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Twentieth-Century Wartime Life Histories from East-Central Europe

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A Memoir of Childhood and Youth/albo pamiętnik dzieciństwa i młodości, by Teresa Halikowska-Smith (a joint language publication), Marki, Poland, Wydawnictwo Parma Press, 2022 (forthcoming)

The Daughter Who Sold Her Mother: A Biographical Memoir, by Irena Powell, Bloomington, IN, Authorhouse, 2016, 642 pp., \$51.87 (cloth), \$35.00 (paper), \$4.99 (Kindle)

The ARKS: The Low-Beer Story Behind Schindler's List and Villa Tugendhat, by Daniel Low-Beer, Brno, Czech Republic, Books & Pipes, 2021, 236 pp., \$14.00 (paper), \$8.99 (Kindle)

Letters from Lwów: Life in Poland before Hitler, 1938–9, by Elizabeth Wehrfritz, London, Wolverwood Books, 2005, 324 pp., £7.99 (paper)

City of Lions: Portrait of a City in Two Acts: Lviv, Then and Now, by Józef Wittlin, translated from the original memoir 'Mój Lwów', written in 1946, by Antonia Lloyd-Jones, introduced by Philippe Sands, Photographs by Diana Matar, London, Pushkin Press, 2016, 160 pp., £12.00 (paper)

East-West Street: On the Origins of Genocide and Crimes Against Humanity, by Philippe Sands, London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2016, 464 pp., £9.99 (paper), £19.99 (audiobook), £9.99 (ebook)

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My mother, Teresa Halikowska-Smith, a literary critic, translator from Polish to English, and one of the very last Poles to be born in the city of Lwów, died after a quick succession of strokes at the end of November 2020 in Leamington Spa in England, a town she had lived in since 1975. During the months of the spring lockdown, she had worked hard and systematically (somewhat uncharacteristically, if I am allowed to judge her character), shutting herself away in her study amidst an uncomfortable array of bookcases, to write her memoirs. These memoirs (in Polish *Pamiętniki*) concerned her birth during the difficult wartime years, family background, and choices in life up until the moment she met her future husband at a dinner at St. Antony's College, Oxford, in 1967. She chose then to disregard what she had always told us was the happiest time of her life, a year-and-a-half with two young children in Vienna in 1973–4, while her husband tried to build up a Quaker

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meetinghouse with a regular congregation. Perhaps she felt that this was—for our family at least—an *histoire vécue*, for which other sources were readily available. Perhaps she felt it was more dangerous to speak candidly whilst treading on territory full of the living, and that in any case the drama of the war years would be more intriguing for her audience. Either way, she chose as a motif to head the memoirs, embellished with contributions from her half-sister Ewa and niece Agata, a suitable quote from the Nobel Prize winner for Poetry, Czesław Miłosz (1911–2004). In fact, the various Polish and English language versions of her memoirs opted for different Miłosz quotes. While the English one suggested that life is a “constant search for one’s tracks in the sands of time” (from the 2002 exhibition catalogue *Miłosz: In Search of a Homeland*), the Polish reminds us that “what is not spoken fades into nothingness” (*Co nie jest wymówione, zmierza do nieistnienia*).

In the memoir, she tries to dig up histories of which she in fact knew rather little. She explains: “My parents, as so many others at the time, very rarely spoke of their war experiences” (30). Her own father, in a letter written on the 36th anniversary of Teresa’s mother’s death, explained that he had tried to write his reminiscences of that time for Teresa and her older sister, Nulka, but these papers got lost during the war in Tarnopol in 1944. Consequently, the variant published is slight, no more than 46 pages long, but including twelve photos.

For readers today one of the most intriguing facets of the narrative are the discrepancies in the emotional register of the war-scarred victims of World War II. We learn, for example, in one of the sections written by Ewa, that Poles evicted from Lwów who went to live in the territories vacated by the departing Germans were so traumatised by their experiences, and so fearful of and uncertain about their future, that they refused to invest in the renovation of their new housing: “I went to visit my grandmother,” Ewa writes, “and the ruined stumps of burned-out tenement houses in the city [of Wrocław] made a terrifying impression on me.” Then, in a beautifully written essay published alongside her *Pamiętnik*, “Grandmother Zofia’s Table,” Teresa tries to explain to her daughter how her own grandmother Zofia cut off her son (Teresa’s father, Bogusław) entirely for not marrying the girl the family had wanted for him, and only met her son’s choice of bride by chance when Bogusław ended up in hospital with an amputated arm after a bombing raid. Teresa reflects on this episode in the company of her own daughter with great honesty and pathos, and does well to bring her confusion directly into the narrative:

“Seems very heartless of her, don’t you think?”—observes my daughter and I don’t know how to respond to this. I cannot even begin to understand it, myself.

