ANTHROPOLOGICAL NOTEBOOKS

Vol. 31, Issue 11, pp. 52-73, ISSN 2232-3716.
DOI: https://10.5281/zenodo.17471846
Research article

The agency of genocide victims in the lives of their relatives: Ethnographic study of the Katyn Massacre's impact on the biographies of widows and orphans

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Abstract

Katyn widows and orphans are categories referring to two generations: the wives of Katyn Massacre victims (widows) and their children (orphans). Their lives were irrevocably shaped by the genocide and the consequent absence of approximately 22,000 husbands and fathers, including Polish Army officers, policemen, and reservists such as civil servants and teachers. These men met a sudden death in 1940, executed by the NKVD (*Narodnyy komissariat vnutrennikh del)* with a shot to the back of the head and buried in death pits in the forests of Katyn, Mednoye, Piatykhatky, Bykovnia, and Kuropaty, located in present-day Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus. Characterized by features of genocide the Katyn Massacre can be understood within the framework of Philippe Ariès' concept of *mors repentina*, which forms the core analytical lens of this article. Another inspiration is Ewa Domańska's concept of discrimination against death and the dead bodies, which is negated by the researched agency of Katyn Massacre victims in the lives of their relatives. Drawing on ethnographic material—mainly in-depth interviews with descendants of Katyn Massacre—the authors examine the biographies of Katyn widows and orphans through the lens of the dead's enduring presence (forms of commemoration of the victims) in the lives of these two generations. The Katyn Massacre and its difficult legacy influenced the way the posthumous presence of the victims was experienced by Katyn widows and orphans.

KEYWORDS: Katyn widows and orphans, Katyn Massacre, reversal of death, biography, memory, commemoration, ethnographic research

Introduction

The Katyn Massacre was the mass execution of Polish citizens by the Soviet communist regime in the spring of 1940, at various locations in present-day Russia, Ukraine and Belarus. In the collective memory of Poles, it is seen as a genocide unparalleled in scale and in its enduring influence on both personal and public aspects of contemporary life. The subject of our research was shaped in the atmosphere of communist propaganda (the Katyn Lie), which transformed this mass execution into a social and political taboo. In this text, we explore how *mors repentina* (the concept explained below and related to the Katyn Massacre) shapes the experiences of those who lose loved ones to genocide, and how the responses of victims' relatives counteract the societal tendency to discriminate against death and the dead. We argue that genocide, as an instance of *mors repentina*, exerts a distinctive influence on the presence of the dead in the lives of their relatives. The victims continue to maintain contact with the living, thereby creating an environment in which our dead exist, and shaping the relationships we establish with them. The notion of "environment" in the context of relations between the living and the dead was introduced by Vinciane Despret. Her concept stands in opposition to the theory of mourning, which presupposes the severance of such relations. In our text, we adopt the environmental model (Despret, 2017) that draws attention to the destiny of the dead—namely, their continued existence within the lives of their loved ones.

The concepts of *Katyn widows* and *orphans* are not legal categories but rather constructs rooted in mythobiographical (Bernhard, 1969) and biomythographical (Benton, 2009) practices. They derive from the linguistic image of the world, narrative structures, and recurring motifs and *topoi* within discourse about the Katyn Massacre. These constructs, shaped by homogenization, attribute typical traits to individuals within these groups, characterizing them as representative of a shared generational or social experience. A key thread linking these two generations is, on the one hand, the physical absence of the husband or father and, on the other, his enduring posthumous presence in the lives of the widows and orphans through various forms of commemoration, both personal and public. The use of plural categories (*widows* and *orphans*) reflects their stereotypical nature, which generalizes rather than differentiates individual biographies. For instance, Ewa Bąkowska, daughter of Jerzy Adolf Jaxa Bąkowski, a victim of the Katyn Massacre, writes of her mother: "For me, the only and dearest, but at the same time one of many Katyn mothers" (*Pisane miłością* ..., 2000, p. 9).

The article is based on ethnographic field research conducted as part of a research project "Lexicon of Katyn Archaeology (1990–2015)" that is described in the correspond-

ing chapter. Our analysis and interpretations draw on in-depth interviews (a group of 60 relatives of victims of the Katyn Massacre) as well as memoirs, both published and unpublished. Purposive sampling resulted from the passage of time and generational changes, which had an impact on the erasure of the memory of the victims of this crime. It is natural that the number of the living relatives is not large, and their inclinations and abilities to share memories are in different states. Our goal was to reach those descendants who live in different parts of Poland and want to take part in our research. We are aware of the trauma resulting from the Katyn Massacre, and therefore we selected the research sample with ethical sensitivity.

The Katyn massacre and the Katyn Lie: Historical context and socio-political taboos

The Katyn Massacre occurred in the spring of 1940, when NKVD (Soviet political police) officers, acting on orders from Joseph Stalin, executed Polish prisoners of war in Russia from camps in Kozelsk (in Katyn), Ostashkov (in Mednoye) and Starobelsk (in Kharkiv), as well as prisoners in western Belarus (in Kurapaty near Minsk) and Ukraine (in Bykivnia near Kiev, Kherson). The victims of the Katyn Massacre were officers and regular soldiers of the Polish Army, officials of the state administration and the judiciary, police officers, border guards and other members of the Polish elite such as clergymen, aristocrats, entrepreneurs, scientists, doctors and artists. This crime, which claimed nearly 22,000 lives and which was covered up by concealment of the victims' bodies, stands as one of the most grievous tragedies that Poland experienced during World War II (Kalbarczyk, 2010; Przewoźnik & Adamska, 2010).

