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Poles from the Peruvian Montaña: Recollections of Polish Emigration to Peru in the Early 20th Century

1 Introduction

The subject of organizing Polish settlement in Peru in the early 1930s, although not extensively discussed, has found its place in the literature of social sciences and humanities. The few available studies, written in the subsequent decades of the 20th and 21st centuries in Poland and abroad, have primarily focused on the chronology of the colonization efforts, the causes, progression, and consequences of this Polish emigration project, as well as the public perception and opinions regarding the conditions in Peru.¹ Therefore, this text is not intended to replicate existing positions. Instead, the presented article aims to explore the various ways in which the Polish exile has been remembered in the social space, particularly in Poland, since the 1930s. The text aims to verify the hypothesis that two main directions of narratives of memory² can be distinguished in relation to the topic of

1 See among others: Michał Jarnecki: Peruwiańska porażka i próba jej naprawy. Wokół polskich międzywojennych koncepcji emigracyjnych i kolonialnych. In: *Sprawy Narodowościowe* 44 (2014), p. 102–132, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.11649/sn.2014.008>; Marta Kania: Positivists, Naturalists, Travelers, But Not Settlers: Poles in Perú in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries. In: *Polish American Studies* 69, 1 (2012), p. 27–53; Marta Kania: Żyć można w Montanji całe lata — o kolonizacji polskiej w Peru. In: Marcin Gabryś (ed.): *Pani Anna w Kanadzie: księga pamiątkowa dedykowana Pani Profesor Annie Reczyńskiej*. Kraków: Księgarnia Akademicka 2016, p. 17–37; Jacek Knopek/Anna Ratke-Majewska: *PERU XIX i XX wieku w opisach polskich podróżników, emigrantów i urzędników*. Bydgoszcz: Przedsiębiorstwo Marketingowe “Logo” 2013; Łukasz Krokoszyński: Las promesas alentadoras: La colonización polaca en la amazonía peruana (1925–1935). In: *Amazonía Peruana* 16, 32 (2019), p. 197–235; Mikołaj Paczkowski: “Stworzyć tu naprawdę słiczną a bogatą kolonię polską.” Polskie międzywojenne opisywanie Peru. In: *Białostockie Studia Literaturoznawcze* 19 (2021), p. 107–120, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15290/bls.2021.19.05>; Anna Ratke-Majewska: *Stosunki bilateralne Polski z państwami andyjskimi: 1918–2018*. Poznań: Wydawnictwo FNCE 2018, p. 203–213.

2 Narratives of memory understood as stories about past events, which are simultaneously an expression of the memory of their authors and a tool for constructing the memory content of their recipients. It is worth adding that narratives of memory should be understood as the result of an interpretation of a past event known to their creator, either through acquired experience or through his or her exposure to accounts and descriptions present in the culture. Therefore, these narratives reflect all the characteristics that memory possesses, including its transience,

colonization efforts in Peru, primarily differing in their portrayal of the Polish settlers. The first direction, while recounting the story of colonization in Peru, depicts the Polish exiles as involuntary victims and martyrs caught up in circumstances beyond their control. On the other hand, the second direction, in its portrayal of the emigration campaign, presents Polish settlers as individuals who were aware of their fate and migrated to Peru predominantly driven by selfish motives, such as greed or the desire to escape. In this latter case, the misery of the exiles is explained mainly as a consequence of indolence and laziness.

It is worth noting that the research presented in this article is primarily based on an analysis of archival materials housed at the Central Archives of Modern Records (Archiwum Akt Nowych) in Warsaw, Poland. Specifically, the study focused on selected folders labeled *Files of Janina and Kazimierz Warchałowski (Akta Janiny i Kazimierza Warchałowskich)*, which contained official documents, contracts, letters, reports, press clippings, and brochures. Additionally, these archival materials were supplemented by other texts present in the public space of the 1930s, including newspaper articles, travel literature, and popular science papers. The selection of these sources and the research methodology employed, which included content analysis and analysis of narrative structures, facilitated the exploration of the motives, attitudes, and values held by the creators of narratives of memory. Furthermore, it allowed for the identification of the meanings conveyed by these narratives and the tasks they fulfilled.

