

# Between Individual Memory and Social Memory. What Do People in Poland Remember About 1989?

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## Abstract

30 years have passed since the events of 1989 that led to the collapse of communism in Central and Eastern Europe. In the paper the themes of social memory of political transformation in Poland in 1989 are discussed. The content of online statements collected from popular Polish news portals are analysed. When asking the question what events and experiences do Poles bring back when they think of 1989, I am interested in the relationship between the individual (biographical) memory and collective memory – the socially reconstructed knowledge of the past.

**Keywords:** biographical experience, social memory, transformation, collapse of communism

## Introduction

The purpose of the paper is to present the themes of memory which, on the one hand, are based on individual, everyday experiences of people and, on the other hand, are placed in the socially negotiated frames of collective memory. My research investigates memories of Poles or, more precisely, internet statements posted on the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the political transformation in 1989.

2019 marks the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the events of 1989. The Round Table Talks and the first partly democratic parliamentary elections in Poland, followed by the "Autumn of Nations", with the triumphant demolition of the Berlin Wall and the "Velvet Revolution" in Czechoslovakia, were the events that led to the fall of communism in Central and Eastern Europe in 1989. Memory of those events is the subject of my research.

In looking at what events and experiences are evoked when Poles recall 1989, I am interested in the relationship between the individual (autobiographical) memory and the socially reconstructed knowledge of the past. An analysis of the content of online statements collected from popular Polish news portals will shed light on the patterns

of thinking about the past and ways of assessing historical figures and events. It will also reveal discourse styles used by Poles when recalling the events of 1989.

The theoretical framework for this study is the phenomenological perspective involving the concept of *Lebenswelt* – world-as-experienced (Schütz, 1945, 1953). From this perspective, the past is treated as an element of the everyday world. "It is about the world as encountered in everyday life and given in direct and immediate experience, especially perceptual experience and its derivatives like memory, expectation, and the like, independently of and prior to scientific interpretation" (Gurwitsch, 1970, p. 35). I also refer to Maurice Halbwachs' concept of social memory. Accordingly, I perceive Poles as subjects influenced by diverse interactions with family, politics, historical memory, education and mass media. The effects of these interactions remain in collective knowledge, creating specific social memory frames.

### **Year 1989 today**

On the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first partly free parliamentary elections in Poland, which took place on 4<sup>th</sup> June 1989, calls appeared on the Polish portals Interia.pl and Polskatimes.pl, appealing to readers to post their remembrance statements. What do Poles remember? What events and experiences are evoked when recalling 1989? What has changed since 4<sup>th</sup> June 1989? What did reality look like then, and what does it look like today? Internet users answered these questions by presenting their own stories, reflections and memories associated with the political transformation, the turning point of which was 1989. These questions give rise to other, more generic ones, such as: What is the general social memory of Poles? How is memory differentiated internally? Which population group are the memory bearers from, i.e. who remembers? And finally: What is the content of the collective memory – what and how is it remembered? I am aware that I will not be able to answer the above questions in this paper. This is because such questions are of fundamental nature and require in-depth studies and extensive research (Szacka, 2007; Korzeniewski, 2007). They go beyond the year 1989 (the time interval chosen for this article) as well as the purpose and subject of my research. My main goal is to present the themes of social memory related directly to 1989. In my view, this goal in itself presents a serious challenge. The difficulties with research on memory after 1989 have already been discussed by, among others, Piotr T. Kwiatkowski in the book titled *Pamięć zbiorowa społeczeństwa polskiego w okresie transformacji* [Collective Memory of the Polish Society in the Transformation Period] and Bartosz Korzeniewski, the author of the book titled *Transformacja pamięci: przewartościowania w pamięci przeszłości a wybrane aspekty funkcjonowania dyskursu publicznego o przeszłości w Polsce po 1989 roku* [Transformation of Memory: Re-evaluations in the Memory of the Past and Selected Aspects of the Functioning of Public Discourse about the Past in Poland after 1989].

The attempt to analyse the themes of memory related to 1989 presented in this paper is of a selective nature. From the collection of remembrance statements available online, I have chosen those which were published on the portals Interia.pl and Polskatimes.pl and preceded by a call to readers. I am aware that the published comments had been selected by the editors; however, I have no knowledge of the selection criteria or the number of statements collected. What interests me is the nature of the presented statements – themes of memory that, on the one hand, are based on autobiographical memory and individual, everyday experiences of people and, on the other, refer to collective memory and thus to the ideas and beliefs about the past held by particular social groups. Therefore, I do not aim to present generalizing conclusions about the social memory of Poles.

