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## Narrative Agency and Structural Chaos. A Biographical-Narrative Case Study

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**Abstract** The article is an analysis of a single case—a biographical narrative of a Tri-City resident who enters adulthood at the beginning of political transformation in 1989, and whose life path turns out to be an unintentional, dynamic journey between various professions, social worlds and structural positions. This creates a complicated and ambiguous biographical pattern which does not fall into either the socio-economic promotion of the “winner” or into the degradation of the transformation “loser.” The reconstruction of this pattern reveals the hero’s great resourcefulness and entrepreneurship, but also the fragility of the structures stabilizing his life and the volatility of life orientation points. The binder of this biography turns out to be, above all, reflexivity and, what I suggest calling, the narrative agency of the narrator, who can transform his structurally dispersed and chaotic life experiences of the time of transformation into a very original story, making him a strong subject of his own fate. This, however, creates the inevitable tension between the experienced or lived life, life history and the narrated life, life story, prompting us to again pose the question about the commonly assumed, although differently defined, correspondence between the level of reality and the level of its linguistic (in this case—autobiographical) representation.

**Keywords** Systemic Transformation; Biographical Narrative; Subjectivity; Agency; Reflexivity; Chaos; Complexity

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The heroes of the well-known documentary film “Talking Heads” of Krzysztof Kiesłowski from 1980 answer several seemingly simple questions: Who are you? What would you like? What is most important for you? The interlocutors are forty-four people born between 1880 and 1979. They are of different age, gender, occupation, social background, and “class” affiliation, attitude towards the world in general and the political system then in particular. Regardless of these differences, almost all the heroes seem to take the task extremely seriously. Although each of the talking heads appears on the screen only for a short time, we can see how the participants of this short movie survey ponder the answers, looking for the best justifications. Perhaps the film director, who did not have to worry about any sociological or psychological representativeness of his sample, wanted to include only such most reflective statements from among the many recorded during the realization of the film. The method of filming and editing further strengthens this individualizing interpretation. Thus, “Talking Heads” can be read—at the most basic, existential level—as a film about the orientations of the modern man in the world of values and ideas, but also in the context of social structure. However, when it was shown in 1980, it was read rather as a record of civil hopes for political and moral change (Hendrykowska 2015). The emergence of the trade union “Solidarity” may have seemed to be a spectacular fulfillment of some of these hopes, though very short-lived, as it turned out.

One of the protagonists, a man born in 1934 (45-year-old at the time of filming), begins his answer with such a declaration: “Since I changed my

profession from a humanist to a taxi driver, I have been feeling a much freer man.” After which he immediately adds: “But, at the same time, I have understood that a sense of personal freedom is not enough. For a man to truly feel free and at ease, he must live in conditions of democracy and a sense of security. This personal freedom, a sense of personal freedom, however, is not enough.”

This explanation may suggest that it is about systemic, political restrictions on the freedom of the “humanist” working in Poland under real socialism. The officially valid ideology, propaganda, censorship, falsification of history—we know all these labels, although we rarely see them in the perspective of an individual biography. We can assume that the taxi driver has it easier in this respect, because his problems seem much more down-to-earth, which does not mean that they are less severe, such as imposed limitation on fuel, not to mention the difficulties associated with buying a car. Yet another association, probably unintended neither by the hero nor the director of the film, is the increase in economic freedom associated with abandoning the intellectual profession in favor of a “private initiative.” A symbolic degradation in exchange for a better income and a more prosperous life (most likely, and, if you take into account the rides paid in foreign currencies, almost certainly).

What is more important than these casual socio-biographical speculations is the observation that despite the internal anxiety and even tension manifested by many protagonists, their structural embedding, to put it technically, is very stable. It raises no doubt either. In other words—professionally

and socially, everyone is as if in their own place: children have dreams, youth have (un)real plans, adults have stable family and professional roles, the oldest reflectively look back on their lives. Even the current biographical experiences cited by several interviewees to a minor degree make this static image more dynamic. What is really important, for the characters, but maybe even more so for the director, takes place in the existential and axiological aspect, and allusively, the political one. The sociological dimension, understood as looking at a man through the social roles he plays, though so clear, sometimes almost exemplary (the cook is filmed in the kitchen, a worker in a factory, a sculptor in his studio, a mountaineer in a “highlander” sweater, a professor in a smoky study full of books...) is of least importance here. In this “spiritually” disconcerting, but sociologically very stable, almost static company, the intellectual taxi driver seems to be a rather special, structurally least obvious figure.

I present this cinematic and historical example as a sample of reflective inspiration for the interpretation of the biographical narrative of a completely different intellectual taxi driver. My protagonist<sup>1</sup> was born thirty years later than the hero of Kieślowski’s film, so he entered adulthood in the declining phase of the existing political order,

<sup>1</sup> The interview was recorded over several meetings in autumn 2016 and spring 2017 during the implementation of another research project. Then, by a joint decision of the research group, we included it in the pool of interviews analyzed in the project *Experience of the Process of the Transformation in Poland. A Sociological Comparative Analysis Based on Biographical Perspective*, carried out at the Department of Sociology of Culture of the University of Lodz (funded by the National Science Center in Poland, the NCN project number UMO-2013/09/B/HS6/03100). This text was written as part of this project.

whose value crisis the documentary was diagnosing. The systemic or structural background of his story is, above all, the Polish reality of economic, social, and cultural transformation which began after 1989. A great, traumatizing change, as one of its prominent and influential sociologist-researchers already stated in the title of his book (Sztompka 2000).

I would like to take a closer look at this biographical “case,” because more than many other ones I know from my research experience, it encourages one to pose interesting questions about individual, subjective agency and freedom (to use this sociologically suspicious word not only in a movie quote), happening in the context of radical structural transformations. Understood here, which is worth emphasizing right away, not as “macro-social” transformations, but as the experienced at an individual level dynamic process of the disappearance of some and the emergence of new patterns of action, lifestyles, social roles, and what follows, the framework, or even attachment points, biographical orientation. And it is not just about the diachronic, temporal dimension of this process, about replacing some patterns with others. It is also about their synchronous dimension: the multiplication and overlapping of these patterns, and the related biographical (im)balance.

