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## “I Have Such Mixed Feelings”: Readers Respond to Memoirs by Political Relatives on Lubimyczytac.pl

This chapter explores online reader reviews of popular memoirs authored by female relatives of prominent politicians from post-socialist Poland. The books whose vernacular reception is considered in this article are *Secrets and Dreams* (*Marzenia i tajemnice*, 2011) by Danuta Wałęsa, wife of former Solidarity leader and president in 1990–1995 Lech Wałęsa; *Lady Comrade* (*Towarzyszka Panienka*, 2013) by Monika Jaruzelska, daughter of Wojciech Jaruzelski, the military general and de facto leader of socialist Poland in 1980–1989; *Between Us* (*Między nami*, 2013) by Małgorzata Tusk, wife of Donald Tusk, liberal prime minister of Poland in 2007–2014<sup>1</sup> and president of the European Council in 2014–2019; and, *Secrets of a General's Wife* (*Tajemnice generałowej*, 2015) by Maria Kiszczak, wife of Czesław Kiszczak, the notorious minister of internal affairs and head of the police apparatus in 1981–1990.<sup>2</sup> All these books generated an intense public response, not least through the discussions in online recommendation sites for books such as *Lubimyczytac*, which is a popular Polish platform for readers to connect with one another, read and post reviews, and discuss literary topics. The *Lubimyczytac* reviews are a rich if complex source of material that has not yet been systematically explored. This paper presents a textual analysis or close reading of a sample of the reviews with the emphasis on identifying their recurring features and themes. I will consider what motivates readers to take up the books, how they engage with them, what functions the texts serve, and what value readers ascribe to them. The paper draws on research into contemporary readers and reading practices and on cultural memory, life writing, celebrity, and first lady studies, as these can help

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**Note:** The article is part of the project ‘Translating Memories: The Eastern European Past in the Global Arena’ that has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (Grant agreement No 853385).

1 Donald Tusk returned to office as prime minister of Poland in December 2023 after emerging victorious in parliamentary elections that were widely seen as one of the key political events of the year in Europe.

2 There are numerous other texts of this type, including Jolanta Kwaśniewska’s series of self-help books published between 2009 and 2015, and Marta Kaczyńska’s 2014 memoir about her parents among the best known. None of them, however, has achieved similar resonance to that of those explored in this chapter.

elucidate the ambivalence that underlies the cultural fascination with the life narratives of the wives and daughters of prominent politicians. By focusing on reader responses to four memoirs that represent different types of life writing, different types of political relatives, and different perspectives on the past, the paper provides new insight into how a popular genre is received as media of memory within its contemporary social and cultural context.

While the books whose reception this paper investigates are sometimes considered less than serious and lacking authenticity, they and the responses of readers to them are relevant for at least three reasons. First, they are part of a larger boom in celebrity memoirs that swept post-socialist Poland in the new millennium, marking a significant departure from a tradition of more egalitarian life writing that had dominated the national culture for some two hundred years (Hellich 2016; Rodak 2012). The shift towards elitist life writing, which is epitomised by the celebrity autobiography, was linked to the embrace of individualism after 1989 in the context of commodity capitalism, and it elicited ambivalence from professional critics among academics and journalists because it was often perceived to be a purely commercial undertaking. Many critics bemoaned the popular obsession with celebrity, which they saw as a fashion rather than as intrinsically linked to the structure and dynamics of society, driven by a new economy of visibility and attention (Antonik 2019). The unprecedented intensity and scope of the reception for books authored by Danuta Wałęsa and other female relatives of frontline politicians actually influenced the perceptions of celebrity memoirs in Poland, so that the genre increasingly came to be seen as salient and imbued with both public and private significance (Kułakowska and Łuksza 2015; Nadana-Sokołowska 2018). Literary scholars for instance began to view the popularity of such texts as part of a wider democratising shift in culture that brought into focus the social contexts of reading and what people actually *do* with literature (Hopfinger 2018).

Second, the four memoirs and their reception matter because the emergence of political spouses as significant political actors tells us a lot about post-socialist society. This development is linked to the rise of democratic politics with a free but market-driven press and free elections (Olczyk 2013; Luthar 2010), and simultaneously to a resurgence of traditional values in politics and culture (Korolczuk and Graff 2018). Research on political spouses from the US and Europe confirms that they, perhaps more than other contemporary public figures, embody conventional expectations for women (Anderson 2004; Widlak, Pont-Sorribes and Guillaumet Lloveras 2016; Vigil 2019). As a symbolic resource for male politicians, they tend to reinforce traditional dichotomies between the public sphere, which is political, male, and important, and the private sphere, which is female, domestic, and trivial (Van Zoonen 1998; Harmer 2015). In Poland, where political spouses have traditionally had few sociocultural functions, their newfound prominence also

demonstrates how global collective memory shapes narrative templates for previously absent public roles or paths, such as that of the first lady (cf. Ling and Berkowitz 2018), where frequent comparisons are made to Jacqueline Kennedy or Hillary Clinton.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, and most pertinent for the current volume, the memoirs circulate in a larger context of debates about how to interpret Poland's post-war history, particularly the contested meaning and nature of the social upheaval of the early 1980s. The books came out some thirty years after Solidarity emerged as a left-wing workers' movement that stood against a supposedly left-wing workers' state (Ost 2020), only to be driven underground when that state, represented by General Jaruzelski and General Kiszczak, imposed martial law in 1981–1983. In the thirty years that separate the historical events covered by the four memoirs from their publication, the liberal perception of Solidarity as a symbol of a national anti-communist struggle became the norm and the received wisdom, and the ideological ambiguity of the movement faded from view (Kubik 2015; Ost 2020; Szcześniak 2022). As Polish politics in the new millennium turned into a clash between the national conservative right and its liberal or neoliberal centre-right opponents led by Donald Tusk, and all sides sought to project an image of Solidarity that served their political interest, the question of how to assess the legendary movement and its onetime leader, Lech Wałęsa, became a key dividing line between the two camps. In this setting, any hint of scandalous revelation made the afterlives of reputations or legacies highly contentious, with a political figure's perceived status as a hero or villain potentially shifting over time, even posthumously.<sup>4</sup>