2 How did the Polish Emigration to Peru in the 1930s Proceed? Outline of the Issue

One of the challenges faced by the newly established Polish state after World War I was the need to counteract the economic underdevelopment resulting from the prolonged partitions and the damage suffered by various sectors during the war.

fallibility, bias and selectivity. At the same time, they are the outcome of the narrative nature of memory, which allows memory content to be recalled in the form of narratives and thus to be altered and complemented by them as well. It is worth adding that narratives of memory are transmitted both through words and through things, objects and places. The architecture of places of memory is thus a structure in which a narrative is designed to reflect the memory and at the same time to shape it by communicating with and affecting the viewer. The elements of architecture thus give access to the stories about the past that function in a given community, and as a result are able to strengthen its identity. See Anna Ratke-Majewska: *Konflikt pamięci: Polska po przemianach systemowych 1989 roku*. Zielona Góra: Oficyna Wydawnicza Uniwersytetu Zielonogórskiego 2022, p. 68–70.

The need for reform and restoration, together with agrarian overpopulation and growing numbers of unemployed people, whose situation was aggravated by global echoes of the Great Economic Crisis, led to massive social discontent and aroused strike movements. There was a growing threat of an increase in radical groups' activity. Economic emigration, in turn, could satisfy the subsistence needs of at least part of Poland's population, leading to a reduction in the number of unemployed workers and landless and smallholder peasants, and resulting in a calming of social tensions. It was for this reason that the government circles of the Republic of Poland tried to support emigration initiatives, including those aimed at overseas areas.³

In the mid-1920s, the Peruvian government developed an interest in the potential colonization of extensive areas in the Montaña region, with the intention of settling European emigrants. Initially, despite ongoing negotiations, this proposal did not receive a positive response from the Polish authorities. In the autumn of 1926, Polish institutions such as the Emigration Office and the State Emigration Council voiced their opposition to the settlement of Poles in the Peruvian Montaña. They highlighted the challenging conditions in the proposed areas for Polish colonization, including the harsh climate, lack of infrastructure, and absence of human settlements. Despite these unfavorable opinions, private individuals persisted in their efforts to obtain colonization concessions. As a result of their endeavors, two permits for settlement were eventually granted by the Peruvian government. The first concession in 1927 was obtained by Kazimierz Warchałowski, former head of the overseas department of the Emigration Office in Warsaw, while the second concession was secured in 1928 by the Polish-American Colonization Syndicate, a joint stock company formed in 1926 by a group of financiers and affluent landowners.⁴

Kazimierz Warchałowski's successful acquisition of a colonization permit from the Peruvian government marked only the initial phase of the settlement campaign. Another crucial requirement was the collection of a sufficient amount of money. To secure the necessary funds, Warchałowski engaged in several months of negotiations with the National Economy Bank of the Republic of Poland. The Bank's representatives, intrigued by the opportunity to establish their own cotton and rubber plantations, participated in a research expedition to evaluate the concession areas in Montaña in 1928. The expedition, which also in-

³ Anna Ratke-Majewska: *Stosunki bilateralne Polski*, p. 199–200.

⁴ Marta Kania: *Żyć można w Montanji*, p. 19–20; Edward Kołodziej: *Wychodźstwo zarobkowe z Polski 1918–1939: studia nad polityką emigracyjną II Rzeczypospolitej*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo "Książka i Wiedza" 1982, p. 126; Mieczysław Bohdan Lepecki: *Opis polskich terenów kolonizacyjnych w Peru*. Warszawa: Naukowy Instytut Emigracyjny 1930, p. 7–8; Anna Ratke-Majewska: *Stosunki bilateralne Polski*, p. 203–204.

cluded delegates from the Emigration Office, was financially supported by the Polish–American Colonization Syndicate. It is worth noting that the Syndicate obtained a settlement concession from the Peruvian authorities on April 23, 1928, after the expedition had already commenced. During the expedition, the designated areas for colonization were surveyed, and their suitability for agricultural settlement was positively evaluated. However, both the Polish government and the National Economy Bank eventually decided against subsidizing the emigration endeavor. As a result, colonization could only be achieved through private capital investment. In this challenging situation, and unable to raise money from other sources, Warchałowski made the decision to delegate some of his authority to other private individuals who were willing to invest their funds in the colonization of the Montaña lands. Consequently, on April 20, 1929, the Settlement Cooperative 'Polish Colony' was established. In an agreement dated June 27, 1929, Warchałowski transferred the right to settle 220,000 hectares out of the 350,000 hectares of land granted to him in concession by the Peruvian government to the Cooperative.⁵

