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BETWEEN CULTURE AND NATURE: SOME CONSIDERATIONS ON THE LIFE HISTORY PERSPECTIVE¹

Abstract

Life history is a term usually assigned in the history of historiography to the Italian school of microhistory. In fact, it is a concept typical for the natural sciences in the case of which it is a framework focused on studies of life history strategies as well as life cycles. Life history analysis has become the subject of numerous studies around the world and has been gaining in popularity in social sciences. The author presents life history as a certain research perspective for historical studies which is capable of incorporating both natural and cultural approaches. He draws inspirations of the life history perspective from recent research into history of modern Poland.

Key words: life history, microhistory, life course theory, quality analysis, biographical studies

There are certain people of whom it is difficult to say anything which will at once throw them into relief—in other words, describe them graphically in their typical characteristics. These are they who are generally known as “commonplace people,” and this class comprises, of course, the immense majority of mankind. Authors, as a rule, attempt to select and portray types rarely met with in their entirety, but these types are nevertheless more real than real life itself.
Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Idiot*, Part IV, Chapter I

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INTRODUCTION

In this article, I would like to examine the problem of the life history perspective and share my own research experience in this field. I seek an answer to the question of how to envisage the life history perspective in historical research and what consequences stem from adopting this perspective to historical narrative. Subconsciously, in our innermost dreams, each of us would like to reach the plane of history in such a way as to touch, via palpation, historical experience. This idea was once more fully expressed by our eminent historian Gerard Labuda, who wrote: “History also seeks man, but it does not pose questions to them formulated based on detached philosophical theories, but would like them to speak and say everything they know about themselves; not only that — it would like to introduce them to the same circle of thoughts and feelings in which they once lived and acted, because only in this way can one discover what the motives behind their actions were, as well as properly understand and evaluate them. However, it is us who impose our concepts on people of other times, instead of understanding their own, and this often causes misunderstandings, because we want to judge people of the past according to today’s concepts”²

This intention clashes in practice with the possibilities and requirements of our cultural environment. This is clearly reflected in the above motto chosen to accompany these considerations. The motto points, in an interesting way, to the problem life history faces. The crux of the matter is not only and not so much about the question of whether historians act like writers, because they certainly do, but also about whether such a historical representation has any value and what is its value. Does such an approach make sense from the point of view of the pure experience of the past that Labuda writes about in the above quotation?

When asking about the essence of the life history perspective, one should refer to the philosophical, social and historical conditions of looking at the world, which interest us because of a specific “way of treating man, aimed at discovering and capturing their most important concerns”.³ Therefore, I would like the life history perspective to assume, first of all, that its focal point is a specific person and a concrete life from the past, and that the most important events in a person’s life happen from his birth to his death. The space of life designated in this way constitutes the first and most important chronological boundaries of an inquiry. It should be recognized that although they often participate in important events, or only considered as such by the society, we are interested in their, that is the human beings’, view of these events and their assessment of their importance and significance. However, it is not always

² Gerard Labuda, *Święty Wojciech w polskiej tradycji historiograficznej* (Warszawa: PAX, 1997), 36. I owe this quotation to the unpublished book about Karol Potkański by Andrzej Kobak. The work will soon be published by the University of Lodz Publishing House. I used it with the consent of the author.

³ Janusz Kuczyński, *Filozofia życia* (Warszawa: Wiedza Powszechna, 1965), 97.

possible and it is difficult to exclude from this perspective aspects in which such components of human life history as infancy, childhood, youth, mature age or old age become the subject of analysis. Similarly, it is difficult to exclude those elements in which education, professed ideas, military service or traumatic experiences of war determine the human view on being in time. All of them —as we know it— are covered in voluminous literature dealing with both universal and our domestic historiography, which cannot be denied and rejected. However, in the case of the life history perspective, it is about matters most important from the point of view of a specific human existence, and not primarily about human life perceived through the lens of the most important events and concerns of a social group or institutions such as churches, religious associations or the state. It is the state, religion, political parties, and economic activities that become “more real than reality”, as Dostoyevsky said, if we look at them from the perspective of a specific person’s life.

I have decided to take up this issue because in many countries, including my home country, Poland, the dominant historical narrative still adopts the perspective that excludes life history as a focal point, which is in contradiction with what awaits us in the era of the Anthropocene and the problems posed by the modern world and its future. The dominant perspective has an institutional focal point in the case of which the pivotal role is played not by a human being but by a nation, political party, religion or a social group, and human life is only an element that is included in these components. It is a specific appendage and not the essence of social phenomena. The adopted typology of social groups and phenomena surrounding us becomes more important than the individual experience of life on the basis of which these typologies are possible.

At the same time, when applying this perspective, we, living and creating historians who present a specific “cognitive culture”, employ it, as Jan Pomorski rightly wants it. What Jan Pomorski means by cognitive culture is “a kind of self-reflection of cognitive culture, which, while rethinking itself, does not discover/realize its timelessness, but its historicity (changeability), and it tries to share with the society this experience of various forms of presence (and absence) of the past in the present.”⁴ Generally speaking, this concept determines that it is us who choose the focus point. We perceive its, i.e. this point’s, behavior and opinions in the categories of a historian’s cognitive culture which is a culture of a different space-time continuum and, in addition, a specific cognitive culture about the past based on patterns of perceiving the past available and acceptable in our culture. What ‘acceptable’ means here is that these patterns are not always only accepted, but often foreign to our culture.

