Biographical Method in Polish Sociology

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Zur biographischen Methode in der polnischen Soziologie

Inhalt: Die Forschungsmethode via persönlicher Dokumente: die Verwendung subjektiv-authentischer Lebensaufzeichnungen zu Zwecken der Analyse sozialer Prozesse und der Persönlichkeitsentwicklung, hat im Rahmen einer humanistischen Soziologie einen anerkannten Platz gefunden. Sie ist weitgehend in Polen begründet worden. Die positiven Erfahrungen, die mit dieser Methode gemacht, und die guten Ergebnisse, die mit ihr in der polnischen Soziologie erzielt werden konnten, werden in diesem Beitrag um so berechtigter vorgestellt, als die biographische Methode in Polen nunmehr auf eine fünfzigjährige Tradition zurückblicken kann. Der Autor gibt ein zunächst allgemeines, die Hauptannahmen dieser Methode betreffendes Bild. Die Vorkriegsperiode steht hier insofern im Vordergrund, als sie ihre Ursprünge und zugleich größten Erfolg markiert. Daran anschließend werden die Versuche behandelt, die Methode auch im Sinne der neueren Forschungsentwicklung einzusetzen; wie sich zeigt, haben sich willkommene und fruchtbare Korrespondenzen ergeben. Die Gesichtspunkte und Überlegungen, die in der Arbeit zur Sprache kommen, nehmen dabei hauptsächlich auf polnische Soziologen – wie JOZEF CHALASINSKI, JAN SZCZEPANSKI und andere – Bezug, die an der Methode biographischer Dokumentation besonderes Interesse zeigen. Der Autor dieses Beitrages stützt sich so in hohem Maße auf Publikationen (zustimmender oder kritischer Art), wie sie in der neueren polnischen Soziologie vorliegen. Viele Überlegungen gehen natürlich auf ihn selbst zurück, so dass er nach zweijähriger Arbeit an diesem Problem bestimmte, wenn auch wenige Mängel fest: eine Reihe gescheiterter, aber schließlich auch erfolgreicher Versuche, zum Problem biographischen Materials als einer Quelle soziologischer Forschung eine neue Plattform zu gewinnen.

Abstract: The method of personal documents, which is the utilization of authentic subjective people's relations for the analysis of social processes and personality development, has been one of the methods of humanistic sociology. This method has been widely developed in Polish sociology. Author presents here the positive experience and successful results of this method in Polish sociology, the more so that it has a half-century tradition in Poland by now. He provides a rather general picture, presenting the main assumptions of the method of biographical documents. He refers to the prewar period, since there were the sources and greatest achievements of this method. He presents the attempts of applying the method along the new lines which met with the most favourable welcome. Viewpoints and ideas presented here are, for the most part, those of Polish sociologists who are particularly interested in the method of biographical documents, e.g. JOZEF CHALASINSKI, JAN SZCZEPANSKI and others. Author makes use, to a large degree, of all positive and critical utterances recently published in Polish sociological literature. Of course, many opinions, contained in this article are only his own viewpoints. He has noticed having worked on this problem for a couple of years, quite a few shortcomings, a number of successful or failed attempts of taking a new stand to the problem of biographical materials as a source for sociology.

Introduction

The method of personal documents in social sciences is over half a century old by now; it is still, however, at its initial stage. The work of THOMAS and ZNANIECKI entitled „The Polish Peasant in Europe and America“ had won a great renown for the reason, among other things, that personal documents such as letters and autobiographies were utilized in it for the first time on such a big scale. This method brought up a debate, particularly on the ground of American sociology, where it was thoroughly discussed, and thus concluded in a way in HERBERT BLUMER'S work (1939). Since then it is no more in the centre of attention of sociologists who adopted a viewpoint and research methods of a more scientific and empiric nature.

The method of personal documents, which is the utilization of authentic subjective people's relations for the analysis of social processes and personality development, has been widely developed in prewar Polish sociology. In prewar years this humanistic-documentary approach to the problems of social realities dominated in Polish sociology and the achievements of that period undoubtedly influenced establishing the term „Polish method – or school – in sociology“. It should be mentioned that in the thirties this method scored a success and achieved its top development point, in respect to methodology.

There appeared then great works of memoir sociology such as „Young Peasant Generation“, „Peasants' Diaries“, „Diaries of the Unemployed“, „Emigrants' Diaries“, and various ways
of approach to this research material aroused heated methodological discussions. In the first postwar years the interest for memoir and biographical materials became considerably limited, which was a consequence of an excessive isolation from subjectivism in social sciences in the years 1948–1952. The interest in autobiographies and diaries was restored in sociology after 1956 and it increased particularly since 1961 when there was announced a big contest for diaries of the young peasant generation in People’s Poland. The effect of the latter was a 10-volume book publication. The sociological analyses of 5,500 diaries which were sent for the contest clearly refer to the prewar traditions. The growing interest in biographical material, which resulted in many competitions for diaries, books published, more or less successful scientific studies, and which was expressed by the institutionalized form of memoir studies – the Centre of Polish Memoir Study, the Association of Memoir Study Friends and the editorial office of „Polish Memoir Study”, did not, however, go hand in hand with the improvement and development of the scientific workshop of sociologists using biographical materials.

