

The Conscience of the Skin: Interwar Polish Autobiography and Social Rights

Oh, if I could express myself like [those orators] I would have jumped on a table, a fence, a roof, and shouted for all the world to hear that the people were being wronged, that the world was pursuing an evil course, that everyone had a right to a decent life.

—Anonymous¹

In 1933, a collection of life-stories titled *Memoirs of the Unemployed* became a surprise bestseller in Poland. While for some readers its tales of hunger and destitution were taken as a warning of potential revolutionary disorder, others saw it as a damning indictment of society and its ills.² The volume's editor, the sociologist Ludwik Krzywicki, argued that the memoirs were, above all, a demand to right the wrong of unemployment: "I don't want assistance or support" was, according to Krzywicki, their refrain—"give me work!"³ Following on the success of *Memoirs of the Unemployed*, other compilations of workers' memoirs appeared to call for a fundamental reassessment of the nature of work and the meaning of justice. As one author put it, "Why does not the law, that has allegedly been written and perpetuated by society, indict and bring to trial the cause of unemployment, why does it not annihilate this cause by a terrible sentence? . . . I need work much more than the air I breathe."⁴ Joined by further publications of memoirs by peasants, youth, and other marginalized social groups, as a genre interwar Polish "social memoir" articulated demands not just for codification of a right to employment but more broadly for what are often termed "social rights": as the worker quoted at the beginning of this essay put it, the "right to a decent life."

Social (or economic) rights were enumerated, most famously, in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, including the right to education, work, food and housing, and social security.⁵ As Samuel Moyn points out, however, the idea of such rights was neither groundbreaking in 1948 nor particularly controversial. Krzywicki, for instance, had been defending the idea of a right to employment since at least 1885; guarantees of social rights had appeared in the Weimar (1919) and Soviet (1936) constitutions, while a range of wartime pronouncements, from FDR's "New Bill of Rights" to the Beveridge Report, indicated that "social protections were close to the core of international promises for a better world."⁶ Yet, as Moyn argues, this broad wartime consensus only temporarily subordinated unresolved tensions, not least around how the right to work or housing, say, would be balanced against the West's much-

cherished right to property.⁷ As Paul Betts shows in his contribution to this dossier, with the onset of the Cold War, social rights guarantees dropped out of the script in noncommunist countries, while Soviet Bloc propaganda declared that only under socialism was the full freedom of the human individual guaranteed through the protection of *both* political and social rights.⁸

In the burgeoning historiography of human rights, social rights per se have received relatively little consideration. To the extent that what we might call a “social history of social rights” is currently being written, it largely focuses on the Soviet Bloc countries, where citizens did not take constitutional guarantees of social rights lightly and frequently called rulers to account for discrepancies between promises and reality—for example, to reference Betts once more, in the widespread deployment of “rights-talk” that appeared in letters of complaint. I am interested here, however, in extending discussion of the social history of social rights in another direction. Rather than exploring the grassroots adoption and renegotiation of a rights discourse scripted “from above,” I propose to consider how, like all legal discourses, that of social rights was historically embedded in a range of extralegal social and cultural practices. Polish “social memoir” is one case in which this embeddedness can usefully be surveyed.

As defined by the sociologist Feliks Gross, the term “social memoir” indicates “biographical descriptions, notes, or letters written by representatives of a given social group, the chief purpose of which is to depict their milieu as typical (one might also say stereotyped) and to give us samples of a particular type of social group.”⁹ In practice, however, social memoir (also sometimes known as “competition memoir” or, outside of Poland, the “Polish method”) is closely associated with the innovative means first devised by Polish sociologist Florian Znaniecki for the collection of such documents: namely, competitions—publicized through the press, adult education circles, and political organizations—for the “best” autobiographical writing by members of a specified social group. Facilitated by rising literacy and expansion of the mass media following Poland’s recovery of independence between 1921 and 1938, some twenty social memoir competitions were held, resulting in twenty-five different publications; many attracted extensive popular readerships, and a few won prestigious national literary awards.¹⁰ As sociologist Janina Markiewicz-Lagneau argues, the tremendous enthusiasm for the social memoir among readers in interwar Poland is striking, a phenomenon worthy of study in itself.¹¹

Taking up Markiewicz-Lagneau’s observation, I propose to approach Polish social memoir here as a conversation, rooted in a particular time and place, about contemporary society and its ills, as well as to explore the proposition that Polish social memoir can be read as one historically specific discourse of social rights. In interwar Poland, these autobiographies of “simple people” (*prości ludzie*) made an argument about the limits of liberal citizenship, calling for a radical reorientation of political ethics—one to be based, as Gross later wrote, on the principle that “freedom is as important as bread, and bread as important as freedom.”¹² Against the backdrop of the deepening economic and political crisis of the 1930s, in particular, activist academics like Gross and Ludwik Krzywicki, director of the Institute for Social Economy, presented memoirs both as an invaluable source of sociological knowledge and as an explicit intervention in wider policy debates. As Gross explained, compe-

tion organizers “attempted to steer the interests of the participants toward certain concrete social and cultural problems,” and the published memoirs were almost universally received as a commentary on contemporary events. Thus “public opinion was stirred” (Gross wrote) by *Memoirs of the Unemployed*, while *Memoirs of Physicians* “revealed the good and bad points of the Polish health policy and could be a valuable guide in planning proper measures of prevention and care” (for instance, by showing the catastrophic outcome of the 1933 abolition of compulsory health insurance for agricultural workers). *Memoirs of Peasants*, too, contained “sharp criticism of the government.”¹³ Krzywicki, in his introduction to *Memoirs of Peasants*, wrote that the texts “should find themselves in the hands of every man of state and every activist, directing their efforts toward minimizing the effects of the crisis, toward ridding the village of petty injustice, abuse, and exploitation.” Social memoir was to be a powerful weapon in the Institute for Social Economy’s declared crusade: “removing the sources of penury and injustice from Polish soil,” nothing more, nothing less.¹⁴

In this sense, I will suggest that the social memoir may be compared to other representations of and/or by the “common man,” such as documentary photography, oral history, “mass observation,” or “outsider art” that came to prominence in the transatlantic public sphere from the Great Depression through the early Cold War. Exemplified, for instance, by MoMA’s “Family of Man” photography exhibit of 1955, they promoted visions of the common humanity of subjects across nations and classes, supporting arguments for the existence of universal human rights.¹⁵ What these genres especially shared was their capacity to break down the story on the front page—whether mass unemployment, war, famine, or genocide—into a *multitude* of stories, unique (yet representative) narratives of individual human subjects, each “one among millions of others.”¹⁶ Such a process not only of individualization but of narrativization was arguably central to the construction of contemporary human rights discourse. We see it, for example, in the fact that asylum-seekers must routinely produce “persuasive narratives of political persecution” to gain refugee status, and in the canonical place of Holocaust testimony for what Stefan-Ludwig Hoffman calls the modern *doxa* of human rights.¹⁷

If personal narratives have been central to the construction of human rights, how does this apply to social rights in particular? We might ask, for instance, whether some kinds of stories constitute more effective arguments for social rights than others—and what limitations or contradictions might accompany their production or reception. To explore these questions, this essay will trace social memoir’s rise and fall (and rise) across the pre-/postwar divide and on both sides of the Atlantic. Describing social memoir’s origins in early sociology’s preoccupation with the “personal document,” it will consider how and why memoir competitions came to occupy such a prominent role in interwar Poland. Drawing upon two memoir compilations from this period—*Memoirs of the Unemployed* (1933) and *Workers Write* (1938)—it will consider how social memoir constructed arguments for social rights upon contradictions between liberal notions of citizenship and embodied experiences of oppression and want. The essay will conclude by briefly exploring social memoir’s transfigurations after World War II. On the one hand, while Poland’s new rulers appropriated social memoir to bolster claims that social rights had finally been achieved under communism, others

adapted its methods to documenting the victimhood of Polish citizens by Hitler and Stalin. Thus, I would argue, social memoir can help illuminate key features of the shifting cultural and ideological landscapes in East and West on the verge of the Cold War era, as well as the fate of social rights arguments against that backdrop.

