



Gender, Politics, and Participation: Memoire Competitions in Poland

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ABSTRACT

The article discusses the connections between gender and the politics of participation through the lens of life stories. It takes as an example the memoir competitions held in Poland between the two World Wars organized by newly founded sociological institutes. They encouraged non-privileged groups – peasants, workers, the unemployed – to write an account of their lives. The analysis focusses on the different types of texts published in the volumes: introduction, announcement, empirical data, and the memoirs themselves. The narrative and descriptive practices connected the necessity of integration and proof of scholarship with the aim of a counter-interpretation of Polish society. By doing so, they reflected and dissolved gender differences at the same time.

ABSTRACT IN GERMAN

Der Beitrag diskutiert die Beziehungen zwischen Geschlecht und politischer Partizipation aus der Perspektive von Lebenserzählungen am Beispiel der Autobiografie-Wettbewerbe, die von neu gegründeten soziologischen Instituten im Polen der Zwischenkriegszeit organisiert wurden. Die Wettbewerbe ermutigten unterprivilegierte Gruppen – Bauern/Bäuerinnen, Arbeiter/innen, Arbeitslose – über ihr Leben zu schreiben. Analysiert werden die unterschiedlichen Textgattungen, die die Editionen gestalten: die Einleitung, der Aufruf, empirisches Datenmaterial und die Erinnerungen selbst. Die Erzähl- und Darstellungspraktiken verbinden die Notwendigkeit der Integration und den Nachweis von Wissenschaftlichkeit mit dem Ziel, eine Gegenerzählung über die polnische Geschichte zu präsentieren. Dadurch reflektieren sie Geschlechterdifferenzen und lösen sie gleichzeitig auf.

Keywords: Gender, Politics, Poland, Memoir Competitions, Narrative Strategies, Participation

Life writing brings together several genres and types of texts. The contexts as well as the strategies and aims of writing vary by time and place, class and gender.¹ Although their interpretation as reflections of ‘real life’ has long since been deconstructed, auto/biographical texts are still seen as oscillating between historical and literary writing. They establish writing strategies of authenticity and truth on the one hand and notions of subjectivity and writing traditions on the other. This makes them interesting for political purposes.

Autobiographical texts reflect power structures of society. They purport to give a truthful account of ‘real life.’ They put forward (alternative) models of society, yet also depict hierarchies and exclusion. Nevertheless, the writing of autobiographical texts by less privileged authors confirmed the freedom to participate in a privileged genre. Since the authors took part by presenting themselves as workers, peasants, unemployed people and women, the texts also set forth new strategies of power and new hierarchies.² Philippe Lejeune discusses the different genres of life stories – sociological enquiries, autodidactic writings – and stresses their communicative aspects. Instead of merely copying privileged genres, the writings also fulfill their own messages.³ The tensions constituting the genre in general and especially the autobiographical writing of “those who didn’t write”⁴ are the leitmotif of the following reflections.

Lejeune describes the way in which these texts are read as an “autobiographical pact” between author and reader to identify the author with the narrator.⁵ However, this pact is not gender-neutral. A pact implies two legally competent persons whose names are known. Legal competence and having the same name for life are a subject position which women do not necessarily share.⁶ Even so, women found strategies to deal with the possibilities and challenges of life writing and to take part in accounts of history and the future.⁷

The following reflections discuss the connections between gender, the politics of participation, and truth through the lens of life stories.⁸ They take as an example the memoir competitions held in Poland between the two World Wars. Poland after the First World War is a good example to analyze the social and political significance of participation because it was a newly founded state with a long heritage of autobiographical writing. The lack of national historical institutes and Polish-speaking universities in two of the three parts of partitioned Poland strengthened the significance of these types of texts. Perhaps more so than in other societies, they became important media of past, present and future. Looking through the lens of gender not only refers to differences between sexes; even more important is its symbolic representation.⁹

