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WHAT SORT OF HISTORY DOES CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE NEED? THE CHANCES OF ORAL HISTORY¹

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Abstract: Michał Kierzkowski, WHAT SORT OF HISTORY DOES CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE NEED? THE CHANCES OF ORAL HISTORY. "PORÓWNANIA" 7, 2010, Vol. VII, pp. 43-56, ISSN 1733-165X. In my article I consider the necessity of distinct means of historical research in the Middle-East Europe. My analysis is divided into two parts. The first part is a presentation of a contention between different Western and Eastern approaches to own past. To illustrate this issue I give two examples – first one relating to historical sphere, second one relating to social and cultural sphere of reality. These two perspective constitute a justification of a title question and attempt to answer. The second part is a proposition of answer. Here, considering few methodological and theoretical problems raised by Polish researchers, I am trying to find inside these problems an adaptation for oral history as a research method which gains more and more interests. By using some general issues as cultural memory, historical education or historical policy, I concentrate on a peculiarity of contemporary history of the Middle-East Europe. To illustrate my considerations on chances and possibilities of oral history, I refer to some projects from post communistic countries.

Abstrakt: Michał Kierzkowski, JAKIEJ HISTORII POTRZEBUJE EUROPA ŚRODKOWO-WSCHODNIA? SZANSE HISTORII MÓWIONEJ. „PORÓWNANIA” 7, 2010, Vol. VII, ss. 43-56 ISSN 1733-165X. W artykule zastanawiam się nad potrzebą odmiennego sposobu prowadzenia badań historycznych w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej. Swoje analizy prowadzę w dwóch etapach. W pierwszym ukazuję spór dotyczący różnic między wschodnim a zachodnim podejściem do swojej przeszłości. Ilustrując tę kwestię, w sposób czysto arbitralny przywołuję dwa przykłady – pierwszy odnoszący się do kwestii czysto historycznych, drugi zaś do sfery społeczno-kulturowej – stanowią uzasadnienie dla stawianego przeze mnie pytania w tytule i próby odpowiedzi na nie. Drugi etap to propozycja odpowiedzi. Tutaj, odnosząc się do stawianych przez polskich badaczy kilku problemów natury teoretyczno-metodologicznej, próbuję znaleźć zastosowanie dla zyskującego coraz większe zainteresowanie i uznanie nurtu

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badawczego, historii mówionej. Przemycając pewne ogólne tezy dotyczące pamięci kulturowej, edukacji historycznej czy też polityki historycznej koncentruję się na specyfice współczesnej historii Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej. Ilustrując z kolei swoje przemyślenia na temat szans, możliwości oferowanych przez historię mówioną, odwołuję się do kilku projektów wynikających z doświadczeń krajów postkomunistycznych.

I. Introduction

The question posed by me in the title might seem naïve, unnecessary or ill-formulated. How should Central and Eastern Europe be different from the rest to such an extent that it would need a different kind of historical research? It could be said, by paraphrasing Leopold von Ranke, that Central Europe, similarly to other regions, needs such a history that would show how important things happened in the past. It seems, however, that there exist certain social and cultural conditions which make this part of the old continent need a fresh look at its past, apart from the hitherto traditional methods of looking at the past.

This text is divided into two parts. In the first part, I would like to show a kind of debate on the differences between the Eastern and the Western approaches to their pasts. In order to illustrate this debate, I would like to totally arbitrarily refer to two examples – the first one regards purely historical issues, the other the socio-cultural sphere – that constitute the rationale for the posited question and an attempt to answer it. The second part is the proposed answer. Here, by means of referring to some problems of a methodological nature stated by Polish researchers, I would like to find application for spoken history, which is a research trend that is stirring more and more interest and gaining recognition. I would like to focus on the specificity of contemporary history of Central and Eastern Europe by referring to some general theses of those researchers. I will illustrate my own thoughts on the possibilities offered by spoken history and refer to some projects on the experience of post-communist countries.

