youth are living the dream.” However, the level of current social ties was viewed negatively. Marianna Czerw [interview #2] felt that in the past, people were kinder, visiting each other often “not like today, everyone locked up.” Housewives got together in each other’s homes and talked about issues that were important to the local community. The interviewees [Marianna Nowak, interview #7 and Stanisława Wójcicka, interview #15] also emphasized a different approach to religious holidays. It was highlighted that they used to be much more solemn. They were attended by all residents without exception, and whole families went to church together, for example, to attend a midnight mass.

The project also included people already born in the PRL, who in their statements referred to the communist system that prevailed in Poland for almost half a century. Most of the interviewees who brought up the subject referred negatively to this period. They believed that these [Paweł Bojara, interview #1] “were hard times,” and that Poland was [Maciej Sapieja, interview #13] a “backward country” in relation to the democratic Western world. One person’s [Maciej Sapieja, interview #13] recollection regarding the imposition of martial law was interesting. In 1981, he was 8 years old and, lying in bed, he wanted to watch *Teletanek* while “a gentleman wearing dark glasses and a general’s uniform was saying some nonsense I couldn’t understand.” Also telling was the misinformation and lack of understanding of the situation in which the society found itself. His mother began to cry because she thought her other son, who was doing military service at the time, would go to war. However, not everyone was equally critical of the PRL. Another interviewee [Bernarda Lech, interview #6] rated the communist authorities better than the opposition’s. Martial law “is remembered badly by some and well by others. [...] but no one died of starvation. [...] I think that if the introduction of martial law was necessary, it may have turned out well.” One of the interviews [Maciej Sapieja, interview #13] also touched on the subject of basic military service, which was mandatory in Poland during the communist era, as well as in the 1990s (compulsory military training

in Poland was not suspended until 2010). The dad of one of the students was interested in World War II history in his youth and liked the militaria, so he was very happy to be drafted. He was a mechanic by trade and was assigned to a motorized unit. In the army, he made numerous connections and visited a large part of Poland, as he served for a year and a half in three units (Tomaszów Mazowiecki, Babimost and Dęblin). However, in all interviews about the period of the People's Poland, memories of lines in front of stores, ration cards or lack of essential goods dominate.

An intriguing side note of the students' conversations was the topic of national, religious and ethnic minorities. Jews were mentioned most often by their grandparents. They were linked to well-paid professions – they were store owners, hairdressers, tailors and carpenters: “Jews were the rich men” [Janina Grzegorzcyk, interview #4]. This suggests that in small towns, Jews lived more prosperously than Polish peasants. Attitudes toward them were ambiguous. The events of the Kielce pogrom reverberated strongly in the family of one of the fathers [Paweł Bojara, interview #1]. His grandmother and mother often recounted the events of July 1946: “a human tragedy, terrible events, [...] all of Kielce was shaken.” One interviewee's story [Zofia Bugajniak, interview #12] about the Gypsy caravans stopping near her place of residence was very interesting. In her youth, she used to go to Roma feasts to sing and dance. Gypsy women also foretold her future: “It was so joyful, you could hear that music all over Nieznanowice.” At various times, even after the war, many caravans appeared, and these were large groups. They would set up in the meadow, play games around the campfire, go around the local houses and get various things from the local people, such as chickens.

Papers

The papers of the students of the Institute of History at the Jan Kochanowski University in Kielce are about the history of their ancestors. Each work is unique. By searching for sources and making inferences based on them, the students were introduced to historical research. This was potentially easier for them, since they were researching history with which they are sentimentally connected. Many of them turned to the internet and websites, such as geneszukunft.pl. Some went to the State Archives in Kielce, while others researched records kept in parish chancelleries. In addition, each student drew on “living history,” i.e., talked to grandparents, parents, and relatives. It presented an individual picture of what they experienced and heard. And it was these accounts, combined with archival sources, parish records or city files, that produced a unique synthesis of the family's history.

At the outset, it should be noted that the papers most accurately describe the events of the 20th century, which are best remembered by the grandparents. The analysis of the papers presented below shows in detail the work in the

countryside and outside of agriculture, as well as the history of the Polish peasants during World War II.