In the narrative retrospective, it is clearly seen: some matters, commitments, roles proved to be stable and long-lasting—others only fleeting; some important and with significant biographical consequences—others rather insignificant; some reinforced one another—others conflicting. Yet, these

processes appear only in the autobiographical retrospection and reflection—in the life story. A lived biography which is happening as life goes on, is first and foremost specific, pinpoints life events—life history. And among them those that complicate and sometimes ruin biographical scenarios (Strauss 2012:529-531). The subjective answer may then be a crisis and entry into the experience of trajectory, frequently described by sociologists—biography researchers. But, it can also be the perception and opening of opportunities for efficient action and implementation of new scenarios. It is quite obvious that not everyone and everywhere had a chance for the second type of answer, as the conditions for the possibility of one’s agency were very unevenly dispersed. However, this does not weaken the argument that the systemic transformation in Poland (although not only, of course) can be viewed through the prism of de- and re-composition of life orientation frameworks and biographical scenarios.

Interpreting the chosen “case,” I will look at its narrative structure, *what* and *how* is told, in order to recognize the interviewee’s biographical experience behind it. This analytical “inward” orientation is typical of sociological biographical research, in which case analysis usually means showing how this case is constructed, what it consists of. What is more difficult to show here—for various theoretical and methodological reasons—is the “outward” analytical orientation (Filipkowski and Życzyńska-Ciołek 2019). Still, I would like to, at least, pose the question: what do the narrative and biography analyzed here refer to? In other words: what can it be a case-study of? But, first things first.

## Narrative Exposition—Episodic Family History

The request to tell one’s life (story), which is usually how the transcription of the biographical-narrative interview begins, fits into the broader communication situation between the researcher and the narrator. In the minimal version, it is a brief explanation of the research objectives and plan; in the maximum version, it is a long-term, private acquaintance. I met Leszek<sup>2</sup> while I was looking for (using the so-called snowball technique) contacts to former employees of the Gdynia shipyard, which I had been investigating as part of another research project using the oral history method. He was recommended to me less as a “shipyard worker,” that is, an interview candidate, but as a potential informant, having contacts to other interlocutors and a good orientation in the topic that was of my interest. It was already during the first conversation that we redefined this communication situation. Leszek began to tell his family story, and I—switching on the recorder—asked him to tell *his* biographical story. I did not think at the time what research project this interview could be included in, or even what specific topic (or topics) will be the leading ones, or which would be most interesting for me from the research perspective. The starting point here was simply an interesting, engaging biographical story. Both formally, linguistically, narratively, and in terms of content, to say so—meaning the constellation of life experiences, commitments, choices, embedded in a specific historical reality. History is, in fact, a strong background to Leszek’s biographical story from the first sentences.

<sup>2</sup> The name of the narrator has been changed.

However, not in the sense which sociologists from Lodz wrote about years ago—the embedding of biography in history, contrasting it with embedding biography in milieu (Piotrowski 2016). Here, history is not simply the course of events, which had been happening on a macro scale, above people's heads. Events, which people had an insignificant impact on while bearing the radical biographical consequences of these situations, experiencing trajectory (in the strict sociological sense—as this biographical “process structure” in which an individual under the pressure of external circumstances is thrust out of current practices, routines, structures, and loses control of their own life [Schütze 2012a, Riemann and Schütze 2012]). From the very beginning, in the story of Leszek, history is treated as a moving stage for a biographical drama. And this drama has its own dynamics—it can be a tragedy, a comedy, or even a farce—as if independent, or at any rate not dependent on the movement of the stage. And it takes place at the level of individual biographies of the family members who were included in the story. The story, over a dozen pages long in transcription, about his own family history is extremely convoluted. Despite repeated reading, I could not fully understand it. Perhaps because the narrator's purpose is not to narratively build the family tree, but to highlight the most grotesque characters and family situations embedded in the “big” history.

It [my life—PF] began in Wrzeszcz and, like almost all Gdansk residents, I was born on Kliniczna, which is on the border of the shipbuilding district. About three hundred meters from the shipyard's borders. I think North street is closest there. And I was born there, and at home, I had a grandfather who worked

in the foundry, right? It was not his only job, because it was another picturesque figure in this flat in which I spent my childhood, because in the year 1939 he was an uhlan of the Greater Poland Cavalry Brigade. And there, at Bzura river he did something, right? Well, it wasn't such an uhlan from the first line who would charge at tanks, he was a corporal in the communications platoon...And together with this Brigade there near Bzura he would be pulling a wire somewhere to the positions, right? And he would run away, trying not to let the Germans kill him. He tried sometimes/ I mean, it was not his duty to kill the Germans on the battlefield, but to ensure communication with the command post. And when it turned out that these command posts are not getting the hang of it, they gave the order that everyone should save oneself on their own, and so they dispersed. He ran away for two weeks, right, to Poznan, so as not to get caught and locked up in Oflag, right? He succeeded, along the way killed the only German in his life, which he would tell every time...It was one of his standard stories.

The most important message the narrator conveys here is not really about the grandfather's involvement (as it will turn out later, he was not his biological grandfather, but his mother's stepfather) in the defensive war of 1939, but his ability to *disentangle* himself from dangerous and too risky stories. History—this big one, written with a capital letter—gets people entangled in historical circumstances. The narrator will choose those characters from the family saga who were able to transform History into individual small stories—and to disentangle themselves efficiently, somehow take command of one's fate—even if the spectrum of agency was

very narrow in the given circumstances. Using one's own reason, cleverness, resourcefulness, craftiness, courage. But also, by a lucky accident. If there is any heroism here, it is very private. The almost caricatured image of uhlands charging at tanks emphasizes the narrator's distance to national historical myths. Myths, to clarify here, understood not necessarily as mere “untruths,” but as fixed images and narratives fulfilling the binding, community-forming function, as specific historical “super-truths” (Niznik 1978).

This applies not only to the heroic myths, but also to those demonized ones. The narrator's biological grandfather was in the Waffen-SS, which we will find out about in a few minutes.

I once talked to my aunt, who is an ethnic German, because I have such people in my family too, be prepared for the worst, right? [Laughs] My second grandfather was in the SS, the original one, right? And he was at Stalingrad...And this aunt, who also lived ninety years, wrote in her diary that he was in the SS, just like Grass, right? Only that as for the Grasses, they made a big thing about it, right? Almost, practically. That he volunteered, they dragged his name through the mire. And in my aunt's diary, there is such a feminine and purely pragmatic explanation, right? They/ She expressed it in one sentence. “Adolf,” because that was his name, “went to the SS like all the *Volksdeutsche*.” The Germans simply conscripted the *Volksdeutsch* automatically to the SS. And who was *Volksdeutsch*? It was a German from outside the Reich...And the free city of Gdansk was just such a state. So, the citizens of the free city were sent to the SS automatically.

