

ON STEFAN ŻEROMSKI'S 'LITTLE POLE' AND KAROL IRZYKOWSKI'S 'TRUE POLAND' – THE REAL DIMENSION OF POLISHNESS IN THE FACE OF THE GREAT WAR

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Basia and *A Reminiscence of Adam Żeromski* were inspired by the experience of the loss of a child – Basia Irzykowska dies of kidney disease after a difficult ten-month-long treatment in April 1916, and Adam dies of tuberculosis after a few years of disease in July 1918. What both works have partly in common, is the time of the events being described and the time of writing¹. They can be categorized as autobiographical writings, and it is worth treating them in accordance with Philippe Lejeune's (2001: 18) ascertainments:

Autobiographies are not object of aesthetic consumption, but social means of interpersonal *understanding*. This understanding has several dimensions: ethical, emotional, referential. The autobiography was created to pass on universal values, sensitivity to the world, unknown experiences – and this within the framework of personal relations, perceived as authentic, non-fictional.

¹ Three notebooks of Karol Irzykowski's diary, probably included by Zofia Irzykowska under the title *Part IV 'Basia' and Family Matters*, were written from April 9th 1916 till October 14th 1922, but the essential part of writings dates back to the years 1916-1918 (B. Górka, *Nota wydawnicza*, [in:] Irzykowski 2001: 627). The reminiscence of Adam Żeromski, written in Zakopane in April and May 1919, covers chronologically the period of the son's life from the age of 2 years till a few days after his death connected with his funeral, i.e., from 1901 till August 1st 1918 (Z.J. Adamczyk, *Uwagi wydawcy*, [in:] Żeromski 2015: 466-467).

Such a perspective opens the gates of interpretation that are very important for the topic that I bring up here, which is apparently marginal in the narrative of the loss that can be very individualized in the form of - Polishness (see: Okupnik 2012). The object of my interest will not be a comparison of scales of emotional consequences of the loss of a child, but a certain factor that they have in common. Seeking the sense of death of a close person is an inseparable part of the mourning process and, therefore, constitutes a part of the story of the loss. In the texts under analysis, this happens not so much within the scope of the individual road to consolidation (as in the case of epicedia) as through location in a broader structure – the narrative of the loss is almost integrated into the narrative of the community in the key historical moment for it and assumes the form that can be called ‘internarration’ after Reinhart Koselleck. Marc Augé (2004) wrote that the human being lives in many narratives at the same time, and the frame that allows them to be intertwined (‘captured by the other’s story’) may be, for example, emotions and affective relations. However, it is worth treating emotions according to the model of cognitivists and partly constructionists in the categories of universal ability, which may differ according to methods by means of which emotions are produced, felt and expressed and, most importantly, depend both on cultural norms and on individual tendencies, as Barbara Rosenwein (2002) writes. The experience of the loss connecting Żeromski’s and Irzykowski’s narratives involves experiencing strong emotions and the mourning process and, to a varying extent, dictates the need for a story being a ‘fruit of memory and oblivion, the work of composition and decomposition that explains the pressure exerted on the interpretation of the past by the expectation of the future’ (2004: 45). The thing that connects both texts juxtaposed by me is not only their existential genesis, but also their social & cultural and historical context; in both texts ‘the history of an individual becomes crazed (may even tip towards death) because it is absorbed by the great history, for example, as a result of the declaration of war,’ as we read further in *Oblivion*. The experience of loss of a close person has much in common with war. Sigmund Freud (1915) wrote that it involves mainly acceptance and a change of the attitude towards death.

The situation that determines the horizon of the experience of individuals telling about and experiencing the mourning period (recollecting Żeromski

vs. Irzykowski keeping a diary of disease, death and memory practice) and the subjects of their narratives in the world of events (Adam, Basia and their surroundings) is Polishness. This hardly definable Polishness for the needs of this paper will have a formula proposed by Mieczysław Porębski (2002) – exactly as a situation ‘conditional’ upon the existence of a spiritual community that is partly integrated and partly lives in a diaspora, focusing on some historically determined symbols, with which it identifies its lasting and the continuity and dignity of that lasting’. At the same time, this community is ‘situated in the world that is governed by the laws of nature, the laws and cases of history, within or on the edge of situations that arose earlier, co-created it and have formed various relationships and affiliations with it’ (ibid.). In such interpretation, Polishness is something different from a phantasmatic and ideological construct (the collective *ideal I* of the nation) formed in conditions of non-existence of the Polish state and determined by its absence (Sowa 2011: 478; Kolarzowa 2015)², and something connected with the situation of each symbolic identification that results in the existence of national identity and the individual becoming a part of the political order, and the goal is/may be the fulfillment of the national project (Bauman 1992).