The Katyn Massacre was a direct consequence of the German-Soviet invasion of Poland in September 1939 and was part of a genocidal plan to exterminate the Polish intellectual and leadership elites, with the aim of permanently liquidating Polish statehood and the multi-ethnic identity of the occupied territories, formed over centuries. Following the German invasion of the Soviet Union, mass graves were discovered by the occupiers in the Katyn Forest. In the spring of 1943, the Germans established an international commission of forensic doctors, with members of the Polish Red Cross also participating in the research. Despite its propaganda purpose, which aimed at disrupting the Soviet Union's relationship with the Western Allies, the investigation identified many victims and led to the creation of the first memorial to the victims of the Soviet crime at Katyn, the Polish Red Cross Cemetery (*Zbrodnia Katyńska w świetle dokumentów,* 1982).

However, after the Red Army drove the Wehrmacht out of Smolensk, a Soviet investigative commission was established, which in 1944 claimed to have "proved" that the Katyn Massacre had been committed by Nazi Germany. This interpretation was binding on all official discourse in post-war Poland and other Eastern Bloc countries. Political and social taboos protected the fake version of history. The lie consisted of an intensive process of obliterating evidence, testimonies and material traces of this crime. This policy was implemented by diplomatic, legal and operational means, including repression against those who spoke the truth about Katyn or cultivated the truth. The debunking of so-called "Katyn Lie" is inscribed in the scientific biographies and family biographies of the descendants of the victims who keep the memory alive. The victims' families commemorated this crime in an atmosphere of secrecy. Efforts to uncover the truth became a lasting part of Polish culture, both domestically and in exile. The breakdown of the communist system in Poland in 1989—for which the Katyn Lie was a founding cause—led to the fall of the lie.

"Lexicon of Katyn archaeology (1990–2015)": An ethnographic component

The interdisciplinary research project *Lexicon of Katyn Archaeology (1990–2015)* has been ongoing since 2022. Its aim is to collect, archive, and make available to the widest and most diverse audience the previously largely dispersed and unstructured information on the research of traces of the Katyn Massacre conducted from 1990 to 2015. The project involves documenting and compiling a lexicon that addresses issues such as archaeological research methods used, public perception of the research, and non-archaeological exhumation work conducted prior to 1990, such as the investigations by German authorities in 1943 and Soviet authorities in 1944. Additionally, it covers the detention sites of Polish prisoners of war from September 1939 until their executions in the spring and summer of 1940, as well as identifying potential burial sites of the Katyn Massacre victims that require future archaeological research.[1]

[1] The research project *Lexicon of Katyn Archaeology (1990–2015)* is being conducted as part of the *National Heritage* module of the National Programme for the *Development of the Humanities by the Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education* in the years 2022–2027 at the Faculty of Philosophy and History of the University of Łódź (project no. 11H 20 02 48 88). A selected collection of materials will be presented in the *Lexicon of Katyn Archaeology (1990–2015)* summarizing the project (in both Polish and English). The work on the Lexicon will also produce an open text and multimedia e-repository in Polish, English, and Russian. This multimedia platform will present the content of the Lexicon entries, enhanced with interactive 3D visualisations of archaeological artefacts (mainly from the Katyn Museum in Warsaw) and short audio and visual materials. The e-repository will incorporate current knowledge on presentation methods, including the visualisation of information, and the needs and preferences of diverse audiences, including the younger generation, seniors, and international users from Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine.

As part of the project's framework and methodological approach, ethnographic in-depth interviews (IDIs) are conducted with descendants of the victims, those who inherit memory of them, researchers, and participants involved in the archaeological work at Katyn, Mednoye, Kharkiv, and Bykivnia. The authors' contribution to this research project involved designing the ethnographic component to supplement the archaeological and historical investigations, conducting in-depth interviews, and analyzing and interpreting the collected data.

The guidelines for interviews with descendants of the victims and members of the Federation of Katyn Families include thematic areas such as: the history and functioning of the Katyn associations; family biographies, including memories of the murdered, ways of narrating and transmitting their memory, and the Katyn Lie; objects/mementoes of the murdered; forms and formulas of remembrance and commemoration, such as cemeteries, monuments, museums, and so-called Katyn pilgrimages; and the reception of archaeological research conducted at the crime scenes. This is a way of accessing not only individual knowledge and memory but also the supra-individual resources that constitute a unique community of discourse surrounding the Katyn Massacre.

The guidelines for interviews with researchers/experts/participants in the archaeological research include topics such as the motivation and circumstances of joining the research team, the course and organization of the research, and their relationships and cooperation with the Polish and Russian administration, officials, and local communities. They also cover the research methods and practices used, the experiences and emotions accompanying participation in the so-called Katyn research, and the reception of the research in scientific and social circles. Accounts and recollections obtained in this way serve as testimonies to the research process. They enable the reconstruction of the course of the research and highlight its significance in aspects that sometimes escape historical studies, archaeological reports, and analytical scientific texts in the biographical, personal, and emotional contexts.