We look at cognitive culture that determines the behaviors and opinions of the focus point. We usually deal with a situation in which these behaviors do not simply confirm the characteristics of that culture, and may even contradict it. The element of looking into the past, which in the case of the life history

⁴ Jan Pomorski, *Homo Metahistoricus. Studium szczęścia kultur poznających historię* (Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS, 2019), 3.

perspective is a fundamental problem, is the assumption about the differences in the space-time continuum of the observation point and the space-time continuum of the point that is being observed. An essential element of this procedure is the necessity to become aware of this difference and the necessity to intentionally enter the plane of history as an observed plane, which defines the issue of the ontology of history.⁵

A FEW REMARKS ABOUT THE PHILOSOPHICAL ROOTS OF THE CONCEPT

The question about the role of cognitive culture directs our attention towards the philosophy of life as an ideological foundation of looking at history. Life as a category of philosophical thinking has had a great past. Herbert Schnädelbach has written that once in Germany, to be precise in the years 1880–1930, it constituted the main philosophical theme that dominated all other concepts such as ‘being’, ‘nature’, ‘God’ or ‘the self’.⁶ The fundamental fact is that it derives, in fact, from the German philosophy of life, *Lebensphilosophie* (*Philosophie des Lebens*), and is associated with the developed phase of historicism, the research practice of history developed in the first half of the nineteenth century that is especially associated with Wilhelm Dilthey’s thought. According to it, a historian potentially assumes the role of a philosopher. The unforgettable Elżbieta Paczkowska-Łagowska wrote:

Dilthey considered it to be a merit that, unlike the whole philosophy to date, it was only in the philosophy of life he had created, referred to in German as *gechichtliche Lebensphilosophie*, a philosophy taking into account the historical dimension of life, that full and distorted experience came to the fore, which allowed him to equate the philosophy of life and the philosophy of reality. After the collapse of the Hegelian system, life appears in Dilthey’s thought as the only kind of “absolute” to which philosophy may still lay claim, which no longer wants to be speculation, but an analysis of experience. Within the framework of the critique of historical reason, human life constitutes this core, which is always embedded in history and available through cognition via its externalization (objectification), “products of the human spirit”, which can be comprehended because the human spirit has produced them.⁷

⁵ I elaborate on this need, its limitations and possibilities in Krzysztof Zamorski, *Dziwna rzeczywistość. Wprowadzenie do ontologii historii*, vol. IX and X (Kraków: Księgarnia Akademicka, 2008). See also Zamorski, “Zagadnienie przestrzeni ontologicznej w historii”, in *Gra i konieczność. Zbiór rozpraw z filozofii historii i historii historiografii*, ed. by Grzegorz Dominiak, Janusz Ostoja-Zagórski, Wojciech Wrzosek (Bydgoszcz: Oficyna Wydawnicza Epigram, 2005), 17–34.

⁶ Herbert Schnädelbach, *Filozofia w Niemczech 1831–1933*, transl. Krystyna Krzemieniowa (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 1992), 216.

⁷ Elżbieta Paczkowska-Łagowska, *Logos życia. Filozofia hermeneutyczna w kręgu Wilhelma Diltheya*, Gdańsk: Słowo/Obraz Terytoria, 2000), 32/3.

It was intentional that Dilthey had in mind, first of all, causative entities, which create and influence the course of history. In the perspective close to our cognitive culture, this is no longer the only and important indicator of interest in the past. Along with the development of anthropology, we are interested in every manifestation of human life in the past, recorded in the traces of his culture. This is how we can read Dilthey's intentions today when he pointed out that focusing our cognition on a particular life did not lead to knowing only that particular life. This is because, according to Dilthey, "the individual is the point of intersection of various systems [...] of mutual interactions."⁸ In this sense, we reach various —as Paczkowska-Łagowska writes— "references, relations and dependencies". Thus, the historian, as a cognitive culture, reaches the traces of cognitive culture, that is, they enter the plane of history. Entering the plane of history is associated with the necessary cultural imputation, which is brought about by the historical consciousness of cognitive culture. Dilthey himself would say that historical consciousness brought with it a destructive force in the face of the diversity and complexity of the world of cognitive culture.⁹ In a sense, when we actually reach the plane of history, we attribute to it the features of our culture. What is most important, however, is to verify these imputations for the benefit of our understanding of the world on the basis of a study of a concrete experience of life. Andrzej Przyłębski has rightly noticed that:

Dilthey stated that a human being lived as though in three main existential dimensions: emotional (feeling), volitional (action) and cognitive (intellect), which in relation to each other constitute a whole subject only to conventional and philosophical analysis.¹⁰

However, both he and other researchers have noticed that the category of life for Dilthey, although formally not completely limited to man, perceives life primarily as a human category. On the other hand, Przyłębski has observed something that, in consequence, leads us to break the barrier of an exclusively cultural view of human life.

Unlike them [Husserl and Heidegger] Dilthey, whilst emphasizing the tension between the interiority of life and the existence of cultural objectivizations, took into account the divergence between two disproportionate manifestations of life: what —as Hegel would say

⁸ Wilhelm Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Stuttgart: B.G. Teubner Verlagsgesellschaft, Vandenhoeck co. Ruprecht in Göttingen, 1994), vol. 5, 63, quoted after: Elżbieta Paczkowska-Łagowska, *Logos życia*, 109.

