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Voices of Displacement: Gender, Memory, and the Ukrainian Minority in Poland

Abstract: This article presents part of the findings of a research project that focuses on women from the Ukrainian minority in Poland. There is a huge imbalance between the strong involvement of Ukrainian women in maintaining the culture of the minority and their absence from collective memory and historical knowledge. Families store memories of women, but in the process of institutionalization the collective memory of the public automatically becomes masculinized. Therefore, collective memory ignores the real experience of half the minority and perpetuates the conservative gender division. These conclusions are further analyzed in the context of contemporary conditions that shape the collective identity of the minority. Currently, as Russia continues its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, questions about the masculinization of national memory and the collective dismemory of women's war experiences have returned.

Keywords: collective dismemory of women, heroines, herstory, masculinization of memory, Ukrainian minority in Poland, displacement

Introduction

After providing a brief summary of the modern history of the Ukrainian minority in Poland, I will discuss the theoretical framework for the institutionalization of memory. In the section on methodology, I present the types of data I used and how I analyzed them. My findings concern the key differences between private memory (communicative—individual and familial) and cultural memory from a gender perspective. Although the case of women in the Ukrainian minority has its specific social and cultural context, I will attempt to place my conclusions within the broader debate regarding the impact of the communist period on gender equality in Central and Eastern Europe, and the mechanisms behind the exclusion of women from collective memory.

The institutionalization of memory in post-communist Central and Eastern Europe has become a dynamic field of scholarly inquiry, intersecting with debates on national identity, historical justice, and the politics of commemoration (Čeginskas, Kaasik-Krogerus and Sääskilahti 2022; Mink and Neumayer 2015; Bernhard and Kubik 2014). The conceptual frameworks that have been developed in connection with memory studies and cultural trauma theory have revealed how collective memory serves nation-building and legitimizes political transitions (Alexander 2004; Halbwachs 1992). Studies have predominantly focused on the memory politics of majority groups and on

dominant historical narratives, while the experiences and memories of national minorities—particularly from a gendered perspective—have received comparatively less attention.

In this article I address the gap by exploring the gendered dimensions of memory within the Ukrainian minority in Poland, with a particular emphasis on the intergenerational transmission of memories and the role of oral history (Hirsch and Smith 2002; Reading 2014; Kuźma and Pietrzak 2020; Bold et al. 2002; Pető 2003). I also consider the position of women's memories within the collective memory of the Ukrainian minority in Poland and explore how mechanisms of exclusion and narrative invisibility might operate. I examine how official historical knowledge contrasts with feminized forms of communicative and family memory, and how these memory modes are shaped by broader institutional frameworks and constrained political contexts.

I draw on cultural memory theory to explore two key dimensions of how memory is shaped and transmitted. Vertically, memory shifts from personal stories to broader cultural narratives embedded in symbols, official histories, and commemorations (Assmann 2006; 2008). This process influences which voices are heard and which remain silent. Horizontally, memory circulates across generations through shared experiences and everyday acts of remembrance (Pickering and Keightley 2012). These exchanges are flexible and reflect ongoing negotiations of identity, belonging, and intersectional experiences. Memory serves important social functions, such as defining group boundaries and belonging (Misztal 2003). Feminist and intersectional research highlights how gender, alongside other social categories, shapes memory—often marginalizing women's perspectives and other excluded viewpoints (Hirsch and Smith 2002; Paletschek and Schraut 2008). This is especially apparent in oral history, where voices from minority and gendered positions challenge dominant narratives (cf. Gluck and Patai 1991; Srigley, Zembrzycki and Iacovetta 2018). Examining the interaction between institutional and personal memories emphasizes gender's vital—but often overlooked—role in how displacement, exclusion, and belonging are remembered. Such a perspective contributes to debates on memory politics in post-socialist Europe and highlights the challenges of studying marginalized and intersectional memories, particularly those of women.

My research focused on the transfer of intergenerational memory within the Ukrainian minority in Poland, based on interviews with women from three generations. Using constructivist grounded theory combined with oral history methods, my analysis highlights women's perspectives, which are often missing from the dominant historical narratives. The respondents were Ukrainian women who identified strongly with their national group. They were recruited through snowball sampling. Throughout the study, I maintained the requisite ethical standards and confidentiality of research.

In the first section, I will situate the Ukrainian minority in Poland in a historical and scholarly context. In the second, I will outline my theoretical framework for analyzing the institutionalization of memory. In the third, I will discuss my methodological approach, which emphasizes oral history as both source and method. In the subsequent sections, I will analyze gendered memory practices: first, masculinized cultural memory; second, feminized communicative and family memory; and finally, memory negotiation under political constraints. In conclusion, I will reflect on the implications of these findings

and the methodological challenges inherent in studying memory at the intersection of institutionalization, gender, and minority experience.

The Historical Context and Dominant Research Perspectives

In 1947, Ukrainians who lived in the southeast of Poland were forcibly resettled into the northern and western regions of Poland that had been freshly acquired under the Potsdam Agreement of 1945. The communist regime launched "Operation Vistula" to annihilate any remaining community support for Ukrainian-nationalist guerrilla warfare within Polish territory and to make the new, communist Poland's ethnic geography neatly match its political geography (Snyder 2003). Practically the entire Orthodox and Greek Catholic populations (more than 140,000 civilians) were displaced; in their new homes, they were spread out and scattered among Poles. Returning to their ancestral homes was forbidden, even for a family visit. The resettlement destroyed historical, territorial, neighborly, and even familial ties. It was an act of collective punishment of a civilian population. The operation also included mass repressions and systemic political discrimination.