According to Marc Augé (2004), life formulated as a narrative is characterized by the fact that the microscale and the macroscale (in the common field of Polishness as being within and towards a symbolic universe) overlap with each other and, at the same time, contain ‘us in themselves, because they create our own version of events and we have our place in it ourselves, however marginal and insignificant it may be, just as thousands and millions of other individuals have their place in their own version that they develop by themselves’. Thus, I treat both juxtaposed texts mainly as a kind of very intimate testimony to the working-out of forms of Polishness in the situation of the Great War. Following Lejeune’s (2001) ascertainments, we can say that this testimony is more authentic, as it is characterized by emotions resulting from the experience of the personal

² The psychoanalytic interpretation is a very tempting perspective in this case, but it remains outside the scope of my actions. It seems, however, that thanks to Jan Sowa or earlier Maria Janion and others, Lacan’s terminology has become a permanent part of Polish human science in the field of research on national identity.

tragedy (not related directly to the war) with which they are connected genetically and formally (due to their autobiographic form). At the same time, these experiences are situated in the war horizon as events dependent on others and, in terms of interpretation, determined by emotions produced by war events. The degree of impregnation with the topic of Polishness is different in Żeromski's and Irzykowski's works – its very presence in narratives of loss seems to be important for the way of thinking about its form.

The specific characteristics of the autobiographic writing (described, among others, by Lejeune [2001] and Czermińska [2000], to mention only the most canonical items) allow us to derive various genealogies of the identity of the subject of this kind of narrative from autobiographical writings. In a very interesting text about Żeromski's diaries from the years 1882-1891, Magdalena Saganiak (2005) showed how experiences of the author of *Popioły* [*Ashes*] translated into his project of Polishness and the idea of love for the Homeland that became a matrix integrating various experiences and marking out his ethical and metaphysical horizon. Then she characterized Żeromski as a writer consciously modeling the fates of his protagonists with regard to national identity understood in this manner – the most distinctive example of using such writing strategy seems to be *Uroda życia* [*The Charm of Life*], which is excellently clarified by Anna Zdanowicz's (2004) interpretation. Krzysztof Stępnik described Żeromski's attitude as the 'father of the nation' and – after the war – a social and political activist, the author of works such as *Snobizm i postęp* [*Snobbism and Progress*]. Mateusz Chmurski (2013) derived the genealogy of Irzykowski's identity as a writer and critic from his early diaries. Differently shaped proportions between individual dimensions of the autobiographic pact (the ethical, emotional and referential approach) in each writer's work are connected with the different way in which each of them arrives at the topic of my interest: Polishness.

I. 'THE GOLDEN DAYS OF THE FIRST SHIVERS OF FREEDOM, DREAMS OF FREE POLAND'

One of the epithets used most frequently towards Adam Żeromski, which characterized the boy from his youngest years, when he already knew that it was necessary to behave silently when uncles Józef 'Ziuk' Piłsudski

and Stanisław 'Edmund' Wojciechowski spent the night at Żabia 4³, with a circulation of „Robotnik” to be distributed in a suitcase, was a characteristic 'little Pole'. Thus, the boy is identified primarily as a Pole by the narrator from the beginning of the story. The diminutive appears in two contexts: in the first one, sketched above, the son is constantly situated within the scope of the writer's political activity and presented as 'involved', as his activeness is stressed several times:

One day, the little Pole acted openly against the representatives of the Moscow authority. He called all Muscovites, gendarmes, soldats and, in general, brutes, aggressors, villains, all phantoms, spectres, ghosts, ugly figures or even concepts by his own word 'Muńka' (Żeromski 2015: 356).