The competitions were organized by newly founded sociological institutes. They encouraged non-privileged groups – peasants, workers, the unemployed – to write an account of their lives. Although the competitions themselves didn't address women as a separate non-privileged group, they offered some topics to involve them, and a few responded. The institutes had a more or less left-wing or Marxist background and were committed to a critical, scientific narrative. Apart from seeing themselves as defenders of the voices of the unprivileged classes (the workers, peasants, and the poor in general), they were intent on creating a new academic discipline and establishing themselves as successful scholars. The institutes can be viewed as examples of how to establish participation and scholarly expertise at the same time.¹⁰

I will discuss the autobiographical writings resulting from the competitions and supported by research institutes as part of a process of the establishment of political practices in new democratic states.¹¹ They offered entrants an opportunity to take part by writing down their own views, demands and interpretations of the world. However, the authors were used to conventions of tradition, narration and ideas of society being in good order. Therefore, the competitions organized the intersection of identities such as gender, class and social situation in a specific way.¹² They represented male researchers and mostly male writers. Accordingly, they integrated male dominance into a space of empirical knowledge and socialist politics. The new democratic objective was conjoined with establishing normality as male experience.¹³ I will start with a short overview of the Polish background followed by a description of the competitions. Then I will analyze the different types of texts published in the volumes: introduction, announcement, empirical data, and the memoirs themselves. While doing so, I will discuss different writing strategies which connect the authentication of memoirs with the creation of 'truth,' participation and politics. Using gender as an analytical category, I will show how the social and gender hierarchy was established: the male expert.

THE POLISH CONTEXT

At the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 after the First World War, the Polish state was restored after more than a century of partition between Prussia/Germany, Russia and the Habsburg Monarchy. The Second Republic of Poland was a newly founded democracy. It reunited three partitions with different social, economic, political and legal systems, with all the challenges that this entailed.¹⁴ Moreover, different social strands had to be integrated into the new democratic system with universal suffrage for

men and women.¹⁵ The political movements practiced participation. In spite of this, like many other states in Europe, the new democracy became more authoritarian following the world economic crisis.

Biographies, autobiographies and memoirs had already been important during the partition era. For the stateless nation, they were one of the means used to construct national history.¹⁶ However, the majority of these memoirs were written by the intelligentsia and the nobility. Despite seeing themselves as social elites and leaders of the nation, they often protested that peasants also belonged to the nation and had to be integrated if Poland was to gain its independence. Therefore, some autobiographical texts and memoirs were written by politicians who had been workers or peasants and moved up in the world. Others (albeit a minority) were written by educated women.¹⁷ But the tradition of autobiographical writing before World War One confirms that it was the preserve of educated men and the upper classes. Representing social elites and representing a privileged genre are interrelated. Upward social mobility and integration were possible, but did not change the overall situation.

The tradition of autobiography and memoir writing continued and even intensified during the Second Republic. Different groups, political parties and movements stressed their contributions to the struggle for the new state. Memoirs of a number of politicians and other public figures came out along with several publications concerning the fight for independence, the uprisings and the First World War. They created heroes and a historical narrative which was meant to unify and integrate society.¹⁸ The women's movement edited a series of biographical and autobiographical life stories of "women of outstanding merit."¹⁹ The journal *Niepodległość* ('Independence') first published in 1928 collected memoirs and historical analyses of Polish history since the partitions.²⁰ The memoirs of armed women fighting during the First World War were published in two volumes.²¹

In this situation, the newly founded sociological institutes held several competitions to encourage non-privileged groups – peasants, workers, the unemployed – to write down their lives.²² The first was held directly after the First World War. In the 1930s, the institutes arranged more competitions. In 1932, YIVO, the Yidisher Visnshaftlekher Institut (Yiddish Scientific Institute) in Wilno (now Vilnius), organized the first of three competitions for young Jewish entrants.²³ However, this research could not be completed, for on the very day that YIVO planned to announce the winner of the third competition, the German army invaded Poland.²⁴

The competitions have continued to this day. After the Second World War, when the People's Republic was under construction, many such competitions were held for miners, young peasants, urban inhabitants, and

so on. Just two months after the foundation of the trade union Solidarity in September 1980, a memoir competition was held.²⁵ Between 1996 and 2004, a series of fifteen volumes of peasants' memoirs was published which directly referred back to the first competition in the 1930s and once again included the announcement.²⁶