The year 1989, especially the Round Table Talks and June 4, the day of the first partly democratic parliamentary elections in Poland, are events which still arouse lively discussions among Poles and constitute the reason for the so-called Polish-Polish war. Part of the society considers the events of 1989 as a herald of a real libertarian breakthrough, while others consider them as a manifestation of the betrayal by the opposition of that time, too mild for the communists with whom they later created the Third Republic of Poland (Nałęcz, 2019; Dudek, 2011).

However, it is worth emphasizing that in 2019, the Poles' evaluations of the social consequences of the transformation are better than ever before. Public opinion polls from 2019, conducted before the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the June 4 elections, show that 81% of the respondents believe that it was worth changing the system in 1989. Among adult Poles, 3% believe that it was not worth undertaking the political transformation, and 15% of the respondents are unable to assess whether it was worth doing (CBOS, 2019). As regards the socio-demographic variables, the attitude of Poles towards the transformation is mostly differentiated by age. In this case, two significantly different groups can be distinguished, with the demarcating line running between those born before 1981 (people aged 38+) and younger (aged 18-37). The respondents aged 38 or above not only have more sophisticated opinions on the question of whether it was worth or not worth changing the system in Poland in 1989, but also more often than younger people strongly support the changes (59% against 35%).

### **1989 – then. An outline of events leading to a breakthrough and political transformation**

The beginning of the system transformation in 1989 in Poland was marked by the Round Table Talks and parliamentary elections. The Round Table Talks were preceded by unofficial meetings of the then communist authorities with the opposition, including Lech Wałęsa (a leading oppositionist and co-founder of Solidarity movement) and other representatives of this movement (Solidarity as the Independent Self-Governing Trade Union was legalized as part of the Round Table

arrangements). The talks between the authorities and the opposition were caused by the economic crisis and social dissatisfaction which had been growing for years (lack of food, price increase, inflation). It was manifested in successive waves of social strikes. In September 1988, the first talks took place between opposition leaders and the rulers. As a result, the Round Table Talks were initiated. The negotiations between the parties began on 6<sup>th</sup> February 1989 and lasted two months. On 5<sup>th</sup> April, final agreements were signed, including on organizing partly free parliamentary elections, where the opposition was to receive no more than 35 percent seats (161 seats) in the Sejm – lower house of Polish parliament. The remaining 65 percent (299 places) was guaranteed for the communists from the Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR), i.e. the representatives of the then dictatorship. On 4<sup>th</sup> June 1989, the first round of parliamentary elections (to Sejm and Senate) was held, in which the opposition took part. The election ended with the victory of Solidarity. The communist authorities failed.

### **Main categories: *Lebenswelt* and memory**

According to Alfred Schütz, life-world is an intersubjective reality given to a conscious human being by virtue of natural predisposition as an arena of meaning and a space for experience and interpretation. It is a world that, on the one hand, takes its origin and exists because of the 'I', but at the same time, from the very outset, it is intersubjective and already interpreted. A human being is not born in a symbolic vacuum or in the chaos of meaning. Our knowledge about life and the world is preceded by knowledge acquired socially, i.e. related to our being in a community, it is "a stock of previous experiences of it, our own experiences and those handed down to us by parents or teachers" (Schütz, 1945, p. 533). Hence, the experienced world is not completely private. Although each of us organizes our own life for our own sake (around our own 'I'), we coexist with other people and share our everyday world with both our contemporaries and ancestors who left behind heritage in the form of meanings.

The transfer of meanings is made, among others, in the process of inter-generational and intra-family transmission. Family stories or memories of individual family members are a basic element of family memory, transmitted through stories or through visual materials. The role of social memory, especially in the context of the family, was observed by Maurice Halbwachs, for whom the past exists in the minds of individuals but is possible thanks to their belonging to a given group or community (1992, p. 81). Halbwachs is the author of the first important reflection on it: *Les cadres sociaux de la memoire* (1925). According to Halbwachs, memory is not individual in nature; rather, individual memory is shaped by collective memory. To recall a memory, an individual must place it in a wider community context, i.e. a set of memories shared by given social groups such as families, religious groups and social

classes (Halbwachs, 1992, p. 52). The so-called social memory frames are everything that builds a group, namely institutions, beliefs and values.