Foregrounding the Individual

Published in 1930, worker-emigrant Jakub Wojciechowski's autobiography caused a literary sensation. The text had been chosen as the winning entry in a competition conducted by the Institute of Sociology in Poznań in 1922. Wojciechowski's original manuscript, over nine hundred pages long, written with few punctuation marks and erratic orthography, related the story of his childhood and early adulthood under German rule in western Poland, his experiences as a German soldier in World War I, and his work and family life.¹⁸ Feuilletonist, women's rights activist, and man-about-town Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński was among those who championed the book, comparing it to the seventeenth-century memoir of the Polish nobleman Jan Chryzostom Pasek. "Along with all the appeal of the older memoir," "Boy" enthused, "it speaks to us at the same time of things most concerning our society; it speaks to us of how our worker lives, plays, and loves, how he thinks and understands, how he absorbs a foreign culture, all the while remaining stubbornly true to his roots."¹⁹

The competition Wojciechowski had won was the brainchild of Florian Znaniecki, a major figure in the development of sociology on both sides of the Atlantic.²⁰ Znaniecki addressed one of social science's fundamental epistemological dilemmas: what is the relationship between the particular and the general—in other words, between the infinite variety of human personality and experience and the general social forces or laws that govern them? For some of Znaniecki's contemporaries, it was doubtful that such a relationship could be established at all. As Henri Poincaré agonized in 1908, for instance, humans were "too various, too variable, too capricious, in a word, too complex" to admit of scientific study. "Many methods had been thought up" to address this, but all were inadequate, making sociology, in his view, "the discipline with the most methods, and the fewest results."²¹ The positivism that came to dominate American social science after World War II represented one response to this dilemma, a decisive swing toward the abstract and general at the expense of the particular and, as its critics would charge, of the "human."²² At other moments, however, the individual has been foregrounded as an object of social scientific research. In the early twentieth century, some sociologists' preoccupation with the so-called personal document bespoke the new discipline's efforts to grapple with this dilemma.

Having been expelled from the University of Warsaw for anti-Russian activities in 1903, Znaniecki had travelled throughout Europe before returning to the more liberal Habsburg-ruled Polish lands for a Ph.D. in philosophy in Kraków in 1909. He was working as director of an immigrant-aid society in Warsaw (an academic career was largely out of the question for a Pole under Russian rule) when he met the University of Chicago sociologist W. I. Thomas. Thomas, planning a study of Polish immigrants in the United States, invited Znaniecki to Chicago as a collaborator; the result was one of the founding texts of American urban sociology, *The Polish Peasant in Europe*

and America (1918–20).²³ According to American sociologist Herbert Blumer, the work was far more than “a monograph on Polish peasant life . . . but actually a broadside treatment of the theoretical problems set by the study of contemporary social life.”²⁴ Above all, *The Polish Peasant* came to be associated with a methodology based on the analysis of personal documents. Synthesizing Thomas’s long-standing interest in autobiography with Znaniecki’s work on the philosophy of culture, the authors argued that social processes must be understood as “the product of a continual interaction of individual consciousness and objective reality.” For this reason, they wrote, “personal life-records, as complete as possible, constitute the *perfect* type of sociological material.”²⁵ Innovatively, Thomas and Znaniecki reproduced a vast number of these in their entirety in *The Polish Peasant*’s five volumes, including 794 letters by immigrants and their family members and a book-length autobiography by an unemployed, tubercular worker, “Władek.”²⁶

In 1920 Znaniecki returned to his newly independent homeland, where, from his base at the University of Poznań, he established the institutional infrastructure of modern Polish sociology. At the same time, it seems, Znaniecki applied himself to finding a solution to the one problem he and Thomas had identified with the use of “personal life-records,” namely, the “practical difficulties” of gathering sufficiently large samples. (Władek’s autobiography, for example, had been obtained by paying the author five dollars a week to write it—a method obviously not reproducible on a large scale.)²⁷ The first memoir competition, conducted by the Institute of Sociology in 1922, gathered 149 entries; over the next few years, competitions were held on women’s participation in electoral campaigns, the life of agricultural laborers, and residents’ attitudes toward the city of Poznań.²⁸

In contrast to the memoir contests of the 1930s, those Znaniecki conducted at the Institute of Sociology were limited affairs (the competition on Poznań, for instance, attracted about twenty entries; one later contest attracted more than 1500).²⁹ However, they established social memoir’s basic mechanisms and principles, not least its insistence upon the collaborative partnership between researchers and their subjects. For while prizes and the chance of publication were used as a lure, organizers were careful to frame participation primarily as a disinterested service to science, and authors were assured that, regardless of their literary qualities, all sincere and truthful entries would constitute valuable documents for researchers—a message reinforced, for example, by distributing diplomas to all entrants.³⁰ Anecdotal evidence suggests that these diplomas were highly valued by their owners and that, in Daniel Soyler’s words, competitors “already appreciated the historical significance of their own lives . . . They saw themselves not as isolated individuals but as representatives of their people and their times.”³¹ This sociological understanding of the significance of single lives would also, as we will see, be widely shared by contemporary readers and commentators.

The publication of Wojciechowski’s memoir opened up the dialogue between researchers and writers to a host of new interlocutors, including cultural arbiters like Boy-Żeleński. Boy later explained the strong emotions that had beset him upon first reading Wojciechowski’s book: pleasure, on the one hand, at the freshness of its “anti-literature,” devoid of the stale conventions of the avant-garde; pain, on the other, in contemplating how this untutored literary genius, despite publication, continued to

toil in poverty in the village of Barcin. Wondering at the “treasure-trove of talent and character of our people” that lay undiscovered (as Wojciechowski’s talents would have been if not for “that blessed competition”), Boy sent a letter to Wojciechowski. Wojciechowski wrote back, to Boy’s evident delight, on “some kind of accounts paper” and in “fantastic orthography.” After Boy visited Wojciechowski for a profile in the *Daily Illustrated Courier*, Wojciechowski came as his invited guest to the capital, where he was introduced to the cream of Warsaw’s literary world at Café Ziemiańska, attended the theater, and had an audience with the president. After a second memoir, published with Boy’s involvement, Wojciechowski was awarded the Golden Laurels of the Polish Academy of Literature in 1935 for “outstanding service to Polish literature.”³²

The unlikely encounter between Boy, the man of letters, and Wojciechowski, the man of labor, speaks volumes about the craze for the social memoir in 1930s Poland. If “most working-class autobiographers were cultural ambassadors who deliberately moved across the formidable but not impermeable boundaries between classes,” as Mary Jo Maynes writes in her study of French and German worker autobiographies, Wojciechowski’s and Boy’s transgressions remind us just how formidable those boundaries were. In many ways, the Polish citizenry that had come into being with independence was more notional than actual. Apart from tremendous regional, linguistic, religious, and ethnic variation across the territories that made up the new state, interwar Polish society was sharply divided between a small educated, urbanized elite and a peasant (and, to a small but growing extent, working-class) majority; it was a society in which, as one contemporary put it, “two closed worlds lived side by side: the upper and lower [*góra i dół*].”³³

The “imagined community” of the Polish nation had always been beset by such contradictions. While peasants were widely viewed (and increasingly represented themselves) as the backbone of the nation, the cultural legacies of Poland’s late feudalism were deeply entrenched, and the masses were often thought of as incapable of intellectual or emotional refinement.³⁴ Social memoir’s frisson arose from these fissures, allowing the writer Maria Dąbrowska to proclaim, for instance, that *Memoirs of Peasants* had issued “from spheres that until now have maintained silence toward the outside world. Today the Great Unknown has spoken to all who have ears to hear him—the peasant.”³⁵ Maynes also suggests, however, that worker autobiography flourishes in contexts witnessing rapid transformations of “both reading and political publics,” and Poland had experienced both, dramatically, in the two decades following 1918. On the one hand, by the 1930s, more than a decade of independence had borne fruit in terms of increased literacy and fertile grassroots cultural activism, supported by universal public education and relative civic freedom. On the other hand, Maynes’s observation that reading and writing might constitute a space uniquely suited to cross-class encounter applies singularly well to this juncture in Polish history, which combined rising cultural expectations with ever more extreme social, political, and ethnic polarization.³⁶

