

# AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS COMPLAINT: POLISH SOCIAL MEMOIR BETWEEN THE WORLD WARS

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**This article considers life-writing as a form of grievance and complaint. In particular, it examines interwar Poland's answer to the *cahiers de doléances*: "social memoir" (*pamiętnikarstwo społeczne*), or autobiographical writings by youth, workers, peasants, immigrants, the unemployed, and others, gathered by sociologists in memoir-writing competitions. Like the *cahiers de doléances* in prerevolutionary France, social memoir accompanied broader discourses of crisis and reform in the Second Polish Republic. The article explores how complaint was framed and conceived as a meaningful speech act by both sociologists and memoirists, arguing that memoirists turned grievances drawn from everyday experience into demands rooted in a moral understanding of social justice. As such, social memoir has much in common with what, in other contexts, we would call witnessing or testimony, and was embedded in cultural assumptions about truth telling and the rights and obligations of citizenship. While critics of the social memoir genre complained that it was too full of complaints, memoirists presented their ability to complain as evidence of their subjecthood: I complain, therefore I am.**

**Keywords:** Autobiography; Poland; Complaint; Interwar; Peasants; Sociology; Testimony

This article considers life-writing as a form of grievance and complaint. In particular, it examines interwar Poland's answer to the *cahiers de doléances*—"social memoir" (*pamiętnikarstwo społeczne*), or autobiographical writings by youth, workers, peasants, immigrants, the unemployed, and other members of the traditionally nonliterary classes, gathered through memoir-writing competitions. These contests, introduced by Polish sociologists in the 1920s and promulgated through the press, adult education circles, and mass political organizations, met with unanticipated popularity among both writing and reading publics, fostered by rising literacy and the spread of the mass media after Polish independence. By the late 1930s, some 20 competitions, the largest receiving over 1,500 entries, had resulted in around 25 published volumes that were widely discussed in the press at the time (Markiewicz-Lagneau 1976:594). Among the most important publications were *A Worker's Own Life-Story*

(*Życiorys własny robotnika*; Wojciechowski [1930] 1971), *Memoirs of the Unemployed* (*Pamiętniki bezrobotnych*; Instytut Gospodarstwa Społecznego [1933] 1967a, [1933] 1967b), *Memoirs of Peasants* (*Pamiętniki chłopów*; Krzywicki 1935), *The Young Generation of Peasants* (*Młode pokolenie chłopów*; Chałasiński [1938] 1984), *Workers Write* (*Robotnicy piszą. Pamiętniki robotników—studium wstępne*; Mysłakowski and Gross 1938), and *Memoirs of Emigrants: France* (*Pamiętniki emigrantów. Francja*; Instytut Gospodarstwa Społecznego 1939). Plans for a compilation of memoirs by Jewish youth, gathered by the Jewish Scientific Institute (YIVO), were cut short by the outbreak of World War II.

Like the *cahiers de doléances*, or lists of complaints, of the Third Estate in pre-revolutionary France,<sup>1</sup> social memoir accompanied broader discourses of crisis and reform in the Second Polish Republic. Against the backdrop of deepening economic and political polarization in the 1930s, competition memoirs were both promoted and received as documents worthy of careful attention from policymakers and educated society (Lebow 2012). Setting the tone for social memoir's reception throughout the rest of the decade was the Warsaw-based Institute for Social Economy's 1933 compilation, *Memoirs of the Unemployed*—called by the government-aligned *Illustrated Daily Courier* "a true goldmine for the writer, the sociologist, the economist, the demographer, but above all—for society" (Instytut Gospodarstwa Społecznego [1933] 1967b:383). Importantly, reviewers stressed not only the memoirs' documentary value but their capacity to evoke moral disquiet. "From the outset one can say," claimed the conservative Catholic *Warsaw Courier*, "that the reader who fears for his peace of mind will not read this book" (295). According to the liberal Jewish *Our Review*, it was a "work of first-rank importance, not only for every politician, social activist, economist, doctor, publicist, psychologist, eugenicist, or hygienist, but for every average mortal with eyes that see and ears that hear, for everyone whose short-sighted egoism does not command him to shut himself up in a house with walls that do not admit the voice of life" (297). For the metalworkers' journal *Struggle*, it was "a terrible, cruel document...not only a document of the times, but simultaneously an accusation against the capitalist system, written...not in legal terminology, but on the scale of lived suffering" (260). The *New Journal* of the socialist Bund asked how *Memoirs of the Unemployed* should be classified—whether as scholarly book, belles lettres, or reportage—concluding that it was, in fact, "a fragment of life, streaming with blood" (282). For other reviewers, it was "terrible," "strange," and "true," a collective "accuse" (302, *passim*).