⁹ "The aspiration of today's man is to understand the life lived by man. The multitude of systems that have tended to encompass the fabric of the world remains clearly linked with life; it is one of the most important and informative of its products, and thus the very formation of a historical consciousness that has done such a devastating work against great systems will have to help us to overcome the sharp contradiction between the aspirations of philosophical systems to universal validity and the historical anarchy [prevailing among] of these systems", Wilhelm Dilthey, *O istocie filozofii i inne pisma* (Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1987), 119.

¹⁰ Andrzej Przyłębski, "Hermeneutyczna antropologia Wilhelma Diltheya", *Analiza i egzystencja* 19 (2010): 70.

— is within the sphere of the subjective spirit (i.e. what is mental, purely conscious), and what belongs to the sphere of the objective spirit (i.e. to intersubjectively available works and institutions, materialized manifestations of life). As G. Arlt rightly emphasizes, for Dilthey life was more than a means of self-realization of consciousness — spiritual and cultural life forms have their basis in biological life, “im naturgebundenem Leben” [my emphasis]”The whole man” in their psychophysical unity is responsible for historical and cultural changes.¹¹

The already cited Schnädelbach distinguishes three types of it in the entire school of the German philosophy of life: metaphysical, historiosophical and ethical.¹² The historiosophical trend, which interests us most here, presumes that it is difficult to assume that the cognitive culture of the past disregards the physical side of being a human, in other words, ignores the approaches that today, often perfunctorily, are called naturalistic. In practice, this often leads a historian’s narrative towards the bio-social determinants of human life, and the very understanding of the past can be seen both in terms of culture and in terms of nature.

Such an interpretation of life undoubtedly opens us to new possibilities, but also brings with it threats. Oswald Spengler, for example, pursued the creation of a naturalistic, in fact pessimistic, theory of history based on the mutual relationship of two basic varieties of life; *Dasein* (a being that Spengler understood as an involuntary, vegetative and plant existence) and *Wachsein* (an awakened, conscious, free and self-aware existence, characterized by inner tension). For him, organic life was:

a primal phenomenon, an idea that becomes reality out of possibilities and a thoroughly mysterious process passing before our eyes. The idea of life has a similar internal form everywhere: procreation, birth, growth and demise — identical from the smallest weakling to a powerful culture.¹³

For Spengler, organic life was a deep unity that arises and passes away, having its end and beginning, going through the natural cycle of birth, development, adulthood and death. All emerging creations repeat this great process from powerful human groups to individual life, which is most strongly expressed in the man of culture. Both of the above-mentioned forms of being appear in Spengler’s thought in different places, and all of his definitions should be taken into account in order to make a comprehensive interpretation. Andrzej Kołakowski, an expert on Spengler’s thought, says that:

On the basis of these and many similar statements it can be said that the primary existence [*Dasein*] is internally uniform, characterized by tact, momentum, direction or fate and

¹¹ Przyłębski, *Hermeneutyczna antropologia*, 39.

¹² Herbert Schnädelbach, *Filozofia w Niemczech*, 231.

¹³ Oswald Spengler, *Urfragen. Fragemente aus dem Nachlass* (München : Beck, 1962), 1. Polish translation: Andrzej Kołakowski, *Spengler* (Warszawa: Wiedza Powszechna, 1981), 1; see also Oswald Spengler, *Historia, kultura, polityka. Wybór pism*. (Warszawa : Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1990), 9.

destiny, but it lacks the element of self-awareness. Complex existence [*Wachsein*] is associated with tension, polarity and expansion — it is a double concept, it comprises components that are in oppositional tension and it is equipped with a superstructure of consciousness.¹⁴

The concept of Spengler's historiosophy of life history can be treated as a thought referring to the idea of Dilthey's *Lebensphilosophie*, but also one that actually distorts and attempts to imitate it.¹⁵ The sad and predatory vision of life history in Spengler's concept is therefore not the only one that can be derived from the sources of the philosophy of life. As an example of such an approach, Herbert Schnädelbach refers to Sigmund Freud's philosophy of culture expressed in his late writings.¹⁶ It is rather peculiar that the philosophy of life, which played such an active role at the beginning of the previous century, was forgotten. It had been absorbed into the philosophy of existence and existentialism.¹⁷ In a sense, today's philosophical anthropology grounded in the thought of Max Scheler, Helmuth Plessner and Arnold Gehlen is its continuation. It is difficult not to notice the connections between Dilthey's thought and the development of German hermeneutic philosophy. However, researchers in this field point out that, for example, Heidegger, like Husserl, was unable to take advantage of Dilthey's proposals leading to both a biological and cultural analysis of human existence. Husserl, as William Casement shows in his interesting analysis, while admiring the certainty of the natural sciences, did not recognize that everything could be seen in natural terms. He thought that an approach going beyond the physicality of phenomena was necessary.¹⁸ Moreover, historians, like representatives of the natural sciences, "do not penetrate true reality. It is only the philosopher who, using Husserl's phenomenological method, is capable of this. To put it another way, the philosopher deals with the truth of essence, while natural and humanistic scientists, whether they concentrate on the physical (events) or the psychical (ideas), deal with facts which are necessarily subject to relativism since they are conceived from within the prejudices of the natural aptitude."¹⁹ Thus, according to Casement, Husserl saw a difference in general and cognitive approaches appropriate to philosophy and in the practice

¹⁴ Andrzej Kołakowski, "Życie-kultura-cywilizacja. Historiozofia Oswalda Spenglera jako wyraz kryzysu i krytyki kultury", *Archiwum historii filozofii i myśli społecznej* 22 (1976):108.

