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Politics of queer life writing in contemporary Poland

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Abstract

The article presents an analysis of the first comprehensive volume of memoirs *Cała siła, jaką czerpię na życie. Świadectwa, relacje, pamiętniki osób LGBTQ+* ('All the Power I Draw for Life: Testimonies, Accounts, Memoirs of LGBTQ+ People in Poland') (2022). It is a landmark volume in many respects. It is the first of its kind, a comprehensive (nearly 1,000-page) selection of memoirs sent to a competition announced in 2020 by the LGBT+ History and Identities Research Laboratory at the Institute of Applied Social Sciences at the University of Warsaw. Therefore, they have become part of the long Polish tradition of diaries written for a competition announced by state institutions, a tradition dating back to the interwar period (diaries of peasants, Jewish youth, the unemployed, etc.). At the same time, the diaries were published at a very politically sensitive moment, when homophobia became an element of global politics, including the construction of East/West European distinctions. The published collection of diaries thus became a unique, autonomous, and empowered voice of the LGBTQ+ community from Central and Eastern Europe in a contemporary, hostile, geopolitical context.

Keywords: queer studies; life writing; Polish literature; memoirs; Central and Eastern Europe

1 Introduction

According to the ILGA Europe 2023 report, Poland ranked as the most homophobic country in Europe for the third consecutive year (ILGA Europe, pp. 114–116). Managing resentment and hostility towards LGBTQ+ communities has become a permanent part of the political game and the Catholic Church's interference in the structures of the Polish state. On July 20, 2019, the streets of Białystok, a city in one of the poorest regions in Poland – Podlasie – saw the first-ever Equality March in this part of the country. Nearly fifty counter-manifestations were registered along the route of the march, including road blockades and collective prayer stations organized by the All-Polish Convention of Football Fans (*Ogólnopolski Zjazd Kibiców*), which for the duration of the gathering decided to

conclude a pact of non-aggression against sports sympathizers and, as the participants themselves told reporters, to 'defend Białystok against perverts' in solidarity. Firecrackers, paving stones, and bottles were thrown in the direction of those marching with rainbow flags, and dozens of acts of physical violence occurred. Less than two weeks later, on August 1, 2019, the 75th anniversary of the outbreak of the Warsaw Uprising, Archbishop Marek Jędraszewski delivered a sermon at Wawel Cathedral in Krakow, during which he called the LGBTQ+ community the new enemy of Poland – the 'rainbow plague.' Both events were met with outrage from left-wing and center-left circles in Poland, but almost immediately, politicians of the right-wing party that has ruled Poland since 2015 – Law and Justice (*Prawo I Sprawiedliwość*) – got involved in defending both Jędraszewski and the Białystok hooligans – aggressive soccer fans, politically linked to nationalist radicals. The public media, dependent on the government's ideological agenda, launched a months-long propaganda campaign against the LGBTQ+ community. These attacks, part of systemic strategies to disseminate the growing homophobia and transphobia that has existed in Polish public discourse since 1989, were officially legitimized by the democratically elected government and the Church, which has real power in creating public sentiment.

In the face of a growing fear of persecution and political hostility towards minorities, researchers at the LGBT+ History and Identities Research Lab at the Institute of Applied Social Sciences at the University of Warsaw (*Pracownia Badań nad Historią i Tożsamościami LGBT+, Instytut Stosowanych Nauk Społecznych Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego*) noticed the vital need to collect and memorialize the experiences of LGBTQ+ people in contemporary Poland. On June 1, 2020, the LGBT+ History Lab, together with the Heinrich Böll Foundation, announced the first-ever Polish competition for memoirs of queer people. One hundred and eighty-four submissions were received from all over Poland between June and October, including numerous villages and small towns.

Most of the contestants were born in the late 1990s and early 2000s, with the youngest participant being fifteen years old at the time of submission and the oldest being sixty. Classic memoirs were submitted, as well as artwork, texts of a poetic nature, and printouts of posts from social networks. In the introduction to the anthology of contest entries, published in 2022, *Cała siła, jaką czerpię na życie* ('All the Power I Draw for Life'), the organizers note that for most of the participants, the impetus to write a memoir came from widely reported political events and organized social hostility towards LGBTQ+ communities on a scale formerly unknown (Mikolajewski & Laskowski, 2022, p. 12). This is because the collection of texts coincided with the peak phase of the presidential campaign, during which the staff of Andrzej Duda (a former member of the then ruling party Law and Justice), who was seeking re-election, placed particular emphasis on managing resentment against non-heteronormative people. Duda, whose first presidential decree was to veto the Gender Reconciliation Act, began his campaign by signing the resolution called the 'Family Charter' (*Karta Rodziny*), consisting of, among other things, provisions on 'defending the institution of marriage' and 'protecting children from LGBT ideology' (Gluza, 2002). The Polish parliament also begun discussing a legal ban on the promotion of 'LGBT ideology' in public places, including sex education in schools. The political fuel of right-wing circles began to be the linking of psychosexual orientation with pedophilia. President Duda, in one of his speeches, said to those gathered at an election rally: 'They are trying to make us believe that they are people, and this is simply ideology,' adding further: 'We will not