The four texts of self-life-writing thus emerged as part of broader networks of texts about contemporary culture, about fundamental shifts in post-socialist politics, and about contested history, to function in the words of Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson as "supplements, remediations, and new versions interacting with new generations of readers", and as "dynamic sites open to interpretation over the course of their textual afterlife" (2020, 11). Ongoing present-day interest in the four memoirs suggests that the readers expect them to illuminate aspects of the past that do not come across in official histories or other types of memory.

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3 For a recent example, see a biographic publication on Jolanta Kwaśniewska, whose title translates as *The First among Ladies* and is a reference to Kwaśniewska's post-1996 invention of a non-existent first lady trajectory for the new Polish democracy (Priebe 2023). The book's cover is adorned with an image that plays on Kwaśniewska's physical similarity to Jackie Kennedy and the protagonist is repeatedly referred to as the "Hillary Clinton of the East" (Priebe 2023, 7, 26).

4 As evidenced by the allegations that Lech Wałęsa was a communist-era informant or the polarisation that surrounded the multiple trials after 1989 of General Jaruzelski and General Kiszczak for their role in imposing martial law. Jaruzelski died in 2014, Kiszczak in 2015.

Does this mean that these life stories function as modifications to the official narrative that frequently depicts socialism and its end in monolithic terms, conjuring up socialist lives that were rigidly uniform, always oppressed, and chronically unfulfilled? And what happens when personal life accounts are placed within a larger archive of narratives that affects both their scope and their circulation? These are some of the questions this paper aims to explore by analysing the *Lubimyczytac* reviews.

In the subsequent sections, I briefly characterise the four books and their reception in the mainstream media and scholarly outlets, before accounting for how I go about reading the *Lubimyczytac* reviews. I then move on to investigate the main themes in the reader responses.

## The books that launched a thousand debates

The four memoirs discussed in this paper exemplify the generic hybridisation of contemporary life writing, where the distinction between autobiography and biography appears to be increasingly fluid (Antonik 2019, 84; Medecka 2017, 139–141). None of the four is an autobiography in a strict sense, as the books by Wałęsa and Tusk were, to some extent, written or co-written by others as someone else wrote *about* the famous public figure using information provided by that person themselves; Kiszczak's is a book-length interview, so it is structured by someone else; and Jaruzelska's is a collection of sketches.<sup>5</sup> This genre fluidity is reflected in the *Lubimyczytac* reviews, where the designations *autobiography*, *biography*, and *memoir* are used interchangeably, and sometimes even in combination like *memoir-autobiography*. Whereas an autobiography typically “moves from birth to fame and beyond”, a memoir “focuses on a particular time in the writer's life that is somehow significant” (Avieson, Giles and Joseph 2018, 1), which makes it a fitting description here, since all four authors concentrate mainly on their relationship with the famous political relative, and on the 1980s and Solidarity as *the* transformative events of recent history. While all the books maintain a chronological structure, the three spouses dwell little on their premarital life. The opposite applies to Jaruzelska, who is a politician's daughter and whose memoir is centred more on her childhood. Jaruzelska, who is a popular journalist and animal rights crusader, was already more of a celebrity before the publication of her book than

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<sup>5</sup> Wałęsa's book was co-authored by Piotr Adamowicz, a former Solidarity activist who is strongly engaged in the memorialisation of the movement. In 2013, stories emerged that the book was in fact the work of a professional ghostwriter; see Nadana-Sokołowska 2018, 330. For Tusk's book, see Medecka 2017, 140.

the other women were. Moreover, despite the obvious differences in the political legacies of the four politicians, the books use a similar narrative strategy in their biographical portrayal of the men who are hailed as efficient and visionary statesmen, but at the same time criticised for their failings as husbands and fathers.<sup>6</sup>

Wałęsa's *Secrets and Dreams* by far exceeded the other books in terms of publicity and coverage, and the difference in circulation and reception is mirrored in the different sizes of the datasets of reviews for each memoir. The book was adapted for the stage and incorporated into film; it became a veritable "collective cultural experience"<sup>7</sup>. Public interest in Wałęsa's intimate life was not limited to domestic audiences, as the book was widely discussed in the international press and translated into French, Portuguese, Russian, and other languages. Much of the national and international media coverage centred on how Wałęsa's focus on personal relationships and everyday life had shed light on women's experience of history, and how her book provided an important amendment to official memory scripts by exploring a more intimate legacy of a contested past. At home, liberal feminists celebrated Wałęsa's decision to "stand up for herself" as an example of female agency that could empower working-class women within Wałęsa's age group.<sup>8</sup> A conflict soon emerged about the modes of representation that Wałęsa and other political spouses were afforded, as more left-leaning feminists argued that the politicians' wives were cast in highly limited roles that made them inadequate role models for contemporary women, and that their books were part of a neoliberal system of governance that furthered the depoliticisation of society (Mrozik 2012, 2013). This dispute rehearsed not only longstanding disagreements about how to define female emancipation and how to assess the socialist and post-socialist period, two issues that remain closely interwoven in Polish debates (Fidelis 2010; Kościńska 2021; Lišková 2018; cf. Hopfinger 2017, 33–35), but also the arguments about today's popular culture and two contrasting opinions of it, one that is overly positive and a second that is markedly pessimistic.

