

## PLEASE TURN OFF YOUR TAPE RECORDER... ON SILENCE, SHAME, AND TRAUMA IN RESEARCH INTO WAR EXPERIENCES

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Memory is essential for constructing identity, but at the same time, the process of defining memory depends on identity<sup>1</sup>. Both phenomena have their roots in time: memory is what brings the past to life, and identity is based on the sense of continuity, and thus also on the awareness of existence in time (Skarga 1995, 4). The process of creating collective memory is connected with creating a collective identity. We all need to remember – to settle our own identity in the past. Narrative identity is “a history according to which we live,” a story with many variants, layered with consecutive interpretations formed throughout the years, throughout successive acts of narrating (Gałęzowski and Urbanek 2017, 19). Remembrance of our ancestors or group legacy builds up our self-esteem, serves as a way to pass on behavior and symbols characteristic of the society we belong to. In a world that is constantly changing, remembering is the mainstay of permanence. It connects us to the dead, creates the sense of time continuity, which is regularly undermined by experiencing the difference between the past and the present, of which the most primordial form is the experience of death. We quite often hear that someone “lives in our memory.”

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<sup>1</sup> This text is a corrected and amended version of an article “Proszę wyłączyć dyktafon... – o milczeniu, wstydzie i kłamstwie w badaniach dotyczących doświadczeń wojennych” (“Please turn off your tape recorder... On silence, shame and lies in research into war experiences”), *Pamięć – pogranicze – oral history*, ed. Popławska Aneta, Świtalska Barbara, Wasilewski Marcin, Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Kardynała Stefana Wyszyńskiego in Warsaw, 2014, pp. 197–208.

A forgotten human being ceases to exist in the world that keeps on going. And so, the memory becomes an essential element of the collective structure of immortality (Kapralski 2010, 10). The main thesis about the permanence of recollections claims that people remember events that are important to them, that are related to emotions or changes in life, or were evoked by external factors. Remembrance has a form of a narrative; it is divided into some “micro-stories,” which put together give an identity narrative – they organize life experiences and serve as self-presentation in relationships, help with the exchange of experiences, developing and strengthening bonds with others (Jagodzińska 2008, 415).

In the social history of Europe, war experiences are seen as a turning point, as they mark a breakthrough in individual and collective experiences we knew until then. Some researchers differentiate between war experience – authentic (original) experience (*Primärerfahrung*) – and forming a recollection of it (Saryusz-Wolska 2011, 197). Experience, along with the concepts of testifying, bearing witness, and physical participation associated with it, are the right words for analyzing accounts of the war. In contrast, the idea of a mark describes what is left after a person went through the experience.

Undoubtedly, every war is a borderline experience for a population affected by it. In the case of World War II, events have individual character, but they are also a generational experience, as they touched communities, societies, nations. What people go through during a war is directly connected with corporeality, boundaries of the body, defects, and finally – death<sup>2</sup>. Borderline experiences are preserved in our memory in a form that does not change much. They are least marked by the activity of the memory (Saryusz-Wolska 2011, 202). According to clinical psychologists, when faced with a borderline experience, the “I” becomes crashed, transformed, and then built anew. Typical reactions to a borderline experience include terror, anger, withdrawal, and escape. None of them, however, helps solve the problem of a sudden change of identity, of the “I” broken into pieces. And it has to be rebuilt, as after the borderline experience, “nothing is as it used to be anymore,” because there is a feeling of being isolated, trapped with no way out, and being out of touch with reality (Szymkiewicz 2013, 119–120).

When I look at the memory from the perspective of an ethnologist, I fully agree with Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, who writes:

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<sup>2</sup> War experiences can be called borderline experiences on two levels. Firstly, the war divided the era into “before” and “after.” It was a turning point for the history of European humanity. Secondly, for an individual, war experiences are closely connected with an extreme type of experiencing one’s body.

My field, ethnography, is not interested in facts, only in what people have to say about facts; memory doesn't care at all about facts and appeals. And no matter how obvious these facts are for historians, it doesn't make human memory obliged in any way to anything (Tokarska-Bakir 2004, 17).