allow our children to be led down the wrong path.' In turn, the official Twitter profile of a leading ruling party politician featured a post proclaiming, 'Poland without LGBT is the most beautiful.' Many memoirs recall the events of July 7, 2020, when police used violence against protesters during a demonstration in solidarity with a non-binary activist of the *Stop Bzdurom* ('Stop the Bullshit') collective arrested for a citizen stop of a van displaying homophobic slogans. Those who had gathered were beaten, their rainbow flags were yanked from them, and tear gas was sprayed among them. Forty-seven people were detained, and the way police conducted interrogations and personal searches (especially on transgender people) bore the hallmarks of inhumane treatment, according to representatives of *Krajowy Mechanizm Prewencji Tortur* ('National Torture Prevention Mechanism'). As we can read in the introduction to the selection of the competition diaries: 'The night of August 7 was the culmination of the political events of that summer and at the same time, apparently, a turning point in the history of the LGBTQ+ community in Poland' (Mikołajewski & Laskowski, 2022, p. 11).

The contest, the fruits of which were published in the collection *All the Strength I Draw for Life*, is part of a long tradition of Polish memoir writing. The organizers of the initiative in question were particularly inspired by the competitions of the interwar period (1918–1939): the three editions of competitions for peasants, emigrants, and the unemployed held at the initiative of *Instytut Gospodarstwa Społecznego* (The Institute of Social Economy) under the leadership of Ludwik Krzywicki, and the competition for diaries of young people of Jewish origin organized by *Żydowski Instytut Naukowy* (The Jewish Scientific Institute, JIWO) in Vilnius. Memoir competitions reached the peak of their popularity only during the communist era: it is estimated that by 1989, the archives of *Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Pamiętnikarstwa* (The Society of Friends of Memoirs Studies) had accumulated some nine hundred thousand manuscripts and typescripts (Gluza, 2002), but it is the pre-war projects that seem to have the most in common with the initiative dedicated to the diaries of LGBTQ+ people. First, they are united by their precursor character – they were the first such initiatives dedicated to minorities. Second, the pre-war initiatives also focused on texts by authors belonging to communities (of class or religion) that, due to the exclusionary policies of successive conservative governments, remained on the margins of public discourse. Both the participants in memoir contests for peasants, workers, or Jewish youth and the LGBTQ+ communities should be analyzed as individuals who were experiencing symbolic violence through their dependence on the disposers of the dominant culture; those who controlled and steered the social narrative. Writing down and submitting a memoir thus becomes an attempt by a marginalized individual to take control of their fate and create a sovereign narrative about the group on whose behalf the author speaks. For this reason, the participation of LGBTQ+ people in the contest in question can also be interpreted as an action in the name of collective solidarity – an activist gesture. Third, groundbreaking historical events were the impetus for the texts submitted to these competitions. Competition memoirs often exemplify *ad hoc* statements and texts-testimonies that react to current and significant socio-political events. In the case of the competitions for Jewish youth, this was the growing anti-Semitic propaganda; the backdrop for The Institute of Social Economy competitions was the economic and social effects of the Great Depression; the memoirs in the collection described here were written under the influence of the homophobic and transphobic political campaign.

2 Managing queer identity

One of the most important and conspicuous elements of the successive narratives is the self-identification or identity labels that always appear at the beginning of the diaries. They serve as identity signposts (for readers) and, at the same time, help manage one's own identity. They rarely come down to one word; they are usually elaborate and, importantly, individualized. They often pertain to both sexual and gender identity and sometimes even class (by indicating the place of birth and upbringing in childhood), as well as age (most often young people, 18+). Sometimes, they take the form of an extended biographical form that will later be developed in the main text of the memoir, indicating a considerable degree of self-reflection on the part of the authors. It seems especially important that these identity labels are individualized. It is as if the authors wanted to collectively say, as one of the diarists put it, that 'My only concern at the time was that my sexuality would overshadow my personality. I'll explain – I didn't want to be known in my circle of friends for being non-heteronormative because it was just one aspect of me' (Michał, memoir No. 3, p. 78).

It is worth mentioning some of the sexual and gender self-identifications mentioned in this volume. These are authorial formulations, not terms coming from the editors of the volume: 'homosexual person' (not 'homosexual man'), 'cis woman, lesbian, living in a small town,' 'I am a cis man and gay. I was raised and still live in a small, ten-thousand-person town,' 'cis woman, lesbian, living in a city in southern Poland,' 'cis man, homosexual/bisexual,' 'I am a cisgender man and gay,' 'I am a cis woman and a lesbian. I live in a provincial city in southern Poland,' 'cis man, homosexual,' 'I am a cisgender woman and a lesbian,' 'cis man, gay,' 'homosexual cisgender man [...] lives in a small village near Warsaw,' 'cis woman, lesbian, lives in Wrocław,' 'I am a trans woman, I identify as panromantic asexual,' 'trans man – born and raised in a small town,' 'cisgender woman, lesbian, grew up in Nowy Sącz,' 'cisgender homosexual man,' 'Homosexual cisgender man [...] lives in a small village near Warsaw,' 'cisgender woman, bisexual, born and lives in a provincial city, 'identifies as a non-heteronormative woman, lesbian,' 'Homoerotic and heteroromantic cis man,' 'cis woman, bisexual,' 'trans woman, lesbian,' 'cis man, gay,' 'demisexual and homoromantic woman, lives in a rural area in the Pomeranian Voivodeship,' 'non-binary person with an agender identity, demipansexual orientation,' 'non-binary person, bisexual, born in 1999 in Białystok,' 'transgender man', etc.