Outright oppression diminished after the political thaw of 1956, but surveillance and political subjugation continued up until the political transformation of 1989. Politically acceptable forms of collective cultural life were reduced to a narrow canon of regime-approved folklore (Solarz 2012). Furthermore, the Greek Catholic Church was essentially prohibited from serving the population, even though the majority of Ukrainians were Greek Catholics by faith (Hałagida 2002). The oppressive, fear-inducing climate led many families to assimilate: they stopped speaking Ukrainian, abandoned their original religious affiliation, and ceased to identify as Ukrainian. The resettlement and subsequent events caused cultural trauma (Alexander 2004) and collective victimization, which in turn became cornerstones of the new collective identity of the Ukrainian minority in Poland.

It was only after the political transformation of 1989 that the Ukrainian minority was able to engage in institutionalized self-organization. Yet the decades of anti-Ukrainian policy had led to the mass assimilation of resettled Ukrainians. At present, a minority educational system is in place within the general system of education; there are Greek Catholic and Orthodox parishes in the areas with Ukrainian communities; and there is a formal Ukrainian minority organization with local units dispersed throughout the relevant areas. According to the most recent census data from 2021, the Ukrainian minority in Poland still has over 40,000 members.

So far, sociological research concerning the Ukrainian minority has tended to focus on two issues: the maintenance of their ethnic identity, and their processes of settling and putting down roots (Babiński 1998; Drozd and Hałagida 1999; Domagała 1999; Sakson 2006; Brzezińska and Wosińska 2009 and others). These studies not only share general subject matter but also a masculinized language of narrative and analysis. Granted, this is to a certain extent a consequence of the traits of the Polish and Ukrainian languages in general. The crucial words—"Ukrainians," "resettlers," "migrants," "members of the minority," "politicians," "activists," and "leaders"—take the grammatical masculine gender, whether they refer to a mixed-gender group or an all-male group. Thus, using masculine nouns

automatically imposes a masculine perspective in interpretation. This is compounded by the use of terms such as "patrimony," "fatherland," or the "culture of [our] fathers and grandfathers," and so on. However, the subconscious impact of grammar and language hugely hinders the delineation, documentation, and inclusion of women's authentically different experience and knowledge (cf. Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Mattuck 1986; Lerner 1986; Lutz 1995; McCarthy 2005; Kramer 2016). As a result, the public invisibility of women has been perpetuated, both in historical events and in the contemporary functioning of the Ukrainian minority.

As we will see below, a tendency toward masculinization can also be observed in historical narratives produced by certain historians from the Ukrainian minority in Poland (Misiło 2013; Drozd 2013). These accounts often emphasize male historical actors and political events, while women's experiences are more commonly associated with the domestic and everyday spheres—domains traditionally underrepresented in mainstream historiography and rarely framed as politically significant (Grzebalska 2015; Kałwa 2015).

The Theoretical Framework for the Institutionalization of Memory

Theoretical, vertical (through time) differentiation of the forms of memory "starts" with a single person and their individual memory (Halbwachs 1992; Assmann 2006; Erll 2011). Once verbalized and transmitted to others, this memory becomes communicative memory, subjective and spontaneous, passed from one generation to another, usually within a family. Its lifetime is limited to three or four generations. The foundation of family memory is the strength of relationships and emotional engagement (Halbwachs 1992). Family ties and loyalties have a strong impact on how family members interpret the past and may even lead to "postmemory" (Hirsch 2008; Erll 2011). Researchers have discussed the ways that family memory—which is located between communicative memory and cultural memory—supports the process of mediating memories through preexisting symbolic systems (Erll 2011). The generation of the next phase, cultural memory, requires further institutionalization. This kind of memory allows certain ideas to live trans-generationally, yet such longevity comes at a price: memory is inevitably simplified and reduced in order to achieve this more universal status. The ultimate stage of memory institutionalization is national memory, which is forged in accord with the nineteenth-century model: masculinized, wielded as an instrument of raising national awareness, and often promoting rivalry with other ethnicities (Paletschek and Schraut 2008).

In my approach, the final stage of the memory-institutionalization sequence is not national memory but historical knowledge. Researchers often note the difficulty in drawing the line between these two concepts. The boundary between memory and knowledge is fluid, knowledge itself is pluralistic, and the temporal distance between history and the present is becoming ever shorter (Hirsch and Smith 2002; McCarthy 2005; Burke 2016). History interacts strongly with memory because both are shared in a community and both serve as instruments of collective identity (Assmann 2006; 2008).

Memory transmission also occurs horizontally (in time), as individual experiences and memories are situated within existing or inherited memory frameworks that confer

communal meaning. These groups—the family, the ethnic group, and the nation—are examples of the main mnemonic communities that socialize us to what should be remembered and what should be forgotten (Misztal 2003). Horizontal memory gains particular significance in the context of family transformations, which lead to a breakdown in the transmission of collective memories from one generation to the next. Pickering and Keightley (2012) refer to this dynamic and creative process of linking past, present, and future as "mnemonic imagination." The interplay of memory and imagination allows not only for the inheritance of meanings but also for the creation of new ones, both intergenerationally and within a single generation. I attend to these horizontal dimensions of memory transfer in analyzing vertical transmission within women's family genealogies. This especially includes examining the institutionalization of memory and the attribution of new, sometimes instrumental, meanings. My interviewees also engaged in such processes, as the interview context provided space for creative reflection and the resignification of memories.

Research Methodology

This article presents a selected aspect of a broader research project, focusing on the issue of intergenerational memory transfer within the group under study. The methodological description thus pertains exclusively to the work conducted on this specific issue.

In the initial desk-research stage, I analyzed cultural memory in the form of the recent historical discourse of members of the Ukrainian minority in Poland. In this regard, the monographs written by Eugeniusz Misiło (2013) and Roman Drozd (2013) stand out. Both books cover a relatively wide range of events and were recommended by members of the Ukrainian minority. Misiło and Drozd both come from families that experienced forced displacement. Misiło addresses the reasons behind the forced displacement and describes the process, while Drozd discusses the situation of the minority in the years 1947–2005. I conducted a quantitative analysis on the basis of these works (a statistical analysis of the indexes of surnames), as well as a partial qualitative analysis (studying the specificity of the historical role of each of the women mentioned in the indexes).

