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The Unemployed in the Inter-war Period and at the End of the 20th Century: Problems, Attitudes, Narratives. Analysis of the Memoirs of the Unemployed

Abstract: This article compares memoirs written by the unemployed in the 1930s and at the end of the 20th century. It pays particular attention to the structural, social and psychological similarities between the plights of the unemployed in these two periods. Through affirmative reading of the diaries, fully trusting in the diarists' honesty, the author tracks the sources of income, the consequences of poverty and joblessness, attitudes towards capitalism, and the diarists' social and psychological condition. Much of the work is devoted to discussion of differences between women's and men's memoirs. The author attempts to identify the reasons for gender-specific personal narratives which the memoirs clearly are. She also discusses the question of self-narrative as a modern way of constructing identity and agency, a painful and often fruitless process for marginalised people.

Keywords: unemployed people, gender, wild capitalism, poverty, self-narrative.

A national competition for the best memoir of the unemployed was announced in Poland in December 1931. The project was piloted by Ludwik Krzywicki. The best entries were already awarded in February 1932 and the submitted memoirs were published in 1933. All in all, 774 unemployed men and women entered the competition which gives one entry per 400 registered unemployed people. Fewer than 10% of the submissions were from women.

Publication of the memoirs of the unemployed was a real social event and attracted enormous interest not only from the media but also from the so-called ordinary people who discussed the publication of the competition entries. The memoirs were reprinted in 1967 and supplemented with a second volume containing documentation of diary perception in the inter-war years (several hundred press articles, debates, comments and critical reviews). The second 1967 volume also included follow-up information on some of the authors of the original contributions.

A similar competition was announced in 2000. The competition committee received 1700 entries of which 1635 qualified. Two groups of authors prevailed: urban dwellers (1258 compared with 377 submissions from village dwellers) and women

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(1192 women compared with 443 men). Volumes One and Two of the memoirs were published by the Institute of Social Economics at the Warsaw School of Economics in 2003 and Volume Three was published in 2005. Reception of the present memoirs was lukewarm. There were no press reviews nor comments and there was not a sign of any social and political event similar to the one which the memoirs stimulated in the nineteen-thirties.

The first question which comes to mind is the high share of women in the present competition. Why is gender, which was under-represented in the nineteen-thirties, over-represented in the present edition of the competition? Perhaps the emancipation of women in the 20th century has something to do with it? In the nineteen-thirties it was not acceptable for women to have literary or artistic ambitions and women who wished to participate in public life were disavowed for rejecting their “natural” role. In essentialist terms they were said to lack the necessary skills. Women whose ambitions were not limited to the home were often teased on the grounds that they were not “real women.” I shall not go into the analysis of the concepts of “real” or “nature” in the gender essentialism discourse. I simply want to try to envisage the climate of the times which perhaps led women to believe that the appeal to describe their experience was addressed to men. Women’s experience did not interest anybody. On the contrary, the work of female writers in the inter-war period, whose goal was to expose not only class differences but also gender differences, was labelled “menstrual literature” and shrugged off as dull because it did not deal with universal issues. Only male experiences merited interest (Górnicka-Boratyńska 1999). Perhaps this is why women in the thirties did not feel that they could add a very interesting dimension to the pool of accounts of the plight of unemployment, i.e., cultural and social gender.

The second argument has to do with the present. Although the second wave of feminism which led to major changes in mores and awareness of social roles, their accessibility and limitations due to sexual stereotypes, was hardly detectable in Poland, the socio-economic and moral situation of Polish women today is quite different from what it was in the ‘thirties. Despite the assertions of some liberals who have proclaimed that the democratic project has been fully implemented, women and men in Poland are still not equal—far from it. Today however, with just a few exceptions, it is no longer possible to say that a literary work is lousy just because a woman wrote it. Moreover, it is easy to accept memoirs written by women precisely because this is the most intimate form of literature, i.e., the woman’s provenance according to the stereotype which is still functioning. According to all popular self-help books, addressed to both men and women, women do most of the emotional work in relationships because they are accustomed to continual scrutiny of their emotions and feelings, they want to be aware of what they are experiencing and to introduce this quality into their relations with other people (Tannen 1999). The memoir seems to be an ideal form for such self-reflective effort. I am not saying “how things really are” or “what women are like” and I would be the last to make any definitive statements in this respect. I am simply reporting a fragment of lay knowledge, a feminine cliché, into which memoir writing fits perfectly.

Let us return to the memoirs. In his introduction to the 1933 edition Ludwik Krzywicki warns readers of the traps of generalising the conclusions which may be drawn from them onto all unemployed people in Poland. First of all, he argues, memorists may write “for show.” Krzywicki suspects that some diarists may have wanted to arouse pity in readers and the jury. The present memoirs suggest that this fear was not justified. Of course some memoirs do indeed include fragments meant to make a good impression on the jury and the authors of the 1967 publication give evidence of some diarists’ little lies. Some authors explicitly appeal to the jury to reward them because they have experienced the most hardship. We may also wonder what information the unemployed memoirists preferred to keep to themselves because they were ashamed, because it would disqualify them or deprive them of the reader’s respect and sympathy. I shall return to this later. However, Krzywicki’s fears that the diarists were perhaps wanting to “arouse pity” seem to be exaggerated in the face of the very realistic and detailed accounts of poverty on the borderline of survival, especially if we compare the diaries from the ‘thirties with the present ones.