In almost all the papers, the theme of ancestors living in the countryside recurs, and farming was considered the main source of family income. Families usually had multiple children. In many papers, the theme is the numerous offspring of ancestors, who often dispersed, looking for their own place in this world. The mentioned ancestors appeared in Silesia [paper #2, paper #5], at the seaside [paper #9] and outside Europe, including North America [paper #7, paper #9]. Marriages were usually entered into within the same village or parish.

Paper #7 contains a description of the tillage characteristic of rural areas in the first half of the 20th century. The author writes as follows: “Work in the field was hard, there were no modern machines. The field was sown with grain from a sheet. Stanisława worked the sickle and threshed the grain herself. Unfortunately, Michał was drafted into the tsar’s army and served in Manchuria, where he suffered frostbite in the trenches” [paper #7]. The author’s great-grandparents experienced hard times of separation – the great-grandfather, going to the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905), left his wife alone on the farm. The work, as the author recalled, was very demanding and extremely difficult for a woman.

Farm work educates, teaches the importance of being systematic, and requires skills. This is the conclusion we can draw from paper #10, whose author writes: “Grandfather hated the countryside and physical labor, although he was considered a master of the scythe; my father recalls that they always needed grandfather’s help and every year, he would go to his hometown (to Bławatków) to help with the harvest” [Jakub Pęczkiewicz, paper #10]. Undoubtedly, mowing with a traditional scythe is not an easy task; it takes many hours of practice to mow effectively. Properly hammering a scythe is also a great secret that our grandparents will take with them to the grave.

Men often combined agricultural work with non-agricultural activities in industry, crafts or trade. A student wrote the following in his paper: “My grandfather was a peasant laborer, working in the fields and at Koneckie Zakłady Odlewnicze [Foundry Plants – KZO]” [paper #11]. We can see that, similar to the description in paper #11, the author’s grandfather was a farmer, and the fact of his proximity to an industrial plant meant that he had the opportunity for permanent employment at the factory. A trace of the tradition of being employed in a single industrial plant is present in paper #13. The student cited the Koneckie Foundry Plants mentioned above, where her ancestors on both her mother’s and father’s sides worked. This is an interesting example of how the place where we live can influence our possibilities for nearby employment. In another paper, we can read: “Władysław worked on the farm, namely, dug wells for neighbors, you could say that he was a casual worker” [paper #3]. The skills we acquire during our lives can help both us and the local

community. The student's ancestor combined farm work with digging wells for local residents. The well was an essential element that made the peasants' lives easier.

Our ancestors worked from an early age, as it was determined by the rural work ethic. Thrifty women and hardworking men were valued at the time. In paper #10, we read: "Grandfather Eugeniusz Pęczkowicz [...] was said to have grown up in the countryside, where he worked from the age of 8. At 14, he went to work in the Miedzianka mine extracting uranium and silver" [paper #10]. The author of paper #4 described his great-grandfather, a blacksmith, as follows: "Great-grandfather Władysław Grzegorzcyk was born in 1905. [...] Władysław had three children, he was a blacksmith by profession, but he also did farm work. During the occupation, he barely escaped death at the hands of the occupiers during the pacification of Krajno; he was spared because as a blacksmith, he was needed by the local community and the stationed German troops. Grandfather was warned of the pacification by a friendly German" [Adrian Grzegorzcyk, paper #4]. An important piece of information stands out in this description. Being a blacksmith, the great-grandfather survived because he performed an important function in the Krajno community. We remember from history that the blacksmith's services were valuable to the locals and thus conferred significant trust. This made his profession so important that in June 1943, it saved his life.

The Third Reich's invasion of Poland in September 1939 continues to be a traumatic memory for the Polish people. The students' papers contain descriptions of the World War II period. The grandparents' accounts are incredibly valuable, as they relate the fate of their families during this period.