The idea that social memoir's value lay in raising things that rankled, in its presentation of grievances and accusations, seems to have been shared by many ordinary Poles who submitted their life stories to memoir competitions throughout the 1930s. Even when the revelations they contained were less sensational than those in *Memoirs of the Unemployed*, memoirists appear to have understood competitions as a

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<sup>1</sup> The *cahiers* were lists of grievances drawn up by the three estates in March–April 1789 on the order of Louis XVI. Reflecting widespread dissatisfaction with taxation, corruption, and Church and noble privileges, the *cahiers* of the Third Estate contributed to discussions of reform on the eve of the French Revolution.

wholly appropriate venue for the airing of grievances. In response to a call for memoirs by young rural Poles in 1937, for instance, a peasant from the Warsaw region thanked the organizers for making the competition “free of censorship” because this meant “one could speak freely...[and] complain about every evil.” Another competitor, a young woman from the district of Garwolin, explained that she was “writing only in order to complain and present to people of higher knowledge how a rural girl lives in the village, what her dreams and projects are, what she desires, what she endeavors to do and what she can endeavor to do. I don’t expect that I will describe it properly, but simply, the way I know how, honestly” (Chałasiński [1938] 1984, 1:6–7). Commenting on the compilation *Memoirs of Peasants* (Krzywicki 1935), rural sociologist Władysław Grabski considered complaint so intrinsic to the texts that he devoted part of his analysis to enumerating “the ways in which” and “about whom” the memoirists complained, providing separate listings for “brothers and sisters, neighbors, the local landowner, the local parish priest, members of the intelligentsia, policemen, etc.” (1982:21–22).

Here, I do not intend to analyze the content of complaints in the memoirs à la Grabski so much as explore through close reading how complaint was framed and conceived as a meaningful speech act by the sociologists and memoirists who produced social memoirs in interwar Poland. To be sure, “complaint” is hardly a precise analytical category; unlike certain terms devised by social scientists to indicate complaint-like activities (e.g., “claim making,” “voice”), the idea of complaint is hard to disengage from its rich, sometimes contradictory associations in colloquial usage, which are always historically and culturally contingent. To study complaint, therefore, necessitates reflexively engaging with some of the cultural baggage that renders it such an ambiguous and slippery concept to begin with.

In this article, I will look especially at how stereotypes of peasants contributed to the discourse of complaint in social memoirs. After considering contemporary scholarly debates surrounding the aforementioned *Memoirs of Peasants*, I turn to the 1937 memoir competition “A Description of My Life, Work, Plans, and Hopes.” Organized by the Institute for Rural Culture for village youth between the ages of 15 and 30, its 1,544 collected memoirs served as the basis for sociologist Józef Chałasiński’s<sup>2</sup> magisterial *The Young Generation of Peasants* published the following year (Chałasiński [1938] 1984). Through a close reading of memoirs excerpted or reproduced fully in Chałasiński’s work, as well as of unpublished manuscripts from the archives, I examine how peasants’ memoirs turned the airing of grievances into demands for inclusion and respect as political and human subjects.

As such, “complaint” in these memoirs has much in common with what in other contexts we would call witnessing or testimony. Based on this understanding of social memoir, I speculate that even in the Communist period, cultures of grievance in

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<sup>2</sup> Józef Chałasiński (1904–1979) studied with Florian Znaniecki (see footnote 4) in Poznań and is seen as one of his most important disciples. Continuing his career after World War II at the University of Łódź, he is best known for his memoir-based studies, such as his follow-up to *The Young Generation of Peasants* drawing on thousands of memoirs collected from rural youth in the early 1960s.

