
A review of Marcin Starnawski's *Socjalizacja i tożsamość żydowska w Polsce powojennej: Narracje emigrantów z pokolenia Marca '68*, Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Dolnośląskiej Szkoły Wyższej 2016

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Abstract: This is a review of Marcin Starnawski's *Socjalizacja i tożsamość żydowska w Polsce powojennej: Narracje emigrantów z pokolenia Marca '68* [Jewish Socialization and Identity in Postwar Poland: Narratives of Émigrés from the March 1968 Generation], Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Dolnośląskiej Szkoły Wyższej 2016.

Keywords: March 1968; identity; Jews

Marcin Starnawski's *Socjalizacja i tożsamość żydowska w Polsce powojennej: Narracje emigrantów z pokolenia Marca '68* [Jewish Socialization and Identity in Postwar Poland: Narratives of Émigrés from the March 1968 Generation] is a sweeping, 418-page-long monograph on one aspect of March 1968 which has thus far eluded exhaustive examination in literature. Poland's difficult postwar history is rife with milestones marked by a specific point in space and time (such as October 1956, March 1968, December 1970, August 1980, or December 1981) as well as processes spread over time, like the experience of the Polish People's Republic (itself heterogeneous, with different characteristics in different periods). In the book, the author attempts to capture these two separate orders by demonstrating that the experience of March 1968 was not just a turning point in the biographies of many an individual (as well as the Polish society as a whole) but also a key element underpinning the extended process of shaping individual and collective identity. The very attempt (although perhaps not entirely successful) to outline the dynamic of events and social realities which, in turn, shaped biographical processes, is already an indisputable advantage of the book. Another important feature of the monograph is its attempt to combine sociological and pedagogical perspectives. The author brandishes equally strong sociological and pedagogical credentials, confirmed by the ease with which he moves within the concepts and bodies of literature produced by both respective fields. His pedagogical inclinations are perhaps most evident in the Conclusion, where, to some extent, he "abandons" the fundamental subject of his deliberations – Jewish identity in postwar Poland and the contexts of March 1968 –

and focuses instead on Polish society, which he believes ought to, firstly, confront these seminal events through collective memory work and, secondly, use this work for future reflection – to shape collective identity and social attitudes, especially with respect to the Other, so as to ensure that events such as March 1968 can never happen again. Events of this kind are, after all, not born of some “external” impulse as much as they are the consequence of cultural codes entrenched in collective memory – along with their representation of the Others, their wellsprings of antipathies, their stereotypes and prejudices – and passed down from generation to generation. The application of a specific *pedagogy* – the author argues, providing examples, perhaps even offering specific directions for its evolution – should not just be a subject of contemplation for those who shape future generations, but should also inspire reflection in all members of society. It’s a very interesting proposition, bearing some resemblance, in my opinion, to the notions of Florian Znaniecki, whose writings on the man of the future drew on the Socratic perspective and proclaimed wisdom and virtue to be the future man’s preeminent characteristics.

But let us circle back to the beginning. The book comprises seven chapters, the Introduction, and the aforementioned Conclusion. In the Introduction, the author lays out the premise of his work and characterizes his research material, which centers around 69 unstructured in-depth interviews (conducted in various countries with March 1968 émigrés), containing some autobiographical interview elements. The author explicitly asserts, however, that autobiographical analysis was not his goal, but rather a means to an end, or a subelement of a more general analysis, which Starnawski wanted to focus primarily on what he terms identity narratives. Offering convincing arguments in favor of the breadth and richness of his research material, the author then informs the reader that his analysis concludes at the moment of his interviewees’ departure from Poland – as the work would quickly grow too expansive if he were to focus on the post-emigration parts of their biographies. Having gone through the whole book, however, I came to the conclusion that the decision to do so had been wrong. Seeing this latter stage of their life through the lens of identity-crafting processes would allow for painting a fuller picture of the entire process, which, as the author himself has repeatedly demonstrated, is, first, the product of many interacting factors and, second, is essentially endless – as identity is ceaselessly retooled and refashioned. Following this logic, we ought to contend that the way we present our past selves is contingent on how we see ourselves in the present. The Introduction and the main thrust of the book may also leave the readers with some doubts about the very notion of “identity narratives.” Admittedly, Marcin Starnawski is indeed very well versed in issues of theory and methodology, and draws here on a diverse, broad body of sources. It is then somewhat surprising, particularly in this context, that we won’t find anything resembling a concise explanation of how the author interprets that rather central concept. Does the term encompass narratives related to the sense of identity that emerge spontaneously in the

course of the interviews? Are these identity narratives triggered by specific questions? Or is the term used as a metaphor, seeing that many, if not most, of the interviewee statements collected in the book come across more as argumentation than narratives? Finally – in the light of the remarks included in the Introduction – it is somewhat disappointing that the passages quoted from the interviews are used primarily to illustrate specific theses and are themselves rarely subject to the author's analysis (despite his assertions that the passages would be used for both purposes).

