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Military service and war experiences in the personal documents of Polish Tatars[1]

Służba wojskowa i doświadczenia wojenne w dokumentach osobistych polskich Tatarów

Keywords: Polish Tatars, World War II, personal documents, biographical method, diaries, memoirs
Słowa kluczowe: polscy Tatarzy, II wojna światowa, dokumenty osobiste, metoda biograficzna, pamiętniki

Abstract

This paper analyses memories of military service and life experiences from the time of World War II, present in the social consciousness of Polish Tatars. The memories of representatives of this small ethnic group have been preserved through personal documents (including diaries and memoirs), which have been made public and published in print. The content analysis included a collection of sources consisting of 13 items.

Introduction and methodological note

Polish Tatars are a small ethnic group, largely assimilated and fully integrated into the Polish environment, with oriental, Golden Horde roots.[2] The origins

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[2] An important distinctive feature of the Polish Tatars is the cultivation of traditions and remembrance of their ancestors, and above all of their own model of Muslim faith. The preserved

of the Tatar settlement can be traced to military defectors who fled from the East and settled in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania as early as the mid-14th century and, in the 1770s, were given land grants in Podlasie by King John III Sobieski. When World War II ended, part of the community connected with the Eastern Borderlands (mainly Vilnius intelligentsia) was repatriated to the so-called Recovered Territories, to the Tricity and Warsaw. From the late 1950s, Tatars from the Western and Northern Territories began to migrate to Podlasie, where there are now settlement centres for this community (the largest being in Białystok).[3] The fact of having and cultivating military traditions is not without relevance to the research issue addressed in the paper. This is because this heritage is part of the devotion to patriotism evidenced by the independence-oriented attitudes and veteran ethos, which are clearly visible in the Tatar diaries.

The paper is based on an analysis of personal documents[4], carried out using the biographical method as a technique of qualitative research[5] and the theoretical findings of the project, which is innovative in terms of the researched issues of the Second World War, entitled "Biography and national identity", carried out under the direction of Zbigniew Bokszanski (*Biografia i wojna…* 2016). Unlike epistolography[6], the Polish Tatars' memoirs have not been the subject of

relics in the form of Tatar manuscripts bear witness to the interpenetration of Slavic and Oriental cultures. They are being studied by a new philological sub-discipline – kitabistics (Kulwicka-Kamińska 2018: 61–80).

[3] According to estimates, there are currently about 3,000 people of Tatar descent living in Poland, some 500 of whom are members of the Muslim religious communities at the Muslim Religious Union in Poland. Official figures from the Central Statistical Office are much lower: about 500 persons according to the 2002 Census and about 2000 according to the 2011 Census (Łyszczarz 2017: 219–222).

[4] Personal documents refer to any source containing projections of a particular person's state of mind, where the author recounts his or her participation in certain events and offers a personal view of a given situation (Guzik-Tkacz, Siegień-Matyjewicz 2012: 76–77).

[5] In sociological terms, the biographical method means a qualitative research technique in which the social significance of biographical sources is established through content analysis; it can also be a complementary way of collecting qualitative data through so-called triangulation; in addition, it can serve as a basis for monographic research – a case study (*key study*). The objective of the analysis is to reconstruct memory based on imagined facts and their significance for social consciousness (Włodarek, Ziółkowski 1990: 3–9).

[6] A study of the rich archive of Maciej Konopacki's correspondence has been undertaken in several publications by Rafał Berger. An analysis of the significance of these letters has been included in a hitherto unpublished paper: M. Łyszczarz, *Epistolografia Macieja Konopackiego jako źródło do badań położenia Tatarów w powojennej Polsce*, being the aftermath of a speech at a conference entitled "The Role of Outstanding Individuals in Creating Community Identity" (24–25.06.2022).