As mentioned above, most of the diarists are young people, probably very familiar with the way information about the memoir competition was circulated: it was done almost exclusively through social media. Nevertheless, this allows us to see that the self-identifications are not only very individualized but also clearly problematize both sexual and gender identity. This is a novelty compared to previous waves of emancipation (such as the one from the first decade of the 21st century, when the symbolic event was the 'Let Them See Us' campaign [*Niech Nas Zobaczą*] from 2003, which marked the beginning of the so-called politics of visibility). It is also evident that, especially in the biographical narratives of young authors, pivotal events are recurring. These are the events mentioned above: arrests on Krakowskie Przedmieście in Warsaw after the detention of one of the activists (July 2020) and the earlier attack on the Equality March in Białystok. In the context of the entire volume, both events take on the character of 'generational' or formative events for young queer people in Poland.

The self-identifications used by the diarists in the biographical forms are now highly globalized. Their sources can be found in the cultural spaces and texts mentioned in the diaries of younger authors: primarily the Internet, but also TV series, movies, music, and, to a much lesser extent than for people from previous generations, books. Many of these cultural texts are English-language works with a global reach. The significant individualization and personalization of identity descriptions is also due to global changes in the channels and forms of communication of LGBTQ+ people. New forms of self-identification, such as xenogender, discussed on Tumblr channels, are expanding the range of gender, sexual and identity terms while making them contingent and disposable, and on the other hand, building new policies of non-binary identities, such as MOGWAI (Marginalised Orientations, Gender Alignments and Intersex) or LIOM (Labels & Identities, Orientations, Other Minorities) (Brzozowska-Brywczyńska, 2023, p. 61). It is, therefore, worth looking back and examining what self-identifications were used in the past in Poland, how they related to identity politics, and whether something can be said about Polish or Central and East European dynamics of change.

The last issue is the subject of the book *De-Centring Western Sexualities. Central and East-European Perspectives* from 2011, and particularly the first chapter by two editors – Joanna Mizielińska and Robert Kulpa (Mizielińska & Kulpa, 2011). This is a very interesting and important article that explains the differences in the LGBT vs. queer approach in the Polish context, addressing the issue of exclusions within the former. The key thesis is related to differences in 'geo-temporal modalities' between West and Central-Eastern Europe. According to this thesis, a Western 'time of sequence' with successive stages of emancipation and corresponding theories took place (from the 1950s and the homophile movement), and an Eastern European 'time of coincidence' where everything has happened simultaneously since the 1990s, and specifically after 1989.

However, the period of the People's Republic of Poland, referred to as 'communist time' in the diagram (Mizelińska & Kulpa, 2011, p. 15) in *De-centring Western Sexualities*, essentially constituted a blank spot or a timeless space, which only moved towards modernity after 1989. Nevertheless, several important books have filled in this blank spot in the last decade. For example, Łukasz Szulc's book *Transnational Homosexual in Communist Poland* (Szulc, 2018) includes the beginnings of activism around zines in 1980s Poland and the collective work *Queers in State Socialism: Cruising 1970s Poland* (Basiuk & Burszta, 2021) tries to cover the previous decade. Very interesting research on the expert discourse on sexuality in the Polish People's Republic by Agnieszka Kościańska (among others, *Zobaczyć łosia,* 2017) and especially transgender issues (Dębińska, 2020) have shed light on the collection of biographical texts by non-cisgender people published legally and in large numbers at the end of the Polish People's Republic period – *Apokalipsa płci* [Gender apocalypse] (Dulko & Imieliński, 1989).

From these works, it is clear that while the 1970s can be characterized as a time when there were rather social circles of homosexual men (Burszta, 2021), the 1980s can be described as a period of native emancipatory discourse. However, in the public discourse of that time, the most emancipatory and non-stigmatizing terms centered around the words 'different' and 'other' (as in the manifesto of Krzysztof Darski *Jesteśmy inni* ['We are different'] (Darski, 1986) in the popular weekly *Polityka* in 1986 or the title of the pre-queer anthology by Maria Janion and Zbigniew Majchrowski *Odmieńcy*, ('The Odd Ones', originating from the German word *Außenseiter*, the title of Hans Mayer's influential book from

1982, see Warkocki, 2021). The word *gej* ('gay') only appeared in the 1990s, and then even in written form (rather than just oral) in the circulation of minority publications, and there you can even see the assimilation of this initially foreign word: in the first issues of these publications, words like *gaye, gay'owie,* and *gayowie* (now incorrect in Polish) were sometimes used, alongside *geje* (proper form in Polish). It remains very symptomatic, however, that none of the magazines for homosexuals, which began to appear after 1989, used the word 'gay' in the title or subtitle (e.g., *Filo. Miesięcznik kochających inaczej* ['Philo: Monthly magazine of those who love differently']; *Magazyn kochających Inaczej* ['The magazine of those who love Differently'], later *Inaczej* ['Differently']; *Okay. Miesięcznik dla panów* [Okay: Man's Magazine]). It is as if the word 'gay' was both too foreign and too informative.