It is worth noting that the positive opinion of the 1928 research expedition, although it did not secure funding from the National Economy Bank, was crucial for obtaining permits to recruit settlers. By a decree of the Polish government dated August 8, 1929, the Settlement Cooperative 'Polish Colony' was granted permission to recruit 200 families. Similarly, on April 24, 1930, the Polish–American Colonization Syndicate was permitted to recruit 250 families. However, in both cases, these objectives were not achieved. The Cooperative managed to send several groups, averaging about a dozen people each, to Peru between 1930 and 1931. On the other hand, the Syndicate sent an even smaller number of individuals, primarily those involved in administrative work in the concession lands, along with a group of laborers dedicated to working in the designated areas.⁶

Several factors contributed to the failure of both colonization campaigns. Major financial and organizational problems, the unstable situation in the Peruvian state, and the Great Global Economic Crisis played a significant role in the ultimate failure of the Cooperative 'Polish Colony' and the Syndicate. However, of key importance was the fact that both institutions failed to fulfill their commitments, including cases of fraud by collaborators and subcontractors, as well as wishful thinking.

⁵ Koncesja udzielona przez Wysoki Rząd Peru Panu Kazimierzowi Warchałowskiemu. In: Archiwum Akt Nowych: *Akta Janiny i Kazimierza Warchałowskich* 98, p. 17–19; Mieczysław Bohdan Lepecki: *Opis polskich terenów*, s. 9, 21–24; Anna Ratke-Majewska: *Stosunki bilateralne Polski*, p. 206–207.

⁶ Edward Kołodziej: *Wychodźstwo zarobkowe*, p. 127–129; Anna Ratke-Majewska: *Stosunki bilateralne Polski*, p. 210–211.

The land designated for settlement was poorly prepared, with plots not properly marked out, the forest uncleared, and buildings unprepared. When the first settlers arrived in Montaña in mid-1930 on behalf of the Cooperative, they found the area in such a state. Moreover, the living conditions were much harsher than those described in propaganda brochures, and the situation was further complicated by the improper professional selection of settlers. Due to the rush in organizing the campaign, the Cooperative failed to prioritize sending primarily farmers to the concession territories designated for cultivation. Instead, a large group of representatives from the intelligentsia and factory workers were sent. However, it is worth noting that the low participation of the peasant population in the venture did not indicate a lack of interest in colonizing Peru among this occupational group. The problem usually arose from the several-hundred-dollar sums demanded by the Cooperative and the Syndicate for shipping and preparing the land for a single settler family.

The concessions held by both the Polish-American Colonization Syndicate and the Settlement Cooperative 'Polish Colony' expired in 1933. At that time, the group of Polish settlers located in the Montaña territories was largely left to fend for themselves, although a small subsidy provided by the Polish government was sufficient for some of the emigrants to reach Brazil.⁷ It is important to note that the experiences of the settlers in the Peruvian Montaña garnered significant media attention from the early 1930s. Their stories also found their place in 20th century Polish travel literature, thus contributing to the spread of narratives about the emigrants in Peru within Polish society. These circulated narratives of memory present two contrasting perspectives on the Polish settlers. One narrative portrays them as passive individuals who obediently followed orders and were unable to cope with their difficult circumstances. They are depicted as martyrs caught up in events beyond their control. The other narrative describes the emigrants in Peru as cunning, calculating, and lazy individuals. In both cases, the Polish colonists are portrayed as being responsible for their own fate, whether due to their perceived stupidity, helplessness, compliance, laziness, or greed. However, the issue of overly optimistic propaganda and deception, as well as the crimes they endured, often remains overlooked. It is important to examine this problem by considering two different perspectives within the narratives of memory.

⁷ Jerzy Mazurek: *Kraj a emigracja: ruch ludowy wobec wychodźstwa chłopskiego do krajów Ameryki Łacińskiej (do 1939 roku)*. Warszawa: Muzeum Historii Polskiego Ruchu Ludowego 2006, p. 112–114; Anna Ratke-Majewska: *Stosunki bilateralne Polski*, p. 213.