The second stage of the research project was fieldwork (2014–2016). The respondents were women belonging to the Ukrainian minority and were selected through snowball sampling. Some held positions of authority within the nationwide or local-level network of the minority, and many actively participated in community initiatives. The sample also included women who were recognized within the group for other valued qualities, such as having compelling family histories related to resettlement or having successfully raised children and grandchildren who, as adults, contributed to the minority's efforts. In total, 60 semi-structured, in-depth individual interviews [citations labeled with a number and generation, e.g., U024_GI] were conducted in twelve localities, along with over a dozen more spontaneous group interviews [citations labeled with the letter "F" and a number, e.g., F08], which took place during local cultural events or even at informal social gatherings to which I was invited. The interviews were conducted in the small and medium-sized towns and villages to which Ukrainians were resettled after the Second World War and where they

continue to live today (primarily in the former eastern German territories and the former Free City of Danzig, which became part of Poland following border changes after the war), as well as in urban centers such as Warsaw, Wrocław, Gdańsk, and Przemyśl (one of the few indigenous areas to which some minority members returned after decades). The locations were chosen by the interviewees themselves. In smaller towns, interviews typically took place in the respondent's home or at a site connected with the Ukrainian community (the offices of local organizations, schools, workplaces, and once even in a Greek Catholic church). In urban areas, the interviewees often suggested meeting in a café. Each interview lasted between one and three hours. All the participants were informed in advance about the nature and scope of the study, including the topics to be discussed during the interviews. Verbal consent was obtained prior to each interview, and the participants were assured that their personal data and narratives would be treated with strict confidentiality and used solely for academic purposes, in accordance with ethical research standards.

In my decision to include only women as respondents, I was motivated by a desire to give their voice a clear platform, separate from the masculinized social and political discourse. By employing oral history methods, I aimed to foreground women's voices and perspectives, making them visible and recognized as valuable sources of knowledge about the social world they inhabit (McCarthy 2005). A recurring response among interviewees of all ages was the denial of possessing any valuable knowledge. Several pointed me instead—or sometimes additionally—to existing monographs, which they regarded as more authoritative sources on resettlement. Many women expressed the belief that "historical knowledge (sic!)" resided elsewhere—often with their husbands, whom they tried to involve or regretted being unable to involve, explaining that "they know more." It took gentle insistence on our part to convince the participants that their voices and lived experiences were meaningful. After the interviews, some expressed gratitude for the opportunity to share their stories and said they appreciated the chance to reflect on and give shape to their memories.

The interviews conducted in participants' homes often included viewing photographs and other family memorabilia, and this made the encounters personal, even intimate. Similarly, the researchers were generously offered at least drinks and often homemade cakes or other refreshments. Although these gestures came from the interviewees themselves—since the researchers were guests—they helped establish a level of trust in the research setting and encouraged deeper conversations (Fraser and Puwar 2008; Ślęzak 2018). However, contrary to our initial expectations, the conversations only occasionally evoked strong emotions, and primarily among the oldest interlocutors, who recalled the hardships (the poverty, intolerance, and fear) they had experienced during childhood. The attitudes of the younger respondents in regard to the past appeared to be significantly more emotionally distanced. Furthermore, several of the youngest interviewees reported that much of their knowledge had been acquired not through familial transmission but via formal education and commemorative ceremonies organized by the Ukrainian minority. In such cases, institutionalized frameworks had shaped memory.

The respondents belonged to three generations (GI, GII and GIII), with the oldest respondent being 94 at the time of the interview and the youngest being 19. I use the term "generation" to denote a cohort with shared attitudes formed by a shared experience of

historical events and with shared knowledge (Mannheim 1952; Ossowska 1963). The first generation (GI) comprised nine women born before 1947, who had been displaced and whose childhood had coincided with Stalinism and the most severe repressions against Ukrainians. The second generation (GII) comprised 35 women born after the forced displacement, between 1948 and 1970. Their early socialization occurred at a time of fear (Stalinism), and later during the thaw, yet still under the constant political control of the regime. The third generation (GIII) was represented by 16 women born between 1971 and 1997. The oldest of the latter were sufficiently young to be able to adjust to the beginning of the new social and political era after 1989. The fact that three generations fit into the time that has lapsed since the forced displacement enables us to analyze how memory is transformed in the process of institutionalization. The disproportion in the number of respondents in each generation is reflective, at least to a certain extent, of social activism.

I analyzed the research material using Kathy Charmaz's (2006) constructivist grounded theory, which combines elements of the classic methodology developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), particularly the principle of generating theoretical generalizations from individual cases. I also used the theoretical grounding proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Therefore, my analytical framework was shaped by a critical feminist perspective that focuses on hierarchical relations, gender inequalities, intersectionality, and reflexivity (Bielska et al. 2025). Additionally, in establishing what model of memory transfer is typical of the Ukrainian minority, I drew on theoretical approaches to the institutionalization of memory.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim. The analysis involved multi-stage in vivo coding using qualitative data analysis software. Individual code categories were further compared across generational groups. Coding was conducted in parallel with the interviews, and the validity of preliminary findings and interpretations of experiences was continuously checked and discussed with the respondents. This approach also strengthened the ethical and emancipatory dimension of the research by enhancing the awareness of both participants and researchers (Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002). Crucially, the opportunity to engage with the lived experiences and reflections of other women operated as a form of horizontal mnemonic transmission, fostering a shared space of memory-making and creative reinterpretation.