How to write suitable and successful life histories? What distinguishes a good life history from a bad one? These are the questions that infuse this contribution, broad questions of a thriving genre meriting its own academic journals, such as the *European Journal of Life Writing*, founded in 2012, and textbooks such as *Essays on Life Writing: From Genre to Critical Practice*, edited by Marlene Kadar, *Writing Life Stories* by Bill Roorbach, or Beth Kephart’s *Handling the Truth: On the Writing of Memoir*. These last two titles stood on my mother’s bookshelf. While they may help shed light upon some of her motivations, as do corollary emails informing of her long-standing desire to write a family history, and calling for help in doing so, we also need to be aware of unintended consequences from this enterprise: as Kadar writes, life-writing often becomes a “playground for new relationships both within and without the text” (152). I approach some of these questions relating

to a genre in Poland (as Ryszard Nycz has pointed out in his essay *Literatura nowoczesna*) ever on the rise just as fiction is in decline, by placing Teresa's memoir next to five other solid recent examples.

The books chosen are all life histories turning on the events of the Second World War and based on the tragic fate of Eastern Europe, particularly of my mother's home city, Lwów, which was invaded by both Nazis and Soviets (twice), which resulted in the ethnic cleansing of a city that was both 60% Polish at the time of the outbreak of war and a historic cornerstone of that nation's history going as far as the 1340s. Furthermore, the international treaty—the Treaty of Yalta, signed on 4–5 February 1945, which dictated the city's fate after “liberation”—was not even attended, let alone signed, by a Polish representation. It was felt amongst the Western Allies that the victorious Soviet power needed to be placated in the *Kresy* (the Polish term for the border regions), and that anyway (as Roosevelt insisted), Poland was rewarded with the (smaller) territories in the West appropriated from the vanquished German Reich. Polish history was being very visibly produced for Poland rather than by Poland.¹ Yet the terrible fate of the Polish population, ethnically cleansed over the 1945–6 period, the experience of which has been described in the poems of Adam Zagajewski such as “To Go to Lwów,”² pales next to the liquidation of the city's 160,000 Jewish population. This was an estimate contained in a report prepared for the Nazi administration in July 1941, although a letter by Archbishop Sheptyts'kyj points to a higher figure of 200,000.³ The “final solution” took place primarily in the Belżec concentration camp 85 kilometres away, but also as far away as Siberia, from which occasional stories of survival pierce the gloom.⁴

In terms of producing life histories, it seems hard both emotionally and experientially to approach the terrible experiences of the Second World War, of the Holocaust and ethnic cleansing. These were phenomena that departing generations, hardly disjointed from our own, lived through. The constant eventuality of death, the programmatic destruction of entire nations by more predatory ones, and the lying and opportunism that were needed to survive as an individual in the Third Reich and Soviet Russia are realities so very alien to us today, at least in the pampered, liberal West. What does it say about the psychological effects of having to change your name three times in the course of a lifetime? In *The Daughter Who Sold Her Mother* Irena Powell approaches her mother's experiences of that Holocaust with very much that trepidation, with love and forgiveness for her old mother who had, as she explains, left Frankfurt to move into her daughter Irena's home after her own husband's passing in 1997, looking for a safe place to come to die in, but also with the fear of uncorking terrible truths and unwanted spirits from the past. Irena knew well and (could closely) observe how summoning up these stories anew could not stave off the offloading of bitterness and provocation so injurious to the peace of other members and generations of the family living in that house: specifically Babcia's grandsons and her son-in-law, Irena's husband. But Irena felt it was her own desire if not duty to embark upon the project as a means of “reassuring her that her experiences as a young Jewish mother fighting to save the life of her new-born infant in Nazi-occupied Poland [would not be] forgotten.”