In the second case, this term becomes significant in the context of the boy's fascination with French history and culture, i.e., when being a Pole calls for situating oneself in the world and establishing one's own identity within a larger network of references from the historically and politically determined 'peaking point of Polishness', as Jan Sowa (2011: 373-374) has called it. The choice of France on the map of these references has a political character and refers to Żeromski's sympathies (Stępnik 1997), at the same time being connected with the need to maintain national identity and the independence of the boy functioning in the French education system. Adam is described by the narrator as a politically oriented participant of the father's ideological & political life, who becomes Żeromski's 'only political friend'⁴ as a youth. As Jadwiga Zacharska (2005: 106) aptly noted:

the recollections are dominated by the presentation of the child in the perspective of history and towards the idea, not in the circle of family and privacy. They are written by a father who is also an ideologist, an educator and the spiritual leader of the generation. We can read from his eyes that

³ Żeromski and his family occupied an official apartment at Żabia Street 4 in the years 1897-1903, when the writer worked as an assistant librarian in the Zamoyski Family Library.

⁴ In a letter to his son dated September 8th 1913, Żeromski sends birthday wishes to Adam, at the same time expressing his expectations towards him: 'in Zakopane, you will grow to be a stout Pole and a brave man' (Żeromski 2008: 110; see: Olech 2013: 207-208).

he does not always look at Adam as his son. The role of the writer shapes the father's vision and restricts privacy even in a statement where it seems to be intentional.

The researcher indicates that this results 'from two contradictory directives shaping the text and determining its functions, i.e., utilitarian and poetic (literary), documentary and idealising functions' (ibid.: 102), where the order of facts is subordinated to the order of parenthesis that 'presents the model of a little Pole and the ideal of a young man being prepared for the role of the savior of the Homeland from his earliest years' (ibid.), which has a decisive impact on the composition of *O Adamie Żeromskim wspomnienie* [*A Reminiscence on Adam Żeromski*], its narrative and psychological probability in Adam's creation. At times, however, the perspective of an activist and writer-moralist with a strong political orientation, who gave the novel *Ashes* to the soldiers of the Legions, is replaced with emotions – however, they are intimate rather than fatherly emotions⁵. This can be illustrated by a fragment describing the political awareness of Żeromski-son, an 'undefeated taunter' and 'poignant critic' of 'dignitaries or alleged benefactors of the nation':

These were real toreador's arrows, cast unnoticeably at the back of the stupid bull as it was tossing around on the arena, not knowing where to run. How I loved you, you swift arrows, cast by the subtle hand of my only political friend (Żeromski 2015: 431) .

This suggests that the reminiscence can be included in the formula of a parenetical narrative, as Zacharska indicates, in which Adam becomes the figure and model of a Pole, determined by the love of the Homeland to the highest extent – yet it also presents him as a critical and intellectually independent person in the field of political practice. In order to understand

⁵ M. Głowiński (2013) made an interesting analysis of *A Reminiscence...* in the perspective of poetics, specifying the double style resulting from two tendencies shaping Żeromski's writing (the realistic one and the poetic one) as its characteristic quality and the characteristic feature of the prose of the author of *Ashes* in general. B. Olech (2013) notes that the relationship between Stefan and Adam was determined by three complementary role arrangements: father-son, master-apprentice and partner-partner.

the weight of this loss, we must look at the attitude of Żeromski – the narrator. He reconstructs Adam's biography in a selective way, focusing mainly on things that are significant from the perspective of Polish identity in the face of a specific social & political situation – the text was written in the spring of 1919, when the challenge of building Polish statehood was valid. The internal structure of the work is organized around the tension between the permanent cohesive method of creation of the main protagonist and the non-homogeneous narrative perspective. The narrator oscillates between the detached narrative that avoids speaking in the first person (contrary to what the subtitle announces)⁶ and the narrative that allows us to identify him with Żeromski as a writer, moralist and public authority, who assumes a politically undeclared position during the war (Stępnik 1997: 109-113), as well as the narrative having the characteristics of a fatherly narrative, which – paradoxically – occurs most rarely in the text and more frequently in its final parts, which describe the death and burial of the nineteen-year-old (determining an intersubjective space for a common experience, thus triggering the possibility of empathy). These inconsistencies, which were accurately reconstructed by Jadwiga Zacharska, induce us to read *A Reminiscence...* with focus on what was omitted, not fully stated or sometimes even contradicted the details of the writer's biography reconstructed by researchers.⁷ They also prompt us to ask a question (going beyond the framework of this sketch) about the real functions of *A Reminiscence...* and its place among such texts as *Wisła* [*The Vistula*] (see: Saganiak 2004), *Początek świata pracy* [*The Beginning of the World of Labour*] or *Projekt Akademii Literatury Polskiej* [*The Academy of Polish Literature Project*], i.e., about its importance within the entirety of ideological and program views of the writer with regard to independence and in the context of the role that he ascribes to himself in the face of current