In this study, memory was initially approached as the object of analysis—I focused on the content of recollections, the ways in which they were articulated, and on what, how, and why certain events were remembered by women belonging to the Ukrainian minority. The analysis encompassed both individual narratives presenting biographical fragments and the socio-cultural contexts in which these narratives emerge and are transmitted in accordance with the arguments put forth in key works on feminist oral history research (cf. Gluck and Patai 1991; Srigley, Zembrzycki and Iacovetta 2018). Having identified patterns of remembering, I was able to distinguish characteristic features of feminized memory and subsequently to contrast it with cultural memory and the historical narrative produced by representatives of the minority. Therefore, in the later stages of the research, I employed these different forms of memory as analytical tools to capture broader processes within the Ukrainian minority, such as the negotiation of identity, the redefinition of gender roles, and the intergenerational transmission of values. The analytical framework I used thus

enabled a comparison of different forms of memory and their functions within the collective memory of the minority group.

Masculinized Cultural Memory and Historical Knowledge

In the case of the Ukrainian minority in Poland, family memory is reflected in neither cultural memory nor the historical knowledge currently being constructed: women's issues and women's memories are practically nonexistent in both. As for the absence of women, the two celebrated monographs mentioned above offer a stark example. Misiło's monograph has an index of approximately 2,150 surnames. 178 of those surnames belong to women (8.3%), and 147 of them are Ukrainian (6.8%). These women are noted, in the great majority of cases, simply because their surname appears in archival texts and not because the person herself is described as having played an important part in history. Most typically, archival documents mention women on account of their being the wives or mothers of (male) heroes. Drozd's monograph comes with an index of surnames too. Out of the 469 surnames listed, 37 belong to women (7.9%), of whom only five (!) are Ukrainian, and only two can be considered to have been of historical importance. The striking absence of Ukrainian women in particular also says much about the intersectionality.

Heroes are important figures in national memory, hence their function as powerful symbols for upholding collective identity. While institutionalized memory includes a handful of heroines, they are either instrumentalized for political gain or mediated through male characters, reflecting the patriarchal order. They serve to represent vulnerability and highlight the injustice of collective responsibility borne by the entire displaced civilian population. Only two women are discussed in both monographs. One is Maria Baran. She was the first prisoner of Ukrainian nationality (assigned number 1) to be held in the Central Labor Camp in Jaworzno, the main prison where Ukrainians were detained, after the start of the forced displacement campaign. For the Ukrainian minority in Poland, Baran is a powerful symbol of how misguided the Polish authorities were in their attempts to crush the Ukrainian resistance movement, because she was an innocent victim. The second is Anna Karwańska-Bajlak. She was an active member of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists, and her husband fought in the Ukrainian Insurgent Army. She spent 14 years in prison, and, after her release, emigrated to the United States. In the 1990s, after the political transformation in Poland, she launched an initiative to have the body of her husband exhumed from an anonymous mass grave, with a plan for the reburial of all the bodies with dignity and a commemorative plaque. Her account of the last moments spent with her husband, which she wrote in the form of a brief memoir, is emotional and strikingly evocative of the female experience (Karwańska-Bajlak 2012). Her request turned into a decade-long struggle with reluctant Polish administrations, both local and national. Her story is a telling example of the mechanism that incorporates women into cultural memory only when their actions are mediated by a heroic male character (in this case, Karwańska-Bajlak's husband) and rendered politically instrumental.

The mainstream historical narrative describes the forced displacements as affecting entire villages. It is unlikely that any statistics were ever compiled on the gender of the

displaced persons, yet there are some sources as to the numbers of persons and families forced to leave specific regions. In total, approximately 140,000 persons and between 28,000 and 32,000 families were forcibly displaced (Bobusia 2007; Misiło 2013). This gives an average of four or five persons per family. Given that the families were typically multigenerational and with many children, five is a surprisingly low number. Why? Many men had gone missing by 1947. They were dead, or in prison, or had been forcibly sent into exile in Soviet territories, or they were hiding in the thick forests and planning guerrilla operations. And yet when cultural memory evokes displacement, it does not specifically refer to women but to civilians, a term that blurs the issue of gender and the specificity of women's collective experience. This evident masculinization in the history books suggests the idea that the masculine experience is a good stand-in for the experiences of both genders.

The historical narrative is "a selective view of the past," but sometimes the selection speaks much more of the present than of the past (Daskalova 2006). When asked about the forced displacement, the respondents automatically reached for generic narratives similar to those found in textbooks, heedless of their "false universalism" (Grzebalska 2015). Only when asked questions specifically relating to their family (and even more specifically to the women in their family) did the respondents begin to focus on the women's stories. In talking to the interviewer, a stranger, these stories did not emerge at once, while cultural memory was instantly accessible. The respondents probably believed that the experiences of their female relatives, which they perceived as mundane and typical, were neither representative nor sufficiently spectacular because they often involved ordinary matters such as packing the wagon, acquiring food, and taking care of the children. However, in the opinions expressed by the respondents, the persistence with which the women had carried on was sufficient to make them family heroines.

After the interview, several respondents spontaneously reflected that the representation of women's experience in the cultural memory of the Ukrainian minority in Poland is too scant. And yet, prompted by that very cultural memory, they themselves had automatically perpetuated the absence of women, inadvertently helping to shape collective dismemory. Moreover, cultural memory in turn influences how individuals remember by mediating memories through broader frames of reference (Saryusz-Wolska 2009; Bojar 2011; Reading 2014).

In sum, the marginalization of women's everyday experiences in the historical narratives of the Ukrainian minority in Poland reflects deeper structural dynamics rather than deliberate omission. When women do appear, their roles are often mediated through male figures or embedded in symbolic frames serving collective identity. This underscores the need to critically examine how cultural memory is gendered and how historiography continues to reproduce those silences.

Feminized Transmission and Family Memory

A review of the above-cited numbers and data suggested the research premise that many women were forcibly displaced without men. This was confirmed by information received during the interviews. From the accounts of 54 respondents who spoke about their family

history related to the forced displacements, 16 mentioned a mother or grandmother who was displaced without her husband. 12 were widows, with two to eight children (four on average); two women had husbands who were in prison; one woman was resettled separately from her husband; and another had been abandoned by her husband. Furthermore, eight other respondents mentioned that their mothers-in-law (three) or other close female family members (five) were forcibly displaced with children but without men. The same 54 interviews rendered 32 accounts in which full families were forcibly displaced. Only one respondent talked about the forced displacement of a single man, her grandfather; at the time, he was a widower with adult children. A quote from one of the interviews illustrates the gendered nature of displacement (in the vicinity of Biały Bór):

A lot of women came here. Widows…For example, my dad's mother was a widow, and she arrived with three children. Later there was [surname], and she was also a widow; [surname]—a widow with two children; [forename] was with three children; and my granny was also with three children. Widows, because their husbands had died somewhere [F04].