The first two chapters serve as a theoretical introduction into the book's central issue. Chapter 1 is devoted to interrogations of the question of cultural identity. Drawing on a plethora of theoretical perspectives, the author is left with, in my view at least, an embarrassment of riches, glimpses of which may be caught already in the Introduction. Attempts to reference such a broad range of interpretations of identity and, above all, combine traditions that could be considered antithetical – the Bourdieusian perspective and interpretive sociology, to name but one example – are, first, rather unconvincing, and, second, not corroborated by the analytical portion of the book. This, in turn, produces numerous inconsistencies rooted, I believe, in the attempt to use a variety (if not all) of patterns of describing reality through the lens of identity. To bring up one example – already in the Introduction, as he declares identity to be the book's central theme, the author invokes Zygmunt Bauman and his diagnoses of ambivalent identity in the era of liquid modernity. Then, as an example of such an ambivalence, he cites the tension between the categories of "nation," "ethnic group," and "homeland" (Starnawski, 2016, pp. 16–17) as they apply to the group under scrutiny. Alas, it seems to me that, first, the aforementioned categories all belong, to a much greater degree, to the order of the modern rather than postmodern society, and, second, in this particular instance – the issue of Jewish identity in postwar Poland – this ambivalence stems not from the processes of postmodernity but from the "classical" reference framework for building collective identity. It is indeed unfortunate that, despite drawing on such a broad range of theories, the author failed to include Robert Park and Everett Stonequist's concept of the "marginal man," which would offer a much more exhaustive explanation for the aforementioned ambivalence.

Chapter 2 describes the social, historical, and cultural contexts which the author collectively called the identification field for Polish-Jewish relations from the mid-nineteenth century all the way up to the 1960s. Although an interesting overview of the field, the chapter, given the length of the book (and the aforementioned lack of inquiry into the post-emigration portions of the interviewees' biographies), could have been a bit shorter. After all, the body of literature produced on this particular subject is rather broad, and comprises studies that the author himself cites throughout the chapter.

The analysis of the material proper begins on page 167 (Chapters 3–4). It's a very interesting description, pertaining to several stages/phases of life portrayed in the context of social, historical, and political processes. Marcin Starnawski deftly combines the

micro- and macrosocial perspectives by showing their mutual interactions. Chapter 3 examines the macrosocial factors differentiating the experiences of Starnawski's interviewees according to their parents' social status, their residence – larger urban areas versus townships that could be considered centers of Jewish life in postwar Poland – their attitudes toward Communism and the political reality of the Polish People's Republic, particularly among the generation of their parents. Showing the interviewees from this particular angle allowed Starnawski not only to outline the characteristics of the social framework that shaped their identity but also to reveal the internal diversity of the Jewish community, which is often, and stereotypically, seen from the outside as rather monolithic in nature. The next chapter, entitled "Socialization to 'Polishness' and 'Jewishness' – an Identificatory Diversity," features an interesting typology. The Author identifies "Jewish Jews" [żydowski Żydzi], "Jewish Poles" [Żydzi-Polacy], "invisible Jews" [niewidoczni Żydzi], and what he calls the "no man's land." What I fail to see, however, is why assimilation, defined herein as the process of "striking root into Polish culture," should be the framework underpinning these identities. In my view, the category of rootedness much better suits the generation of (some of) the interviewees' parents, as the interviewees themselves were fully competent in "Polishness," speaking in socio-cultural terms, regardless of the degree of their identification with their Jewishness. In short, for reasons associated with the processes taking place within the Jewish community (especially among Jews who decided against leaving Poland immediately after the war), as well as processes pertaining to the Polish society in general – related, in part, to the ideological intention of ensuring its monoethnicity and, in part, with the ideological (although not exactly implemented in practice) egalitarianism – the interviewees and their generation didn't have to assimilate due to their full cultural competencies. My doubts are confirmed by Chapter 5, where the author characterizes "Jewish identity resources" and examines not just the diverse sources feeding the construction of this identity, but also a sort of "labor" put into its cultivation, construction, and even reconstruction against the dominant Polish socio-cultural frame.