One could say that we still stick to the prewar ZNANIECKI’S and his disciples’ traditions. There do appear from time to time attempts of an innovative approach to autobiography but they melt away in tradition. In fact, there occurred a doubtless decline of trust in autobiography as a sociological material. The method has ever less followers and those who still appraise its advantages are not eager, as a rule, to introduce essential changes in once formulated principles of methodology of cognizance of social realities through biographical materials. The attempts to establish cooperation of humanist-sociologists with empirist-sociologists who are using statistical methods did not bring results either.

It is to our credit, undoubtedly, that Polish sociology has greatly contributed to world sociology, though it is not always widely known due to language barrier, in the question of using autobiographical materials for the needs of social analyses. But it is also true that this contribution is not as extensive as it could be, considering the source material in form of the available effects of some hundred competitions. This waste of an opportunity, the disproportion between the source base and the form of its utilization and methodology is the reason why it is a method which does not count on a large scale now in Polish sociology. We may say that it is no more a „school” in sociology but a group of enthusiasts – sociologists, psychologists, historians – who want to get out of the deadlock.

It seems that the present situation of the biographical method in Poland could be determined as that of an „anti-Cinderella”: out of a beautiful princess she again became a poor girl persistently trying to pick out poppyseeds of the ashes.

**Memoir Competitions**

The most general division of memoir-autobiographical material is that into diaries, memoirs and autobiographies written spontaneously, without the research worker’s interference, and those which were elaborated on his initiative, realized most frequently in form of a general competition. It is obvious that the latter ones, which are not a singular fact but a mass response, evoked at a determined time in a social environment determined by the competition appeal and in reply to concrete aims of the research worker, are an important source of knowledge of social realities. Therefore the prior problem faced by the research worker who wants to fully utilize the biographical material is skillful tapping of this source of information.

The traditions of inspired contest memoir writing in Poland date back to the early twentieth century when primarily centres of intelligentsia became involved in several competitions. In Polish sociology the year 1921 is considered as the beginning of the history of competition memoir writing, for it was then that FLORIAN ZNANIECKI, as Director of the Institute of Sociology in Poznan, addressed Polish workers in the country and abroad calling on them to write their biographies.

Since that time the bibliography of memoir competitions has registered several hundred competitions appealing to different social and vocational groups, which allowed a more or less comprehensive look at the social realities from the angle of subjective relations of memoir and bio-
graphy authors. Considering all competitions held so far and the social response, the number of participants and the quality of their relations, we may venture a thesis that spontaneity of memoir writing and a willing response to contest appeals can be counted on mostly at particular history-making periods by knowingly reaching the essential and "blocked" resources of this creative activity. Thus, the suppliers of biographies and memoirs are mainly either discriminated social groups (as it was in the period between the wars) or rapidly promoted groups in social respect (as is shown by postwar history in Poland). The contemporary explosion (this is the term often used in our country for the tremendous number of competitions and participants) of Polish memoir writing is a specific reaction to an long period in Poland, in which the people's masses - peasants and workers - did not share the full life of the community, and which were called to appear on the public forum by the cultural and social revolution. ROMEIN (1948) states that the rise of biography proves the decline of established authorities. This is what he says, I quote: "Always when man begins to doubt, when old qualities are shattered and new ones need to be established, the activation in the field of biography is particularly strong". The socialist revolution while shaking ideologies of social inequality rooted for centuries, and abolishing the barriers separating classes, strata and professions, at the same time increased the pressure of social psychology, which was called by one of Polish sociologists a social disposition of man or a longing for social contact. Thus the main motive of mass participation in memoir competitions in the postwar period is, on the side of their participants, a drive to autonomization of their own personality, a wish for sharing the democratized national culture and it is a confirmation of social and cultural promotion of the worker and peasant classes.

As proved by the biographic and memoir competitions organized so far, in order to obtain a good document by way of competition it is needed to prepare a good, clearly precised competition inquiry, well fitted to the concrete recipient. In the article "Die biographische Methode" (1962) JAN SZCZEPANSKI emphasized the significance of a good construction of the competition appeal. This question was further developed by J. SZCZEPANSKI in one of his recent articles (1970). Let me present it here in its essential points. The following moments have to be taken into consideration while drafting a competition appeal:

1. Think over carefully what community, class, category or group is being addressed in the appeal and realize the social features of this community. Always direct the appeal to communities of a similar intellectual, social and economic level. Avoid, for example, addressing intelligentsia and workers at the same time, as this is discouraging for the authors-to-be and makes them assume they have no chances in this competition.

2. Clearly present in the appeal the objectives of the competition, so that there remain no things untold and no chances of guessing other concealed purposes.

