

Tomasz Basiuk

Interviews as Life Writing? A Literary Scholar's Field Notes on Reciprocal Witnessing in an Oral History Project

Abstract: This paper describes my experience interviewing queer individuals in Poland as part of the “Cruising the Seventies: Unearthing Pre-HIV/AIDS Queer Sexual Cultures (CRUSEV)” project. My practice was influenced by my earlier work on gay men’s life writing, as I searched for narrative patterns and ways in which they were interrupted, paying close attention to experiences of shame and to what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls queer performativity. I propose that a relationship of reciprocal witnessing between the interviewer and the interviewed plays a role in interviews conducted with queer participants.

Keywords: homosexuality, oral history, performativity, queer, reciprocal witnessing, sexology, shame, state-socialist Poland, testimony, transgender (transsexual)

Introduction

My experience with oral history interviews stems from my involvement as a PI in a HERA-funded project “Cruising the Seventies: Unearthing Pre-HIV/AIDS Queer Sexual Cultures (CRUSEV),” which brought together research teams from the UK, Spain, Germany, and Poland.¹ Not only did the queer 1970s have a different run in each of the four countries but their queer pasts have been researched to an unequal degree. In Poland, LGBTQ historiographies typically began in the 1980s (see Fiedotow 258), with some scholars noting that grassroot organizing intensified as a response to a state police operation dubbed Hyacinth, which first occurred in November 1985, and then exploded after the transition of 1989. Scholars working on earlier periods usually focused on specific historical figures without offering a contextual narrative about Poland’s queer past. The 1970s remains a promising period to examine in this respect because it is a little-explored decade marked by political thaw and relative prosperity, which offered novel

¹ “Cruising the 1970s: Unearthing Pre-HIV/AIDS Queer Sexual Cultures (CRUSEV)” was financially supported by the HERA Joint Research Programme *3 Uses of the Past* and the European Commission through Horizon 2020 under grant agreement No 649307. The project began in 2016 and ended in 2019.

opportunities for the exchange of people, ideas, and goods both within the Soviet bloc and across the iron curtain. It is also recent enough to identify individuals who could be interviewed about their queer experience as young adults then.

My co-investigators and I assumed from the start that oral history interviews would be an important component of our research, in part due to the relative scarcity of available archival sources. The Polish research team included a cultural anthropologist, two literary scholars, a literary translator, an artist, an art historian, and three doctoral candidates, one in history, two in cultural studies.² All of us conducted archival research, examining personal ads, state police training manuals, court documents, letters sent to sexologists who wrote sex advice columns, literary criticism, documentation of art exhibitions, a samizdat gay bulletin and letters sent to its editor's address in Vienna, and various private archives. However, many of these sources were ephemeral, incomplete, and difficult to reach. For example, letters sent to magazines which had folded years ago may have been destroyed or have ended up in the possession of individuals who did not always consent to share them, while court files were difficult to locate because they have never been catalogued to enable a search for "homosexuality," which is not a category under Polish criminal law. (The absence of penalization did not preclude social ostracism.) We therefore understood that our archival research needed to be supplemented by interviews, which helped us locate additional sources and better understand the documents we were reading. For example, team members interviewed sexologists who wrote for the popular press, as well as men who had been targeted by the police for their same-sex activities. The interviews provided a fuller grasp of how the 1970s were experienced by queer subjects, allowing us to develop at least a fragmentary account of this decade. On a pragmatic level, the chances to speak to people who had witnessed the queer 1970s were diminishing. Indeed, a man of eighty died within a year of being interviewed for the project. Conversely, we interviewed a former activist whom others mistakenly thought had passed away (Zabłocki).³

The interviews helped us understand that queer culture in state-socialist Poland survived the introduction of a Soviet-backed regime and that it endured from the interwar years, albeit in subdued forms. Queer men in big cities socialized in cruising spots and habitual places like bars and saunas, none of which were

² My co-investigators were Jędrzej Burszta, Agnieszka Kościańska, Karolina Morawska, Karol Radziszewski, Magdalena Staroszczyk, Wojciech Szymański, Błażej Warkocki, and Krzysztof Zabłocki.

³ Two edited volumes are issued forth to-date from the Polish research team (Kościańska et al.; Basiuk and Burszta) and a third is forthcoming. Additional papers by individual researchers were published in collected volumes and in journals.

exclusively gay under state socialism. Informal gatherings took place in private apartments, hosted not just by homosexual men but by heterosexual women too, for example, a well-known opera singer.⁴ Moreover, the 1970s saw a continuation of intellectual, academic, and artistic cultural transfers that the Soviet-backed regime had been cautiously curating, including in the scope of sexology. This moderate permissiveness allowed echoes of the sexual revolution in the West to reverberate, however faintly, in the Polish media, including in popular sex advice columns.⁵ According to some of our interview partners, in the 1970s people began to speak more openly about homosexuality, gradually lifting this social taboo. The change in discursive norms, though subtle, meant that queer people were more likely to discuss their sexuality among themselves outside romantic or sexual relationships, even if covertly. And as queer social life flourished in semi-public and private settings, so did the rise of informal, non-anonymous networks of queer people and their acquaintances, providing a safe space for these early debates. These networks set the ground for the political activism of the subsequent 1980s, for example, by facilitating the distribution of gay samizdat publications. In this way, the 1970s stand out as “proto-gay” (Szcześniak) or “proto-political” (Basiuk, “Od niepisanej umowy” 37–40). While these developments are limited to urban centers and therefore do not reflect a universal queer experience, they could not have been traced at all had we not spoken to individuals who had witnessed this unfolding social history; as Thomson aptly puts it, oral history has enabled us to practice “history from below” (52).⁶

Some Parameters of the Oral History Component of the Project

The methodological bias inherent in our choice of interlocutors must be acknowledged. As is true of qualitative research in general, our respondents were a voluntary, self-selected cohort. We reached out to individuals whom we had met through a senior LGBTQ support group and to others we knew professionally or

⁴ See Burszta “Three Circles” for a discussion of locations in which urban gay men socialized in state-socialist Poland.

⁵ For a discussion of the role played by a sexologist who wrote a sex advice column see Kościańska, “Treatment.”