II. Shoah or Gulag? Western rationalism and eastern messianism

Although the European Union is becoming a creation which is more and more inclusive, going far beyond the originally planned economic community, it is difficult to talk about common collective memory. This starting point was assumed by the French historian, Emmanuel Droit, in his article *Gulag contra Shoah. The divided memory of*

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enlarged Europe.³. The main issue is that for Western Europe the central aspect of collective memory is the Holocaust, whereas for Eastern Europe it is the communist crimes. This asymmetry of memory introduces unwanted upheaval. The author recalls Simone Weil's words:

In some Eastern European countries it has not yet been acknowledged that Annihilation has taken place: under the influence of manipulation by communist regimes the memory of the crimes carried out by the Nazis in the conquered lands obscured the memory of the crimes committed, frequently with the involvement of these nations, on Jews⁴.

Droit points to the fact that the border which arose after the fall of the Soviet bloc still functions as an "iron curtain" but now rather symbolically separates the memories of western and eastern Europes. The countries that regained independence and sovereignty anew after 1989 were eager to look for justice and emphasise their suffering with reference to the Gulag rather than the Shoah. The French historian in order to seek solutions for this situation formulates the task that stands before us:

In the European Union there arises the question about the weight and place of the memory of the Shoah and communist crimes in politics of memory and collective memory of post-communist societies. It is strictly connected to the issue of European identity: to what extent does Shoah have to become the "signature of the 20th century"? Should Western Europe impose their hierarchy of memory and suffering? How to make it possible for the two categorical imperatives of memory – Shoah and Gulag – to co-exist in Europe without raising suspicions of negationism?⁵.

This asymmetry of memory from the above mentioned perspective is understood as heritage of decades of Sovietisation. It seems, however, that this conditioning has deeper roots and stems from the socio-cultural realm. This view is represented by Marek J. Siemek. The years after World War II for such countries as Poland or Czechoslovakia which represent a certain Central European dilemma of being in between the East and the West constituted the bone of contention between two superpowers, whereas the times after 1989 does not bring an end to some classical divisions in these countries. The problem lies much deeper and pertains not so much to history as to the social, cultural

³ E. Droit, *Gulag contra Shoah. The divided memory of enlarged Europe*. http://wyborcza.pl/1,97737,8277069,Gulag_kontra_Szoah_Podzielona_pamiec_rozszerzonej.html?as=2, 23.08.2010.

⁴ Ibidem.

⁵ Ibidem.

and mental aspects. Its core is the category of the *East which is within us*⁶. It is visible in many fields. It is particularly noticeable in the realm of politics in which instead of public debates on key problems of the future, there still are arbitrary and subjective debates on the symbols of the past years. In Central and Eastern Europe, particularly in Poland, the effective and rational civil servant was not the paragon for the ruling elites, but rather the bard with his messianic vision of mission⁷. Surely such a situation is not desired but is still effectively maintained. Change requires an immense effort:

[...] for the European countries that are at present called «post-communist» the core of modernisation is the dismantling of the “East which is within us”. The omnipresent immaturity of these countries and their impotence in the face of the challenges of the 21st century reside in this aspect and are symbolically expressed by it. The East [...] is rooted in the mentality of the people much deeper than it could have been assumed. This is why it today constitutes an obstacle on the way towards modernisation. [...] It turns out that the so bravely won political freedom alone is not enough to create the lacking substance of the modern social life. Maturing to the “Western”, or simply European, normality seems more and more visibly a daunting and long process in which there are obstacles in the form of economic weakness, but more so of political incompetence, ethical and legal anomie, mental impotence and immaturity of the people⁸.

The two examples above point to the lasting differences in the functioning of the two parts of the old continent even within one, institutional European community. This is where the question on the form of history arises. Which areas of past reality should it be focused on? What should be its character and aim? What kind of historical knowledge do we need? What research methods are worth applying in historical practice in order to highlight not only its scientific but also cultural aspect?

