Barbara Szacka, *Życie i pamięć w mrocznych czasach* [Life and Memory in Dark Times], introduction by Ellen Hinsey, Warszawa, 2024, Polski Instytut Wydawniczy, 471 pp.

Barbara Szacka (*née* Plewniak, 1930–2025), the professor of sociology at the University of Warsaw, had explored numerous areas of study throughout her academic career. Her doctoral dissertation, as well as several monographs, focused on Stanisław Staszic, a Polish thinker, writer, and journalist of the Enlightenment period. However, she was most widely known as a scholar of collective memory – a fact of no minor significance for readers of her memoirs. Every memoir, diary, or recollection can be a source for the historian, but not all are equally valuable or trustworthy. Szacka's memoirs constitute a source of exceptional value – precisely because they were written by someone professionally interested in the study of social memory, someone perfectly aware of its workings and pitfalls. As a result, the author did not exhibit uncritical belief in her own words or memories; instead, she verified facts and reported on instances where her recollections diverged from real events, tracing the causes of these disparities. Therefore, the factual reliability of her book vastly exceeds that of the typical memoir composed years after the fact.

Życie i pamięć offers an expansive historical panorama. The book opens with an introduction by Ellen Hinsey, Szacka's close collaborator in the research

into the Katyn massacre and the 2010 presidential plane crash in Smolensk. The memoirs themselves follow a chronological pattern, beginning with the author's childhood in a family from the intelligentsia in pre-war Kalisz, then moving on to wartime, the post-war evolution of the new, "socialist" reality, Stalinist repressions, the Thaw, the strange days of Gomułka and Gierek, and the period of Martial Law, and concluding with the collapse of the Polish People's Republic (PRL).

Although there is minimal disruption to this chronological pattern, it is not merely a straightforward recounting of events. Several parallel narratives converge here, each addressing a distinct issue. Part one, "Childhood and war", mainly deals with personal matters – everyday life, the home, and school experiences. In a brief preface, the author relates her family history. Then, her remembrances turn to the family home in Kalisz and her doctor parents. For a twenty-first-century reader, it may come as a surprise that an intelligentsia's home in the early twentieth century differs very little from one today. Both of the author's parents were employed – her father was a radiologist and her mother was a dentist. They had two children; notably, the relations between parents and children were very straightforward and informal: if things were not done, they were not merely forbidden, but explained; the personal preferences of each child, for instance, in food, were respected. If the child had something really important to relate, they could interrupt the mother at work. Though public attention in the summer of 1939 is consumed by talk of a war that many still think will not come, the family are busy discussing vacation plans. There is no difference in how the siblings – a sister and a brother – are being raised. Only once (ever, according to the author) did her aunt tell her that a girl should not be running about with boys, but she waved it off as "pure idiocy" (p. 44).

War found the family in Warsaw and set them wandering through a string of towns. Father came to Warsaw in military uniform, said his goodbyes, and was never seen again; he was murdered by the NKVD in 1940 in Katyn, along with other Polish officers. The account of wartime is a particularly captivating part of the story, as Polish memoirs of war rarely focus on the everyday – not major events and dramas, but descriptions of life at school, budding friendships, and the lives of children and adolescents who remain children and adolescents even in war. Szacka writes: "I was more and more consumed by fear, though that didn't stop me taking joy and sorrow from the petty details of everyday life" (p. 73). The author belonged to a scout group, though Polish scouts were made illegal, but since parental consent was required for the children to take part in the more dangerous missions, and one father would not give it, Barbara was left to rue never having received the scout cross – a token of belonging to the scouts.

After the war, the time came for Barbara to complete her education in Warsaw, but there was a problem. Pupils were not all the same age; they

did not share the same life experiences. However, for the teachers, they were still the same pupils from pre-war, knowing only their homes, schools, and the care of their parents. The closing of the war, of course, also brought about a political transformation, and there was little indication initially as to what might be expected – official statements and actual events contrasted so drastically that even experienced politicians were unsure what might happen; a young girl was even less so.

The final section of "Childhood", entitled "The first post-war years: mirages and their dissolution", follows a pattern distinct from the preceding part of the memoirs. A new narrative element appears – brief outlines of contemporary political and social developments in Poland. From this point on, personal remembrances are depicted against the backdrop of historical events. Though it may seem too textbook-style to Polish readers, especially those older or possessing an education in history, the majority of the audience of the book that is less conversant in the history of the PRL will find this addition invaluable because it allows for a better understanding of the broader context of life-choices and difficulties that would arise not from individual decisions, but from dramatic changes in the political situation inside the country.

The subsequent chapters, entitled "Years of study in a changing world" and "Stalinism", respectively, raise two major questions deserving of attention. One is seemingly personal (because what Szacka is writing about are her own decisions and choices), but actually of significance for a large number of people living in Poland at the time. These mechanisms led people who initially espoused entirely disparate political views, with no ties to the authorities or the party, to support the political slogans of an increasingly dictatorial regime of terror and endorse it. For readers who are unable to find an answer to the question "how was that possible?" or tend to see any form of support for the government of the PRL as treason, or perhaps a pragmatic choice by a career opportunist, this account will provide an opportunity to see that things were not as straightforward. Szacka masterfully depicts how propaganda affected – not infrequently! – intelligent, well-educated, and conscious people, and how their political choices could not be reduced to mere opportunism or blind faith in Stalin and the righteousness of the new order.