¹⁵ For example, this is how Andrzej Kołakowski, an expert in Spengler's philosophy, sees it: "Thus we can see in Spengler— admittedly in a caricatured form — elements of such research, which from Dilthey led to the modern cognitive humanities and its structuring aspect, but at the same time he attacks positivist naturalism, which is strongly vulgarized. This epigone's work, *Lebensphilosophie*, clearly reveals what was contained in this philosophy itself, but it was obscured by the power of the intellectual effort of its leading representatives and the drama of the search," Kołakowski, *Życie-kultura-cywilizacja*, 107.

¹⁶ Schnädelbach, *Filozofia w Niemczech*, 241.

¹⁷ Schnädelbach, *Filozofia w Niemczech*, 241.

¹⁸ William Casement, "Husserl and the philosophy of history", *Theory and History* 27, No. 3 (1988): 231.

¹⁹ Casement, *Husserl and the philosophy of history*, 231.

of detailed cognition relevant in the case of the natural and human sciences. Herbert Schnädelbach also noticed the relationship between the philosophy of life and the concepts of neo-Marxism. He wrote:

Even the neo-Marxism since Lukács and the Frankfurt critical theory carry its established cultural-critical topoi, although they still strive to clearly distinguish themselves from the “irrational” philosophy of life. Metaphysical commitment is on the side of the dynamic against the static. The juxtaposition of the dead and the vital is not very effectively concealed behind it; it merges here with the reception of the Marxist critique of commodity fetishism, thanks to which “reification” becomes the basic concept of culture.²⁰

This leads us to the Italian concept of ‘history of life’, which is well known in the history of historiography of the last century. Giovanni Levi, Carlo Poni and Carlo Ginzburg, the Italian fathers of microhistory, although not renouncing Marxism, made slightly different assumptions. They wanted to see this history on the side of cultural anthropology, hence its openness to the concepts of philosophical anthropology.²¹ As for the philosophical inspirations, they cared more about the social conditions of human life, which are not always perceived by a person. We should refer to the words of Claude Lévy-Strauss, one of the fathers of contemporary cultural anthropology, and more specifically to his *An Introduction to Structural Anthropology*, which included Marx’s famous words: “Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past”²² Ginzburg and Poni wanted to call such history a “science of Real life” — history of life: history in which the multiplicity of human experiences makes us reflect on the limits of historical generalizations proposed in both historicism and modernism (“Annales”). As they beautifully put it:

We propose therefore to define microhistory and history in general as *the science of real life [science del vissuto]*, definition that seeks to comprehend the reasoning of both the supporters and the enemies of history with the social sciences, and for this, no doubt, it will be pleasing to either side.²³

²⁰ Herbert Schnädelbach, *Filozofia w Niemczech*, 17.

²¹ Carlo Ginzburg, Carlo Poni, “The Name of the Game. Unequal Exchange and Historiographic Marketplace”, in *Microhistory and the Lost People of Europe*, ed. by Edward Muir, Guido Ruggiero, Baltimore University Press, 1991, 4. For more on this concept, see Carlo Ginzburg, John Tedeschi, Anne C. Tedeschi, “Microhistory: Two or Three Things That I Know About It”, *Critical Inquiry* 20, no. 1 (1993): 10–35.

²² “Die Menschen machen ihre eigene Geschichte, aber sie machen sie nicht aus freien Stücken, nicht unter selbstgewählten, sondern unter unmittelbar vorgefundenen, gegebenen und überlieferten Umständen. Die Tradition aller toten Geschlechter lastet wie ein Alp auf dem Gehirne der Lebenden.”, Karl Marx, “Der achtzehnte Brumaire des Louis Bonaparte”, in: Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, *Werke*, Band 8 (Berlin/ DDR: Dietz Verlag, 1972), 115.

²³ Carlo Ginzburg, Carlo Poni, *The Name of the Game*, 8/9.

LIFE HISTORY AND HISTORY

The concept of “life history” functions in social sciences, sociology, demography and even in economics. It is not treated equally and unequivocally in all of them. It differs from the concept of *life history* adopted in the natural sciences, especially in evolutionary theory, which does not mean that there will be no points of contact between them.²⁴ Personally, however, I am convinced of the special value that microhistory has for life history in historical studies, but it must be viewed and applied in relation to wide-ranging research, as it was once wanted by Giovanni Levy. Life history in historical studies cannot be discussed without referring to the achievements and concepts of microhistory.