Maybe my protest, as a reader of the pre-war memoirs, against the accusation of “arousing pity” comes from the civilisation change in which I want to believe. The more one ceases to detach oneself from the object of study when reading, the more one allows oneself to emphasise with that object, the more the time limit becomes evident. The conditions of life which the unemployed describe are “factual literature,” a history of every day life, but history nevertheless because as we read we are convinced that “such things no longer exist”—such qualities and quantities of poverty and lack of social welfare. Perhaps I am wrong, perhaps this feeling is caused by psychological resistance, refusal to acknowledge the extent of present poverty (and therefore to take responsibility for it) and perhaps if we analysed the silence enveloping the contemporary diaries we would be able to deconstruct it.

Krzywicki’s second reservation had to do with representativeness. The competition could not reach the lowest classes of society. The memoirists were literate, ambitious people. Many of them owned books—not a typical feature of the poorest members of society.

His third comment had to do with the political nature of the memoirs. Part of the competitors were politically involved in one way or another, usually in the workers’ movement. Such people make up only a few percent of the authors of the published works, however, and therefore do not have much effect on our reception of the whole book. Political involvement can be seen in some of the memoirs where the authors offer more general reflections on the situation in the country. This does not make the diaries any more difficult to read, however, and there is no reason to treat these particular diaries as less trustworthy. The fact that one does not share one’s opinions does not eliminate them from the deep layers of the text. On the contrary, such a practice is an interpretative challenge. Reflections of a more general kind, pertaining to one’s world view, are often very valuable material for the analysis of social involvement and digressions on the political potential of the under-class.

History and Sense of Injustice

Of course the historical background for the pre-war memoirs is the recently regained independence and all the economic and social troubles with which people had to cope in the new state structure, for example galloping inflation. This immediately brings to mind the historical background of the memoirs submitted to the 2000 competition. Here the authors refer to the systemic transformation, the transition from command economy to capitalism and market economy. Both the memoirists writing in the 1930s and the present ones are embittered with the changes which they had previously anticipated in the hope of improvement. They have the feeling that somebody did not keep their promise “because we have come to live in such bad times for the blood we have shed and the brothers who were killed in the war or hanged on the Citadel gallows” wrote a mason and plasterer from Warsaw in 1932 (*Pamiętniki bezrobotnych* 1967: 51–52).¹

Broken promises are also a source of chagrin for the present unemployed. Uncertainty as to their children’s future is the most powerful cause of resentment, especially in women. We hoped that the advent of democracy and capitalism would improve our conditions of life, they seem to say, meanwhile things have changed for the worse and not only we are suffering but so are our children because we cannot provide them with the conditions of development and education they need if they are to have a chance of breaking out of the present lamentable state of affairs.

In the ’thirties people were displeased but they believed that things could change for the better and they placed their hopes in certain institutions or political solutions. In 2000 the unemployed trust nobody and they feel that every project for improvement of their lot is just meaningless talk, meant to make an impression. Although the unemployed in the ’thirties were often dissatisfied with the general situation in the country they respected the authorities and placed their hopes in the government. “I believe in a better tomorrow, I believe in this work race, I believe in Marshall Piłsudski, that he will lead us onto a better road. I believe in the Institute of Social Economy which will look into the difficult situation of poor, abandoned orphans” [P1, 497]. Piłsudski is mentioned several times in the diaries from the ’thirties. One diarist, signed “a worker in the petroleum refinery, living in Wygoda in the Stanisławów voivodeship” attached a letter addressed to the Marshall in person [P1, 575]. In this letter he informed Piłsudski about his own and others’ miserable plight on the assumption that, were he familiar with the state of things, he would immediately begin to intervene. In 2000 the unemployed think that politicians are a band of cynical frauds whose only concern is their own prestige and enrichment. Today’s poor people’s attitude towards authority is an attitude towards “them:” symbolically and actually walled off with a wall which is insurmountable for ordinary citizens.

The people of the ’thirties trusted in the government and were sure that help would come eventually. They did not blame the politicians so often. Today people

¹ Henceforth marked [P1].

address their anger and resentment to the authorities: they blame them of beguiling people with their electoral promises, complain that parliamentary deputies have high salaries, think only of themselves, not of the people, even were they to err in their judgement. Typically, the unemployed in 2000 say very little specifically about politics: everyone is blamed equally, from right to left, as a “band of fraudsters:” “The deputies have not forgotten about themselves and have raised their allowances again. I just can’t look at these people who are governing this country any more” (*Pamiętniki bezrobotnych 2* 2003: 2005).² The unemployed are furious with the authorities, do not trust state institutions and their frustration is caused by the feeling that they have no influence whatsoever on the elites which decide about their fate.

In the ’thirties the memoirists had more general reflections on political affairs. “It is my personal opinion that the crisis is a worse world war than the European war. The toughest heads are labouring in vain to prevent it, crises will not pass until technology is restricted. Technology is stealing our jobs, and with them our lives” wrote a weaver from Łódź [P1, 193]. And one more opinion shared by a type-setter from Lviv, this time concerning the workers’ cause: “the working class has reached such a level of humiliation and is enduring the present conditions with strange humility. I belong to the pre-war people who remember the many demonstrations of the unemployed and the unrest they caused” [P1, 520]. Some of the unemployed, particularly those who identified with the working class, suggest their own solutions of the problem of poverty and share their own diagnosis of the economic crisis. Surprisingly, they are much more politicised than the diarists of the ’nineties who discuss their position individualistically.