The purpose of my research on remembrance of World War II was not only verification of information given by interviewees. Even though I confronted the experiences they talked about with other sources, the "historical truth" was not my priority. Above all, I wanted to know what and how the interviewees remember, in what way they present their biographies. For biographies are a very subjective type of source. Accounts of historical events we can find in biographies have the advantage of presenting not only verifiable facts but also reactions to them by the authors and their closest circles (Cała 2012, 10). The basis for this article are reflections that emerged from ethnographic fieldwork, the center of which was interviews with people who remembered World War II. In the majority of cases, they were displaced persons forced to leave the Eastern Borderlands of the Second Polish Republic and settle in Lower Silesia<sup>3</sup>, but the interviewees also included people of Polish origin who lived in Lithuania, Belarus, and Ukraine. The project to collect accounts of DPs (Displaced Persons) was carried out in cooperation with the Remembrance and Future Center in Wrocław, and the research approach was a biographical interview. After each interview, to add the recorded narrative to the archives of the Remembrance and Future Center, the interviewee had to sign the so-called "certificate of testimony," which meant they agreed to using their story and archiving their personal information, as well as a possible publication of their memories.

The text discusses how biographical interview<sup>4</sup> is used in research on the remembrance of war experiences based on stories one can come across "in the

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<sup>3</sup> Interviewees were DPs resettled during the first and second waves from the Eastern Borderlands of the Second Polish Republic to Lower Silesia.

<sup>4</sup> Florian Znaniecki is considered the precursor of biographical research, but he analyzed biographical texts which had already been written down, whereas, for Fritz Schütze, research material is a personal record obtained by the researcher through a biographical interview. The first stage of a biographical interview is a casual conversation, during which the researcher does not interrupt the speaker, does not ask questions. This autobiographical narrative considers the interviewee's life or this part of it that interests the researcher. Theoretically, the role of the researcher is limited to asking the first question. However, in practice, not every interviewee is a colorful raconteur who finds it easy to keep the narrative going smoothly. To continue with their story, some interviewees need questions that would encourage them to talk. The second part of the biographical interview is devoted to questions about gaps in the casual narrative, for example, if some issues interesting for the researcher were raised, but the speaker did not go into details.

field.” The article revolves around experiences gained while doing field research. In many cases, there are stories about “unrecorded interviews” and about what was written down or noted “on the margins” of the story told during the meeting. The text is divided into four parts. I present the specificity of the biographical interview and dilemmas a researcher on the memory of war experiences has to face in the first one. The next three parts are related to the main points of interest of the article, that is silence, trauma, and shame. These concepts have no clear boundaries. They often overlap, as the readers will be able to see in the examples I give. I use them to show possible situations the researcher can encounter in the field. I do not provide simple answers to questions presented in the article. I hope that thoughts on the topic of a meeting, ethical issues, and dilemmas that appear during the research will give some insight into their character and make the reader sensitive about the ethical side of fieldwork.

#### BIOGRAPHICAL INTERVIEW AND DILEMMAS ARISING DURING RESEARCH

Barbara Skarga underlines the necessity to be present if we want to understand the other person. It is by meeting with the interviewee, by being in their presence, that we can grasp the sense of the story they tell us (Skarga 2002, 7–8). Shall be understood in this way, a conversation is like a stamp that leaves a mark on us, the listeners. A narrative (biographical) interview focuses on individual remembrance of the past; it gives the subject a chance to present their experience and share their reflections about it as fully as possible (Kurkowska-Budzan 2011, 11). It is a rather old method, used not only by cultural anthropologists but also by scholars in many other disciplines – historians, sociologists, linguists. Approaches vary, depending on the field, yet the research tool itself usually remains the same.

Narrative continuity sets a borderline experience – the turning point – in a bigger picture. Just as in life, where a given event is connected with other situations, also in a narrative, memories are closely associated with one another. Using biographical interviews in research is particularly recommended for complex topics related to borderline experiences, often traumatic, which would not be mentioned during a casual or in-depth interview. It is crucial to assume that a biography told by the interviewee presents experiences and a definition of the life of that person or a group of people in the way this person or group interprets it (Denzin 1990, 53). Researchers who use biographical methods frequently touch upon complex issues that require emotional engagement from the speaker and the listener. For this reason, it is not ethical to keep a distance during the interview; on the contrary, empathy, and co-participation are required. Every person’s life story bears in it a trace of the historical moment. Each

interviewee is a potential witness to history. This is why in biographical analysis, the meaning has precedence over the method (Engelking 1994, 12).