Poland may have been embedded in certain assumptions about truth telling and what has come in recent literature to be called “moral witness”—a type of storytelling founded on the storyteller’s belief that “in another place or another time there exists, or will exist, a moral community that will listen to their testimony” (Margalit 2002:155). We can better understand these assumptions through a reading of interwar social memoirs. For while interwar critics complained that social memoir was too full of complaints, memoirists presented their complaining as evidence of their own personhood: I complain, therefore I am.

## THE POLISH METHOD OF COMPLAINT

In their entries to the competition “A Description of My Life, Work, Plans, and Hopes” authors frequently described how the competition’s announcement had awakened in them a powerful urge to write about their lives. One rural youth, for instance, described working on his entry “in a feverish tempo by the light of a reeking kerosene lamp,” battling to keep his eyes open after long, hard days of work in the fields. The unfamiliar act of writing sometimes seemed like carrying “a huge weight beyond [his] strength,” but a mysterious and potent force, he said, somehow drove him to complete the nearly 60-page manuscript.<sup>3</sup> “I immediately decided” to submit an entry upon learning of the contest, wrote another author, “first, because I would like to win a prize, and second, because for a long time now I have felt the need to pour out my thoughts and plans and...record them on paper with the goal of sharing them with others” (Chałasiński [1938] 1984, 1:5).

The lure of self-expression, of finding a sympathetic interlocutor, or indeed of winning a prize were all compelling reasons for participating in memoir competitions. (“I don’t dream of [winning a trip to] Denmark—O God, I would simply go mad with joy; I don’t dream of it,” as one memoirist wrote. “But if I got just one single book, which under my present circumstances I couldn’t afford...I would be so happy” [Chałasiński [1938] 1984, 1:6].) And yet, perhaps the most important motivation for writing one’s life story was the opportunity to express grievances of both a personal and generic kind.

Social memoir arose out of the collaboration between Polish philosopher Florian Znaniecki<sup>4</sup> and University of Chicago sociologist William I. Thomas on the classic study *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (1918–1920). *The Polish Peasant* promoted close analysis of “personal documents” such as letters, diaries, and autobiographies, reproducing in its five volumes nearly 800 letters by immigrants and their family back home and a book-length autobiography by a Polish worker living in Chicago. Of all types of personal document, the authors privileged autobiography as

<sup>3</sup> Memoir of Jan P. (“Iwan Olsowski”), University of Massachusetts Amherst Library Special Collections, Józef Obrębski Papers, Group 1, Series 6, Box 39, Folder 69.

<sup>4</sup> Florian Znaniecki (1882–1958), coauthor of *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (1918–1920) and founder of academic sociology in the Polish Second Republic. Also an important figure in American sociology, Znaniecki settled at the University of Illinois during World War II and served as forty-fourth president of the American Sociological Association.

offering fullest access to the formation of personality and worldview. Thus, in their famous "Methodological Note," they argued that "personal life-records, as complete as possible, constitute the *perfect* type of sociological material" ([1918–1920] 1958, 2:1831–1832, emphasis in the original). After returning to Poland and establishing the newly independent country's first sociological institute in Poznań, Znaniecki devised a strategy for generating such materials in heretofore unprecedented quantities: in 1922, his institute advertised a competition for the best memoir by a manual worker, in response to which it received 149 entries. Znaniecki followed up with contests on other themes; emulated by other scholars, the method soon came to dominate Polish sociological research (so much so, in fact, that it was sometimes known as the "Polish method" by scholars elsewhere) (Lebow 2012; Markiewicz-Lagneau 1976; Thompson 1979).

Subsequent competitions employed the basic ingredients introduced by Znaniecki in 1922: a theme and target group for the contest were chosen by organizers, and an announcement describing the competition's theme and offering guidelines for writers was carefully scripted and placed in newspapers and/or circulated through mass organizations. The 1922 competition announcement "for the best life story of a worker written by himself," for example, began by specifying the prizes being offered (usually money, books, or travel) and laying out the competition's minimal eligibility requirements:

Anyone may take part in the competition who supports himself through physical labor...If you do not know how to write, you may dictate to someone else. Grammatical errors, bad style, and poor handwriting will not in any way prevent you from getting a prize. One should not imagine that writing the history of one's own life is a very difficult thing.... All that matters is honestly, truthfully, and precisely to describe one's whole life from childhood to the present moment. It is easiest to describe everything in order, year by year, event by event. In the end, write however you like.<sup>5</sup>