Source of Income

The memoirs of the unemployed are an excellent source of information on sources of income and ways in which jobless people earn money. They most frequently resort to odd jobs of all possible kinds: kneading dumplings, replacing broken window panes, cleaning shoes, producing baskets and toys, carrying parcels, handing out advertisements, clearing snow. The last is viewed, incidentally, as one of the worst possible jobs: “I went to work hungry and frozen and nearly passed out. I worked for several hours suffering terribly, not because I was lazy but because I had an empty stomach. This was worse than penal servitude under the Tsar and then I learned what it means to be poor and unemployed” [P1, 47], wrote a man in his thirties. Winter and frost were apparently one of the greatest bothers of the pre-war unemployed because of the difficulty they had getting fuel and the fact that, being desperate and having to take any job that was going, they had to work in the open air.

Odd jobs are often dangerous because they are illegal and uncertain. It is easy to fall prey to swindlers or lose one’s hard-earned money. Then and now, people who sell their wares in the street can have their wares confiscated by the police.

² Henceforth marked [PW2].

The next basic source of income is assistance received from social welfare institutions. The unemployed must exhibit much perseverance and effort. Queues, unclear rules concerning eligibility, lack of continuity of assistance, nonsensical aid—for example frozen potatoes, the need to pay for tickets to travel to the social welfare centre (considerable expenses for the unemployed), unfair and often humiliating verdicts issued by social workers who come to interview the applicant in his home—problems such as these are mentioned in nearly every memoir, both pre-war and contemporary. Many unemployed people get help from their family or other private persons. The memoirists often mention the proverbial next-door neighbour from whom one can borrow a penny or two and to whom one is permanently indebted. Of course such assistance is irregular. Many unemployed people are ashamed to ask even their nearest relatives for help because they are reluctant to admit how bad things are.

Another popular way of earning money is selling or pawning one's possessions. This causes many emotional problems, however. The unemployed feel that selling out is a sign of complete destitution, the stamp of poverty: "not to have to sell things and clothes from home, as I saw other people do, that's what I was most afraid of. But by winter I too was having to do this" [P1, 46].

Other sources of income include taking out bank credit, letting rooms (one of the 'thirties diarists, a mother of eight, moved into the kitchen with her children and let her only room to a couple [P1, 101]. Some unemployed people even mention hunting in garbage bins for food and things which can be sold. But only a few resort to such methods or only a few admit to doing so because there is nothing more shameful.

There is no mention in the memoirs of stealing, which must have occurred considering the extremes of poverty which we sometimes read about. Nobody admits to stealing, either notoriously or sporadically. Neither do we find any accounts of criminality. If there is any mention at all of illegal sources of income it is in the context of "illegal work." Some memoirists admit that they feel almost compelled by their circumstances to violate the law when describing their blackest thoughts and moments of complete breakdown. They do not treat these ideas seriously and isolate themselves from them, viewing them as desperate phantasms to which one must not succumb, almost as if they were a kind of mental disorder. One married woman, mother of three, recalls an event of which she is most ashamed in front of her children and neighbours:

(...) I had my last 5 zloties in my pocket and still a week to go to pay day. (...) I remember feeling trapped, as if I were in a labyrinth from which there is no exit. I entered the shop as I do every day but instead of picking up a basket I opened my shopping bag and began to put in things from the shelf: tea, coffee, jelly, biscuits, sweets, then bread, butter etc., quite openly. The manageress called the police. She asked me to go back-shop with her. I went, my legs like cotton wool. Anyway, by that time I was no longer me; it was just as if I was standing beside myself looking at a completely unfamiliar person, I was acting as if in a trans. The police didn't think so though [PW2, 198, my emphasis—A.Z.].

Problems and Fears

What the unemployed fear most is loss of a roof over their heads. Fear that they will not be able to pay their housing expenses leads them to pay the rent first. Of

course fear of eviction is related to the fact that homelessness is associated with the ultimate social downfall. The unemployed sometimes recollect their own or their neighbours' "adventures" with homelessness when they and their families had to sleep in shelters with the so-called underworld. Very many diarists, both in the 'thirties and in 2000, are afraid of the "social outcast" stigma. They describe their desperate and often unsuccessful struggles to maintain their good opinion, to be seen as a respectable family. This is why the unemployed try to avoid all those places in which it is impossible to distinguish between "respectable people" and the "underworld:" night shelters, labour exchanges, social welfare centres, soup kitchens etc. "What moral and physical tortures one had to endure before one got that job, no-one will understand who has not been forced by poverty or hunger to mix with these people who, for the most of them, were a bunch of the town's worst scum who, in those bad days, for want of a better source of money, were not adverse to this [i.e., clearing the snow from the streets] so that they could earn money for their vodka without much effort" [P1, 109].