While it was certainly not inevitable that memoir competitions would come to dominate sociological research in interwar Poland, following Wojciechowski’s dazzling reception, a number of prominent researchers embraced what they saw as the possibil-

ities social memoir offered to turn research into “a powerful lever for social change,” one allowing them not merely to observe but “act upon the society they were supposed to be studying.” By participating in a memoir competition, the theory went, authors would come to place their own experiences within a broader context and deepen their thoughts about specific issues and problems, while the framing of competitions would “lead participants imperceptibly to define themselves as a worker, peasant, unemployed person or emigré,” as the sociologist Franciszek Jakubczak wrote, generating “something like class consciousness.” Most important, perhaps, the contest would generate practical links between participants and researchers (bringing them together through award ceremonies and correspondence) as well as a more abstract “community of interests” among them.³⁷

One scholar to see autobiography as a “powerful lever” was Max Weinreich, director of the Yiddish Institute for Jewish Research (YIVO). Weinreich had studied *The Polish Peasant* with Edward Sapir at Yale in 1932–33, during which time he articulated the principles of YIVO’s youth research (Yugfor) project: in order to study the “whole personality in its whole social setting,” the “life history method” was, he argued, most suitable. YIVO scholars, meanwhile, had closely followed the latest developments in Polish memoir-based research, and in 1932, 1934, and 1939, YIVO held competitions that collected over six hundred memoirs by Jewish youth.³⁸ Weinreich believed that writing their life-stories could have a therapeutic effect on young authors, whom he understood as suffering from psychological traumas similar to those experienced by African American youth in the United States. At the same time, by reaching out to young authors, Weinreich hoped YIVO would expand its constituency, drawing youth into its orbit and encouraging their identification with its Yiddishist agenda. In other words, what some left-wing sociologists hoped the social memoir would do for class consciousness, Weinreich hoped it would do for young Jews’ sense of ethnic identity.³⁹

Another striking example of the irresistible appeal of this logic for interwar Polish social science was the enthusiastic adoption of the social memoir by Ludwik Krzywicki, a respected Marxist economist and veteran of Polish struggles for independence, whose services to the new state had included creating Poland’s first modern Office of Statistics. From 1920 to 1941, Krzywicki directed the Warsaw School of Economics’ Institute for Social Economy (IGS), where teams of pro bono researchers conducted survey and quantitative research on living conditions, social insurance, local government, and unemployment. However, starting in the 1930s, such research would be eclipsed by the IGS’s large-scale memoir competitions, *Memoirs of the Unemployed*, *Memoirs of Peasants*, and *Memoirs of Emigrants* (intended as a three-volume work that would cover France, the United States, and Canada).⁴⁰ Krzywicki became convinced that both narrative and statistical data were essential for shaping public policy debates, a belief seemingly borne out by the reception of the IGS’s works in years to come.⁴¹

Memoirs of the Unemployed (1933), which reproduced fifty-seven of the more than six hundred worker memoirs collected in the IGS’s 1931–32 competition, was the social memoir compilation that arguably made the greatest impact on Polish public opinion.⁴² Reviews of the book ran in every major Polish periodical, traversing the political spectrum from *The Polish Freethinker* to *The Priest’s Atheneum*. Reviewers of

all political stripes interpreted *Memoirs of the Unemployed* as a wake-up call, noting that policymakers ignored it, and the realities it described, at their peril.⁴³ The book's positive reception across the political spectrum is especially interesting given that the Marxist Krzywicki made no pretense of scholarly neutrality; in his introduction, for example, he dramatically signalled the volume's intent as being to "waken human conscience! Let these echoes of destitution . . . of hard experience, and above all of hunger and sickness, this insinuation of the torment of moral suffering, go out into the world. The number of those crying out for help are in the tens, the hundreds of thousands!"⁴⁴ The right-wing daily newspaper *ABC* ("Informs all about all") was not put off: "Ludwik Krzywicki has written a beautiful introduction to these tragic accounts . . . It is more than a book: it is a priceless document of the epoch not only for the future historian, but for any thinking person who wants to understand the present, and especially who wants to have an effect on its developmental path."⁴⁵

Krzywicki claimed that he wanted the memoirs to grate on educated readers like "dissonant" modern music, yet their greatest impact often lay precisely in their quiet matter-of-factness.⁴⁶ Memoir no. 1 is typical: without rhetorical flourish, it catalogs a bricklayer's family's rapid descent from relative comfort to starvation following the collapse of the building trades in the Depression. Almost as an afterthought, it ends with the story of a homeless man who was badly burned in the street by hooligans. "In addition to my family there is him," the author concludes, "because I understand what poverty is and I share this poverty with him, and let God never visit upon anyone the unhappiness of such a one as he."⁴⁷ Elsewhere, Krzywicki noted that complaining about one's own poverty was anathema in Polish folk culture; it was far easier to speak about the suffering of others. For this reason, there was the danger, he suggested, that the memoirs would even downplay the horrific realities faced by the unemployed.⁴⁸ But the memoirs' frequent understatement, together with their often deceptively simple style—their "un-literariness"—clearly lent them an apolitical authenticity in contemporaries' eyes.⁴⁹ Readers' tendency to compare the memoirs to documentary photography was telling. *The Work Inspector*, for example, proclaimed it "an essential thing to acquaint oneself with this book, which some call 'the largest and most natural photograph of the present world.'"⁵⁰

Sociologists, of course, warned against viewing these memoirs as "copies" of reality. Władysław Grabski, for instance, argued that the memoirs should be read using tools of literary analysis, examining their deployment of literary tropes and conventions.⁵¹ Similarly anticipating the linguistic turn by several decades, Gross and Mysłakowski explained that they "were more interested in . . . how [an author] speaks of various issues," including evasions and silences, "than in the content of what is said."⁵² Reading the memoirs today, one has the impression that authors and scholars were often speaking to one another over their readers' heads, each more aware of the slippery epistemological shoals they were treading than the public at large. As the memoirist Zygmunt Wróbel explained, "One should write the truth, as it is the most valuable currency," adding: "I consider this way of proceeding to be my Truth, although I know that truths are as many as ideas, and maybe even people."⁵³

But truth was one thing, authenticity another, and social memoir's rhetorical force depended upon establishing the authenticity of its texts and the representativeness of

its authors. At a basic level, as Krzywicki noted, some readers might be inclined to doubt that the memoirs had been written by actual workers, as such “literary talent” was unexpected among the uneducated (indeed, “he who reads [them] carefully will detect in them—to use an old-fashioned expression—the divine spark”). The editors had thus conducted investigations in a few of the cases in which doubts might have been raised. In each case the author’s identity had been confirmed.⁵⁴ But social memoir’s authenticity could be doubted in other, more subtle ways, and it was defended accordingly by its sociological practitioners. First, in introductions to published memoirs, editors always explained that the works were presented in as close to their raw, original state as possible. In editing Wojciechowski’s manuscript, for example, Chałasiński had added punctuation marks but had otherwise sought to preserve all of the original’s peculiarities of spelling and dialect.⁵⁵ Such a hands-off editorial policy not only had sociological value—to expunge the linguistic traces, for example, of Wojciechowski’s youth in Prussia would have diminished the memoir’s value to researchers interested in national identity formation—but it also, of course, deflected doubts about editorial shaping, nipping, and tucking.

Authenticity could be established, moreover, through material evidence. Whereas Chałasiński included a facsimile of one page from Wojciechowski’s original manuscript, Krzywicki offered material descriptions of some of the entries submitted to the IGS. Calling to mind Boy’s pleasure at the unorthodox appearance of Wojciechowski’s first letter, Krzywicki’s notes on this theme are charming and full of pathos. Some entries “were written in a tiny, careful print so as not to waste a single place on the page, others in great, crooked letters, like the handwriting of a child”; some were written on worn pages torn from school notebooks, others on large, loose sheets; some were decorated with small drawings—crossed hammers (on a miner’s memoir), or a loaf of bread. Krzywicki also notes that many contestants stumbled over instructions to use a pseudonym: “I hereby submit,” wrote one author, “that I could not find the required envelope with pseudonym anywhere in Katowice.”⁵⁶ Such material “proofs of authenticity,” to use Krzywicki’s phrase—the spelling of an uneducated person, the handwriting of someone unaccustomed to writing—allowed the memoirs’ authorship to be established without a shadow of a doubt.⁵⁷ This, in turn, was essential for the social memoir’s ability, to quote Gross, to reveal “the splendid talent that lay dormant in the . . . masses.”⁵⁸