⁶ Thomson also discusses “bearing witness” (59) and “shared authority” (67) in the context of oral history projects conceived as ethico-political. Similar considerations inform my present argument although the CRUSEV study was research-based rather than aimed at community building.

personally. All members of the seniors' LGBTQ group agreed to our interviews and some recommended additional interview partners, but we were also turned down by others we approached. Moreover, our efforts to diversify the cohort rarely panned out. The more widely—and publicly—we spread word about our study, the fewer people responded. A radio program in which my colleague and I described the project and provided contact information yielded no observable result. Meanwhile, the snowball method of seeking out interview partners led to an urban-centric bias. A female colleague who attempted to break this pattern by publicizing her call for interview partners on a gay social media site secured a single interview. In the end, most people we spoke to came from Warsaw and Poznań, some from Kraków and Gdańsk. Most were middle class. We did not interview anyone living rurally. This geographic distribution may suggest that discourses of queerness feature urban space as a privileged site of queer self-making, and that these discourses are largely shaped in cities.

While we did not count the reasons why potential interview partners turned us down, a pattern correlating with their gender seemed to emerge. Some women declined because they believed that they had nothing to say about lesbian life in the 1970s. Others became aware of their desires only much later, while others still had a single isolated same-sex affair in their youth and had not met other lesbians at the time. Interview partners uniformly affirmed that lesbian social life and self-organizing only began at the cusp of the 1980s and 1990s. Men declined to be interviewed because they felt this would impinge on their privacy. A few expressed their disapproval, suspecting we would manipulate their biographies to accommodate and affirm a contemporary gay identity. Some disapproved of what they saw as the study's leftist bias, reflecting Poland's intense political polarization under the right-wing regime in power from 2015 till 2023.

The ratio of men to women among the total of almost fifty interviews was about 5:1.⁷ The disproportion no doubt reflected a differential visibility between lesbians and gay men. Two of the interviewed women were transgender while all the men were cis-gendered. When looking for interview partners we were confronted with a terminological dilemma. The word "queer" in the title of our project was sometimes unfamiliar to the older age group we were trying to reach, as was its Polish translation (*odmieniec*). The abbreviations LGBT and LGBTQ were occasionally unfamiliar as well, though they were known to seniors in the support group to whom we reached out. The word "gay" (*gej*), which in Polish refers only to gay men, was acceptable to some men but not all; however, many men responded to the designation "homosexual" without finding it problematic or

7 In the age bracket of fifty years and more, our cohort had a similar gender ratio to other similar studies (see Mizielińska et al. 35).

offensive. The derogatory term *pedal* (derived from *pédé*) for a male homosexual was almost never used by our interlocutors. Some male interview partners recalled using feminine names and pronouns to refer to themselves and other male homosexuals in the 1970s, but others opposed this camp usage. The linguistic situation was even more complicated for women, some of whom deemed the word “lesbian” (*lesbijka*) pejorative. Additionally, women identifying as lesbian today did not necessarily identify as lesbians in the 1970s. The women we interviewed did not commonly describe themselves as homosexual, either. More descriptive solutions, such as “women loving women” (*kobiety kochające kobiety*) seem to have been confusing or, in any case, did not yield new interview partners. These terminological issues compounded the difficulty of seeking interlocutors other than through the snowball method. The words bisexuality and polyamory almost never came up, but bisexual behavior and polyamorous arrangements were mentioned in some accounts. While our analysis does not support a statistically meaningful conclusion in this regard, it seems worth noting that a permanent arrangement between a married heterosexual couple and the husband’s male sexual partner was described by a working-class man (the husband).

Prior to the project, four people in our team of nine had published extensively or created art based on interviews. Some others had previously interviewed people on specialized subjects, but not about their personal lives. At a preliminary stage of the project, we discussed the methodology and ethics of conducting oral history interviews with a professional historian specialized in oral history. We also obtained access to a collection of oral history interviews with queer subjects which had recently been created as part of a different project and which served as a practical reference for us. We met regularly as a group to discuss the interviews, compare notes, and draw plans. Some of our meetings were open events in which we summarized our findings and answered questions from the public, which included activists and other queer community members, faculty and graduate students in history, literature, cultural studies, and other fields.

The Relationship between Interview Partners (Reciprocal Witnessing)

The oral history interviews were loosely structured in the sense that the interview partner was not required to answer all questions and could decide where the conversation should go. We typically began by asking for a brief outline of the interlocutor’s life, including what they remembered about the 1970s. Some interlocutors responded well to this open-ended invitation while others asked for

additional questions to guide them. Some asked questions about our project and, in a few cases, about ourselves. For example, Renata*, a middle-aged woman whom I was interviewing, recounted a period in her life when she was deeply religious.⁸ At one point, she queried me about whether I was a believer and wanted to know when and why I lapsed. I understood this as a request for reciprocity, motivated by her wish to have her experience acknowledged by someone who could relate to her story on a personal level. She was seeking recognition, or more precisely a gesture of reciprocal witnessing, through which I could reassure her that I was hearing her without judging her or disapproving of her choices. She expected me to confirm this by sharing a relevant bit of my life story.

The term “interview partner” (alongside “interlocutor”) follows one of the established terminological conventions in oral history. The convention is intended to reflect a reciprocal relationship between the interview partners that is necessary for some experiences to be communicable. It bears noting that certain memories were difficult for my interview partners to bring up because they invoked shame or embarrassment when recalled and narrated, especially if the shared narrative failed to conform to the interlocutors’ contemporary sense of themselves and to the norms they had come to embrace as members of the LGBTQ community. These interlocutors were initially uncertain about my anticipated response as a scholar and queer community member, often presuming me to be a progressive activist.⁹ Before they would open up, these interview partners required assurance that their stories would not be misunderstood or met with condemnation. Such assurance would likely be ineffective if given in a perfunctory manner by someone who, in their view, failed to understand the moral complexity of their choices and the differences between past and present contexts. (To illustrate, Renata* chose to speak to a man in her age bracket instead of a younger woman.) Sharing some of my own story sometimes eased those concerns.