The overarching aim of the ethnographic research conducted within the *Lexicon...* project is to uncover sources that shed light on forms of remembrance and commemoration, methods of reaching for the past, and ways the past is utilized in the present.[2]

[2] The ethnographic material compiled can be found in the archives of the *Lexicon...* project and the Bronisława Kopczyńska-Jaworska Ethnographic Archive of the Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, University of Łódź. Quotations from interviews presented in the article are identified using the internal signatures employed in the project.

Analytical categories for the analysis of ethnographic material: *Mors repentina*, discrimination against death and dead bodies, biomythography, commemoration

According to Michael Benton, biomythography involves collecting and organizing scattered fragments of the past for the present. Biography is more than a mere sequence of events. Thus, biomythography becomes a narrative arrangement that confirms a cultural sense of destiny (Benton, 2009, p. 65). A biomythographic narrative pattern—in the context of the Katyn Massacre—serve as media for ordering difficult experiences such as pain, fear, despair, loneliness, and trauma. Given that the authors of the biomythographic narratives about the Katyn widows are primarily their children, two interconnected categories emerge. The Katyn widows, through raising their children, shaped their attitudes towards the Katyn Massacre. Simultaneously, the Katyn orphans, whose socialization occurred within this narrative environment during the time of the "Katyn Lie", constructed the *topos* of their mothers. To analyze this dynamic, two fundamental topoi (representational models) can be identified: the Katyn widows and the Katyn orphans. The concept of biomythography has been applied within the humanities to analyze and interpret contexts related to the anthropology of death. Aleksandra Chomiuk, for instance, has suggested that biomythography requires a "good death", where its sublimity confirms the perfection of life, thereby giving the narrative a deeper meaning (Chomiuk, 2016, p. 79). However, this assertion is challenging to reconcile within the ethnographic study of the Katyn Massacre's commemoration. The genocide of 1940 is a cornerstone of the biomythographies of Katyn widows and orphans, profoundly shaping their experiences of the presence of their murdered husbands and fathers. In this context, "evil death" becomes the organizing principle of their biomythographies, where the realms of the living and the dead converge into a single dimension.

The Katyn Massacre exemplifies Philippe Ariès' concept of *mors repentina*. This type of death comes without warning; it shatters the order of the world and appears as a senseless instrument of chance or evil. For this reason, it has traditionally been regarded as both disgraceful and shameful. Within Western culture, where death has for centuries been integrated into the social and spiritual order, its abrupt and unanticipated nature is regarded as both alien and terrifying (Ariès, 1985). From an anthropological perspective, we would add that *mors repentina* is a death devoid of ritual. In the case of the Katyn Massacre, the absence of funeral rites—most notably, a proper burial—is striking. The mass graves, after all, cannot be considered genuine resting places for the victims. In accordance with the shifting social contexts of different historical periods, the French historian presents various examples of *mors repentina*, each reflective of the prevailing ethos

of its time, from death attributed to witchcraft in the medieval era to the sanitized, institutionalized passing behind hospital screens in the modern age. Notably, however, he does not elaborate on the notion of *mors repentina* as a 'filthy' death resulting from mass execution—a conceptual gap that is addressed by our ethnographic research into the cultural perception of death among the victims of the Katyn Massacre. In the biomythography of Katyn widows and orphans, feral, evil death significantly influences the forms and nature of the agency of the dead in their lives. The relegation of the Katyn Massacre to the margins of public discourse, the social and political taboo surrounding it during the "Katyn Lie", the prolonged postponement of mourning have all contributed to the distinctive images of the presence (forms of commemoration) of the victims in the lives of the Katyn widows and children. They draw heavily on the imaginarium of Romanticism, a way of thinking and valuing the world that transcends literary history to resurface in different historical contexts. Romantic sensibilities, including a deep belief in dreams, the loss of reality, the primacy of spirituality, the sense of national belonging, and the cult of the dead, are evident in the biomythographies of the Katyn widows and orphans. Romanticism enables commemoration as a form of transgression between distinct ontologies.

The categories operationalizing the ethnographic material collected are thus various forms and strategies of "reaching for the past'. The act of evoking the past—central to commemoration—facilitates community integration through ritual (Lukes, 1975). A shared past underpins the framework of community identity and continuity (Casey, 1987, p. 216). Jay Winter identifies two primary approaches to the politics of commemoration: a "centralised" or "top-down" approach and a "bottom-up" or "pluralist" one (Winter, 2008).

What is remembered, and how? Who safeguards the memory of the Katyn Massacre victims? What constitutes institutionalized mnemonic? How are past events from the Second World War rendered present, and to what purpose? These can be family "transfers of memory" that often involve physical and cultural traces, such as family photo albums, or contemporary commemorative ceremonies that function as cultural forms of representing past events or people so that they are honored by a specific social group for which it is a way of confirming its identity.