However, this research tool is not free of flaws. During a conversation, the witnesses tend to select the fragments of stories they want to tell. When conducting research, it is easy to fall into the trap of thinking that a biographical interview is a person's biography – the whole story or a part of it that the interviewee tries to tell us – and that it does not change time. What we hear is an interpretation; we need to be aware of the fact that it is a selective and changeable presentation of the speaker's life. The narrative is full of incoherent statements, allusions to general knowledge, mistakes, mental shortcuts. Frequently the narrator uses generalized expressions, such as: "And then they took us, attacked us...", "Then we went there...", "The war put an end to all this." The interviewee makes references to general knowledge or to the knowledge he or she and the interviewer have in common. Additionally, oblique or erroneous information is typical of oral statements.

Individual experiences are discussed in very close connection to the general historical narrative of certain events. And so, in research on memories of DPs from the Eastern Borderlands, the narrative contains both public discourse and personal memories mixed to such an extent that the interviewer cannot separate these two narratives. It also happens that the general discourse supplants the witness's own experiences; when this happens, the person telling their story starts evoking "facts from history books." However, the mixing of the narratives is inevitable. Usually, experience precedes knowledge, but they remain blended, as knowledge becomes an interpretive net that wraps experience (Filipkowski 2010, 79). This allows the speaker to locate his or her fate within the scope of the history of the community with which they identify, to which they relate. Of course, not all interviewees have the same level of knowledge of the general discourse concerning past events. In my research, I can find examples of people who recommended that I should talk to some other people, usually prominent figures, "local specialists," and authorities. They were mostly military men and teachers or those who wrote down or even published their memoirs.

One more factor that influences researching remembrance of World War II is the age of the interviewees. Doing this type of research assumes that the speakers will be older adults, quite often ailing. Moreover, in the elderly age, people's autobiographical memory undergoes certain changes. Even though results of such research are not clear-cut, we can distinguish the following characteristic features of autobiographical memory in this time of one's life:

- a) difficulties in evoking specific information about an event (the elderly find it difficult to evoke details of an event or details concerning the source of information about the event);

- b) distinctly remembering repeated fragments of their biography (this applies both to individual memories and also to frequently repeated historical facts);
- c) good remembrance of emotionally charged events;
- d) remembering exact information, faces from one's childhood or teenage years (Maruszewski 2005, 170).

Because of childhood amnesia, we have hardly any memories from the first years of our life. However, when a person turns 70, the number of memories from childhood and youth starts to increase. Memories are very vivid; they appear unintentionally, for example, due to some stimuli coming from the senses, which trigger childhood memories. In biographical narratives of people who have turned 70, we can notice a phenomenon called reminiscence bump, which relates to recollections from the period between the ages of 15 and 20–30. The reminiscence bump makes people remember more from their youth and adolescence than from other periods in their life (Rzepa 2007, 399). One of the correlatives of the reminiscence bump is also that there are more positive than negative emotions in people's recollections. This leads to a correlation – people in their late adulthood and old age remember their childhood and the time till they were about 20–30 years old, as the happiest time in their lifetime. The reminiscence effect itself may be a process dependent on the culture. Namely, it is connected with the myth about idyllic childhood and a stereotype that says that people in their older days find the most joy in bringing back memories from their childhood, indulging in nostalgia for the bygone times (Maruszewski 2008, 54).

Ethnologists rarely consider the collected research material as a simple recording and giving an account of reality or treat it as proof supporting some historical facts. Reflecting upon sources and determinants of anthropological knowledge changed the way the problem of remembrance is seen and gave rise to a theoretical discussion on the subject. How should such subjective narratives be approached? Can we trust such sources? Social psychologists make it clear – no. Anthropologists and historians agree. Still, they use oral accounts and treat them as subjective sources. Therefore, each group deals with the issue of subjectivity in two ways (Radkowska-Widlarz 2011, 52).