Qualitative analysis revealed the broad range of problems that women had to face both during the process of being forcibly displaced and after resettlement. The following description is typical:

Everything was loaded onto the train. The horses were in one [wagon]. The wagons were taken apart and loaded, but everyone roughly knew where their things were—the cows in another [wagon], the rest in yet another. And all the grain, about two–three sacks, some food, clothes, and bedding, the featherbeds. I was with my mother and grandmother, my sister was watching over everything, and we had our goat. Because Daddy bought a goat and said, "We might not be able to milk the cows. We don't know how long we'll be traveling. We won't have water." Mom was pregnant, but if there was a stop, I'd take the goat out so it could eat something…I remember I had a half-liter cup with milk for Mom to drink because goat's milk is very nourishing, and dry bread, Grandma and I. And my sister milked the goat at least three times a day. (…) To get to Giżycko, we traveled through Upper Silesia or somewhere, for about two weeks. (…) And of course, every other day they disinfected us. It's hard not to remember when everyone had to raise their hands up, get off on the platform, and have something like a pump spray azotox under their arms [U005_GI].

The risk of sexual violence was significantly higher for women relocated without a husband. However, the interviews did not include direct questions on this subject, as I wished to avoid retraumatizing the respondents. Addressing such sensitive issues would have required prior disclosure at the consent stage, which could have increased refusal rates and disrupted the snowball sampling strategy that relied on access to a nationwide network of Ukrainian minority women. Moreover, I deliberately chose not to pursue more sensitive lines of inquiry than those already implied by the very nature of the study, which involved women belonging to a national minority—a group potentially vulnerable to social harm and structural marginalization.

As a result, sexual violence was mentioned only once—by one of the oldest interviewees. Notably, only three women had experienced displacement as young adults and had thus been directly exposed to such a risk. Two others recalled other forms of hardship in detail, including the humiliating, weeks-long journey and post-resettlement poverty or local hostility. In subsequent discussions with fellow researchers, I was occasionally challenged for potentially underestimating this issue, which is considered central to women's wartime experiences. None of the younger respondents reported sexual violence involving their mothers or grandmothers, though a few acknowledged it as a general threat. This

silence contrasts with the rare but explicit testimonies found in the only publication addressing this topic (Buczyło 2006). Given the context and the broader literature on sexual violence and trauma (e.g., Pető 2003), I cautiously interpret this absence as a likely result of suppression and silencing by the victims themselves, shaped by personal, social, and cultural factors.

Upon arrival, the newcomers were scattered among villages in the area. They were prohibited from sharing their new addresses with anyone. For single women, the primary sources of stress included the trauma they had suffered, the loss of their belongings, and the poverty into which they were plunged. Some of them also lived in anxiety about the fate of their husbands, who had been arrested. There was a sense of impermanence and fear. The sample quotes describe typical beginnings after settlement:

When they brought us here, my mother was alone, my father wasn't there—he went to war in '34 [sic!]…The Russians took him, and he never came back. At that time, I was nine years old. One brother was seven, and the youngest one was probably two years old. So my mother was alone… (…) They brought us here and threw us into a sort of shack—no windows, no doors, nothing at all. Just a heap of rubble. And you know, there was fear. Because, well: we were afraid of the Poles, and maybe the Poles were afraid of us, because Ukrainians, Banderites, had arrived. But we had nothing to do with that… [U011_GI].

And then winter had already started approaching, it was close to winter. But here there were no windows, no doors. And together with the other…[female housemate—AH] we would go (…). There were also houses in ruins, and there we'd take stuff; we wandered around the pigsties (…). There was nobody to transport it for us… So we took a cart from a neighbor, and it was downhill, and we both hauled it! But when the neighbor had ploughed his field in the evening he hauled us further, to our house. That's how we prepared for winter, so there'd be something to burn. And as for the windows: somewhere we'd found one pane of glass, so we put that pane in place. Then a second one. [And you did that all by yourselves?] Yes, we did it on our own. And my husband returned in January, at the end of January [U025_GI].

At the same time, the women had to look for wage-earning jobs, because they had neither savings nor food. This was particularly difficult because most of them spoke no Polish. Typically, they found work as hired help at the small farms in the neighborhood. Their low social and economic status meant they were often exploited. They were also ostracized by their new Polish neighbors, who gossiped that their husbands were in prison for murdering Poles, or were guerrillas still hiding in the woods. The typical Ukrainian woman's experience at the time was of backbreaking work, humiliation, and the newfound necessity of doing both women's work and men's work: construction work, household work, wage-earning work, and child-care, all at once:

I remember how Mom would always cry for a long time, how much she cried… (…) Because she wasn't accustomed to such work… As I remember it, she was constantly having to do community work as there was no horse, no man [U010_GI].

Children were also forced to undertake difficult work to earn some money:

Well, I didn't go much to school, because I couldn't go. I was the oldest, both of my brothers were younger. Our father wasn't there. I had to go to work at the collective farm…We had to make a living somehow…There was no other way… (…) I was tall, that's how I am, but I was terribly skinny. I remember how Mom dressed me up in those thick waistcoats. She gave me her own, because they didn't want to take me on at the collective farm, because I was still a child. But Mom dressed me up and said, "So, you're going to be plumper." I remember that… [U011_GI].

I started working for pay right away. I started immediately… How old was I?… I was 16. Yes. People went to work on the state farms, in the forest… I still went with older people to work. Well, you had to earn something. And my father, in 1953, came back from Siberia exhausted and emaciated [U036_GI].