Commemorations of the Katyn Massacre victims have either a material form, effects of which are commemorative plaques, monuments, lists of the names of the murdered etc., or are cyclical, so to speak, rhetorical gestures and ceremonials in the form of anniversary celebrations, speeches, the reading of memorials, and organization of public meet-

ings (most frequently connected with "places of remembrance" or material signs of "the traces of memory"). The cultural forms of commemoration create an intra-family transmission of memory and acts of post-memory, but they also permeate and connect various media and domains. The perpetuation of the "Katyn widow" *topos* in cultural memory was notably influenced by Andrzej Wajda's film *Katyn* (2007). Marcin Adamczak argues that Maria Janion's (1996) declaration of the romantic paradigm's decline in Polish culture after the 1989 systemic transformation was premature. He views Wajda's film as exemplifying a romantic vision of history and sensitivity to the agency of the dead in the lives of the living (Adamczak, 2012).

Many scholars consider practices commemorating the dead to be the foundation of modern commemoration ceremonies, with collective experiences of loss and suffering being central to these practices. Referring to Freud's dichotomy of "acting out" versus "working through", two perspectives dominate this field. One sees omnipresent memorials and annual commemorations as indicative of recurring trauma (Fussel, 1975), while the other views them as tools for culturally taming past loss, preventing its recurrence (Cannadine, 1981). Paul Connerton (2011) offers a broader perspective, emphasizing the overlap between narratives of legitimation and mourning. Beginning with the experience of death and bereavement, he describes the narrativization of loss in individual and collective memory, culminating in the corporeal consolidation of memory.

The forms and formulas of remembering and commemorating the Katyn Massacre victims bridge past and present, linking separate points in time (events) into a cohesive narrative structure (Zerubavel, 2003, p. 40). Thus, it can be said that commemorative practices clarify the past, making it bearable and enabling the present to be lived (Napiórkowski, 2014, p. 510). The inclusion of the Katyn Massacre victims in contemporary discourse stands in opposition to the phenomenon of death and corpse discrimination, as theorized by Ewa Domańska. This concept, as articulated by the Polish historian, involves the privileging of the living over the dead, resulting in the exclusion and vulnerability of the deceased and their bodily remains (Domańska 2017, pp. 52–53).

Topos of the Katyn widows (wives): Presence/absence of husbands

Katyn widows are women who "survived the war, saved the memory of the fallen, and raised their children" (Książek-Czerminska, 2000, p. 7). An important source for researching the structure of their biomythography is the three-volume collective work created on the initiative of the Katyń Family in Gdynia *Pisane miłością. Losy wdów katyńskich* (*Written with Love. The Fate of Katyn Wives*) (1999–2003). Its protagonists are women

whose biographies were constructed by their children. These memoirs inevitably recount the lives of "Katyn mothers". Based on an analysis of this source and the ethnographic material collected as part of the "Lexicon…" project, it is possible to construct a narrative pattern of biomythographies concerning Katyn widows. This model includes the following motifs: (1) a time of safety and peace during childhood and maidenhood; (2) a happy marriage; (3) a change of life trajectory (war and the Katyn Massacre); (4) life in the shadow of the Katyn Lie and the impossibility of mourning; (5) a time of demystification of the Katyn Lie and mourning. At the stages of their lives corresponding to motifs 2 through 5, their husbands—both living and dead—remain present. The biomythographies of the Katyn widows are not limited to these predefined "bricks"; they also include original, often patternless, elements, resulting in narratives that are diverse in content. These biomythographies possess herstorical potential (Witczak, 2014) and align with the process of democratizing history in contemporary historiography, where women take the foreground while their husbands, victims of the Katyn Massacre, occupy the background. However, *this* background actively shapes and organizes their experience.

The motif of a time of safety and peace during childhood and maidenhood

The future Katyn widows belonged to a generation of women generally born at the beginning of the twentieth century, before the First World War. Their adolescence, marked by the happiness of family life, first friendships, and early loves, often coincided with the war and/or the interwar period. They entered adulthood after Poland regained independence in 1918. During this time, they learned, studied, and, in some cases, worked amid the creative reconstruction and rebuilding of the state. For those whose childhoods preceded the regaining of independence, education was often conducted privately:

> Mum's parents, Aleksandra and Jan Sienkowski, belonged to the Mazovia landed gentry. Filled with deep patriotism, they did not send their daughters to state schools because of their Russified character. This is why my Mum was homeschooled. My grandfather brought in private teachers and controlled the children's education himself.

With these sentences Maria Magdalena Blombergowa, daughter of Jan Kossowski, a victim of the Katyn Massacre, recalls a memory of her mother Teodosia (*Pisane miłością...*, 2000, p. 192). These women primarily came from the landed gentry and intelligentsia and often did not have to work. Their biomythographies are replete with images of idyllic lives filled with abundance and security in the family home. The period of the First

World War is frequently omitted in these narratives, likely due to the overwhelming emphasis placed on the tragedies of the Second World War.