This means that we can talk about the emancipatory discourse in the 1980s, but the politics of visibility began in the first decade of the 21st century. And the collection of memoirs under discussion is another symptomatic element of it.

3 The diary and memoir form

Every form of autobiographical writing includes conventional, typical, as well as individual and idiolectical elements. Regardless of the level of literacy and cultural competence of the individuals writing autobiographies, they creatively relate to or replicate the patterns and themes of autobiographical writing. The very form of autobiography enforces predictable writing techniques and basic themes. Additionally, in the case of commissioned autobiographies, each life story interprets the competition announcement, responding to the expectations and assumptions of its creators. All the texts that were submitted were prepared for the competition at the same time, even if they referred to different temporal orders (due to the age of the authors) or were based on previously written texts (blogs, diaries, social media) –, and narratives close with the deadline for submitting entries (the year 2020). Therefore, the collections of competition autobiographies maintain coherence. From the readers' and analytical perspective, this situation risks deindividualizing experiences and excessive and unfair comparison, as cautioned by autobiography researchers Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (2020).

The texts submitted to the competition primarily relate to two fundamental and traditional genres: the personal journal (the diary) and the memoir. They are united by the central position of the writing subject ('I') and their different spatiotemporal context in relation to the subject's narration of events.

In the case of a personal journal (diary), recent events are recounted, and emotional states and reflections refer to moments recently experienced, viewed, and analyzed from within. Journal forms, written day by day, focus on temporary interpretations of processes, events, and themes captured in the flow of life. Strictly speaking, diaries appeared in a clear minority of the collections of competition (memoirs No. 76, 77), but several authors were inspired by their diaries (especially those written in the past). In several other cases, entries from internet blogs (memoirs no. 48, 74) and selections of social media posts were submitted for the competition. Probably, one of the texts is fictitious and only stylized as a personal journal (memoir No. 38).

In contrast to the personal journal, in the case of a memoir, the subject separates their past 'self,' which was the subject of action, and also the hero of the story, from their current, present 'self,' who recalls and analyzes their life. The time gap does not have to be significant (the youngest author was 16 years old); the key aspect is differentiating the 'self' as the object and subject of the narrative. The memoir perspective suggests that acquired experiences and participation in events led to the current life situation and existential condition. As a result, the memoir strengthens a teleological perspective and encourages summarization and ordering, such as dividing life into stages, typologizing experiences, identifying recurring themes, selecting the most important (influential) people, and determining exceptional and transformational events critical to one's life and self-understanding.

Life, organized into chronological and narrative sequences, transforms into a story about experiences concentrated on events occurring 'before' and 'after' key events for the subject. Therefore, in a memoir narrative, moments of change in a life, decisions that transform it (coming out, transitioning and initiating legal and medical procedures, divorce, leaving the religious order, moving out of the family home, emigration), and independent random events with individual and collective significance that affect the subject (family relocation during teenage years, completion of compulsory education, job loss, the death of a loved one/partner, the outbreak of a pandemic) are easily discernible.

An additional ordering factor is the anticipated queer perspective in the competition. Experiences related to gender and sexual identity were the central focus of the narratives, regardless of their declared character. These experiences became the central narrative category for all authors. Therefore, most memoirists describe the process of discovering their gender and sexual identity, and the period of coming of age and adolescence, along with new psychological and physical experiences, including consent and disagreement with them, was a crucial time in almost all texts.

Special emphasis is placed on family relationships and the description of the socialization process (especially the attitudes of caregivers and families toward the discovered identity, the level of acceptance and support, and the possibility of continuing relationships), as well as intimate/sexual relationships (the particular nature of the 'first time' and the first 'great love,' seeking partners, unsuccessful relationships and imposed unions, separations, singlehood, and starting a family).

Most memoirs repeat a sequence of three key events, not necessarily in this order: (1) discovering one's gender and/or sexual identity, incompatible with the dominant heteronomy and cisgender, (2) coming out (variably: to family, friends, potential partners, support groups), (3) searching for a loved one, falling in love, trying to enter a relationship.

Regardless of the experiences and age of the authors, other dimensions of identity and life aspects (work, hobbies) are treated less elaborately and mostly contextually in the diaries. However, school plays a particularly significant role as a state institution of education and socialization, and the Catholic Church, as the dominant institution in Poland, is also addressed by almost all memoir authors. The third point of reference is the deepening crisis of democracy in Poland and the country's radicalized policy toward minorities. Consequently, the recurring themes of emigration and migration to the city, attitudes toward religion, and political activism are not primarily the result of the conventions of autobiography or the competition announcement but of the social and political conditions of the authors' lives.