in-depth scientific study until now.[7] The source materials that were used in this paper come exclusively from long and short memoir formats. Due to the significant impact on the formation of community members' consciousness as well as availability, personal documents that were made public and published in print were analysed (the collection of sources comprises 13 items). Strictly private and uncategorised materials (e.g. epistolary correspondence, accounts, notes, scribblings) were excluded. One exception is Zulejka's diary, which was published, although in a very small print run (about 50 copies) and with immediate family in mind.[8] The document has not been made public in its entirety and therefore has retained its private character. For this reason, as well as due to the author's explicit wish not to disseminate the diary without her permission, this source has been anonymised.[9] Except for the diaries of Zulejka, Zula Janowicz-Czaińska Drotlew, and the memoirs of Dżenet Dżabagi-Skibniewska, the majority of personal documents analysed herein are available in digital form.[10] The quotations are presented in their original wording. Before proceeding with the study, the author formulated two research hypotheses, assuming that: 1) the memories of war – just like in the case of the entire Polish society – were the dominant generational experience of Tatars born in the first half of the twentieth century, and 2) addressing war issues is part of the theme of military service, which is associated strongly with Tatars' national identity (feeling Polish) and patriotism. Verification of these assumptions will take place by means of an analysis of the content of personal documents of Polish Tatars, whose issues have been divided into several particularly interesting threads.

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[7] The present paper is a continuation and elaboration of the issues taken up in the hitherto unpublished paper: M. Łyszczarz, *Rola pamiętników w podtrzymywaniu pamięci zbiorowej polskich Tatarów*, being the follow up to the presentation at the conference titled: "The birth of Turkology in Eastern Europe and its significance for Turkic minorities". On the 50th anniversary of the death of Prof. Ananiasz Zajączkowski and the 80th anniversary of the death of Leon Kryczyński" (02.04.2020).

[8] Zulejka's memoir entitled. 'A Sentimental Tale' has no publisher information, nor is it listed with an ISBN. The document has been published in a near B5 format, in hardback. The book has 107 pages, comprising reproductions of dozens of photographs and documents and 94 pages of memoirs, divided into 13 chapters – starting with an outline of the family background (Tatar grandparents and parents), through the author's childhood in Wołkowysk in the Eastern Borderlands, the war years, repatriation, the realities of life in the People's Republic of Poland and marriage to a Polish Catholic (crowned by religious conversion), to the period of old age and widowhood, in which she attempts to put her life back on track.

[9] The back cover of the memoir included a copyright notice: "Reproduction and distribution without permission of the author prohibited".

[10] A digital archive of Tatar periodicals, books, brochures, educational charts, maps, music CDs and historical archives can be found at: http://bibliotekatatarska.pl [accessed: 20.07.2022].

Military and war issues present in the diaries and memoirs of Polish Tatars

1. Military service of Tatar soldiers in pre-war Poland

What is striking in the memoirs of Polish Tatars serving as soldiers is the considerable distance separating the position of privates and officers in the Polish Army in interwar Poland. This divide, which ran across the Tatar community, reflected the social diversity of the ethnic community, as well as the massive inequalities present in the society of the time. Indeed, the Second Polish Republic was a strongly hierarchical state in which clear class and stratum divisions were evident (Poznańska 1991: 19–32). A picture emerges from the personal documents of Tatars regarding the difficult situation of a pre-war private serving in the elite 13th Vilnius Cavalry Regiment, which cultivated lancer cavalry traditions. Mustafa Abramowicz recalls with shame the terrible state of the uniforms, the low pay that made it impossible to buy razor blades and the permanent state of malnutrition:

> […] we've been given uniforms. My God! What condition they were in! Rags from the First World War… Patch after patch, the lining was tearing like paper, the trousers were soaked and badly worn, the boots were so tattered and patched that they were rubbing off the feet, and the coat was so shabby it looked like a sieve. As for personal clothing, it was made of coarse linen like potato sacks […] heavily worn and patched that w we were disgusted to put it on. […] Shaving was even worse, as the soap would not dissolve in cold water, and the razor blades were in very bad condition. After a single use, they were no longer suitable for another shave. […] Our pay was only 85 groszy for ten days […]. We were required to buy shoe polish and buttons for our uniform with this money […]. However, buying razor blades was the most essential purchase […]. In fact, this was the most expensive purchase, as a razor blade […] costs as much as 10 groszy. This […] was our duty, and we appeared before the commander every morning for inspection. No one cared what we bought the razor blades for. […] The food was just as poor […]. For breakfast we were given only dry bread and black coffee […] we got hungry pretty soon. […] One way of feeding ourselves was through parcels sent from home. […] we felt ashamed when we had to write to our families to ask them to send us food (Abramowicz 2016: 28–31).