THE COMPETITIONS

In 1921, Florian Znaniecki (1882–1958), one of the founders of sociology in Poland, established the Institute of Sociology in Poznan and held a competition for workers' life stories.²⁷ Znaniecki had worked in the United States with another sociologist, William I. Thomas (1863–1947). Together they had developed biographical methods and integrated life stories into their work.²⁸ The stories were intended to help the study of social working conditions and were referred to by Józef Chałasiński (1904–1979), an authority on Znaniecki, for his doctoral thesis.²⁹ Life stories became an important source for scholarly research, especially in connection with the development of sociology as an academic discipline.³⁰

In 1929, the stock market in the United States crashed. The global economic crisis which followed left its mark on Poland, and unemployment and poverty mushroomed. The republic became an increasingly authoritarian state and the myth of a unified nation lost its sway.³¹ Against this background, another series of competitions took up the idea of empirical studies via life stories. In 1933, the Institute of Social and Economic Studies at the University of Warsaw³² held a competition in which members of the unemployed were invited to write their life stories. It was initiated by another specialist on Znaniecki's methods, the institute's director Ludwik Krzywicki (1859–1941), also a Marxist and sociologist. Having been announced in the press, the competition attracted 774 memoirs.³³ Fifty-seven of them – some long, others short – were published as *Pamiętniki bezrobotnych* ('Memoirs of the Unemployed') with a preface by Krzywicki.³⁴ Most of the authors were men. Only sixty-three of the whole sample and six of the published texts were written by women: three female workers, an etcher's wife, a schoolgirl, and a kindergarten teacher/housemistress.

The Institute of Social and Economic Studies held its next competition in 1935. The results came out in two volumes under the title *Pamiętniki chłopów* ('Memoirs of Peasants'), which contained sixty-one memoirs, again of varying lengths. The two female authors were introduced as a "wife" and a "daughter of a peasant." The announcement was published in peasants' journals and spread via youth organizations. Altogether, the institute was sent 498 life stories, including seventeen by women.³⁵

In 1938, another competition for autobiographical texts was jointly staged by two other Polish institutes: the Pedagogical Seminar of Jagiellonian University and the Society of the Workers' University, founded in 1922 by the Polish Socialist Party. Both institutes were interested in new ways of exploring the ins and outs of workers' lives and in new forms of sociological practice.³⁶ The competition was aimed at workers and took place under the auspices of the Workers' University. The book came out under the title *Robotnicy piszą* ('Workers write').³⁷ It contained twenty-five autobiographical texts, including one written by a woman.

The volumes published by the Warsaw Institute of Social and Economic Studies contained four different types of texts. The first was the introduction, which explained the general aim of the volumes. An article on the data analysis of all the life stories received constituted the second type and included a map of Poland showing the geographical origins of the life stories. The third type, the announcement, was reprinted in the book. It helped the reader understand the context against which the texts were to be read. The life stories themselves were the fourth type. The Cracow volume was structured in a similar fashion. It explained the competition and published the announcement, although the empirical analyses were less detailed.

All three competitions offered a prize for the best text. However, none of the announcements stated the criteria which would be considered; they merely mentioned that in order to win the first prize, texts should be at least twenty pages long. Taken together, these elements made up the objectives of the volumes. The publication of these collected autobiographical texts complemented each other. They strengthened the research institutes and the new empirical direction of sociology. They formulated a socialist approach to social and economic problems, and contributed to an interpretation of the present society of integration and hierarchy.

AUTHENTICATION OF MEMOIRS

The introductions explained the social background to be borne in mind when reading the books. The Warsaw volumes both contained prefaces by Krzywicki, which began with an emotional reminder of poverty and misery: "But they [the memoirs] will go out into a world of echoes of the misery which at the moment is not confined to our country ... these sounds of harsh experiences, and particularly hunger and illness."³⁸ One of the first sentences of the peasants' volume was: "When will the crisis stop?!"³⁹ In addition to evoking sympathy, it also underlined the writings'

importance: “They concern our future.”⁴⁰ And it introduced them as authentic: “The peasant suffering from the economic crisis has begun to talk about his worries and needs.”⁴¹