The above quotations come from interviews with the oldest respondents (GI), whose perspectives highlight the hardships of everyday life and the private struggle for survival during the resettlement period. These narratives were transmitted within families where intergenerational conversations about the past took place—which was not always the case. Several interviewees emphasized that under communism, the transmission of memory was often disrupted due to fear instilled by state policies aimed at denationalizing Ukrainians and accelerating their assimilation into Polish society. In some families, conversations about the forced displacement only started after the political transformation of 1989. Earlier, the memories were dangerous; there was the constant threat of political sanctions from the communist regime:

To begin with, up until the eighties, it wasn't spoken about. I mean it was, but we—as the younger generation—were rather…perhaps not sheltered, but they tried to make sure we didn't suffer the consequences of what happened back then. But after the year 1989, what had previously been such a secret became widely accessible. And it was only then that our parents began passing down what had happened [U028_GII].

You know what? There was a time when they very often, for a long time…they…no one talked about it. I think they…now, from this perspective, that's what I think. I believe they were simply afraid to talk about it. (…) Maybe when I was around 15, that's when people started to speak about it more openly, I think. And mostly it was my grandmother. She would talk about how they came, how it was back then [U024_GII].

On the other hand, there were also families in which the forced displacement was discussed freely even under the communist regime.

As for the silence, respondents in generation GI explained that their mothers (G0) tended to focus on hard daily work and festive traditions. In generations G0 and GI, the reluctance to reminisce was rooted in the trauma of the past and in fear of political oppression—so it was a significant silence (Danieli 1998):

Grandma also never spoke about the things she had done before. I know she went through a lot in prison—torture, interrogations—she kept all of that to herself, and to me, that alone builds a monument to her in my eyes [U019_III].

My mom also didn't really like to talk about that topic. Maybe now…sometimes she has moments when she wants to share those stories. [*And from your childhood, as you recall, it was as if the topic didn't exist, as you said earlier—is that right?*] That's just it—I don't remember. I don't remember anyone talking about Operation Vistula. I don't remember [U012_II].

However, the silence experienced by respondents in generation GIII was already different contextually—it was no longer significant, as it was rooted in other, more trivial factors.

Another factor disrupting memory transmission was cultural transformation, including industrialization and urban mobility, which led to family atomization and generational fragmentation. As a result, intergenerational memory was reduced to two generations within the nuclear family, with external institutions assuming many socializing functions:

When my grandparents on my mother's side passed away, I was still in primary school, so I wasn't really curious or interested in all that. Especially since I lived about, what, 20… around 60 kilometers away from them. So I used to visit my grandparents during the holidays… [U003_GIII].

Well, my granddaughters live far away. Back when they were little, yes. I used to tell them things, you know…But now, what can you do…Some of them are still studying. One is already working—somewhere in Gdańsk, I think—so she doesn't come here often…So now I don't have much contact with them [U011_GI].

Against this backdrop, the role of women in preserving family memory becomes particularly significant. Analysis of the interviews in terms of who in the respondents' families talked about their memories suggests that women are more responsible for maintaining family memories. In addition, the respondents (especially in GII) shared their more general reflections on the cultural role of Ukrainian women, who keep families together and are responsible for upholding the national and religious culture to a greater extent than men are. Respondents in generation GIII spoke about the importance of their mothers' day-to-day work to raise them in the culture of the Ukrainian minority:

I really have to point out that it was Mom [GII] who was the carrier of that Ukrainian culture. She was the one who passed it down to us. I could even say that my dad wouldn't be a Ukrainian today if not for his marriage with my mom [U037_GIII].

Both the mothers (GII) and the grandmothers (GI) were described by the GIII respondents as "the glue that holds families together," the "safeguards of tradition," and persons who "connect others across generations."

The structure of family roles of women in memory transfer was also analyzed. A comparison of the roles of mothers and grandmothers in maintaining family memory in generations GII and GIII reveals the greater impact of grandmothers. The women in generation GIII also spoke of the importance of their grandmothers (GI) as cultural models. For members of generation GIII, their GI grandmothers are the last direct link connecting the Ukrainian minority in Poland today to the era before the forced displacement.

The respondents in generation GII were able to listen to proportionally the largest number of family stories. This was memory transfer from the women with immediate experience of the forced displacement (GI and G0; category G0 was further established to refer to the generation of mothers of the women in generation GI. The women in G0 experienced the forced displacement as adults). However, the transfer partially ceased in generation GII and did not automatically continue on to the next generation, GIII. As the third generation after the forced displacement, GII should—in line with the theory outlined at the beginning of this paper—close the transfer sequence for family memory. Indeed, the GIII respondents had less detailed knowledge of their family history in comparison to the previous generations. One of them reported that her entire understanding of the forced displacement came from present-day events organized in connection with the issue and from the internet. Thus, although she had cultural memory, she had no communicative and family memory of the displacement. Notably, GII was also the last generation to be socialized in an era when being Ukrainian required a measure of political nonconformity.

Alongside vertical transmission, it is also essential to highlight horizontal transmission, which continually re-signifies the frameworks of memory and thus reflexively influences Ukrainian identification. The most vivid examples collected during the study extended beyond the female perspective and revealed a broader dynamic of social relations at the micro-level.

One example involves sisters and cousins who shared a single embroidered shirt that their grandmother had brought on the forced resettlement. The exchange was orderly, and

the sisters voluntarily passed the shirt among themselves whenever one of them wished to wear it for a particularly solemn occasion.

Another example concerns a group of neighborhood friends who, by sharing stories about their families' origins before the displacement, came to recognize a parallel—historical—system of neighborhood defined by their ancestors' former places of residence. Furthermore, two individuals discovered that their families came from the same village.

A third example is that of an engaged couple negotiating a shared canon of holiday customs, which differed slightly in their respective families of origin. They also made efforts to unify the wording of a prayer that varied between their households, in order to create a coherent world of shared tradition in which to raise their future children.