National conservative commentators saw all four books as evidence of what they perceive as the endless multiplication of "lies" about the origins and meaning

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6 Because her husband was still in office, this proved particularly contentious for Małgorzata Tusk and led to intense media speculation that she was strategically deployed to compensate for emerging inadequacies in her husband's political profile. For an overview, see Medecka 2017, 145–146.

7 I use this term in the definition coined by Meredith Nash as quoted in McDonell 2014, 73. The public debate about Wałęsa's marriage and her own role in Solidarity coincided with Andrzej Wajda's filming of *Wałęsa, Man of Hope* (2013). On the convergence of Wajda's film and Wałęsa's book, see Medecka 2017, 141. On the stage adaptation *Danuta W.*, see Kułakowska and Łuksza 2015, 63–65.

8 For an overview, see Nadana-Sokołowska 2018, 333–336.

of the post-1989 Third Republic. They consider that Lech Wałęsa was not a hero but a traitor and a communist informant, and that his legend, which they believe false, is the very symbol of the Third Republic that they believe to be a sham democracy designed to benefit former communists and those Solidarity elites that colluded with them. Sławomir Cenckiewicz (2011), a controversial conservative historian and one of Lech Wałęsa's chief detractors, claimed that Danuta Wałęsa's "propagandistic" memoir was meant to revitalise this myth. The books by Jaruzelska and Kiszczak seemed to provide even more proof of how communist influence persists in Polish society. The conservatives said that the aim of the books was to confuse the public and obscure any revelation of truth, and that their popular success vindicated conservative calls for a radical renewal of Polish society. These commentators agreed with Cenckiewicz (2013), who argued in a special issue of the prominent right-wing weekly *Do Rzeczy* dedicated to Małgorzata Tusk and other political spouses turned memoirists that the books were prompted by their authors' desire to bolster positive perceptions of the political records of their relatives and to profit financially from the brand that was the family name. At the same time, the conservatives delighted in the critical depiction in the books of the private conduct of the authors' political relatives, as views on political integrity increasingly became intertwined with assessments of private behaviour. It was implied that an absent father or an inattentive husband could not be trusted to act responsibly in other aspects of life, and a similar focus on intimate details dominated in the tabloids. One tabloid wrote that "Danuta Wałęsa comes from a dysfunctional family and has many secrets" (Radź 2015), while another used Małgorzata Tusk's book to reveal that the prime minister relied on the advice of his mother-in-law, who told him "how to govern" (Chajko 2013).

While the books generated polarised reactions along partisan and ideological lines, there were also similarities in the critical engagement across the political divides. The ways in which gender expectations were embraced or challenged in the memoirs became a central issue, and frequent recognition of the books' commercial success was combined with emphasis on their subordinate position in cultural terms as popular texts by and for women. The judgement of the critics included many assumptions about the audience response but little if any actual account of it, and that response was imagined to be a uniform bloc. Critics attached importance to readers' emotional investment in the narratives, but defined this investment as a one-dimensional process of identification that drew on similarity to the narrating I. Moreover, the concern expressed by both leftist and conservative commentators about how mass culture manages, forms, and weakens political agency was valid, but failed to explain the meanings and values attributed by the readers to the memoirs, or their appeal to readers.

## Reading book reviews on Lubimyczytac

Founded in 2009, *Lubimyczytac* [we like to read] is the largest online reading community in Poland (Szajda 2009; Marczak 2011). At the time of writing in July 2023, the website reports 1.2 million users, 3.3 million reviews, and 586,000 books that have been added to the virtual bookshelves. Users on Lubimyczytac can give the books star ratings, write and react to reviews, participate in discussion forums, and get suggestions for future reading choices based on their reviews of books they have read previously. The site also offers literary news, author interviews, book lists, and competitions. In many ways, Lubimyczytac is like Goodreads, the global network that has become an important domain of reception in contemporary book culture (Thelwall and Kousha 2016). Literary and media scholars, among others, have studied reviews on Goodreads as performative acts that function as "a social network identity display", and as texts that are "written in ways learned through use of the social media platform" (Driscoll and Rehberg Sedo 2019, 257; Bartlett et al. 2022, 567–568), and therefore best understood as constituting a genre unto themselves. Other established features of Goodreads reviews are that they focus on describing the reading experience; they are more reader-oriented than other forms of shared reading like book clubs or book festivals, which are more author-oriented; and they tend to express positive rather than negative opinions (Driscoll and Rehberg Sedo 2019, 250–257).<sup>9</sup> Many studies of Goodreads reviews apply digital humanities methods, but this study uses close reading and looks at both individual reviews and whole sets of Lubimyczytac reviews. The themes that interest the readers are expressed in a multitude of ways, making it difficult to capture them through automated methods. To gain a better picture of the material, I coded it manually for recurrent traits and themes: I divided the reviews by category or topic like "politics", "history", and "motherhood", and ran searches for particular phrases like "mixed feelings" or "autobiography".