The book benefits from a conversational, dialogic technique gained from many hours of personal conversations with her mother on these topics, but also from previously recorded audio interviews with her father (who also left his testimony with the Survivors of the Shoah

Visual History Foundation) so as to gain different perspectives. The book also benefits from the chance to follow through on her mother's past by Irena's personal visit in 2004 to the East Galician *shtetl*, Tartaków, where her mother was born in 1911.

The flighty, jolly positivity of Daniel Low-Beer in *The ARKS: The Low-Beer Story Behind Schindler's List and Villa Tugendhat* speaks of a different discursive style, one developed by a different generation, not at a time of war and not in Eastern Europe, but more recently—from the 1980s to the 2000s—in the good years of liberalism and economic growth and prosperity in the West. It is the voice of the third generation, following the second generation that had been impregnated (if unconsciously) with a heavy dose of trauma from the first generation, their parents investing them with all their memories and hopes, so that they became “memorial candles” to those who did not survive.⁵ But the third generation's voice too is worthwhile, for they see opportunities to repopulate and regenerate areas in Eastern Europe hollowed out and abandoned for the last seventy-five years. History is in essence family stories that need to be sowed across the generations and which in their microcosms build up the direction and meaning of a nation's identity. Although the sheer inter-continentiality of the Low-Beer diaspora would suggest that rather than contributing to any single modern nation-state, the collective conclusions to be drawn shape rather that of the Jewish *naçãõ*, to go back to an early modern identifier of the Jewish Sephardic diaspora.⁶ For Low-Beer, a family story across not one (biography) but across three generations constitutes “real history” (169), but it is universal, for all families possess these stories. His book is constituted consequently of a bricolage of vignettes moving across generations, distinctive and full of flair. His emphasis not on the officiousness of History but on private, family “stories” reminds one of Chaim Potok's *Old Men at Midnight*, and the idea that “Without stories nothing exists. Stories are the memory of the world. Without stories, the past is simply erased.”⁷

Other life histories, like Elizabeth Wehrfritz's *Letters from Lwów: Life in Poland Before Hitler, 1938–9*, are specific testimonies to a departed parent, here Ruth Isabelle King (b. 1914), a mother who had confessed to her daughter that the best years of her life had been spent in Lwów as an assistant to Professor Ludwig Ehrlich (just like Nahlik, see below), in the Zakład Prawa Politycznego i Prawa Naradów (Institute of Constitutional and International Law), at the Jan Kazimierz University. It was a brief working stint in her youth between November 1937 and March 1939, financed by the Rockefeller Foundation, before the chains of marriage and childbearing raised their head back home in wartime Britain. The text is accompanied by photos of people and places, and comments on the Jewish and Ukrainian questions, all on the backdrop of rising international tensions. Using both letters and her mother's private diary, much of the text and indeed of Ruth's life seems to have been driven by a covert love affair with Dr. Stanisław Hubert. By allowing her mother's letters to speak for themselves, with rather little by way of authorial intervention, Wehrfritz transcends what Lisa Appignanesi has typecast as the “bereavement memoir,” which is firmly fixated on the author's response to bereavement.⁸

For an outsider, it is not as enjoyable perhaps to read such narratives, which are weighed down with personal detail, as it is to engage with Józef Wittlin's classic memoir *Mój Lwów*, only recently translated as *City of Lions*, an altogether more literary, but also stylistically more self-aware text. It is at first glance an ode to his departed and lost prewar city of Lwów, although, as he tellingly remarks at one point, “It is not for Lwów that we yearn after all these years apart, but for ourselves in Lwów.” Wittlin writes elegiacally from

the distance of postwar New York, summoning up memories of long forgotten drinks, like *rozolis*, a rose-flavoured vodka, of *Dziady*, a pre-Christian Slavic feast to commemorate the dead, or the criminal songs of the *batiary*, the urban underclass. Better than anyone, Wittlin conjures up the characters and feel of the place: “Balabans, Korniakts, Mohyłas, Boims, Kampians—what sort of a motley crew is this? That’s Lwów for you. Diversified, variegated, as dazzling as an oriental carpet.” The book is written with a passion and a wistfulness only hindsight can provide, and unlike Holocaust literature purposefully excludes the tragedy in which the city was enveloped during the war. In some ways, the book reads as a mnemonic exercise:

I close my eyes and I can hear the bells . . . ringing; each one rings differently. I can hear the splash of the fountains on the Marketplace, and the sougning of the fragrant trees, which the spring rain has washed clean of dust. It is coming up to ten o’clock and the place is so quiet that I can recognize the people going past by their footsteps as they hurry home for dinner. I recognize the footsteps of people who ceased to walk this earth long ago. There’s no one but shades clacking their heels on the well-worn pavement slabs. (85)

Otherwise, one of the most successful representatives of the life memoir is Philippe Sands’s *East-West Street*, which has won at least three awards since it came out in 2016. The book was written primarily to evoke the world of Sands’s departed grandparents, Jewish fugitives from Lwów during the increasing racial tensions and exclusionary politics of the Polish Second Republic in the 1930s. Their final destination—although they travelled separately with a considerable intervening and uncertain interlude—was Paris, which is where Sands went to stay with them as a child. “In common with many others, that period was a time of darkness and pain of which he [grandfather Leon] did not wish to speak,” Philippe says. “I knew nothing of his early life in Lviv, or the circumstances of his and my mother’s departure from Vienna.”

Sands’s work, which has been characterised by critics as a “*novela a testimonio*”—a novel testifying to history, or in other words based upon facts—takes on a far more significant dimension by providing the important backdrop of intellectual activity defining new crimes against humanity that was conducted by two Jewish graduates from Lwów’s Jan Kazimierz University, Raphael Lemkin and Hersch Lauterpacht, during the war and the immediate postwar years. As theoreticians of a new architecture of human rights law, central to which was the concept of “genocide,” Sands’s professional life as professor of law at King’s College in London has been in one way or another entirely taken up with them.

Sands’s book has another ace up its sleeve: carefully documentary sleuthing to make sense of the hearsay and remaining puzzles in the family memory. He is able to find out, for example, the identity of the young woman, an English charity worker—Miss Tilney—who brought his mother out of Austria on a *Kindertransport* to the safety of the United Kingdom. It transpires that in later life she emigrated to Florida to live out her later years. Similarly, he is able to identify mysterious figures on family photographs, friends and lovers, who might have fatefully pushed the family history in a different direction at key junctures, and their destinies.

In *The ARKS*, in contrast, Low-Beer appears to be keener to uphold the family myths rather than questioning them or tearing them apart. Part of this is a tribute to the family’s larger-than-life industrial and commercial success running textile factories in interwar Czechoslovakia, or Moravia to be exact, a time and place which marked the rapid ascent of

“the Jewish Renaissance,” when Jews moved from the ghettos to become owners within a generation of iconic modernist “glass” family houses such as the Tugendhat House in Brno, built by the acclaimed architect Mies Van der Rohe. Low-Beer sketches these developments in broad brushstrokes over the course of one section.⁹ He is proud to take his place at the centre of an intercontinental postwar family diaspora, and his recent plans include the rebuilding of the now derelict factories in Brněnec (Moravia) as a tribute to the Oskar Schindler story, which employed 1,200 Jews saved from the Kraków ghetto there.¹⁰ But his imagination is in places allowed to run riot, so that as a reader one is not always clear where the line between fact and fiction lies, as for example, in the story of his grandfather Walter holding up the Nazi army for three days over quarrels as to the new boundaries of German-occupied Sudetenland in 1938 (35). Part of this is Low-Beer’s reliance not so much on documents (as is the case with Sands) as on prize-winning fictional narratives such as Thomas Keneally’s *Schindler’s Ark* (1983), later retitled *Schindler’s List*. His choice of illustrations, which are often comic-derived, similarly gives one the sensation that it is the myth as much as the reality which is important to the author. As if aware of this tendency, it is descriptions of “real places and facts” like Rabbi Loew’s synagogue in central Prague that the author asserts serve to “anchor the family history” more firmly (163). To open up the book to a wider audience beyond that of Low-Beer *aficionados*, the book is marketed as an exercise in family genealogy: “Follow your name and find out who you and your family are!”