III. History as memory of culture

While thinking on the future of history, Wojciech Wrzosek asks in a straightforward manner whether cultural and civilisational development indicates the end of the demand for historiography⁹. The answer seems obvious in this case. The author points to the fact that it is difficult to imagine such civilisational changes as would

⁶ M. J. Siemek, *Wolność, rozum, intersubiektywność*. Warszawa 2002, p. 325.

⁷ Cf. Ibidem, p. 331 – 332.

⁸ Ibidem, p. 325 and n.

⁹ Cf. W. Wrzosek, *Czy historia ma przyszłość?*, in: *Gra i konieczność. Zbiór rozpraw z historii historiografii i filozofii historii*. Red. G. A. Dominiak, J. Ostojka-Zagórski, W. Wrzosek. Bydgoszcz 2005, p. 11-16.

eliminate the necessity of history in culture. The problem, it seems, is of different nature. One should ask the question with what we identify history and determine what makes it inalienable.

History is commonly treated as a collection of dates, names and facts from the past. Lack of theoretical consideration creates a situation in which knowledge of the past becomes a collection of more or less connected issues. Such a collection only gives the possibility of undertaking the attempt at understanding and locating ourselves in the present. It is not peculiar that lack of historical knowledge understood as archives of facts is not a problem in everyday life¹⁰. However, instead of identifying history with facts and dates, it should be identified with the memory of culture. Such a type of knowledge that derives from the past gives us a possibility to attach sense to our everyday life. It is so because:

Historiography, similarly to collective memory or tradition, is a systematic trace of culture [...] Historiography which was and is art, moreover, sometimes was and wants to be science, which preserves past states of culture and gives us a chance to shape contemporary understanding of the world. A deeper recognition of the sense of the phenomena that surround us – political, legal, artistic, religious, moral, etc. – without the roots from the past is impossible. Such history is necessary for the present times¹¹.

We should now turn to spoken history and analyse how it corresponds to the vision of history as memory of culture. Dobrochna Kałwa in her text *Historia mówiona w krajach postkomunistycznych. Rekonesans* carries out a number of analyses that show the specificity of research practice in Central and Eastern Europe¹². Here spoken history developed in isolation from Western European and American centres, which resulted in a different choice of topics. What is more, remaining “aside” the main trend is also visible in the attitude towards researchers from academia, who are still treated with caution. The researcher characterises spoken history in the old communist bloc and calls it a civil-educational trend whose main task is to build post-communist collective memory. The hitherto prevailing contrast between personal experience and official historical discourse resulted in turning the emphasis towards the political sphere and putting aside the social

¹⁰ Cf. Ibidem, p. 12.

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 13.

¹² D. Kałwa, *Historia mówiona w krajach postkomunistycznych. Rekonesans.*, „Kultura i Historia” 2010, no. 18, <http://kulturaihistoria.umcs.lublin.pl/archives/1887>. 25.09.2010.

issues, which later was reversed. The emphasis began to be directed towards the regaining of lost memory that was enslaved by the totalitarian system. In the process of creating identity anew in the post-communist societies, thanks to spoken history there was more activity on a local, as well as on a national level, which developed intergenerational bonds. The function of spoken history is particularly visible in this sphere as a memory of culture that gives sense to the present. The accounts of witnesses of history are not treated as collections of objective historical facts that serve the reconstruction of past reality but they constitute guideposts that open the sphere of interpretation of human memory and experience. In this way, as a record of culture, it becomes a trace of culture. Dobrochna Kałwa writes:

The researchers of spoken history define the spoken sources as cultural texts whose analysis and interpretation provides knowledge of, i.a. the system of values, practices and strategies in everyday life, ways of using the past by individuals and, finally, collective and individual memory. The culture change meant both the expansion of the scope of topics as well as the development of the research tools. The last one should allow a multifaceted analysis of sources as cultural texts of memory whose content depends on various factors such as: intellectual abilities and intentions of the speaker (both the declared and the hidden ones), character of communication (the method of the interview, the scope of the researcher's interference) the level of coincidence of the axiological realm among the participants of the interview or the public memory discourse, to mention just a few¹³.