Finally, a notable example involves teenagers residing in a dormitory at a Ukrainian-minority school. They had exchanged information about the holiday customs preserved in their families, and thus they had learned about a broader canon of traditions and had been able to situate their own family heritage within it.

These examples reveal not only still-active mechanisms of memory recall and exchange but also demonstrate the dynamic and spontaneous processes of transforming memory and tradition in order to enhance their functionality in both the present and the future.

In summary, displaced Ukrainian women faced considerable hardships, including increased vulnerability to violence, social marginalization, and the long-term consequences of forced resettlement. These experiences form a crucial backdrop for understanding the transmission of memory within the community. While memory transfer was often disrupted, it nonetheless persisted—primarily through vertical transmission, with mothers and grandmothers playing a central role in preserving family and cultural memory. At the same time, my research found instances of horizontal transmission, both within family networks and through peer interactions and community-based exchanges. These multiple pathways of memory transfer reveal not only the fragility but also the resilience and adaptability of intergenerational memory under conditions of political repression and social upheaval. The use of the term "feminized transmission" highlights the everyday and intimate nature of this practice, and emphasizes its roots in the domestic and private sphere.

Remembering under Constraint: Gendered Memory across Political Transitions

The communist period was marked by a lack of democratic freedoms, and the political agency of national minorities was thus limited. State borders, particularly in the aftermath of the Second World War, were redrawn by force at the initiative of the central authorities, and the minorities created through these processes were subjected to forced assimilation through administrative measures and policies targeting language, education, religion, and population transfers. As a consequence, the continuity of national and ethnic identity became primarily a private matter and was often concealed.

After 1989, within the framework of democratic processes, official historical narratives of the Ukrainian minority, which focused on politics, war, and power, were legitimized and became a central mechanism of the minority's social and political empowerment (Lytvyn and Khakhula 2019). At the same time, familial and private memories, which

were often passed down by women, played a crucial role in preserving national identity and its emancipatory potential (Német and Rézműves 2018). These female voices expand the general understanding of history by speaking of everyday life, emotions, and interpersonal relationships—dimensions that are typically absent from official accounts. Through their emotional resonance and attention to how "grand politics" affects daily life, the female voices establish a parallel system of meaning that enables the reinterpretation of the past in light of both the present and the future.

Yet research on memory that has explicitly addressed questions of gender has tended to be viewed as less significant than research on memory that has addressed national identity or traumatic memory, even though gender is a crucial factor that shapes both individual and collective memory (Reading 2014). Precisely for this reason, the feminist theory of memory may understand private feminine memory as a countermemory to androcentric cultural memory (Hirsch and Smith 2002; Bold, Knowles and Leach 2002). However, it appears that the optimism of Astrid Earl was unfounded when she argued that family memory may cause a bottom-up verification of the purism of national memory, at least as far as gender is concerned (Erll 2011).

The fixed patriarchal image of the past is inadequate and incomplete, yet it continues to be viewed as both objective and universal. The Ukrainian minority developed culturally during the years of socialism, and the oppression they faced was a catalyst of their national mobilization. Collective identity at the time was rooted at most in family memory, as there was no official consent for the construction of a Ukrainian cultural memory. But why then is the cultural memory of the Ukrainian minority, which only achieved political and ideological emancipation after 1989, so highly masculinized?

Above all, after their displacement, Ukrainian women were settled in villages where they strove to cultivate the model of rural, patriarchal culture they had known before they were resettled. To this day Ukrainian women—including young GIII—glorify the traditional patriarchal culture.

Real emancipation among the women especially concerned the GII generation, whose members went to the cities for further education and thus achieved social advancement. Today, it is the women of the GII generation who are most active in support of the minority. These women did not feel discriminated against because of their gender but because of their ethnic origin, which was not accepted by the communist control apparatus. In addition, in the communist system, women were only allowed to have agency and be active within the permitted framework of political control (Funk 2014). The struggle for political freedom obscured the issue of gender inequality.

It should also be borne in mind that equality of the genders under communism was not the same as that understood today. Communist ideology was shaped by social and political anti-liberalism, while today's understanding of equality has been determined by the mass social and political movements of the 1960s and 1970s, which aimed to create a civil society based on a liberal-democratic order (Fidelis 2015). The communist regimes thus had slogans full of gender equality and even legislation to that effect, but as far as social mores were concerned, petit bourgeois morality and double standards dominated (Ghodsee and Mead 2018). Gender equality was above all an ideological response to bourgeois ideas of property (Fidelis 2015; Lišková 2016), while under communism, the freedom of women

was equated with their "right to work" (Daskalova 2006: 121–122). In practice, it was a matter of utilizing additional labor in the economy, so as to maintain socialist progress (Massimo and Penn 2009). Sadly, the state did not in exchange engage in the struggle over women's "double burden," or against widespread domestic violence (Klich-Kluczewska 2014). Gender differences remained a fundamental way of determining boundaries and of maintaining the newly established political and social order, in which systemic patriarchy and sexism dominated.

The Ukrainian minority in Poland, despite achieving political emancipation after 1989, has seen limited attention to gender dynamics within its collective memory. The privileging of masculine perspectives in cultural narratives remains influential, particularly in minority groups striving to preserve core cultural and religious values amid dominant mainstream cultures. The institutionalization of memory often requires narrative simplification, which can reinforce traditional patriarchal models (Paletschek and Schraut 2008). While symbolic representation matters, and women's experiences are significant (Pitkin 1972), national memory frequently presents masculinity as universal. This situation has shaped the collective perspective; leadership roles and official representation of the Ukrainian minority have been predominantly male. Women's experiences, especially during traumatic events such as forced displacement (when they constituted the majority and faced specific gendered risks) are less visible in the dominant cultural narratives (Reading 2014). This limited gender differentiation in memory influences how gender identities and power relations are constructed within the community (Hirsch and Smith 2002; Crenshaw 2004). Therefore, broadening the scope of collective memory to include diverse gendered experiences could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the minority's history and identity.