3 The Direction of Narratives of Memory: Polish Settlers in Peru Were Helpless Victims and Martyrs

This particular narrative direction gained significant traction in the press, persisting even after the Polish–American Colonization Syndicate and the Settlement Co-operative ‘Polish Colony’ concessions had expired. Its prevalence was primarily driven by the continuous influx of accounts from Polish settlers in Peru. As a result, this narrative trend had already emerged in the social sphere at the beginning of the 1930s and later found representation in travel literature as well. During its initial phase, the narrative garnered support through direct reports from settlers, often published in the form of letters to editors. These accounts emphasized the martyrdom of Poles abroad, shedding light on their immense suffering and unwavering sacrifice in the pursuit of truth. This portrayal served to expose the hardships endured by Polish emigrants and garnered sympathy for their plight.

This was the tone of an article published in the daily *Kurjer Czerwony* on November 18, 1930. It quoted a letter written to the newspaper’s editorial board and explicitly stated, “the fact remains in its tragic nakedness that our emigrants to Peru are exposed to such unimaginable ordeals,”⁸ and emphasized that they have been “left to their own fate without the help of the institutions primarily established to provide it.”⁹ The published letter exposed that the Polish–American Colonization Syndicate had hired 8 laborers to work in the Sepa colony. However, during the journey to the workplace, a representative of the Syndicate verbally informed them to abandon their contracts. As the hired workers did not have any official confirmation that their contracts had indeed been terminated, they were unable to notify the Polish Emigration Office. Despite this uncertainty, they proceeded to reach the colony. Upon arrival, they were informed that their contracts would not be acknowledged and were essentially left to fend for themselves.¹⁰ Regarding the events that transpired next, the authors of the letter wrote the following:

⁸ Martyrologia naszych emigrantów do Peru: by nie umrzeć z głodu kraść muszą żywność. *Kurjer Czerwony* 267 (18.11.1930). In: Archiwum Akt Nowych: *Akta Janiny i Kazimierza Warchałowskich* 128, p. 5.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Surviving freehand in the wilderness, without food and amidst danger! We requested assistance to facilitate our journey to Lima, but it was refused. We traveled 1,200 kilometers by water and through the wilderness, crossing snowy uplands, without knowledge of the language and without a penny. On a raft made of four logs, we sailed in search of a last hope from the Polish Consul in Lima. For sustenance, we relied on what we managed to steal from the indigenous people, and our hope rested on the Consulate, with a bullet as our last resort. Unfortunately, one of the men traveling on our raft took his own life, and four of us sustained such severe wounds during the crossing that without help from the Emigration Office doctor in Cumaria, we would have died. [. . .] Due to the antagonism that has developed against foreigners in revolutionary Peru, earning a living or finding work is out of the question. [. . .] Unless public opinion stands up for us, we are doomed, and dozens more victims of the Polish-American Syndicate will follow behind us.¹¹

A few days later, the issue of the fate of settlers in Peru was brought up in an article by the daily *Piast Wielkopolski*. The article implied that Polish emigration, despite the unfavorable climatic conditions in Peru, was being encouraged as a means to counterbalance radical land reform. Furthermore, the text highlighted the remote location of the designated land for colonization (several thousand kilometers from the coast) and the absence of roads and railways connecting to these territories.¹² The article commented:

In such circumstances, even if the unfortunate Polish colonist survives the deadly climate, if he is not infected by subtropical diseases, if he survives in the face of a plague of dangerous animals — how will he encash the product of his hard work? [. . .] The government has given the Polish-American Syndicate and the Cooperative 'Polish Colony' permission to recruit colonists to Peru. This recruitment is taking place. Encouraging brochures about Peru are being circulated. This must be stopped!¹³

It is important to note that the mentioned article was not the sole response to the publication of the letter, which appeared in *Kurjer Czerwony* on November 18, 1930. The editorial board of *Kurjer* received other letters as well, including those expressing hope for intervention or offering help. This correspondence was published on November 28, 1930, in an article titled: 'The misery of the unfortunate victims dying of hunger in faraway Peru. Who will take care of them and how to help them?'.¹⁴ On December 22, 1930, another article was published in *Kurjer Czerwony* titled: 'The Emigration Office has taken care of the misery of our emigrants in Peru.'