The expectation of reciprocity, sometimes articulated and other times left unspoken, thus occasionally required me to share my experience to establish my own credentials as someone capable of bearing witness to the testimony the interview partner was offering. I use the terms “testimony” and “witnessing” to emphasize the moral dimension of the personal accounts shared but also to

⁸ The name of this anonymous interview partner has been changed, as have the other names. The asterisk next to a name indicates a pseudonym.

⁹ I did not present as an LGBTQ activist in the formal sense of being affiliated with a particular group or organization, although the very nature of the research project was sometimes taken to mean that the researchers were themselves activists also when no such claim was made by myself or others. A member of our research group was an activist in the formal sense, a circumstance which greatly facilitated contacts with the aforementioned senior support group and which led to a number of interviews.

underscore the speaker's sole authority about their own intimate experiences. Reciprocal witnessing does not mean that my personal account received equal weight or took as much time as my interview partner's account. On the contrary, I kept my self-exposure to a minimum, rhetorically speaking. My objective was to reassure my interview partners that I was listening to their accounts with empathy.

Hearing My Interview Partners

As a literature scholar, I listened to my interview partners with an ear for the narrative patterns they were using but also for ways in which they broke with those patterns. While working on a previous project (Basiuk, *Exposures*), I have come to think of life writing as *prosopopoeia*, that is, as the fiction of voice, as Paul de Man famously defined autobiography, but also as motivated by the need to include the events from one's life which might not comfortably fit one's adopted narrative model, but which demand to be included. I saw this paradoxical way of narrating as linked to performativity and to what I call the demand for reciprocal witnessing.¹⁰

When we were applying to have the project funded, I gave a seminar about queer life writing. At that occasion, I suggested that coming-out narratives are premised on the notion that in coming out of the homosexual closet one leaves behind one's shame about being queer. However, I added, even the most emblematic of such narratives often communicate feelings and memories of shame which persist after one's coming out. I was contending that life writing does more than one thing at a time, things that may seem mutually contradictory. Someone asked if any of the writers I was discussing eschewed the coming-out narrative as an inadequate response to the lived experience of being queer. My answer was a qualified no. A narrative framing such as that of a coming-out story dictates in part what is expressed and what is left out, but that is not the whole picture because life writing is often haunted by the persistence in memory of some event, perhaps especially if that event defies the narrator's understanding of it or fails

¹⁰ Shoshana Felman cites a student describing a literary text which she has asked her class to read as testimony and to which they were to respond with their own testimony as "the site of my own stammering" (56), thus underscoring the importance of discontinuity and interruption for testimony and witnessing.

to fit into the narrative framing.¹¹ In the context of queerness, such a past event or the memory of it may threaten to shame the narrator. The decision to confront rather than avoid such an event, to give testimony in this regard, or to become *interested* in it, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick puts it in a famous essay on queer performativity, has the potential to disrupt the narrative framing. Moreover, the contagiousness of shame (Sedgwick 36) makes it likely that such a gesture will provoke the reader's empathy. It thus has a doubly performative function: on the one hand, it reconfigures the narrative framing and, on the other, it draws the reader into what I call reciprocal witnessing because the reader's own shame is interpellated by the narrator's display of their past, present, or potential shame.

I was attuned to moments when my interview partners recounted an event from their past in which they addressed, and in some cases failed to address, their shame about being queer. Furthermore, I focus on the related difficulty of communicating life decisions which had been taken in epistemological and discursive contexts different from the present ones, a discrepancy likely to produce a sense of shame in the present. Writing about the hermeneutics implicit in these interviews, I call on the notions of testimony and witnessing, which I see as connected to queer performativity. I also offer comments about why some interviews seemed to work better than others. Reciprocal witnessing was not a feature of all the interviews I discuss here, and it addresses some, but not all difficulties which arose in the interview process.

The Trap of the Rote Account and of the Dissipated Raconteur

Most interviews I conducted were one-on-one; for some, I was joined by a colleague. In retrospect, I found that the presence of more than one interviewer sometimes impeded the interview partner from speaking more personally than they might have otherwise. Except for interviews with professionals, such as sexologists, my colleagues and I expected to hear something about our interlocutors' emotions and their intimate lives; this expectation was occasionally ignored. We also prompted our interview partners beyond generalized, rote accounts, but some would not probe so far. Finally, we tried to place our interlocutors' personal experience in a historical context, which meant in part that we paid attention to

11 The narrator's betrayal of his teacher, which in effect is also a self-betrayal, at the end of Edmund White's *A Boy's Own Story* is a well-known example. This closing anecdote threatens to undo the novel's affirmation of its narrator's self-liberating sexual exploration.

the chronology of events and sometimes asked for clarification of factual points. Our efforts to obtain such precise information were sometimes frustrated. In what follows, I underscore difficulties posed by some of the interviews as well as instances in which the communication felt seamless, for example when an interview partner and I agreed on the significance of reciprocal witnessing.

One of the most rote accounts was offered by Anna*, a middle-aged trans* activist who shared her life story in a manner which seemed to follow a coming-out paradigm. Anna* described her teenage forays into cross-dressing in the 1970s, her early attempts to pass, her failed marriage to a woman, offered as the low point of her life, and her post-1989 transition, offered as narrative resolution. Her account was generic, as though it had come from an activist pamphlet.¹²

Another interview partner was Tadeusz*, a gay man of eighty with a long and successful career as a drag queen, a hobby he had pursued while working as a clerk at the offices of an older homosexual lawyer who seemed to provide patronage and functioned as a queer role model. Retired for years, Tadeusz* has continued to perform drag and had appeared in a photo story in a magazine shortly before we sat down for our talk. He had already given other interviews about his life and, unsurprisingly but disappointingly, his account was almost exactly the one that he had given on other occasions. While I did not expect to hear a completely different story, I had hoped for details that were previously unpublished. His account was filled with humor and offered information about how queer men used to socialize, but these details were not new. Like Anna*, Tadeusz* emphasized the positive aspects of his experience and spent less time on obstacles that may have required substantial effort to overcome, elements which might have introduced additional complexity to his colorful life story.¹³

Andrzej* was an interview partner in his late seventies who wrote a gay novel published in the late 2000s, which he dismissed as an artistic failure. He spoke to us as though he were being interviewed for a literary magazine, name-dropping writers and publishers to spice up his account with literary gossip. This account of his professional self seemed almost a protective shield, diverting attention away from personal parts of his life. This was disappointing because he had been one of the few literary figures to have come out as a gay man in his

¹² We did not interview anyone who transitioned prior to 1989. See Dębińska for an illuminating discussion of transitioning in state-socialist Poland.