3. Provide the appeal with a survey and order of problems which should be contained in the relation.

4. However, do not impose any pattern or scheme of the relation and do not suggest a limitation of the relation to the problems mentioned only. A possibility should be given for speaking up on all matters.

5. The wording of the appeal should not contain expressions incomprehensible or unknown to the recipient, or long and confusing sentences either.

6. We should thoroughly consider to which motives we wish to appeal to make people write. It is advisable to take into account the types of autobiographies which had been written so far. Sociologists single out four basic kinds of autobiography namely, autobiography-chronicle, autobiography-self-defense, autobiography-testimony, autobiography-self-analysis.

We may appeal to the will of earning money by establishing awards for the best relations, to the will of writing which lurks in many minds, to the will of contributing to collection of scientific materials, of serving some social or national cause, and the like. Anyway, one particular motive should not be emphasized so strongly as to distort the written autobiographies.

7. Quote the sums of the awards, the composi-
tion of the jury which will evaluate the works, the fixed date for sending the works, the address of the institutions announcing the competition, the way in which more detailed information and assistance during the writing can be obtained.

The form of a competition has, undoubtedly, big advantages. It has proved useful for scientific research work, and its great quality is that in this way material is obtained which allows, as far as possible, to reveal the authors' viewpoints. These materials, however, are most varied and uneven as for the informative quality of each relation. One of the Polish sociologists, Jan Lutyński (1972) compared the situation of a research worker facing abundant competition material to someone undertaking the task of utilizing a big mass of extracted ore which, undoubtedly, contains valuable ingredients. The mentioned sociologist suggested a modified conception of competition organizing. According to this suggestion, the organized competition should be preceded by a preliminary stage and thus made a two-stage enterprise. The idea would be to address an appeal to those willing to apply for participation in the competition on a determined subject, without submitting precise indications usually contained in a competition announcement. The appeal should contain a request for submitting some data characterizing the candidate and probing questions on how he imagines developing the subject and what, precisely, he would wish to write on. If there were too few applications, the appeals could be repeated by using different ways of reaching respective environments. In case of a too small number of applications the competition would not be organized. On the other hand, a bigger number of applications would allow a selection of candidates-participants of the competition, representing the desired environment or social types, as well as of people adequately qualified to formulate their thoughts in writing. What could facilitate such orientation would be a short report on, say one event connected with the chosen subject of one day of his life, requested from the competition candidate. Simultaneously, the suggestions submitted by the candidates how to deal with the subject would facilitate to the research workers an earlier precising of problems of their own investigations and a preparation of a respective instruction for participants along the line of interests of the future diarists. A competition prepared in this way, as a closed competition, would be held then in a smaller or bigger group of persons selected by the research worker.

The basic intention of the suggestion presented in short is to increase the research worker's interference, particularly as for choice of the competition participants, and consequently, to limit the number of materials to those fit for utilizing. As it is known, only a part of the materials received can be published. Also, as a rule, the research worker forms his viewpoint on the given phenomenon or process only on the basis of a part of materials, which viewpoint together with the documentation he presents later to the readers. In this connection it should be attempted to provide the competition organizers in result of the contest with a sufficient amount of valuable relations right away, which would present as fully as possible the phenomena involved in the research. Thus, a certain spontaneity in collecting the materials could be avoided and greater emphasis could be put on the quality and not the quantity of materials obtained.

By way of conclusions of the considerations on organizing competitions I would like to emphasize, in form of a hint for future organizers, the fact that the operation of announcing competitions for biographies and memoirs requires a great deal of thought and orientation in the social need for that kind of enterprises. The major point is to avoid inflation of the institution of biography competitions. While beginning the work on announcing a successive memoir or chronicle competition it is necessary to find out who, when and how had organized a similar or related operation, what its effects were and how they were utilized. One should also become oriented if there exists a social demand for a new competition and if organizational and subject-matter guarantees of its proper implementation are available as well as those of utilization and protecting the material obtained.

Theoretical Bases of the Method

Let us now deal with the biographical method as such and with those viewpoints of Polish sociologists which form the theoretical bases of this method.
Sociologists see the value of autobiographical documents in the fact that, beside providing the image of actual circumstances in which their authors lived and acted, they present the mental attitudes, opinions etc. Thus, a well and extensively written autobiography allows to trace the way in which, under the objective social conditions, the beliefs, opinions and ideas of the author took shape. Consequently, considering the usability of autobiography in social investigations one can say, judging by the experiences so far, that they proved to be the best material for studying the subjective aspect of social life, to study such phenomena as beliefs, opinions, creeds, aspirations, inclinations, reluctances, personal ideals, as well as more complex phenomena like social and family ties, personality, class and national consciousness etc.