I examined reviews spanning a decade, from the oldest, published in December 2011 after Wałęsa's *Secrets and Dreams* came out, up to 31 December 2021. This longer period of time was chosen to test whether there were both consistent and fluctuating elements in the textual afterlives of the books. The dataset of readers' responses was taken from the Lubimyczytac site as it appeared on 6 June 2022. The reviews were captured along with the date, the onscreen name of the reviewer, the star rating, and the number of likes the reviewer received from other members. There are 348 reviews and 2297 ratings for Wałęsa's book with an average star rat-

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9 For a critical position on the commercial underpinnings of Goodreads, see Murray 2021, Nakamura 2013 or Trzeciak 2013.



ing of 6.0 out of ten stars; 174 reviews and 1143 ratings for Jaruzelska with an average rating of 6.7 stars; 49 reviews and 241 ratings for Tusk with an average rating of 5.8 stars; and 21 reviews and 70 ratings for Kiszczak with an average rating of 5.4 stars. In total, my sample consists of 592 reviews. More than one in six readers who gave a star rating to the books wrote and posted a review. While some reviewers post long texts, most write a short paragraph on what they thought about a book. Some reviews quote extensively from the books or refer to content published elsewhere in other versions of the same review posted on a blog or on Instagram. The majority of reviews in the sample analysed were written by younger, female readers, and fewer than 10 % were posted by male readers.<sup>10</sup> A possible explanation for this gender disproportion is given by the male reviewers themselves, who often regret that the political spouse memoir is associated with female readers, and express the belief that the genre has broader relevance.

There is no such thing as a typical *Lubimyczytac* review, but many contain a brief explanation of why the reader chose to read the book; comments on different aspects of the text such as its style of writing, main themes, author or protagonist, and genre designation; and assessment of the book in the form of a recommendation based on a reading experience that the reviewers frequently describe as subjective. In the case of the four memoirs, the main motivation for the readers to pick up the books is an interest in recent history, often in combination with curiosity aroused by the publicity and hype surrounding the books. A string of topics relating to the 1980s, Solidarity, and martial law are the themes referenced most in the reviews, followed closely by issues revolving around the definition of a “good” woman such as motherhood, marriage, and spousal or filial loyalty. Two other prominent themes are the readers’ ambiguous relationship with politics and an ongoing moral evaluation of the memoir writers as public figures and as “expressive elites” that “provide a means of cognitive orientation and constitute the embodiment and reference points for both social stability and processes of social change, representing emerging as well as established social ‘characters’” (Van Krieken 2019, 13). These four major themes are closely interwoven in the reviews, and underpin the discussion of numerous other issues that the reviewers address, including those of agency, authenticity, appropriation, myth, identity, and re-mediatization, and a set of problems associated with the public visibility of female political relatives. In the following sections, I do not present an exhaustive reading of the memoirs, but I do include elements of the textual analysis of them when such an analysis may help elucidate the expectations or engagement of readers. One recurrent reaction to the memoirs reported by the reviewers is ambivalence, cap-

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10 The average for Goodreads is that 75 % of users are female (Thelwall and Kousha 2016).



tured in numerous phrases, most markedly perhaps in the phrase "mixed feelings" [*mieszane uczucia*], which appears thirteen times in the reviews. The two foremost areas that provoke heightened ambivalence in readers are the depiction in the books of the socialist past, and the question of personal loyalty, which the readers see as challenged by the undertaking of the memoir writer.

## Socialism with a domestic face

The dominant motivation for engaging with the memoirs expressed by the *Lubi-myczytac* reviewers is the desire to learn about life before 1989. Wałęsa's book especially is referred to as a "lesson in history" or "history in a nutshell" [*historia w pigułce*].<sup>11</sup> Some reviewers allude to nostalgia or travelling back in time to a bygone childhood or youth, but the most affective responses are often posted by those who were not present at the time. The early 1980s and Solidarity are conceptualised by the reviewers as "revolutionary" or "momentous events" that "rolled across our country" and "changed the course of history", and there are numerous references to national identity as a natural framework for discussing the movement. The 1980s appear as a historical moment of contestation and negotiation, and an apex of collective and individual agency, but also as an era that is unknowable ("everything is so complicated [...] it's impossible to know where the truth lies") and constantly reconfigured ("everyone should know about Lech Wałęsa, regardless of [how we might judge him today]"). Despite frequent reference to its political consequences, what intrigues the readers about Solidarity are the mass movement's cultural and biographical effects, or the effects it had on individual lives. The readers expect the memoirs to bring a different kind of understanding of the past and to imbue the events with new meaning through the less-explored terrain of the domestic and the quotidian, captured in the repeated phrase *od kuchni* [from the kitchen], meaning to take a look behind the scenes or to glimpse what is usually hidden from public view.

Some readers confess that before turning to the books they had asked family members about life under martial law, but found the responses too bland or devoid of drama:

- Mummy, were you afraid when martial law was imposed [in December 1981]?
- Sweetie, it was winter, I had a baby at home, and I really had other problems to deal with.

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<sup>11</sup> When quoting from the reviews, I will not cite the reviewers' usernames. For the reasons behind this choice, see Driscoll and Rehberg Sedo (2019, 250–251). The translations from Polish are mine.