Although far from being a communist agitator, Mustafa Abramowicz was severely criticising pre-war relations inside the Polish Army. The Tatar private pointed out that conscription to the army was a planned action by the state, which directly supported the privileged classes, thus perpetuating existing divisions and fuelling simmering social conflicts. Abramowicz regretfully remarked that the authorities of the Second Republic took no interest in him when he wanted to

study and angrily recalled the fact of the high discounts enjoyed by the elite of the time:

> In 1937 […] I was drafted […] for active military service. I was surprised that the authorities […] knew I existed when I was needed for military service but were not interested in me when I'd wanted to go to school but couldn't afford it because my parents could barely make ends meet. They were not interested in me when I was running barefoot in a field and had hardly anything to put on. But that was the state policy of the time, a citizen in his prime was needed to defend the small aristocratic class and its interests. […] It was very distressing for us soldiers because we knew that despite their good wages […] officers and civil servants had a 75 per cent discount on travel. And we […], with our pittance soldiers' salaries, had to pay for our transport home (Abramowicz 2016: 26–32).

The plight of a private in the barracks near Vilnius was contrasted with the situation of cadets from the cadet school in Warsaw. Sulejman Mucharski points out that young non-commissioned officers in pre-war Poland were able to enjoy a completely carefree life and indulge in numerous social pastimes, including gambling and drinking parties. Essentially, their only problem was the need to get in good physical shape and endure the hardships of drill:

> […] I introduced my colleagues to my friends […]. The master of the house was into playing preferans. He needed partners, which he found in my colleagues. They played every Saturday […] until early morning. The lady of the house made the time more pleasant by playing the piano and singing fairly well. […] During the card game at night, delicious hot dinners, lavishly laced with various vodkas, were served a couple of times. During the breaks, they danced with the Mrs […] the then popular dances, singing […] sentimental chants […]. Halusia danced with […] cadets, who pressed her tightly as they danced and whispered in her ear: "You're a devil, not a woman" (Mucharski 2015: 99).
>
> This did not prevent […] speeding up the pace and discipline of the exercises. More often without stirrups, a fine trot in circles. So that the buttocks of the 'gentlemen cadets' were red, so that […] in the barracks they had to lubricate them […] with Vaseline. […] The buttocks of the […] sons of […] wealthy families, who had never seen a horse […] in their lives, except in Warsaw carriages maybe, were particularly delicate. […] Their muscles and characters were too delicate and unsuitable for "boorish physical and mental stunts" (Mucharski 2015: 75).

2. Tatars' reactions to the outbreak of World War II

The moment of the outbreak of the Second World War takes a prominent place in the memoirs of Polish Tatars. This caesura represents the defining

generational experience for the representatives of the generation that was born and grew up under the Second Republic. The German invasion is associated with an acute sense of defeat and anger at the unequal struggle and no real chance of victory. Tatars were critical of the fact that the authorities of the time did too little to make effective resistance possible. In their recollections, there is also a sense of shame due to powerlessness and fear of death. The image of total destruction and the turning of the country into ruin has become embedded in the memories of the Tatars. The outbreak of war meant anxiety about the future and awareness of the end of the hitherto peaceful life. This was perfectly understood by everyone, even the children, who had to interrupt their schooling and say goodbye to their fathers leaving for the front:

> Oh, what a surprise it was for us when on 1 September 1939, Germany declared war on Poland. […] In my opinion, the ruling class, which had ruled for twenty years of independence so as not to lose its positions and personal gains, was most severely affected by the war. […] The largest […] section of society […] reacted to the outbreak of war with horror and anxiety (Abramowicz 2016: 40–41).

> I felt really sorry. I felt like a meaningless son of this land. I was ashamed of myself, of my colleagues, of my former commanders. Shame for our helplessness, our powerlessness. With a gun at my side, I felt humiliated and detached from my own land, suspended in the air (Mucharski 2015: 217).