Getting to know the social facts through the available narrative material provides indirect knowledge of the past, a knowledge which reaches the scientist’s mind through other minds. Consequently, the research worker is faced with a new problem, which had been pointed out by FLORIAN ZNANIECKI (1931). There are two types of utterances to be singled out, which are contained in the personal materials namely:

- Pronouncements expressing author’s observations and social generalization. They „claim to be true, and as far as we take these claims into account, they are no social facts but judgements of facts“. Such utterances are not, as such, a scientific material. The facts are scientific material and they require verification.

- Utterances expressing only author’s tendencies and evaluations. „They do not have the nature of truth on facts, but they are themselves social facts. That is because they do not convey observations but, the active, standard, regulative or evolutionary trends of the writer“. Therefore they can be used as scientific material because „evaluating attitude towards social facts is an actual though indirect phenomenon of some regulative or standard tendency and thus becomes itself an actual social fact“.

Interest in pronouncements expressing author’s tendencies and evaluations became the basis for the so-called method of autobiographical documents and, at the same time, the subjective nature of the relation is a prior objective of criticism. The blame is that diaries and works utilizing them (or another kind of autobiographical documents) reduce the image of social realities to subjective, individual attitudes and tendencies, disregarding the objective processes.

Since emphasis was put on these subjective features of the relation, people’s utterances became a research material for sociologists and psychologists who were more interested in man as such than in the relation. The memoir material which contains a fuller psychological image than that provided by inquiries and interviews, enables a better knowledge of motivation of attitudes and behaviours, difficult to trace in regional investigations.

Accepting the subjective nature of biographical relations as a prior element of the method of personal documents derives from the humanist concept of FLORIAN ZNANIECKI’S sociology. Ideas and works of this scientist essentially influenced the advance of this method in Poland till the present day. Therefore I believe it necessary to call to mind some of ZNANIECKI’S opinions in order to show how far we are affected by the tradition of his school. As a co-author of „The Polish Peasant in Europe and America“ ZNANIECKI (1918) wrote the following:

„... the environment by which he is influenced and to which adapts himself, is his world, not the objective world of science — is nature and society as he sees them, not as the scientist sees them. The individual subject reacts only to his experience, and his experience is not everything that an absolutely objective observer might find in the portion of the world within the individual’s reach, but only what the individual himself finds. And what he finds depends upon his practical attitudes toward his environment, the demands he makes upon it and his control over it, the wishes he seeks to satisfy and the way in which he tries to satisfy them“.

ZNANIECKI’S belief that subjective experiences of an individual form social realities found its full expression in the concept of „humanistic coefficient“. JAN SZCZEPANSKI discussed this concept at great length in his above mentioned article „Die biographische Methode“. It is worth noting that according to this concept the socio-
logist should see social realities not with the eyes of an absolute observer but watch them as the partakers do. The sphere of interest for the humanist is not the world of self-contained realities – it is the world of the consciousness of others, according to ZNANIECKI.

Thus we arrived at an extremely important issue in sociology, namely the dispute on the proper subject of interest in sociology.

The question, whether objective social processes, with their creators, conscious men, involved, or subjective manifestations of this consciousness are the subject of sociological studies, still remains the prior problem or, anyway, one of high priority, which groups sociologists in different schools and trends. The significance of this problem particularly showed up in the discussion on the „method of personal documents in sociology”, for the application of this method primarily emphasized the cognition of the subjective image of social realities, individual attitudes and aspirations. The question of subjective nature of relations contained in diaries and autobiographies suggests a number of problems worth attention. Is it the low informative value or the matter of control of relations which is involved while discussing the subjective nature of relations? The individual comment which supplies the source of information on man’s evaluations, attitudes, behaviour and aspirations, is of interest to the research worker in its inner sincerity, that is to say, to what extent the utterances of the authors of autobiographical documents actually depict their attitudes and their knowledge of the realities. The question arises, how reliable the data are, contained in this type of source material, for social investigations, and also how to check and verify them. Since using the biographical material stimulated the formulation of hypotheses and statements concerning human behaviour, the prior question in the discussion on the method of personal documents became that of the representative character of this source and of the justifiability of going over from the biography authors’ utterances to conclusions on communities and on processes occurring therein. By analysing the opinions of Polish sociologists we shall see how they answered these questions.

While discussing a research method we usually have in mind a determined, reproducible way of obtaining and analysing a certain type of information on facts, which information is indispensable for solving a defined type of research problems. These are then typical and repeatable ways of solving more general problems. The author of several outstanding books on the methodology of sociology, a Polish sociologist, STEFAN NOWAK (1965), says that most disputes coming up in social sciences refer to „the choice of the research problem, the relative importance of some problems in relation to other ones (. . .). The most part of disputes, labelled as those on the method, does not concern methods sensu stricto (. . .). The point of those disputes usually is not how to but what to investigate“. In the method of personal documents this matter looks somewhat different. At the initial stage of this method is was determined what to investigate, namely, the subjective aspect of social life, the development of man’s personality etc. It had not been precisied, however, how it is to be investigated by the help of such a research source as the personal documents, i.e. biographies and diaries. In this connection the disputes concerned as a rule the very method sensu stricto – how to analyse. In my opinion, no precise views on this problem are available yet.