4 (E)migration

One of the key experiences for many individuals writing diaries is migration, taking various forms, such as moving from rural to urban areas, from smaller towns to larger cities (notably Warsaw, Gdańsk, Białystok, Lublin), and, of course, from Poland abroad, mainly to Western Europe (Germany, the Netherlands, England, Ireland, but also Canada and China). The pressing need for a change of residence is virtually a common experience for most memoir writers and is always more or less associated with a sense of discomfort in their current place of residence, often related to experiences of homophobia and transphobia or simply a lack of the opportunity to fully realize one's life. One could even argue that migration/emigration is a pivotal moment in biographical narratives, sometimes even causing a complete narrative shift. This change is often highly valorized to the extent that the narrative may already be presented from the perspective of being an expat, which somehow intensifies the retrospective viewpoint. For instance, memoir No. 60, signed 'Szymon Maurycy,' ends a sort of manifesto written after moving to Berlin:

> I experienced homophobia at all levels of life, from school to institutional and systemic. In the store, during breaks, in class, at home (sister, parents' friends), at the police station, on the street, in a club, or in a taxi. I was beaten in Krakow at Planty Park and on the Poniatowski Bridge in Warsaw. And that damn PiS, that stupid Pawłowicz. Nationalism and xenophobia. The wasted money on an ugly fountain and musical benches. And the omnipresent anger that Warsaw is not the Paris of the North.[1] (Memoir No. 60, p. 743)

This affective charge is not unique. It seems that many memoirs serve as accusations more than testimonials, and it is this kind of poetics that is employed. It involves a generalized accusation against Poland for not treating its non-heteronormative citizens as equals to heterosexual ones. For this reason, Western Europe is sometimes almost idealized – as a place where the limitations arising from homophobia and transphobia are less severe. In memoir no. 61, signed by Aleksandra Puciłowska, this difference between Poland and Western Europe appears quite literally or graphically as the Polish–German border between Słubice and Frankfurt. The memoirist describes her experience of participating in the Equality March and the fear, uncertainty, and threat on the Polish side. On the German side, such feelings disappear: 'Crossing the bridge to the German side, everyone proudly raised their colorful flags up, allowing them to flutter in the wind. It was beautiful, almost magical. [...] And, above all, the breeze of freedom – as if the gentle wind blowing from the western shore of the Oder heralded that we would soon be in a completely different world' (memoir No. 61, p. 745). Europeanness, or broadly defined Western Europeanness, often becomes an entirely different world, and the Polish border almost acts as a projection screen.

Of course, emigration's success depends on various factors, especially the type of work and earnings; nevertheless, biographical narratives thematically and structurally based on emigration typically have their happy endings. In other words, despite the hardships, the choice of emigration is presented as a proper, purposeful, and fulfilling one.

[1] The author refers here to pre-war saying: 'Warsaw is the Paris of the North.'

5 Class and Catholicism

A shared experience among many authors, often from small towns, is the desire to leave their family home and move to a large city, which is associated with anonymity and greater freedom of self-expression. In most cases, this desire is accompanied by a lack of understanding and acceptance in their immediate surroundings: from parents, siblings, friends, and school. A recurring theme is the authors' desire to move to a larger city to continue their education and establish new relationships, including, importantly, not just romantic ones but also support networks. As Krzysztof Kosiński pointed out, one significant benefit of sources from memoir competitions is the ability to discern the evolution of mechanisms of social advancement (Kosiński, 2003, p. 138). Many of the memoirs published in the collection can also be interpreted as non-traditional scenarios for breaking the class structure, where the stakes are not just material or symbolic status improvement resulting from education but the preservation of one's own identity. Often, this involves escaping violence and discrimination experienced during upbringing. Reading these memoirs according to Florian Znaniecki's traditional biographical method, a pioneer in life-writing studies among working-class people, who, along with William Thomas, compiled the groundbreaking collection of personal documents of Polish peasants in *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (1918–1920), allows an analysis of the changes in the relationships between 'identity (individual and collective) and organization (social/cultural)' (Kaźmierska, 2013, pp. 18–19), which undergo significant shifts over time and space. At various stages of their stories, the authors make different class and environmental identifications. Many narratives of the desire to leave their hometown (usually a small town or village) are linked to the challenging experiences of being raised in the Catholic faith and having a close relationship with the church, which amplified the difficulties of self-acceptance for the authors and support from their immediate environment. Sociological studies have long shown that LGBTQ+ individuals in Poland perceive the Catholic Church as the most discriminating institution, deliberately organizing collective animosity towards minorities (Jóźko, 2009, pp. 107–108). Researchers point to strategies employed by the Polish Episcopate against LGBTQ+ communities, which draw on anti-Semitic slogans (Kulpa, 2020) and depict non-heterosexual individuals as a 'threat to Polishness and the Catholic unity of Poles' (Hall, 2016, p. 81). Authors typically move to large urban and academic centers (Warsaw, Krakow, Gdańsk, Poznań), providing them with anonymity, greater freedom in expressing their identity (e.g., through clothing), and a sense of acceptance by finding friends within the LGBTQ+ community (in college or through the internet). Above all, they gain the freedom to decide the character of their religious practices or lack thereof. Authors for whom religion and faith were essential reference points for morality during their adolescence devote considerable attention to describing the traumatic collision between the conservative Catholicism instilled within their family communities and their emerging queer identity. *Cała siła, jaką czerpię na życie* contains numerous descriptions of internalized, fear-fueled homophobia, of which LGBTQ+ individuals raised in religious homes were both victims and perpetrators. One memoir entry provides a glimpse into this experience: 'I spent a lot of time in Church. Everything the priest did seemed fascinating to me. My religiosity was very fervent and sincere, even now, with the perspective of everything I've been through; it still seems very authentic to me. Whenever I felt sinful,