> The outbreak of the war etched itself into my memory the most, shivers running down my spine at the mere mention. The first one: I'm three years old, my dad comes into the room in his elegant uniform with a sabre by his side, says goodbye to my crying grandmother and mother, and puts me and my brother on a chair and squeezes me tightly until I'm out of breath. Next come the horrible images of air raids, the laughing faces of German airmen firing rifle bursts behind us as we fled […] they were having fun while our hearts were shattering with fear (Szahidewicz 2020: 20).

> On the first of September 1939, there was no new school year to start, and the war broke out […]. The air raids and bombing of Volkovysk began […]. During the air raids, we went down to the cellar with the grandmothers […] and the servants […]. The grandmothers prayed, holding hands (Zulejka 2015: 22).

The first of September was only the beginning of the trauma. For the Tatars living in the Eastern Borderlands, the Soviet incursion into Poland was no less critical. The Soviet aggression was surprising, which intensified the sense of threat. People were overwhelmed by panic, paralysing the functioning of state structures, and causing all-pervasive chaos. In Tatar memoirs, 17 September is regarded as

a treacherous act that removed all hope. In the memoirs written down post-factum, the Soviets were seen as occupiers even worse than the Germans, as they acted in a covert and tightly focused manner. Their terror relied primarily on oppressing class opponents – the Polish elite, including the Tatars. The arrests carried out by the NKVD were portrayed by the apparatus of communist agitation as the just revenge of the people. The Tatars never succumbed to this propaganda:

> […] the Soviet army crossed our eastern border. It was a massive shock to us, no one knew what purpose this might have served. […] The commanders […] had not received any instructions […] and we did not know whether we should welcome the Russians or shoot at them. Great confusion and panic ensued. […] The Soviet army's motto was supposedly to liberate the local population from Polish oppression. […] Everyone able to flee did so into the wilderness, as far away from the Soviets as possible. […] The Russians […] invaded […] our borders sneakily, without any declaration of war, they stabbed us in the back (Abramowicz 2016: 41–45).

> The agitation began right away – it is great to live in the Soviet Union, there is plenty of everything, people live prosperously and without worries. […] Generally speaking, the folk looked indifferently at the agitation. […] The Tatars immediately positioned themselves in opposition to the Soviet authorities. They gave no heed […] to agitation, to any persuasion. They recognised the Soviets as their enemies and did not enter into any comity with them (Sobolewski 2019: 73–75).

> The Soviets entered our city on 19 September […] without a fight. It turned out that there were those who were expecting them, they even set up a table and welcomed them with bread and salt. […] My mother was summoned several times by the NKVD, where she gave evidence and wrote biographical notes, which were verified by them. They were well aware of the family history, and mum's background; they knew who her father was and what property he owned (Zulejka 2015: 23).

> The Soviets struck from the east. […] Returning soldiers were turned in and arrested, including my husband. […] We were allowed to bring them meals, so […] I would bring them water, letter paper and cigarettes […] their favourite treats. I […] stood guard near the prison every day. From the gate […] there stretched a long line: all women […] landowners, officers' wives and […] the prosecutor's wife (Janowicz-Czaińska Drotlew 2001: 14).

3. The complexity of the experience of Tatar soldiers during World War II

The diversity of the social status of Tatars serving in the army in pre-war Poland influenced the specificity of the frontline experience after the start of

hostilities in 1939. Based on the analysis of memoirs, four types of Tatar servicemen can be distinguished: 1) "retired soldier-officer"; 2) "ordinary frontline soldier"; 3) "soldier-traveller"; 4) "female soldier". Due to the small number of memoirs available, however, it is necessary to emphasise that the models identified are based on individual experiences, which are not representative and cannot be directly carried over to the entire Tatar community.

The first type is represented by Sulejman Mucharski. A "Soldier-officer" was characterised by belonging to the elite and a conviction of the need to act honourably. However, in this case, it takes the form of exaggerated Don Quixote-ness, when a retired lieutenant colonel got on his bicycle and set off alone to fight in the war in September 1939:

> The seventh day of our defeat had arrived. I made a final decision: waiting any longer would lead to nothing good, we had to leave. […] I felt sad. I was leaving the piece of my homeland that was closest to my heart behind. As if I were leaving my closest family. I got on my bicycle like Don Quixote on his skinny horse and set off in search of the real enemy who had disturbed our peace. I was heading towards Modlin, the place where my former unit was deployed (Mucharski 2015: 219).