Suggestions of topics to cover included childhood, family relations, "school (if you went to school)," experiences and conditions at work, "way of life (home, food, clothes)," "participation in unions and associations; participation in political and religious life," love and marriage, "what you expect in life and what you most desire."<sup>6</sup>

If we think of social memoir as a conversation, then during the 1920s, this conversation had the character of a quiet chat carried out discreetly behind the closed doors of the academy, involving a select number of scholars and memoirists. In the 1930s, however, this conversation came out into the open and attracted a wider set of interlocutors. First, the numbers of contributors to memoir competitions swelled from tens to many hundreds. Commenting on the results of the 1937 competition, Chałasiński noted a seemingly inexhaustible graphomania among members of the

<sup>5</sup> Archive of Modern Records (Warsaw), TPP 210, n.p.

<sup>6</sup> Archive of Modern Records (Warsaw), TPP 210, n.p.

Polish public: "After every competition it appeared that the maximum success had been achieved," he wrote, and that "those who had wanted to have a voice had already done so and stepped forward." And yet, with each subsequent competition, the numbers of entries had only increased (Chałasiński [1938] 1984, 1:1). The "conversation" had expanded, moreover, to include broad segments of the press, the literary world, and the educated reading public.

Furthermore, the tone of the conversation had also changed, as memoirs came to reflect a sense of intensified crisis during the Great Depression. On the one hand, a number of left-wing researchers, such as those associated with the Institute for Social Economy (Instytut Gospodarstwa Społecznego, IGS), saw memoir as a tool for raising public awareness of the crisis. In his introduction to *Memoirs of the Unemployed*, for example, the IGS's director Ludwik Krzywicki<sup>7</sup> reminded readers that behind these tales "of destitution...hard experience, and above all hunger and sickness" lay hundreds of thousands of others desperately "crying out for help" (Instytut Gospodarstwa Społecznego [1933] 1967a:v). Some readers were so moved by the plight of particular authors that they sought to offer them work or financial assistance.<sup>8</sup> The IGS's 1935 *Memoirs of Peasants*, meanwhile, depicted equally abysmal material conditions in the Polish countryside (Krzywicki 1935). While that image would be critiqued by Grabski from the right (as I shall discuss below), the press responded favorably to the volume in hundreds of reviews that spanned the political spectrum, and the compilation's second volume was to win one of Poland's most prestigious literary prizes (Markiewicz-Lagneau 1976:608).

Such consensus about the urgency and importance of memoirs by poor peasants is striking given the intensely polarized character of Polish politics and society: linguistically, religiously, and ethnically diverse, the country was moreover sharply divided between cosmopolitan urban and "backward" rural areas. Political parties representing ethnic and class groups vied with traditional bourgeois parties for influence in the parliament, or Sejm, but also with their counterparts across the political aisle. Although freedom of speech and the press remained relatively protected following Józef Piłsudski's 1926 coup d'état, the "government of the colonels" clamped down with increasing violence on perceived enemies such as Ukrainian nationalists, peasant activists, and Communists while tolerating and/or encouraging antisemitic agitation from the far right. During this period, many intellectuals moved into opposition, radicalized by both rising state authoritarianism and the perceived failure of economic reforms to alleviate the difficult situation of peasants and workers (Polonsky 1972).

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<sup>7</sup> Ludwik Krzywicki (1859–1941) was an important figure in the development of Polish anthropology, economics, and sociology. Before World War I, Krzywicki was active in the socialist and pro-independence movements. In independent Poland, he served as vice-director of the Central Statistical Office, taught at the University of Warsaw, and directed research into living conditions and social issues as director of the Institute for Social Economy.

<sup>8</sup> The *Illustrated Morning Express* in Lwów, for example, solicited offers of employment and collected funds for memoirist "Ludwik T" (*Memoirs of the Unemployed*) from readers (Instytut Gospodarstwa Społecznego [1933] 1967b:288).