11 Ibid.

12 Jeszcze o kolonizacji Peru. *Piast Wielkopolski* 276 (27.11.1930). In: Archiwum Akt Nowych: *Akta Janiny i Kazimierza Warchałowskich* 128, p. 7.

13 Ibid.

14 Niedola nieszczęsnych ofiar mrących głodem w dalekiem Peru. Kto się niemi zajmie i jak im pomóc?. *Kurjer Czerwony* 276 (28.11.1930). In: Archiwum Akt Nowych: *Akta Janiny i Kazimierza Warchałowskich* 128, p. 8.

The unfortunate victims will be repatriated.¹⁵ Information regarding repatriation also appeared in the Varsovian daily, *Express Poranny*, on December 30, 1930, in an article titled: 'Bitter bread in exile under the mother sky of the Peruvian Montaña'.¹⁶ A day later, news of the planned repatriation was reported in the daily *Kurjer Poranny*, also printed in Warsaw, in a text entitled: 'Misery of Polish emigrants in Peru'.¹⁷ Thus, the narrative of the suffering and desperate situation of the unfortunate, starving, and seeking help victims was consistently maintained in numerous press articles.

The situation did not change in subsequent years, including within the context of the Polish Diaspora press. An article titled 'The sad end of emigration to Peru' was published in the Brazilian magazine *Jornal polonez "LUD"* in Curitiba on May 7, 1935. In fact, the article indicated:

The Warsaw prosecutorial authorities are investigating a sensational case involving the organization of emigration from Poland to Peru. [...] The Colonization Syndicate promised the emigrants a prosperous future and painted a rosy picture of their new lives. Labor contracts were drafted, guaranteeing the emigrants salaries for their work, as well as their own land, tools, settlement funds, and more. However, upon arrival, the emigrants were faced with a tragic reality. A representative of the Colonization Syndicate awaited them on-site. . . He transported them deep into the country, where they were expected to settle permanently. Unfortunately, they soon discovered that the area was an untouched jungle, hundreds of kilometers away from any city or significant human settlement. Moreover, they were informed that they were required to sign new contracts [...] which did not include regular salaries for their work [...]. The unfortunate emigrants refused to accept these changed conditions and bravely embarked on their journey back [...]. Their trek led them through virgin jungles, teeming with dangerous wild animals, and across the towering Cordillera. Two indigenous guides accompanied the exhausted emigrants, and after several weeks of adventurous travel, they finally reached Lima, the capital of Peru, where they received assistance and care.¹⁸

Did travel literature also support the narrative of Polish emigrants as desperate individuals seeking help? It should be noted that the theme of pity for Poles suffering in Peru and being helpless victims was not extensively explored in travel writing. However, it did make occasional appearances. In 1935, Arkady Fiedler's book, *Ryby śpiewają w Ucayali*¹⁹ (English: *Fish sing in the Ucayali*), was published.

¹⁵ Urząd Emigracyjny zajął się niedolą naszych emigrantów w Peru. Nieszczęsne ofiary będą repatriowane. *Kurjer Czerwony* 295 (22.12.1930). In: Archiwum Akt Nowych: *AKta Janiny i Kazimierza Warchałowskich* 128, p. 11.

¹⁶ Gorzki chleb na obczyźnie pod macoszem niebem Montanji Peruwiańskiej. *Express Poranny* 360 (30.12.1930). In: Archiwum Akt Nowych: *AKta Janiny i Kazimierza Warchałowskich* 128, p. 12.

¹⁷ Niedola polskich emigrantów w Peru. *Kurjer Poranny* 361 (31.12.1930), p. 7.

¹⁸ Smutny koniec emigracji do Peru. *Jornal polonez "LUD"* 33 (7.05.1935), p. 6.

¹⁹ Arkady Fiedler: *Ryby śpiewają w Ucayali*. Warszawa: Towarzystwo Wydawnicze "Rój" 1935.