Narrating the Self

Autobiography has always been closely associated with modern ideas of subjectivity and citizenship. According to the Marquis de Condorcet, citizenship rights were “derived from the nature of man,” which was that of “a sensitive being . . . capable of reasoning and having moral ideas.” Literary forms such as the novel, letters, and autobiography developed together with this understanding of human subjectivity. Since the late eighteenth century, therefore, members of disenfranchised groups have used authorship, and more particularly autobiographical authorship, to advance their claims to emancipation. For women, writes Joan Scott, becoming a published author of any sort was a way to “assert . . . moral and intellectual agency,” suggesting parallels

between women's capacity for citizenship and their ability to "represent themselves" in the world of letters.⁵⁹

Polish social memoir of the interwar period was deeply embedded in these Enlightenment conceptions of the human subject. As Dąbrowska put it, "the inclination of our memoirists" to use memory as creative material should be "considered the true legitimation of their cultural humanity."⁶⁰ The memoirs showed authors reflecting upon and making meaning of experience, not simply responding to stimuli and fulfilling instinctive needs. They demonstrated the fact that, in Gross's words, "the worker reflects [*zastanawia się*] more, thinks more, too, than it appears to some. This independence and capability of thought and decision," he argued, "is a rich capital that we must value properly."⁶¹ Social memoir fulfilled James Olney's description of autobiography as a "second reading of experience," one that is "truer than the first because it adds to experience itself consciousness of it."⁶² It thus transformed its authors from passive objects into subjects and agents, and in so doing it inevitably generated implicit claims about citizenship and equality.

At the same time, however, the memoirs' content frequently called Enlightenment ideals of the autonomous subject into question. Thus, for example, in keeping with their indebtedness to the conventions of bourgeois autobiography, many of the memoirs took the form of a *Bildungsroman*, tracing authors' paths from ignorance and dependency to maturity and self-realization. This narrative arc was especially clear in the memoirs of *Workers Write*, a collection that grew out of Gross's sociological seminar for workers in Kraków. In the competition questionnaire, developed in the seminar with the participation of its worker-scholars, authors were asked to describe their cultural pursuits and educational trajectories. In one text after another, books and reading, on the one hand, and involvement in the workers' movement, on the other, charted a hard-won path toward enlightenment.⁶³ And yet, as the importance of class-based organizations in these memoirs would suggest, inevitably the memoirs also undermined key aspects of autobiographical convention, including the very autonomy of the individual subject. They engaged, therefore, in what Maynes calls a "counternormative project of defining the self."⁶⁴

A good example is the memoir of an anonymous worker from Jasielski *powiat* who, according to its title, "in his whole life attended school for [just] half a year." The memoir's central theme is the author's struggle to escape a dogged know-nothingness that he characterizes as typical of his parents and milieu. As the author makes clear, such ignorance was not the mere absence of knowledge or understanding but a learned response to poverty: the working-class child had to be taught to know his place and not to ask questions. Good children soon learned such acceptance, but he struggled to do so. Ironically it was his stubbornness and disobedience that led to his ultimate enlightenment: "I was never content when told 'it has to be that way' or 'that is God's will,'" he explains. "I wanted to know why it had to be that way and why it was God's will." This led to considerable psychological tension.

As a young child, therefore, the author tried to force himself to think like the adults around him, practicing resignation ("other children would go to school, and not me") and closely observing adults like his father, a worker in a sawmill: "I looked . . . at his overworked hands, at their bulging veins, and the fingers disfigured from

injuries. I thought to myself how I, too, would one day sit at a low table . . . just the same, I would breathe heavily, and pour a glass of vodka down my throat before supper.” Rehearsing his own future, he tried to identify with his parents and their worldview, summed up in their “philosophizing,” such as the oft-repeated truism “School won’t put bread in your mouth.”⁶⁵ It did not then occur to him “that my parents could be mistaken, that they could be ignorant or stupid.”⁶⁶ Gradually, however, the contradictions between what he heard, saw, and felt became unsustainable. The author describes how he questioned “why” ever more insistently, seeking answers in books, sexual experimentation, and the workers’ movement. The latter came closest to supplying enlightenment, but not completely, for his fellow workers, he found, were often as ignorant as he. Craving knowledge of a more systematic nature, he tried to enroll in a high school correspondence course, only to discover that the fees were beyond his means.

The trajectory of self-improvement ends (nearly) at this point. Cursing the educators “in his soul” and abandoning hopes for education once and for all, the author explains:

I won’t beat my head against a wall. Everything conspires to keep the proletarian stupid. Otherwise, he would not be a proletarian . . . Education for others. No *kielbasa* for the dog.

This bitter outburst seemed to say that the proletarian’s self-realization was not a process that could unfold in harmony with nature, but one that would always be stunted by the social order.⁶⁷ And yet the memoir concludes on a more ambiguous note. Although he and his wife had attempted to postpone having a child until they could afford to pay for its education, his wife had nonetheless become pregnant. The doctor refused an abortion (*nie chciał ręki przykładać*), and the wife’s own attempts to end the pregnancy led to her hospitalization. She eventually recovered, and life “somehow stabilized,” even if they had to scrimp on food and clothing to afford their great pleasure in life, the newspaper. “But, damn it all,” the memoir ends, “I console myself with the fact that my child . . . will be raised differently from the way I was.”⁶⁸ Being subject to many forces beyond their control, they could at least encourage their child to “know life from the ground up, to be educated . . . to be a human being.”⁶⁹ Man makes his own history, if not under circumstances of his own choosing; with luck, though, the parents will have had a hand in choosing the circumstances for him.

Among those circumstances, as the memoirs make clear, the hardest to control are those associated with the body. In dwelling continually on the embodied experience of poverty, the memoirs engage in what is perhaps their most powerful argument against liberal selfhood. The Enlightenment subject, Scott and other feminist scholars argue, was conceived as a largely disembodied individual, devoid of the distinguishing features of birth, religion, and biography. This “abstraction made it possible to posit a fundamental human sameness, a set of universal traits, and thus opened the way for thinking about political, social, and even economic equality.” Yet the same abstraction “could also function to exclude” those whose embodied differences from white men led the *philosophes* to question their capacity to reason and imagine.⁷⁰ Just as women’s reproductive functions were believed to detract from this capacity, so the laboring

classes' productive functions limited their freedom: condemned to the mind-numbing fatigue of physical labor, peasants and workers could not be expected to reflect and reason. Adding to this the wildcard of hunger (which, if not a constant presence in laborers' lives, was at least a constant threat), the separation of biology and intellect could hardly be vouchsafed. Ironically, however, just as social memoir argued for authors' "fundamental human sameness" with educated Poles based on their capacity to reason and imagine, its narratives simultaneously drew attention to the interdependence of bodily experience, on the one hand, and intellect, emotion, and imagination, on the other.

It is through the bodies of those around him, for example, that the worker from Jasielski *powiat* struggled to grasp the meaning of poverty, long before he had the vocabulary of "capital" and "proletariat" at his disposal. As if to mock his parents' watchword of "golden, healthy hands," his early narrative repeatedly describes hands that are disfigured and ravaged. These include both his father's, described in the passage above, and those of his brother after he, too, began work at the sawmill: "It strangely pressed on my heart," he writes, to lie in bed at night with his brother and to see his

thin hands and sickly profile. Now he never smiled . . . In the winter, when he got woken up at five in the morning for work, he always cried . . . I thought it strange that although he was very small he walked already just like an old worker. He held his hands open to their full length as if always ready to grasp something.⁷¹

Later, when listening to a speech about child labor, he thought again of his brother's "elongated, prematurely stretched-out hands," a symbol of the youth and health that were stolen from him.⁷² Other memoirs, too, stress the maiming effects of poverty, including those not visible to the naked eye. Zygmunt Wróbel (in *Workers Write*), for instance, attributes the death of his three older siblings in infancy to his mother's hard work and undernourishment in adolescence, which he supposed had left her "organs undeveloped." Although Wróbel himself survived, he was sickly and weak, and the memoir suggests this might have been because his mother fell down a tumble-down staircase, suffering internal injuries that kept her bedridden while pregnant with him. Thus the physical imprint of want was passed from one generation to the next.⁷³

While injury, disease, and death are omnipresent in the memoirs, however, they are typically narrated in an understated and matter-of-fact way; there are few descriptions of what one could call purely physical suffering. On the other hand, as in the terrible image of the young man who cries every morning when woken up for work, considerable emphasis is placed upon the psychic suffering that accompanied physical hardship as a by-product of poverty. Many authors describe feeling at one time or another emotionally overwhelmed by the difficulties of their own situation, or they describe the psychic suffering of their family members, which suggests that anxiety, stress, and depression were a common feature of poor people's lives. Parents worried perpetually about the safety and welfare of their children, while children experienced unnamed fears of something terrible happening to their parents or themselves. Wróbel's younger brother, for instance, was so terrified at being left home alone during the working day that he spent most days hiding under the bed.⁷⁴ Wróbel

himself had a nervous breakdown at the age of ten, while his father was dying of tuberculosis and the family turned to the sale of home-brewed liquor as a source of income. Detesting the constant traffic of drunken customers, Wróbel wrote, “something in me broke,” and for months he remained in a deep depression, refusing to get out of bed.⁷⁵ The memoirs thus demolish ideas about poor people’s supposed insensibility (or “healthy” peasant mentalities), stressing the inevitable blurring of the physical and spiritual under the strains of poverty.