It seems to me that the above emphasized typical and reproducible ways of solving a research problem justify speaking of the „method of autobiographical documents“ as of one covering not uniform, sometimes various types of cognitive activities. FLORIAN ZNANIECKI and the direct continuator of his ideas, JOZEF CHALASINSKI, followed a different line of interests and cognitive activities than LUDWIK KRZYWICKI, who edited collections of diaries of the unemployed, of the peasants and of the emigrants, and who was the author of several analyses, or than WŁADYSŁAW GRABSKI, who was the rural sociologist in the period between the wars. It is true that the present line of research works on memoir writing concentrates, in a way, the major features of the achievements of these sociologists, but it also developed a new, enriched research technique, different from the previous ones. These various types of approach to this specific sociological material which are the documents, indicates that you cannot consider the method of autobiographical documents as a uniform, theoretical and empiric view. Therefore I would rather feel inclined to speak of various ways of
approach to this research material, in other words, not of a method of autobiographical documents but of many methods of utilizing autobiographical documents.

Chalasinski's Method of Biographical Documents

First of all, let me deal with the method applied by JOZEF CHALASINSKI. He is a disciple of ZNANIECKI which, undoubtedly, influenced his opinions. He is the most outstanding Polish sociologist analysing the memoir material. We credit him with many brilliant analyses such as the „Young Peasant Generation“, published before the war which was a development of ZNANIECKI'S concept, and the monumental edition „The Young Generation of People's Poland Rural Population“, published on the basis of the greatest in history memoir competition. The method of personal documents in CHALASINSKI'S concept is most interesting (1931, 1938, 1964–1972).

In CHALASINSKI'S publications there can be noted a deliberate defining of the memoir method as not only a sociological but also a historical method. In the foreword to the „Young Peasant Generation“ CHALASINSKI reminds us that not only the past but also an answer to contemporary problems is sought after in history. This historism in CHALASINSKI is reshaped to a research directive. An analysis of memoir texts cannot be detached from the historic perspective, from history of the peasant stratum in Poland, for only when knowing the past we can get to know the present. Man is not a universal creature but a „homo historicus“ because „history is alive in him“ so, only by knowing history we can get to know man. There occurs an unavoidable continuity of social processes, which makes it necessary to reach far back, further than the date of political liberation in 1918, namely, to the time of peasants' enfranchisement or, to still earlier days of villein service, in order to understand works, ideas and aspirations of the peasant youth as well as the internal struggle of the whole Polish society. CHALASINSKI recommends not only reading the diary through history of the social stratum to which the diary's author belongs but he determines memoir material as historical material as he recognizes man to be a creator of history. Man's autobiography is a part of history and not only an effect of historic process. „A historic memory is formed in people who make history; a historic memory of one's own history in the degree in which it is one's own history“. A human being without any historic memory is unthinkable.

CHALASINSKI clearly indicates that the image of history shown by a biography is a subjective and partial image which does not cover the whole historic image of facts. It seems that he does not mean here: History is a science which is asking about what was and how it was, objectively. A component of the historic image is to be a subjective man's biography; it is the man who is to write „his history“, not an objective one, but history he feels and experiences in his consciousness. Several years after these formulations he wrote: „In the mathematized sociology historic facts are lost and so is man's personality in its conditioning by the national culture and other forms of culture. Memoir study brings sociology closer to history“.

The sociological-historical method, to which CHALASINSKI was always true, amounts to the following research directive: while studying the given phenomenon we cannot disregard its socio-historical context, we have to investigate thoroughly „the sight and meaning“ of this phenomenon in a narrower cultural context in which it occurs. These methodological directives of him allowed to obtain from memoir materials what seems to be, unquestionably, their biggest quality in sociology, namely, presenting attitudes which are not isolated or detached from social context, tracing the evolution of social attitudes of an individual and their social conditioning, reproduction of transformation processes of man's personality within the framework of social facts, of the determined culture and nation.

The basic thesis of CHALASINSKI that memoirs are an irreplaceable source for becoming acquainted with the processes of forming a modern nation. This is what he wrote in one of his works:

„Memoir writing is the only kind of literary output which can show us how People's Poland has grown and is growing at everyday work. Such a true image of transformations can be given only by people who directly create them.
Let us also remember that in the light of memoirs there occur vital phenomena, not much noticed till now. I have in mind dynamic development of the province, its parts in setting up essential values of the national culture. Another phenomenon of this kind is a tremendous role of women, simple women, who organize the cultural life of their families and of their environment, who form the customs. Memoirs also teach us, sociologists, that the subject of investigation can be only the concrete, historically shaped and conditioned people's groups, and not an abstractionally understood society. In my works I considered memoirs primarily as material for studies on personality in its connection with the social environment and national culture. 