This work is still considered the most popular Polish book describing an expedition to Peru. Interestingly, despite Fiedler's account of traversing the Ucayali basin, which was the exact region where the establishment of a Polish colony was planned, he only briefly mentioned the Polish settlement attempt in his narrative.²⁰ His concise remark stated that it was in this area "where the unfortunate Polish colonists were supposed to build their future."²¹ The brevity of this statement may have been influenced by both the failure of the Polish emigration project to Peru (which had already become a reality by the time the book was published) and the author's self-portrayal as a traveller-explorer venturing into previously unknown territories.²²

The colony in Cumaria, which was a part of the concession of the Cooperative 'Polish Colony', was also mentioned in another publication. This reference can be found in Adam Dudek's book titled *Poszukiwacze*²³ (English: *Explorers*), which recounts his memories of expeditions and geological explorations in the 1960s and 1970s. In the section dedicated to Peru, the author includes quotes from individuals he encountered during his expedition. Alongside the harrowing descriptions of the emigration conditions, there is a poignant statement that resonates with the narratives of suffering and vulnerability experienced by Polish emigrants:

All I knew about the Ucayali was that fish sing there, I think. In the meantime. . .

— It's not the fish that sing in the Ucayali — my interlocutors are touched to the core — it's the accusing souls of the Poles who died there, but not everyone is given to understand their voice. [. . .] And it is sad to remember — my new friend continues — how in the 1930s people were sent to the promised land, to a country that became a hell for them. [. . .] we were robbed not only of our possessions, but also of our good name. To this day, it is still said that we are thieves, slobs, drunkards. [. . .] We were mocked at every turn, and it has remained so to this day.²⁴

The indicated fragment suggests that the reputational damages caused by Polish emigration to Peru, as shaped by the institutions organizing colonization, persisted throughout the subsequent decades of the 20th century, particularly impacting those Polish individuals who remained in the Peruvian state.

²⁰ Mikołaj Paczkowski: *Stworzyć tu naprawdę śliczną*, p. 116–117.

²¹ Arkady Fiedler: *Ryby śpiewają*, p. 138.

²² Mikołaj Paczkowski: *Stworzyć tu naprawdę śliczną*, p. 117–118.

²³ Antoni Dudek: *Poszukiwacze*. Katowice: Krajowa Agencja Wydawnicza 1987.

²⁴ As cited in: Jacek Knopek/Anna Ratke-Majewska: *PERU XIX i XX wieku*, p. 186, 188.

4 The Direction of Narratives of Memory: Polish Settlers in Peru are Cunning, Greedy, Calculating, Shiftless and Lazy People

This narrative direction, although also common in press and travel writing, was especially characteristic of circles supporting Polish settlement aspirations. In criticism of emigration, this direction often saw a search for unhealthy sensationalism rather than genuine concern for the fate of citizens. In turn, in descriptions of the settlers' negative experiences, it typically placed blame on the emigrant, who, driven by the low motive of quick profit, decided to leave Poland without being oriented towards hard work and sacrifice.

This position is supported by an article titled “The Truth about Peru”, published in the October 18, 1931 issue of *Gazeta Świąteczna* magazine. In the article, the editors shared excerpts from a report by Father Franciszek Sokół, who embarked on a journey to Peru in 1930 alongside a group of Polish emigrants. The introduction of the article stated:

While a group of troublemakers, looking for easy profit and unwilling and unable to work honestly, ‘after many unpleasant deeds’ (such as shooting at indigenous people, plundering their fields, stealing their boats, etc.) left the shores of Ucayali in disgrace, Father Sokół and a group of other, mostly genuine farmers, immediately set to work, surveying the surrounding land, cutting down the forest, and cultivating all kinds of local plants. As people who came from those areas testified, Father Sokół proved to be a man of indomitable will and truly iron perseverance, at the same time a truly passionate farmer.²⁵

It is worth noting that Father Sokół was described in the text as a “truly passionate farmer,” and the group of people who stayed with him — as “mostly genuine farmers.” It implies that the mentioned ‘willing and able to work honestly’ settlers may have been (like Sokół) farmers only ‘by passion’, as their occupational status was not clearly defined. It should also be noted that in the report presented in the article, Father Sokół did not hide his criticism of the settlement organizers at all. However, this criticism focused on the lack of conducting adequate field research prior to settlement, in particular, the inadequate level of land investigation. On the subject of the organization of the settlement itself, he did not mention.²⁶