The motif of a happy marriage and blissful family life

In the biomythographies of Katyn widows, the period of marital happiness is usually described as brief but deeply cherished. This phase encompasses love (often the first), marriage, the arrival of children (though not always), and a good life in free Poland. These narratives depict everyday life, ordinary family life, almost always idyllic. One such memory is shared by Bożena Łukomska, daughter of Halina née Kostecka and Stanisław Łukomski, a victim of the Katyn Massacre:

> We spent our holidays at my grandfather's estate in Tuchyn. I remember happy and carefree times, full of love, in the company of both my parents. I was four years old in 1938. The moment that stuck deep in my memory was when, in Kovel, during a military parade, Daddy was returning from maneuvres on horseback, and Mummy and I greeted him, and she handed me to Father on horseback. Daddy would then hug me warmly and kiss me. I also remember a walk with him on the estate in Tuchyn, where we were picking raspberries, and he taught me to sing. (*Pisane miłością...*, 2003, p. 335)

Similarly, Romuald Sikora, son of a Katyn Massacre victim, recalls his parents as a young married couple:

> I remember the post where [my father] served, a wooden porch, an entrance, one room. There was a large desk behind which the commandant sat. I remember that he was bald. There was a rack for police uniforms on the left and a rifle stand on the right. ... I remember my mother nervous, always waiting for him. When he was late in the evening, she would go from door to door .... We were waiting for father, so when we heard him coming, stomping in front of the porch, grunting, we hid behind the door with my sister. Father would come in, say hello to mother. Mother used to say that he called her "roe deer". I don't remember that; I know it from my mother's stories. He would come in, open the door, and ask: "And where are my children?" He couldn't find them, so we would dash out from behind the door. He would unfasten the hook and eye of his collar, take off his jacket, his belt, lie down on the bed, and we would get on top of him. We were interrupted by fate. (W40_Sikora)

The ethnographic material is rich with similar narratives of carefree games between parents and children, fathers and sons, watched by mothers. Father Janusz Mękarski, son of Włodzimierz Mękarski, a victim of the Katyn Massacre, recalls: I always accompanied him. How old was I? Four, perhaps five. I always drank his coffee in the morning when he was preparing for work. So he said: "Anka, always prepare two coffees, for him and for me". My brother was already in school. He was older than me; he was already in first grade, so I accompanied my Daddy. When he was shaving, I watched him shave. Sometimes he pulled my leg and with his face soaped he'd say... "Now give Daddy a kiss!" That's how it was. I would close my eyes and give Daddy a kiss. He was a wonderful man (W38_Mękarski).

Maria Magdalena Blombergowa writes about her parents:

> After the end of hostilities, Dad moved into the reserves in 1921. He first worked in the Border Guard and later in the Prison Guard in various cities across Poland. Mum was always with Him, showering Him with deep love. Dad was very kind and caring towards his wife, taking care of the home and the children. [...] They had eight children. (*Pisane miłością*..., 2000, p. 193)

However, for many of these women, childhood and maidenhood were not always easy, which made the brief period of marital happiness seem even more idyllic. Małgorzata Książek-Czermińska, daughter of Józef Książek, a victim of the Katyn Massacre, speaks of her mother Julianna, née Siemaszko:

> Mum couldn't bring herself to speak about it; it was too painful a subject for her. The only five years of happiness she [mother] had in her life—because she had a difficult life—all came crashing down…and so, she hesitated between what she should pass on to us so that we would remember and, on the other hand, what was impossible for her to put into words. (W30_Książek-Czermińska)

The motif of changing life trajectories (the war and the Katyn Massacre)

The outbreak of the Second World War turned everything upside down. Husbands disappeared from their homes—as it turned out, forever. Their wives did not know they would soon become widows. A happy family life came to an end. For many women, it was a profound shock, forcing them to change their lifestyle overnight. Jadwiga Siemaszkiewicz, daughter of Ignacy Bąbka, a victim of the Katyn Massacre, recalls her mother, Zofia, in this context:

> Those were very difficult times for us, and above all for Mum. Before the war, she did not work. Now, she had to take on various jobs to earn a modest living for our family. To the best of our abilities as children, we helped her. During that month, we matured a lot. Each of us felt responsible for the family. But we were not able to help her much. The first months of the war were almost tragic. Mum also had to adapt to the situation. She started—like many women at the time—to trade in food, for which she would go on foot, often with us, to various villages eight, ten, or more kilometers away, and which she would then sell in Łódź for a small profit. Such trade was illegal and could have serious consequences with the Germans, up to and including being shot. (*Pisane miłością...*, 2000, p. 25)

During this tragic time, many Katyn widows found the strength to face their new reality. Years later, Katyn orphans often idealized their mothers' character traits which is also recalled by Father Janusz Mękarski, son of Włodzimierz Mękarski, a victim of the Katyn Massacre, about his mother Anna (née Wacek).