I would go to church… and regularly confessed my sin, believing every day that God would send me a good boy to marry and start a family with. Those were the worst five years of my life, self-hate, disgust with my own desires. For years, I was a homophobe, spreading hatred towards myself. The self-loathing speech' (memoir No. 4, pp. 89–98). In memoir no. 9, the author tells us the story of participating in a religious organization led by an exorcist priest who performed prayers for the 'liberation from homosexual spirits/demons,' as well as the 'March for Life and Family,' during which the diarist agreed to chant slogans like 'boy, girl, a normal family' to gain the favor and interest of the clergy. Memoir no. 10's author describes a secretly kept relationship with a member of a youth religious community who remained in a committed romantic and intimate relationship while posting homophobic content on social media and forbidding her partner from maintaining connections with the LGBTQ+ community. Many memoirs (e.g., 2, 4, 9, 10, 14, 24, 35, 78) present a similar repertoire of experiences: childhood spent in a small town, upbringing in a deeply religious family, participation in some form of youth religious community, and the recurring words in their texts: shame, guilt, and sin.

6 Shame

'Am I sick? Will I be a source of shame for my family? I had no doubts about one thing: that I am sinful… You bring shame to your home and your family, and for that, nothing good will ever come to you. Punishments, karma, sins, call it what you will, you'll live in hell' (memoir No. 4, pp. 95–98); 'I was afraid to go to confession; I felt ashamed that I was the evil sent by Satan to destroy the world. I felt guilty for who I am, even though I didn't harm anyone' (memoir No. 19, p. 173); '[S]in. You have a grave sin. You should confess it quickly, but I have no idea how you could admit this to the priest; it's pathetic, embarrassing, terrible' (memoir No. 78, p. 958).

The distinction intuitively made between the status of guilt and shame in trauma and violence experienced by victims is developed in Ruth Leys' book *From Guilt to Shame: Auschwitz and After*. It assigns the sense of guilt to actual actions (including the commission of an act deemed sinful by a specific moral code), while the effect of shame is related to the feeling of who one is, revealing internalized beliefs about one's deficiencies and inadequacies under the judgmental gaze of another (Leys, 2007, p. 11). Experiences that lead to a sense of being ashamed, particularly the shame caused by something that should not be subject to someone else's judgment, reveal traces of sovereign consciousness, undermining the oppressive narrative of proper and improper identity. As Kaye Mitchell states, 'The question of shame is utterly imbricated with questions of identity and selfhood – particularly, but not only, flawed selfhood' (Mitchell, 2020, p. 2). In the memoirs, the evaluative adjective 'flawed' is integrated into the authors' processes of consciousness transformation. In their texts, often written from a distance in time, this no longer communicates non-normative, non-conforming to a socially acceptable identity repertoire but signifies being marked by oppressive feelings of guilt, a survivor of a false norm. Drawing inspiration from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's insights into the performative and creative potential of the effect of shame, Mitchell assigns the notes about experiences of shame the status of a 'redemptive act' (Mitchell, 2020, p. 1). It is precisely within the category of a certain redemption and the act of forming a new, subjective form of identity that fragments of

memoirs can be interpreted. In these fragments, authors write about 'euphoric elation' (memoir No. 2, p. 66), a sense of real freedom (memoir No. 10, p. 185), or a memory akin to the best birthday (memoir No. 35, p. 461), which resulted in processing memories of experienced guilt and succumbing to the processes of moral shame. This redemption is also achieved through radical, albeit often painful and bitter, actions such as cutting ties with an unsupportive environment or migrating to another part of the country or the world.

7 Collective and individual self-therapy

The necessary brevity and selectiveness of memoir narratives are accompanied by general reflections on one's life, family, loved ones, society, culture, and, as is typical in life writing, instructional and/or therapeutic elements.

The didactic nature of memoir forms arises from the ever-present, albeit often invisible or seemingly absent audience for every autobiographical text to whom one narrates one's life. Put simply, the narration serves as a cautionary tale ('do not repeat my mistakes') or a model to emulate ('this is how one should live'). However, most often, these elements are combined and are not treated as the primary value or purpose of autobiography. Didacticism is largely a byproduct of life writing.

Today, didactic functions are closely intertwined with self-care and therapeutic elements. Queer memoirs share many similarities with the genre of illness memoirs, especially those written by individuals who have gone through or are going through transitions or describe various illnesses, often of a psychological nature. The story of dealing with illnesses, physical discomfort, and/or healthcare, doctors, surgeries, and hospital stays, on the one hand, supports the author but also provides examples for potential comparisons, the use of warnings, setting an example, or, conversely, refraining from certain paths of treatment.