⁶ The full title of the memoir is: *A Reminiscence on Adam Żeromski by His Father As a Manuscript in 55 Copies, Printed for a Group of Persons Who Showed the Grace of Love, Friendship and Care for the Deceased One.*

⁷ An example of the adoption of a specific writing strategy is the omission or distortion of motivations for some situations from Adam's biography, e.g., those concerning the writer's relations with Monika Żeromska (see: Z.J. Adamczyk, *Uwagi wydawcy*, [in:] Żeromski 2015: 465-466).

events. At that time, the generic vastness of Żeromski's writing activity is, according to Krzysztof Stępnik (1997: 137), an expression of 'internal activity, the vitality of free thought and emotions that are a real precondition for the independence of the creative subject in his artistic and ideological arguments'. The narrative about the son becomes an emotional form of attesting Polishness as a project to be fulfilled in a certain social & political situation. It becomes an exceptional testimony confirming the importance and necessity of consolidating the national community. It also indicates the attitude that supports such a project – critical thinking and intellectual independence. At the same time, the narration provoked by the loss becomes a space of self-confirmation of the identity of Żeromski, who, to paraphrase Jacques Derrida (1991: 49), 'responds to the challenge or attribution of what is universal'. This self-confirmation requires the attitude of intellectual engagement and responsibility, but it also involves inherent adventitiousness and particularity as well as emotions. Adam Żeromski dies of tuberculosis in 1918, and as the recollective narration approaches the tragic finale, it gradually becomes permeated by the emotional tone of Żeromski – the father's expression. In the writer's narration, the death of the 'little Pole' was put within a broader structure of sense, namely the Polish identity. This obviously has a therapeutic dimension, as giving sense to the death of a close person is an inseparable element of mourning (di Nola 2006). It can be said that the adventitiousness of Adam's death calls for comforting placement in Żeromski's recollection, but the realness of the personal loss does not allow us to inscribe it simply into a comforting scheme – the order of 'collectivised mortality' is not convincing when the son's peers died for the homeland in various Great War formations (sometimes fighting against one another)⁸. In the face of real necessity of building the Polish state and related challenges (the ethical horizon for those who have survived), Żeromski may be particularly aware of the empty place occupied by boys like Adam, who are endowed with political insight and independent judgement.

⁸ However, Żeromski describes his son as a brave soldier in a scout formation. He perceives Adam simultaneously as the one who would have wanted and should have fought if a disease had not prevented him from doing so (see: Zacharska 2005: 106). Apart from the eagerness of young boys preparing for the war, Żeromski recollects also the difficult situation of soldiers of the dissolved Eastern Legion.

Both Żeromski's wartime attitude and the attitude of Żeromski, who is the narrator of *A Reminiscence*... prove the things that were highlighted by Krzysztof Stępnik and described in the theoretical plan by Zygmunt Bauman; they paradoxically confirm the dignity of Polishness as a project, but require its revision in the practical implementation plan and concrete political actions. Influenced also by his personal tragedy, Żeromski distances himself from independence movements deriving from Romantic tradition that have been cultivated in the circle of the Legions and speaks in favour of a modern project aimed at acting for the benefit of the future independent Poland. In the situation of war breakthrough, Polishness demands a form other than the one developed in different conditions – the past cannot be a matrix for building the future because the stability and transcendence of Polishness is determined through its real cultural and political situation rather than the image construct elaborated in the 19th century. As in the case of fictitious fates of Piotr Rozłucki⁹, Żeromski personalizes Polishness in order to confirm it. The individual death fits into the project of immortal national continuity, but this occurs at a certain (clearly highlighted) expense – the lack of those who will attest this continuity in concrete political actions characterized by intellectual independence and critical thinking. The anxiety and pain brought upon by the son's death can be compensated for in the current political activity, but the author remains aware that there is nobody to assume the burden of building a real national state. In this context, we can interpret *A Reminiscence*... as a work reflecting the dynamics of attestation of Polishness as an ethical postulate and Polishness as a space for its implementation. However, in the second case, it fails to bring the consolation that the project paradoxically requires (full devotion and lack of autonomy) because costs of 'national immortality' must be borne (Bauman 1992). Here, Polishness demands a modern form and a political shape to be constructed, which will be built by Żeromski in his writings in the first years of Poland's independence.