To tell the truth, I was a bit disappointed by my Mum's attitude to historical events. Workers were on strike, there was martial law, and the murder of Father Popiełuszko – well, yes [she says], all those things happened [...] yes [...] she was concerned, but [...] she had a young child at home [...] there was enough to think about. The event that made the greatest impression on her during those years was the explosion in Chernobyl [...] But I was so insanely curious about how it all looked from the inside. That is why I reached for Danuta Wałęsa's book.

Socialism is depicted in the books through a flexible evaluation of the past that makes it possible to merge stories of a happy life told from the perspective of a child (Jaruzelska), a naïve girl (Tusk), or a young working-class mother (Wałęsa) with questions about the regime's legitimacy (cf. Nugin and Jõesalu 2016; Silova, Piattoeva and Millei 2018). Kiszczak for example seeks to balance her mostly positive image of the old system by criticising issues like bureaucracy or the inefficient management of resources, and she emphasises her initial eagerness to join Solidarity (2015, ch. "Chcę wstąpić do NSZZ 'Solidarność'"). Wałęsa and Tusk on the other hand combine their disdain for the regime with an appreciation for some parts of life under socialism, mainly by focusing on living environments and their complex relationship to social mobility, as there was a lack of visible inequality and a strong sense of community but also shortages of housing and of consumer goods. Both reject the label of poverty as irrelevant to their life stories or, more broadly, to the socialist period.<sup>12</sup> But while the authors' evaluation is flexible, so are the reactions of the readers, and the readers use the notion of "communism", or the more neutral acronym PRL for the People's Republic of Poland, to describe various features of everyday life under socialism, even those that are not distinctive to the pre-1989 era. They are also able to reconcile the more nuanced accounts presented in the books with obstinate generalisations, by acknowledging that the socialist era was "less materialistic" for example while at the same time reviling it for its dire "poverty".

Two elements, however, prove difficult to incorporate into a flexible interpretation, and cause consternation among younger readers especially. The first is that the four books pay only scant attention to the year 1989, which the younger readers expect to be portrayed as more of a turning point. The second, and more important, is the account in the books of martial law. The focus in the memoirs on mundane spaces disrupts the totalising account of a perpetual state of oppression, and of victimised citizens living in constant fear, which lies at the heart of the

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12 Wałęsa 2011, 77, 81; Tusk 2013, ch. "Nasze 'dorosłe' życie bez obowiązków". In fact, the protracted end of socialism during the 1980s triggers a sense of loss in the four books and requires a complex reconstruction of the self in its wake. Tusk, for example, details the depression she suffered when she moved from a socialist form of housing to an individualised, private form (2013, ch. "Nie mogę się przeprowadzić" [I cannot move]).

totalitarian interpretation of history that is prevalent among younger readers on *Lubimyczytac*. The expectations created by this interpretation clash with how the books describe the conduct of the communist-era security services and the level of repression experienced both by activists and by ordinary people; in Wałęsa's book for example, the security service agents give her a lift to the hospital when one of her children falls ill. "I honestly expected the activities of the security services to be depicted as more brutal", notes one reviewer, while another writes:

Reading [Wałęsa's] book I conclude that back in the day, Lech was safe, no one tortured him during interrogations, home searches were civilised, and security services were not that bad! When [Lech] was interned [during martial law], things were not so bad either: his wife visited and he could take some time away from the kids.

Even so, only a few reviewers respond by either "romanticising" or "demonising" the past (cf. Hopfinger 2017, 28–29, 31–32). Of the 174 reviews of Jaruzelska's book, six could be classified as partisan anti-communist for their strong bias, and only two of those do not mention any positive features of the book at all such as its sense of humour or that it is well written. For the majority of reviews, the intersection of genre, gender, subject position, and power means that the four narratives are rarely perceived as a threat to dominant discourses. Their status as popular memoirs, the distance between public figures and ordinary people, and differences of age and class all influence how the readers perceive the truths presented by the text. The reviewer who expressed disappointment with her mother's lack of heroics concludes:

I thought that Lech Wałęsa's wife would choose a different focus for her memoirs. But, in her book, I find the same aspect of reality that was and still is most important to my Mum. [...] I think it is good that [Danuta] dared to write these memoirs. Her voice should be heard too. [...] History will judge everything the way it sees fit, anyway, we can only hope that, in the end, the truth will triumph rather than a version that suits those in power.

Moreover, the four authors face different constraints in writing about their life before 1989. For Wałęsa and Tusk, these constraints arise from the demands of dissidence and the recognition of that within the text. To downplay the heroic aspects of the democratic opposition, as Tusk does when she injects humour into the description of her husband's political engagement in the 1980s, risks causing offence (Karaś 2013). Jaruzelska and Kiszczak meanwhile have to acknowledge their privileged position under socialism and negotiate it in the text. This is challenging for Jaruzelska who writes about herself as a child in a manner that is both playful and fragmentary, and about her parents as individuals who are weighed down by the sheer pressures of life as much as by specific political events. The *Lubimyczytac*

reviewers acknowledge the allure of this account of an innocent child, but they also object to how the adult author fails to address the child's lack of knowledge. Because of this "style of writing", the book is deemed "shallow", evasive, without reflection, or "depth", and the narrator is considered "either naïve or dishonest". Many readers express regret that Jaruzelska's book lacks more "serious" engagement with the events of martial law, which, some believe "could have been the strongest part of her autobiography".