The specific conditions of the competition, detailed calls suggesting the thematic scope and character of confessions, heightened socio-political tensions, and immersion in dynamic, reaction-based social media have intensified the appeal, persuasiveness, and rhetoric of the entire collection of texts. Their didactic, therapeutic, and political dimensions are closely intertwined and mutually influence one another.

Since publication was the prize in the competition, authors immediately considered the existence of audiences beyond the competition committee, although texts were evidently accompanied by additional comments for the jury, such as: 'I am sending you the text. It's very important, written quite recently […]. It is part of something that will be compiled in the future,' (memoir No. 74, p. 931). Such explanations, on the one hand, place the memoirs in the context of the lives of individuals, often signed using their first and last names. On the other hand, they refer to the authors' creativity, activism, and social media beyond the competition. Most authors write about the internet as a public space (hence, they consider coming out/expressing support/activism on social media as a public activity). The competition is thus treated as an additional channel of communication and a space for popularizing their activities. For instance, Kinga Kosińska, the author of autobiographical novels, directly addresses her readers: 'And from this loneliness, I greet you' (memoir No. 55, p. 699), encouraging engagement and contact.

The youngest authors, belonging to the generation of digital natives, even if they do not introduce themselves, heavily employ the dynamic, replicable, and discussion-oriented formula of writing. They also use emojis, although less frequently than the abbreviations common in social media. For example, when describing homophobic comments from a teacher, Pati Maniura writes: 'And returning to our part-time school, we had Social Studies with an elderly lady who was trying to make a living. I greet the lady very warmly. I have never encountered such a mentally inflexible person in my life' (memoir No. 46, p. 550). The ironic tone of the greetings weakly suggests that the teacher might be a potential reader of the confession. However, it builds a community of readers who share the author's skepticism and distance themselves from the violent nature of education. The author's distance from the memoir form creates a community belonging to a post-Gutenberg world, even though memoirs have traditionally been printed in book form. With a wink of an eye, Ksawery Kondrat refers to classical but outdated forms of memoir writing: 'Dear Diary, you're just a notebook, a little booklet with which I will share my story. It won't be a sweet fairy tale, but I won't go with some heavy drama either. We'll just chat, like pals, straight from the heart,' (memoir No. 16, p. 255).

Anonymous authors, too, who are reserved or camouflage personal data, create strongly appellative texts. They often write in the plural, where 'we' encompasses a community of individuals affected by exclusion; people with similar identity concerns or desires. For example, Michał writes: 'I want to share my story with you, which may not take your breath away, but it offers a few morals, the most important of which: WE only want LOVE.' (memoir No. 41, p. 502)

In other memoirs, 'we' builds a community transcending gender, identity, or religious divisions. These texts have the character of an appeal for recognition and social respect. For example, Aleksandra Syrokomla writes: 'I have taken it upon myself to present my life as a non-heteronormative person, and I assumed that I would show that I am just like other people. I'm not different; I'm a normal human being' (memoir No. 73, p. 910). In the case of this memoir, the strategy of inclusion also involves parallel representation of political, social, and sports events in relation to their life story.

Similarly, Natalia directs her confession to a wide audience: 'I would like people to realize that there are no uniform groups, and in reality, both in the LGBT group at the Equality March and in the counter-demonstration, there are people with similar life stories, and the only thing that sets them apart is where they stand because they have a need to belong somewhere' (memoir No. 37, p. 481).

Most often, however, 'we' refers to the LGBTQ+ community. Memoir authors convey their creed and message to readers, stemming from their life experiences. They are aware when their stories are not uplifting and deviate from the narratives of pride, which they sometimes address with irony, detachment, or even sorrow. For example, Natalia writes: 'I would like this to be another nice story about how someone came out of the closet, and their parents hugged them and said they love them, and since this is a story with religion in the background, that God loves them too. Unfortunately, it wasn't that colorful' (memoir No. 37, p. 474). Individuals who have experienced mental breakdowns due to discrimination, have endured violence, or have suffered from depression, personality disorders, or eating disorders often share in their memoirs the ways to overcome trauma, fears, and discomfort. They often highlight the transformative role of psychotherapy and interpret

their lives in psychoanalytic terms, referring to the authority of their therapists. They usually provide encouragement and support and fit into the framework of empowerment and rescue in crisis situations. For example, Kamil Wajda warns against suicide and other forms of self-destruction: 'This is my last thought. I really want the person reading this to know that there is no such thing as a situation with no way out,' directing the message towards psychologists and support groups for queer individuals. Jolie, the author of memoir 30, concludes with the following words: 'I want to conclude my statement, adding courage to all those who are in a difficult situation and letting them know that they are wonderful people, regardless of what others say about them. Don't be afraid to discover your sexuality, and don't shy away from calling yourself a person who is not completely decided, because exploring your identity is a very tedious and demanding process, so not everything will come to you right away' (memoir No. 49, pp. 395–396). These kinds of demands, wishes, warnings, and good advice are explicitly didactic in nature.