This blurring is probably nowhere more evident than in *Memoirs of the Unemployed*, where hunger often appears as the ultimate test of spiritual resilience. “The beast has awakened in me,” as one memoirist wrote. “I am a log, a piece of flesh. . . . I have no longer any present or future; there are only my senses and death.”⁷⁶ Here the dilemma becomes acute: while childhood trauma evokes an easy pity, the hungry man may be too dehumanized to elicit anything but our disgust (or fear); it may seem as if the only solution is to cast him out of society. In this way, the question of hunger inevitably becomes a question of justice. As another memoirist demands of the (presumably well-fed) reader,

Do you know what hungry men do? Have you ever heard of beings ruled by hunger? It is foolish to say that they are like animals. They are hungry. Hunger rules them, everything they do is the result of hunger. There is the law of the hungry man, beside which human law is a mere invention.⁷⁷

How should society respond to the hungry man who steals?

By implication, those who have never felt, or who cannot imagine, hunger—those who are unfamiliar with “the law of the hungry man”—are unqualified to make “human law.” The memoirs are replete with examples, like a priest who condemned Wróbel during confession for stealing a bag of grain from his employer (he gave it to a war widow and her starving children), or a police officer who cruelly blamed the mothers of two drowned children for their deaths (the women, like Wróbel’s mother, had to leave the children alone while they were at work, and the unfortunates had wandered away from the village and fallen into a lake). Both the priest’s moral condemnation and the police officer’s “judgment” showed a willful refusal to understand the realities of poor people’s lives, to exercise their imaginations. Presumably, a memoir like Wróbel’s could serve as an *aide d’imagination* for anyone who was weak in this basic prerequisite of citizenship. At a minimum, it meant that neither the “sages” nor “dictators who ‘make’ the Law,” as Wróbel put it, could claim ignorance as an alibi.⁷⁸

The original inspiration for this essay came from a phrase in an unpublished memoir by a miner and veteran of the Spanish Civil War, written in the late 1930s or early 1940s. Describing how he had begun work in the mines as a boy of thirteen, he explained: “Already long ago, I was conscientized on my skin [*uświadomiony na swojej skórze*]”—suggesting that the body’s largest organ could register not only sensation but also its own kind of knowledge.⁷⁹ This strikingly embodied image evokes the troubled relationship between physical and intellectual experience that constitutes a major theme of the interwar autobiographies and serves as their strongest argument for social rights. The mind and body could not be separated: hunger, fatigue, and

disease entrapped the spirits of the poor, obstructing their quests for autonomy. Nonetheless, the fact of that inner life, given voice in memoir, gave authors the strongest claim to enjoying the same rights as others, above all the right to self-realization. Moreover, their intimate, bodily knowledge of suffering endowed them with something those from other classes—at least, those with narrow imaginations—lacked: “consciousness,” a sense of justice deriving from an awareness of humans’ common physical frailty.

Memoirs, Rights, and Intersubjectivity

In 1942, the American psychologist Gordon Allport ruminated that “a decade of depression, war, and misery has had one benign effect”:

It has brought out upon the center of our cultural stage the struggles of the common man, the picture of his daily life, his courage, all his homely values. It has brought the documentary film into popularity, the public opinion poll, radio programs dealing with the common man’s life.

Allport went on to name “sidewalk interviews, ‘we the people’—candid cameras, [and] autobiographies that give unaccented accounts of ordinary experience” as further examples of the public’s new thirst for narratives by and about “the ordinary soldier, the ordinary baby, the ordinary school girl. The layman has become interested in the *personal document*; and so too has the social scientist, caught up in the general cultural tide.”⁸⁰

Allport’s comments appeared in the midst of a veritable referendum by U.S. social science over the valid use of “the *personal document*,” and more particularly over the methods advocated by Thomas and Znaniecki in *The Polish Peasant*. Symptomatic of growing trends toward methodological conformity, in 1937–38 the Social Science Research Council appointed a Committee on Appraisal of Research charged with promoting recognized scientific standards. The committee’s first act was to commission papers on the methodology of a handful of works recognized as extraordinarily influential in their respective fields, beginning with an assessment by Herbert Blumer of *The Polish Peasant* in 1938. The essay served as the basis for a day-long symposium attended by leading lights of the social science establishment, including W. I. Thomas himself, during which the methodological issues raised were, in the view of the committee, of such importance that a series of additional publications on the use of “personal documents” followed (including contributions by Allport, Louis Gottschalk, and others).⁸¹ Ultimately, no consensus emerged; while widely admired, *The Polish Peasant* had both its detractors and its defenders. But the terms of debate were significant. The question posed by Blumer was not how personal documents should be used and what they could reveal but to what extent Thomas’s and Znaniecki’s method was scientifically valid. Could its conclusions be verified, and could they be derived objectively, independently of the scholar’s subjective interpretive biases? The terms of debate were now structured by positivist categories, signalling the profession’s new self-image and concerns.⁸²

There were thus multiple reasons why scholars like Znaniecki, Gross, and Weinreich, finding refuge in the United States after 1939, did not succeed in transplanting

social memoir to American soil (or even, in most cases, did not attempt to do so). For Gross, the socialist workers' movement that had provided the perfect substratum for memoir-based research was absent in Truman's America. Moreover, if the social memoir thrived on bridging the yawning cultural gap between *góra i doby*, Gross's perceptions of class in the United States—where, he felt, everyone from factory worker to executive dressed the same, ate the same, and talked the same—eliminated much of its *raison d'être*.⁸³ In Weinreich's case, an institutional structure for memoir research still existed: YIVO had escaped from Vilna to New York and, perhaps equally important, had a Yiddish-speaking constituency in the United States. On Weinreich's initiative, YIVO organized a memoir competition among American Jewish immigrants in 1942. Yet for reasons that are not clear, its results were never published.⁸⁴ Znaniecki, meanwhile, who found refuge at the University of Illinois until his death in 1958, had returned to more theoretical pursuits long before. Although the transatlantic circulation of ideas begun by Thomas and Znaniecki seemed to have come full circle with these scholars' flight to the United States, it had also been ruptured.

Social memoir, language- and culture-bound, thus resisted international circulation in ways that, for instance, photographs of the “the ordinary soldier, the ordinary baby, the ordinary school girl” did not (under the auspices of the United States Information Agency, the “Family of Man” exhibit was viewed by a staggering nine million people in thirty-eight countries).⁸⁵ Social memoir's untranslatability raises a number of questions about what functions it actually served in the interwar Polish context. To what extent did social memoir, for example, depend upon unspoken nationalist assumptions of a linguistically bound community of writers and readers? Comments on social memoir, as we have seen, were replete with unreflexive references to “our” peasants or “our” workers, signalling its capacity to exclude as well as include.⁸⁶ One might be tempted to conclude that the social memoir was not a discourse about human rights transcending the nation-state, after all, but a more traditional argument about citizenship rights. And yet, by centering this argument on the reference point of the body, the social memoir stretched conventional understandings of citizenship in ways, I argue, that pointed toward a more universal understanding of rights and wrongs.