The aforementioned village – Krajno – was pacified by German troops. The description included in the paper is an attempt to shed more light on the situation of partisans and civilians in the Kielce region. The author wrote: "The events of the pacification were as follows: On June 4, 1943, the Germans pacified the village of Krajno. The Germans surrounded Krajno and herded all the inhabitants to the schoolyard. Some people escaped into the field, hoping to hide there. They were largely shot as they hid in the grain. On that day, 24 men and 3 women were murdered in Krajno. The Germans came to Krajno from Święta Katarzyna and Bieliny. They surrounded the village from both sides. Franciszka Nieburska, who was seven months pregnant, died pierced with a bayonet. In the schoolyard, the gendarmes made a selection and interrogated the appointed people. Before the eyes of those gathered, they shot Mrs. Franciszka Tofil and Józef Susło. Mrs. Tofil, at whose home bundles of partisan underwear were found, was shot in the square in front of the school. During the manhunt, village chief Kwiatkowski walked around with the gendarmes and pointed out who should be murdered. Two people were murdered by the Germans in and around the church (the first tried to hide in the bell tower, the second was caught when seeking shelter in the rectory). Antoni Szlufik was accused

of possessing weapons. He was taken to a school, where he was tortured. Although Szlufik did not belong to any organization, he knew a great deal. He also had a rifle hidden in the forest. The village chief was afraid that he would shoot him one day, and that's why he turned him in. Antoni Szlufik knew very well that throughout the winter and spring, partisans were quartered in the cottages near the forest at Piotr Wzorek's and Józef Szyszkowski's, and that they regularly washed their underwear and repaired their clothes at Katarzyna Zielińska's and Witkowska's. The Germans decided to murder him in a very cruel way, they dragged him behind horses from Święta Katarzyna, a town located over the mountain from Krajno. Despite the torture, he did not give anyone away. The Germans forbade the burial of Antoni Szlufik in the parish cemetery, but the population secretly moved his body at night and held a funeral for him. Village chief Kwiatkowski fled the village with the retreating German troops, fearing reprisals from the residents" [paper #4]. The murder of civilians by Third Reich soldiers was in retaliation for supporting the partisans. We must remember that history will hold the murderers and traitors to account, and recognize the heroes, however humble. The aforementioned pacification of Krajno is commemorated every year on June 4, the anniversary of the events.

Men from the Kielce region took part in the September campaign: "Antoni Klamka [...]. He fought during World War II, had the nickname 'Sierp' [Sickle], fought in the September campaign, fought near Modlin and was wounded there. He lay in a German hospital, his lung and leg were shot through. He stayed there for six months. He came back after the war" [paper #15]. Poles died during World War II in various circumstances. Orphaned families had a difficult time coping after losing the head of the family, often the only breadwinner. The wartime ravaged Polish lands and Polish peasants lost their source of livelihood. Many victims were claimed by the war and to this day, we have no information on where they rest. As the author recalls in paper #14, his great-grandfather died under unclear circumstances, probably shot by German soldiers in Austria during a death march: "The family's peaceful life was disrupted by the arrest of Jan Sornat by the Germans; he was held in the Zamkowa Street prison in Kielce and then taken to the Auschwitz camp, from where, in the final phase of the war, he was moved to Austria, where he was probably shot by the Germans. After the war, my grandmother searched for her husband, but the Red Cross was unable to determine the exact burial site of Jan Sornat" [paper #14]. The aforementioned passage is a noteworthy testimony to the atrocities committed by the Germans against the Poles.

Paper #2 by Hubert Czerwia deals with the crime in the Welecki Forest near Busko-Zdrój, where his great-grandfather, Henryk Kozłowski, was executed. He was another person affected by the cruelty of the German soldiers. However, in this case, the family managed to recover the body and bury it in the parish cemetery: "In 1943, on July 31–August 1, a group of peasants, including Henryk, went to the mill

in Strzelce. This was probably an illegal practice, forbidden by the authorities of the Kreishauptmannschaft Busko.²² Some of the victims were arrested at another mill located in Młynczyńska. Henryk, along with the other 17 people, was caught by a division of Germans, transported to the Welecki Forest near Busko-Zdrój and shot there. The local population of Czyżów knew about the execution, but everyone was afraid to move the bodies for fear that they were being watched by the Germans. It was not until the end of August 1943 that the village hired a 90-year-old man who, along with my grandfather's mother, went outside Busko. When they returned, my grandfather Stanisław supposedly cried out, 'That's not my daddy!' According to the story, the body did not resemble his father's, it was almost black and rotten; he said it was not a person but mud, because that is how the weather affected the corpse. Next, they took this 'body' of Henryk to bury it in the Stopnica cemetery. When the coffin with the remains was being lowered into the grave, there was an air raid over the cemetery, during which a bomb was dropped, which fell into the freshly dug grave of my great-grandfather" [paper #2].