The grandfather survived the battle of Stalingrad. Suffering from jaundice, he was evacuated for treatment near Hamburg, where he lived to see the end of the war. After the war, he did not return to Gdansk and to grandmother, but started a new family in Germany (and then another one). All this is told in an adventurous, almost absurd convention. History entangles the hero—and he, here with a happy coincidence of tragic circumstances, disentangles himself from it, telling his individual biographical story. No wonder that we often find here a reference (the above is only one of several) to the German writer Günter Grass. It is not only about the similarity of the fate of some members of the German-Polish narrator's family with the fate of this famous writer from Gdansk (and the fate of thousands of other Germans of his generation). It is more about the way of constructing the narrative—here biographical, there fictional, but in both cases, immersed in the colloquial and colloquial oral tale, in the element of orality, storytelling (Janion 2001). Behind this formal resemblance lies, I suppose, a similar philosophy of history and the philosophy of individual human life. And of survival in extremely hostile conditions. Ethical questions seem somewhat inadequate here. Not because of “fading out of awareness” or “repression,” but simply because we know nothing about the course of the (biological) grandfather's service in the Waffen-SS. And since we do not know, we do not judge him for this with a collective historical responsibility. An ordinary man is too weak to resist the power of historical events and overwhelming historical forces. What he can do, if he is lucky, is to try to disentangle himself from the historical matrix—before it is too late.

Another hero of this family saga, the foster grandfather of the narrator (with the biological one, despite efforts, he did not manage to meet), came from Podlasie, but before the war he lived in the western part of the country. In 1939, also his biographical events gained tremendous dynamics:

And when the Germans came, then snatch! Take them to Stutthof, right? And there, him alone, a sixteen-year-old, of course, those from Stutthof were sent to work somewhere in the fields near Krynica, Stegna, and they were working there, in the field. And one time he said that he would just run away. And so he did, ran away and made his way back to Lublin area. So this is the next story which/ And later, because it was somewhere at the beginning of the war when he was a sixteen-year-old and later when the war ended, he was twenty-something, the Russians came and took him to the ISC, the Internal Security Corps, and he went to Bieszczady [mountains], under [general] Świerczewski, he fought against Ukrainian bands. What he would tell about it...

The fate of this grandfather turns out to be no less complicated than the life events of the “German” one—although, from a historical perspective, there is nothing extraordinary about them. He manages to get himself out of one big History, but he becomes entangled—or perhaps entangles himself—in another. To what extent he exercises his agency in this, and to what he is tuning in to the new historical and biographical situation and thus to the new “system”—this we do not know. We only get a suggestion that with time, he was able to transform these experiences into a suggestive story. Perhaps, by imposing *narrative agency* where its real

impact on the course of events was very limited. The briefly outlined further professional path of the foster grandfather—working in the militia, and then many years of working in the shipyard—suggests adaptation to external institutional or “systemic” conditions rather than any biographical rebellion. Well, not every History can be efficiently disentangled from—but each one can be told (or at least attempted) as an interesting story of individual life events. If only there is sufficient self-critical reflexivity and narrative skill.

To break this male-centric perspective, let us stop for a moment at the female heroines of these family stories. The narrator’s grandmother clearly resembles the Kashubian grandmother of the hero of Grass’s novel, who—in every historical turmoil—“has her own mind.” She also has strength, which seems to be greater than men’s, to develop her own counter-history (Grass 1994).

Grandmother lived the entire war in Gdansk. I mean, she was Polish, but she was a maid at the home of such wealthy Gdansk residents, also of Polish origin, but in some past generation they got uprooted. They came from Swiecie area, but they switched to German and it was believed they had some incredible real-estates, tenement houses, plots of land, and securities.

Although during the war, the grandmother’s employers were successively losing this property at the Sopot casino, so that in 1945, “when the Russians came and began seizing it, they actually had nothing to take,” it was probably impossible to get a better job during the occupation.

In turn, the narrator’s mother ends up doing “forced labor” at that time. Very peculiar, indeed. Her grandfather, the grandmother’s father, is saved from Stutthof (“they locked him up because he openly confessed that he was Polish. And he spoke Polish, he taught Polish to children and did not want to be German”) thanks to the intervention of his front friend from the First World War world—currently an SS general—and relegated to the management of a several-hundred-hectare property. Working there, he brought his grandchildren, among them the mother of the narrator.

My mother did not have any siblings, all the cousins, everyone spent the occupation there, right?...And when it was over, they were like butterballs. Because there was everything—molasses, ducks, geese, dry sausage. My mother remembers the occupation as such a paradise land of happy childhood.

These are just short excerpts from the narrator’s family war story. There are many more references to Polish History, and many more surprising individual counter-stories. These random experiences of family members supported by their causative action (more often consisting of disentangling from History or rather avoiding being swept by the current than implementing some individual life plans) make up a gripping family tragicomedy, full of surprising, situational, and consequently biographical turns. However, it is the task of the listener/reader to build an understandable plot out of them—the narrator merely tells episodes from the lives of the characters, his own ancestors, which are diffused, though interrelated. To understand them, one needs to have a grasp of Polish 20<sup>th</sup>-century history, and

a minimum of openness to its possible biographical implications and complications.

### Feature Accumulation—Autobiography of the Time of “System Transformation”

The narrator does not become the hero of this story until “in due time.” Its shape is determined not by chronological, but by narrative order and binding events into a web understandable to the recipient (or at least by the narrator’s attempts of such binding). Somewhere at the very beginning, he emphasizes his attachment to Gdansk, Wrzeszcz, to be precise—not only declaratively, but also recalling a specific biographical episode (sightseeing his city by following the footsteps of the writer Günter Grass).

However, he appears in the main role as late as in the story of a trip to Germany in 1991, which unfolds the story of grandfather Adolf evacuated from Stalingrad, whose family the author meets there, and tries to meet with him, though unsuccessfully. However, this addition (in the terminology of the narrative analysis of Fritz Schütze, we would speak about narrative drive and constraint [Schütze 1983; 2012b:164-165]) turns out to be an independent narrative whole—yet another family story which, this time, takes us not to the times of war, but transformation.