¹³ The narrative included a dramatic anecdote from the man's wartime childhood that was unrelated to his queer self. I think of that anecdote both as the manifestation of a persisting memory demanding to be expressed and as a detail anchoring his story in something other than his queerness, perhaps to win sympathy from his audience.

advanced years. I asked about this experience and was told that his coming out was overwhelmingly positive, as various editors and publishers he was working with showed their support. However, he would not dwell on his experience of the many years he had stayed in the closet. We spoke briefly about the relief of overcoming the shame over being queer, but he did not expand beyond acknowledging his familiarity with such shameful feelings. His reticence in the interview seemed to reiterate his approach in the novel, which tells the story of a summer love between two young men of different nationalities, and which reads like a fantasy. Neither the novel nor its author's accounts of queerness transcended a straightforward articulation of same-sex attraction. Andrzej*'s reserve might be explained by the historical and discursive context of his formative years. He was well into adulthood by the time the taboos of homosexuality began to lift. Among my interlocutors, men who were a decade or two younger and who grew up among seemingly lighter taboos spoke more freely about their past. Those born in the 1930s and early 1940s, like Andrzej*, had come of age in a world in which same-sex encounters often took place in furtive silence (Basiuk, "Od niepisanej umowy" 37–40).

These accounts were similar in their close adherence to a storyline formed prior to the interview. A certain reluctance to address motivations and emotions was an aspect of all three, apparently stemming from the wish to maintain a demarcation between the subjects' public personae (trans* activist, drag queen, openly gay writer) and their private selves. Although all three interview partners had called this demarcation into question when they publicly professed their queer subjectivity—and thus declared that the personal was political—a determined emphasis on their public personae seemed to obscure their individual selves.

The neat organization of these three accounts stood in sharp contrast to an interview with Jurek*, a man who was describing the events of his life out of chronological order and whose memory did not always seem trustworthy because his account seemed inconsistent and occasionally jarred with information obtained from other sources. For example, Jurek* described his two long stays in the USSR, where he was friends with local gay activists, but it was difficult to understand when these events took place, which complicated our team's understanding of the temporal relationships between Soviet and Polish gay rights activism. At another moment this interview partner referred to the contact he maintained with an important Polish activist after this man defected to the West in the second half of the 1980s. Jurek* seemed to have information about this man which no one else possessed but when I probed for more, he simply pivoted the conversation. (He seemed to realize he had made a mistake.) In the end, I was left with a tangled sense of Jurek*'s account. The interview exemplified the issue of factual

credibility in personal testimony. My interview partner was deemed to be credible when he was recounting his personal experience, for example, when he explained how participating in the youth movement enabled him to travel outside his small town to make friends and meet prospective lovers, or when he described broadly the views of his gay activist friends in Soviet Ukraine. But our uncertainty about the specific details he shared left us with open questions about developments of significant interest, including his passing assertion that women took part in the fledgling gay rights movement in Warsaw in the late 1980s. Their alleged participation may have been one of the very first such occurrences, and so to learn more about these lesbian activists and their identities would be indispensable to an authentic understanding of social queer development in Poland.

Understanding Historical Differences—The Marriage Compulsion

Establishing the boundaries of factual detail is a challenge. Another challenge is appreciating the difference made by the sweeping historical change which has occurred since the 1970s. For example, coming out of the closet was neither common nor was the phrase itself common verbiage prior to the late 1960s (Delany 24–25). This was also true of Poland in the 1970s, where a sexual revolution had not yet taken place: the politically tumultuous year of 1968 was marked by student protests and the government's brutal response to them, as well as anti-Israeli and anti-Semitic rhetoric, but none of the countercultural phenomena of that time provoked a mainstream debate about sexual mores (Garsztecki 184). Distant echoes of developments in the West concerning sexual minorities received coverage in the Polish press, including in a popular sex advice column written by the sexologist Zbigniew Lew-Starowicz (Kościańska, "Treatment" 74 ff.), but their impact was limited and gradual. Several interview partners claimed that their parents were aware of their same-sex liaisons but that they were never discussed. As a colleague in the CRUSEV project has noted, without a popular concept of coming out and given that the very term homosexuality was taboo, telling your parents you were queer was both inappropriate and unthinkable (Burszta, "Do czego się" 14–15, 18). By contrast, the contemporary context of greater social and rhetorical openness in which our interview partners were describing their intimate lives differed significantly from the past which they were recalling, as they were reaching back across four or five decades.

Some very intriguing interviews resulted from partners searching for ways in which to express the epistemological and discursive differences between the

1970s and the present. Several brought up the relatively common experience of marrying a person of the opposite sex while harboring same-sex desires. Interview partners whose life trajectory included a short-lived marriage were able to dismiss it as relatively unimportant chapters in their lives. (This strategy was used by Anna*.) But those who spent many years in a marriage found it difficult to gloss over it. They contended that their marrying was dictated by the very strong familial and societal expectation that one should marry at an early age. Such imperative expectation may be difficult to fathom in today's context, where casual romantic and sexual relationships are more common. Additionally, today there is a more readily available language to speak about queer life. This language emphasizes the courage needed to make what are deemed morally right choices but pays less attention to the dilemmas that provide the context for what are deemed morally wrong ones. In the contemporary discursive framing, marrying someone of the opposite gender while harboring same-sex desires may easily be dismissed as conformist surrender to social shaming.

Two interlocutors, Renata* and Jan*, both in their sixties, struggled to voice their experience under this framing but were determined to encapsulate it with words. Both had divorced a number of years ago to pursue same-sex relationships but each regarded marriage as an important part of their life. Both remained married for about twenty years. Jan* had been an only child. His dominating father was a professionally and socially successful man who wrote police dramas for state television in addition to having a career as a public servant. His mother was the more self-effacing parent. Jan* partly escaped their supervision by going to college in another city. He recalled his acute awareness of his same-sex attraction when he would observe students from East Germany taking showers and walking in the nude. He also befriended a female classmate, whom he initially disliked but later married before graduation, aware that his parents expected him to. Although Jan's* parents occasionally entertained friends who were suspected or known to be homosexual, he was too afraid to broach his same-sex desires with them.