⁹ An even stronger confirmation of this situation is the case of Włodzimierz Jasiół, the protagonist of *Charitas* written in the years 1914-1918, particularly because the plot of the novel is situated in the reality of the Great War and can be regarded as the writer's ideological and political commentary regarding war attitudes (see: Stępnik 1997: 122-131).

II. 'THREE WAYS OF BEHAVING TOWARDS REALITY: BEING IN IT, REMEMBERING IT, AND DEATH'

However, when I look at her photograph, at this high forehead and beautiful and wise eyes, I do not believe that this could die. To me, it is the essential Poland, my true Poland (15.05.1916; Irzykowski 2001: 19).

Today, when I was writing war bulletins from those July days decisive for me – so many dead and so many prisoners of war – the only thing that came to my mind was what happened to Basia at that time. This black and red background of the overall slaughter seems too ordinary to impress me. The microcosmos is as big as the macrocosmos. And the death of such a little child is more tragic to me, or at least makes me sadder than the death of a hundred heroes. Their role as heroes is to die, and in general, when an adult person dies, he dies on his own account, grows up to his fate and can carry it – but here you can feel the extreme wrong and injustice, you would like to hold part of this death and you cannot – and it is actually not death, but one-year torture, imprisonment with tortures and hunger, a slow breakdown of the body and spirit ... does not frighten me any more. What does the war matter to me? And if it is true that Basia has suffered from kidney due to dysentery since the beginning of the war, maybe there is no coincidence and now peace should come. My whole Poland has died – the only one that I knew and truly loved. For me, there is no such Poland where Basia is dead (9.07.1916; *ibid.*: 46).

Żeromski's recollection is dominated by the ethical dimension of the autobiographical part, whereas Karol Irzykowski's diary assumes a completely different form. The difference in the form of writing down the existential experience of the loss of a child results from a different nature of its function. As the title quotation from the diary suggests, it is a form of experiencing reality (and conveying the truth of this experience)¹⁰, a form of practicing memory (apart from metamemory reflection, it serves as a medium for what Astrid Erll defines as *collected memory*)¹¹ and a place

¹⁰ We can repeat after Paweł Rodak (2011: 116-117) that, in a sense, it has a performative dimension (by shaping the experience using a written form).

¹¹ According to Astrid Erll (2009: 212-213), as opposed to *collective memory*, *collected memory* is a socially and culturally shaped individual memory. See: Assmann 2013: 41-43, 47-51.

of metaphysical reflection: seeking truth about death – a forming existential fact. If Adam Żeromski's biography was inscribed into the symbolic universe of Polishness as a situation demanding identification and confirmation, Polishness as a challenge and moral imperative, Irzykowski adopts a different attitude: he does not project the macroscale onto the microscale, but, just the opposite, the microcosmos of Polishness, which he perceives in his dying daughter, is to him as big as the macrocosmos. Basia is the 'true' Poland – not Poland as an idea, but something real. It can be said that it is as in the case of Gombrowicz, because the opposition 'real-unreal' is significant here (Rodak 2011: 456-457), as long as Basia lives and is remembered, she is situated on the side of reality, concrete facts, everyday life or even the present. It is difficult to understand this identification of Basia with Poland otherwise than in the perspective of Irzykowski's tanatological reflection provoked by a fundamental existential experience – the loss of a child, which is considered in the context of mass 'heroic' death on the fronts of the war being observed by the author of *Pałuba* [*The Hag*] from the perspective of an employee of the Correspondence Office in Kraków, who has access to the latest information and reports. In many points of the diary, Irzykowski consciously clashes the home reality marked with disease and death with the reality of the war, but he is interested mainly in imponderabilia – the things that are apparently least necessary in the understanding and self-understanding process. Basia is real, in contrast to the unreality of the war, which is an impersonal force willing to appropriate the whole experience and subordinate it to unreal things: the macrocosmos, the collective/nation, history or the past. The war would like to 'capture' his narrative and, thereby, soothe the pain and inscribe the loss into the narrative about 'collectivised death', if we wish to refer to Bauman's terminology once again. It seems that those few points of the diary where the topic of Polishness appears contain also a warning against Polishness in which identification with it must involve readiness for death that is justified in advance – death in the name of political will. We can say that Irzykowski objects against modern collectivised death, grieving his loss partly in the 19th-century paradigm described by Philippe Ariès (2010: 171) as the hypertrophic excessive care of places of remembrance that is connected with the cult of souvenirs: '19th-century death (...) is not a death the human being is afraid of for himself and which treacherously lies in wait for us, but a death that takes loved persons away from us,