Microhistory has played an important role in contemporary historiography as an idea of a new look at history in the last decades of the last century. This is how Ewa Domańska introduced and presented it in Polish historiography in her still up-to-date and very valuable work. She looked at microhistory not necessarily as Levy saw it, but as a version already modified by the authors of such classic works as Carlo Ginzburg (at the time when he wrote *The Cheese and the Worms*), Robert Darnton, Natalie Zemon Davies or Emanuel Le Roy Ladurie.²⁵

Giovanni Levi, who was the first to try to oppose Braudel’s macrohistory, based his concept of a new social history precisely on microhistory. He saw the latter as a history that was universal in its own way (economic, social and cultural), but also based on research conducted on a “reduced scale of observation”. It is the reduced scale, which through the study of many cases of individual events and phenomena entangled in the network of social connections, should ultimately provide data allowing verification of judgments resulting from macro-structural analyzes. He, therefore, did not deny the value of macro-analytical approaches; he even pointed out that basing history solely on microanalysis may lead to a return to history torn by nationalist and xenophobic visions of history. It is therefore necessary to perceive the advantages of the reduced scale of observation in relation to the limitations of macro-observation. He also argued with the concept of Clifford Geertz’s textual analysis (thick description), fearing that in the case of microhistory it might lead to micro-prosopography.²⁶

Poni and Ginzburg wrote, in turn, the above-mentioned article at the time of the great conceptual domination of the Annales school. They were, of course, aware of the multiplicity of the ideas and methodological approaches of Annaliste historians. However, they mainly referred to the then dominant concept of

²⁴ Krzysztof Zamorski, “Historia życia u źródeł. Włoskie korzenie”, in *Badacze przeszłości wobec wyzwań XIX – XX wieku*, ed. by Katarzyna Błachowska, Zbigniew Romek, Marcin Wolniewicz (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Neriton, Polskie Towarzystwo Historyczne, Instytut Historii PAN, 2013), 285–292.

²⁵ Ewa Domańska, *Mikrohistorie. Spotkania w międzyświatach* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 1999). Cf. especially Part III.

²⁶ Krystian Górczan, “Giovanniego Leviego koncepcja mikrohistorii”, *Historyka. Studia Metodologiczne* 37/38 (2007–8): 77–90. See also Ewa Domańska, *Mikrohistorie* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 1999) (2nd edition, 2005), 58.

serial history promoted by Pierre Chaunu. Personally, I observe in the concept of serial history an attempt by the Annales group to respond to the rapidly progressing quantification of historical research, especially to the easy to interpret research of the new economic history.²⁷ The Annales school had a number of strong arguments in the debate about the quantification of history: from climate history and Le Roy Ladurie's quantitative research on rural life in Languedoc, to Chaunu's studies of Seville and the Atlantic, to the fantastic achievements of French historical demography and Henry's elaborate method of reconstructing families. The idea of group work and research groups so close to Braudel, brought quantitative history closer to the model of the natural sciences. Mass research clearly identified and preferred one type of source material: mass sources ignoring many others which were rich but of a different nature. The Braudelian approach of *longue durée* was perfectly suited to structuralism and was intended to discover structures. Thus, both Italian scholars did not deny the value of grasping the mechanisms responsible for Malthusian crises; moreover, they argued that by shaping history's paradigm, this made history a science in accordance with Kuhn's terminology. However, they stated that the *longue durée* approach, with all its advantages, pushed lived human experiences to the sidelines: "Lived experience (undoubtedly an ambiguous expression) is largely relegated to the margins."²⁸

They were very hopeful about these new avenues of research, which emerged as such next to the then prevailing macro-structural mainstream. They drew attention to the role of regional research, monographs on small towns and analyses delving into the history of individual families or individual human experiences. In fact, they already had excellent reference points in Italy. These were both the ideas promoted by the *Quaderni Storici* magazine and, in particular, the previously mentioned works by Giovanni Levi. In their opinion, the development of the micro-historic perspective and its successes clashed with the growing doubts about macro-historic findings, which indicated that they were not very useful in demonstrating different aspects of human life. In recent decades, micro-history has conceptually merged with cultural history. For many, it has almost become a flagship example of a cultural shift in historiography. I believe that this view lacks what in empirical research was once the basis of cultural interpretations of the past as well as the anthropologization of history, expressed, for example, in Filip Ariès's works (mainly by him rather than by other representatives of the so-called third generation of the Annales School). What I mean is the effectiveness of the family reconstruction method developed in French and then world demography. This method called the aggregative analysis of parish registers, is in fact the essence of microhistory in the sense in which a network of connections is built on the basis of an analysis of individual families, i.e. a specific microhistory. A number of issues, such as the behavior of traditional populations

²⁷ I had the opportunity to write about the concept of serial history at the time of its birth. Cf. Krzysztof Zamorski, "Czym jest historia serii Pierre Chaunu?", *Zeszyty Naukowe UJ. Prace Historyczne* no. 66 (1980): 139–150.

²⁸ Carlo Ginzburg, Carlo Ponti, *The Name of the Game*, s. 3.

in periods of subsistence crises or changes in fertility and attitudes of the studied populations towards death, emerged in this field. Detailed analysis led to general conclusions of a broad and classically macrostructural range. This was the case, for example, in the research of the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure, which brought about the concept of Roger Schofield's models used to explain the pathways of biosocial changes leading to the birth of capitalism in England.

Consequently, I am of the opinion that the effect of this development in the future will be a kind of fusion of what we call and understand today as "historical anthropology" and some ideas of the HSS era. I would like to see the effect of this fusion in a concept that I call, for my own purposes and perhaps a little ineptly, "life history". In some sense, Ewa Domańska shares my way of thinking and calls this kind of history "existential history". Referring to the concept introduced into historiographic analyses by Jerzy Maternicki, she distinguishes it from existentialist history and defines its purposes as follows:

It is rather a research perspective that searches for the meanders of the human condition in inquiries about the history, theory and history of historiography, which are conducted through the prism of authors and their texts. He, therefore, directs his interests to existential motifs included in these works, which reveal them.²⁹

However, I want to retain the name of life history, because I believe it better reflects the research goals, methods and sources that should be used to present history of human life; it is more closely related to the term of *life history*. Besides, it is more deeply embedded in the historiographical tradition and the tradition of other sciences.

