

R E C E N Z J E , O M Ó W I E N I A

MAŁGORZATA FELIŃSKA
University of Wrocław

“CHILDREN OF WAR” — BIOGRAPHIES OTHER THAN THE USUAL

The subject matter tackled by Jakub Gałęziowski in his latest book *Nieopowiedziane biografie. Polskie dzieci urodzone z powodu wojny* [Untold biographies. Polish children born because of war — CBOW] includes testimonies of people who were conceived during the Second World War.¹ An important aspect, however, is that these children were born from unions between the occupants and local women. The act itself may have been voluntary or forced, and the book refers only to the latter. The book is an important attempt to fill a large research gap that could not be filled for many years, due to communist rule in Poland as well as the women themselves or surrogate families concealing the truth.

Adres do korespondencji: malgorzatafelinska@o2.pl; ORCID: 0000-0001-5260-1439

¹Jakub Gałęziowski, *Nieopowiedziane biografie. Polskie dzieci urodzone z powodu wojny*, Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, Warszawa 2022, 512 pages (cited page numbers are given in the text).

The discourse on the war and its consequences for society, including Polish society, had a huge impact on intergenerational transmission, which is most clearly reflected in the family, education, and rapid nationalism. The biographical experiences of mothers, as well as children conceived due to war, influence the transmission of the past but also their future, often marked by trauma. In addition to the challenges women faced in raising children, the book also touches on abortion in the post-war period.

The book is divided into three main chapters, an afterword and a methodological note. The first chapter — *CBOW. Konteksty, terminologia, dyskursy* [CBOW. Contexts, Terminology, Discourses] — is centered around the unit of analysis, its definition and development, and definitional considerations.

The author delves into the fundamental issues of the definitions adopted, as well as how they function in Polish research. Gałęziowski explains, through reference to biosocial theory, the motives of Soviet soldiers who committed

rape. This context is extremely important considering the personal documents and accounts of the victims. The research material should be analyzed with an awareness of certain motivations behind the soldiers' actions: their desire for revenge, national hatred, sexual abstinence, and sense of deserving some kind of award. The author takes the reader on purpose through both the legal analysis and the actual process of pregnancy itself, being the result of rape. He also devotes a large part of the work to the development of CBOW research, both in Europe and Poland.

In chapter two — *Słoń w salonie. Tabu CBOW w Polsce* [The Taboo of CBOW in Poland] — the author focuses on the causes and consequences of the topic being taboo in Poland, particularly during the communist period. The chaos in wartime Poland was also conducive to the topic being ignored, which could be observed, for example, in the Church, which did not announce its position on the topics of rape or abortion. Gałęziowski points out that the taboo also functioned at a historiographic level, and highlights a period of taboos being broken, a moment of breakthrough and the exposure of this issue through culture — through literature and art.

The third and, for me, most interesting part — *Polskie CBOW* [Polish CBOW] — is divided into 5 sub-themes:

— *Dzieci niemieckich okupantów* [Children of the German occupiers] — in this part, the profile of the “children of the enemy”, i.e. children from relationships between Polish women and the Germans, is introduced. Such women were called traitors or “pigs”. The author recalls the wartime “codes of morality” and the rules that prevailed at the time with regard to male-female relationships between different nationalities. For the public, the drama of the “children of the Wehrmacht” was a mystery. Gałęziowski points out that there is still insufficient research material for identifying biographical patterns.

— *Dzieci żołnierzy Armii Czerwonej* [Children of Red Army soldiers] — an extremely

interesting subsection supplemented by official documents, documents from company archives and excerpts from respondents' testimonies. The author shows not only the drama of the women survivors of rape, their further fortunes, the decisions they made, and the children of “Stalinka” or “Ruska”, but also presents an interesting and controversial situation at the time — of Polish women voluntarily marrying Russians.

— *Dzieci polskich robotnic przymusowych w Trzeciej Rzeszy i dopisek* [The children of Polish female forced labourers in the Third Reich, with an addendum] — this is one of the more extensive parts of the book, and is extremely moving. The researcher points out that less than 20% of Polish children from the camps returned to Poland. The rest remained in the Third Reich. “Plundered children” were given up for adoption, but no one was interested in their real parents (neither the Allies, nor the PRC (*Polish Red Cross*), nor the Polish Military Mission).