Władysław Grabski's critique of *Memoirs of Peasants* must be seen, first of all, against the backdrop of these ideological conflicts. Grabski (1874–1938), an agrarian populist in the conservative Popular–National Union, had held ministerial positions in the Polish government (including two terms as prime minister) before his appointment as rector of the Main School of Rural Economy in 1936.<sup>9</sup> In interesting ways, his biography paralleled that of Krzywicki while ultimately diverging from it politically. Both men had spent their youth in milieus dominated by the Polish Socialist Party, both had served prison terms for their nationalist activities before World War I, and both had promoted statistics and economics as state-building tools after Polish independence, serving the new state in important government or administrative functions. However, while Krzywicki remained a (highly unorthodox) Marxist, Grabski turned to agrarian populism, promoting an organicist vision of solidarity between city and country and the awakening of peasants' consciousness of their role as bedrock of the nation (Krzeczkowski 1938; Łetocha 2012).

Grabski published his influential critique of *Memoirs of Peasants* in Poland's main sociological journal in 1936, objecting to both the premises and methods employed by Krzywicki and his team of researchers in *Memoirs of Peasants*. First, Grabski argued that, although peasant livelihoods had declined as a result of the Depression, this was in contrast to a strong upturn in the years just prior to 1929. Peasant discontent during the Depression, he argued, was thus largely a reflection of the relative difference in some peasants' livelihoods before and after 1929—the result of ordinary cyclical fluctuation, rather than a crisis of capitalism, as sociologists of the IGS would have it. Grabski went on to charge investigators of the IGS with manipulating this reservoir of relative discontent to promulgate an inaccurate and alarmist view of the rural economy, hoping to generate public support for “dramatic measures” to correct problems that, for him, did not exist (1936:297–307).

While on the one hand, then, Grabski's attack was directed rather bluntly at the IGS's socially reformist politics, on the other, it presented a methodological argument that reflected a growing interest among Polish sociologists in the dynamic relationship between researcher and subject within the framework of social memoir. In Znaniecki's original conception, memoirs were the ideal source for studying what he and Thomas called attitudes and values; Znaniecki was interested in memoirs as reflections of sociological processes from the subjective point of view of individual social actors. For Znaniecki, however, memoirs were essentially static documents; he devoted little reflection to methodological questions involving, for instance, the design of memoir competitions or the relationship between researcher and subject. On the other hand, in the 1930s, a number of Polish researchers became interested in how participation in memoir competitions could transform the very social relations the memoirs were meant to document. An example was Max Weinreich,<sup>10</sup> the driving

<sup>9</sup> Grabski's political career is best remembered for monetary reforms that created the złoty in 1924.

<sup>10</sup> Max Weinreich (1894–1969) cofounded the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research in 1925. With training in philology and linguistics, Weinreich became increasingly interested in the social sciences in the 1930s, developing YIVO's social science division and, in particular, its *Yugfor* (youth research) project, which conducted extensive memoir research among Jewish youth in interwar Poland.

force behind YIVO's social scientific research program. Influenced by psychoanalysis, Weinreich believed that writing memoirs would help young Jews work through identity conflicts deriving from their minority status in Polish society. The memoir competition was also seen as a means of establishing contact between YIVO and Jewish youth, thereby (it was hoped) creating a community of interest between them (Soyer 1999:221). In this view, the unburdening of grievances would serve as both a therapeutic and a communicative act.

Grabski, too, was concerned with communication between researchers and their subjects, but he saw this interaction in a highly problematic light. Subjecting the language of the competition announcement for *Memoirs of Peasants* to scrutiny, Grabski accused the IGS of steering memoirists toward a set of predetermined results—namely, the bleakest possible view of peasant existence. Grabski charged that the announcement's exhortations not to "omit even the smallest detail from their life in poverty" or to "feel ashamed of what they had experienced" had given license to "exaggerate," especially since, it was implied, this might "make others become interested in their situation." In any case, Grabski argued, such language would only have discouraged better-off peasants from participating, as apparently the competition's organizers were interested only in tales of dire suffering. The result, he argued, was a compilation that should more accurately be titled *Memoirs of Poor Peasants*, as it presented a skewed picture of the peasantry's material situation (Grabski 1982:17–19).