PLEASE TURN OFF YOUR TAPE RECORDER...  
STORIES THAT WERE HEARD BUT NOT RECORDED

During interviews, people resettled from the Eastern Borderlands of the Second Polish Republic to Lower Silesia – the so-called witnesses to history – gave the Remembrance and Future Center their written consent to use their testimonies. They knew they were not anonymous, so quite often, they asked

for the tape recorder to be turned off, or they looked at it suggestively. Usually, such requests appeared when the interviewees talked about “the Others,” situations like this were typical when the conversation turned to the issue of Polish-Ukrainian or Polish-Jewish relations. Thinking about it, I realized that certain stories could have been left unsaid by my interlocutors, yet some of them felt the need to tell their stories in total. Having the tape recorder in front of them and the awareness that they had agreed to have their stories made public were probably the reasons why some interviewees “kept their distance.” Yet more often than not, I had a feeling that – despite all – what “should be told” was indeed told for the sake of making the whole story clear.

One of the stories I heard when collecting testimonies in cooperation with the Remembrance and Future Centre came from an 85-year-old man from Volhynia. The man kept looking suggestively at my tape recorder when the subject was the Polish-Ukrainian-Jewish relations. He was at ease talking, for example, on intimate topics. However, when the conversation turned to the post-war Polish-Jewish and Polish-Ukrainian relations, he would make it clear that he did not want to be recorded. When I asked why only these two topics were excluded from recording, he answered that he was afraid of the influences of the Ukrainians who were resettled in Lower Silesia and also of the Jews who stayed in these lands. Of course, all this was said after I had turned the tape recorder off.

The issue of Jewish and Ukrainian populations hiding in Lower Silesia came upon quite a few occasions in narratives on post-war life. Interestingly, the interviewees would usually attribute Jews with the quality of being “secretive,” in stories, I was told it was the Jews who were the “secret option” (something like “fifth column”) on the territories of the so-called Regained Territories. My interlocutors spoke about conspiracy theories of the post-war period, such as the notion of “żydokomuna” (Judeo-Communism); it was also believed that some Lower Silesia Jews “were hiding” under false names. The concept of “żydokomuna” was connected to opinions circulated at that time in some circles and claimed that Jews were partly responsible for introducing communism in Poland. Moreover, when conducting interviews, I could easily see the deep-rooted prejudice against “the mythical Jew,” who only seemed to be just the same as the rest of the society, who made sure not to stand out too much (Janion 2009, 106).

Questions about Polish-Jewish and Polish-Ukrainian relations were received with mistrust. Sometimes I was asked about my roots, the history of my family, place of origin: “Is your surname really Polish?” “What parts of the country is your family from?”, “Jakimowicz or Jakymowycz – this sounds like a Ukrainian surname.” In the majority of cases, I had to explain where my ancestors came

from to Lower Silesia. My “borderland descent,” as well as my interest in this field, quite quickly made me “one of them.” Since my area of study was the historical Eastern Borderlands of the Second Polish Republic, and I traveled to today’s Lithuania, Belarus and Ukraine, I was perceived as a person with right-wing views, often as someone fighting for preserving Polishness in those territories. With an identity label attached, I had access to stories about the superiority of the Polish culture of the gentry over the Ukrainian or Belorussian culture of the peasantry. However, when one of the interviewees asked if I thought Lviv could return to Poland, I replied that I could feel a distance growing between us according to my beliefs. They were these particular moments during our conversations that I knew my interlocutors started weighing their words. They possibly felt deceived.

It is worth considering whether frankness does not destroy our relationship with the interviewee. As researchers, we face the problem of the ethicality of our work, that is, if for the sake of our research we want deliberately to deceive our speaker, for instance, by presenting our views as the same as his or hers. When conducting research, I decided that, if asked, I would answer according to my conscience, yet I tried to avoid discussions with my interlocutors. I assumed that the purpose of our meetings was to listen to their biographical narratives and record them, and so the center of the gravity in our relations was shifted towards the interviewees’ stories and not discussions.

Alexander von Plato made an exciting proposal to introduce one more stage to the biographical interview. His idea is that the final stage should be polemics and discussion with the interviewee. As von Plato points out, a researcher who can speak openly with his or her interlocutor will not deceive them but offer a new perspective on the discussed matter (as per Kurkowska-Budzan 2011, 25).