> To this so-called aunt, [father] said: "Tell Anka to bring up my boys to be good Poles". That was his wish, and that's what my mother complied with, what she did. ... I admire my mother. She was truly an outstanding heroine in every respect. She always had her head screwed on right and knew what to do. (W38_Mękarski)

The motif of living in the shadow of the Katyn Lie and the impossible mourning associated with it

Throughout cultural history, in different societies, death has always been accompanied by rituals; one of these is the mourning of the dead, or grief. In cultural anthropology, it is understood as a customary victory over death, "achieved through ceremonies and traditions that level the destructive power of death and enable the individual and the community to return to a normal, serene rhythm of life" (di Nola, 2006, p. 10). In communist Poland, the social and political taboo surrounding the Katyn Massacre obstructed mourning for its victims. In the absence of accurate information, many women lived in uncertainty about the life or death of their husbands. In this sense, they did not feel fully widowed; they sensed their husbands were dead but lacked absolute certainty. For some, this liminal state—a position between social statuses, old lives, and new—was a difficult and undesirable condition. As Margaret Grupa, an archaeologist involved in studying the Katyn Massacre, explains, communist censorship and the transfer of the subject of the Katyn Massacre from the public sphere to the informational underground

deprived many women who had lost their husbands in the Katyn Massacre of the right to survivor's pensions, exacerbating their daily struggles:

> These people lived in such secrecy. They kept in touch with each other; these widows knew each other a little bit, but they tended to hide from their neighbors that their husbands had not returned from the East, so they did not have a pension either. ... They also talked about such mundane things. (W47_Grupa)

For others, the uncertainty about their husbands' fate represented hope for the restoration of a pre-war familial idyll. Romuald Sikora, son of Stanisław Sikora, a victim of the Katyn Massacre, recounts:

> She [my mother] didn't want it. She was afraid of this news that her husband was dead. These were special women. Out of the forty families I knew, with whom I met, lived with, socialized with, with children I met at Siberian gatherings, only two, two out of forty families. One became the mother of an illegitimate child and the other remarried. The rest stayed faithful to those husbands who died. There are no such women any more. ... Is he dead? That is the question! My mother once said this: "I prefer not to know that he is dead, and I prefer to delude myself that he is alive somewhere." … My mother didn't want to have it written in black and white, so I was looking [for my father] without my mother knowing. (W40_Sikora)

The motif of the time of demystification of the Katyn Lie and mourning

It was only after 1989 that archaeological research at the crime scenes and death pits enabled Katyn widows, orphans, and others to mourn the victims over their graves during so-called Katyn pilgrimages. These pilgrimages were organized trips to Katyn, Mednoye, Piatykhatky, Bykivnia, and Kuropaty, where the husbands, fathers, and grandfathers of these families were buried. Exhumations played a pivotal role in this process, eventually leading to the establishment of the so-called Katyn cemeteries.[3] These cemeteries represented the culmination of a long-delayed rite of passage, allowing for funerals to be held decades after the deaths and giving survivors the opportunity to experience mourning. Tragically, many Katyn widows did not live to see the closure of this ritual. Małgorzata Grupa, an archaeologist involved in the exhumations, highlights the significance of this customary victory over death in relation to the Katyn widows:

[3] In 2000, the Polish War Cemeteries in Katyn, Mednoye, and Kharkiv were ceremonially opened and consecrated, followed by the cemetery in Bykivnia in 2012.

> When we held an exhibition in Gdańsk, one of the widows was brought in a wheelchair. ... This is unbelievable to me. She crawled out of her wheelchair and started kissing our feet. We wanted to lift her up, and her son said: "No, please, she's been waiting for this all her life. She is so grateful to you, she can't thank you any other way". (W47_Grupa)

The collected ethnographic material abounds with thoughts and sensibilities that describe visits to the Katyn cemeteries as a time when "that world", through the elements, fauna, and flora, "communicates" with the living, who interpret signs such as silence (the absence of birdsong) as a metonymy for death and the proximity of a reality beyond human reach; death treads quietly like the wind; rain and earth (mud) work together in the minds of the victims who "do not wish" to part with the pilgrims from Poland; in common knowledge, the wind gets up in response to sudden, feral death (and the Katyn Massacre can be classified as such); with the wind fly the souls of people who died an unnatural and violent death. Małgorzata Markiewicz, daughter of Stanisław Dąbrowski, a victim of the Katyn Massacre, recalls the following:

> The orchestra arrived, everyone lined up, and we, myself included, stood by the grave, about a meter, a meter and a half away from it. First, the mass began, but all the time there was a murmur in the forest, such a strange thing, in those bushes, in those trees, you don't know what kind of trees, there was such a rustling of the wind all the time, and it left us with such a grim impression—there wasn't a single bird; we saw nothing in the area, and we stood there, as if rooted to the ground. We thought perhaps a storm was coming. At one point during the mass, we lit candles and placed them on the planks, on the grave; they were all burning, but then this gust came… It got to the point where this wind started to intensify … and there was this strange sound, and we stood there, completely still, and then the rain began. At first, it was a calm rain, but in a moment, it turned into a downpour. … Almost immediately, our legs began to sink into the ground. It was incredible—the loess soil, so greasy, began to swallow our feet. All you could hear were cries and sobbing. The rain poured harder and harder, and we sank deeper and deeper into the mud. We all began saying that our people didn't want us to leave—the candles from Poland, the flowers from Poland, the mass. We all felt utterly defeated. It was such a terrible feeling for us, as though the earth didn't want to let us go. (W08_Markiewicz)