What makes Grabski's critique interesting, however, is less its charge of sampling bias than its unconscious characterization of the researcher-subject relationship as a dynamic interaction embedded in established social roles. Grabski portrayed this relationship in terms of what we might characterize as paternalism and dependency: the competition's organizers had "exhorted the peasants to describe their poverty," and peasants had obliged (even exaggerating a little) to "please the kind-hearted gentlemen who had announced...that they felt pity for the poor." While the IGS's researchers were thus dismissed as naïve do-gooders at best, the peasant memoirists were also portrayed in a less than flattering light, their participation characterized as a step-and-fetch-it performance: memoir writers enacted poverty on demand in exchange for (hopefully) a prize. Barely hiding his scorn, Grabski suggested that competitions such as *Memoirs of Peasants* would ultimately attract only "those who [felt] their own poverty most and want[ed] to display it." For, he concluded, "one can also suffer one's poverty with pride. But then one does not write a memoir" (Grabski 1982:17–19).

Critically, then, for Grabski, the communication between the IGS and peasants had been "effect-oriented" on both sides—not truth-oriented. Ironically, Grabski thus invoked longstanding stereotypes of the dishonest and cunning peasant that stood in stark contrast to his own political program of fostering a conscious and empowered rural class. He also confronted an apparent Catch-22: a "proud" peasant could not write a memoir that spoke of hardships without betraying his values and those of his class; this, however, effectively deprived peasants of authentic spokespeople in what had developed into a critical sphere of public discourse, namely autobiography.



Interestingly, in his introduction to *Memoirs of the Unemployed*, Krzywicki had also raised the matter of an alleged taboo in Polish folk culture against complaining about one's poverty. The two researchers, however, drew dramatically divergent conclusions from a similar premise: while Grabski believed that only born complainers (those who would exaggerate their poverty) would take part in competitions, Krzywicki argued that deep-seated cultural biases against revealing one's poverty to others would inoculate respondents against exaggeration. Indeed, Krzywicki argued, memoirs could thus be assumed, if anything, to *understate* the grim realities of poor people's lives (Instytut Gospodarswa Społecznego [1933] 1967a:xi). If nothing else, Grabski's and Krzywicki's divergent conclusions from a similar set of assumptions suggest the inseparability of ideology, culture, and politics in the discourse of social memoir.

## I COMPLAIN, THEREFORE I AM

Grabski's methodological criticisms of the IGS's research design seem to have had an impact on competition announcements of the later 1930s, which appear careful to avoid steering memoirists toward "effect-oriented" descriptions of hardship or suffering. While powerful descriptions of material want remained a central element in almost all memoirs by members of the lower classes in the 1930s, these emerged in later competitions in response to more open-ended questions about topics like childhood, education, work, or emigration. As it turned out, explicit questions about the authors' material circumstances were not necessary to elicit what could often be dramatic and heart-wrenching tales of poverty.<sup>11</sup>

Grabski was chair of the scientific council of the Institute for Rural Culture when the latter issued its calls for memoirs by rural youth in 1937. The competition announcement asked authors to write, first, a biographical narrative from early childhood to the present (under subthemes such as family, education, work, and involvement in village life and social organizations); then, it solicited their views on the Polish village and its relation to society at large, concluding with the succinct request for information about "what the author considers bad in contemporary life, and what good—and how it should be." In his study *The Young Generation of Peasants*, Chałasiński used the memoirs to address what he saw as transformations in peasant worldview and, especially, in the self-image of peasant youth: as Znaniecki put it in his foreword to the volume, the memoirs demonstrated young peasants' struggles to become "an integral part of nation-state society." In particular, they suggested that many young people, having rejected traditional peasant social roles, were actively engaged in constructing new ones that better conformed to their aspirations to partake in social and political processes (Chałasiński [1938] 1984, 1:xiv–xvi).