In contrast to social memoir's atrophy in emigration, the practice of soliciting and collecting the personal narratives of ordinary people flourished as never before in Poland both during and after World War II. Among the best known examples is the “Oyneg Shabes” archive coordinated by Emanuel Ringelblum (who had worked closely with Weinreich through YIVO before the war), which gathered many diaries and first-person accounts; among its papers rescued after the war, there is an announcement of a memoir competition conducted in the Warsaw Ghetto, complete with prizes for the best entries.⁸⁷ After the war, Polish Jewish leaders saw the collection of survivors' personal narratives as one of the most pressing tasks facing the community. Teachers, social workers, historical commissions, and writers urgently gathered autobiographies and recorded testimonies of Holocaust survivors in orphanages and DP camps, solicited survivors' and rescuers' accounts through newspaper advertisements, held a competition, and published compilations of memoirs in Polish, Yiddish, and Hebrew.⁸⁸ As Philip Friedman, former director of the Central

Jewish Historical Commission in Warsaw, noted in 1949, the impulse to collect testimony was not a universal Jewish response to catastrophe; German Jews, for example, had different “traditions,” and the primary impetus came from Polish Jews.⁸⁹ For Polish Jews, the gathering of personal narratives was an immediate and seemingly natural response in times of national crisis—a function as much, perhaps, of their “Polishness” as their “Jewishness.” Moreover, Polish Jewish efforts closely paralleled those by non-Jewish Poles to document the still-fresh experiences, for example, of civilians deported to the Soviet Union in 1939–41 by collecting essays and personal testimonies of survivors awaiting repatriation in Central Asia.⁹⁰

Postwar testimony, however, would be inserted into a radically different set of rights-oriented discourses from its interwar precursors. Although social memoir had, as we have seen, struggled with the tensions between claiming “universal” social rights while framing the human subject as implicitly Catholic, Polish-speaking, and male, postwar testimony explicitly documented crimes committed by the Nazis or Soviets against collectivities of race or nation. It would be a matter of time before the “universalistic” appeal of, for example, Holocaust testimony would become embedded in a discourse of human rights, but when it did, poverty would not appear to be among the “crimes against humanity” it portrayed. Postwar testimony therefore offered no traction for the idea of social rights.

In the end, it was left to the communists in Poland to claim the social memoir’s mantle, and with it a discourse of social rights. The first nationwide memoir competition in the postwar period was organized by a Polish magazine in 1947 on the theme “the Polish village during the war.”⁹¹ With the onset of Stalinism, the social memoir entered its phase of mass production, with some competitions garnering entries in the thousands and publications of memoirs appearing regularly each year (Chałasiński’s *The Young Rural Generation in People’s Poland*, for example, elicited 5,500 memoirs, five hundred of which were published in ten separate volumes). Subjects for such competitions included “When the war ended” (1948); “My village yesterday and today” (1950); “Recollections of workers” (1951); “We are changing the life of the village” (1954); “Memoirs of teacher-veterans” (1955); and so on. Perhaps some 300,000 Poles took part in such competitions through the mid-1970s. According to one scholar, those especially were encouraged to participate who “had gained the most as a result of the postwar changes in the system.”⁹² Such narratives of social advancement helped make a new argument about social rights. As Irena Landau and Jerzy Wiatr put it when *Memoirs of the Unemployed* was reissued in 1968, since the book’s publication “changes ha[d] been accomplished of enormous importance and depth. . . . [These were] ultimately the result of conscious action of the people’s state,” not least “adoption of the principle that the citizen in the socialist country has a right to work.”⁹³

One year after these words were written, the Society of Friends of Memoir was founded in Warsaw, the brainchild of Chałasiński and another student of Znaniński’s, Jan Szczepański. Its archive grew by 1975 to hold some 40,000 individual memoirs, works that had been sent to hundreds of competitions over the years, including the very first one organized by Znaniński in 1922. There were plans to combine the archive with several other institutions concerned with memoir-writing to create an “Institute

of National Memory” (*Instytut Pamięci Narodowej*).⁹⁴ After 1989, however, funds for the proposed institute dried up. A part of the collection was accidentally thrown away when the organization’s offices were liquidated. When a building housing another part of the collection was sold to a private owner, the documents were stored out of doors, where they remained for five years until, moldy and damaged, they were rescued through the intervention of the independent KARTA Center and deposited with the official Archive of Modern Records. If my argument that social memoir constituted a conversation about social rights is correct, the violent neglect of such a significant collection during the neoliberal transition can be seen as a kind of back-handed compliment. Of some 900,000 manuscripts in the original collection, perhaps fewer than 20,000 survive.⁹⁵

This essay has attempted to show that the study of rights—human, social, or otherwise—must take account of a range of social actors and cultural practices, including shifting patterns of narrative and representation. In the modern era, in particular, global human rights regimes have existed in dialogue with media representations of the “common man.” Among these, autobiography is of special interest because of the close historical linkage between conceptions of rights, on the one hand, and understandings of the human subject, on the other. The voices that call distantly from *Memoirs of the Unemployed* or *Workers Write* suggest that articulating and consolidating social rights—a category that lies outside both traditional liberal understandings of the subject and any of its modern illiberal variants—depends upon new ways of constructing the self.

The practice of the social memoir as well as its key themes also remind us that rights possess an intersubjective dimension. As new international courts are established, as new categories of rights are added through discussion and debate, we may be left with the comforting illusion that a world of universal and realizable human rights lies on the horizon within our grasp, so long as we succeed in expanding upon the current consensus. On the one hand, the memoirs seem to have a more disquieting message. None of our rights is secure, they seem vehemently to whisper, so long as one single lawyer or judge presides over them who has never been haunted by the memory of hunger or scarred by toil. At other moments, however, they offer hope, namely, that the imaginative encounter between worker and judge made possible in the memoir’s pages will enable the two, finally, to share the same skin.

NOTES

1. Quoted in Feliks Gross, *The Polish Worker: A Study of A Social Stratum* (New York: Roy Publishers, 1945), 100.

2. Irena Landau and Zbigniew Landau, “Pamiętniki w świetle prasy,” in *Pamiętniki bezrobotnych: Edycja przygotowana staraniem Instytutu Gospodarstwa Społecznego i Państwowego Wydawnictwa Ekonomicznego*, ed. Adam Andrzejewski et al., new ed., 2 vols. (Warsaw: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Ekonomiczne, 1967), 2:29; Irena Landau and Jerzy Wiatr, “Pamiętniki bezrobotnych z perspektywy współczesności,” in *ibid.*, 2:30; review from *Inspektor Pracy* in *ibid.*, 2:249.

3. Ludwik Krzywicki, “Słowo wstępne,” in Andrzejewski, et al., eds., *Pamiętniki bezrobotnych*, 1:16.

4. Quoted in Gross, *Polish Worker*, 94–95.

5. "The Universal Declaration of Human Rights," <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/index.shtml> (accessed March 25, 2011); C. Wilfred Jenks, "The Five Economic and Social Rights," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 24 (January 1946): 40–46.
6. Ludwik Krzywicki, "Prawo do pracy," *Przedświt* 3 (1885).
7. Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010), 63–64.
8. See also Jennifer Amos, "Embracing and Contesting: The Soviet Union and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948–1958," in *Human Rights in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Stefan-Ludwig Hoffman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), and Mark B. Smith's contribution to this dossier.
9. Gross, *Polish Worker*, 71.
10. Important collections of social memoir from the 1930s included those edited by Ludwik Krzywicki at the Institute for Social Economy in Warsaw (*Memoirs of the Unemployed* [1933], *Memoirs of Peasants* [1935], and *Memoirs of Emigrants* [1939]); Józef Chałasiński at the Institute for Village Culture (*The Young Generation of Peasants* [1939]); and Max Weinreich at the YIVO Institute for Yiddish Research (a volume of memoirs by Jewish youth was planned but interrupted by the war). For a summary of interwar social memoir, see Gross, *Polish Worker*, 71–75. Also see Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Marcus Moseley, and Michael Stanislawski, "Introduction," in *Awakening Lives: Autobiographies of Jewish Youth in Poland before the Holocaust*, ed. Jeffrey Shandler (New Haven: YIVO and Yale University Press, 2002), xi–xxvi.
11. Janina Markiewicz-Lagneau, "L'autobiographie en Pologne ou de l'usage social d'une technique sociologique," *Revue française de sociologie* 17, no. 4 (1976): 594, 598, 607–8.
12. The phrase is originally Danton's. Feliks Gross, *Socjalizm humanistyczny* (New York: Związek Socjalistów Polskich w Stanach Zjednoczonych, 1946), 17.
13. Gross, *Polish Worker*, 73–75.
14. Ludwik Krzywicki, ed., *Pamiętniki chłopów* (Warsaw: Instytut Gospodarstwa Społecznego, 1935), I:xii, 2:vi.
15. According to its curator, Edward Steichen, the purpose of the exhibit was to capture "the likeness—the similarity" among humans of all "races," "creeds," and "nations." Eric J. Sandeen, *Picturing an Exhibition: The Family of Man and 1950s America* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995), 3.
16. Jorge Ribalta, "Introduction," in *The Worker Photography Movement (1926–1939): Essays and Documents*, ed. Ribalta (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, 2011), 15.
17. On the institutionalization of storytelling in humanitarian work with refugees, see G. Daniel Cohen, "The 'Human Rights Revolution' at Work: Displaced Persons in Postwar Europe," in Hoffmann, ed., *Human Rights*, 55.
18. Józef Chałasiński, "Uwagi wydawnicze do wydania z roku 1930," in Jakub Wojciechowski, *Życiorys własny robotnika* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 1971), 23.
19. Józef Chałasiński, "Pamiętnikarstwo jako świadectwo przeobrażeń narodu polskiego," in *Pamiętniki Polaków, 1918–1978: Antologia pamiętnikarstwa polskiego* (1982), 1:18–19.
20. See, among others, Zygmunt Dulczewski, *Florian Znaniński: Life and Work* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Nakom, 1992); Dulczewski, ed., *A Commemorative Book in Honor of Florian Znaniński on the Centenary of His Birth* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu im. A. Mickiewicza w Poznaniu, 1986); Janina Markiewicz-Lagneau, "Florian Znaniński, sociologue de