Jan*'s decision to marry reveals the intensity of pressure from the family of origin. In his eyes, his father's openness to homosexual friends did not extend to him. His father's perfunctory comments about homosexuals reflected the widespread homophobia of the day, which resembled indifference to the fate of queers more than it did explicit hatred. Jan* surmised that his father would reject his homosexuality had he learned of it. While his father's intentions remained untested, they dictated Jan*'s fate for a number of years. His unwillingness to risk separation from his family of origin was reinforced by very practical considerations. Jan*'s well-to-do parents would help him in practical and financial ways if he started his own family. Such an offer was not unusual; it did not necessarily

indicate suspicion about the young man's sexual preference. When Jan* married his college girlfriend, his parents fulfilled their promise by finding him an apartment that a friend of theirs was vacating while away on a diplomatic mission. They subsequently helped the young couple settle in Warsaw and leveraged their connections to help their son find a job.

These practical benefits loomed large in state socialism. Finding an apartment in a big city was a challenge and it was doubly difficult in Warsaw, where there was a severe housing shortage which the authorities mitigated by discouraging newcomers. A career in foreign trade allowed Jan* to travel abroad, bringing in significant additional income because of the difference between official and black-market currency rates. Most families would not have been able to provide their children with comparable advantages, but many people in state socialism routinely depended on personal connections for commodities and necessities. The unofficial circulation of goods, services, and benefits strengthened the dependence on one's relatives in a way which may be difficult to fathom in today's environment, which is premised more apparently on money than on the socialist "economics of shortage."¹⁴

These pragmatic considerations are only part of the story. So is the social taboo of homosexuality, reinforced by a conservative family model to which being married and raising children were central. Many who harbored same-sex desires could not imagine a life trajectory that did not include these elements. My interview partner was not being simply opportunistic when he married his girlfriend, but rather was unable to live his life as a gay man because the social context of the 1970s did not leave room for this choice except in few and narrow social niches, and only to the most determined individuals. Remaining single and being queer were not in the repertoire of reputable biographical possibilities.

This last point is illustrated by the interview with Renata*, who met her future husband in group therapy, which she joined after ending an affair with a female schoolmate triggered a mental breakdown. Renata* and her girlfriend saw their love as aberrant and chose different colleges to intentionally separate themselves. At the time, it did not occur to Renata* that she could cultivate a romantic relationship with another woman. Like other interview partners who had been

¹⁴ The term was coined by János Kornai. In the real socialist economy, characterized by commodity shortages, scarce goods assumed some of the functions of currency, that is, they became exchangeable for other scarce goods. Access to these goods was more advantageous than having money because money on its own did not guarantee that one could purchase these commodities. My point is that this kind of economic environment deepened one's dependence on familial and other informal networks, since they often provided the coveted access. By contrast, John D'Emilio shows that market capitalism has enabled the emergence of gay identity because life's necessities could be obtained from the marketplace rather than from one's kinship group.

married, she described her inability at the time to imagine an openly queer life. The circumstances in which she met her future husband meant that he knew about her past same-sex partner. However, as lesbianism was barely discussed at the time—in contrast to the more vilified male homosexuality—the events from her past did not present an obstacle to the couple's eventual marriage. She was relieved that her past affair would not surface unexpectedly because her husband already knew about it.

Renata*'s married life seemed happy to the outsider—she and her husband raised two sons and she had been looked after—but the marriage felt suffocating. In her words, she was not living her own life. Two decades into the marriage, after her children had grown, she had a one-night stand with another married woman which resparked her same-sex desires and eventually unraveled in a divorce. After a series of affairs with women she was meeting at one of the newly opened gay-and-lesbian bars, she settled into a relationship with a younger partner. She has remained on friendly terms with her former husband, who has not remarried, and her sons are aware of her lover but refuse to discuss her homosexuality.

Jan*'s marriage ran a similar course. He and his wife raised an adopted son, even as he remained attracted to men. When the son had grown up, Jan* began to visit cruising spots only to watch other men have sex, until a later trip to France, when he had sex with a man at a cruising spot. Back in Poland, he struck up an affair with a man. His wife found out about the affair, then divorced him. To this day, she has not forgiven Jan* for what she considers his betrayal and for having misled her about his sexuality during their marriage. Once divorced, Jan* volunteered his translation services to a new gay magazine and eventually met his present partner.

The changes in the lives of these two interview partners as they moved from their stifling twenty year-long marriages coincided with a rapid growth in LGBTQ visibility in Poland in the early 1990s and were enabled by this social and discursive transformation. By then, Renata* could meet other women in a new bar for lesbians and gay men, the kind of institution that simply had not existed earlier. Jan* became enthused that a Polish gay magazine was now sold at newspaper stands; he had known such magazines from his travels abroad, but until then not at home. (Previously, there had been Polish gay samizdat pamphlets with limited circulation.) Jan* deemed the new magazine important and volunteered for it as translator. This involvement was his symbolic entry into the newfound gay community, the likes of which had not existed at the time of his marriage.

Gay and lesbian bars, magazines addressed to LGBTQ readers, widespread grassroot organizing, and representations of queerness in popular culture—all of them consequences of a regime change—reconfigured social understandings of same-sex desire not only for the straight majority but also for queer individuals

themselves. Renata* and Jan* strove to elucidate the change which had occurred in society and in themselves, risking the possibility that narrating the story of their marriages would expose them to accusations of hypocrisy, internalized homophobia, and opportunistic self-delusion. In listening to their accounts, I had the sense that they were walking through an experience which not only had been painful in the first place but threatened to dishonor them if interpreted without regard to historical context. They seemed aware of this risk, for example, Renata* specifically asked to speak to a middle-aged researcher rather than to a younger female graduate student because she was concerned that a young person might not understand what she wished to say.