During World War II, the ancestors of the author of paper #7 were displaced due to the approaching front line. "In 1941, Germany invaded the USSR. However, the Nazis were defeated by Soviet troops heading west. The Germans moved behind the Vistula River, and the Russians captured the Sandomierz bridgehead. The village of Stodoły was displaced as it was on the front line. According to my great-grandmother Maria's account, the occupiers came and ordered them to take what they could carry. They moved in with their family or strangers" [paper #7]. Returning to their homeland, the author's ancestors found only the ruins of their house. The village had been completely razed and the buildings burned. After the war, "Maria and Józef built a house made of pine beams and a kitchen fitted with a bread oven" [paper #7]. The postwar reality was dull and devoid of hope, yet the aforementioned ancestors tried to live in the circumstances they found – a reality in which they could count only on themselves.

In the villages, local nomenclature has been preserved and is still used by older people. We can find such an example in paper #13, where we read: "Throughout the 19th century, there was a tradition in the Sapieja family of Nieświnia of giving their sons the name Jacek/Jacenty. The family became divided into those referred locally as 'Biali Jackowie' and 'Czarni Jackowie,' living in different parts of the village." Such naming still occurs today among the local community.

Each family is unique and hides many secrets. In paper #4, the author recalled his ancestors who were folk poets. Since they were illiterate, their work was recorded by Professor Roch Sulima of the University of Warsaw. Subsequently, on the basis of the life of the author's ancestors, Józef Gębski directed a movie entitled *Rozalia*

22 K. Trzeskowska-Kubasik, *Zbrodnie niemieckie w Lesie Weleckim koło Buska-Zdroju*, Warszawa 2022, p. 36.

i Wojciech Grzegorzycowie. Poeci ludowi w jesieni życia [Rozalia and Wojciech Grzegorzycy. Folk Poets in Their Twilight Years]. The Grzegorzycy couple was honored with the Jan Pock Award for their work. This is family trivia of the author of paper #4. The student's ancestors included poets showing the beauty of the Kielce region and the Świętokrzyskie Mountains. Given the years of their lives, the couple's work contains a theme about World War II. An interesting discovery was made by the author of paper #10: "As an intern, my grandfather [...] took part in the filming of the 1956 *Tajemnica dzikiego szybu* [The Secret of the Wild Shaft]" [paper #10]. The unusual finding, which is the unforgettable experience of the author's grandfather, for future generations may be an interesting fact that their ancestor was a film enthusiast.

The regionalism shown in the works (e.g. *Ponidzie* in papers #2, 14, and 15 or *Kielce region* in paper #4) is an excellent example of attachment to the Świętokrzyskie region. Of course, many families originate from this region and are still connected to it today, mainly through professional obligations, but also the sentimental importance of these places keeps us where our ancestors lived. The family's history is a kind of testament to future generations and a history lesson. It is important to remember how much our ancestors accomplished, whether locally or in universal history. In a sense, the papers show an outline of the history of the 20th century, however, we can also find threads about the late 19th century. This is residual information that was still remembered by our grandparents, and oral transmission tends to introduce modifications that may raise doubts. As historians, we must approach oral messages critically and confront them with other source materials or literature.

The above analysis of the students' papers, describing the histories of their families, leads to the conclusion that the family is the basic unit of society. Just as the political history of a country creates a model of patriotism, the history of the family – often passed down through the oral retelling of grandparents – creates our membership in the local and national community, allowing us to learn about the history of our ancestors and draw conclusions.

Every family writes its history. Just as the biographies of famous people and figures have been recorded by historians, the record of family history is important for its members. It is the family that shapes us as human beings and creates our identity. The Kielce region lost many brave and noble people who sacrificed their lives for freedom. It is important to remember that they fought for Poland for future generations.