"The ordinary frontline soldier", on the other hand, experienced the true hardships of war. Jan Sobolewski describes struggling with hunger, fatigue, cold, pain and lack of sleep.

> […] our daily ration consists of a few dry biscuits, two spoonfuls of tushonka and water from the stream. Food shortages cause painful stomach cramps and nausea. To dilute the stomach acids, we eat grass roots and young tree shoots. Some of these are bitter and unfit for consumption. […] We are so exhausted due to constant rain falling on our heads […], the sleepy soldiers fall into the bottom of the trenches full of dirty water. We help them out of the armour and drag them under the canopy, where we rub their freezing bodies. […] Soaked greatcoats and jackets give no warmth. Shivers and gnashing of teeth never leave us even for a moment. Only in battle do we forget about the oppressive cold. […] Soaked boots and shoelaces hold our feet in an icy grip. The swelling and bloody fissures on our feet […] add to our suffering (Sobolewski 2014: 18).

Frontline soldiers spent their rare moments of rest smoking cigarettes. In the trenches, tobacco was an exclusive conversation companion.

> Boris passes me […] dill with makhorka. Its pungent scent spreads around. I quickly roll a cig and inhale the lung-scratching smoke. A few more hasty puffs. My exhausted body has little resistance to nicotine. I get dizzy, extinguish the cigarette

> and put the butt in my pocket. I admire Boris for having stored a supply of makhorka up to this point. It's a bit damp, but […] still a luxury (Sobolewski 2014: 20).

Alcohol is also mentioned in Sobolewski's memoirs. Unlike cigarettes, however, it was not viewed in terms of relaxation, but solely as medicine. For a Tatar-Muslim – in addition to medical and disciplinary reasons – the prohibition of alcohol consumption present in Islamic religious doctrine may have played a role in this case. However, this argument was not explicitly formulated.

> Soldiers were going in groups to get hot food. […] The cook encouraged us to consume alcohol. He said that a sip of something stronger was good for warming up, and that the nights in April were cold. He argued that booze stimulates the appetite […]. And indeed, the soldiers were just sampling the drink. They approached the conch and drank carefully in small sips. The alcohol was strong; we were supplied with spirits mixed with a small amount of water. Everyone was well aware that we could not take any risks. If we drank too much, we could all get carried away by our fantasies or excessive bravado (Sobolewski 2014: 67).

Yet the most characteristic experience of a frontline soldier was the prospect of omnipresent death. Without shying away from the pathos that is understandable in this situation, Jan Sobolewski describes it in detail, emphasising the despair and rage he felt. For the author of the memoirs, it was always the death of a specific person, a person whose memory remains. In wartime conditions, it was often more lasting than life.

> Igor is already dead. The heart no longer beats, the raised head drops down inertly. Glazed eyes testify conclusively to his death. Several bullets are lodged in his chest. […] Igor's death is strongly felt. This impression will remain in our memory for a long time. Boris sits dazed for a moment, then takes off his cap and bows low in front of Igor's body. He quickly utters a few words: "You were a good soldier, a faithful colleague. You are our hero. You'll remain in our memory forever". Reality does not allow for despair, the whistling of bullets reminds us that the deadly battle continues (Sobolewski 2014: 21–22).

> Elsztejn's death was tragic; first he received a burst from a machine gun. An orderly rushed to his aid and dragged the wounded man under the trench […] and then […] another bullet reached him. His body was torn to pieces […] I sat motionless at the bottom of it for a long time, reflecting on what had happened […]. I was distraught at the loss of my colleagues, I was overwhelmed with rage (Sobolewski 2014: 54).