Understanding Historical Differences—Lesbian Invisibility, Gender Bias, Seduction Theory

By contrast, some interlocutors unselfconsciously voiced assumptions about homosexuality and gender which seemed holdovers from a bygone era. Stefan* described parties at private apartments in the 1970s, when he was in his twenties and thirties, and where he and his partner met other homosexual men. These parties were hosted by queer men as well as by women, including Maria Foltyn, a famous opera singer and director. When I asked him about the possible presence of lesbians at such gatherings, he seemed surprised by the question. He could not recall any lesbians being present but perhaps more significantly, the question had not occurred to him. His surprise may tell us that the subversion of lesbian subjectivity in 1970s Poland persists, to some degree, today. The point is reiterated with Renata*'s youthful assumption that (other) lesbians did not exist and with her sons' contemporary refusal to acknowledge her gayness.¹⁵

Stefan* expressed his disapproval of effeminate men and of cross-dressing men as politically damaging, in addition to finding such behavior personally distasteful. The same sentiment was reiterated by two other men in separate interviews. This was surprising in the sense that all three were authors who have contributed to gay rights activism in various ways, but unsurprising in the sense that these men were echoing the gay movement's earlier, exclusionary position on drag queens and male effeminacy.

Roman*, another male interview partner, made a surprising claim when he attributed his same-sex preference to having been repeatedly fondled as a young boy by an older brother with whom he was sleeping in one bed. As a teenager,

15 For a discussion of lesbian unintelligibility see Staroszczyk.

Roman* hoped to meet a girl at a carnival but ran into two men in a restroom, perhaps a cruising spot, who struck up a conversation with him and whom he told he was hoping to pick up a girl. One of the men orally pleased Roman* while the other talked to him about girls. Encouraged by this encounter, the teenager returned to the carnival area, where he met a young soldier with whom he had oral sex more than once and with whom he began discussing his feelings and learning about other cruising spots. He returned again and again to the park where the carnival had been, which to this day remains a cruising area. Roman*'s subsequent life story was a series of affairs and relationships with men. He was one of the young men visiting Michel Foucault's apartment in Warsaw in the late 1950s (although he never met Foucault), he was the occasional lover of an enterprising older man who was suddenly arrested and never heard from again, and at one point, he was a suspect in a widely publicized murder case of a high-ranking homosexual officer whose apartment he had indeed visited. (The case may have prompted closer surveillance of homosexual men.) He spent time in the US, where his Polish boyfriend began sex work. They subsequently broke up and Roman* found other gay partners, including a wealthy medical doctor who hosted gay parties at his home. He also described encountering a sexual orgy in the men's room of a New York City subway station. Roman* returned to Poland with a stack of hard currency and a fancy car with which he seduced men. He had a long-lasting relationship with a man, now a farmer, whom he left for a series of younger lovers but to whom he remains devoted. Roman* is godfather to the child of another former lover, with whom he has remained friends after the man married and started a family. When I interviewed Roman* in his elegant apartment (one of his two homes), he was accompanied by a much younger lover. Nowhere in his account or in his surroundings could I see any trace of heterosexual desire.

And yet, this adventurous gay man thought that, had he not been seduced by his brother when he was a child, he might have turned out bisexual or even straight. Roman* seemed to resent his brother for making him gay. His anger was abetted by the fact that his brother, now married with children, seemed to have forgotten these childhood interactions even as my interlocutor suspected him of furtively having sex with men after marrying. The complaint was as much about the brother's hypocrisy as it was about his youthful advances. Nonetheless, Roman*'s claim that he had been pushed into homosexuality was astonishing in the context of his biography, which did not substantiate it. I sympathized with his anger at having been harassed sexually and with his frustration at his brother's perceived hypocrisy, but I also realized that he was relying on the debunked psychological concept that homosexuality resulted from same-sex seduction at an early age. Roman* did not explicitly mention this theory, but he implicitly called upon it as though it were common sense, as indeed it had been for the generation

of his parents and perhaps his own. At this juncture in the interview, Roman* seemed caught between an older, homophobic discourse about homosexuality and the more contemporary, affirmative language with which he was describing his life as a gay man. His words seemingly bespoke envy of his brother's ostensibly heterosexual life, although Roman* did not explicitly acknowledge such feelings. This impression resulted from his invocation of a psychological doctrine that cast homosexuality as affliction. It seemed that an indirect acknowledgment of residual shame about being queer had manifested itself, testifying to the effectiveness of social stigma. I was impressed that Roman* had been able to cast off such feelings in so many areas of his life.

Leaving the apartment, I glimpsed a political sticker in support of the right-wing party currently in power glued to a coat hanger in the hallway. Roman* saw me look at it and asked about my political views. I was too tired to plunge deep into this conversation, as it was unrelated to the interview which had been focused on the past. The incident made me think, however, about those who may have turned down an invitation to be interviewed because they expected to disagree with the research team's presumed views about sexuality and politics.

Interview with a Self-Proclaimed Conservative Queer Man

In one instance, an interlocutor preceded his interview by voicing his right-wing sympathies and questioning the project's validity on political and methodological grounds. Piotr*'s tirade was loud and long, and before turning on the voice recorder my colleague and I were asked to promise that we would not use his words to illustrate and affirm a contemporary gay identity. Piotr* was a retired physics professor who became an expert in the energy sector. We were able to contact him due to connections he had made through his short-lived engagement with LGBTQ activism.

Piotr* had lived his life as a single man, a choice inspired by his desire to remain intellectually and spiritually independent. He treasured the time and freedom that being alone offered him using them reading and learning. At the same time, he was painfully aware of his attraction to teenage boys, on which he has not acted but which colored his self-perception and influenced some of the most important decisions in his life. He gave up his ambition to become a schoolteacher when he understood that the temptation would be too strong. He became an academic instead, working at a major university to avoid the urge to make advances towards teenage boys, but in his middle age he fell in love with his neighbors'

son, whom he had been home schooling. He experienced intense internal turmoil and was helped by a straight woman friend who put him in touch with an LGBTQ group, where he received moral support and psychological advice. He then left the university and found a better paid position in a government agency.