In the following month, December 1931, the monthly publication *Wychodźca*, which served as the official organ of the Polish Emigration Society, a social orga-

25 Prawda o Peru. *Gazeta Świąteczna* 2646 (18.10.1931), p. 4.

26 Ibid., p. 4–5.

nization committed to supporting Polish emigrants, also featured an article on Polish colonization in Peru. It proclaimed:

The national press has recently covered the issues of Polish colonization in Peru rather one-sidedly, with a distinct flavor of unhealthy sensationalism. [. .] The first batches of Polish settlers arrived in Peru in May 1930. However, the initiated colonization soon came to a standstill because into the virgin wilderness, where only the power of fists and muscles can mean something, were sent groups of settlers, composed of 90% of people who had never before had an axe in their hands. The colonists, discouraged from the pioneering work of colonization, 70 in number, including children, left the area, [. .] but about 40 souls, including children, remained on the spot in Cumaria, completely acclimatized, already used to working in the local conditions and waiting for a further influx of settlers to continue their pioneering work and lay the foundations of a nationally dense Polish colony over the seas.²⁷

Later in the same article, there was an open letter described as being sent to the editors of the monthly publication “by a group of people who have settled in the concession areas and present in their report the real advantages and disadvantages of these areas.” The letter stated:

We, the undersigned, constitute a group of individuals who have no material or moral obligation to remain in Peru. Therefore, our assessment of Polish colonization in this country is completely unbiased and holds great value for relevant entities in Poland and Polish public opinion. [. .]

Recent reports from Poland regarding the intended Polish emigration to Peru indicate a lack of knowledge or misinformation about the possibilities of settlement in this country. Given this circumstance, we consider it our duty to highlight this issue to prevent any irreversible harm to our Nation.²⁸

The stay of Poles in Peru was thus presented in the above article as the realization of Poland’s national interest. However, Maria Bochdan-Niedenthal, who, together with her husband (road engineer Kazimierz Niedenthal), was among the pioneers in Montaña, had a different view of the Polish settlement in Peru. She described her two-year stay in South America in a travel book entitled *Ucayali. Raj czy piekło nad Amazonką*²⁹ (English: *Ucayali: Paradise or Hell by the Amazon*). In her book, she offered criticism of both Kazimierz Warchałowski and the Cooperative ‘Polish Colony’, as well as the Polish-American Syndicate. She noted that the purpose of organizing the Polish exodus to Peru was to rid the country of the unemployed and serve the financial interests of specific individuals. In her opinion, this led to a situation where “For the creators of such plans, it was less important

27 Kolonizacja polska w Peru. In: *Wychodźca* 7 (December 1931), p. 2.

28 Ibid.

29 Maria Bochdan-Niedenthal: *Ucayali: raj czy piekło nad Amazonką*. Warszawa: s.n. 1935.

to create a colonization cell, even if only a trial one, but based on a firm foundation, than to ‘diversionary’ search for territories in the most reckless manner and to give oneself absolution in advance for the failure of such an action.”³⁰ This does not mean, however, that she expressed particular pity for the Polish settlers who arrived in Peru. She believed that “mostly a ‘lumpenproletariat’ of demoralized intelligentsia and workers”³¹ reached Peru. Her opinion of the Polish exiles was therefore not high. Nevertheless, Bochdan-Niedenthal dedicated more space in her descriptions to the issue of the settler profile. She divided the newcomers to the colony into three groups. The first group consisted of the urban element, mostly intelligentsia, who were seeking adventure, dreaming of quick riches, and unprepared for hard work. The second group comprised life derelicts who believed they could secure a life for themselves amidst the chaos of the emerging colony. The third group consisted of true settlers and pioneers. The author considered the first two groups to be either burdens to the building of the Polish settlement or troublemakers.³²