Krzywicki distinguished between stories and knowledge about misery and identified the addressees:

That is why the *Memoirs of the Unemployed* are not only stories intended to awaken the conscience of the public, but are a book for those who are worried about the future, for politicians, for men of elevated position, so that they will know what is growing in the position, so that they will know what is growing in the souls of those in the lower depths.⁴²

He implicitly established a hierarchy of the actors involved. With publication legitimized by the poverty described in the life stories, responsibility was firmly placed on the (doubtless male) addressees, who were urged to act. In no way was it an appeal for resistance or protest. Krzywicki distinguished between “the people” and “men of elevated position.” The preface was not so much about gender differences as differences between the masses and experts. The male marker underlines this hierarchical order.

The Cracow volume opened with a long description of education at the Cracow Workers’ University. It described the development of sociological research into the working class, stressed its topic, and explained how the idea of using a questionnaire was born.⁴³ Despite the editors’ conviction of the high significance of the collected texts, they also discussed the snags involved with sources like this. They concluded that they would have to expect essays marked by subjectivity and even fantasy.⁴⁴

The editors also addressed the problems of “scribbling” and “subjectivity,”⁴⁵ although they assumed that many of the authors wrote the truth. Rather than serve the “scribbling of a literary autobiography,” the point of the questionnaire was to collect details of workers’ everyday lives. The editors ennobled themselves as truth tribunals. Similar to the Warsaw volume, this hierarchy between experts and writers is gendered. In this way, even critical reflection serves as a medium to read the following memoirs as truth: “Rightly the reader diagnoses that it will be the best, selected material. Truth.”⁴⁶ Implicitly, the authors distinguished between authenticity and truth: while the memoirs were meant to be read as authentic, the editors themselves (i.e. scholars) produced the strategies of truth-making. By doing so, the editors implemented a hierarchy in the practices of participation – or a difference between objects and subjects of the research process. Aleida Assmann describes authenticity as a “persistent concept that provides a seminal value and normative source for cultural interpretation, decision and practices.”⁴⁷ Authenticity is discussed as a counter-concept against the alienations of modern societies,

as the continuation of romantic ideas of opposition. It is used as a positively connoted quality of democratic societies; it creates agreement.⁴⁸

PARTICIPATION

The announcements represented another level of narrative strategies. When they were first published, they had the character of communication. They were addressed at workers, the unemployed and peasants, requesting them to tell their life stories. However, when they were published in the volume their meaning changed to a strategy of guided participation.

This began with the forms of address. The announcement of the Cracow competition used the familiar form of ‘you,’ whereas in the Warsaw volume the peasants were addressed by the Polish ‘you’ in the plural. None of the announcements used the formal term of address. The unemployed were not addressed directly; instead, the editors used the form ‘they’ while the style of guidance was more functional. Though the direct ‘you’ was not unusual and was intended to create a familiar atmosphere, it also strengthened class differences. All the announcements stressed that entrants’ chances of being published or even winning wouldn’t be hampered by orthographical or grammatical mistakes or simple style.⁴⁹

The announcements of the Warsaw institute started with similar phrasing: “the very tough conditions of the rural population [...] and landless population”⁵⁰ and “the harsh fate of an unemployed person.”⁵¹ In this way, the announcements promised that the life stories would convey authentic, representative impressions of the social group invited to participate. Furthermore, they asked the addressees “to accurately, truthfully and simply describe how you live.”⁵² The Cracow announcement even threatened that not telling the truth would devalue the story: “An untruthful questionnaire is worthless for you and for us.”⁵³ Why writers might have been tempted to lie was not specified.

These introductory words were followed by detailed instructions about the salient things to write and how to do so. These instructions served as guidelines for those whom they expected to be unfamiliar with autobiographical writing – or even writing at all. The announcement for the unemployed asked entrants to state their jobs before unemployment, their wages, how their hours had been reduced, their unemployment benefit, how they earned a living, and any small additional income, which was broken down by gender (e.g. washing and selling vegetables for women, making and selling products for men).⁵⁴

The announcement for peasants listed the topics to be covered as instructions: “And then tell us about the conditions of your birth, whether

you were born into a well-to-do family or a very poor one.”⁵⁵ It encouraged peasants to divulge all the negative aspects of their lives and their most serious problems. Information was then requested concerning entrants’ concrete economic and social circumstances (i.e. the farmland they owned, and also their integration into the market: what they bought, what they would like to buy), the conditions of their dwellings, other income, etc. Both announcements enquired about entrants’ membership of organizations, their reading habits, family relations, and the differences between their prewar and postwar circumstances. They closed with organizational remarks: the deadline for entries, where they should be sent, and how to collect the prize.