There are other aspects of the socialist past that create uncertainty and inconsistency in the reviews. One is family and gender, which produces a series of often contradictory statements ranging from perceptions that socialism was a "hotbed of patriarchy" to the opposite view; and another is the status of the Catholic church, whose wide-ranging autonomy in Poland after 1956 is difficult to align with any dualistic vision of the socialist era. Another topic that provokes strong reactions is the international communist movement and socialist Poland's links to the global South. Twelve of the reviews in the Jaruzelska sample foreground and explicitly criticise the book's description of a visit to Cuba and the author's praise, however restrained, for the Cuban version of socialism.

## Politics without politics

While the Solidarity era is recalled by the authors and their readers alike as a time of possibility when people "stood up for themselves" and "spoke their mind", contemporary politics is seen as lacking in both inclusivity and transformative potential. And where the liberal interpretation of Solidarity that dominates the reviews represents the ultimate fantasy of national unity, post-socialist politics quashes all hopes of consensus and a conflict-free state. Most disturbing to the readers is the growing polarisation that they believe is shaping every aspect of public life, and is becoming a negative lens through which both policy issues and current and past political figures are viewed. In this polarised environment, political wives and daughters appear as figures that embody "an idealised version of politics, contrasting with the political world dominated by men and linked to negative stereotypes" (Widlak, Pont-Sorribes and Guillaumet Lloveras 2016, 78).

An important element that helps the four authors rise above the partisan fray, even as attitudes toward their politician relatives shape feelings towards them, is their embrace of the traditionally feminine traits and values of restraint, empathy, and discretion. Jaruzelska for instance awakens respect for her "positive attitude to life" and to other people, including her father's political adversaries. Wałęsa's consistent criticism of her husband's political opponents meanwhile is dubbed "controversial", and Kiszczak, who comes across as brash and makes excessive

statements about her husband's political importance and legacy, is reprehended. The preference for a conciliatory tone in the reviews extends to the controversial politicians themselves, who are the husbands and fathers of the authors. The conventional depiction of Polish attitudes towards Wojciech Jaruzelski is that he roughly splits the population into two halves, where half see him as a patriot, and half as a traitor, a "*Ruski* general in a Polish uniform" according to one review, but the majority of responses on *Lubimyczytac* do not match these extremes. The biographical, or autobiographical, lens of his daughter's book shifts the focus onto the attachments of her father other than party political, primarily those of his aristocratic class background, his Catholic upbringing, his occupation as a "typical" soldier, and his personal life, and this creates a space where the reviewers can move beyond tacit assumptions of an easy convergence between institutional histories and individual life stories (cf. Mrozik 2016).<sup>13</sup>

However, the status of an author as the wife or daughter of a prominent politician also provokes antagonistic reactions in the readers. Many profess annoyance with how the publicity surrounding Wałęsa's book depicted her as "heroic" when, in the eyes of many readers, "unlike ordinary women, she had ample help" and "even back then, the Wałęsas were relatively well off". While some scholars identify a democratic discourse in Wałęsa's book, exemplified by her unimpressed account of interactions with US presidents, European royalty, and famous artists (Nadana-Sokołowska 2018, 354), the *Lubimyczytac* reviewers perceive the same stories in a different light. Rather than seeing her attitude as evidence of egalitarianism, many admonish Wałęsa for being "indifferent", "arrogant", or, perhaps worse, incapable of fully benefiting from the opportunities she had been granted in life. Notwithstanding elements of "celebrity bashing" or ambivalence about power in the hands of women in this criticism, the antagonism is also caused by the conviction that major positions of influence should be reserved for those elected to office, and by discomfort with how the growing emphasis on individuals removes the focus from collective endeavour, which is a problematic tendency with a mass movement such as Solidarity.

The question arises, whether, despite reviewers often declaring their aversion to politics, reading and discussing this reading with others could prompt them to reflect on the implications of being part of larger communities. One reader claims to have picked up Tusk's book as part of a search for a "*polityka bez polityki*" [politics without politics], a concept she proceeds to define as a "reality that is so close to and yet so independently distinct from great national events". This phrasing

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13 Of course, the most startling element in Jaruzelski's biography is the family's deportation to the Soviet Union during World War II and his subsequent conversion to communism.

brings to mind Lauren Berlant's influential concept of *intimate publics* (2008, X), whose readers do not directly address social or political issues but thrive in "proximity to the political [...] often [...] acting as a critical chorus that sees the expression of emotional response [...] as achievement enough".<sup>14</sup> One notable feature of the Lubimyczytac reviews is the importance placed on how the book was acquired, whether it was bought, and if so, whether at a reduced price; recommended by a friend or another poster; or borrowed, with recurrent motifs including mention of waiting lists for books and receiving advice from librarians. Reviewers also find it relevant to mention whether they will keep the book once they have read it, display it on a shelf, exchange it for another book, or make it available to other potential readers by passing it on to a public library. Reading on Lubimyczytac thus involves interacting with others and making frequent reference to "the materiality of the book" in the quality of its paper, illustrations or copyediting.<sup>15</sup> In addition, the reviewers often remark how reading the memoirs is "like talking to a friend", "meeting over coffee", or even becoming "part of the family". This tendency to evoke informal exchanges taking place in domestic, gendered spaces can be interpreted in different ways. Conversations "over coffee" might be seen as a way of recasting "female" issues as valid political concerns, but they might also place interpersonal relations above public deliberation, thus "reinforc[ing] the idea that women's political power is, or should be, grounded in their ability to influence others relationally" (Vigil 2019, 76).

