

### **Life writing competitions. Memoir-writing practices in Poland 1918-1939 (analysis - reception - meaning).**

The goal of the research project is a comprehensive description of Polish memoir-writing competitions in the interwar period. These competitions were uniquely Polish contribution to the development of Polish and worldwide sociology. They also contributed to social sciences and humanities in general—through the enrichment of statistical analyses by qualitative analyses, but also by giving voice to representatives of social groups, which rarely had the opportunity to be heard, not to mention – to write: peasants, the unemployed, workers, economic migrants, the youth. Therefore, the significance of this phenomenon transcendent the research area of any single science discipline. The phenomenon demands its own cultural history and asks for the description using the tools of the anthropology of writing practices. This is especially important today – on the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the “biographical method” and establishment of the Institute for Social Economy (1920/1921); but also in these times when new competitions are being announced— for the memoirs from the times of pandemic.

We want to question not only the significance of memoir-writing competitions and sources based on these competitions for the development of social sciences (especially for the development of the famous “biographical method”) but also in what way was the writing itself a new experience (and a challenge) for authors of memoirs. After all, the memoir-writing competitions were addressed primarily to social groups of low literacy levels. People who attempted to write memoirs or started to write journals as an entry for competitions were often “the first readers,” “the first writers” – persons, who were first in their families to complete elementary school and possessed the ability to write and read. Among the memoir authors, there were also illiterate people, who would dictate their experiences to others. From this point of view, a major part of the project will constitute the presentation and description of specific literary practices of memoir writers, as well as their reading practices. Therefore we want to propose a new, innovative outlook at memoir-writing competitions and memoir materials by using tools of the anthropology of writing and anthropology of writing practices, as well as the anthropology of literature and history of reading. It will also be important for us to consider memoir-writing competitions from the point of view of social history: the interwar period was a time of political, social, and mental changes. It was also a time of formation and transformation of identities: national, class, citizenship. Last but not least, it was the time of development of important social initiatives (cooperative, pedagogical) and Polish social thought in general.

In the Polish interwar period (1918-1939) the tradition of acquiring, publishing and using autobiographical materials was significantly developed, mostly by Florian Znaniecki, who created Polish Institute of Sociology in Poznań, but also by extraordinary Polish sociologist, philosophers and social scientists Józef Chałasiński (Znaniecki’s student) and Ludwik Krzywicki. The latter was for many years a director of the Institute for Social Economy (Instytut Gospodarstwa Społecznego), the institute which organized e.g., three competitions that are the subject of our research: for the memoirs of peasants, the unemployed, and the emigrants. We will also take a look at two important competitions for the memoirs of the youth: peasant youth (organized by State Institute for Cultural Advancement of Rural Areas and Jewish youth (organized by Jewish Scientific Institute – YIVO).

We want to produce as a comprehensible description of memoir-writing competitions in interwar Poland (when the memoir-writing competitions began in the first place) as possible. We will then consider the phenomenon as a part of a long, crucial, and unique tradition of memoir-writing competitions and tradition of collecting personal documents in Poland: beginning with Florian Znaniecki and William Thomas’s famous monograph *Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (1918-20), then through the practice of collecting testimonies of Second World War and Shoah (e.g., the activity of Oneg Shabbat group in Warsaw Ghetto, which actions resulted later in the creation of enormous Ringelblum Archive), up to the post-war activity of the Society of Friends of Memoir Writing and hundreds of memoir-writing competitions organized in Poland after the war. The research results of our project will be gradually published in the form of academic articles, as well as comprehensive monography. An important part of the project will be the popularization part: an anthology with a selection of memoirs and a website with a database dedicated to Polish memoir-writing competitions from the interwar periods from 1918-1939 containing textual, visual and audiovisual materials.