The announcement from Cracow differed from the other two. The editors developed a lengthy questionnaire covering six pages in the published book, reading which must have been a feat in itself. The very title sounds pedestrian: “Questionnaire on Proletarian Culture and Self-Education.”⁵⁶ Then, the long names of the organizations involved as well as the aim, circumstances and reasons for the questionnaire were listed. The concrete instructions contained four paragraphs. First, the announcement assured entrants that not all questions had to be answered. This was followed by some advice on how to write the text: “Write the truth – because only a true description is worthwhile.”⁵⁷ Finally, thirty-five (!) questions followed. They concerned workers’ social origins, family relations, political organizations, education, and reading matter.

To sum up, the announcements used strategies of motivating and instructing the addressees. On the one hand, this may have encouraged them; on the other, the guidelines explicitly established hierarchies between scholars and writers – or between intellectuals and non-intellectuals. Both samples stressed the ‘authenticity’ of the expected stories and demanded ‘the truth,’ hence establishing a popular and participative practice of ‘producing history.’ Like the introductions, the announcements did not emphasize gender differences. Nevertheless, they encouraged some women to write. The broad spectrum of topics listed in the announcements clearly included aspects of female lives, as is shown below.

EMPIRICAL ‘TRUTH’

In addition to publishing the collected life stories, the volumes’ editors also did a lot of empirical work. They analyzed the statistical data received from the authors and discussed the method of collecting memoirs in detail. While the Cracow volume gave a detailed description of how they

arrived at the ‘experiment’ of using such texts,⁵⁸ the two volumes of the Warsaw institute published a chapter about twenty pages long on socio-economic data together with the life stories.⁵⁹ The data were collected from the autobiographical writings and from information added by the authors. This is somewhat surprising because the announcement for the peasants explicitly stated that the institute was not interested in statistics.⁶⁰ The difference between the tone of the announcement and the analysis again emphasizes the difference between popular and scientific culture.

The sample of autobiographical writings was analyzed with regard to geographical distribution, gender, age, land ownership, marital status, debts, education, size of family, migration, fields of business, duration of unemployment, social support, ways of making money, etc.⁶¹ The article on the unemployed gave data on the proportion of all those officially unemployed who had entered the competition (about 2%), their occupations and jobs before they became unemployed, how they survived, and who supported them.

The competitions were held by new research institutes keen to prove their academic mettle. By collecting autobiographical writings, they established new sociological methods. Moreover, they considered themselves left-wing and to represent an oppositional position in Polish politics – a risky policy in a newly founded state and against a background of economic crisis. Forging new sociological methods underlined the institutes’ scientific self-esteem – and also their oppositional narrative.

While the volume devoted to the unemployed distinguished between men and women in several tables, the peasants’ volume only did so regarding the number of autobiographical texts. At first glance, and taking into consideration the texts themselves, this seems to reflect the patriarchal structures of the rural milieu. Given the scholarly and political aims of the competitions, the gender order may be understood as a symbolic communication of integration.

MAKING POLITICS

The published autobiographical writings varied in length up to about seventy pages. By and large, the stories followed a chronological account of the hard toil of life: unemployment, misery, shortages, discrimination. Some of them faithfully answered the questions of the announcement.⁶² Most of them attributed the consequences they described in such detail to the economic crisis. The crisis justified the writings; it validated the importance of the circumstances of their lives. Some of the texts started with a statement: “beginning with my childhood, I can describe my misery like

a confession.”⁶³ Many texts ended or started with a gesture of modesty – “please overlook my mistakes.” This may be understood as a gender and class bias – an expression indicating that authors were departing from their assumed social position.⁶⁴