Reading the memoirs themselves, one is struck by the fact that the social roles rejected by young memoirists include precisely the two conflicting stereotypes juxtaposed by Grabski—that is, mendacious dependency, on the one hand, and

<sup>11</sup> See, for instance, the memoirs in *Workers Write* (Mysłakowski and Gross 1938).

proud but silent stoicism, on the other. On the one hand, memoirists rejected silent suffering by declaring their intention not to “wrap anything in cotton” in their narratives—that is, not to pull any punches or sugarcoat the truth (Chałasiński [1938] 1984, 1:5). In this connection, memoirists also sometimes praised the competition’s lack of censorship (2:310). On the other hand, memoirists emphasized that with the freedom to complain came a responsibility to be judicious and, above all, truthful: “What I write, I write honestly. I try not to cover up the things that are bad—I praise what is good” (1:5, 9). By offering a privileged space for *truthful* complaint, memoirists implied, the competition allowed young peasants to prove their independence of thought and, thus, their right to participate as equal partners in the nation-state.

Such independence was often expressed through criticism, either of other peasants who conformed to discredited social models or of social superiors who refused to acknowledge that such models were out of date—to admit that peasants could feel, think, and reason like themselves. We see this in the memoir of Jan P., or “Iwan Olsowski” (the author requested the pseudonym since, as he wrote, his “sharp” criticisms might otherwise lead to retribution), an “Orthodox Pole” (according to sociologists’ notes) from the Polesie region. The first half of the memoir is a colorful *Bildungsroman* describing the making of a peasant-intellectual, an autodidact with no schooling beyond the primary level but with a firm belief in peasant self-improvement and self-help. Besides his struggles to enlighten the superstitious peasants of his parent’s generation on scientific farming methods and the wonders of radio, Olsowski battled with the “Efremovs” and “Pugachevs”—a couple of local gangs with whom he and his bookish, teetotaling friends carried on a dangerously violent rivalry.<sup>12</sup>

While the memoir’s first half stresses the backwardness, fanaticism, superstition, and passivity of Olsowski’s fellow peasants, this is nothing compared to the criticism he unleashes in the memoir’s second section against representatives of the state and national agrarian organizations. The latter, he argued, repeatedly undermined grass-roots initiatives in the village, particularly among youth, by replacing local activists with useless and/or corrupt functionaries. But the worst were the civil servants and their criminally high-handed behavior. Officials treated the peasant “not as a citizen, but as a person inimical to the state who...under no circumstances should be trusted”; they intimidated supplicants with name-calling (“boor” [*cham*], “subversive,” “Communist”)<sup>13</sup> and failed to realize that “the time of slavery had irrevocably passed.” Everyone, Olsowski commented, “eats the bread [the peasant grows], whether king of minister, factory owner, or worker.” And yet, while the century had brought wonders to some, the peasant dumbly watched while others went “by car, airplane, or train.”

<sup>12</sup> Memoir of Jan P. (“Iwan Olsowski”), University of Massachusetts Amherst Library Special Collections, Józef Obrębski Papers, Group 1, Series 6, Box 39, Folder 69, Pp. 27–35.

<sup>13</sup> According to the anti-Communist Olsowski, the insult “Communist,” especially, was “used to excess.”

Only the peasant, “as in the eighteenth century, had to plod along on foot.”<sup>14</sup> Ultimately, Olsowski’s rather monumental complaint was that the peasantry had been excluded from both democracy and modernity.

The fact that the announcement for the 1937 competition carefully avoided language encouraging complaint had evidently not discouraged Olsowski in the least. Perhaps Grabski had a point: in the context of the Second Republic, the genre of social memoir inexorably lent itself to the voicing of grievances, not least as evidence of authors’ profound belief in their own independence of thought. In transforming its authors from passive objects into subjects able to critique and complain, social memoir lent itself well to claims about citizenship and equality. As one contestant explained, “I am writing so that in the so-called ‘enlightened spheres’ they will know that a peasant does not only rummage in the filth, plow, sow, and reap, but also thinks, feels, and begins to understand his situation—and that the time is coming when the peasantry will take its affairs in hand and become the true landlord [*gospodarz*] in Poland.” Said another, “I write in the hope that perhaps my account will appear in print, so that perhaps someone who doesn’t know the village will learn that in the village, too, live human beings” (Chałasiński [1938] 1984, 1:6–8).