"I don't think of my family as dysfunctional. Yes, there is poverty. Such times that we're all finding it hard!" (*Pamiętniki bezrobotnych 1 2003*: 189).³ It is psychologically understandable that people want to protect their near ones from being called an underclass family. Those unemployed people who are very afraid that, because of their shabby looks, they will be mistaken for criminals, alcoholics or "street urchins" probably use such stereotypes themselves. The diarists very rarely mention alcohol abuse. We only learn that drinking and alcoholism are very common in the families of the unemployed from the diaries of women who share their concerns about their husbands' problems and problems with their husbands.

The portrait of the lives of the unemployed which emerges from both series of memoirs is one of constant struggle for survival. It reminds us of someone who is trying to support a collapsing house by propping up the ceiling with cardboard boxes. Things keep falling down, there is not enough building material, one cannot patch up holes in the roof with paper just as one cannot patch up one's budget with unemployment benefit and loans from neighbours. The memoirists must incessantly choose between lesser evils: more and less dangerous debts, food and utility payments, buying a ticket or not going to the labour exchange etc. When one has no money everything is a problem: a notebook for the child, a ticket for the school bus, a visit to the doctor, sick leave which carries the risk of the husband or wife losing their job because of too much absenteeism etc. The portrait is so suggestive and so tiring that it begins to irritate the reader who would like a rest from this narrative of continual shortage. Unfortunately these stories rarely have happy ends.

All the memoirists devote an enormous portion of their memoirs to detailed accounts of food: what they ate, how much it cost, how they managed to get food, where they bought it, what they did not buy, what they plan to cook tomorrow, what they give their children to eat etc.

I feed my children with potatoes and carrots, even beetroots, because I don't have any cabbage because I couldn't afford to buy it and sour it. That's how we lived and I was so tired I didn't even have the strength

³ Henceforth marked [PW1].

to walk. It came to the point when the children begged for a piece of bread. Romcio comes, our oldest son, and brings this loaf of bread, I ask him where he got it and he says: I gotten it. I then found out that he begged for it at the bakery telling them how his father lived [P1, 49].

The daily struggle for food must be overwhelming for the unemployed. First of all they must be “frugal”—they must buy the cheapest products, look for bargains, cook as nourishing meals as possible, try to give them variety not only in terms of taste but also in terms of nourishment, grow their own fruit and vegetables in the garden or allotment. The unemployed today have similar concerns. The memoirists plight in the ‘thirties’ was certainly much worse than it is today. Many of them lived at the brink of survival. At the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first century some memoirists write about occasional hunger, for example going to bed without supper. The ‘thirties’ memoirs give many accounts of permanent undernourishment and emaciation.

The second recurrent theme in almost every memoir in addition to food is illness. This is a vicious circle. The unemployed often do not eat properly and do not get enough vitamins. They are weak and vulnerable and fall ill more often than normal. Medicine is expensive and so their diseases are often not fully cured and recur. Illness weakens the organism even further and the unemployed cannot afford convalescence through, e.g., healthy food and rest. Some of the unemployed describe their problems with the health service, particularly when they need to see not only their general doctor but also a specialist. In the ‘thirties’ the diarists also wrote about their lack of health insurance, deeming them completely without health care in case of illness.

Many unemployed women complain of marital crisis: “We used to be a respectable couple but we now quarrel more and more frequently and more and more violently. All because of hunger and poverty” [P1, 281]. Men are more reluctant to describe their domestic problems but this is more a case of masculine narrative than of lack of problems (more about this in a moment).

One of the things which strikes us is the complete lack of pleasures and recreations to which poor people are sentenced. Today television is often the only source of enjoyment. It is usually the men who watch television to the dismay of their wives. Dismay because instead of helping them with the children or simply talking to them about their troubles—a source of mutual support—the men sit in silence gazing at the TV screen no matter what they are watching.

The unemployed lament their shabby looks due to lack of money for good clothes or at least attire in which they could show up for a job interview. In the ‘thirties’ one of the reasons for their dreadful appearance was physical emaciation:

my husband is now no more than a shadow who walks the streets all the time so as not to look at me, a living corpse, sallow as the earth or cinders, and on top of all this greyness yellow, shining marks which come from I know not where and as if that weren’t enough the eyes (they say they are black but they are not black), black, big, not sad but positively wild, which surely make me look as if I were out of my mind and to which not only those who know me cannot get accustomed because even my own husband is avoiding me [P1, 279].

Today bad looks are more often caused by apathy and lack of grooming due to loss of sense of meaningfulness of any vital activity.

In the fragment of the diary quoted above, written by a woman in the 'thirties and signed "wife of an engraver living in Kalisz," we find the motive of roaming the streets. This roaming, doing nothing, sometimes "rotting" at home out of shame, messing around, boredom filled with worry and despondency, is another recurrent motif of the diaries of the unemployed. Boredom due to lack of anything to do and lack of recreation. In some contemporary diaries we read that Saturday and Sunday are the worst time for the unemployed person, the apogee of helplessness and the killing awareness that for working people the weekend is a time of rest and enjoyment. The unemployed not only long to work and earn money, they also long for a dignified life with its daily and weekly routine, its agenda, its traditional division into time for work and time for rest which organises one's life.

Some memoirists reflect upon the consequences of the decline of certain occupations due to technological progress. Of course this motif is much more frequent in the 'thirties than today, probably because nowadays people recognise that technological progress is irreversible.