We went to Germany together because [a friend—PF] had a prepayment for a large Fiat, then there was a prepayment system. Well, but because there were few of these cars still, the Rakowski government or someone invented that those who had a prepayment can bring a car from abroad and will not pay the duty,

right, duty exemption. And because my friend emigrated to Germany at that time, he noticed immediately, whether right after the first or the second trip, he said that he found in...near Frankfurt there is an American military base. And there's a Jew from Poland who sells to these Negroes, right, those who have to do military service for two years, the Polonez, Polish cars. He advertises them as large, heavy, typically American, right? He had such a special leaflet, I regret that it got lost somewhere, but there were slogans that really...depicted this Polonez so descriptively, as a car that has all the features that Americans care about when they decide on a car. And these American soldiers bought these Polonez cars, right? They were ridiculously cheap, right, they cost four thousand marks there, I think. It was then terribly cheap/ the conversion rate for a mark was six thousand probably, so this car cost twenty-four million. And almost everyone from this base bought these Polonez cars. And when they finished their service after two years, they sold them back to this trader. This trader repaired them there and sold to Poles. We bought one, only it was supposedly unused. Although I doubt it, it seems to me that/ [You bought a Polonez in Germany, second-hand, from US Army soldiers!?] I mean just, supposedly unused, because it was on white plates, we brought it on white plates.

Times have changed, but the way the main protagonist experiences the world—now being the same as the narrator (whether also in a stronger sense postulated by biographical analysis, which, after all, is looking for, in various ways, the correspondence between the narrative *here* and *now* and the experiential *there* and *then*—let us leave aside this question for the time being)—remained as if intact.

The History (with a capital “H”) is again changed into minor episodes of interpersonal comedy (although, perhaps, it would be more accurate to speak of a grotesque or farce here). Inter-human, but here built on vernacular, bottom-up anthropology of things. The most important, most efficient actor (or in a newer sociological terminology—*actant*) of this story is, after all, the Polonez car. The object which is really strongly and, at the same time, ambiguously and surprisingly symbolically cast, which cannot be reduced to the last oddity of the Polish automotive industry of the PRL<sup>3</sup> times, nor to the object of desire, and the ultra-detailed amateur historical and technical studies of retro-automotive fans. Polonez is here yet another comedian, who in the symbolic vortex of “breakthrough time” can change masks and roles, depending on the needs, and even more on the imagination of buyers, sellers, and various intermediaries. Everyone is rational here—and yet the whole scene is grotesque. It reveals the “absurdities” of the late PRL, but also the unobvious agency and resourcefulness of all the actors involved in it. It is even more credible because shown on the occasion of telling the story about the life events of the German part of the family and meeting them after many years.

However, let us finally recreate the chronology of the main life events of the narrator-hero. It takes on clear contours only during the second meeting, after several hours of conversation. Yet, it does not cover the “whole” life—the years of childhood and early youth are blurred in the literary pictures of Gdansk-Wrzeszcz (this is spoken literature, but, as

<sup>3</sup> Polish People's Republic.

we have already seen, strongly and explicitly inspired by canonical written works, at least for Gdansk). However, in place of these (un)told experiences of the family home, the narrator offers an interpretative frame for his entire autobiography. The more important because it appears as early as in the first sentences of the interview.

Unlike most of his peers, my father did not work “the Japanese way,” that is, in one place all the time, doing such an employee, ant career, but he changed jobs seven times. And this for me/ I mean, a man learns by imitating, just like animals. Well, because he was an alpha-male in my home, so I started doing the same, right? I mean, even not really planning this intentionally, it just happened to me that life turned out so that I had to change jobs every now and then. Whether I want it or not/ I mean, I usually want to, right, because it just stops engaging me, and then kind of accidentally it also stops bringing satisfactory income. And I have to look for something else. And so it goes on.

It is not a binding or sufficient interpretation for us, but it is worth—and in line with the spirit of humanistic sociology—taking seriously this initial self-reflection of the narrator. The forecast fluctuation and instability of the life course gain a simple psychological or psychoanalytical explanation. We do not have to question it (succumbing to the fears of many sociologists about “psychologization”) in order to search for, on a slightly shallower biographical level, other than deeply psychological determinants, or rather the conditions of the narrator's course of life. Anyway, his initial self-reflection also encourages it, revealing the hesitation be-

tween translating the biographical turns with his own “wanting”—and with situational extortion, between autonomous choice—and fate, explained by the metaphor of *the course of life*. When in a moment this autobiographical story will begin to manifest more content of event and experience nature, aligning itself with the historical context of transformation, it will turn out that this initial self-reflection of the narrator about the unintentional imitation of his father does not shed, but rather poses the question about his individual agency—about its scope, conditions, and restrictions.

The choice of secondary school in 1978 is the proper beginning of a relatively chronologically ordered autobiographical narrative.

And so I went to this high school according to his wishes, to this technical college. And there I started my adventure with shipyards.

Although the decisions are made by his father (whose professional career seems to be much more stable than we could gather from the introduction, and is firmly rooted in state institutions connected first with the sea and then with agriculture), the narrator agrees with his reasoning at that time. The prestigious Technical Secondary School of Shipbuilding in Gdansk, commonly known as Conradinum,<sup>4</sup> which he attends, is a place that allows one to reasonably count on sound education, good professional preparation, and the prospect of

<sup>4</sup> Conradinum is a colloquial term for the oldest, prestigious secondary school in Gdansk with over two hundred years of tradition, educating specialists in “ship” professions to this day. Its current name is Conradinum Ship and General Schools. Its graduate was, among others, Günter Grass.

stable work in the developing shipbuilding industry—then treated as the avant-garde of the modernizing country. The proof that it turned out to be quite accurate is the career of his close friend (and later my interviewee in the shipyard project), who, after this school, graduated from the Shipbuilding Department of the Gdansk University of Technology, after which he started working as an engineer in the Paris Commune Shipyard, later transformed into the Gdynia Shipyard. After its fall in 2009, he easily found a satisfactory employment in one of the private shipbuilding companies operating in the Tri-City. The example of the friend illustrates the *possible* direction in which, in a typical scenario, the narrator's professional life could have unfolded—regardless of transformational changes with the accompanying “collapse of Polish industry.” After graduating from secondary school in the late 1980s, the narrator studies philosophy at the Catholic University of Lublin. He justifies this firstly with the need to escape from his father's domination: “but, at some point, I thought that it was under his influence that I made this decision [about technical education—PF], so now it's time to make my own.” However, a moment later he shows the biographical basis of this decisions, emphasizing the attitude that has distinguished him since his youth, distancing him from reality, from commitment, also from the political one, demonstrated by his peers.