Memory, although defined in various ways in social sciences, is one of the most important concepts. It is associated with identity, biography and narrative. Polish sociologist Marian Golka argues that memory is a specific type of conversation with the past: "Every community must have this conversation in order to continue. Social memory is all from the past that continues in the present, and all in the present that is made with ideas from the past" (2009, p. 7). In his opinion, social memory is socially created and transformed knowledge which refers to the past of a given community. "[...] This knowledge encompasses various contents, performs various functions, continues thanks to various cultural media and reaches the consciousness of individuals by means of various sources. Its relative unification is due to the mechanisms of social life" (Golka, 2009, p. 15). Social memory lies in the fact that subsequent generations (children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren) have a sense of continuity with their predecessors. It is a continuation of identities and fates as well as responsibility for the past and future. As Golka points out, social memory creates social order, and its durability depends on this order: "Order changes, memory also changes" (2009, p. 8). Similarly, Bartosz Korzeniewski writes that memory is subject to re-evaluation resulting from multifaceted changes, both political and cultural. In his opinion: "The democratic system and changes in contemporary culture that emerged after the transformation had a decisive impact on Polish memory after 1989" (2007, p. 57). In line with Golka and Korzeniewski, I understand social memory as a cultural phenomenon: "memory is one of the elements of historical culture that is part of the cultural universe of a given community" (Korzeniewski, 2007, p. 56).

### **Internet users' memories of 1989**

The main question to ask when analysing the statements of internet users is: which elements of the past (events, experiences, characters, etc.) from the period of political transformation in 1989 are recalled in memories? This question allows tapping into how the past (or, more precisely, year 1989) is reconstructed in the reflection of individual people on the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the political transformation. I use the quoted statements as exemplification material, i.e. examples presenting themes of social memory.

I will start my discussion of the content of internet users' memories by observing that the statements contain both biographical themes and references to historical events. Internet users remember what was happening in their lives at that time in history and talk about the changes in their lives which they noticed, and which were caused by the transformation of the system. These memories go beyond individual memory.

*It was euphoria. I was a fourth-year student at the University of Technology. When I went back home to the countryside, my neighbours were asking me to tell them about what was happening in the city. I was canvassing for the members of Solidarity and I*

*think it had an effect. And at the beginning of July we went camping in Masuria. I remember that we had a small transistor radio and were listening to the proceedings of the Sejm!!! I am proud that I had my small contribution to it all. (Darek, Polskatimes.pl)*

The above statement contains several significant themes. It includes stories about one's own life (studying, going home and going to university) and involvement in social activities (canvassing), as well as evaluation of one's own contribution to those events (sense of pride). The author also mentions the role of the radio in the process of message transmission. The media at that time, after years of censorship, ceased to be equated with communist propaganda. They heralded information pluralism and freedom of speech. Listening to the radio and watching TV was a manifestation of interest in the rapidly changing reality and its unpredictability.

*I was born in 1983 and, from my childhood, I remember Teleranek [children's TV series] and the fact that my mother and I often queued up at the store. [...] In 1989, I remember my parents watching something on TV as if it were an important political event. Then came the year 1991 and I went to first grade. In lessons, we often made paper flags and learned patriotic poems. (Gosia, Polskatimes.pl)*

In this statement, the turn of 1989 is compared with the time before and after. 1989 appears as a turning point, separating the two epochs. It separated communist times from new times, i.e. what was about to come. However, unlike the fall of the Berlin Wall, there was not one specific and spectacular event in Poland that would be a point of change. 1989 was a series of long-lasting changes that led to the emergence of a new political system.

1989 absorbs people and evokes strong and varied emotions – from uncertainty and fear to joy. A sense of euphoria and "celebration atmosphere" are the motifs recurring in the statements:

*These were my first elections, I was a student at the time. I remember the amazing atmosphere of celebration and joy, that even though the communists had reserved 65 percent of the seats, these elections would finally allow us to change something. I remember a long queue to the polling station, people were laughing and joking. There was also a reflection that we Poles are the first to dismantle the communist system. And we succeeded. Then came the difficult years of transformation, very painful for many, but it paid off in balance. It was a historic event that changed Poland and later gave us full freedom. (Wojciech Rogacin, Polskatimes.pl)*

The author of this statement juxtaposes several themes: his own biographical experience with historical events (facts) and a reflection on the topic of 1989. This reflection is two-dimensional. The first one is a reconstruction of the reflection from that particular moment placed in the reality of 1989. The second level concerns a *post factum* reflection, an evaluation carried out in retrospect, 30 years after the fall of communism. The theme of being aware of a breakthrough taking place is discernible



in the statement. In general, the awareness of participating in something important is a distinctive motif in the statements of internet users:

*I was 15 years old then and, although I couldn't vote, I remember that at school we were very aware of what was going on. Interestingly, even as kids, we were arguing about what this change should look like.* (Marcin, Polskatimes.pl)

Internet users mention their age when talking about the political transformation in 1989. Referring to age allows people to place their memories on the axis of one's own biography and give it a personal, individual overtone:

*I was 35 years old. It was the first vote in my life, but not the last one.* (Anna, Interia.pl)

Adults recall the parliamentary elections (4<sup>th</sup> June) in their memories of 1989, stressing the importance of participating in them:

*In June 1989 I graduated from the AGH University of Science and Technology. I knew that these elections would be important and different from the previous ones.* (Małgorzata, Interia.pl)

Younger people, namely those who did not participate in the elections, refer to family memories that go beyond the life of an individual:

*And then came '89 and suddenly everything changed. I remember great joy. But I also remember massive unemployment and my dad without a job, I remember inflation, this terrible word that I didn't understand at the time. I remember poverty, having to scheme about, saving money and great sacrifices of my parents so that I could finish school.* (Oli, Polskatimes.pl)

The question of age is important for the manifestations of social memory – different age groups have different knowledge about 1989 and refer to different elements of memory in their statements: biographical memory and individual experiences and/or historical memory acquired in the process of cultural transmission (e.g. school, family, media). Historical events form a reference point for an individual biography. Also, historical events often become part of family memory – they are part of the family's everyday world – family members are their participants/observers and reflect on them from the perspective of the family. In the statement below the author mentions the day of parliamentary elections, in which the whole family participated:

*Of course, the whole family voted, even my disabled mother. [...] I was in the second month of pregnancy, so now I say to my daughter: "You also voted for Freedom, Dignity and Solidarity."* (Aleksandra, Interia.pl)

Alongside joy, there is also a sense of disappointment. Most notably, the consequences of the transformation, i.e. what happened after 1989, are described as disappointing:

*I thought that Solidarity Festival would last FOREVER, how wrong I was. I miss human cordiality, solidarity and trust the most.* (Ewa, grandma Ewa)

The theme of interpersonal solidarity or, more broadly, a sense of belonging to a community, appears in the following statements:

*I remember an extraordinary joy and a sense of community with people in and around the polling station. People were smiling to each other as if we were one wonderful family. I was at the Market Square in Krakow near Piwnica pod Baranami, when the election results were announced and then there was an explosion of joy and happiness (Aleksandra, Interia.pl)*

The author of this statement draws attention to the sense of community – a reality experienced jointly – as a result of the events of 1989. A shared, experienced history becomes an element of the social identity of Poles who took part in the elections on 4<sup>th</sup> June 1989. In the following statement, the author speaks not so much (not only) on her own behalf, but on behalf of a particular community. This is because she uses the pronoun "we":

*There was lots of joy and a great hope for change, a lot of positive feeling that maybe this country would finally be normal. It is a pity that afterwards this unity got lost, the divisions among the people who were together are deepening to this day. But maybe it was worth fighting for so that we could argue with each other on our own, and not Soviet terms (Bronisława, Polskatimes.pl)*

This statement is not so much a specific memory of 1989, but a rather critical assessment of the events that took place during the political transformation. There is a fairly marked political stance that can be described as anti-Soviet. The names of the main political actors of 1989, activists and people associated with Solidarity and the Round Table, are also cited:

*What has changed since 4th June 1989? Mediocre people, who at the time were not even second-rank players, are posing as the main heroes. That is what has changed! And for me the heroes will always be Wałęsa, Geremek, Michnik, Kuroń and, of course, the great late Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki. (Darek, Polskatimes.pl)*

The statements include not only a criticism of the communist system, but also a criticism of the main actors participating in talks in Magdalenka, i.e. the meeting of the communist authorities with the representatives of Solidarity movement:

*Freedom would have been secured if Solidarity had really held the communists accountable, instead of making a deal with them in Magdalenka and allowing Poland to remain in that arrangement until now. It's a pity that so many years for the reconstruction of the country have been lost. (Jerzy Radom, Polskatimes.pl)*

However, the "lost opportunities" do not diminish the importance of the transformation, although the theme of political accountability appears in the statements:



*It was a great celebration. I think it's good that it was possible to change the system and regain freedom without bloodshed. But it also may have given the communists time to smooth themselves out, get organised, hide and do their business. (Leszek, Polskatimes.pl)*

### **Conclusions and reflections**

First, let me present a general reflection on the internet users' statements. The presented statements indicate that memory cannot be understood as an archive in which a complete version of the past is stored, but rather as an active and dynamic force which is engaged in the process of reconstructing the past from the perspective of the present. It is the present that creates the history, while remaining in relation to the current circumstances (Szacka, 2006). The role of the present in the above statements is revealed by the adoption of an evaluating stance or attempts to reflect on what happened in 1989. In their statements, the authors do not limit themselves to providing historical facts but present a certain vision of events. This vision is rooted in specific frames of memory.

Among the online recollections of 1989, there are memory themes which indicate affiliation with specific social groups, and therefore point to collective memory frames. Nationality seems to be of particular importance. Knowledge about 1989 as a turning point in Polish history is something that Poles have in common. Due to their nationality, Poles acquire specific knowledge about the transformation and localize their own memories within that knowledge. In this way, their belonging to the national community is consolidated. Maurice Halbwachs claims that people as group members learn to remember not so much through direct experience as through constant repetition by the community to which they belong (e.g. through anniversary celebrations). However, what seems particularly important is Halbwachs's claim that people as group members do not articulate their entire memory but select from the past particular elements which helps them to designate their place within the group. An individual remembers what is important in the context of their functioning within the group as well as their own identity (Halbwachs, 1992, p. 40). Memory is connected with identity – "Recalling the past, we make certain 'additions' to it, which are related to the experience and knowledge acquired over time, current events and views" (Kępiński, 2016, p. 18). This, in turn, means that people, as members of groups, are being sensitized to some contents and desensitized to others. Consequently, it can be concluded that the knowledge about 1989 as a landmark moment in Polish history is also something that differentiates Poles.

Therefore, the second reflection on the internet users' statements concerns memory pluralism: there is not one memory, but there are many different memories (Olick, 1999, p. 339). Accordingly, various groups reconstruct various themes of memory, making moral evaluations of specific events and particular persons. The differentiating factors in this case include age and attitude towards communism. For

the generations born after 1989, the events from the period of the transformation make up history which is focused mainly around the institutional and media transmission of memory. As for the people born before 1989, the systemic changes are directly inherent in their own biographies. For the authors of the statements expressing a strongly negative attitude towards the communist authorities in Poland, 1989 was not a fully democratic breakthrough. Rather, it was the result of political decisions, the outcome of the Round Table Talks. As a result the communist authorities ensured not only their participation in the democratic political structures of the Third Republic of Poland, but also immunity after the fall of the Iron Curtain (the first president of the Third Republic in 1989–1990 was Wojciech Jaruzelski, the Chairman of the Council of State in 1985-1989 and the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party responsible for the imposition of martial law in Poland in 1981 and the bloody suppression of workers' strikes in 1970).

The third reflection on the internet users' statements concerns the style of discourse and thus the way of organizing the statement. In what style do internet users express their memories of 1989? The style of the statements is undoubtedly colloquial and, in this respect, they are not different from other online statements. This is because colloquial style is the dominant style of expression on the internet. The statements posted on Interia.pl and Polskatimes.pl are public, which may prove significant when comparing them with the comments left by other internet users. On Interia.pl, people who read the remembrance statements have the opportunity to comment on them. Although the style is colloquial in the case of both statements and comments, the comments display a high degree of vulgarity and linguistic aggression, which are absent from the statements. This can be explained by the fact that the statements about 1989 are a public element of the authors' self-presentation – their authors were recalling events from their own biographies. Therefore, these statements were not completely anonymous, although it is impossible to fully identify their authors.

The presented memories were constructed from the available resources of their authors' memory – autobiographical, family, generational or even institutional. The present knowledge of the authors allowed them to interpret the events of 1989 not only from the autobiographical perspective, but also by virtue of referring to the memory formed in the process of communication and interaction within social groups. These statements are characterized by the awareness of a common national history and, at the same time, by memory pluralism. There is a theme of nostalgia in them that consists in attributing a certain ideal to the past (e.g. interpersonal solidarity). All this unambiguously supports the thesis of Jan Assmann: "(...) an individual growing up in complete solitude would not have memory. [...] Individual memories arise and continue in the process of communication and interaction within social groups (2008, p. 51-52).

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