The unemployed have always migrated in search of work. Such migration is usually successful but hard to organise. The following conclusion can be gleaned from the diaries: it is hard to find a job but if one does manage to go abroad one can earn money. In the 'thirties the unemployed usually migrated to France and the United States of America. Today they go to Holland and the United Kingdom. In one of the pre-war memoirs we find a colourful account of a stoker who spent more than half his life in the United States where he travelled all over America in goods trains, did all sorts of odd jobs, was down-and-out, unemployed, a man of all trades, a gang victim etc. Interestingly, he finally convinces his readers that he loves his country and returned so that had he could support it with the money he earned over the ocean and then asks for the prize explaining that he is one of the most vitally and "worldly" experienced unemployed people: "You can be sure that nobody in this country has struggled with unemployment to such an extent or gone through what I had to go through on both hemispheres" [P1, 416].

The Psychological Consequences of Poverty and Unemployment

The emotional picture which emerges from the memoirs is very depressing and alarming. The unemployed are painfully uncertain of what tomorrow will bring and live from day to day. They feel that they must set out each day to struggle for survival and that no matter how hard they try, their success will be short-lived.

All memoirists, both pre-war and contemporary, mention suicidal ideation. In 37 of the pre-war memoirs this ideation was portrayed as a realistic intention. Sometimes not only the authors themselves but their whole families thought about taking their lives. In 2000 thoughts of putting an end to one's misery were present in every single diary. Sometimes in the form of black humour: "All Saints' Day. At home all day. We didn't go to the cemetery until evening and found that we were not the only ones to conclude that those who were buried here were freed of their problems at last"

[PW2, 138]. Sometimes in the form of more specific consideration of the pros and cons. When women consider taking their life they always think of what will become of their children. Many unemployed mothers say outright that they view their further existence as their duty towards their children, still too young to manage on their own.

One of the most serious emotional problems with which unemployed and poor people must cope is the sense of humiliation, hurt feelings and shattered ambitions: “You don’t write to your family at all. Hunger and poverty cannot win with ambition, nobody even guesses what we are going though”—writes a woman in the ‘thirties.

Lack of respect and sense of inferiority are humiliating. A building and contracting worker from Poznań wrote before the war:

When I walk in the street I feel that I cannot match the ordinary citizen, that everybody is poking their finger at me, so I instinctively give way to everybody, looking with tears in my eyes at these lucky people who can still hurry to work every day or go back home without having to worry about what they are going to eat tomorrow [P1, 396].

Today tears of shame mingle with tears of wrath:

I no longer have any illusions concerning the good will of the bureaucrats who work, for example, at the Labour Exchange, people whose only concern are their own pay checks and needs, people who are a bit above me in the social hierarchy because they are better off materially and therefore think they are cleverer than me and can treat the likes of me as their inferiors. It is because of them that I have given up the struggle, because of their ironical smirks, the way they look at me and the humiliating way they treat me. I have really believed that I am nobody and that’s how I feel: resigned, despairing and totally depressed [PW1, 195].

writes Olga, a forty-year-old unemployed woman from Ruda Śląska in 2002.

No bread, no fat, no salt, flour, soap, coffee or light, no coal, wood or even matches, no underwear, shoes, clothes although it is freezing outside, no family warmth, not a word of consolation, no Sunday or holiday, no singing or love of their neighbour or country, no variety in life, in taste, in humour, no attraction to beauty, no sizing up of one’s life, one’s achievements, not even strength to pray [P1, 397]

—that is how a building and construction worker from Poznań describes his life in 1931. What we have here is the feeling of incessant, acute shortage of everything, both material essentials and basic attachments, elementary feelings which give a person a sense of dignity, importance and meaningfulness. Apathy is saying the least.

There is nothing in this world except money, nothing at all! I don’t believe in anything sacred, in anything at all and from now on I couldn’t care less, just couldn’t care less! I live as if I were dead, I feel dead and everything is dead for me, the only thing that is still alive is my pride and I’d be very happy if that too were to die, because then maybe I’d come to life a bit, but that is a great question mark,” writes a woman signed “wife of an engraver living in Kalisz [P1, 281].

The motif of death during one’s lifetime recurs in the memoirs time and time again: “I am slowly but systematically dying” [P1, 528]. In the face of such deficiency work becomes something extremely valuable because it stands for life not only in the sense of means of living but also the sense of meaningful life, harmony and fulfilment. It is worth recalling Freud’s definition of mental health: “a person is mentally healthy when he is capable of love and capable of work.” To travesty the

words of the psychoanalyst we may risk saying that if someone is unemployed despite efforts to find a job and the wish to work, it must be very difficult to maintain mental balance.

Frustration breeds aggression in many unemployed people. They mainly focus their aggression on so-called normal people. Indifference or hostility towards the poor stimulates aggression:

I won't steal because I don't know how to, but am I to go and beg these directors to take pity and let me earn some money? I shan't go! The best thing to do would be to put a bullet in my head. The easiest. But before that I would like to shoot these scoundrels one by one, all those who have not a grain of sympathy for human misfortune [P1, 574].

Lack of respect, resentment, refusal to help when the one who is asking for it is having to overcome his pride, leads to further humiliations and eventually to mutual hostility and complete isolation.