Eighteen years old, I was still wearing a Shetland polo-neck sweater, herringbone jacket, I would take an umbrella and a pipe with amphora and set off down the avenues. There, my friends were running, I mean, they were running away, because there

wasn't even a need to do anything. It was enough when there was a group of young people wearing jackets and chanting slogans, they would immediately start chasing them, or shooting, or something. And I was calmly walking through these avenues in this outfit with an umbrella and a pipe. Nobody just dared to approach me...And I liked that, right? The fact that thanks to this I am, in some sense, untouchable. I mean, I'm neutral and I'm not getting one look or another. The more so that my father would always convince me that you always have to look for the other party's arguments. And even though he would listen to Free Europe [radio] for days, he never let me uncritically repeat what was broadcast there, right? He always had an answer to the arguments that Free Europe provided. And it wasn't just a simple answer. So no, no, he didn't paste it with quotes from the People's Tribune. He just said it wasn't quite right or not quite so. Because they tell you something else and this is an obvious exaggeration, but the truth probably needs to be looked for somewhere in-between. And so he accidentally produced a philosopher.

Again, a long piece of argument to justify the distinction and singularity of the narrator, who persuades the listener to his individual “third way” between the extremes of “communism” and an active “fight against communism.” It is easy to interpret this fragment as a narrative dodge, setting aside the question of one's own commitment to Solidarity, and even justifying its lack. The birth of this mass, spectacular social movement and its “carnival,” radically ended by the imposition of martial law at the end of 1981, coincided with the last years of the narrator's education at the Gdansk technical school. So he was very close to the center of those important

events that made the big, national history. However, the context of this statement and the further biographical story suggest a different interpretative trail than a desire to justify. The narrator has no problems with his own “maladaptation” to historical patterns—on the contrary, he derives some sense of pride from this separateness. He also shows that when entering adulthood, he not only wanted to free himself from his father, but also to run away from History—into his own biographical stories. Although the narrator is well aware that none of these escapes can be fully successful (in short, the father is still acting “at the bottom” and the historical process is “at the top”), since that moment, he focuses his story on this intermediate level, where he can reveal his individual agency. Not some total or subversive anti-structural, but—to refer to the theory of Margaret Archer (2013a)—real and realizable in the subjective band of possibilities of a specific, reflective man (Domecka 2013).

Along with his wife, whom he met at the university, they return to the Tri-City. The first employment after obtaining a diploma is at the Student Work Cooperative “Technoserwis.” We have several snapshots from this short period of pre-official work. One is cleaning the dry dock after sandblasting the hull, the other, much more lively, is cleaning the workers' hotel belonging to the Gdynia shipyard, which includes, among others, clearing a clogged sewage system: “And also, women's panties, bras, and other things were taken out. Most often such items of clothing were the cause of these clogs.”

I am extracting this particular picture from many, not for the sake of the vivid anecdote itself, but to

show from what position the narrator is observing reality here—in this case, the turn of 1980/1990. Although he returned to the shipyard to work for which the technical school prepared him, he returned as a “philosopher” and not a shipyard worker. Structurally, he is there as a short-term laborer, well-paid for the exhausting and dirty tasks (“the salary that I got to my hand then was twice as high as the salary in the first official job I took after studies”). Mentally, he is outside this shipbuilding world—he is distant to his role, interpreting it “from the bottom” or “from the margins.” In almost literary stories, extracting the “structural” paradoxes of large-scale socialism in its declining phase along the way.

The first permanent job at the Marine Fisheries Institute as a senior editor does not change much in this respect, although the narrator's observations are now carried out from the center of the microcosm in which he is functioning. This institutional microcosm (represented rather than experienced) becomes an inter-world. “Structurally” belonging to the old institutional and bureaucratic order, “functionally” adapting efficiently to the new market rules of the game organizing the life activity of many people even before the symbolic breakthrough of 1989.

There were several such institutional periodicals. In addition, they, books of these researchers, all publications. So everything that was devoted to the industry in which they worked...So, you know, it was a bit absurd, because I, for example/ they had their duties, right, such a ritual. And such an article, such a professor dealt with “factors affecting the population of the

Baltic cod." And she had to, it resulted from some regulations, she had to write such an article every year. Well, what to write here, we know what these factors are...Well, she just submitted year after year the same piece of text and added tables with some measurements...And we published it, and everyone had work.

This story about bureaucratic stability (much more extensive in the interview: unfilled vacancies, a kiosk next to the institute to which they "threw" attractive goods, view of the sea from the window...), is not an introduction to the story of stagnation or implementation of the institutional pattern of action, but about initiating individual agency.

Everyone was happy, and at the same time it was possible to do extra jobs on the side. Because thanks to the fact that this manager was influential, we had a photocomposition program...it was called digitset. And it was a program which allowed the typesetting of newspapers and big books, right?...The manager trained everyone, right? They were carefully trained. Young, twenty-something-year-olds. More or less my peers, I think. And after two months, two of them ran away to England. And this one [who stayed—PF] was obviously the least brainy. And he broke/ that is, accidentally formatted the hard disk in that computer on which there were most of these photographic programs...And, of course, there was a computer specialist employed full-time, and he started saving this data, and I was assisting him. And I learned so much from this assistance that after a month the manager decided that he would make me the manager of computer photocomposition...Theoretically, my job was to manage a team. There were two, three, or four people employed. Well, but after some time, we were about to

take over the administration of the tenement house. I mean, I took steps to take over this administration, so it was quite absorbing. You had to go here and there, write letters, deliver them. Well, I convinced my boss to create a second shift and I would start work at two [o'clock—PF]. And my subordinates finished at three. So I had an hour to settle their tasks, delegate work for the next day. And then, I had seven hours to myself. Nobody controlled me because no one was there anymore, only the security guards came from the company that was guarding the building, and we would gossip. And I also took the opportunity and was learning this photocomposition program. Or, I was doing some side job. Or, I was doing some work that really had to be done and no one but me could do it. And so I was bluffing there until at some point the manager said that the market for offset plates collapsed.

The scientific state institution resembles a revolving door mounted between completely different realities. Both are operated by the same machines (by the way, we get here a micro insight into the computer revolution of the early nineties) and, in part, by the same people for whom the full-time employment of the old-times turns out to be the "base" for implementing completely new ideas and biographical scenarios. These ideas are not invented here, planned, or dreamed, and the scripts are not waiting to be played by the actors.

The narrator's presented world as a dynamic, shimmering world, is open to sudden and frequent change. At the same time, it is not about "accepting fate" or some adaptive adjustment to it. No, here the change coming from the outside—from the

world, from the "system transformation"—meets the active operation of the hero, who grabs it, integrates it in his actions, and thus changes the direction in which his (professional) biography unfolds. This evokes associations with the theory of chaos, which describes complex, intertwined systems, susceptible to unexpected, non-linear, holistic changes, caused by single micro-causes (Smith 2007:1-6; Byrne and Callaghan 2013). Random, from the point of view of the disturbed system, although having their own logic, their causes, and effects. With such an addition, however, that in this biography of the "breakthrough time," it is difficult to catch longer periods of stabilization of the biographical "system." From the narrative retrospective, rather emerges a picture of continuous biographical dribbling, constant reconfiguration of the points and the framework of life orientation. And almost every such change is constructed as a result of unexpected external circumstances and an active, efficient, and subjective response to them. Not passive adaptation, but the active use of emerging and perceived options—within the limits of individual biographical possibilities. In short, the world of the hero in the period of transformation (and, by the way, of youth) is a potential world, full of new opportunities, an open world *in favor of*. However, these possibilities are arranged horizontally rather than vertically—their implementation does not add up to the path of social promotion or the path of "career."