Thus, it can be stated that owing to the analysis of memoir documents the cultural concept of the essence of the nation and the processes of nation's coming into existence has been developed and considerably verified. The properly understood thesis that "(...) the nation is a nation owing to the culture which it produced" agrees, in my opinion, with the Marxist understanding of nation-building processes and of conception of a nation as a historical category.

The specific nature of taking shape by the modern Polish nation, depicted in such documents, appears to the researcher worker as a growing process of a determined common line of historical destiny and community of culture, a process of forming the most common type of personality in the basic class (national character) and of economic-state organism.

CHALASINSKI, as a promoter and often a glorifier of memoirs and biography, is often reproached with idealistic, one-sided vision of the world. This blame is a misunderstanding and a considerable simplification of his concept. It seems to me, it is just the contrary: honesty of the scientist makes him complete the image of facts with one more of its elements, with the vision of this image in man's consciousness.

The method applied by CHALASINSKI met with much criticism both at the prewar and the post-war time, since he remained true to it till now. The essential objection was that in his analyses CHALASINSKI selects from the biography the most characteristic fragments and seeks in them a confirmation of his own judgements, made in advance, and not a justification of these judgements. According to those critics, his apt judgements of the processes of social life are not a result of a good elaboration method of the accumulated biographies but an effect of general knowledge of the subject, for the sake of which the biographies serve the author as appropriate and meaningful illustrations.

This is a reproach similar to that put forward by H. BLUMER against ZNANIECKI and THOMAS (1938). This blame was criticized, very clearly, in my opinion, by L. GALLINO (1968), in the foreword to the Italian edition of "The Polish Peasant". Since it is, indirectly, also a defense of CHALASINSKI, I would like to quote here a few sentences of this foreword:

"In the perspective limited to purely technical aspects of research methods applied in social sciences, this criticism seems to be justified. The connection between the analysis and the documents is slight and not covered by any scheme. Where this connection is available, the documents seem to fully confirm the authors' conclusions (...) A thorough verification, however, required by BLUMER (and also by our Polish sociologists who oppose this method — note J.B.), leads to the isolation of single variables, easy to determine both in respect to their range and value, which they can accept. All the advantage of a precise formulation is obtained at the expense of essential reduction of the image. Such a method may be required in certain types of studies but not in an investigation, the aim of which is to provide a relation of one class of a modern society in full and concrete complexity of its life (...) There exists a definite cultural environment which gives significance to each concrete cultural phenomenon. If we eliminate this environment, each attempt of finding the sense and cause of the phenomenon will be arbitrary."

To the Modern Method

The one variety of the method of personal documents which is closest to the patterns of empiricists, also comes from prewar times. This method was developed by L. KRZYWICKI, an organizer of several competitions for memoirs of
peasants, emigrants and unemployed. The method is characterized by the following:

- application of scientific, materialistic theory of social realities, of the rules of social development, of Marxist methodology for studies of socio-economic facts;
- recognition of the autobiographical documents as material depicting living conditions and objective social relations;
- applying the principle of linking memoir studies with the empiric regional investigations;
- applying statistical methods of analysis with reference to pertinent indices on an all-Polish scale;
- raising the rank of representativeness of memoir materials through verification with regional studies and statistical-economic analyses.

Nowadays, this method is being continued, to some degree, in sociological studies taken up by the Polish Academy of Sciences in the regions of rapid industrialization.

In the studies carried out in an industrialized region, diaries are considered to be one of many forms of accumulating cognitive materials and, to a certain degree, a confrontation of the image obtained by studies applying other research methods and techniques with the subjective depiction of changes in a region under industrialization, provided by diaries. I would like to particularly emphasize this approach to memoirs as a wholesome tendency of abandoning considerable methodological air-tightness which characterized leading Polish sociologists — documentary research workers.

The value of memoir materials in a region under industrialization consists in the fact that, by way of example of the diarist’s vicissitudes, we may observe the functioning of the institutions in the place of his residence, we can watch the arrangement of interhuman relations, seen by a man inhabiting a region under industrialization — wrote DYZMA GALAJ (1972), who directed these studies. As exemplified by the diarist’s life we get to know a degree of assimilation of new contents by various persons. Thus, there can be established the assimilation degree for the new contents by persons inhabiting the area under industrialization, that is to say, by older and younger persons, more and less dependent on the phenomena brought about by the concrete industrial plant. We see these phenomena in their interrelations and this occurs in memoirs very clearly. We learn only these phenomena, which are subjectively important for diarists. It is of prior importance for the research-worker analysing memoir material what phenomena occur in the consciousness of the diary authors, and only next he is interested in how this phenomenon occurs and how it is evaluated by them. In the materials concerning industrialized regions there is of particular importance what has already reached the consciousness and brought about for the diarist the need of assuming an attitude to this phenomenon.