Contrary to my expectation, Piotr* welcomed the advent of lesbian and gay rights but stopped short of supporting gay marriage and child-rearing. He was a self-described social conservative but rejected the label of right-wing radical. Neither was he religious, though he thought that most people needed religion as a moral compass. His main critique of LGBTQ activism was that it confronted people's deep-held beliefs about gender roles, sexual morality, and family values. He believed that social and cultural change took patient effort and required time. Radical demands were pointless shortcuts at best and likely regrettable provocations, much like ostentatious displays of queerness, such as crossdressing, which risked provoking backlash.

There was a whiff of pessimistic elitism to Piotr*'s position in the sense that he did not trust people to change their views simply because they were given good reason. He never came out to his long-dead parents, convinced that they could not possibly grasp the concept of homosexuality because they lacked education. He thought of them as honest and well-intentioned people who would never change their minds about certain things. These parental figures seemed to stand in for the way he saw society. Nonetheless, change was theoretically possible. When this man moved to a big city to enroll at the university, he became friends with some male ballet dancers and regularly spent time with them and others working at the theater. Although most of these acquaintances were straight, he was struck by their openness about homosexuality. Their liberal, matter-of-fact treatment of sexual liaisons between men became for Piotr* a model of how society at large could become more open-minded if broader sexual diversity was introduced to everyone at an early age in an appropriately neutral manner, as a simple fact of life rather than sensationalist gossip, extravagant rights claims, or jarring displays of difference.

Piotr* was an intellectually rigorous interlocutor. His arguments were clear and to the point. However, some of his well-reasoned views seemed overdetermined, obliquely colored by his personal dilemma. For example, his choice to live alone seemed an answer to his illicit attraction to young boys, which he rejected as immoral. These repudiated desires were nonetheless indulged in, as he illustrated with his enthusiasm for a French novel about love between schoolboys and with an account of his long-lasting, chaste friendship with a much younger

ballet dancer.¹⁶ Likewise, his reluctance to come out to more than a handful of people seemed affected by the complicated nature of his personal closet. He lamented that some of his relatives failed to acknowledge his homosexuality, believing that they knew about it even though he never came out to them. By contrast, he insisted that no one at the university knew he was gay even though he had once run into a colleague in a cruising spot. I asked if he thought his colleagues and relatives were perhaps simply being discreet, respectful of his reticence, but the question seemed to strike a nerve and Piotr* switched topics.

I thought of this interview partner as painstakingly negotiating the threat of social stigma and his deeply felt ethical apprehension about his illicit desires. Like some other interlocutors, Piotr* was engaging with his queer shame by addressing it and explaining it as best he could. In retrospect, his angry opening tirade tested our reaction to his explicit warning that his account would not conform to a model gay narrative, while implicitly demanding that we adopt the non-judgmental tenet of reciprocal witnessing to hear him out. While Piotr* did not expect that we would share our stories with him, he did require some rhetorical and gestural reassurance that we were not judging him and that we were prepared to hear his account which, in his own assessment, did not meet the standards of a contemporary model gay identity.

Piotr's* political views were difficult to disentangle from his complicated coming out. His friendships with people at the theater and his enthusiasm for a novel about love between schoolboys refuted him from the normative straight world and also from a model gay trajectory in which one celebrates their gayness. At these junctures, his account was a throwback to an earlier era in which homosexuality functioned like a secret fraternity rather than as a political project premised on public visibility and a demand for equal rights. But in praising the easygoing interactions among straights and queers in his theater circle he was also proposing an alternative political project premised on mutual respect between the queer minority and the straight majority rather than on confrontation and dissent. This project was at the core of his professed conservatism.

More than any other, the interview with Piotr* made me wonder why potential interlocutors may have turned down the invitation to speak to us. It also made me aware of just how exceptional our self-selected sample of interview partners was. A remarkable quality which distinguished a significant number of them was their willingness to tackle potentially shaming life experiences and memories and negotiate them in a mode which Sedgwick has called queer performativity. In consenting to the interviews, these partners must have counted—one can only

16 For a discussion of Henry de Montherlant's novel *Boys* and its place in this interview see Basiuk "One's Younger Self" 28–29.

surmise—on encountering interviewers who would treat them with reciprocal respect and strive to understand the experience being conveyed. Certainly, the testimonies which they gave demanded, and merited, such witnessing.

Reciprocal Witnessing Acknowledged By Interview Partner

Without presuming to know my partners' experience of being interviewed, I can say that I came to appreciate the central importance of reciprocal witnessing in the three years during which the interviews were conducted. Serendipitously, the idea of witnessing came up in one of the very last ones. Adam* was a sixty-year-old man who led an unusually privileged life. He grew up in a big city, in a progressive and well-to-do family, attended prestigious schools, and spent time in the West through various educational programs. He was a professional film critic and a TV personality. While our conversation at first focused on a more distant past, his very public coming out in the late 2000s inevitably came up. He described the events which led up to it, including a book-length interview with his straight friend and TV co-host of many years, an older film critic who had died before the book was published. As Adam* was completing the manuscript, he realized that his authored passages were noticeably more constricted than those of his late friend because he had been avoiding the subject of his homosexuality. Although he was in a long-term relationship with a man and had come out to family and friends, including to his late co-author, he had not broached the subject in his public appearances or his writing. Working on the manuscript made him reconsider his silence.

Asked to pen an introduction to his partner's gay-themed novel, Adam* disclosed in it his relationship with the book's author. This admission was immediately picked up by a celebrity gossip website and led to a front-page interview in a popular tabloid. Adam* described at length the empowering effect of his public coming out. On numerous occasions he was stopped in the street and congratulated for his courage, usually by straight men (including some opposed to gay rights). But the change which impressed him most was that he was finding it much easier to converse with people, who could tell that he was being frank with them. His job includes conducting interviews, moderating panel discussions, and addressing live audiences. He reported that these occasions became livelier as people spoke to him more candidly than before, as if reciprocating his candidness. In my interlocutor's mind, this dynamic, which I call reciprocal witnessing,

completed the cycle of giving testimony to which he was challenged by the manuscript which he co-authored with his late colleague.