## Mothers and wives, above all?

Given the unique status of Solidarity in the national imagination, and the status of mothers as agents of cultural memory, it is hardly surprising that the traditional patriotic ideal of the Polish mother [*matka Polka*] is frequently invoked in reviews of Wałęsa's book.<sup>16</sup> But motherhood is also a central prism for discussion of the other three authors and their lives, though it is framed in very diverse ways.

The Polish mother trope places national political import on the role of women as mothers who create new generations of patriots. Deriving legitimacy from its links to the Catholic cult of the Virgin Mary and to Romantic literature (Walczew-

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<sup>14</sup> See also Fuller and Rehberg Sedo 2013 or Driscoll and Rehberg Sedo 2019, 249.

<sup>15</sup> Driscoll and Rehberg Sedo find the opposite tendency in Goodreads reviews, where books as "material container[s] of the text" (2019, 253–254) have limited importance.

<sup>16</sup> The title of this section is a reference to Vigil's (2019) excellent discussion of the impact that republican motherhood rhetoric has on US presidential elections and on public ideas about the female presence in political space.

ska 1999; Jabłkowska and Saryusz-Wolska 2011), this concept makes a familiar yet highly versatile point of reference for the readers. The phrase "a typical *matka Polka*" can denote a noble ideal of enduring relevance, but it can also signal a reviewer's rejection of perceptions of women as "incubators" [*inkubator*] or "baby machines" [*maszynka do rodzenia dzieci*], two depreciative terms used about Wałęsa in the reviews. Readers who take a positive view of the Polish mother trope emphasise that it allows recognition for those who historically received little attention, and a reassessment of what counts as political participation. One *Lubimyczytac* reviewer portrays Danuta as just as much, or "perhaps even more", of a hero as her husband, and wonders "how things would have turned out" if it had been *her* and not him "who jumped over the shipyard fence [to join the strike in 1980]". The defining characteristic of a mother, whether traditional or otherwise, is that she is self-sacrificing and puts the needs of others before her own. Wałęsa is seen as a heroic mother by the reviewers when she appears as a skilful manager of her family's daily life so that her husband can pursue his all-important engagement in politics. Conversely, her maternal credentials are called into question when she is deemed to focus too much on herself, for example when she prioritises a hairdresser's appointment even though two of her children have gone missing. Meanwhile Kiszczak, though she married young and had two children, is hardly ever referred to as a mother in the reviews because she is perceived as egoistic and "self-obsessed". Her admission that she had an abortion is pitted against her claim that she was a practising Catholic and she is branded a hypocrite. However, despite this concern with self-sacrifice, positive depictions of female lives on *Lubimyczytac* portray women who both are mothers and deal successfully with other challenges in life. Readers consistently applaud professional achievement and consider it natural for women to work outside the home, whether to improve their family's quality of life, contribute to society, or fulfil their own ambitions. Any tendency for women to define themselves exclusively through their children or spouse is mocked.

A shift in focus to the potential for a crisis in motherhood is evident in Jaruzelska's book, whose narrator oscillates between motherhood and daughterhood. Feminist scholars have criticised how the daughterly self's working through relationships and their meaning in Jaruzelska's memoir ultimately becomes a search for and recognition of the father within the self and the self within the father, while the mother is sidelined or rejected (Piekara 2020). Even so, almost half of the reviewers on *Lubimyczytac* comment on how the book portrays mother-daughter relations as a source of conflict and discontent, thus signalling the continuous importance that is attributed to the presence of a maternal force. A different emphasis on maternal ambivalence appears in Tusk's account of postnatal depression, her difficulty in relating to her newborn child, and her child's illness as a mo-



ment of breakdown followed by a transformation for the maternal subject. This narrative wins widespread reader approval because it is coupled with the rhetoric of traditionalism, since the book stresses in the end that children are a mother's greatest happiness. In contrast, Kiszczak also describes the loneliness she experienced as a young wife and mother, the sense that her first child came "too soon", and a subsequent abortion that she had because she could not cope with another child at this point, but she does not embed this narrative in traditional values and so the result is a low level of reader approval. Tusk's book also stands out for how it depicts domesticity, another hallmark of traditionalism. She is the only one of the four women to document her housekeeping prowess not only by providing detailed descriptions of the family home but also by including culinary recipes and amusing stories about her initial struggles with household chores. This aspect of Tusk's memoir garners positive responses even from those readers who claim not to have enjoyed the book otherwise. When her life story is compared to Wałęsa's, Tusk is often deemed to embody a more relevant social character.

Being a good mother is often linked to being a good and loyal wife. For a memoir writer however, closeness to the other, in the words of one life writing scholar, "mak[es] it hard to demarcate the boundary between where one life leaves off and another begins" (Eakin 2004, 8). Is it even possible to tell a wife's story or a daughter's without infringing upon the stories or truths of their intimate others? One reviewer of Wałęsa's book states:

I have read the book, but I believe that it should not have been written in this form. As a fan of biographies, I have a certain boundary, as recent events and the lives of others should be respected. And some parts of the information were too personal to share with a broader group of recipients, namely the fragments that dealt with the very intimate relationship with Lech. [...] My intuition tells me that this has not helped the marriage.

On top of that, the books' dual strategy of hailing the men as great politicians while criticising their failings at home often makes it difficult for the readers to decode the intentions of the authors. What is the purpose of a political spouse who publicly reproaches her husband? Criticism beyond mild complaints such as an unhealthy diet or hogging the remote control invariably becomes problematic. Kiszczak, who portrays her husband as a deeply flawed human being, is praised for her honesty but widely condemned for staying in the marriage. Wałęsa, meanwhile, is not only criticised for her perceived disloyalty to her husband, but also for being "passive" and "indifferent", *and* for not providing enough support for Lech.