a death of other human being'. Irzykowski grieves his loss conventionally: in the mourning process, in a ritualised manner, which is referred to by descriptions of ordering a posthumous mask, frequent visits to the cemetery, taking care of the grave, planning a monument, and subjectively, internally: in the form of a diary entry concerning not only events, but emotions and concerning a more general metaphysical reflection (mainly about memory and death)¹². Both the first and second form of handling the situation are accompanied by strong emotions, in spite of the fact that the world of masks, roles and social rituals was previously criticized by Irzykowski and by writers that he praised (particularly Nałkowska). The creation of memory establishes an affective minicommunity of mourning, and writing a diary fulfils an autotherapeutic and autoanalytical function¹³, because the loss turns an experienced man into a lonely person. Irzykowski's thought about death whose fragments we can find in the diary is developed in his 1918

¹² For more about Irzykowski's attitude to death, see: Jakóbczyk 2005: 27-30. In her excellent study devoted to Basia, E. Kraskowska (2008) uses the tools of neopsychoanalysis to show this multidimensionality of experience of the loss, saying about the psychology and the Real and Symbolic ritual of loss. The writing-down of the experience of loss in Irzykowski's diary could also be interpreted in the optics of Freud's differentiation between mourning and melancholia, as the conventional process of becoming reconciled with the loss, when 'there is nothing about the loss that is unconscious' (Freud 1957: 245) and the situation in which 'one cannot see clearly what it is that has been lost' (ibid.). We can say that certain elements of the experience being described by the author of *The Hag* make it closer to Freud described as melancholy, but that would require more profound research. If, in this context, we reflect upon the sense of identifying Basia with Poland in the moments of the most intense pain following the loss, we could regard them as a confirmation of the diagnosis about Irzykowski's state of melancholy – Basia's death is situated in relation to other experiences that become parallel in his narrative (the homeland can also be an object of loss). The patient 'knows whom he has lost, but now what he has lost in him' (ibid.).

¹³ Following Paweł Rodak (2011: 44-48), I indicate the auto-analytic function rather than the function of constructing identity, because the experience that is the main subject-matter of the diary – disease and death – seems to become a space both for the construction and deconstruction of the identity of the individual, which could be confirmed by its interpretation in the context of Freudian melancholia.

article for „Maski”: ‘there is also one line that leads into the dark deepness or into the bright height, as some would prefer, and it reminds us that this mask of everyday life in death contains miraculousness that can be understood and felt only by a dying individual or his loved ones’ (Irzykowski 1976: 509). Death turns out to be something that is most real and, at the same time, wonderfully illogical. According to Irzykowski, ascribing some logic to death or inscribing death in other narratives, particularly collective ones (‘the pathos of heroic drill’) is the real cause of the Great War:

Coral philosophy teaches us not to be concerned about death because only a miserable individual dies, but the species, family and homeland live and the individual lives eternally within them, too – in a relevantly modified form. We are eternal because we are a society of corals, who keep growing one upon another and branching off like trees in the ocean of being (ibid.: 509-510).

Collective mortality (constructed in mental space in the name of collective interests) is juxtaposed by Irzykowski with trueness and dignity; in a sense, he touches the Real through death in accordance with Lacan’s terminology. In contrast with heroic boys, Basia’s Polishness is not a result of identification work because she was not aware of the existence of the nation as a symbolic community. Placing Basia in this order and calling her ‘true Poland’, Irzykowski may have been aware of the identification effort himself; at the same time, however, he indicates that death is the field that annuls and almost discriminates this effort. Discrimination is certainly aimed at Polishness, which tries to give sense to death and obscure its wonderful actuality and presence.