The two final chapters touch directly upon the events of March 1968 and the experience thereof. In his attempts to reconstruct this particular stage of his interviewees' biographies, Marcin Starnawski takes into account the macrosocial factors – including the political situation on the one hand and the emergence of antisemitic attitudes on the other – as well as those operating on the microsocial level, referring to the interviewees' individual experiences along with the collective experience of fate, the transmission of familial narratives, and the construction of parallels between the experience of the past and the present in a situation defined as one of danger.

As I already mentioned above, the author decided against including in his book those portions of the interviews that dealt with post-emigration and contemporary parts of his subjects' lives – a choice which I consider deeply regrettable. As it stands now, their stories are cut off by their departure from the country. Naturally, this could

be seen as the author's deliberate attempt to further emphasize the biographical and social impact of the events of March 1968, and thus to force the reader to ponder their consequences, particularly in light of the fact – which I already brought up earlier – that in his Conclusion, Starnawski turns to contemporary Polish society without explicitly referring to his interviewees. On the other hand, this cutting off can be considered an amputation of a portion of history and an act that, at least to some extent, strips the author's interlocutors of their own voice; in the analytical dimension, meanwhile, it precludes the examination of how/whether the contemporary perspective, marked by migration and the specific experiences it entailed (e.g., the need to assimilate into a different culture), influenced the construction of narratives exploring those portions of their biographies, including what the author calls identity narratives. Especially in light of the fact that the book itself declares a number of times to embrace the constructivist approach to identity. Finally – and the remark might flow from the biographical approach I myself practice – it is my duty to emphasize that the selection of these few admittedly highly significant, fundamentally important points in people's biographies (examined in the course of individual chapters) does not do enough to exhaustively flesh out the processual character of the phenomena in question. A much better picture of these biographical and social dynamics is painted in Joanna Wiszniewicz's *Życie przecięte* [A Life Cut in Two], which the author brings up as one of the most important works on the subject (while failing to include it in the bibliography), but then essentially ignores in the analytical section of the book.

In sum, despite a measure of criticism, despite the fact that the book can be, at times, hard to read due to the sheer density of the content and a language that tends to get overly convoluted, I find this study immensely interesting and deeply illuminating. I'd highly recommend it to sociologists, teachers, historians – and not just those professionally interested in the contemporary history of Polish society, but also those with a poorer command of the history of the Jewish community in the People's Republic of Poland, particularly the March 1968 period (meaning, arguably, most of us). In such a context, drawing on the interview passages to give the émigrés back their voice and showcasing the bevy of diverse methods used by them to shape their identities both stand as a grand achievement.

Translated by Jan Szelągiewicz

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Recenzja książki Marcina Starnawskiego, *Socjalizacja i tożsamość żydowska w Polsce powojennej. Narracje emigrantów z pokolenia Marca '68*. Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Dolnośląskiej Szkoły Wyższej 2016

Abstrakt: Artykuł jest recenzją książki Marcina Starnawskiego pt. *Socjalizacja i tożsamość żydowska w Polsce powojennej. Narracje emigrantów z pokolenia Marca '68*. Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Dolnośląskiej Szkoły Wyższej 2016.

Wyrażenia kluczowe: Marzec '68; tożsamość; Żydzi



Article No. 1759

DOI: 10.11649/slh.1759

Citation: Kaźmierska, K. (2019). A review of Marcin Starnawski's *Socjalizacja i tożsamość żydowska w Polsce powojennej: Narracje emigrantów z pokolenia Marca '68*, Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Dolnośląskiej Szkoły Wyższej 2016. *Studia Litteraria et Historica*, 2019(8). <https://doi.org/10.11649/1759>

This is a translation of the original article entitled *Recenzja książki Marcina Starnawskiego Socjalizacja i tożsamość żydowska w Polsce powojennej: Narracje emigrantów z pokolenia Marca '68. Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Dolnośląskiej Szkoły Wyższej 2016*, which was published in *Studia Litteraria et Historica*, 2019(8).

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The preparation of this work was self-financed by the author.

Competing interests: The author has declared she has no competing interests.