The life stories of the peasants and workers often began in a traditional way with information about the place and time of birth, the situation of their parents, a description of their education and work, how they came to own their farmland, etc. The unemployed by comparison got on with their life story and their current terrible circumstances and only later went back to their birth and their origins. For example: “I have been fired. This is the misfortune which causes my inner turmoil.”⁶⁵ In comparison, the peasant writers did not only identify themselves with misery. Some started with the topic most important to them, namely land ownership: “In 1911, my father started farming with fourteen acres of land. He had pasture, woodlands, etc.”⁶⁶ One important topic was education, the success of education, the difficulties of getting it and the lack of it. Several authors reported studying by themselves outside school.

Despite these characteristics, the samples embraced different styles of writing. For example, one author published tables about the economic situation, while a young woman added poems to her story to express her feelings.⁶⁷ Some also took the opportunity to address the readers directly. Other texts were written like a short story or novel using direct speech.⁶⁸

Only very few of the workers’ life stories, male and female, were success stories of becoming a socialist. The authors reported how they discovered socialism and joined the Polish socialist party or other organizations out of conviction. A laundress from Cracow reported joining the caretakers’ organization, despite previously being against it.⁶⁹ As soon as she had joined, she tried to organize other women: “I wanted to organize the women of the laundry, but it was very difficult because only obsequious women worked there.”⁷⁰

These success stories included the authors’ reading practices: Marxist or socialist classics and high literature. “I dedicated plenty of time to reading socialist books, I read the newspapers: *The Female Worker*, the *Forward*, the memoirs of Ignacy Daszyński,⁷¹ the unpublished works of Karl Marx, the Correspondence of Rosa Luxemburg, sketches on woman and socialism” – this was supposed by the editors to be August Bebel, *Woman and Socialism*.⁷² Education was one of the most important topics for socialists by conviction. Another mentioned “Tolstoy, Gogol and Pushkin in Russian.”⁷³ And he added: “(I)n general I read academic works; I don’t like romances and novels by authors writing in a capitalist, hackneyed way.”⁷⁴ These reading practices reflect the socialist views of the authors and their social climbing.

Many of the male authors not only described their own fate but also commented on the political circumstances or the economic crisis in general and put forward proposals as to how the situation could be improved: "The conditions of farming were different before the war, they were good then, the conditions of farming were easy compared to industry."⁷⁵ Often, the authors saw themselves as the losers of postwar development. Some of the workers used the Marxist vocabulary of the exploitation of workers by capitalists. And some of the peasants' memoirs repeated the cliché of Jewish traders exploiting peasants.⁷⁶

The authors seized the opportunity to take their personal economic situation as a metonym for society. Their experiences represented a history of peasants' or workers' poverty, of social injustice. All these reflections on and descriptions of agriculture, business and earnings shaped history through the eyes of peasants or workers. The authors jumped from relevant events of a national history of Poland to the economic situation of a discriminated group and personal experiences.

An unusually long autobiography of a peasant shows this integration of historical events, social history and personal life very well. The structure of the text and the places where the author had lived linked the life story to important incidents of Polish history: the partitions, emigration to the US, the war, the newly founded state. The trek through history was filled with long descriptions of the author's economic situation: his earnings, his business and his agrarian activities. In addition, the harsh fate of peasants in general was repeatedly described in a few sentences or paragraphs: "Those times were very hard for peasants."⁷⁷

Given all these styles, it can be assumed that the authors grabbed the opportunity to explain their world and their views on Polish society to the readers. They understood their writings simultaneously as an unknown truth and a specific world.⁷⁸ This was especially the case concerning the rural life writings, which often constructed the countryside as something different: "Such is life in the countryside."⁷⁹ By connecting historical events, social history and personal life, the authors confirmed their male subject position, while their masculinity confirmed the relevance of the autobiographical writings.