On October 20th 1916, Irzykowski (2001: 84) writes that ‘we are in a prison confined by death, and there is nothing else except it’, and ‘Basia is the background in which everything (...) happens’ (20.10.1916). The reminiscence of his daughter became a *memento mori* of high existential importance in his life; in the field of war experiences, it is also a personal warning against the depersonalization of the human being subjected to its mechanisms. After Basia’s death, Irzykowski is ready to ‘take part in the war’ not only ‘by pen’, as when he wrote about the relationship between war and aesthetics in 1914 (Irzykowski 1914: 256-260), but also by fighting directly, but he remains independent and aware of the fear and pain that the fact

of confrontation with death involves. At the same time, he declares his readiness for this ultimate confrontation¹⁴.

For Irzykowski, Basia's death is an opportunity to make a philosophical reflection on war – its background consists of considerations of the modern condition of the entity, particularly its attitude to death in general. Irzykowski objects to such an attitude and does not accept it – he protests against 'collectivised death' – the one that has deprived war of its adequate individual existential dimension. He objects to the appropriation of Basia by the war narrative, including the appropriation of what he called 'national hyenism' (Irzykowski 1980: 595) demanding testimonies of grave and death when criticising Żeromski's novel *Uroda życia* [*The Charm of Life*] in 1913. In this way, he opts for the wonderful potential of presence, individuality and human dignity. It can be fulfilled not by shaping *collective memory*, but by working out *collective memory* – the cultivation of the individual memory of the dead one.

We can say that the reminiscence of Adam Żeromski is subordinated to the social perspective – this broader frame of collective memory, which helps us understand why Żeromski's son is a 'little Pole' in his narrative and Basia is the object of mental and individual memory and why she can be great Poland. In this sense, both texts constitute media of memory culture, but on various levels. The narrative about Adam is aimed at establishing and confirming a model, shaping an attitude and constituting identity by setting a task to be performed – the complement of the situation of Polishness in the material and practical idea connected with the ethical postulate. The authenticity of this model is confirmed by Żeromski – the narrator, and Żeromski – the author of journalistic writings in postwar years. In Irzykowski's diary, the medium of writing allows for intermediation and transposition between the individual memory of Basia and the collective memory, while serving as a warning against the appropriation of the right to the private dimension of Polishness by big narratives that discriminate adventitiousness, presence and life.

¹⁴ Irzykowski's readiness to take part in the war and potentially die may be interpreted as a symptom of melancholia-related suicidal tendencies (Freud 1957: 250).

Giving testimony to such a difficult personal existential experience that is faced by Żeromski and Irzykowski – writers who are difficult to compare both in the aesthetic and political and ideological dimension¹⁵ – paradoxically involves the need to situate oneself in and towards Polishness once again. This situation is inseparably specified and determined by the experience of the Great War, which seems to confirm researchers' findings about the critical character of the years 1914-1918 (see: Kielak 2001). The experiences of loss, war and Polishness determine also a new co-ordinate system that will specify the situation that Polishness will become for each writer in the independent country.

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¹⁵ Unless the preposition 'towards' is used; after all, the idea of literature developed by Irzykowski, who was younger by one generation, formed polemically, among others, towards Żeromski's works. This was the interpretation to which Sylwia Panek devoted her paper at the conference *Stefan Żeromski wobec tradycji i nowoczesności* [Stefan Żeromski towards Tradition and Modernity] that took place in the Adam Mickiewicz Museum of Literature in Warsaw from 19th till 20th November 2014.

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Summary

The article summarizes and compares the two biographical texts by writers who are difficult to compare in terms of aesthetics and political-ideological dimension – fragments of journals by Karol Irzykowski devoted to illness, death and remembrance of his daughter Basia and biographical memory of the dead of tuberculosis son Adam by Stefan Żeromski. The comparative perspective of both narratives of loss is present in their reflection on Polishness, increased in the circumstances of World War I. The analysis and interpretation shows that bearing witness to such a difficult personal existential experience paradoxically involves the necessity of re-positioning in and to Polishness. The memory of Adam Żeromski is subordinated to the social perspective, frame of collective memory, which makes it understandable why in Żeromski's story he is the 'little Pole', and Basia is the subject to psychological and individual memory, collected memory, so she can be called the great Poland. In this sense, both texts are the media of culture of remembrance, which inherently clarifies and determines the experience of the Great War that seems to confirm the researchers' diagnosis of a breakthrough significance of the period 1914-1918, also in the perspective of Polish identity.

Keywords: narrative of loss, memory, collective memory, collected memory, World War I, the literature of World War I, Polishness