Let's see how this works in practice. A good example of the above characteristic of spoken history is the *Voices From the Center*¹⁴ project. The American artist and researcher, Janeil Engelstad, was the originator of this project. During her research stay in Bratislava in 2006, she carried out a number of conversations on the topic of life in the communist times and changes which have taken place in Central Europe after the fall of the Berlin wall. The main reason for the conversations was to understand what had happened beyond the "iron curtain". These initial talks quickly became an inspiration for a greater project. Simple conversations were substituted by interviews of spoken history with a wider choice of participants including the Czechs, Hungarians and Poles. During her travels in those countries, the researcher visited the homes of the common people, places of work, local social organizations. She talked about life before and after communism and a special emphasis was put on the particular elements connected with

¹³ Ibidem.

¹⁴ <http://www.voicesfromthecenter.net> 25.09.2010

everyday life such as education, architecture, freedom, politics, history, art and culture or human rights. This project became a place for the experiences of common people that were hitherto lost and neglected but they do not constitute a source of historical facts. They are, first and foremost, guidelines that help understand the reality of everyday life. The researcher says that those interviews were not only a return to the past but also a look at the future. This attempt at getting to the past was in this case additionally stimulated. This project was accompanied by satellite ventures. One of them was entitled *Re-Cycled Memory*¹⁵. Its aim was to bring back to the public sphere some commercial symbols from the times of socialism, e.g. the Trabant car or Pedro chewing gum. Posters with these symbols modeled on the original ones were placed in different cities. These products became part of the Slovaks' memory and constitute reference to personal experience and recollection rather than the totalitarian system whose product they were. Their reproduction can constitute a key to memory.

To sum up, it should be said that the answer to the question to what extent spoken history can fill the blanks of memory in post-communist countries and constitute knowledge that allows us to better understand our present remains an open issue. It could be assumed that in this process the place of this research practice which is simultaneously a form of social activity seems undisputed.

IV. Towards new historical education

It seems inevitable that history and politics should intertwine. We can agree with the thesis that history constitutes a starting point for political activity¹⁶. However, it is worth analysing whether there exists a possibility of looking at this relation from the point of view of social experience of the past. This is one of the questions that Jan Pomorski tries to answer in his text *Uciezka od historii jako element poprawności politycznej - tezy*¹⁷. By referring to the opposition of the history of winners vs. the history

¹⁵ <http://www.re-cycled-memory.blogspot.com> 25.09.2010.

¹⁶ Cf. K. Pomorski, *Nostalgia i wzniosłość a refleksja krytyczna o dziejach. Kiedy "polityka historyczna" ma sens?*, in: *Pamięć i polityka historyczna. Doświadczenia Polski i jej sąsiadów*. Red. S. M. Nowinowski, J. Pomorski, R. Stobiecki. Łódź 2008, p. 53-63.

¹⁷ J. Pomorski, *Uciezka od historii jako element poprawności politycznej – tezy*, in: *Pamięć i polityka historyczna. Doświadczenia Polski i jej sąsiadów*. Red. S. M. Nowinowski, J. Pomorski, R. Stobiecki. Łódź 2008, p. 107-116.

of losers, he points to the dependency of political correctness from historical correctness which is its extension. This dependency is frequently subject to turns and revolutions. The process seems particularly visible in the USA where many minority groups hitherto devoid of their own history want to have their say. By protesting against the standards of political correctness they create a new era in which the dominant side is the history of the losers. An important element of this process is historical education which is given more non-standard forms. Political correctness is dealt with differently on the old continent. Jan Pomorski writes:

In Europe, which experienced two world wars and two totalitarianisms in the 20th century, there has been an increasing fear of life “with too much history”, the past that provokes nations [...]. The escape from history has been developed as a means of overcoming the past. The escape is done in two ways¹⁸.