It is worth noting that Maria Bochdan-Niedenthal’s severe judgment of the settlers was shared by Kazimierz Warchałowski, who himself received negative evaluations in her publication. However, for Warchałowski, criticizing the newcomers of the colony served as a means to refute accusations against himself and justify his own mistakes. This need led Warchałowski to unequivocally blame the Polish emigrants for the failure of the settlement campaign in his book *Na wodach Amazonki*³³ (English: *On the Waters of the Amazon*), published in 1938. Regarding the first Polish colonists, he wrote: “Unfortunately, they had flabby muscles and weak hearts. Apart from a few exceptions, it is unknown why they came here. Some rolled up their belongings a week after arrival and left. Others lasted less than two months. Some dispersed along the way. They failed the test of incompetence and ill-will. Most didn’t even try to work. Some did not look into the forest.”³⁴ At the same time, the author lamented the negative reputation left by the Polish settlers within Peruvian society, which was further exacerbated by the actions of representatives from the Polish intelligentsia. These individuals, upon arriving in the colony areas, instead of aiding the settlement idea, brought about its demise. It was about them that Warchałowski mentioned in harsh terms:

³⁰ Ibid., p. 135.

³¹ Ibid., p. 136.

³² Ibid., p. 159–160.

³³ Kazimierz Warchałowski: *Na wodach Amazonki*. Warszawa: Liga Morska i Kolonialna 1938.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 173.

They were the ones who smashed the work that had been initiated with difficulty and tremendous effort, because they were disappointed in their morbid ambitions or dreams [. . .]. They raised a lament, flooded the authorities and editorial offices with complaints, and went out into the world to see that there is no place where work is not required, where conquests come without sacrifice, and where the delight of possession can be achieved without effort. [. . .] Envy, stupidity, and incompetence shook hands. Instead of setting foot firmly in this virgin country, instead of opening wide horizons for Polish thought, of creating a market for industry, of giving the unemployed work, of giving the landless land, we have presented ourselves with the image of a feral and bolshevized bunch of human beings, without any guiding thought, without any moral brakes.³⁵

Thus, not only did these ill-fated settlers act against the national interest. They also inflicted, in the opinion of Warchałowski, serious social and economic damage, on a very broad (state) scale.

It is worth noting, furthermore, that the aforementioned texts, taking the position that individuals who complain exaggerate problems and are to blame themselves (or even lack morality!), failed to pay attention to a crucial cause-and-effect relationship. How did it happen that non-farmers appeared in Peruvian regions despite the provisions present in many documents? According to concessions, permits, agreements, and informational brochures, only families of confirmed farmer status were allowed to go to the Peruvian territories (except for individuals providing organizational, pastoral, or medical services in the colony). If others were sent, the fault lay solely with the recruiting institutions, without justifying it by poor organization, haste, or lack of funds.³⁶

5 Conclusions

The press articles and fragments of travel literature presented above demonstrate the prevalence of two main narrative directions in the memory discourse surrounding Polish settlers in Peru during the 1930s. On one hand, there is a narrative that portrays them as helpless victims and martyrs caught up in circumstances beyond their control. On the other hand, there is a narrative that depicts them as greedy troublemakers, deceitful, incompetent, and lazy individuals. It is worth noting, however, that neither of these narrative directions empowers the Polish colonists. Even when they are given a voice, it is limited to the reader's or recipient's

35 Ibid.

36 Anna Ratke-Majewska: *Stosunki bilateralne Polski*, p. 203–213; Warunki osadnictwa w Peru na terenach "Kolonii Polskiej." In: Archiwum Akt Nowych: *Akta Janiny i Kazimierza Warchałowskich* 105, p. 3.

interest, often serving to generate sensation or support a particular hypothesis. Furthermore, none of the narratives portrayed the colonists as victims of crimes, manipulation and misinformation, instead limiting their depiction to showing them as victims of a bad fate they were unable to counter. In reality, Polish emigrants to Peru endured significant violations of their well-being, regardless of whether some were able to navigate the situation successfully. This should not diminish the magnitude of the irregularities perpetrated by the colonization institutions, whose culpability should be emphasized within the narratives of memory about the Polish settlers.

It is also worth pointing out that the Polish-Peruvian entanglement of communities and cultures that occurred at the beginning of the 1930s also had other significant and long-term effects. Peru in the Polish social space began to appear on the one hand as a paradise on earth and on the other as a savage wilderness unfriendly to humans. This hinged on the subsequent decades' perception of Peruvian areas, with their society and culture, in Poland. It formed a replicated perception that Peru is a country tempting in its charms but unfriendly, dangerous and wild.