8 Accusation

Confessions take on a political dimension primarily in those cases where the authors formulate demands related to social life. Even if not stated explicitly, almost every memoir resonates with wishes for change: social acceptance, equal education, and a wide range of human rights, including same-sex marriage and child adoption. Often, these demands boil down to calls for respect, empathy, and neutrality. Treating their case as a symptom of the necessary changes, Polie writes, 'It's about not panicking. It's about not fearing to leave the house every day because someone might push me under a tram just because of how I look. It's about not having to climb onto the windowsill every day and look down with hope. It's about not having to flee the country to finally live in harmony with myself and the person I love. It's simply about making the experiences of a non-binary person, born in Poland, equally important as anyone else's. And nothing more' (memoir No. 42, p. 519).

One of the key demands is to halt the radicalization of conservative social policies in Poland, which memoir authors observe closely. For example, Natalia writes, 'That's why I decided to share a piece of my story because I feel like an individual who is somewhere in all of this and mourns the decline of humanity in people, not as the politicians claim an ideology unworthy of human rights' (memoir No. 37, p. 470). Readers of the memoirs are encouraged to be politically active: 'How long will we continue to accept aggression into our already battered insides? We're all afraid, but let this damn fear drive us, not paralyze us. Together, we'll cut off the head of this far-right Hydra, because there are more good people, I believe. The end,' writes Madness, the author of memoir No. 20 (p. 281).

The collection of memoirs is a collective accusation against society and the ruling party. It is also a literary manifestation, a collection of political demands. The story of 'one's own life' takes on the characteristics of an exemplum and, without losing its individuality, acquires a political dimension by becoming evidence in a symbolic, collective process for equality policies. This is how the anthology has been interpreted since its publication. For example, Renata Lis, a lesbian literary critic, described it as a 'collective act of accusation' in which 'LGBTQ+ people bear witness in their own language and on their own terms against Poland' (Lis, 2022), referring to Emil Zola's famous article *J'accuse…!*

(1898) and the Dreyfus affair. This raises hope that the anthology will trigger an equally broad and engaged public discussion about the social injustices faced by LGBTQ+ individuals in Poland. The book's title is a quote from one of the memoirs, the ending of which is significant: 'All the strength I draw for life must always come from within. I needed more and more of that coal and fire to get through all these socio-cultural obstacles' (memoir No. 26 by Paweł Bednarek, p. 344).

Another aspect that strengthens the presence of memoirs in the cultural and literary field is the book's form of publication. The anthology was published by Karakter, a prestigious publishing house known for its meticulous editorial and graphical work. It specializes in releasing politically engaged books alongside fine literature, both international and Polish (including translations of works by Rebecca Solnit, Mona Chollet, and Paul B. Preciado). The collection of memoirs, written by individuals with diverse cultural, educational, and economic backgrounds, thus entered a rather elitist yet recognizable public sphere. It is clearly associated with the progressive middle and younger generations' intellectual circles and is easily accessible (the book is also available in digital form).

Even more ambiguous is the decision of Karakter to publish separately one of the competition memoirs by Patryk Pufelski, titled *Pawilon małych ssaków* ('Pavilion for small mammals'). This book was published as a standalone work and thus excluded from the anthology and the context of the collection of texts. This separate publication, with a different title, enjoyed a seasonal literary career, received several nominations for prestigious awards, and the author was invited to author evenings and literary festivals. This publishing success has propelled Pufelski to continue his writing career. The differentiation of Pufelski's text from the rest of the memoirs is due primarily to its theme and writing style. His memoir is a collection of social media posts primarily related to his professional work of caring for animals in a zoo, his Polish–Jewish family history, and close friendships with his grandparents. Only towards the end, appearing the least frequently, do LGBTQ+ issues come into play. The hierarchy of narratives is significant for Pufelski's life and is arranged differently than most memoirs. At the same time, the author's witty, lively style and the undoubted appeal of stories about inter-species relationships and life as a Jewish gay person of the younger generation have made this memoir a subject of discussion in circles focused on animal rights and the Jewish diaspora. Excluded from the collection, Pufelski's memoir takes on a completely different context and no longer participates in the collective *J'accuse…!* Regardless of the publisher's decision to separate one memoir and publish it separately, the initiative itself of publishing an anthology of queer memoirs in a commercial rather than an academic publishing house has a groundbreaking and political dimension.

9 Conclusion

In this article, we discussed the key aspects of the politics of Queer Life Writing in contemporary Poland, based on the primary source material, which is the collection of memoirs of LGBTQ+ individuals gathered in the anthology. We presented the political and social context that significantly influenced the nature of the texts produced as part of a commissioned competition. We analyzed the most important themes in the memoirs, including issues related to identity, subjectivity, migration, class, attitudes toward Catholicism, key

existential experiences, the role of coming out, and the self-therapeutic, didactic, and emancipatory dimensions of the writing process. We connected the analysis of individual identity politics with the poetics of life narratives, and the tradition of memoir competitions and placed them in the context of the history of queer lives in Central Europe, highlighting the significance of collective writing work for collective emancipation.

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