When it comes to chronological order, in biographical research, experiences are very often discussed in an irregular way. One story may contain topics from different years, which means that the understanding of a given story requires a dialogue – not only questions but also a discussion with the interviewee. What we get from our interlocutor during a conversation can be compared to what we see behind the washing machine window: some colorful pieces of clothing whirling in the drum (Koselleck 2001, 376). According to von Plato, such a discussion – by ceasing to be a co-participation of the researcher and the interviewee in remembering and becoming a conversation – may offer far more interesting, in-depth information (as per Kurkowska-Budzan 2011, 26).

Another example of a story that I was told but which I did not record comes from a conversation with a woman who was born in Kazakhstan and moved to these territories in 1936, during deportations from the parts of Soviet Ukraine. The Soviet authorities classified her family as kulaks, and she most probably



came from a Polish-Russian or Polish-Ukrainian family. My interlocutor did not know much about her descent. She made a point of telling me that she got her “Russky” surname from her father, so she had not stood a chance of repatriation. For this reason, her mother “forged” documents by giving her maiden name when filling in her and her daughter’s forms. For many years both the issue of the surname, as well as the question of the father who, in unclear circumstances, was left behind in Kazakhstan, were the taboo topic. Even though the woman knew she was not in any danger, only after I turned the tape recorder off did she tell me what she knew about her parents’ marriage. She also mentioned she was afraid of being deported – as a consequence of revealing the forgery. For all those years, her mother forbade her to even mention the time they spent in Kazakhstan, and my interviewee did not dare to ask her mother about the father. This example shows us how fears influence the character of the stories we are told. My interlocutor decided that I needed to hear about the “family secret” to understand her story fully, so she said it to me. However, it was not a recorded part of the testimony.

I noticed it wasn’t easy to persuade women to talk and have their narratives registered in my research. Most women felt like they were not the right people to tell their own stories. They treated research as a way to document important, heroic testimonies, which in public discourse are associated with, for example, accounts given by veterans or former partisans. In her book *Three Guineas*, Virginia Woolf declares – and in those days such words were considered too obvious or inappropriate to deserve severe thought or consideration – that war is a man’s game, that the killing machine has a gender, and it is male (as per Sontag 2010, 12). Women do not feel important enough to have their testimonies recorded, and they do not want to talk. They often have specific complexes that make them think their stories are not representative because they are not stories of warfighting. One of my interviewees was a colonel from Vilnius. As I was talking to him, his wife came to the room carrying tea, and said: “I come from the Vilnius region, too. But my life is not noteworthy, I simply moved from a village to a small town. My whole life I stayed at home”. She judged her biography mundane, and it should be noted that historical discourse and collective memory – as ways of remembrance – are both of significance here. There is also the problem of assessing their life stories by women who do not see them as attractive for anyone since they treat everyday “ordinary” life. Quite often, it is the stories told by women that are unconventional as an individual style; they describe war experiences from an everyday perspective.

## ON (UN)TRUTH, HALF-TRUTH, AND DEVELOPING HEROIC NARRATIVES

We all choose stories which – in our opinion – are suitable for sharing. It sounds like a cliché that we do not discuss intimate, shameful matters that would make us look bad. Quite often, we present ourselves in our stories as main characters of events, and we construct the narrative and events as if they were happening “around us.” This is a natural narrative strategy. The essence of our recollections is connected with a strong belief in their authenticity, which is a result of engagement and emotions that accompany the experience (Jagodźńska 2008, 415).

As a young woman talking to male interviewees, I often felt they wanted to present their stories as heroic ones. Usually, veterans in their accounts pictured themselves first and foremost as soldiers, action heroes outwitting other armies. In the light of these narratives, a German or a “Rusky” looked like a naïve fighter. This is a well-known method of constructing a narrative aimed at depicting only the formidable pieces of one’s biography. It is also connected to narrative canons of accepted ways of talking about war experiences. Another manner in which some interviewees spoke about the war was presenting it as a time of youth and developing male friendships. Many accounts of serving at the front contained statements such as “It wasn’t that terrible at war, no, it was rather funny, like in this TV series *Four Tank-Men and a Dog*,” “We were young, cheerful lads, full of life.” On the other hand, there were quite a few interviewees, former soldiers, who did not want to talk about fighting at the front. They reasoned that it was “not right” to discuss the war with a woman.