LIFE HISTORY — TWOFOLD SOURCE OF RESEARCH INSPIRATIONS

There are two planes on which the inspiration of *life history* is evident. The first plane is life history as seen in the context of the natural sciences. The second plane is life history in the context of the narratives of the course of human life, typical of contemporary social sciences and literary theory (in a word, for qualitative research).

In this first approach, what we mean is a field of knowledge that is perfectly developed and firmly rooted in the context of the theory of evolution. This is how two prominent anthropologists, Kim Hill and Hilard Kaplan, write about it:

Life history theory in biology organizes research into the evolutionary forces shaping the timing of life events, with a particular focus on age-schedules of fertility and mortality [...]
 Fundamental to life history theory is the recognition that natural selection on the timing of

²⁹ Ewa Domańska, *Historia egzystencjalna* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2012), 12.

life events, such as growth, maturation, reproduction, and death, depends on the ecology of energy production and mortality hazard.³⁰

The theory of life history understood in this way has a distant past reaching as far back as the theories of Charles Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace. After a period of thorough scientification in the 1930s and the emergence of theories based on mathematical models of life strategies in the 1950s, it was dynamically developing in the last decade of the last century.³¹ This period also brought about a revival in the application of the proper life history theory to research in the field of social history, based on the paradigm of history as a social science. Very tempting perspectives also appeared in the developing view of the need to look for bonds that unite the natural and social sciences on the basis of the so-called bio-history. The concept of “life course” became a key concept for this strand of research. People started talking more and more often about the life course paradigm, or even about the life course perspective.³² It should be noted at this point that such a perspective has found its solid foundation in historical demography research in social history, mainly in the long-term perspective of this research, and especially in its branch based on Louis Henri's nominative method and in the whole range of works based on its use in various centers and places around the globe. It should not be construed that that historical demography is a kind of extension of life history or that this concept of the natural sciences was the basis of its development. Simply speaking, at some point in its development, after all possible attempts to explain a number of phenomena such as Henry's concept of natural fertility or the causes of demographic transformation, the category of the order of life and the analysis based on life course seemed to carry a significant organizing potential of narrative. It was also justified because this concept had been used in the natural sciences since the beginning of the 1960s and penetrated into demographic analyses, opening it towards bio-history and thus giving hope to become a new paradigm of history as a social science.

There is terminological confusion regarding the concept of *life course*.³³ Duane F. Alwin, for example, draws attention to the ambiguity of the basic concept of *life course*. He believes that it is incorrect not to notice differences

³⁰ Hill Kim, Kaplan Hillard, “Life History Traits in Humans; Theory and empirical Study”, *American Review of Anthropology* 28 (1999): 398.

³¹ *The Evolution of Life Histories: Theory and Analysis*, ed. by Derek A. Roff (New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, 1992); Baker John, “rev. of: Derek A. Roff, *The Evolution of Life Histories: Theory and Analysis*,” *Ecology* 75, No. 1 (1994): 266–267.

³² Among the works shaping the debate on the subject of the value of such approaches, the following publications are worth mentioning: Angela O’Rand, Margaret L. Kreecker, “Concepts of the life cycle: Their history, meanings, and uses in the social sciences,” *Annual review of sociology* 16 (1990): 241–262; Glen H. Elder Jr, Monica Kirkpatrick Johnson, Robert Crosnoe, “The emergence and development of life course theory” in *Handbook of the life course*, ed. by JT Mortimer, MJ Shanahan (New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum; 2003), 3–19.

³³ Glen H. Elder Jr. “The life course”, in *Encyclopaedia of sociology*. 2nd ed. Vol. 3 (New York: Macmillan Reference; 2000), 1614–1622.

and use the terms *life course* and *life cycle* interchangeably. In general, he would like to see these concepts among the terms related to the biological analysis of life that have been used for a long time in the natural sciences; such as *life expectance*, *life span*, *life space*, *life trajectory*, *lifetime*, *life pathway*, *lifeworld* or *lifestyles*. He treats the term *life course* as a relatively new in comparison to, for example, the hope of continuing life or the duration of life. However, he points out that all of them concern slightly different aspects of human life.³⁴ Alwin, after an in-depth analysis of the application of these concepts, writes that while being used in science, *life course* adopted five basic semantic references: “(a) life course as time or age, (b) life course as life stages, (c) life course as events, transitions, and trajectories, (d) life course as life-span human development, and (e) life course as early life influences (and their cumulation on later adult outcomes)”.³⁵

Sociologists, who attach more importance to the semantics of the term *life cycle*, approach the issue somewhat differently. As in Alwin’s research on meanings, they are aware of the differences in concepts and the fact that each of the above-mentioned keywords has different practical references. They rightly conclude that if anyone hopes to find a progressive concretization of the language of social sciences on the basis of the accumulated experience of the natural sciences, then in the case of *life history* it must be regarded as illusory.³⁶

The second source of inspiration, the other side of it, can be seen in qualitative research. What I mean here in particular is the phenomenon perfectly captured in relation to sociology by Kaja Kazimierska, who searched for the reasons for the success of the biographical method:

In the postmodern era, which proposed individualism, creativity, entrepreneurship, independence and innovation, one can notice a change in the nature of the sociological discourse, which “no longer analyzes reality, but attends to it.” Hence the popularity of the biographical method, which if it is applied superficially and unimaginatively, perfectly corroborates the described state of affairs by showing the individual, causative and autonomous dimensions of an individual’s actions [my emphasis].³⁷

In fact, the present situation and similar to what we have been observing in the case of the inspiration of the natural sciences, promotes long-term research in the field of life history. Florian Znaniecki and William Thomas already showed in *The Polish Peasant in America* that life history can be a great and important tool in an analysis of social phenomena. They proved how important research on

³⁴ Duane F. Alwin, “Integrating Varieties of Life Course Concepts”, in *The Journal of Gerontology. Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences* 67B, 2 (2012): 207, doi: 10.1093/geronb/gbr146.