"Contact" with the deceased is also made possible for the participants of the Katyn pilgrimages and the descendants of the victims through so-called Katyn relics. These in-

clude items recovered from the death pits, such as letters written by prisoners of war (future victims) in the camps to their wives and children in Poland, as well as objects from places where husbands and fathers lived before the war, like documents and family photographs. Even soil, wild seedlings, and cones from Katyn cemeteries are treated as sacred relics. These items are used to create replicas of Katyn memorials in both public and private spaces in Poland. Małgorzata Książek-Czermińska, daughter of Katyn Massacre victim Józef Książek recalls:

> I think a relic is the letter my father wrote in November 1939. … My mother saved that letter. She never referred to it as a relic, but she treated it as such, and I inherited that attitude. It was kept in an ordinary envelope. Mum had it in her cupboard with her belongings, along with a few other keepsakes. Mum saved them. There weren't many, because the war didn't allow for it. It's hard to describe, but the way she kept quiet about it—that stayed with me. If there was a fire, what would I save first? First and foremost, I would save the letter from Katyn, because it is an absolutely unique thing. It is a trace written by his living hand. For me, it was a bit difficult that it mentions my older sister, who was three and a half years old at the time—there's a greeting for her, but I'm not mentioned. It wasn't a great jealousy. … There was an aura. Once, when my mum was already quite old, two years before her death. Now I'm older than she was then. I once entered her room and saw her sitting motionless on the edge of the made-up bed, with a piece of paper spread out on her lap, on her skirt. I had seen it before, I recognized it. A page torn from a notebook, written in pencil. I recognized it immediately as the letter and that my mother was holding it on her lap, sitting over it. This pose, this silence, this immobility expressed everything. She said something to me; I don't remember the words. More significant was her demeanor and that emotional aura. It made me understand that in case of a fire, the letter from Katyn should be saved first. Everything that had come before, the photographs in which my father was still alive, such a handsome young man, a thirty-year-old lieutenant, that was ordinary. Whereas the letter was from there, written in the final weeks of his life. It was the last letter. He wrote it as his first letter from captivity and didn't yet know it was also the last. … On the envelope, it says: "The most precious thing of all, guard it like the apple of your eye!" So, for us, in our family, this letter is a relic, and I also try to show this relic to my sons and grandchildren. (W30_Książek-Czermińska)

Topos of the Katyn orphans (children): The presence/absence of the fathers

The victims of this crime and the Katyn children are first-degree relatives. The children of Katyn are half-orphans, having lost their fathers during childhood or even before birth (posthumous children). This absence constitutes a central motif in their mythobiographies, a recurring trauma they seek to understand as they try to inscribe their experiences within the broader narrative of their lives and fates. The *topos* of the Katyn children differs from the *topos* of the child prevalent in the cultural memory of the West (Nowina-Sroczyńska, 1997). The ethnographic material features more narratives centered on the mothers, with the children primarily acting as narrators rather than subjects of those narratives. As a consequence, the widow and orphan *topoi* are developed to differing extents and with varying emphases.

> Halina Padjas, daughter of Tadeusz Borkowski, a victim of the Katyn Massacre, recalls her fatherless childhood: I don't remember my father, let's start from that. … I'll show you pictures—how my sister has toys, how my father rides her on his bike… and I have nothing. I have nothing. After the war, school started. I met people who had fathers, and I was withdrawn. Now, in my old age, I analyze it —what a terrible injustice this was, and I lived in that injustice. (W19_Padjas, Padjas)

Similarly, Romuald Sikora, son of Stanisław Sikora, a victim of the Katyn Massacre, reflects:

> All my life, I have missed my father …. I was terribly upset that father came back to Irka, to my wife, but not to me. I was deeply affected by it. That's when I felt it was such an act of fate that hurt me. It singles out some and hurts others. (W40_Sikora)

An important psychological factor in the socialization process of the Katyn orphans was their childhood, which unfolded without fathers. These half-orphans—both boys and girls—were primarily raised by women: mothers, aunts, and grandmothers. On the one hand, the interruption of the direct transmission of masculine role models from fathers to sons, coupled with their upbringing in a narrative environment centered on the ideal father—the absent hero—had an impact on their mental condition.

> If the father is not there, another very significant gap emerges in the boy's experience. To make matters worse, the absence of a father during this period causes the boy to start being overprotected by his mother. (Eichelberger, 2014, p. 14)

Bożena Łukomska, daughter of Stanisław Łukomski, a victim of the Katyn Massacre, recalls of her mother Halina: "She was a mother and father to us" (*Pisane miłością...*, 2003, p. 336). On the other hand, the absence of a father and the need to work to support the family shortened childhood and accelerated the growing up of the Katyn children.