The third type of military man is represented by Mustafa Abramowicz. This is an unusual case, as this simple soldier of the Polish Armed Forces formed in the USSR did not fight directly in the frontline, but served behind the unit as an

electrician in a brigade that repaired broken equipment. Together with General Władysław Anders' troops, Abramowicz made his way through the Middle East to Italy. His memories of Palestine or Egypt, among others, are closer to the account of a tourist than a military man. Being away from the front, the Tatar soldier adopted the attitude of an observer-traveller. This was probably driven by a curiosity about the world and his realisation that he had a unique chance to get to know other cultures, or perhaps also a desire to wipe out the trauma of being sent to the gulag:

> We sought to meet new people and visit neighbouring towns. We […] went […] to Jaffa […] and walked around the bazaars there, where you could admire all kinds of handicrafts. They were exquisite. […] After a long walk, we went to Tel Aviv for a decent lunch […]. We took a souvenir photo and went to the beach to […] bathe in the sea. I was […] looking forward to this moment. […] What a delight it was […]. After […] bathing […] the whole group went to a […] café for coffee. […] We left […] in the morning […] so that we had plenty of time to explore. […] Jerusalem enchanted us with its beauty and wealth of temples […] we were accompanied by a guide who showed us the monuments and told their stories. We were amazed that a single city could hold […] so much history and such a diversity of peoples and religions (Abramowicz 2016: 99).

> […] we went with a friend to Alexandria […]. We tried […] to see as much as possible. Whenever I had a day off, I always tried to go somewhere and see something new and learn about a culture and customs that were new to me, something I had only learned about at school before the war […]. I followed the principle that whatever I would see and learn now was worth more than the money saved in my pocket (Abramowicz 2016: 109).

The last type of Tatar soldier refers to the female perspective. It was by no means a common sight; nevertheless, the body of sources includes the interesting memoirs of Dżennet Dżabagi-Skibniewska. The author was a liaison officer and paramedic during the defence of Gdynia in 1939, and later carried out educational activities among children who ended up in Italy amid the turmoil of war. The Tatar soldier's experiences from the frontline battlefield on Kępa Oksywska, as well as her extra-frontline activities, which at first glance may be considered 'not very veteran-like', have been etched in her memory. For Dżabagi-Skibniewska, however, the educational work she devotedly carried out among Polish children in exile was no less important than armed action:

> The year 1939. The war. Wearing the rank of lieutenant, I performed the duties of adjutant […] of the Command of Women's Voluntary Detachments. […] A small group of us stayed behind to defend Gdynia. […] My memories of this period are

horrible. […] We were penetrating the battlefield […] dressed in white blouses […] with the Red Cross emblem on our sleeves […]. Some moans reached our ears. What we saw was a shock to us. The swollen bellies of the killed horses, the bleeding, wounded and still alive, dozens of bodies of the fallen defenders […]. We managed to bury the bodies of 30 Polish soldiers (Skibniewska 1991: 192–193).

[…] I was assigned […] to the Bari city command, to the Publishing Section of the 2nd Corps. […] There, books, schoolbooks and textbooks were produced, which we sent to all the schools organised in the camps […]. After the end of hostilities in Italy, there was a massive influx of children who had previously […] found themselves in the Soviet Union and Germany […]. These kids corresponded with us, with the editing team. They had difficulties with the language, they mixed Polish words with Russian ones. Not to mention spelling and syntax. We also prepared short stories, fairy tales and poems for them. We worked in primitive conditions, publishing on loose sheets of paper, using ordinary duplicating presses, the Polish words – intended for the youngest children (Skibniewska 1991: 189–190).

4. Tatar underground resistance during the occupation

One expression of patriotic devotion among Tatars living in the occupied country was to cooperate with the Home Army underground. In his published memoirs, Jan Sobolewski paid particular attention to the pro-independence underground. When describing the moment he joined the ranks of the organisation in his memoirs, he emphasised that, as a Muslim, he took the oath in accordance with his religion. The Polish Tatar was very cautious and, fearing betrayal, decided to cooperate without making statements or signing any documents. He recalled that from time to time he received orders to carry out specific sabotage activities and described the details of clandestine operations, such as hanging flags and passing on information about road and rail traffic:

I […] became a member of the Home Army […]. I took the oath, I had issues with the cross. I said […] that […] I will take an oath on the Koran, but the homeland is the same – Poland. I will follow all orders, but no documents, […] lists and certificates are needed. After all, it is known that there were serious slip-ups. […] Based on the lists they found, the Germans arrested many people that disappeared without a trace (Sobolewski 2021: 170).