Additionally, for a long time, as it is clearly seen in the passage cited above and as confirmed by numerous further fragments, the narrator implements several parallel biographical scenarios. Not only in

the sense obvious to a modern society that he plays many relatively independent social roles—a husband, a father, an employee, or an employer, et cetera—but also in the stronger sense that his professional, and thus social, identity is hardly perceptible. In the above quote, he is at the same time the editor of a scientific journal and a self-taught IT specialist. And also, as a consequence of marriage, the administrator of the tenement house recovered by the heirs of the former owners (including his wife). At the end of the interview—during the next meeting—we will learn that at the same time he undertook extramural doctoral studies at the Catholic University of Lublin (which he had not finished), and a little later he taught logic at the University of Gdansk. Such multitasking (sometimes leading to crises) would not be possible without the acceptance of the social environment of the narrator. The ease with which he negotiates the flexibility of his employment may testify to the universality of such multi-layered biographical occupational scenarios at that time. In fact, he will confirm it elsewhere.

A lot of people at the university were in a situation like mine. Anyway, working at the University of Gdansk at that time was something completely different from what I had expected when I went there. It was not an academic life. You just popped in to tick off the class. And then, everyone hopped in the car, or rushed for the train to get to the next job.

This can legitimately be seen as the degradation of the crumbling system (or its specific subsystems, for example, the academic one), but also as its openness to structural changes—and then a kind of contribution to the dynamically reconfiguring reality.

The collapse of the offset plate market, where the penultimate quote stopped, is my arbitrary cut—somewhere you have to finish the already long quotation. This destabilizing impulse, in line with the biographical reconfiguration pattern outlined above, initiates new action plans. The narrator sets up a private company with a friend (“It was an already registered business. Because then everyone, there was terrible pressure, such pressure, right? To open a business”) and imports offset plates from Germany. This business did not last long, but smoothly turned into the sale of reagents for their development and, in parallel, the distribution of floppy disks (at that time popular data carriers), and then various computer accessories. The next step—and the answer to the technological “transformation” (the whole interview clearly shows how much it overlapped with the “systemic” transformation)—was the provision of Internet access services.

At this point, it seems that the narrator’s professional biography has stabilized around “small entrepreneurship,” so characteristic of the transformation period, especially its early, transitional phase, from before the market dominance of large corporations and the forced popularity of running one’s own franchise business (although many small companies have survived and today operate on a completely different market). This stabilization turns out to be an illusion.

Talking about the subsequent reconfigurations of his small business, the narrator suddenly inserts a short sentence completely out of tune with his thus far narrative: “And then the Internet came

about and I started to deal with the Internet, but in the meantime, I had an accident in which my wife died.” Such short, as if involuntary, digression refers to the experience unlike any previously cited, to a tragic random event whose detailed circumstances we are to learn in a moment. Traffic accident statistics do not leave the impression that this was an absurd, “causeless” case. It was rather a nexus of incidents—not only the death of the wife, but the survival of other passengers, including the narrator and his daughter. This event opens nothing in the hero’s life and is not easily biographically integrated—like all earlier and further life “adventures.” It is not another obstacle in life the overcoming of which triggers new ideas and redirects life in a new direction. Rather, we get a signal of the experienced trauma, confirmed later at the end of the interview. The rapid current of adventure narrative which has thus far exposed the narrator’s agency stops for a moment.

However, this narrative suspension does not last long. The dynamic story of the next business adventures, the need to close down the Internet company which has no chance of surviving in a market dominated by big players, quickly returns. The narrator, although illustrating the growing difficulties and attempts to adapt to increasingly difficult conditions, does not dwell on his business failure at all. He suppresses this thread to develop the next story. It is a story about running a large seaside holiday resort on a lease basis.

He owes the entry into this transformational microcosm to his second wife, whose father-in-law used to be the manager of a neighboring resort, which

belonged to one of Warsaw’s factories during the period of socialist modernization and employee holidays. After its fall in the 1990s, he became an agent for the declining complex, and then bought it at a good price in order to renovate it.

The story’s intricacies do not allow for even a brief factual reconstruction. The more so because the already complicated vicissitudes of family business (previously family life remained on a distant narrative set) are again embedded in the set of colorful pictures of the Polish transformation. Not only are grassroots made credible through his own experience—as we already know well from the entire narrative so far—but, additionally, here narrated from the coastal periphery, from the perspective of the holiday outskirts of former factory holiday resorts.

In this quiet holiday area, the business struggle turns out to be fiercer than in the city, and the rules of the game are much less transparent. After these few years of adventure, we return to the Tri-City with the narrator, where—together with chefs employed at the seaside—he runs a school canteen for several years, and then engages with home baking of trendy healthy bread. After a few more years of this chaotic micro-entrepreneurship (chaotic understood as above—more philosophical than colloquial), he attempts to enter a strongly institutionalized and structured labor market, and work in a large banking and insurance corporation. This decision is presented as very rational and well thought over; however, it is taken, like many others in the life of the hero, under the influence of an accidental impulse:

I rather went there to return to the labor market. I cut myself off because of the fact that I kept the server here, well, it was a very cheap solution and very convenient, because I could be with children almost all day. And be useful at home. However, I lost contact with reality and was out of the loop. Well, so I went to this insurance company with the thought of renewing old contacts...It was an impulse because I was at a friend’s funeral in the winter, who was just “a gem,” or “a diamond.” It was the year ‘98, I met him in the street and he was cheering with delight, how well he is doing. He was just so optimistic that you can’t imagine. And then/ and this picture I kept...I was at the funeral and afterwards I was talking to the widow and said that I got this opportunity, because here, nearby is this branch and they were just looking for someone to work. So I said that if Wojtek praised it so much, maybe I will go there, something will pop up. And she directed me there, to some of his colleagues who were still working there and I talked to them.