The first way, which I am not particularly interested in, is a form of displaying memory which awards it with an ethical dimension owing to which it functions as “cultural religiousness”. A second form of escape from history is carried out in school education. Here, by means of ceasing to teach traditional history, elements such as understanding and empathy towards topics functioning for years beyond the official historical discourse are introduced.

I will focus on the second form of escape and try to show how spoken history is useful in it. I will refer to the Czech example. It pertains to historical education in primary school¹⁹. The students of the last form of primary school in the Czech Republic, where according to the syllabus they learn about the period from World War II to present times, have a possibility of benefitting from the method of spoken history in the didactic process. It is done in two ways. First of all, it includes the possibility of working with primary sources: direct work with witnesses of history. Such narrators can be invited to the school as guests to tell their history. However, the students themselves can record the relations outside school with the help of parents or teachers. Secondly, spoken history can

¹⁸ Ibidem, p. 112.

¹⁹ I will describe the example in reference to the paper by L. Böhmovej, *Usage of Oral History in the History Lessons in Elementary Schools*, delivered during XVI International Oral History Conference *Between Past and Future: Oral History, Memory and Meaning*, Prague 7-11.07.2010.

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be a secondary source. In this case, the students are given the possibility to work with previously recorded interviews and realised projects, which serves the diversification of the didactic process.

An important element of such teaching is the fact that spoken history is used on the basis of the history of the given region which the students come from. This allows the student to notice the changes in their closest environment and simultaneously look at them from a global perspective. By discovering their own little history they become more sensitive to the issue of social bonds and intergenerational relations.

Lucie Böhmová describes the potential of spoken history for primary school education with reference to some particular projects. One of them will be presented here: *How would my life be during Normalisation?* Students are divided into groups. Their task is to describe one of the aspects of everyday life in that period. The first step is to prepare questions about the chosen aspect. Of importance is the fact that each member of the group gets a particular task in the mini-project. Each of them has to carry out an interview with a witness of history. It is usually somebody from the family. The next step is the presentation of the most interesting fragments of the recollections. This can be done in any form, as it is up to the student. It can be a fragment of the interview or a PowerPoint presentation. The important part is that the assessment is done by the students who chose the best team. Apart from team skills they also get practical knowledge that allows them to use spoken history in the future and, what is even more important, they discover the existing difference between the not so distant past and the present.

I have described particular examples of using spoken history as a means of getting away from the traditional models while introducing new elements into the didactic process. This is a way to direct students' attention to the topics around them or those that are outside the official historical discourse. This case is mainly aimed at exploring the everyday life of the entire society during the times of communism. Spoken history as such is also present in the Polish educational system, yet, as opposed to the Czech example, it is an external initiative. The competition *Opowiem ci o wolnej Polsce – spotkania młodzieży ze świadkami historii – I will tell about independent Poland – meetings of students with witnesses to history*, is worth mentioning. It has been organised by Centrum Edukacji Obywatelskiej, Instytut Pamięci Narodowej and Muzeum

Powstania Warszawskiego for three years. The students' task is to record interviews with the participants in the social and political life who were in the opposition to two totalitarian systems in Poland during 1939-1989.

As it can be seen from the examples, spoken history is well-suited as a means of adding new quality to historical education. Owing to the focus on things that are close to us, on history from our closest environment, we retreat from the traditionally understood history and also teach empathy.

V. The positive side of the politics of memory

As I pointed out earlier referring to Krzysztof Zamorski's words, today it is difficult to do politics without historical references. Contemporary political discourse is to a great extent based on the notion of the politics of memory. The notion entered the language and programmes of basically each political option. Of course, it is not always used in the correct context and is overused on many occasions. This provokes a state of agitation in the relations between history, politics and ideology as it is not known whether the politics of memory is a result of the activity of historians that do politics or maybe politicians who do history. All this results in the many doubts that have arisen around the issue and validity of the notion to such an extent that its positive side loses its value.