When conducting research, we have to consider that we are not the only ones to cast the other person in a role during the first meeting. Indeed, we simplify the interviewee’s personality, but at the same time, we were also acting our part in that biographical performance. When I investigated the issue of remembrance of the World War II experiences, my age and gender were of great importance. My interlocutors were convinced that being a young woman, and I would not be interested in military operations. For example, one man who had fought in the front lines said to me: “People in charge are behind, farther from the frontline, so at the front line, you know, heaven can wait, but it’s not appropriate to talk about it.” As a woman, I did not have access to (possibly) “disgraceful,” “drastic” accounts of the war. A male researcher talking to the same people would hear a lot more stories about their war experiences. This mutual influence between the interviewer and the interviewee is significant for the research, and in sociology, it is called the researcher effect. During the study, both parties influence each other, and what they talk about depends on the gender of both the researcher and the interviewee, their background, the way they look, etc.

(Radkowska-Widlarz 2011, 42). Of course, the interviewees are unwilling to describe the events they consider harmful to their good name or present the group they belong to in a bad light. Only the most trusted people, family, and friends can access these stories; they may also be brought up unintentionally.

Occasionally, when we listen to our interlocutors, we may get the feeling that they contradict themselves. It happens that one story undermines the truthfulness of another, and sometimes the stories simply exclude one another. Here and there, contradicting information can be found in the same fragment of the testimony. The interviewer who comes from the outside and confronts the account with historical sources or other people's accounts may come across some exciting topics not included in the narrative. The researcher has also got to be sensitive to signals, enquire about ambiguities and blanks he or she noticed in the testimony. For example, one of my interviewees who talked about his first months in Lower Silesia and making a new life here was quick to emphasize, right at the beginning of our conversation: "In post-war Poland, there wasn't such antisemitism, it was calm [...] And when we sat down, it could be any old place, as long as it wasn't in the same carriage with these Jews". Two short sentences and so many questions. Why would anyone not want to sit together with Jews? What happened to Jews traveling by train after the war? My interlocutor explained: "Aboard a train, there were some young men who would go through the carriages and attack. They looked for Jews and hit, threw them out of the train, and it also happened that they threw out some non-Jews, just like that." I do not think the man lied to me about the post-war antisemitism. This was the way Polish-Jewish relations were seen in the first years after the war, possibly due to, for example, a different understanding of the term "antisemitism." As Tokarska-Bakir puts it:

Asked about antisemitism, whether their own or concerning a group, the interlocutors may deny it, acting in good faith, if from the depths of their memories they cannot retrieve any dark deeds, that in their opinion would settle the matter of antisemitism (Tokarska-Bakir 2004, 74–75).

In this case, antisemitism might have been seen by the interviewee from the perspective of the Second Polish Republic extreme nationalists or from the perspective of the extermination of the Jews during World War II. The situation as mentioned above could be described in this way also as a result of the post-war indifference to the wrong happening to someone else, which arose out of mental numbness and constantly seeing the evil all around. A person who has experienced wartime omnipresence of death, as well as poverty and humiliation that follow it, becomes more egoistic, shows no signs of sensitivity to the suffering

of others, and is more inclined to display aggressive behavior (Marcin Zaremba 2012, 93–97). Lack of dialogue, negotiation of meanings, insight into the historical and social context of the times the interviewee is talking about, depending only on the witness's narrative – may lead to a lack of understanding between the researcher and his or her interlocutor.

#### SILENCE AND “BORROWED” TRAUMA NARRATIVE

*And did the partisans approach you? Did they come to you?*  
 They took some things. They robbed.  
*They robbed. And did they give anyone a beating up?*  
 If only beating up... [silence-note by MJ.]