In the early spring of 1942, I found a small piece of paper in my jacket pocket with the words: "A parcel for you can be found under the thatch at the back of the barn […]. Follow the directions given. Memorise what you have read, burn the piece of paper". I inspected the barn while it was still daylight. I noticed that there was

> a scrap of paper sticking out from behind the thatch in one place. I only took it out after nightfall […]. When I took the wrapping off, a small flag appeared before my eyes […]. There was an octagonal Maltese cross on one side, and the white eagle and inscriptions on the other: God, Honour, Fatherland, For Our and Your Freedom, and a signature of sorts – Z. St. […]. The instructions stated that I was to hang this flag at night on an electric wire in Słonimska Street. […] So I did. The flag hung there for quite a long time. […]. The Germans […] were furious, they searched the buildings […]. I handled Słonimska and Nieświeska Streets, and similar flags were hung in other places in the city. This means that there were still other people doing this job. […] One day I paid an unexpected visit to the house of my cousin, Ewa Abramowicz. I found her making flags. She explained that this was being done by Tatar youths, former members of the Riflemen's Association and the Scouts (Sobolewski 2021: 171–173).

> You visit the railway station in Kletsk almost every day […]. Along the way, see what the Germans are transporting to the east and what they are moving west. We are particularly interested in the movements of military units, their numbers, identification, etc. Remember everything […]. At home you will write down everything […]. You roll up the paper into a tiny scroll and put it […] into a hole in a small stick, plugging the hole with clay or earth so that the stick is no different from any other. […] The caches will be changed frequently […]. Once the parcel is in the cache, you […] leave the fence gate open behind you. We will know that information is available to be retrieved. […] Such transmissions […] will happen every Saturday (Sobolewski 2021: 176–177).

Jan Sobolewski recalls that he was involved in the Home Army underground in the Eastern Borderlands until the conspiracy in Kletsk was dominated by Soviet partisans (the turn of 1943–1944). The growing terror accompanying the creation of a new reality by the communist authorities resulted in the decision to withdraw from cooperation. The Polish Tatar suffered a severe beating by "unknown perpetrators":

> The Soviet partisans lost much of their reputation as defenders of the people. Some people said outright – they're murderers – because murders began to happen with increased frequency. Sometimes a village leader was executed, sometimes an employee of our Mechanical Plant was shot in the village of Dziemidowicze. […] The existing situation discouraged me from active conspiratorial work – I didn't want to help the murderers. […] I stopped passing on information about rail and road transport and the number of troops and police in Kletsk. The consequences of this decision were extremely unpleasant for me. I was […] returning to town from home with a supply of provisions […]. When I was passing by a forest, four armed men jumped me and started a brawl. I defended myself […], but they had the upper hand. I was severely beaten. Having completed their task, the assailants quickly retreated into the forest without saying a word […] (Sobolewski 2021: 178–179).

5. Heroic deeds of war – the symbolism of the Battle of Monte Cassino (1944)

The Battle of Monte Cassino (May 1944) holds a special place in the memories of Polish Tatars fighting on the Western Front. The Allied offensive in the Apennines marked the high point of the Rome campaign, during which the soldiers of the anti-Hitler coalition, although suffering huge losses, paved the way for the liberation of Italy. The soldiers of the 2nd Polish Corps were involved in the fighting, and their decisive assault made it possible to claim victory. The price of the heroic effort was the death of around 1,000 Poles, which contributed to the heroisation of the battle and its inclusion in the canon of national culture. The process of mythologisation was fostered by the creation of symbolism, conveyed, among other things, by Feliks Konarski's song entitled *Czerwone maki na Monte Cassino* [Eng.: *Red poppies on Monte Cassino*]. The narrative present in the memoirs of the Polish Tatars was written post factum and fully fits the patriotic pattern present in the national culture. What draws attention is the fact that the account is given using the first-person plural, which is intended to emphasise the impression of community. The soldiers, standing in full combat gear, embody the virtues of chivalry. In the pathos-filled words of Mustafa Abramowicz, the will to triumph and seek revenge is evident, although the latter is based on rather low reasons. The conquest of the summit of Monte Cassino caused euphoria and pride in planting the white and red flag on the ruins of the monastery:

> Our corps […] was ordered to take Monte Cassino. We waited in full gear, totally ready for the assault. We knew that if we conquered the hill, we would shroud the Polish soldiers in glory forever. We […] wanted […] victory and revenge for the wrongs done to us by the Germans. […] Our motto was both on our lips and in our hearts: 'For your freedom and ours'. […] I remember the pride […] when we looked at our red-and-white flag planted at the very top. Many of us cried with happiness; we realised that we had become […] a part of history forever (Abramowicz 2016: 113–114).

The battle is described in a similar, though more literary, manner by Dżennet Dżabagi-Skibniewska. The author, wishing to evoke certain emotional reactions from her readers, makes direct reference to the symbolism of red poppies. However, the Polish Tatar emphasises not only the martyrdom of the soldiers but also directs the narrative into the realm of politics, suggesting that after the war, the sacrifice of the Monte Cassino conquerors was not properly appreciated for many years. What both memoirists have in common is the fact that they describe the battle despite not having participated in it personally. However, while

Mustafa Abramowicz served at the rear of the front and may have felt a part of the 2nd Polish Corps, Dżennet Dżabagi-Skibniewska – which has only recently been revealed by Bartosz Panek – was in Warsaw at the time, not participating in the fighting against the occupying forces at all (Panek 2020: 150–172; Łyszczarz 2021: 26–29). This fact makes it clear that the stories described in the diaries are of an imaginary nature, not necessarily consistent with objective truth:

> Red poppies. I saw them on those hills after the battle in 1944. They were so tiny. The ones I'm looking at today are different. Bigger. It's like they've grown up and they're so proud. I picked a bouquet back then. I dried it […]. I have five grandchildren. I will leave it to them. […] Since the day I saw those bloody hills, the poppies have been the saddest flowers for me. […] They shouted a direct message. Be proud soldiers. […] It's true that they won […], but they were badly hurt. […] They fought in the name of and for Poland for years. They dreamt of working in peace. They longed for the land […], for their loved ones. When they returned – only harassment awaited them. […] I believe that we need to be apologised to. […] You can't do that to a person […]. You can't just bully them for no reason and then go on with your day (Skibniewska 1991: 194–195).

Conclusion

The limited volume of the paper made it necessary to address only a handful of the most distinctive issues. The biographical accounts also contain interesting material on various macro-social as well as local problems. These include, for instance, accounts of exile and captivity in Soviet gulags, an assessment of German and USSR occupation policy, descriptions of neighbourly relations during the war, the situation of Jews in the occupied territories, Polish-Ukrainian relations and dilemmas related to the future following the end of the war – the decision to repatriate to Poland or emigrate to the West. These themes deserve to be analysed in a separate study.

The Second World War was undoubtedly the most important generational experience interconnecting the fates of Poles and Tatars. The analysed source material allowed the research assumptions to be positively verified. Moreover, the memories of the Tatars – taking into account their specificity – confirm that there was a commonality of experiences typical of the Polish inhabitants of the Eastern Borderlands. The issue of military service and memories from the years 1939–1945 addressed in this paper is reflected in the analysed personal documents. One might even be tempted to say that these motifs are among the most prevalent themes in Tatar memoirs. In addition, war experiences provided a major reason

for writing down memoirs. The Tatar authors wanted to put their lives in order, to account for their own achievements, to work through traumatic frontline experiences, to pass on fleeting memories to their children and grandchildren as well as to warn posterity against the cruelty of war. As evidenced by the Tatars' declarations, the memoirs were written mainly with the immediate family in mind. In recent decades, however, there has been a trend towards making them public. The memoirs have become an object of interest for Tatar organisations (the Muslim Religious Union in the Republic of Poland and the Union of Tatars of the Republic of Poland), which see them as a significant contribution to the consolidation of ethnic bonds and the popularisation of cultural heritage, in conditions of dispersion, assimilation and a progressive reduction in the size of the community. Since 1945, military service has ceased to be a typical craft of the Tatars, and thus the need to preserve the memory of past traditions has become a necessity.

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