Let's then have a look at one of the many descriptions of this notion. I will use Rafał Stobiecki's proposal²⁰. He distinguishes two traditions of understanding this category. In the first one the totalitarian system creates its own and the one and only correct vision of history which the entire society is coerced into accepting by means of repressive systems. The second tradition pertains to democratic systems in which pluralism of competing visions of the past dominates. The author writes:

In the first case the politics of memory is a synonym for one-sided and sometimes primitive propaganda that is based on the monopoly of the state in the realm of information whereas in the second one – a debate lasting continuously between different groups of interests that try to suggest whether to “impose” more strictly their vision of the past²¹.

²⁰ R. Stobiecki, *Historycy wobec polityki historycznej*, in: *Pamięć i polityka historyczna. Doświadczenia Polski i jej sąsiadów*. Red. S. M. Nowinowski, J. Pomorski, R. Stobiecki, Łódź 2008, p. 175-192.

²¹ Stobiecki, op. cit., p. 176.

The contemporary Polish political reality is based on the second tradition and focuses on three main functions of the politics of memory: legitimising – which generally speaking serves the preservation of democratic standards. It is integrative and activist and aims at concentrating the Polish society around a particular image of the past. It is disclosing, as it is focused on determining unwanted ideas both in foreign and domestic politics²².

In fact, each of these functions, though the first not as much, entails the necessity of referring to Poland's relations with its neighbours. Then, which model of politics of memory is the more adequate one, which would give the most constructive effects? Rafał Stobiecki describes two possibilities, the first of which is defined as a civil paradigm in which such categories as human rights or pluralism are given the most important role. The second one is the national paradigm which refers to the nation's interests. He writes:

The answer is not simple because of two reasons. On the one hand, the problems arise due to the difficult geopolitical location of Poland. Even if we assume that it will be easier to communicate with the Germans by referring to the civil or multicultural model, we still need to solve the problem of the challenge from the Russian politics of memory.[...] On the other hand, we face the dilemma of which axiology to use in the modern programme of the politics of memory.²³

Let's focus on the first, geopolitical problem. I do not think that communication with the Germans is sure to be easy with parallel difficulties in communication with the Russian side. Both relations are ambiguous and there are many bones of contention as well as examples of good co-operation. As for the relations with the western neighbour, it is difficult not to mention the moot point of Recovered Territories and expulsion. It is a good topic to refer to when discussing the application of spoken history as a method of historical research which gives us the chance to create positive implications of politics of memory. The example here is the project: *Krzyż – Kreuz w XX wieku. Polska i niemiecka pamięć pewnego miasta (Krzyż – Kreuz in 20th century. The Polish and German memory of one town*²⁴. Before I go on to the project itself, I will shortly describe the history of the place.

²² Ibidem, p. 186.

²³ Ibidem, p. 192.

²⁴ <http://www.kreuz-krzyz.pl> 25.09.2010.

Kreuz was established in the 19th century and initially functioned as a German railway settlement in which there was a crossing of many important roads. After World War I the settlement was located on the border between Germany and reborn Poland. Although Poles did not live in the city, they visited it often and became a fixed aspect of its everyday life. The situation changed together with World War II, which initiated the influx of forced Polish labour into the local plants and companies. Another turning point for the city occurred in 1945 as the eastern front approached. Some German inhabitants left the city in fear of the Red Army as they foresaw the mass rapes which took place when the Soviets arrived. Kreuz formally ceased to exist. It was replaced by the Polish Krzyż which became a destination for many transports with repatriates from the east. The last German inhabitants left Krzyż towards the end of 1946 as they started their forced journey to the west.