How experiences are told depends on their character. Trauma<sup>5</sup> is this type of experience that does not favor narrative. Trauma is a borderline experience, it is personal, and usually, it touches on body limitations, fear, and death. This is why traumatic experiences are told in the most intimate and unconventional narrations – as they are the closest to capturing the moment they concern. In practice, describing such events from the past creates problems of various levels of difficulty. Our indirect access to traumatic experiences is enabled by traces and remains of sources such as memory, testimonies, scarce documentation, or artifacts (LaCapra 2009, 152–153). In the case of research on memory of traumatic events, we, the researchers, are doomed to listen to witnesses, as other sources are scarce or non-existent.

A special group of people comes from the Eastern Borderlands of the Second Polish Republic – they are respondents from Galicia and Volhynia. Their biographies contain references to attacks committed by Ukrainian nationalists on the Polish population in the years 1943–1945. The tragic memory of anti-Polish aggression of Ukrainian nationalists displayed in Polish villages is such a critical point of every narrative that each biography contains recollections of it. In

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<sup>5</sup> The term trauma was developed in psychiatry and psychoanalysis in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when Europe was struck by the crisis in bourgeoisie culture, colonial expansion, industry development, and capitalism. Mental trauma was treated as a memory disorder connected with driving out unpleasant memories to protect consciousness. The term “trauma” was first used by John Erichsen to describe posttraumatic stress syndrome. Erichsen noticed symptoms of posttraumatic stress in people injured in a train accident in the 1860<sup>s</sup>. After World War I, the symptoms were also noticed in soldiers, and a connection between war experiences and mental trauma was recognized. Also, the social sciences and liberal arts started using the term “trauma” to describe the effects of experiencing historical events or surviving an accident (Modi memorandi 2014, 501–502).

a general discourse in Poland, the Volhynia region is inseparable from the massacres of Poles perpetrated by Ukrainian nationalist organizations. It can be easily seen in testimonies of those who survived– they are like memory frames that describe details such as the surroundings, sounds, or smells the witnesses felt at the time of the tragedy. One man from a village in the Ternopil region, who was the only one from his family to survive an attack of the Ukrainian partisans, recalls how his house and outbuildings were torched. His family members were inside:

I start running away, but where. Here are burnt cows, I fell because of this cow, and the smoke was... This fire is burning me, and everything's on fire, my face burns. I cover my mouth with my hands, so that the flames, so that I can breathe [...]. The wind took all my hair, only ash, only the skin is left. And it was on the 24<sup>th</sup> March 1944, crackling cold... I lie there, in this snow, and I eat the snow, but then I look up to see who's coming, I'm afraid it's going to be the bands, but it turns out to be a neighbor.

Listening to stories about painful experiences, we believe our interlocutors, and we do not doubt their versions; shocked by their tragedy and by vividness and accuracy of descriptions, we do not stop to ponder on the truthfulness of the story we hear. Emotions make us believe, sympathize, and – together with the interviewed person – “go through” the story he or she tells us. However, is the traumatic story an account of what actually happened to our interlocutor? Or is it a reconstructed narrative created by shared remembering, somebody's quoted story?

I spoke to twenty-four inhabitants of Lower Silesia who came from Volhynia and Eastern Galicia. In each account, they talked about murderous Ukrainian nationalists, brutal crimes, tortures. In every story, they described the inhumane treatment of victims. The testimonies were highly vivid, emotional, heart-breaking, both to the interviewees and to me. In one case, a man described a murder committed in his village (according to the story, a Ukrainian husband killed his Polish wife). When I was going through my notes, I noticed that he could not have witnessed this himself, as at that time, he was no longer in the village, having been sent to Siberia. “Only” nine of my interlocutors fell victim to an assault or witnessed the nationalists' attacks on Polish villages. The rest of the interviewees identified themselves with the stories of murders in these territories to such an extent that they started presenting these stories as their own as if they talked about their families or neighbors. In one type of narration which so frequently appears in public discourse, the central part of the story is a murder in mixed families. Even though none of my interlocutors witnessed such a murder

personally, most of them told me about them in a very emotional way, with details. As I researched, I had to ask if the murder was committed in the immediate vicinity or instead, it was a story repeated among immigrants from the territories where the anti-Polish action was carried out if they heard about it. Every person whose roots are in what today is Ukraine felt the absolute necessity of telling me about the crimes of the Ukrainian nationalists. Even those who lived in towns that were not attacked by Ukrainian partisans also thought such stories were crucial and made them part of their narratives to emphasize how unique history and ethnic relations in these territories were.