Coming into contact with an international corporation done locally, with a large bureaucratic business employing (producing) a new middle class, with Polish capitalism, which achieved spectacular success, lasted only a few months (*ipso facto*, it was limited to the initial induction training). This short biographical episode turned out to be intense enough to be remembered by the hero as a series of expressive, ironic images of a hostile world of paid work tasks of a completely new Polish middle class: “it’s terrible trash.”

This distance is not surprising when we know the biography of the narrator, as well as his way of constructing the story. It can, however, be interpreted



more objectively as a measure of the biographical and social difference between his world and the world of his colleagues—perhaps also graduates of philosophy and earlier technical secondary school—who twenty or so years ago entered the stable, predictable path of newly opened corporate careers and have remained on it to this day (Domecka 2016). In a social and in their own sense, they achieved professional, maybe also “life” and transformational success (or vice versa)—from the narrator’s perspective: at the cost of abandoning the multitude of biographical plots, and of giving up “philosophizing.”

### “I Started Driving a Taxi”

Driving a taxi is a direct consequence of corporate disappointment of the narrator, and it is still his occupation at the time of the interview in 2017. Presented as a completely natural life choice, which, of course, does not necessarily mean that it has been the target choice. How to locate it “structurally” in the context of the entire biography? It could be perceived as a return to individual entrepreneurship in its next stage of development. It could be a “wait and see” strategy, entering a professional time in-between, allowing him to “return onto the market” at a more favorable moment and into a place where it is possible to use intellectual competences and previous experience. Though which ones? Since there were so many biographical action plans so far, and they were so different. And all of them—seen from a distance—turned out to be so fleeting, impermanent, and so poorly shaped.

It is not easy to classify the biography of our hero as one within the studies of “positional wander-

ings in the period of radical changes” (Mach 2003). There is even no certainty whether he is a “loser” or a “winner” of these processes, to recall the binary (and probably too banal) conceptual opposition popular (also) among sociologists (Palska 2002; Jarosz 2005). At the same time, we have no doubt that we are dealing here with the biography of the time of Polish transformation—that the narrator’s experiences reveal the characteristic socio-historical processes of that time. And he, thanks to his ethnographic imagination and narrative zest, is a good guide to various transformational micro-worlds. Their credibility is assured by the biographical experience of the narrator—these are always participatory observations. He even brings to life some of these narrated microcosms, and then abandons them, extinguishes, closes in order to engage in the next ones.

Unfortunately, these changing worlds of life are not hierarchical at all. I do not even mean in the sense of economic profitability of the activities or “professions” undertaken, because the differences are quite clear (although most often through guessing), but in their subjective valuation by the narrator. A state job is just as good (or bad) as importing offset plates in one’s first company run with a colleague, as later running a computer company, as providing Internet to nearby residents, as running a holiday resort and school canteen, baking healthy bread, or driving a taxi. This last occupation has the additional advantage of providing a constant source of amazing human stories that drive the hero’s imagination (although the freshness effect may also work here) and which he willingly shared with me—also after turning off the recorder. External

measures and possible “structural” consequences of performing these various, so scattered professional activities do not appear at all. The meaning of life seems to be located somewhere else.

It is only at the end of the interview when we learn that the first “permanent” job after studies, taken in the spring of 1989 (this date appears only in this context, seems difficult to calculate for him and is not automatically located in his memory, which tells a lot about the individual experience of the political breakthrough), the narrator treated as a waiting room before what he *had been planning* to do in his life: “Because I submitted my papers and I just wanted to become an assistant lecturer.” So, in the long run, *just* an academic philosopher. He was not employed at the first attempt, but in the following year, it was a success and this ready, ultimately very simple and predictable (though difficult to implement) professional scenario—in the terminology of biographical analysis of Fritz Schütze: the institutional model—seemed to be within the range of biographical possibilities.

It is impossible to judge today whether it was “transformation” that cancelled these life plans. Certainly, it brought about chaotic, de- and re-structural compositions in the midst of which our hero turned out to be an extremely effective and efficient actor, though playing in small-stage performances. This efficiency and agency are something more than “dealing with” social change as described in depth by Adam Mrozowicki (2011) using the examples of Silesian workers. He abandoned his doctorate in philosophy, because combining teaching and running a company quickly

proved impossible. Years later, he tried to return to university as a lecturer (not just of philosophy), but this also proved to be only a fleeting experience—incompatible with his main paid occupation and the associated way of life (“at the seaside”) at that time. However, this unrealized philosophical path is not considered in terms of a biographical loss, an unfulfilled career. The narrator does not cling to this biographical thread when he casually summarizes this story: “The scientific thread has been cut off. And that’s it.”

The binding factor of this autobiography is neither “career” nor other structural embedding, with its daily routines, professional practices, ethos, or, at least, auto-stereotypes (“IT specialists,” “entrepreneurs,” “taxi drivers,” etc.). Just as the hero’s ancestors, at least in his stories about them, tried to sneak out of History and resort to their own counter-stories, he, himself, escaped the sociological transformation schemes to... Well, exactly, to what?

I would say that into a particular kind of “philosophizing.” Individual, non-systemic, very literary. Constantly emphasizing the non-obviousness and multidimensionality of the world, as well as its flickering and grotesque quality. Of every world: the war, communist, transformation, German, Polish, Gdansk (the latter, perhaps the least sociologically important, seems to be the strongest *symbolic* anchor of this biography).

The narrator faces the chaotic reality of “meantime.” He changes it into small ones, looking for streaks of subjective agency somewhere between the disappearing, or perhaps—decaying, old order, and the

new one, emerging chaotically since the late 1980s. Even if each subsequent streak seems to be narrower than the previous one, as the new institutional and structural order crystallizes and becomes more and more closed, the *narrative agency* of the autobiographer remains unwavering.

Whatever happens in life—except maybe for this one life tragedy, when his wife dies in an accident and the daughter and other passengers, including himself, survive “by a miracle”—the narrator is always in control of the shape of his autobiographical story. Regardless of his current profession and life vicissitudes, he remains a reflective humanist—an independent hermeneut of his own fate (Filipkowski 2018), not by title, but through active practice. Driving a taxi—maybe even freer than before. At the same time, at the level of operation, as never before dependent on the courses ordered.