The unemployed people's hostility is sometimes directed against those who have work, who go on strike to demand higher wages or employee rights. The contemporary diarists ask: how can the nurses complain when they have work? Old-age pensioners for whom it is easier to find a job although they are already getting their pension are also a source of hostility. The unemployed have a deep feeling of injustice.

Just as they did before the war the unemployed today feel that they have wasted their lives: "we are wasting away, rotting. That's the life of the unemployed woman who has no house and cannot find a job for years. Black despondency, melancholy—devilish whispers are tearing me apart" [P1, 497]. Today in addition to the feeling of wasting away, we have a feeling of not having proved one's worth, coped with life, fiasco where so many have succeeded. This exacerbates sense of inferiority in the unemployed.

Many of them explicitly complain of psychological problems which are the direct consequence of chronic stress. Some of them have diagnosed neuroses and are taking tranquillisers or sleeping pills: "I get so crazy that I can't stand people's company and now, on top of that, I can't sleep—nervous breakdown, nausea. My stomach is so contracted that it no longer accepts any food, internal pain, I don't have medical insurance, and I can't afford a private doctor" [P1, 497].

Interestingly, the motif of pride is absent in the memoirs of the unemployed although many of these people could be proud of the way they are coping with such hardship. The unemployed do not describe themselves as people who deserve to be respected because they know how to survive in adverse conditions and are struggling so painfully with their fate. Poverty and coping with poverty are never the key to sense of self-esteem. This suggests that the unemployed have accepted the loser stigma stamped upon them by the free market ideology. This stigma is painful. It stimulates feelings of guilt and inferiority. It individualises the social problem by attributing the inferior class of entire social groups to the characters of individual men and women.

The unemployed memoirists very seldom mention mutual self-help. No wonder. If they cannot help themselves then how on earth can they help anybody else? We do, however, find isolated accounts of taking in a friend who has been evicted [P1, 52–53].

Women's Memoirs, Men's Memoirs

The memoirs of the unemployed are an interesting source for gender studies, particularly studies in the sociology of emotion. The difference between male and female accounts of their own experiences, feelings and psychology is quite striking.

Women write "qualitatively." They try to write insightfully, are continually reflecting upon their personal experiences and try to get to the roots of their feelings. Men write "quantitatively." They provide data but very rarely write about themselves in psychological terms. They use a reporting style—concise and soldierly. They are definitely not used to emotionally working through their own selves or their interpersonal relations. Women, meanwhile, give detailed accounts of their relationships, problems, ups and downs. They treat the diary format literally—as a kind of confession, a personal conversation. They see the process as an opportunity for catharsis based on externalisation of accumulated issues.

Women are much more inclined than men to describe their whole life, the antecedents of their pleasant hopeless situation, their childhood and adolescence, their marital history. One female memoirist writes about how her family arranged her marriage:

because as soon as we were married I knew that I did not love my husband but knowing that he loved me I was quiet and submissive and didn't let on how deeply I was suffering. I was convinced that that was how it must be because I had sworn obedience. In the end I had eight children [P1, 98].

Men and women construct their identities and identity markers quite differently. Some pre-war women signed their entries "engraver's wife." Not one man signed his "teacher's wife," for example, which shows that women build their identity on marriage and the family much more frequently than men who always signed their entries giving their occupation or using such terms as "worker," "factory worker" etc. Occupation was the core of the man's identity in the 'thirties and so we can only imagine how serious were the psycho-social problems of men who could not work.

Contemporary women are mothers first. The pre-war, "marital" signatures under the diaries have given way to "maternal" ones such as "the diary of an unemployed mother." Children are the main theme in the female memoirs. The women give detailed accounts of their children's misfortune and everything pertaining to their offspring: purchase of school books, school problems, buying children presents, children's holidays, the need to refuse them the pleasures and recreations which their peers can afford and the enormous guilt this evokes.

The greatest tragedies of the women in 2000 are related to their children. How to talk with them? What to say when they ask "why are we so poor, mummy?" [PW2, 208]. How to help the child not to be ashamed of its inferior looks, of the fact there are so many things the family cannot afford? Mothers describe how they suffer when they have to continually deprive their children of everything and the resentment their children feel because of it. Many women no longer have the strength to pretend that everything is all right so as not to make their children unhappy. They are no longer able to smile or pretend for months on end that their red eyes are caused by conjunctivitis" [PW2, 212].

Men rarely write about their wives whereas women often write about their husbands: they complain that they don't look for jobs, leave it to them to bring up the children and support the family. But they also appreciate their efforts and sometimes even put down their boorishness or brisqueness to their difficult situation. Contemporary men simply shrug off their marital problems and wives' complaints with the words "trouble with women." They hardly ever go into long deliberations over the causes and dynamics of domestic crisis.

Unemployed men live as if they were in a state of internal emigration: "my husband just sits there staring at the television pretending that everything is OK" [PW2, 213]. They sit in front of the TV, find absorbing things to do such as daily journeys to the allotment, regular viewing of *Klan* or *Big Brother* ("stupid to watch but I do" [PW2, 132]). Sometimes things they see on television begin to control their lives: "8.10. Monday. They're going to start to lift the Kursk from the bottom of the Barents Sea today. I went to the allotment today and gathered the rest of the nuts. Everything is beginning to run out, just no shortage of rotten apples on the ground (...). Potatoes and mushroom sauce for dinner. Another passenger aircraft crash in Milan, 116 people killed, a light aircraft hit the plane's side at the airport. The Americans are still attacking the Taliban" [PW2, 136]. This specific mixture of daily hassles and international problems from the newspaper front pages verges on the comic. But it shows how excruciatingly bored the unemployed are. Attempts to amuse themselves by learning foreign languages, body building, quitting smoking, buying lottery tickets, keeping track of the football league matches, are all ways of stalling off boredom.