Like the texts written by men, those by women emphasized their truthfulness: "That's the description of my life, sincere and true."⁸⁰ The female writers dealt with 'female problems' and presented themselves in traditional gender roles. One of the memoirs written by a female worker and a mother began with her marriage, which she described as a way out of her family of origin: having lived with her father and her stepmother, she then married a man twenty years her senior. He loved her but she did not love him. She bore six children, three of whom died. Her husband

lost his job, fell ill and died, too. One of her daughters married a man who beat his family, so she returned home with two little children. Though the mother was suffering so much, she protested that she couldn't escape her fate: "I was convinced of this because I swore obedience."⁸¹ Nevertheless, the story ended like a written request for help: "Rescue us, we are bereft of hope."⁸² Other stories took a similar tack.⁸³ The stories by female authors gave a chronological account of one misfortune or disaster after another. They included every cliché about the misery of women, fulfilling all the reader's expectations. By recounting endless chains of violent fathers and husbands, the authors constructed their life stories as a vicious circle of the female fate. Some of these accounts are akin to penny dreadfuls.

Like men, women wrote their life stories as those of a social group. They depicted themselves and their lives while emphasizing their membership of a social class: namely women: "The fate of women is miserable."⁸⁴ Though the authors pretended to accept their misery as "fate of women," they were accusatory: "We, the rural women ... we shout for our rights!"⁸⁵ The autobiographical writings of women can indeed be read as female. But like the male authors, they also followed narrative structures which told their story with an authentic truth of misery and a demand for a better life, hence confirming the left-wing inclination of the collections. Additionally, the exorbitant accumulation of female misery made the stories specific. They fit in and reflect a gender order of normality and particularity – by representing historical and anthropological views of society.

The autobiographical writings by both men and women confirmed the narrative strategies of the introductory texts in several aspects. They wrote very emotionally and protested to the readers that they were telling the truth. But they also went beyond stories of personal misery. The writers presented themselves as representatives of a discriminated group or a neglected view of the history of Poland. They completed their assertion of 'authenticity' with protestations of 'truth' by employing different genres: autobiographies and memoirs, cheap novels, short stories. The stories – and the selection of them – met the expectations of the questionnaire. The authors, male and female, fulfilled their roles. But they also transcended the individual fate of their lives. They took the opportunity of the competition to give their stories political significance. And although the socialist success stories, male and female, painted another picture – education, gender equality in the subject position of the narrator (not necessarily in the details of life) – they nevertheless failed to question the hierarchies of participation and scholarly expertise propagated by the institutes, competitions and questionnaires.

CONCLUSIONS

The different forms of the published volumes reveal differences between socialist and sociological interpretations of the world. The developments of democratization and participation in Poland after the war brought new practices and new actors into the political arena. The country suffered badly from the consequences of the world economic crisis. In this situation, strategies of legitimization, order and expertise were used. One of these strategies was the organization of competitions. The life writing competitions closely interwove practices of participation and politics of authentication. Participation politics needed to deconstruct the given practices of how to gain authority. One of the main strategies of establishing hierarchies in the face of participation was the male expert. He underlined the hierarchy of the gender order and, thus, normality and particularity – the tension between integration into the Polish state as academics and opposition to state politics as socialists. The volumes with their creation of authenticity and the expertise of truth confirm these strategies. The gendered representation of misery underlined normality and hierarchy but also participation.

The competitions with their publishing practices can be seen as an example of inventing new forms of participative politics. The popularization of autobiographical writing means dissolving the differences between the high and low culture of reading and writing. At different levels of writing strategies – the request, the research, the memoirs themselves – the published collections represent the strategies of authenticity and participation. They established an idea of historical truth, which was verified by various strategies of authenticity. With this in mind, the most interesting aspect is the combination of autobiographical writing and sociological data. The difficulties of this process emerged in the comprehensive explanations of the conditions of the competition as well as the repeated demands made on the addressees. Probably unintentionally, the practice of requesting guided life stories ‘from below’ formed something like a participative way of writing.

The authors told their stories under the influence of what they themselves had read. They probably read fiction, autobiographies and other political material. Some of them may have read the parables of the Bible or stories of desperation and injustice published in journals and newspapers. Last but not least, they read scandalous stories. They combined these different popular and higher genres, topics, metaphors and styles.