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A careful reader has probably noticed that the above analysis focuses much more on the hero's autobiographical narrative, on a *life story*, than on his biography, on *life history* (Rosenthal 1993). In places, it may even resemble a literary interpretation, and not a sociological and biographical analysis focused on the reconstruction of the real course of life or different phases of life experience. As in the classic proposal today of Fritz Schütze, which aims—on the level of individually analyzed cases—to reveal the sequence of “biographical process structures” (Schütze 1983). This is the most well-known and well-grounded proposition in Polish biographical sociology, but the problem of the transition from

the narrative, that is, the linguistic representation created during the interview, to the life behind it or experience (what it was like in the past, at the time of experiencing it) is a key problem. It is a constantly recurring subject of all the most important theoretical and methodological proposals in this research field, in particular, those which today are most popular and still creatively developed, that is, in Germany by Gabriela Rosenthal, and in England by Tom Wengraf (Każmierska 2013).

As the years go by, it is even clearer that the former accusation of excessive “narrativism” put forward by Daniel Bertaux against the “German school” in biographical research (Wengraf's proposal also deriving from there) was rather misguided (Rokuszewska-Pawelek 2006). Perhaps even—though this claim would require solid historical and sociological verification—postmodernism and linguistic turn did not weaken, but, paradoxically, strengthened the realistic orientation of sociological biographical methods, which sought to defend some “truth of experience” against the narrative, or rather narratological arbitrariness. Although, of course, it is still not the very general realism of social structures and facts which Bertaux had argued in favor of in that polemic, but the realism of the individual experiences of social actors. In other words, the narrative “how” is to be oriented towards the biographical, but also sociological, “what?” Today, such realism, or rather—realisms, though at different levels of analysis, as well as the subjective, humanistic perception of the actors present in biographical approaches, is easier to defend theoretically by referring to the works of Margaret Archer (2013b).

I recall these well-known matters to make it clear that my analysis of this case basically stops at the narrative “how?” What I propose here is, first of all, the extraction of the narrator's ways of *linguistic portrayal* of both his own biographical experience and the reality of the Polish transformation observed from the bottom, locally. So, it is a kind of second degree hermeneutics, or, after Giddens (1996), *double hermeneutics* (Hałas 2001), which explains and organizes the senses and meanings of the *presented world* by a narrator rather than gives an insight into the experiences (s)he once lived. I say “rather,” because, in this interview, there are long, strictly narrative passages, in the sense in which they are defined by Fritz Schütze, looking for access to the past reality experienced and lived—“there and then.” It is also possible to reconstruct the elementary process structures of this biography, oscillating constantly between biographical action plans and (weakly outlined, fragile, just emerging, or undergoing revision and decay) institutional patterns. Yet, both are embedded here in the context of dynamic structural and cultural changes of the time of transformation, creating in effect the impression of a mosaic-like and fortuitous course of life. If we were to examine it with a survey repeated every few years (e.g., carried out as part of the POLPAN Polish Panel Survey), aimed at locating this narrator—who would then be called the respondent—in the hierarchically understood socio-professional or class structure, we would probably get a picture of gradual transformational “social degradation”—from a scholar, philosophy lecturer at the university, through a petty businessman, to a taxi driver.

However, this mosaic, fortuitousness, or even more so the loss of position in the social structure diagnosed from the outside, seem to be secondary aspects of the narrator's biographical experience. When we treat his story as a whole (which does not exclude or invalidate detailed analyses), taking into account its various components, and thus also descriptive, argumentative, theoretical fragments, but also considering its self-presentation, relational and persuasive function (Schulz von Thun 1981), something else emerges in the foreground. This is not the biographical experience, but the autobiographical narrative. Or, more precisely, a consistent way of its construction, which puts the narrator in the center of events, gives insight into his various, mounting and surprising life adventures and events, as well as into the social micro worlds he co-created or just passed along the way. At the same time, it makes it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to move from the story level to the level of experience. The interview, which was successful in my opinion, and the resulting many hours of biographical narrative, which fully meets the structural formal requirements, should, at least potentially, constitute good research material for in-depth sociological analyses, even those based on the rigorous assumptions of the Fritz Schütze's method. However, I get the impression that these analyses do not really give good insight into the narrator's real, historical experience. As a subject and object of historical/social processes, it still remains poorly perceptible. And where it can be captured, it is difficult to see much more than the case of the biography of the transformation period, even if extremely interesting. However, what organizes and binds the whole story is the author's specific attitude, which I call *narrative agency*.

The autobiography does not try to be here, first and foremost, a representation of experience—even in its most narrative parts—but its creative organization and interpretation. Certainly spontaneous, that is, not fully controlled and consciously constructed by the narrator, and certainly not prepared in advance and played for the needs of the interview. And, at the same time, marked by clear literariness—natural, unpretentious, own, although revealing various cultural or literary influences. This literariness is obviously of a spoken and storytelling type.

At the same time, this spontaneous, original narrative organization and interpretation of biographical experiences is so strong that it imposes, in a way backwards, a specific form and meaning.

Here, the narrative order prevails over the biographical order and organizes it to such an extent that the resourcefulness of the hero, who is adventurous, mischievous, and exposes a peculiar eccentricity, can be accepted by the benefit of the doubt or rejected, as, for example, a literary creation or biographical illusion (to recall the known critique of biographical approaches by Pierre Bourdieu). However, it is very difficult to challenge it analytically—by juxtaposing the truth of the narrator's experiences with the lack of truth in his narrative. Or, to put it slightly differently: the depth of his experience with the superficiality or conventionality of his wording. Consciously or not (I suppose not), the narrator does not give us access to this first level. We have nothing to grasp—except maybe for one moment when the memory of his wife's fatal accident stutters his swift tale.

However, this difficult access to our truth and depth of the narrator's biography is not necessarily a problem here. After all, we get not only an engaging and suggestive, but also cognitively intriguing autobiographical tale, which—at least—is a valuable, even if mosaic and flickering, illustration of the social and cultural changes of the transformation period.

Yet, it is also a case of something theoretically and methodologically more important. I am convinced, drawing on many years of experience in conducting and interpreting biographical narrative interviews, that once again I came across a very individualized, authentic, creative way of linguistic organization and interpretation of one's own experiences and observations of the social world by an "ordinary person." I call this way *narrative agency*, which is a working and a bit technical term. Even if it restricts access to real socio-biographical processes—and perhaps even more so—it deserves attention. Both methodological—it is difficult to dogmatically defend the assumptions of the method, as "it does not work" or its application does not contribute much. As well as theoretical—the transition from experience to its narrative representation has not been in biographical sociology, in particular in the classical proposition of Fritz Schütze, worked out once and for all and ready to be used in every case.

For there are such stories about individuals' own lives—as the above one—which, although they seem to fulfill the recently recalled (Waniek 2019), strict criteria of the sociological biographical method at the empirical level, they encourage its theoretical reopening. It is difficult to find a better excuse than the serious problem disclosed here by moving from the narrative "how" to the biographical "what."

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