The present prevailing trends in the analysis of diary materials are, to some extent, a mixture of previously presented methods. All of them expose the sociologists to the danger of yielding to suggestions contained in the relations, of treating the diary authors’ interpretation as the relation of facts. Therefore this method met most frequently with the reproach of subjectivism. An exit attempt of this somewhat blind alley was the elaboration of the method of content analysis.

I would like to present here the research technique suggested in BRONISLAW GOLEBIOWSKI’S book ”Socio-cultural Aspirations of Youth“ (1966), which was highly appreciated by our sociologists — documentary research workers. A collection of diaries obtained by way of competition was analyzed. Each diary had a title page containing the following data: last and first name, sex, present address, year and month of birth, sisters and brothers, marital and family status, general and vocational education, organization membership, present profession of the diarist, profession of parents, period of time covered by the diary. Simultaneously, there was established the way of reviewing the works by the referees. The review should include: summary of the diarist’s vicissitudes, evaluation of the diary’s contents, of its sincerity, factography, typical character for the given social process, age group, profession. There was also to be evaluated the diarist’s attitude to life, possibly in connection with exposing the main motive for writing the diary; an evaluation of sincerity, authenticity and matter-of-factness; considering if the
diarist really describes the most important facts of his life or if he omits some of them, only touching upon them, and concentrates on describing less important events, conflicts and issues; it proved necessary to evaluate the diarist's ability for meditation, for generalization in reference to his own life and to the problems of his environment; also the appraisal of the style and language was advisable. After this work was accomplished, a card index of the diaries was done. The card index included data from the diary title page and from the preliminary characterization of the basic features of the diarists. In result, statistical tables were obtained, characterizing the diarists' community as to sex, residential environment, professional groups, years of birth and declared organizational membership. All the above data were broken down into the country's regions. These works were necessary to arrange the collection and the information on the authors in an order, which enabled utilizing the competition material for research purposes.

An analysis of the entire collection of diaries, however, exceeds the possibilities of one research worker. The essential methodological difficulty for the research worker became the way of choice of diary groups to be analyzed. The best solution seemed to draw by lot a suitable number of works as a representative sample. Diaries selected in this way then underwent the following analyzing procedure:

1. they were summarized from the angle of the total life story and individual features of the author and, against this background, of the motives for diary writing, socio-cultural aspirations and attitudes of the diarist;

2. on the basis of noted data concerning authors there was elaborated a description of the features of community researchers in relation to sex, age, education, profession, etc.;

3. using the summary notes, the authors were classified according to the motives for autobiography writing, socio-cultural aspirations and attitudes of the authors;

4. with the available full register of classification of the single diaries in respect to authors' motives for writing them and to aspirations and attitudes of the diarists — proper quantitative estimates were done as well as correlations between motives for writing and aspirations, aspirations and attitudes;

5. with the available full register of classification of single diaries in respect to aspiration level revealed in them, adequate quantitative estimates were done.

Cognitive Value of Biographies

By way of conclusion of these rather general considerations, some attention should be given to the cognitive value of diary materials. Their prior advantage is the information they provide on the events they deal with. This is connected with the problem of index function of man's utterances. This is what the previously quoted, outstanding Polish methodologist, STEFAN NOWAK (1965), wrote: „If from the contents of the pronouncement read we derive some conclusion concerning the author of the utterance or the phenomena or subjects which the pronouncements concern, we are reconstructing a fairly complex, multi-link communication chain“.

This chain looks as follows: between the features of the fact which are the subject of the utterance, and the beliefs of the informant there occurs a cognitive reaction; between the beliefs and the contents of the given pronouncement on the features of the facts and on the attitude of the individual to them — an expressive relation; between the contents of the pronouncement made and the contents taken by the researcher — a communication relation.

In the cognitive relation we are interested in the degree of agreement between the beliefs of the informant on facts and the facts as such, that is to say, how true the judgement of the informant on facts is. In the expressive relation the researcher is interested in the degree to which the utterance of the author agrees with his beliefs, i.e. the point of sincerity. In the communication relation we are interested in how far the pronouncement taken by us agrees with the contents of the utterance, that is to say, if we understood it correctly.
The utterance of the informant can iterest us in three different functions. We may become oriented from the pronouncement as to the very facts and, on this basis, try to get to know these facts. This is the informative function of the utterance. On the other hand, we may consider the utterance as a source of information on the beliefs, attitudes and evaluations of the informant; the utterance then interests us in its expressive function. Finally, it may interest us in its communication function, which means, if and how far the communication conveyance was disturbed during contact.

Diaries and autobiographies met with interest of researchers primarily as far as their expressive and informative functions were concerned.

It turned out that diary documents are not only a source of information on subjective attitudes, aspirations and consciousness of the individual and of the society but also a source of cognition for economic and social living conditions. The communication function of autobiographical documents seems to cause the least difficulty to sociologists. This is primarily because of the amount of knowledge possessed by the researchers before they start analyzing the diary materials; this knowledge enables them to properly understand the contents transmitted by the authors. The knowledge possessed seems to perform a significant role in selecting and verifying the data obtained from this kind of materials.

