

## **Guiding and witnessing. Analysis of biographical elements in a narrative of tour guides the context of the difficult heritage interpretation of the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone.**

In 2016, it has been 30 years since the Chernobyl disaster. The round anniversary sparked a wave of media interest in how the power plant site looks like today. Many people found it surprising, that the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone (CEZ) is now partially open to the public, and tours to the site are gaining in popularity – in the first half of 2016, more than thirteen thousand people crossed borders of the Zone. What makes people want to visit the contaminated area? For some, it is the desire to experience something extreme and exciting, for others – it is an opportunity to take exceptional photos, or see, with their own eyes, all the well-known places. Motivations of tourists are different, so as programs offered by tour operators. However, the CEZ is not an “average” tourist attraction, it is a site of memory, space, that symbolizes cultural trauma of the Chernobyl disaster.

The key role in exploring the CEZ is played by guides, entitled to give tours by the National Agency for Exclusion Zone Management. Sites of disasters, suffering, death, just such as the CEZ, are often referred to as "difficult heritage" – a legacy that we would prefer not to inherit from ancestors and erase from memory. This heritage, nobody wants to voluntarily identify with, but which imposes on the living an inalienable duty to render it in the present and preserve it for the future. (Owsianowska, Banaszekiewicz 2015, p. 13). Therefore, the narrative associated with such sites is particularly difficult, especially when heritage starts to yield to tourist commercialization.

In recent years, several articles on various aspects of exploring the CEZ have been published (Dobraszczyk 2010; Goatcher and Brunnsden 2011 Stone 2013 Yankovska and Hannam 2014), but in subject literature one can see a substantial lack of reflection on the development of tourism in Chernobyl, particularly in the context of the guiding narrative.

The main objective of the project is to show, how the fates of individual guides affect the way they guide tours, and simultaneously influence interpretation of the CEZ heritage. The adopted hypothesis assumes that some guides find a story of personal experience of the Chernobyl disaster an important part of the narrative – their work is a form of giving testimony: talking about the difficult past, which remains unknown to many, as well as showing a human dimension of the Chernobyl tragedy.

The research project is of ethnographic character. Using in-depth interviews with guides and participant observation during trips to the CEZ will allow to gather material for better understanding of the problem, i.e. interpretation of difficult heritage sites by local guides.

The results of the research will be presented in the form of an English-language monograph, and at least two articles in Polish. It will be an original contribution into development of anthropology of tourism in Poland, as well as shall considerably help in the internationalization of the Polish humanities in the world.