## PLAINTIFFS AND WITNESSES: SOCIAL MEMOIR’S ECHOES

Globally, the decade of the 1930s was a high-water mark for public and scholarly interest in the collection and circulation of documentary representations (and self-representations) of the “little man.” Among other coordinated, large-scale efforts to gather and study the personal narratives of ordinary people were the oral history projects of the Federal Writers Project in the United States (Hirsch 2003), Mass Observation in Britain (Hinton 2011), and numerous initiatives in the USSR (Fitzpatrick 2005). Social democratic parties in Britain and Germany also organized several essay-writing contests in the 1920s, in which ordinary people were asked to describe aspects of their daily lives (Lüdtke 1991; Tilghman 2003). What made the Polish case distinctive, besides its large scale and impact in the public sphere, was its union of a prestigious research agenda centered on the human subject with a mass politics of civic inclusion and social justice. Just as Soviet young people may have “worked” on themselves in diaries or autobiographies to become worthy Soviet subjects (Hellbeck 2006), for many Polish autobiographers, writing their life stories was part of the aspirational process of becoming citizens in the new Poland.

After World War II, interwar Polish life-writing traditions collided with Communist ones. Polish Communists were quick to seize on social memoir’s cultural capital and promulgated the mass writing and publishing of memoirs as a tool for legitimizing the new regime. Those life stories published in postwar compilations traced an upward trajectory of personal and professional fulfillment in implicit (or sometimes explicit) contrast to interwar narratives, stressing Communism’s removal of the hardships and obstacles confronted by an earlier generation of memoir-

<sup>14</sup> Memoir of Jan P. (“Iwan Olsowski”), University of Massachusetts Amherst Library Special Collections, Józef Obrębski Papers, Group 1, Series 6, Box 39, Folder 69, Pp. 50–56.

ists. Postwar memoirs were no longer expected to air grievances, in other words, but to praise and celebrate socialism.

And yet, anecdotal evidence suggests an enduring attachment to memoir as a genre of complaint during the Communist period. While doing research on the Stalinist period (roughly 1948–1956), for instance, I came across any number of unpublished memoirs that failed to correspond to the script above and in which authors raised grievances surely knowing it would win them no prizes. In these memoirs, there rather seems to be a vestigial association between memoir writing and truth telling. An eloquent example is the 1978 memoir of a woman whose brother had died in an industrial accident while building Poland's "first socialist city," the steel town of Nowa Huta. "I am fully aware," the author wrote, "that my sole memories...connected with the founding of Nowa Huta...are not popular and will not be looked upon favorably by the organizers of the competition.... I write from moral obligation, from a need of the heart." The memoirist used the occasion of the memoir competition to bear witness and present a counternarrative to the new town's triumphalist official history.<sup>15</sup>

Throughout the interwar period, the fact that memoirists were continually urged by competition organizers to be truthful—combined with the knowledge that their life stories would go before a competition jury, the Polish word for which literally meant "court" (*sąd*)—strengthened associations between life-writing, testimony, and judgment. In *Memoirs of the Unemployed*, an unskilled worker from the Poznan voievodship promised organizers that his memoir contained only "authentic facts" which, if called upon, he could prove. Thus, he hoped the "just jury" would award him a prize because his life story was "a chain of sufferings through which the rays of happiness rarely shine"; let the court/jury, he wrote, judge his account "without the slightest departure from justice" (Instytut Gospodarstwa Społecznego [1933] 1967a:399). The sphere of social memoir offered an alternative realm of moral account, one in which juries' fairness, defined by their presumed scientific objectivity, could be counted on to achieve the justice that was denied beyond the page.

Such an understanding of life-writing as an alternative sphere of justice links the complaint of social memoir to its etymological cousin, "plaintiff," and makes it possible to speak of social memoir as a kind of "moral witness." According to Jay Winter, the hallmarks of moral witness include not only the witness's willingness to describe his or her direct experience of evil and suffering but the "belief that words matter, that they can reach other people." The moral witnesses' words, however, are not always the ones we want to hear; they come to complain, not to console (Winter 2007:473). Their narratives offer both indictment and proof. They lodge the same fundamental complaint—indifference to suffering, refusal of common humanity—while rebutting such dehumanization through their construction of the autobiographical subject.

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<sup>15</sup> Records of the competition "Wspomnienie o Nowej Hucie," organized by the women's magazine *Zwierciadło* in 1978, from the private collection of Barbara Krupa. See "Róża wiatrów" (pseudonym), untitled memoir, and "Ela" (pseudonym), "Druga strona medału."

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