³⁵ Duane F. Alwin, *Integrating Varieties*: 206, 213.

³⁶ Angela O’Rand, Margaret L. Krecker. *Concepts of the life cycle: Their history, meanings, and uses in the social sciences*, 259.

³⁷ Kaja Kazimierska, “Wstęp”, in *Metoda biograficzna w socjologii*, ed. by Kaja Kazimierska (Kraków: Nomos, 2012), 10.

people's individual experiences had been becoming for learning about the social mechanisms of behavior. The autobiographical method, formulated by Florian Znaniecki, found a special place in Polish sociology. It was developed by his students: Jan Szczepański and Józef Chałasiński. This research was continued by subsequent scholars associated with the Towarzystwo Pamiętnikarstwa Polskiego [Polish Memoir Society], *inter alia*, Bogdan Gołębiowski and Franciszek Jakubczak. They treated memoirs as a record of socio-cultural changes that Poles experienced in the 20th century and used them to identify contemporary social problems. The results of their work and methodological reflection on a specific type of research material were published mainly in the *Pamiętnikarstwo Polskie*, the society's journal. A similar approach to the analysis of diaries can be seen in the works of another research center on personal documents – the Institute of Social Economy of the Warsaw School of Economics, which was established by Ludwik Krzywicki. These traditions still await a more comprehensive and meaningful implementation in the massive use of the enormous number of Polish diaries from the 20th century. The achievements of the Chicago sociological school, in the case of which Thomas's and Znaniecki's research is of foremost importance, generally have not lost their significance for research practices concerning life history; although new concepts in this area, based on interpretive sociology, appeared when sociology was being developed in the twentieth century.³⁸ The achievements of the German school of sociology are of particular importance here, especially Fritz Schütze and his concepts framed in the field of biographical sociology, which when it comes to the study of history have gained special recognition in oral history.³⁹ It is not my intention to prove here how useful the birth and development of this branch of historical research, i.e. oral history, has been for the development of history as a science (or how much it emphasized the importance of narrative as an object of historical analysis). It is becoming more and more important to what extent this develops our ability to enter the level that brings us closer to psychology and the knowledge pertaining to it. From a psychological point of view, narrative is always the most essential way of expressing an individual experience. I consider the above-mentioned musings of Marta Kurkowska Budzan on the position of the narrator as pioneering in Polish historiography of oral history. I should only add that — as psychologists put it — narrative should always be viewed as “personal experience as expressed or communicated in language”.⁴⁰ In this sense, whatever the form of expression, there is no history without narrative.

³⁸ See, *inter alia*, Alicja Rokuszewska-Pawełek, “Miejsce biografii w socjologii interpretatywnej. Program socjologii biografistycznej Fritza Schützego”, *ASK* 1 (1996): 37–54; *Metoda biograficzna w socjologii*, 107; Kaja Kazimińska „Badania biograficzne w naukach społecznych”, *Przegląd Socjologii Jakościowej* IX, no. 4 (2013).

³⁹ Marta Kurkowska-Budzan, “Informator, świadek historii, narrator. Kilka wątków epistemologicznych i etycznych Oral History”, *Wrocławski rocznik historii mówionej*, 1 (2011): 9–34.

⁴⁰ *Identity and Story: Creating Self in Narrative*, ed. by Dan P. McAdams, Ruthellen Josselson, Amia Lieblich (Baltimore, MD: American Psychological Association, United Book Press, 2002), 4.

This is not the place to expatiate on the trivial idea that qualitative research gained special importance in social sciences after the postmodern revolution. It has been a specific reaction to the formalization of modernist approaches, but also a profound response to the simplifications brought about by structural analysis. It dovetails with the cultural turn and moves in the direction that seems to lead to a departure from the seemingly closed circle of contradictions between cultural facts and natural facts. This contradiction in the perspective of life history is the starting point of our present considerations.

CONCLUSION: A FEW WORDS ABOUT THE COGNITIVE VALUE OF LIFE HISTORY

It is difficult to comprehensively enumerate in this short and necessarily limited overview paper all the consequences of adopting the life history perspective as an outlook on research problems in history. This perspective is present and can emerge in any branch of historical knowledge; from political history, through social and economic history, cultural history, Holocaust history, oral history and historical demography. It undoubtedly underscores the importance of ego-documents as sources. However, it is important to note that it cannot be limited solely to them. Conversely, one of the basic advantages of this perspective is that it allows for a diversified analysis of personal sources, mass information of different provenance. It proves the complexity of social processes and is able to show their complicated nature, often refuting theoretical myths and the mythical vision of national history. This approach makes every human experience expressed and preserved in a source important.