The autobiographical writings by male and female authors redoubled their marginality as workers/peasants and women. They redoubled the gender gap. The way female authors depicted their misery and

unavoidable fate set them apart from the other unspectacular writers. They strengthened the aspect of the spectacular by telling a story of an unspectacular person, demanding equality via difference.⁸⁶

The texts obeyed different strategies from the autobiographies of middle-class men. They used strategies of describing poverty, modesty: the unspectacular. Nevertheless, the very way in which the competitions were organized meant they added a counter-narrative of history, yet confirmed it as Polish. The competition practices, including the writing strategies, combined affirmative and counter aspects of a narrative of a history of Poland and dissolved the border between high and low culture. The narrative and descriptive practices connected the necessity of integration and proof of scholarship with the aim of a counter-interpretation of Polish society. By doing so, they reflected and dissolved gender differences at the same time.

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- 57 *Ibid.*, p. 16.
- 58 *Ibid.*, pp. 5–13.
- 59 For the following arguments the accentuation lies on ‘together.’
- 60 Odezwa, 1935, *Pamiętniki chłopów* nr 1–51.
- 61 Nieco o pamiętnikach i pamiętnikarzach, 1935, *Pamiętniki chłopów* nr 1–51; “Nieco o pamiętnikach i pamiętnikarzach.” In: *Pamiętniki bezrobotnych*, pp. 21–41.
- 62 *Pamiętniki chłopów* nr 1–51, pp. 43–48, esp. 47.
- 63 *Pamiętniki bezrobotnych*, p. 287.
- 64 Holdenried, Michaela, *Autobiographie*. Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam jun., 2000 (pp. 66–68); Warneken, Bernd Jürgen, “Populare Autobiographik. Ein Bericht aus dem Tübinger Ludwig-Uhland-Institut.” *BIOS. Zeitschrift für Biographieforschung und Oral History* 6, 1993, pp. 119–125; Warneken, “Zur Schichtspezifik autobiographischer Darstellungsmuster.” In: Andreas Gestrich/Peter Knoch/Helga Merkel (eds.), *Biographie – sozialgeschichtlich*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1988, pp. 141–163, here 142–146.
- 65 *Pamiętniki bezrobotnych*, p. 264.
- 66 *Pamiętniki chłopów* nr 1–51, p. 18.

- 67 *Ibd.*, pp. 548–549; *Pamiętniki bezrobotnych*, pp. 290, 295.
- 68 *Ibd.*, p. 545, *Pamiętniki chłopów*, p. 535.
- 69 Musiałowa, Maria, “Żywoť krakowskiej praczki.” In: Mysłakowski/Gross, 1938, *Robotnicy piszą*, pp. 312–316, here 314.
- 70 *Ibd.*, p. 314.
- 71 Ignacy Daszyński (1866–1936) was a Polish socialist. See Szklarska-Lohmannowa, Alina, “Daszyński Ignacy.” *Polski Słownik Biograficzny* IV, 1938, pp. 448–558.
- 72 Musiałowa, 1938, p. 315. Bebel, August, *Die Frau und der Sozialismus*. Berlin: Dietz Verlag 1979 (1879).
- 73 “Robotnik krakowski krytykuje i tłumaczy wady swego wychowania.” In: Mysłakowski/Gross, 1938, *Robotnicy piszą*, pp. 317–312, here 320.
- 74 *Ibd.*, pp. 320, 342, 343.
- 75 *Pamiętniki chłopów* nr 1–51, p. 25.
- 76 See f.e. *Pamiętniki chłopów* nr 1–51, pp. 16–17, 547; a female example: *Pamiętniki bezrobotnych*, p. 259.
- 77 *Pamiętniki chłopów. Serja druga*, p. 31.
- 78 *Pamiętniki chłopów* nr 1–51, p. 48.
- 79 *Ibd.*, pp. 25–26.
- 80 *Pamiętniki bezrobotnych*, p. 98.
- 81 *Ibd.*
- 82 *Ibd.*, p. 104.
- 83 *Ibd.*, p. 292; *Pamiętniki chłopów* nr 1–51, p. 42.
- 84 *Pamiętniki bezrobotnych*, p. 494.
- 85 *Pamiętniki chłopów* nr 1–51, p. 29.
- 86 Braidotti, 2002.