As we can read on the project's webpage:

During the years 2007-2009 the KARTA centre owing to financial support of Fundacja Współpracy Polsko-Niemieckiej carried out the project which aimed at documenting the 20th century history of the city and commune of Krzyż. All in all 60 biographical records were taken. We were able to find 13 former inhabitants of the now non-existent town of Kreuz in Germany. This story would not be complete without them. Among the recorded Poles who came to Krzyż after 1945, there were railwaymen from Wielkopolska region and "repatriates" from the east but also those who before the war lived "beyond the river", on the Polish side of the border and during the war were forced to work in Kreuz²⁵.

In my opinion, the unique feature of the venture is the inclusion of the German point of view apart from the Polish one although the proportions of numbers do not reflect this. The topics of the very interviews also show the attempt not only to standardise but also to emphasise the importance of different points of view and experiences. In the German interviews there appeared the topics of among others: childhood in Kreuz, everyday life in the times of the Nazis, Polish forced labour during the war, escape from the Red Army, Polonisation of the town, everyday life between the two wars, expatriations, and return to Krzyż. The Polish interviews include topics such as: the way to Krzyż, the town just before the war, relations with the German inhabitants, Soviet soldiers and the Soviet Army rule, adaptation to life in a new place, returns of

²⁵

Ibidem.

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Germans to Krzyż. What is important, regardless of the nationality of the speaker, there always appears the issue of “the other” nationality – Polish or German. This shows the character of the co-existence of two nations in one town.

As can be seen, the category of the politics of memory, inevitably present in key areas of democratic social life, can also be manifested in different ways. It is true that in many cases it constitutes an element of dirty political games or duplicates enradicated myths. However, an attempt at looking at it from the perspective of the civil paradigm can bring positive effects even in such difficult and controversial issues as Polish-German relationships in the 20th century. Thus, it is worth considering the potential role of spoken history in the process of eliminating the asymmetry in the memory of the East and the West.

VI. Conclusion

The aim of my reflection was to offer an attempt at answering the question what kind of history Central and Eastern Europe needs. The very formulation of the question was an effect of noticing the asymmetry between the memory of the East and the West. Historical and cultural conditioning led to the creation of two different historical sensitivities that divide the old continent. The approach to this issue offered by me is not thought to be the only correct or even significant way of solving the problem. It is rather a more or less competent attempt at marking certain guideposts that result from the methodological reflection and can be understood as open proposals of interpretation. Therefore, in the next steps I tried to look at the issue of history as memory of culture, a new dimension in historical education and a positive side of the politics of memory. Of course, these three issues do not necessarily have to be deemed crucial from the point of view of Central Europe. This is why, in the next step I tried to describe the role of spoken history in it. I reckon that only a look from the point of view of spoken history will give the possibility of understanding the real historical needs of the post-communist societies. The mentioned research method puts the witness of past events and not the historian in the first place in the process of recovering memory. This method seems to have a long tradition. Apart from the fact that the Greek word *histor* means witness, it is important to know that already J. M. Chladenius equated the role of the historian and the direct

witness in the process of creating images of the past which resulted in inclusion of different, dissimilar experiences²⁶. This, among others, is why today we say that the historian is not the only maker of history.

It seems that the reflection on the topic of what kind of history we need is a crucial element of our existence in culture. What is more, the very past would not be a crucial element of everyday reality without the reflection on it. Gwidon Zalejko, in one of his many texts, wrote that:

We do not derive anything from history which would not be previously in ourselves. History teaches us morality and evil, happiness and suffering, activity and fatalism, if we only want it. So an honest question that we pose today about our historical knowledge should not be: how was it or rather why was it so, but rather – what sort of past do we need today? What do we need to learn from history today?²⁷.

It is worth turning to spoken history in order to search for the answer to this question.

Transl. Jolanta Sypiańska

²⁶ Cf. W. Wrzosek, *O myśleniu historycznym*. Bydgoszcz 2009, p. 30.

²⁷ G. Zalejko, *Stereotypy w myśleniu historyków*, in: *Podręcznik historii – perspektywy modernizacji*. Red. M. Kujawska. Poznań 1994, p. 38.