Finally, the Greek Catholic Church perpetuates the conservative gender order (Zych 2006). The Greek Catholic Church was persecuted and severely marginalized in the Polish People's Republic, with the result that the minority's rebellion against the regime involved intentional religiosity. The political transformation that began after 1989 also meant a revival of collective forms of religious life and a rebuilding of the Greek Catholic Church in Poland. Ukrainian women, who were accustomed to the patriarchy in traditional culture and political control during the years of communism, joined the new model. In the teachings of their Church there is a conservative division of the genders, with women given an ancillary role, as maintained by the decisions of the Second Vatican Council. The cultural construct linking Ukrainian ethnicity to the Greek Catholic faith is very strong among women in the minority. I observed tendencies towards atheization and attempts to question the religious order, coupled with holding on to Ukrainian ethnic identity, in only three of the young respondents from generation GIII.

To situate the findings of this study more broadly, it is important to emphasize that gendered differences in the construction of collective memory are not unique to the Ukrainian minority in Poland. Similar mechanisms appear in Rosemary Sayigh's (2008) research on Palestinians in the diaspora, where women—mothers and grandmothers—play a central role in transmitting memories of the lost country, life before displacement, and traumatic experiences of the Nakba. These memories are conveyed through everyday practices such as storytelling, culinary traditions, religious customs, and language. Sayigh describes how the "*hikāyah*," or narratives, told by older women are based on direct

experience, which enhances their authenticity and educational value as carriers of historical memory. A comparable phenomenon was observed by Ann Runfors (2023) in her studies of the Polish minority in Sweden, where women act as "central narrators," who are crucial for maintaining cultural-psychological bonds within the diaspora. The transmission of family traumas has influenced subsequent generations and is manifested in traits such as frugality and vigilance. In all these cases, as in Hirsch's concept of postmemory (Hirsch 2008), social memory is rooted in the community rather than in state archives. A similar effort to reclaim women's historical agency can be found, for instance, in the oral history of Muslim women in a South African fishing village; this history challenges patriarchal community narratives by highlighting the women's economic participation and resilience (Daniels 2009).

Finally, it is important to draw attention to the large-scale population displacements that occurred throughout Central and Eastern Europe as a result of armed conflicts, shifting borders, totalitarian regimes, and socially engineered policies. These displacements had far-reaching social and cultural consequences, and the impact remains tangible in the region today. Although displacement is a crucial element of the region's modern history, it is still frequently overlooked. Women's perspectives in particular have been largely neglected, despite their critical relevance to understanding both the lived experience and the aftermath of these processes. Memories of displacement, which are often sidelined in official histories and public discourse, are more fully revealed through oral history, which, at a micro level, provides valuable insight into the cultural and social dynamics of post-totalitarian societies in Central and Eastern Europe. A broader reflection of this phenomenon can be found in the volume edited by Simona Mitroiu (2018), which focuses on the narratives of displacement of women from Central and Eastern Europe and their place in public memory.

Although the protection of a threatened minority identity tends to reinforce conservative gender hierarchies, it paradoxically strengthens the position of women as key bearers of memory—it is to them that younger generations turn for knowledge about the past. While their narratives form the foundation of collective identity, they are less likely to enter the public and political spheres. Family-based memory transmission can thus be seen as a form of micro-activism—private and informal yet crucial for building communal bonds and resisting marginalization, while also suggesting the need to expand women's roles at the institutional level. Thus, the research conducted in connection with this article aligns with a feminist approach to oral history. It is not only a research method but also a space for empowerment and resistance, for documenting overlooked experiences, and for reflecting critically on oral history's relationship with traditional historiography.

Conclusion: Limitations and Reflection

This article explores the intersections of gendered memory, displacement, and minority identity through the oral histories of Ukrainian women in Poland. The findings highlight the complementarity between private, family-based memories and official historical narratives, which are often shaped by dominant masculinist cultural frameworks.

These private and often overlooked memory practices, though marginalized in public discourse, served not only as foundations for collective identity but also as subtle forms

of resistance against political exclusion and forced assimilation during the communist era. They reveal the complex ways in which memory sustains community cohesion under conditions of displacement and minority status.

As with most oral history research, this study faces inherent challenges related to the nature of memory itself. Individual recollections are selective, reconstructed, and influenced by current identity needs, social expectations, and the dynamics between interviewer and interviewee. The aim to "give voice" is complicated by difficulties in accessing women with the lowest social visibility, whose experiences might diverge from those presented here. Consequently, certain aspects of the past may remain underrepresented or silenced.

Intergenerational memory transmission is further complicated by linguistic shifts, migration, and transformations in religious, cultural, and familial practices. The transfer of memory is often situational, fragmentary, and emotionally charged, subject to selective reception. While this article touches on these issues, it does not systematically analyze how these transmissions have evolved, especially in the context of the profound social and political changes after 1989. This is an area that merits further research.

Moreover, the gradual loss of memory's material anchors, due to the passing of older generations, the dissolution of communities, and the disappearance of everyday objects and documents, weakens the rootedness and continuity of collective memory. This loss may lead to the mythologization or idealization of the past, particularly in the context of collective trauma. Additionally, memory can be instrumentalized, especially regarding structurally marginalized groups.

Focusing exclusively on women's narratives foregrounds their often-overlooked role but does not account for how men within the same community construct and transmit memory. While it is justified to critique dominant cultural memory as shaped by masculinist values, omitting male perspectives risks a reductive binary. Comparative studies that incorporate men's memory practices could provide a more comprehensive understanding.

Finally, this article limits its scope to the Ukrainian minority in Poland and does not examine the transnational circulation of memory between Poland and Ukraine or within Ukraine itself. Expanding the focus to include these transnational dynamics would enrich our understanding of how displacement and belonging are remembered across borders.

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