l'action sociale et de la méthode analytique," *Revue française de sociologie* 23, no. 2 (1982): 171–93; Jerzy Szacki, *Znanięcki* (Wiedza Powszechna, 1986).

21. Quoted in Jan Szczepański, "Dzieło W. I. Thomasa i F. Znanięckiego w rozwoju socjologii," in William I. Thomas and Florian Znanięcki, *Chłop polski w Europie i Ameryce* (Warsaw: Ludowa Spółdzielnia Wydawnicza, 1976), 33.

22. "The fact that a culture is made up of individuals different from one another," as one oral historian put it a few years ago, "is one of the important things that social sciences sometimes forget." Mary Jo Maynes, Jennifer L. Pierce, and Barbara Laslett, *Telling Stories: The Use of Personal Narratives in the Social Sciences and History* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2008), 16, 10–11.

23. Eli Zaretsky, "Introduction," in William I. Thomas and Florian Znanięcki, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America: A Classic Work in Immigration History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), vii–xvii.

24. Herbert Blumer, *Critiques of Research in the Social Sciences*, vol. 1, *An Appraisal of Thomas and Znanięcki's The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (New York: Social Science Research Council, 1946 [1939]), 5.

25. William I. Thomas and Florian Znanięcki, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (New York: Dover Publications, 1958), 2:1831–32, emphasis original. Thomas had apparently required his students to write their own autobiographies and, on occasion, sexual histories. Robert Bierstedt, "Introduction," in Florian Znanięcki, *On Humanistic Sociology: Selected Papers* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 12.

26. On the methodological innovations of *The Polish Peasant*, see Józef Chałasiński, "Polonia amerykańska," in Thomas and Znanięcki, *Chłop polski*, 24; and Szczepański, "Dzieło W. I. Thomasa i F. Znanięckiego," 31–34.

27. Thomas and Znanięcki, *Polish Peasant*, 2:1831–32; Paul Thompson, "The Humanistic Tradition and Life Histories in Poland," *Oral History* 7, no. 1 (1979): 21.

28. Markiewicz-Lagneau, "L'autobiographie," 593–94.

29. The Institute for Social Economy's *Memoirs of Peasants* and *Memoirs of the Unemployed* attracted roughly 500 and 800 responses, respectively. Thompson, "Humanistic Tradition," 21–22; Markiewicz-Lagneau, "L'autobiographie," 595.

30. Many of the prizes were books or holidays, reinforcing the message of competition participants' commitment to study and knowledge. Prizes for *The Young Generation of Peasants* included a boat tour through Denmark (first prize); a scholarship for study at the People's University (second prize); excursions to Warsaw, Gdynia, or Kraków (third prize); and (fourth prize) books chosen by the winner to the value of 20 zł. See Markiewicz-Lagneau, "L'autobiographie," 599 n. 23.

31. After 1944, the Institute of Sociology received many requests for the replacement of certificates lost or destroyed in the war. Markiewicz-Lagneau, "L'autobiographie," 599. Cf. Daniel Soyer, "Documenting Immigrant Lives at an Immigrant Institution: Yivo's Autobiography Contest of 1942," *Jewish Social Studies* 5, no. 3 (1999): 231–33.

32. Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński, "Raz kiedyś a obecnie," *Pisma* 18 (1959): 67–70; "Jakub Wojciechowski," <http://barcin.pl/portaal.php?aid=118854271546d7b8fbbe346> (accessed November 11, 2010).

33. Jerzy Sulimski, *Kraków w procesie przemian: Współczesne przeobrażenia zbiorowości wielkomiejskiej* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1976), 155.

34. Keely Stauter-Halsted, *The Nation in the Village: The Genesis of Peasant National Identity in Austrian Poland, 1848–1914* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2001), 3–10.
35. Maria Dąbrowska, introduction, in Krzywicki, ed., *Pamiętniki chłopów*, 2:xi.
36. Mary Jo Maynes, *Taking the Hard Road: Life Course in French and German Workers' Autobiographies in the Era of Industrialization* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 51.
37. Markiewicz-Lagneau, "L'autobiographie," 602–3.
38. Max Weinreich, "A Research Project on Jewish Youth," n.d., YIVO Archives, Max Weinreich Papers, vol. 64, 13; Kamil Kijek, "Max Weinreich, Assimilation and the Social Politics of Jewish Nation Building," *East European Jewish Affairs* 41, no. 1 (2011): 28 n. 14.
39. Soyer, "Immigrant Lives," 221; Kijek, "Max Weinreich," 1–2, 25–55.
40. Józefa Hrynkiewicz, *Kwestia społeczna w pracach Ludwika Krzywickiego* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2010), 47–58; Konstanty Krzeczkowski, "Zarys życia i pracy Ludwika Krzywickiego," in *Ludwik Krzywicki: Praca zbiorowa poświęcona jego życiu i twórczości*, ed. Instytut Gospodarstwa Społecznego (Warsaw, 1938), xcvi–cii; "Instytut Gospodarstwa Społecznego," <http://www.sgh.waw.pl/instytut/igs-kes> (accessed November 11, 2010).
41. Adam Andrzejewski, "Przedmowa," in *Pamiętniki emigrantów: Stany Zjednoczone: Tom pierwszy, nr 1–27*, ed. Instytut Gospodarstwa Społecznego (Warsaw: Książka i wiedza, 1977), 8.
42. The competition received 774 entries, which, according to the editors' calculations, represented 2.5 percent of all registered unemployed in the country. After subtracting the 102 responses the editors considered to be by white-collar workers, this left 609 male and 63 female authors. Metal and electrical workers, broadly defined, constituted the largest group of respondents (94), followed by construction (72) and textile (42) workers. Unskilled workers were in a minority, probably reflecting their lower levels of involvement in political and cultural organizations. "Nieco o pamiętnikach i pamiętnikarzach," in *Pamiętniki bezrobotnych* (Warsaw: Instytut Gospodarstwa Społecznego, 1933), xvii–xxvii.
43. A selection of reviews is reprinted in vol. 2 of the reissue of *Pamiętniki bezrobotnych*, cited above, together with an analysis by Irena Landau and Jerzy Wiatr, "Pamiętniki bezrobotnych z perspektywy współczesności," 2:17–45.
44. Krzywicki, "Słowo wstępne," in *Pamiętniki bezrobotnych* (1933), v.
45. "Pamiętniki bezrobotnych. Dokumenty epoki," *ABC*, December 21, 1932. Reproduced in "Pamiętniki w świetle prasy," in *Pamiętniki bezrobotnych* (1967), 2:285.
46. Krzywicki, "Słowo wstępne," v.
47. "Pamiętnik Nr. 1," in *Pamiętniki bezrobotnych* (1933), 1–10.
48. Krzywicki, "Słowo wstępne," xi.
49. Ironically, of course, this style was itself partly an artifact of the competition process. In competition announcements, authors were requested to make their accounts "detailed," "precise," and "sincere"; for even the most mundane features of everyday life, they were assured, were of interest to researchers. They were warned not to fictionalize or embellish. "Scientific research can only be based on the truth," the editors of *Workers Write* reminded prospective authors, warning that "a dishonest account is worthless both for you and for us." Soyer, "Immigrant Lives," 226–27; Zygmunt Mysłakowski and Feliks Gross, *Robotnicy piszą: Pamiętniki robotników—studium wstępne* (Kraków: Księgarnia Powszechna, 1938), 16.
50. Irena Landau and Jerzy Wiatr note the photographic analogy in "Pamiętniki bezrobotnych z perspektywy współczesności," 30; review from *Inspektor Pracy*, 249.