These children, including posthumous ones, often compensate for the their fathers' absence by fulfilling their wills, with a sense of biographical parallels, as well as physical and behavioral similarities. In this way, they symbolically experience their presence, as elaborated by Małgorzata Książek-Czermińska, daughter of Katyn Massacre victim Józef Książek:

> I had this parallel thinking about my father's life and my life, even though we had never met, but he knew that I was on the way. … When he left, he agreed with my mother that if it was a boy, he would be called Janek, … and if it was a girl, Małgosia, and mum kept that promise, and Jan is the name of our youngest son. He's even named after my father, Jan Józef. So for me, these are ways of keeping family tradition alive. In that sense, it's a relic and a legacy. … I keep the last photo of my father alongside the photo of his namesake, Jan Józef—our youngest son. People who knew my father in his youth said that Janek resembles his grandfather. Indeed, you can see the resemblance. I have this sense that father somehow persists in these successors. Thinking about my life, when I reached his age at thirty, I thought to myself that I should live doubly, for myself and for my father. … When I received my professorial degree, I thought, "Well, you know, Dad, you were at the President's breakfast, and now I'm receiving a professorial degree from a different President, in a different place, at a different time. I guess you're satisfied". (W30_Książek-Czermińska)

Among Katyn orphans, the void left by their fathers was also filled subconsciously; ethnographic material shows that the victims of the Katyn Massacre sometimes visited their children in dreams. Janina Buczyłko, daughter of Władysław Blaszczakiewicz, a victim of the Katyn Massacre explained:

> Not in reality, but for several decades I dreamed that Dad was coming back, always in the context of his return, as though he had just been somewhere. Sometimes in the dream, he was coming back from the war, sometimes not, but he had been gone for a very long time. I had many dreams like that. I saw my dad—I knew it was him, that he was back, that he was in the other room—but I never saw his face. Even when he was standing, it was in semi-darkness. I think the

dreams stopped only when I got married and had a baby. That's when I stopped dreaming about my father. (W23_Buczyłko)

Conclusions

The Katyn children (orphans) and wives (widows), as collective categories referring to entire groups rather than individuals, participate firstly in bonding and identity-forming processes. Secondly, they elevate the experiences of Katyn widows and orphans from the intimate, private sphere to a broader social dimension, embedding them in cultural memory and public history. This transformation imbues these experiences with a significance that extends beyond familial narratives. This not only provides a sense of participation in "something bigger", a grand history, but it also denies the discrimination against death and dead bodies, concealed behind social and political taboos. Thirdly, the deceased husbands and fathers remain present in their biomythographies, thus denying their physical absence. The forms of commemoration of the Katyn Massacre, which have evolved over several decades from the 1940s to the present, tailored to political circumstances, testify to the role that the deceased play in the meaning that Katyn widows and orphans give to their lives. Furthermore, ethnographic analysis of the Katyn Massacre situates mass executions within the broader cultural history of *mors repentina*. Yet the agency of the victims emerges as a form of resistance against the shame and perceived indignity associated with such a death. Through the dead, the living participate in a process of demystifying a deeply ingrained mental construct characteristic of Western culture—the rigid dichotomy between the living and the dead. The commemorative forms and formulas dedicated to husbands and fathers who never returned from Katyn and other execution sites—revealed in the ethnographic material—situate the lives of widows and orphans at the liminal boundary between these inherently interconnected categories. The biographies of the widows and orphans of the victims of the Katyn Massacre have shown that the dead manifest themselves within them, mourning refuses to occur, and the relationships between the living and the dead create a shared environment of dreams, premonitions, experiences, and practices.

Figure 1

Sand from the mass grave in Miednoje brought from a pilgrimage in 1991 by Zofia Płaska, daughter of the victim of the Katyn Massacre Jan Kazimierz Kowalski. From the collection of Zofia Płaska.

Figure 2

Maria Matlachowska's hands pointing at a photograph of her father Józef Libura, a victim of the Katyn Massacre. From the collection of the research project.

AI disclaimer

The authors declare that no generative artificial intelligence was used in the preparation of this manuscript, except for support in translating specialized individual terms into English.

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Povzetek

Katinske vdove in sirote so kategorije, ki se nanašajo na dve generaciji: žene žrtev katinskega pokola (vdove) in njihovi otroci (sirote). Njihova življenja je nepovratno zaznamoval zločin in posledična odsotnost približno 22.000 mož in očetov, med katerimi so bili poljski vojaški častniki, policisti ter rezervisti, ki so bili javni uslužbenci in učitelji. Ti moški so leta 1940 doživeli nenadno smrt, ko jih je NKVD (*Narodnyy komissariat vnutrennikh del)* usmrtil s strelom v tilnik in pokopal v jarkih v gozdovih Katyn, Mednoye, Piatykhatky, Bykovnia in Kuropaty, ki ležijo v današnji Rusiji, Ukrajini in Belorusiji. Katinski pokol nosi znake genocida in zločinov proti človeštvu. Je tudi v skladu s konceptom Philippa Arièsa o preobratu smrti, ki ga članek postavlja za osrednji analitični okvir. Na podlagi etnografskega gradiva – intervjujev s potomci žrtev Katyn in udeleženci arheoloških raziskav o zločinu – avtorja preučujeta biografije katinskih vdov in sirot skozi prizmo trajne navzočnosti mrtvih (oblike komemoracij) v življenju teh dveh generacij. Katinski pokol in njegova težavna dediščina sta vplivala na to, kako so vdove in otroci iz Katina doživljali posmrtno navzočnost žrtev.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: katinske vdove in sirote, katinski pokol, preobrat smrti, biografija, spomin, komemoracija, etnografska raziskava

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