Telling stories of tragic events experienced by other people creates a kind of a net of narrative links, thanks to which remembrance and tradition are not separate ideas. Experiences and feelings of some people may become experiences and feelings of all people identifying with the group. The image of the past, cultivated by those who did not witness it themselves, is a product not of direct experience but of being part of the oral tradition and identifying oneself with the narrative of this event (Głowacka-Grajper 2012, 174). Cappelletto notices:

People who are not witnesses bring the event back to life in a form crystalized through their feelings, which is neither an emotion triggered by something they experienced nor a simple representation. [...] Thus, witnesses and people who are not witnesses seem to be connected by emotional memory with one common denominator: the emotional meaning of the event (as per Głowacka-Grajper 2012, 174–175).

Attacks of Ukrainian nationalists on the local populations of Volhynia and Eastern Galicia in the years 1943–1945 are an excellent example of the dichotomy of the meaning of trauma. In the collective memory, they are a starting point for the narrative, or a turning point, which corresponds to the experience of surviving extermination and is strictly connected to the collective memory of people from the territories of today's Ukraine. On the other hand, for those who indeed survived these attacks, the experience is tragic, traumatic, intensively personal, and material. An experience like this, one that touches the feeling of reality of those days, “freezes” in one's memory. According to some social psychologists, borderline experiences constitute a piece of narrative closest to the past reality. Because when body and mind suffer, when there are extreme pain and injustice – this does not leave much space for interpreting the story.

## CONCLUSIONS

Maurice Halbwachs, the father of social frameworks of memory, noted that there is no such thing as individual memory. There is collective memory. According to theory, every recollection – even connected to tragic events – can be evoked through recollections of others or memory carriers such as the media. In my research, when I meet someone for an interview, I assume all the stories are true. I regard them as interpretations that the interviewees made of their own experiences. Of course, this does not mean the researcher trusts the information in the stories completely and treats it as “historical truth.” The researcher may be cautious concerning inaccuracy and errors in the narrative or omitted parts of the biography. This, however, does not mean that they cannot be full of empathy and respect towards their interlocutors. And the interviewee can feel it. It is his or her decision to trust us and share their stories, and as a result – the success or failure of our research depends on them. The person who listens to the story – his or her personality, worldviews, personal experiences from the past – is a significant factor in the process of conducting research (Kudela-Świątek 2012, 21). As far as interviews about borderline – and often also traumatic – experiences are concerned, it seems crucial that family ties do not bind together the researcher and the interviewee. It is assumed that the interview will last just a few hours or that it will be divided into a few meetings, after which the witness and the researcher part company and return each to their world. And this is what often makes the interviewees share their tragic stories with the researcher, for these stories are a burden they do not want to place on their families and friends. Talking to the researcher is much safer and more accessible (Filipkowski 2010, 32). I understood it clearly during my trip to Ivano-Frankivsk: one evening, I sat down with one of my elderly hosts, who told me a story about surviving a Ukrainian nationalist attack. He told me that he witnessed the killing of his family at the hands of Ukrainian partisans. It was not during an interview for my research. It was a casual conversation – which made me realize that as researchers who listen to such stories, we empathize with our interlocutors, we recall memories together with them because very often listening makes us their excuse for summing up their lives or saying something that has not been saying for years. We may think that we are the ones who chose our interlocutors, but we need to bear in mind that it is the interviewees who decide if they want to entrust us with their life stories if they’re going to recount them. For this reason, sometimes, awful memories are brought back during interviews, and they may be so horrible that they have to be said out loud, recorded and archived.

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PLEASE TURN OFF YOUR TAPE RECORDER... ON SILENCE, SHAME,  
AND TRAUMA IN RESEARCH INTO WAR EXPERIENCES

#### SUMMARY

This article explores the notion of experience, the relationship between individual and collective memory, dilemmas arising from researching difficult memory. The author uses stories from field research to address the issue of silence, shame and trauma. The text also reflects on the researcher-speaker relationship and research ethics, based on research material collected among people who remember World War II.

**Keywords:** biographical interview, war experiences, oral history, problems of memory, difficult memory, trauma, emotions