I am particularly hopeful for relating the sometimes noticed well-studied structurally social processes to the level of such experience. What is it about? I will use an example from a recent study in which the course of life and the perspective of life played a fundamental role. The history of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was and is a source of mythical knowledge, reproduced not so much in scientific research although there are cases here as well, but in the social perception visible in culture or in analyses not fully embedded in the matter of history. One of such deeply entrenched and still repeated beliefs is the myth of the “slavery” of peasants in the manorial system in the manorial era. Peasants in the republic of nobles were supposed to be a group completely subordinated to the nobility, unchanging in its internal structure and not moving from their place of residence. They were supposed to be akin to the slaves in the United States in the pre-Civil War era. This thesis has been gaining more and more importance recently, reaching a status of a modern historical myth in the form of the so-called “Polish folk history”. The concept may be useful from the point of view of the present day in that it makes many people in Poland aware of the peasant roots of their culture, but it is simplifying or is even vulgar in relation to the experiences of a person living in the period of manorial economy.

In his recent book, Mateusz Wyżga thoroughly examined this myth by conducting extensive research.⁴¹ He is no stranger to the life history perspective. As a result, he used censuses, tax sources, village court books, customs registers, law books and rural property inventories. What they have in common is that they provide an opportunity to look at the data from the perspective of individual experiences: specific peasants as well as townspeople and inhabitants of noble and church estates in the Krakow region in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (people that can be identified by name and surname). The young researcher from Krakow concluded that the research presented him with: “an image of a highly mobile society in the pre-partition Commonwealth, where the migration rates, despite the domination of the manorial-serf system (at least formally limiting the emigration of the serfs, i.e. peasants), turned out to be similar to the other countries of Europe at that time. The migration distances were similar, as well as the high level of exogamous marriages (i.e. with a person from outside the local community). [...] At the same time, I managed to establish, contrary to the previous claims, that serfdom did not completely block population movement within the social structure of the village and between town and village. It was the paternalistic protection of the manor over subordinate peasants that could have had a stronger influence on the decision to stay in the countryside than the oppression of the subjects”⁴² This picture of the past has nothing to do with the idea of “slavery” at the time of the serfdom economy, promoted today by the supporters of Polish folk history. The attempt to superficially transfer the categories of United States history is a fundamental confusion of categories of phenomena which are comparable in time and space.

I have been trying to implement the assumptions of this perspective for several years. Thanks to my cooperation with the scholarly publishing house “Universitas”, which is based in Krakow, I was able to bring to life the publishing series *Historia życia* [Life History]. I am aware of the fact that this is not a pioneering activity when compared to some historiographic events of the end of the last century. But it is also not my intention to emulate the achievements of the aforementioned microhistory series by Giovanni Levy and Carl Ginzburg. While not denying its role as an inspiration, I do not consider microhistory as the sole and only approach that implements the life history perspective. I am more interested in the search for richness and diversity of forms using the life history perspective in research and historical narrative. Three monographs written by my students and colleagues have been published within its framework so far.⁴³

⁴¹ Mateusz Wyżga, *Homo movens. Mobilność chłopów a mikroregionie krakowskim w XVI–XVIII wieku*, (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Pedagogicznego, 2019).

⁴² Wyżga, *Homo movens*, 405.

⁴³ Bartosz Ogórek, *Niezatarte piętno? Wpływ I wojny światowej na ludność miasta Krakowa* (Kraków: Universitas, 2018), “Historia życia” series, vol. I; Agata Barzycka Paździor, *Ojcostwo drugiej połowy XIX i na początku XX wieku. Szkice z dziejów rodziny galicyjskiej* (Kraków: Universitas, 2019), series: *Historia życia*, vol. 2; Piotr Miodunka, *Spoleczność małych miast południowej Małopolski od końca XVI do końca XVIII wieku* (Kraków: Universitas, 2020), series: *Historia życia*, vol. 3. The next volumes are in preparation, the

Each of them examines a different aspect of the past in terms of specific human experiences corresponding to the identified tendencies, important in the network of connections of events and fates of people of a given epoch. Speaking of the abundance of forms of presenting life history, I mean in particular Bartosz Ogórek's experience in biometric analysis of infants, known by name and surname, who were born in the clinic of the Jagiellonian University during the Great War, and the level of nutrition of the population of Krakow estimated according to modern measures and descriptions of its ingredients contained in the documents from World War I. We see specific experiences of people forced to leave the city of Krakow as a result of the orders of the military authorities, and we try to find out about the long-term effects of the war in the lives of Krakow residents after the war. In the analysis by Agata Barzycka Paździor, we look at examples of fathers' family behaviors recorded in the diaries and correspondence of Cracovians in relation to the legal conditions and social expectations of the era. In Piotr Miodunka's study, we look at the fate of the townspeople in small urban settlements in Małopolska in the early modern period: at the family life, economy and life cycle of these people. What inexorably links these different studies is the fate of specific people known by name and surname, seen from the perspective of the social environment of their lives.

As if in defiance of Fyodor Dostoyevsky's beliefs, all these works show that:

There are certain people of whom it is difficult to say anything which will at once throw them into relief—in other words, describe them graphically in their typical characteristics. These are they who are generally known as “commonplace people,” and this class comprises, of course, the immense majority of mankind, but they also prove that to tell about their lives, a historian, unlike a writer, does not have to, as a rule, select and portray types rarely met with in their entirety, but these types are nevertheless more real than real life itself.

Translation Paweł Hamera

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