— *Dzieci jeńców wojennych* [The children of prisoners of war] — the shortest subsection, but as the author himself points out, this group had rarely been considered before. Relationships between POWs and local women occurred during, but also after the war. Sometimes they were exceptionally short-lived. We do not have accurate statistics on how many children in Poland had a parent who was a forced labourer from another country.

— *Samotne macierzyństwo w powojennej rzeczywistości* [Single motherhood in the post-war reality] — in this section, Gałęziowski shows the drama and problems that single women mothers had to face after the war. It presents accounts in which women described rape, the accounts of their families, and the opinions of priests. The author also cites research on the organisation of mother and childcare in Poland in the post-war period.

The empirical chapter is of particular value because of its rich historical and social context. The selected research material allows one to become acquainted with the problems of

societal life of both collectives and individuals. The author is aware that the subject is vast but also new to academia, and has strived to present it without limiting himself to one nationality.

I consider the triangulation of sources and thorough research work to be a particular strength of the research. Gałęziowski based his work on archival queries, and on recorded accounts from witnesses of history, but also carried out new interviews with now grown-up "children of war" to complete the picture. This is a particular methodological advantage, but also an important addition of new accounts to the subject matter. Although they were conducted many, many years since the end of the Second World War (which was certainly a challenge for the researcher), this is the last moment to explore this issue of this historical period. Gałęziowski's research has focused on the biographical method, memory and the construction of the past in narratives. He is aware of the challenge of the topic itself, but also of approaching the respondents (considering their emotions and ethics), which is extremely important. The research methodology itself is very deliberate, precisely designed, and thought through; his research experience is clearly evident. The author has a broad understanding and concept of the topic, and this can be felt when reading. He himself has conducted many interviews using the oral history method, extremely popular among historians. He has placed the research itself in the interpretative paradigm by referring to Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman. One can see the implications and holistic approach in Gałęziowski's research.

Elements of the world presented here, of social problems that have been hidden for too long by the weight of political systems, are hereby revealed and rescued from oblivion. For the respondents, taboos of the kind described here were extremely difficult to overcome, despite the passage of 33 years since 1989. The author himself emphasises that with this work he wants "above all to bring them [children]

back into history and to empower those [...] erased" (Gałęziowski, p. 303).

The author uses the term CBOW (children born of war). The term itself, and Gałęziowski's approach, leave a certain narrative gap. It is worth emphasising that this term can also be used to describe children conceived among the local population, completely voluntarily, children conceived before the war and born during it, children born in concentration camps, labour camps (from rape or not), and children from ghettos. The concept itself, therefore, is vague and too capacious. Although Gałęziowski, in his analysis, covered only a fragment (though not insignificant) of this reality, a particular set of options, he did not indicate this explicitly in his work, operating instead with this (capacious) term.

A certain objection may be voiced concerning the section on theory, centred above all on terminology. Namely, the language used by the author is hermetic, complex, demanding and difficult for a reader unfamiliar with this verbal nomenclature. This may therefore pose a problem in popularising the subject among the non-academic community. It should be remembered, however, that this is first and foremost a research work, the target of which comprises primarily academics. Nevertheless, the difficult language constitutes a definite obstacle to the non-academic reader. This book may therefore not contribute significantly to breaking the taboo in question among readers in general.

That being said, one should not overlook the author's erudition. What is also important is the fact that Gałęziowski's research deals with a topic that had already been discussed in Europe after World War II, although it was simply not possible to conduct such research reliably in Poland. Already in his introduction, the author refers to the ongoing breaking of taboos related to CBOW around the world. His research also emphasised the diversity of the problem in Europe, with a particular focus on Central and Eastern Europe. This is therefore

a remarkable strength of this book, especially since it was written in Polish.

Regardless of any criticism, the book is an extremely valuable piece of research. Gałęziowski has thoroughly addressed the underlying theoretical problems and has clearly outlined the framework of the issue. This is yet another study that contributes to breaking free of an extremely hurtful and false notion: that the Red Army “liberated” Poland. Any attempt to popularise and understand such

topics provides hope of a kind that such stories will not be repeated, or that we will develop social mechanisms to deal with their consequences. The author rightly added in his introduction that history has come full circle, and acts of violence against Ukrainian women and children are occurring once again. Since 24 February 2022 there have again been rapes resulting in children who are CBOW. The problem is therefore extremely topical.