The dominant psychological problem of unemployed men is guilt towards their families. Few men say so outright but some do: "For a long time now there has been none of the joy and happiness at home which there used to be. I myself feel most guilty for this. I feel that every movement, every step, every look of my wife or daughters is pointing at me as the one who is responsible for this difficult situation. I imagine that they think that I don't want to work, that others work and earn their families' living just I have resigned to somebody else's mercy, I know not whose" [P1, 527]. Guilt and the feeling of failure in unemployed men are determined by their acceptance of the social role of breadwinner, according to the gender stereotype: "I'll do my best to find material help for my family (...), I must make an effort to ensure that we all continue to vegetate" [P1, 529].

Men feel guilty towards the whole family, women feel guilty towards their children: "It's Veronica's birthday today. Sixteen already. Sixteen years ago I was the happiest mother on earth but today I no longer have the strength to rejoice. I hate myself for this" [PW2, 215]. Women address some of their general reflections to the so-called pro-family policy. They call it fiction and feel that they are the victims of this policy. Some say how they resigned from their careers for the sake of the children but now think they were wrong to do so because they cannot find a job.

Many contemporary female memoirists mention their fear of another pregnancy. Unemployed women have an extremely pragmatic approach to motherhood: one woman writes that mother's milk is one of the few good sides of confinement because it allows them to save money. The 2000 memoirists complain that big families are

discriminated against because one must not admit to having many children during job interviews but it will be disclosed anyway when putting in the forms. “You should be looking after your children instead of wasting serious people’s time” [PW1, 188]—heard one 37-year-old mother of three from an employee of a courier firm where she had applied for a job.

Wild Capitalism

Both before the war and contemporarily the unemployed have painfully experienced wild capitalism with its lack or violation of employee rights and it is interesting to see how these accounts compare. In the ‘thirties they complained about being fired without gratuities or proper notice, lack of regular wages although they had a regular job, factory piecework, work which is too hard for older or unfit people, hard physical labour for daily rates worth no more than a loaf of bread. This is how a petroleum refinery worker from Wygoda describes his conditions of work:

Where acetone is boiled in large cauldrons the worker spends the whole shift in steam which has no way to escape except through the door. His clothes are wet, he moves as if blindfolded, walking in mud which never dries. In the drying room you work half-naked in spite of the draughts, standing on hot paving on which the acetone is dried (...) Those who work here usually have tuberculosis, they look like shadows, their faces are yellow, prematurely wrinkled, their eyes shine, they are in tatters, a sorry sight indeed. These ones get 3 zloties 50 [P1, 579].

The modern counterpart of the petroleum refinery is the supermarket. According to the 2000 memoirists these are places of stark exploitation. Unemployed Grażyna Konopczak from the Opole voivodeship gives an account of her friends’ work at the Real megastore chain. Obligatory extra time is not paid, if people complain they are blackmailed with the threat of firing and they are forced to work on Sundays. It is impossible to seek intervention because employers back each other up and work inspectors are helpless because they have no evidence to go by.

The contemporary unemployed also complain of the faulty job-seeking procedure. Firms do not want to accept work offers although they are obliged to do so. Many job advertisements are fictitious or placed by swindlers who deceive desperate job-hunters into extra costs. Prospective employers are nasty or arrogant. People who have managed to find temporary employment complain that they are paid irregularly or not at all and threatened with firing.

When discussing capitalism and its critique it is worth looking not only at analogies but also at differences. First, the contemporary unemployed seem to be more ashamed of their lack of work because they feel that they have not been able to cope. In the ‘thirties the unemployed attributed their desperate situation to social, market and political mechanisms whereas today they are more inclined to look into themselves in search for the reasons for their problem and feel that they themselves are to blame.

I’m beginning to give up. I feel completely deserted. I keep thinking of how little I have achieved, of how I cannot do better. I used to be mad at the government for doing so little for the Polish family that we cannot function normally, that we are pushed to the social margin, at risk of pathology—but now, now

I don't even feel this rage any more which I might otherwise be able to get rid of, just sorrow and apathy, resignation. It's just that I'm so full of guilt and I blame myself. I feel such a failure. I am losing the rest of my illusions [PW2, 208].

Guilt and despair come from the tendency to attribute one's plight to individual limitations rather than to the structure of social inequality, and to the failure to realise greater ambitions. Mothers often say how they must curb their children's ambition so that they learn at a young age that not everything is possible and that they should be pleased with what they have. Grażyna Konopczak writes of her son who did not pass into art school, saying what a relief that was because the family would not afford to pay his way through school, "but I'm still glad he tried. Let him know that nothing comes easily in life and you have to work hard to succeed" [PW1, 178].