I have tried to draw some parallels across five Anglophone attempts to write life histories of people implicated in Central Europe and particularly in Lwów’s messy history of the Holocaust and ethnic cleansing during World War II and thereafter. With the years of postwar amnesia long behind us (Roman Bobryk in his 2019 essay *Lwów utracony, Lwów daleki* thinks it was primarily Communist censorship), the tenor of these accounts ranges from wistful (Wehrfritz) to tragic (Powell), while some, such as Sands’s memoir, or the community regeneration project and construction of a Tugendhat House 2.0 on the site of the long derelict Moravian textile factories of the Low-Beer family (as detailed in a talk the author gave to the ‘Friends of Czech Heritage’ on May 31, 2021, uploaded to YouTube)—seem to suggest something of a new dawn for Jewry in Central Europe in the new millennium. I have not even attempted to broach the many Polish language narratives connected to the loss of that city, part of a cult of memoir-writing enshrined in official Polish associations (*Towarzystwa*) and annual competitions that began as far back as 1918.¹¹ From those texts under discussion here the subject of each narrative has however deceased, so that the theoretical discussion often passes now to the effects on second- or even third-generation survivors of the Holocaust. Meanwhile the Ukrainian city of Lviv has predictably started to produce, translate and republish its own histories that actively de-Polonise the 600 years of Polish history of the city.¹² While there are at least a couple of journals that seek to uphold the memory of Polish Lwów (which was also Jewish)—namely, the *Rocznik Lwowski*, published since 1991 by the Instytut Lwowski in Warsaw, and Koło Lwowian’s *Lwów i Kresy Wschodnie*, which comes out in London as an affiliation to POSK—it is not clear what weight they will continue to bear other than a commemorative one. For example, the poetry anthology *Serce wydarte z polskiej piersi. Lwów w poezji*, edited by D. B. Łomaczewska (1993), was published to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the Eaglets (*Orlęta*) who saved the city militarily at the end of the First World War. Now that Polish Lwów is no more, new generations of ethnologists like Sophie

Hodorowicz Knab almost unwittingly take the post-1945 PRL (Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa) borders as the given geographical framework of *Polczyzna*.¹³ Polish Lwów will thus inevitably be increasingly forgotten to all but historians.¹⁴ Predictably, *Lwów i Kresy* has switched from being a *kwartalnik*, as was envisaged at its launch in 1988, to a biannual publication. In short, we are reaching the very end of the genre of Lwowian life histories imbricated in the experience of the Second World War and Polishness.

Notes

- 1 For more on this subject, see Mękowski, *Lwów*.
- 2 Zagajewski, "To Go to Lwów," in *Without End*, 79–81.
- 3 See Mick, *Lemberg, Lwów, L'viv*.
- 4 See, for example, Kessler, *The Wartime Diary of Edmund Kessler*; Frusztajer, *From Siberia to America*. On Bełżec, see Kola, *Bełżec. The Nazi camp for Jews in the light of archeological sources*.
- 5 See Vardi, *Memorial Candles*.
- 6 See Miriam Bodian's work.
- 7 Potok, *Old Men at Midnight*.
- 8 Appignanesi, *Everyday Madness*, and Rosemary Hill's review in *The Guardian* (Friday 14 September, 2018); <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/sep/14/everyday-madness-lisa-appignanesi-review-rosemary-hill>. Leading exemplars of the bereavement genre are Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, and Joyce Carol Oates, *A Widow's Story*.
- 9 For more details readers can refer to other books already written in Czech, such as Černoušková, *Lwów-Beerovy vily*.
- 10 A full feature detailing his project was published in *The Daily Telegraph*, 24–25 February 2019.
- 11 For the associations and competitions, see Paweł Rodak "Diaries – Poland's Autobiographical Twentieth Century." Among Polish language memoirs on Lwów, see Edward Nahlik, Tadeusz Riedl, Jan Bil, Julian Strykowski's *Wielki Strach*, Aleksander Wat's *Mój Wiek*, and the numerous *Pamiętniki* held under the call number syg. II, in the Archiwum Wschodniego w Ośrodku KARTA at Ludwika Narbutta 29, 02-536 Warszawa, Poland. The 'Eastern Archive' housed at the Association KARTA was established in November 1987 as an independent institution engaging several dozen people to document the concealed and falsified "eastern" past (<https://karta.org.pl/>).
- 12 Kachmar, Kravchenko, and Fraser, *Awesome Lviv; Hrushevsky, History of Ukraine-Rus*.
- 13 Hodorowicz Knab, *Polish Customs*.
- 14 Between 27–29 October 2021, a virtual conference dedicated to "Cities and Memory" in eastern Europe took place under the auspices of PAN and the Muzeum Miasta Gdynia: <https://ihpan.edu.pl/miasto-i-pamiec/>. Interestingly, three papers were dedicated to Lwów.

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