One of the essential questions occurring in discussions on the methods of diary documents in sociology is, beside the mentioned issue of subjectivity of relations, the problem of representativeness of this material. What kind of representativeness do we have to do with — is it a quantitative or rather a typological representativeness? A collection of autobiographies and diaries, though having no features of a statistical probe, can, however, provide a sufficient basis for drawing conclusions concerning attitudes and processes typical for a certain community. „The typical character of the process“ — as CHALASINSKI wrote in „The Young Peasant Generation“ — „is detected by way of analysis of the process and by finding functional connections between single factors of the process, and not by counting“. The question of the representative character of this material is linked with the question on justifying the passing from utterances of autobiography or diary authors to conclusions on communities and processes occurring therein.

It is obvious that authors of works based on diary documents did their best to justify this principle of passing from individual utterances to declarations on social communities. Therefore a lot of space in their works is devoted to the question of mutual relations: society — individual, and culture — personality. „The individual and the environment form one entity in the eyes of a sociologist“: „A human being always appears connected with some socio-cultural environment“: „Social consciousness of the individual is always shaped within the frames of common environment, becoming similar to the common culture pattern“: etc. Many similar pronouncements can be found in the works by ZNANIECKI, CHALASINSKI and other researchers.

Naturally, the diary materials do not show the feature of statistical representativeness of some category of social phenomena.

„The sociologist does not expect“ — as CHALASINSKI wrote — „to find in his autobiographical material, as the statistician does in reference to his material, a mass repetition of some similar facts, in order to detect in them certain steady tendencies. Autobiographers provide sociologists with material for analysis of the social behaviour of the individual. Indeed, a sociologist, similarly as a statistician, is interested in a characterization of the social environment and in the knowledge of social life. However, he achieves this knowledge along a different line than a statistician does, namely, by understanding facts in their correlation“.

Representativeness of the facts and views of a group of diarists in relation to a wider community can be understood as a quantitative or typological (contents) representativeness. In case of autobiographical documents, the contents representativeness is of more value to a sociologist. He considers, however, the fact that the bigger amount and greater variety of diaries and autobiographies he has available, the more precisely and comprehensively he can
reconstruct facts and views of a social group as a whole and the processes occurring therein.

By understanding the facts in their correlation the sociologist detects the typical character of a process occurring in the group, the typical character of attitudes, evaluations and aspirations implemented by the group members. „The typical character of the process“ — as CHALASINSKI wrote in „The Young Peasant Generation“ — „is detected (…) by way of analysis of the process and revealing the functional connections between single factors of the process, and not by way of counting“.

Autobiographies can, in fact, be sufficient material for stating certain matters typical for a certain community. For example, a sociologist analyzing diary documents can obtain from them a type of personality of a member of the given social group, a type of aspirations realized in this community, a type of social process occurring in the social community. MAX WEBER already emphasized the role of types as a tool in sociology. Operating of types allows researchers to arrange facts and establish a smaller or greater distance of subjects from this type. The type is a complex of visible properties, common to some group. However, those who prefer to avoid abstraction can understand it concretely as an average group member. On the basis of pronouncements contained in autobiographies we can conclude on typical phenomena for determined social groups; in the life stories the young peasant generation presents not only rich personalities of the authors but also rich common values, common social attitudes and aspirations, nevertheless it has to be admitted that authors of autobiographies are not „average group members“ in the group they come from. Diarists are a specific elite of the community which they represent. Sociologists did and do realize this fact that diarists are somewhat different from (not to use the qualifying term „better than“) their co-members of the social group. Authors of the diaries and autobiographies are characterized by a higher than average general culture, social and political consciousness, they are more sophisticated, sometimes „acquainted with penmanship“, their personality is richer and their spiritual life is fuller than that of an average representative of the group which they come from.

The studies based on the analysis of the material of memoirs have provided the valuable data regarding first of all the class changes which had occurred on the area of the Polish national culture when a new socialist society was formed. They have proved that there is a possibility of further studies based on memoirs as well as the importance of such a material for the determination of the change of human attitudes, ideals, ambitions, the vision of the world and the self-consciousness of the social bonds — occurring on a mass scale. We are yet aware of the fact that the scientific thought concerning the phenomenon of the especially dynamic development of memoirism in contemporary Poland is still insufficient. This unsatisfied need along with the want of possibility of a common discussion of scientists often dispersed have pointed out the necessity of setting up in 1969 the Association of Memoir Study Friends and the Centre of Polish Memoir Study. These two institutions — set up by eminent scholars, intellectuals and leading memoirists — are in charge of taking care of memoir and chronicle collections as well as of utilizing them to social analysis. Thus there was organized a centre of archives, a library and was also initiated the publication of a unique quarterly entitled „Polish Memoir Study“, which is publishing memoirs as well as articles and materials devoted to biographical method in social sciences.

Bibliography


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