Conclusions

There were many benefits to participating in the "My Family" Project. Here are some of them:

1. Students interviewed members of their families, which enabled them to deepen their family ties. Telling a previously unknown story about a grandparent or

grandmother could become a trigger to open a broader discussion on the topic within the family. Most of the students were pioneers in researching their family history. One student continued the work started by his uncle.

2. Participants in the project recalled great historical events from their own perspective, so these events can be experienced not from the point of view of history books, but ordinary people.
3. Creating one's family tree was an attractive challenge. The students mentioned that virtually everyone had thought about reconstructing their family history, but lacked the time and impetus.
4. The students who can search for materials about their ancestors themselves can more easily carry out similar projects in schools or cultural institutions where they will be employed in the future.
5. The students learned how sources are created, thus it will be easier to critique them in the future. While searching for materials, they expanded their knowledge of historical sources. They also know where to look for the information or materials they might need.

Students also pointed out difficulties in implementing the project:

1. The selection of the interviewee is important. Some older people do not want to talk about their past.
2. Fleeting memory prevented the addition of useful details to the aforementioned stories.
3. Possible inconsistency of reported events with historical facts.
4. Some interviewees, elderly people unfamiliar with recording technology, felt uncomfortable with the situation, and thus the interview lost its substantive value.

General comments:

1. All the students' papers are interesting and valuable. Each is different, reflecting the temperament and capabilities of each of them. Most of the papers go back to the third generation of ancestors, regardless of whether the student has a peasant, landowner or bourgeois background. Only a few students went beyond this line.
2. Almost all of the students' ancestors came from the countryside and engaged in agriculture (combining it with non-agricultural activities). Most of the students have a landed gentry background, a few are heirs to nobility, and individual persons come from cities and towns. No ancestor was involved in trade before World War II. In contrast, after the war, the occupational diversity is greater.
3. The students themselves chose the topics covered in the papers, drew up a list of questions before recording the interviews, or asked for details during the

interview. The topics of the papers are most often related to two issues: everyday life in the countryside centered around hard work tilling the land, and the period of World War II. In the excerpts from the interviews about the war, one can sense the emotions that still accompany the memories. The students also succumb to these emotions. This suggests that this traumatic period has not been worked through by the Polish people, especially in the countryside (this subject is still neglected by historians²³). These wounds are still festering.

4. Each paper features local events touching on great history, including the September campaign, the pacification of Polish villages, the activities of the Polish Underground State, the stabilization of the Soviet front on the Vistula, the entry of Soviet troops into Polish territory, and the introduction of martial law. In one of the works, the theme of the 1946 pogrom in Kielce appears. At the time, a woman from Kielce was horrified by what was happening in the city, over which she had no influence.
5. The works also contain interesting facts. Students tend to find remarkable people in their families.
6. The papers supplement the recordings. However, some students approached their assignments differently. The value of the recording largely depends on the knowledge and attitude of the interviewee, while students have more influence on the quality and detail of the description of the family story in written form.
7. Every history student should write a paper on their family during their studies (the best can be published).

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23 Only a few works deal with this broad topic: T. Domański, *Zbrodnie niemieckie na wsi kieleckiej w okresie II wojny światowej*, Kielce 2018; *Martyrologia i eksploatacja wsi polskiej pod hitlerowską okupacją. Materiały z sesji naukowej odbytej w dniach 29–30 listopada 1985 roku w Borkowie*, ed. S. Meducki, Kielce 1989; “Terror hitlerowski na wsi kieleckiej. Wybór dokumentów z Archiwum Okręgowej Komisji Badania Zbrodni Hitlerowskich w Kielcach,” compiled by A. Jankowski, L. Kaczanowski, S. Meducki, *Rocznik Świętokrzyski* 1988, vol. 15; S.J. Maksymowicz, “Pacyfikacja wiosek na Lubelszczyźnie i w Górach Świętokrzyskich w latach 1939–1945. Metody zapobiegania i działania odwetowe ze strony polskich oddziałów partyzanckich,” [in:] *Wiśń polska w czasie II wojny światowej*, Kielce 2021, pp. 57–69.

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