The other significant question – or, more precisely, layer of narration – are the changes that happened at the universities, especially the elimination of "bourgeois" sociology, which the author was in the process of studying at the time. The relevant department at the University of Warsaw was closed in the 1949–50 academic year, but already enrolled students were allowed to complete their studies; even though the authorities decisively asserted that sociology not only does not contribute to socialism, but even actively counteracts it, the discipline continued to be taught at the university in some of its aspects, and occasionally under new names. As a result, its re-emergence in October 1956, following the end of Stalinism, required little effort.

These portions of the book, which address both politics and personal life, also illustrate how difficult it is to combine scholarly work, family life, and raising children, remain on track with one's dissertation and then habilitation, even for those who eventually become tenured full professors, excelling and gaining recognition in the international arena.

The later history of post-war Poland is the subject of three subsequent chapters: "The times of Gomułka", "The Gierek era", and "The agony of the Polish People's Republic". Aside from the undercurrents of politics and personal life that were present before, this part of the book also introduces a new narrative strand, perhaps the most interesting and crucial in the memoir as a historical source, because it is so uncommon. It is an account of the scholarly community "from the inside", a post-war history of Polish sociology and its practitioners – a group that is not particularly well-recognised. Although studies devoted to the university and sociologists do exist, personal recollections from someone who belonged to that group, and not merely as a rank-and-file member, are truly an invaluable resource. Notably, Szacka describes not only the life of the post-war sociology department at the University of Warsaw, but also some of the studies conducted by employees of the said department (including one of the most famous of them, in which Polish sociologist Stefan Nowak assessed the attitudes of the student body). This section reflects on methodologies, including a detailed account of errors, and the relationship between the study results and social reality. Perhaps this might be a tad too detailed for historians, but for scholars of social phenomena, sociologists, or political scientists, it serves as a fascinating source on the history of science. This is so because Szacka highlights how quickly the demands placed on social research changed, what kinds of studies were encouraged and celebrated in the past, but would very likely be considered methodologically untenable today. It is, however, beside the point that, methodologically deficient though they may appear today, these studies provided highly valuable information, prompting the question of whether perfect methodological adequacy deserves to be put on a pedestal, even when it is achieved at the cost of abandoning studies that cannot meet the strict criteria. One also finds great interest in reports from scholarship programs abroad and accounts of current challenges, such as obtaining a passport, navigating bureaucracy, and securing finances, faced by scholars who were fortunate enough to secure invitations to foreign universities on research trips of various lengths.

Perhaps some readers, especially historians and sociologists, will be disappointed by the author's awe-inspiring discretion. Her memoirs abound with various personages – some whose faces graced magazine covers (like Bronisław Geremek, historian and anti-communist opposition activist, and then politician, minister of foreign affairs, and deputy to the Sejm in the Third Republic of Poland), as well as others, such as celebrated scholars

from Poland and abroad, but the book offers very little about them. Barbara Szacka was always keen to reserve judgment; even when her tone turned to disparagement, she usually restricted herself to providing the last name initial of the person in question or a very general account of the particular situation. On the one hand, this is very unfortunate, since the author would likely have a great deal of interesting things to say about people whose lives impacted the history of Poland and Polish academia; on the other, one hopes that this tactfulness, the ability to look at people objectively, the discretion, will serve as an example to other memoirists, even at the expense of biographers and writers hungering for the sensational. Nevertheless, one finds no justification for the absence of an index of names, other than the additional cost; it is sorely needed here.

In the final chapter – especially the part devoted first to "Solidarity" (established in August 1980) and then Martial Law (introduced by the authorities on 13 December 1981) – one is particularly captivated by a decisively "non-textbook" historical narrative, in which the author highlights inconsistencies in the actions of the authorities, the search for gaps in the system, the exploitation of strictly party-oriented institutes to facilitate discouraged research. Despite her active participation in the opposition during Martial Law, Szacka does not describe herself as a hero; she is forthright about the challenges of illegal activity in the PRL and the absence of clarity about right and wrong. Beyond that, she studiously avoids pathos. On 13 December 1981, the day Martial Law was introduced, Szacka was supposed to travel into the country to collect an order of meat – a highly valuable product, difficult to obtain in stores. As can be expected, she did not: "And so, the first day of Martial Law registered in my memory as the day when everyone worried about their fatherland, and I worried about the pig" (p. 415).

The ending, devoted to the Katyn massacre, the trip to Katyn, and the farewell to the Father, frames the entire account. Instruction about the Katyn massacre was forbidden in post-war Poland; it was also discouraged to admit when one had lost a family member there. The author writes little about the impact her father's death in the massacre had on her life in PRL because she shows no inclination to present her biography in martyrological tones. However, the preface and conclusion to the book reveal that Katyn cast a shadow on her being, whether she was willing to admit it or not.

In truth, *Life and Memory in Dark Times* is the history of a part of the Polish intelligentsia from the 1930s until 1989. It speaks of unavoidable political entanglements, mechanisms allowing for a relatively everyday and creative existence in times when it was difficult to find logic or reason in events or government actions. It should be stressed, too, that the late author was a formidable and self-deprecating writer, and therefore, in contrast to many memoirists, capable of shedding light not only on her successes but also her failures. The problems she faced early in her professional career, when

she was forced to combine family life with scholarly work and struggled to complete her dissertation, will likely give many young readers who see their future in scholarly work an opportunity to understand that one is not a failure when they cannot swiftly overcome all challenges. That goals can be reached even when the only thing one sees at first is hurdles.

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