Conclusion

Adam* recognized the importance of reciprocal witnessing as he was rereading and revising his co-authored text. He subsequently confirmed this recognition in multiple spoken exchanges. My trajectory was similar: I first identified reciprocal witnessing as one of the rhetorical strategies in gay men's life writing and argued for its conceptual and affective affinity to what Sedgwick has called queer performativity. I then recognized reciprocal witnessing in numerous interviews in which my partners engaged with actual or potentially shaming experiences and memories by showing an interest in them instead of avoiding them. In doing so, they were forging a reciprocal relationship of witnessing with the interviewer or interviewers, counting on a sympathetic person occasionally willing to share about their own life, as if to confirm that they were not being judged for their words.

I have been struck by the number of times that I was called upon to provide information about myself or felt compelled to do so by some turn in the conversation.¹⁷ While contributing information about oneself may not be the most orthodox way to conduct oral history interviews and while I strove to contain these self-focused excursions to brief remarks, and to only offer them when they were expected, they seemed appropriate to bring up when discussing queer lives. The candidness for which I was asking required me to be equally forthcoming, especially when asked to do so. The times my narrators were struggling to find the right words to express their experience, when they were communicating across the barriers of historical change and of the different discursive regimes available then and now to address their dilemmas, and when they risked being shamed in the process, required a moral and epistemological stance of reciprocal witnessing. When successful, this gesture opened a performative space in which the narrators were reassured that their testimony was welcome, and which allowed them to experiment with their discursive strategies in the hope of greatest possible clarity.

¹⁷ Yew compares oral history interviews to the interaction between psychiatrist and analysand, for example, comparing oral history to case study (35) and notes that "oral historians may sense the need to talk briefly about their own experience" (37).

Works Cited

- Basiuk, Tomasz. *Exposures: American Gay Men's Life Writing since Stonewall*. Peter Lang, 2013.
- Basiuk, Tomasz. "Od niepisanej umowy milczenia do protopolityczności: dyskursywny i sieciowy charakter społeczności osób homoseksualnych w 'długich latach 70.' w historii mówionej i epistolografii." *Różowy język*, special issue of *InterAlia: A Journal of Queer Studies*, edited by Agnieszka Kościańska et al., vol. 14, 2019, pp. 28–50, interalia.queerstudies.pl/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/basiuk.pdf.
- Basiuk, Tomasz. "One's Younger Self in Personal Testimony and Literary Translation." Tomasz Basiuk and Jędrzej Burszta, pp. 23–32.
- Basiuk, Tomasz, and Jędrzej Burszta, editors. *Queers in State Socialism: Cruising 1970s Poland*. Routledge, 2020.
- Burszta, Jędrzej. "Do czego się było przyznawać, jak nie istniał homoseksualizm?" *Różowy język w narracjach pamięci o męskiej homoseksualności w PRL*. *Różowy język*, special issue of *InterAlia: A Journal of Queer Studies*, edited by Agnieszka Kościańska et al., vol. 14, 2019, pp. 7–27, interalia.queerstudies.pl/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/burszta.pdf.
- Burszta, Jędrzej. "Three Circles of Male Homosexual Life in State-Socialist Poland." Basiuk and Burszta, pp. 11–22.
- Delany, Samuel R. "Coming / Out." *Boys Like Us: Gay Writers Tell Their Coming Out Stories*, edited by Patrick Merla, Avon Books, 1996, pp. 1–26.
- D'Emilio, John. "Capitalism and Gay Identity." *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, edited by Ann Snitow et al., Monthly Review Press, 1980, pp. 100–13.
- Dębińska, Maria. "Diagnosing Transsexualism, Diagnosing Society: The Blurred Genres of Polish Sexology in the 1970s and 1980s." Basiuk and Burszta, pp. 59–73.
- Felman, Shoshana. "Education and Crisis, Or the Vicissitudes of Teaching." *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*, edited by Felman, Shoshana and Dori Laub, Routledge, 1992, pp. 2–56.
- Fiedotow, Agata. "Początki ruchu gejowskiego w Polsce (1981–1990)." *Kłopoty z seksem w PRL: Rodzenie nie całkiem po ludzku, aborcja, choroby, odmienności*, edited by Marcin Kula, Wyd. Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2012, pp. 241–358.
- Garsztecki, Stefan. "Poland." *1968 in Europe: A History of Protest and Activism 1956–1977*, edited by Martin Klimke and Joachim Scharloth, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, pp. 179–87.
- Kornai, János. *Economics of Shortage*. North-Holland, 1980.
- Kościańska, Agnieszka. "'Treatment Is Possible and Effective?': Polish Sexologists and Queers in Correspondence in Late State Socialism." Basiuk and Burszta, pp. 74–87.
- Kościańska, Agnieszka, et al., editors. *Różowy język*, special issue of *InterAlia: A Journal of Queer Studies*, vol. 14, 2019, interalia.queerstudies.pl/14-2019/.
- de Man, Paul. "Autobiography as De-Facement." *Comparative Literature*, vol. 94, no. 5, 1979, pp. 919–30.
- Mizielińska, Joanna, et al. *Rodziony z wyboru w Polsce: Życie rodzinne osób nieheteroseksualnych*. Instytut Psychologii PAN, 2014.
- de Montherlant, Henry. *Les garçons*. Gallimard, 1969.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Duke UP, 2003.
- Staroszczyk, Magdalena. "'No one talked about it': The Paradoxes of Lesbian Identity in Pre-1989 Poland." Basiuk and Burszta, pp. 105–15.

- Szcześniak, Magda. *Normy widzialności: Tożsamość w czasach transformacji*. Fundacja Bęc Zmiana, Instytut Kultury Polskiej UW, 2016.
- Thomson, Alistair. "Four Paradigm Transformations in Oral History." *The Oral History Review*, vol. 34, no. 1, pp. 49–71, www.jstor.org/stable/4495417.
- White, Edmund. *A Boy's Own Story*. E.P. Dutton, 1982.
- Yow, Valerie. "What Can Oral Historians Learn from Psychotherapists?" *Oral History*, 2018, pp. 33–41, jstor.org/stable/44993454.
- Zabłocki, Krzysztof. "Wolfgang Jöhling: A GDR Citizen in the 'Promised Land' of Poland." *Sexual Culture in Germany in the 1970s: A Golden Age for Queers?*, edited by Janin Afken and Benedikt Wolf, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, pp. 215–37.