51. Quoted in Jan Szczepański, “Użytkowanie dokumentów osobistych w psychologii społecznej (szkic informacyjny),” *Przegląd Socjologiczny* 11 (1948): 67.
52. Mysłakowski and Gross, *Robotnicy piszą*, 25, 20. Scholars writing about the interwar social memoir in the postwar period similarly warned against “an uncritical use of [the memoirs] as evidence, treating them like a literal photograph” of reality. Landau and Wiatr, “Pamiętniki bezrobotnych z perspektywy współczesności,” 28.
53. Mysłakowski and Gross, *Robotnicy piszą*, 103.
54. Krzywicki, “Słowo wstępne,” xii.
55. Józef Chałasiński, “Uwagi wydawnicze do wydania z roku 1930,” in Jakub Wojciechowski, *Życiorys własny robotnika* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 1971), 23–25.
56. The pseudonyms chosen included “Destitution is the shame of contemporary culture”; “Voice of the forgotten”; “S.O.S.”; “Work!”; “Can one live honestly as a human in the twentieth century”; “A stork on the chimneys of Silesia”; “People with no tomorrow”; “One of many”; “Hope”; “White eagle”; “Patient”; “Sad”; “He, whose face is lashed by fate”; “Christian-Catholic”; and “Time of justice.” “Niec o pamiętnikach i pamiętnikarzach,” xii–xiii.
57. Krzywicki, “Słowo wstępne,” xii.
58. See, e.g., Krzywicki, “Słowo wstępne,” xii; Gross, *Polish Worker*, 73.
59. Maynes, Pierce, and Laslett, *Telling Stories*, 17–20; Joan Wallach Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), 34.
60. Dąbrowska, introduction, xiii.
61. Feliks Gross, “Nowe doświadczenia oświaty robotniczej,” *Światło* 3 (1937), <http://lewicowo.pl/varia/viewpub/tid/2/pid/223> (accessed February 15, 2011).
62. James Olney quoted in Maynes, Pierce, and Laslett, *Telling Stories*, 78.
63. Mysłakowski and Gross, *Robotnicy piszą*.
64. Maynes, Pierce, and Laslett, *Telling Stories*, 21.
65. Anonymous, “Pamiętnik robotnika z powiatu jasielskiego, który w całym życiu przez jedno półrocze uczęszczał do szkoły (rp. nr. 4),” in Mysłakowski and Gross, *Robotnicy piszą*, 31–33.
66. *Ibid.*, 33.
67. *Ibid.*, passim, 51.
68. *Ibid.*, 52.
69. *Ibid.*, 50–52.
70. Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer*, 6.
71. Anonymous, “Pamiętnik robotnika,” 33–34.
72. *Ibid.*, 40.
73. Zygmunt Wróbel, “Robociarskie dzieciństwo i młodość,” in Mysłakowski and Gross, *Robotnicy piszą*, 107–8.
74. *Ibid.*, 107–8, 112–13.
75. A second crisis occurred when he was fifteen: although Wróbel had left school to work full-time in an iron foundry, he had hoped to continue studying on his own, but after a twelve-hour shift he was overcome by fatigue. He also feared he would go blind. It was only when Wróbel found work as an electrician that he recovered the physical and psychic stamina to return to his program of self-study. *Ibid.*, 119–23.
76. *Memoirs of the Unemployed*, no. 8, quoted in Gross, *Polish Worker*, 91.
77. *Memoirs of the Unemployed*, no. 17, quoted in *ibid.*, 94. Cf. *ibid.*, 86.

78. Wróbel, "Robociarskie dzieciństwo," 108–9.
79. Archiwum Akt Nowych, *Wojna domowa w Hiszpanii—zbiór akt, 182/VII-3*, kk. 67–8.
80. Gordon W. Allport, *The Use of Personal Documents in Psychological Science*, bulletin 49 (New York: Social Sciences Research Council, 1942), xi.
81. Allport, *Personal Documents*; Herbert Blumer, *Critiques of Research in the Social Sciences*; Louis Gottschalk et al., *The Use of Personal Documents in History, Anthropology, and Sociology*, bulletin 53 (New York: Social Science Research Council, 1945).
82. On postwar American sociology, see Andrew Abbott and James T. Sparrow, "Hot War, Cold War: The Structures of Sociological Action, 1940–1955," in *Sociology in America: A History*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 281–313; and George Steinmetz, "American Sociology before and after World War II: The (Temporary) Settling of a Disciplinary Field," in *ibid.*, 314–66.
83. Gross, *Socjalizm humanistyczny*, 18–19.
84. Jocelyn Cohen and Daniel Soyer, eds., *My Future Is in America: Autobiographies of Eastern European Jewish Immigrants* (New York: New York University Press/YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, 2006); see also Soyer, "Immigrant Lives."
85. Sandeen, *Picturing an Exhibition*, 3. See also <http://www.family-of-man.public.lu/apercu-historique/index.html> (accessed March 25, 2011).
86. Feliks Gross indirectly recognized this when justifying the decision not to include Jewish authors in *Workers Write* because of the "specificities" of their situation. He subsequently began a research project in Kraków's Jewish district of Kazimierz, but it was interrupted by the war. Grażyna Kubica, "'Taki Krakauer prawdziwy': Feliks Gross i jego krakowskie korzenie" (unpublished manuscript), n.p.
87. Robert Moses Shapiro and Tadeusz Epsztein, eds., *The Warsaw Ghetto Oyneg Shabes-Ringelblum Archive: Catalog and Guide* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2009), 33.
88. Natalia Aleksiu, "The Central Jewish Historical Commission in Poland, 1944–1947," *Polin* 20 (2007): 74–97; Philip Friedman, "The European Jewish Research on the Recent Jewish Catastrophe in 1939–45," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 18 (1948–49): 179–211. An English-language translation of one of the first of these compilations is Maria Hochberg-Mariańska and Noe Grüss, eds., *The Children Accuse* (Portland, Or.: Valentine Mitchell, 1996).
89. Friedman, "European Jewish Research," 202.
90. On the collection of these documents, see Katherine R. Jolluck, *Exile and Identity: Polish Women in the Soviet Union during World War II* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2002), xiv–xviii. A selection of deportee testimonies appears in, among others, Irena Grudzińska-Gross and Jan Tomasz Gross, eds., *War through Children's Eyes* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1985) and Tadeusz Piotrowski, ed., *The Polish Deportees of World War II: Recollections of Removal to the Soviet Union and Dispersal throughout the World* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland and Co., 2004).
91. Thompson, "Humanistic Tradition," 23.
92. Krzysztof Kosiński, "Pamiętnikarstwo konkursowe jako źródło historyczne," *Polska 1944/45–1989* 6 (2003): 135; Thompson, "Humanistic Tradition," 23; Hanna Palska, "Polskie pamiętnikarstwo konkursowe: Ideologia w autobiografii, autobiografia w ideologii," *ASK* 1–2, 5–6 (1997): 14.
93. Landau and Wiatr, "Pamiętniki bezrobotnych z perspektywy współczesności," 31–32.
94. Those familiar with contemporary Poland will recognize the irony that the same name

was adopted by the historical research commission of the postcommunist Polish state charged with investigating and documenting “crimes against the Polish nation.” The IPN has been known in recent years for its aggressive nationalism and anticommunism.

95. Kosiński, “Pamiętnikarstwo konkursowe,” 134–35; Dariusz Wierchoś, “Zwyczajne życie zwykłych ludzi: Losy archiwum Towarzystwa Przyjaciół Pamiętnikarstwa,” *Histmag.org*, October 4, 2008, <http://histmag.org/?id=1750> (accessed November 11, 2010).