The contemporary memoirists write about unfulfilled dreams, use such expressions as "attempted self-actualisation." Some feel embarrassed when discussing their old plans because they are afraid to make a fool of themselves. The contemporary unemployed seem to be deeply aware of their tragic situation, of the incompatibility between their level of education and aspirations on the one hand and their chances of realising these aspirations on the other hand. They also know a lot about the social and psychological dynamics of their frustration.

In the 'thirties the accounts of the everyday lives of the unemployed centred on day to day experiences and seldom reached further than the next day whereas in 2000 the unemployed experience great fear of the future, their own but especially their children's. It is worth adding that the subject of child labour is unexpectedly much more common than in the pre-war diaries. Younger children (aged about 10–14) earn money by picking wild blueberries or cherries, weeding gardens, cleaning. Older or adult children go abroad to earn money and support the whole family for a while when they come back.

Both sets of memoirs are conspicuous for the absence of topics relating to faith and religion. If somebody does mention the church he/she does so in passing, to say for example how he/she went to church on Sunday. Nobody mentions church institutions as a source of material support which is surprising considering the amount of charity work the church does. Some say that they are so embittered by their poverty that they have lost faith in God and all values. Some still try to be pious but it is not always easy: "excuse me, don't get it into your heads that we always eat with oil, because it is lent, but we do eat oil regularly because it's the cheapest thing" [P1, 181].

When we read the pre-war memoirs today we are stricken by the specificity of the 'thirties. We read of Jews, usually called "those little Jews" (a pejorative expression), to whom they sold or pawned their possessions. They didn't like Jews, thought they were deceitful and out to exploit human misfortune. Interestingly, there are no diaries by unemployed Jews in the collection yet we know that poverty in the Jewish quarters was often even worse than elsewhere, partly because the Jews had no state institutions to turn to for help.

Despite the many differences the diaries from the two different periods capture such phenomena as consolidation of poverty, progressive poverty, deepening depression, permanent poverty: "I was to put in my application to a 2-year college [the

author mentions this at the beginning of his published diary] by I gave up” [PW2, 128]—he gave up after a few months when he understood that he would not be able to afford to study.

Narrative—Confession—Therapy

The memoirs of the unemployed keep us in a state of tension whose source is not quite clear. Sometimes it is a case of lively narrative and anticipation of a breakthrough, rebound from the bottom. More often however it is a case of breaking the barrier of somebody’s intimacy. A diary is a confession. When it is printed it becomes a conversation. A conversation in a low voice because it is about embarrassing things, things which the poor people hide in their own four walls.

Self-narrative is a way of organising the world and defining one’s place in it precisely. But although narrative can be viewed as a way of constructing one’s identity—“by describing myself I create myself” (Trzebiński 2002)—when we are dealing with poor people the discovery of “who I am” resulting from the account of one’s own unemployment history is very painful. A diary which is a kind of self-reflection is therapeutic and psychotherapists often encourage their clients or charges to write diaries. But if the process of in-depth analysis of oneself and one’s experiences, complete honesty with oneself, is combined with an account which is to serve other people as a source of information about poverty, then the diary can become a skid row down which people travel, the more acutely aware of their predicament the more they objectify it and absolutise it.

I cannot say whether these narratives had a therapeutic effect on their authors. Perhaps for some they did. The thing is that the unemployed decided to share information about themselves which cannot be a source of any positive self-identification or the beginning of any community. Unemployment is not a determinant of identity which people choose of their own free will. Jobless people, poor people do not want to identify with their condition but that is their reality.

There is still another dimension of writing about one’s hardship. Competitions for diaries of the unemployed are a way of letting poor people speak up, of giving them the right to speak in their own name. In this sense diaries are certainly a way, if only a fragmentary one, of reclaiming their dignity and social empowerment. Both appeals—in 1931 and 2000—asked people to describe the plight of the unemployed person.

We are not interested in beautiful, refined forms of presentation. Let your words be simple and harsh, as long as they are based on genuine experiences: we place no demands as to the contents of the letters as long as they are related to your own plight, the plight of the unemployed. And if somebody cannot write, let them dictate what they want to say to someone who can [P1, 42].

“I am not a story writer, I am a worker, so I cannot paint my misery although I feel it perfectly, but I cannot really describe my feelings with a pen (...)” [P1, 181]—wrote a man signed “a shingle roof layer from Skierniewice county” in the ‘thirties. Some memoirs are written in very simple, reporting language and it is easy to guess that the

authors are not used to self-disclosure. It is therefore all the more worth appreciating the fact that they decided to take part in the competition. Some authors try to portray their lives in very literary form. They admit that they sometimes write poetry or even have some minor publications. Their memoirs fit into the mood of socially involved prose. When I read the memoirs written in the nineteen-thirties I was reminded of the journalism of Boy-Żeleński or the texts of women writers, Krzywicka and Gojawiczyńska. Why, I wonder, did some writers address social issues in those days and were not afraid to write about problems which were always a bit political, about the so-called underclass. Nowadays “good,” “respectable” novelists and playwrights hardly ever write about poverty and unemployment. What a pity, because there is a lot to write about. However, to write about poverty the writer would have to abandon the “detachment” or “lack of involvement” which is said to be the necessary condition of “good literature” and which reigns in the Polish salons in the name of ideological independence. I think that it is not really a matter of independence—we all have opinions and we cannot possibly prevent them from affecting the way we perceive and describe the world. It is a matter of the artist’s comfort and security.

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