## Passing moral judgement on political wives and daughters

Where the highest praise for an author on *Lubimyczytac* is *liking* them or wanting to engage in friendly exchanges over coffee with them, the most scathing rejection is that an author is not "someone I would like to befriend, work with or even be neighbours with", which is a comment from the Kiszczak sample. There is occasional mention of admiration or identification, but the reviewers focus much more on raising questions about the life choices and personal motivations of the authors. Julie Wilson comments that contemporary texts about the private lives of female public figures, or celebrity gossip, provide readers with "standardised testing centres" (Wilson 2010, 32) for negotiating their own social roles, and for testing their attitudes to a range of topics oriented towards personal choice. Such topics in the *Lubimyczytac* reviews include marriage and romantic relationships, family, parenting, and work-home balance, with readers consistently praising honesty, self-sacrifice, and loyalty, while condemning envy or hypocrisy.

One topic of significance for the processes of moral adjudication taking place in the reviews is how proper names are handled, as they, according to Phillipe Lejeune, "possess a sort of magnetic force, and convey an aura of truth to everything that comes close to them" (Lejeune quoted in Bartlett et al. 2022, 563). The reviews repeatedly cite Jaruzelska's decision to retain her family name despite its controversial associations as evidence of her admirable filial loyalty, while the fact that Wałęsa's actual first name is the less glamorous sounding Mirosława triggers suspicion: "Danuta (Mirosława)?", "Danuta *vel* Mirosława". In addition, the tendency of Wałęsa and Kiszczak to refer to their spouses as "my husband" or, even more impersonally, by the husband's last name tests readers' credence and their trust in the authors' depiction of their marital relations. This naming practice awakens doubt about the sincerity of the narrator's emotions, influencing the overall impression of the readers: "This is a book written without passion, feeling, sensitivity, magic and all the things that a book should have. [...] the most frequently used words are [...] 'my husband' – strange – there is no Leszek, Lech, Lesiu".

Another prominent issue is appearance and the choices made between different modes of femininity. The question of dress as a site of political contestation remains relevant even after the end of the authoritarian era, with the mnemonic afterlives of Wałęsa's 1983 trip to Oslo to receive the Nobel Prize for peace on behalf of her husband as an obvious example. Her performance, carefully built around items of clothing functioning as cultural reference points, was a self-confessed rare moment of political agency, and it is recognised as such by readers on *Lubimyczytac*. However, it is in the context of the socioeconomic change after

1989 that the relationship between legitimate cultural capital and appearance becomes more complex. McRobbie (2009) and others have argued that presenting an authentic version of oneself in all aspects of daily life is crucial for successfully navigating and portraying one's identity in a neoliberal society. Clothing choices are seen as moral choices by readers because they show who the authors *really* are. Jaruzelska's rejection of a hyper-feminine appearance, which is associated in her book with the mother, and her subsequent adoption of a more androgynous style is valued as a natural mode of femininity that is tied to notions of class and authenticity. One reader links this display to the book's overall moral legitimacy: "In the words of Monika Jaruzelska herself: 'minimalism and class' will always come out on top". However, the valorisation by readers of styles that are related to "Western" middle-class ideals of restraint is not easily disentangled from remnants of the socialist ideas of virtue and frugality, and the traditional notions of being "cultured". This is evident in relation to the books' accounts of official visits and foreign travels, as this is an area that invites particular scrutiny of the appearance of political relatives and raises the issue of whether the women are worthy representatives of the nation. Here, the readers express interest in details of dress and insider gossip, but at the same time they voice the belief that people in positions of privilege should be able to tell enlightening or relevant stories about their travels abroad, so that any excessive focus on appearance by the authors is deemed inappropriate.

## Conclusions

This paper approached memoirs authored by female relatives of prominent politicians as both a rich resource for examining larger societal transformations, and as productive cultural artefacts whose complexity is reflected in the reader reviews on Lubimyczytac. The Lubimyczytac reviewers find the memoirs by political relatives to be ambiguous and contradictory texts that are at once a source of pleasure and of apprehension. They give readers the chance to engage with contentious issues like the legacies of the Solidarity movement and the 1980s; a perceived deficit of democratisation and other inadequacies in post-socialist politics; the enduring yet far from static ideals of womanhood in Polish culture; and a string of ethical concerns that are reconfigured around personal choice. At the same time, the memoirs are perceived as non-threatening, which allows the reviewers to confront some issues and equally evade others. For example, the reviewers frequently state their interest in and desire for representations that might supplement or complicate the dominant interpretations and social memories of socialism, but these declarations do not lead to any direct discussion of the varied meanings that could be

attached to recent history. The recurrent themes articulated in the readers' reviews correspond largely with those identified by professional critics. However, the readers' assessment does not always match the expectations of others. The professional critics tended to highlight identification, equating it with a relatively narrow concept of role models, as an important element in the reception, but my analysis suggests that the response of the readers to the memoirs is more multi-layered, and that moral criticism plays a prominent role in this. The professional critics also emphasised the significance of Wałęsa's book while the other three books were deemed less relevant, but from the perspective of the online reviews, all four books are remarkable. Tusk's book for example is highly interesting for the way it employs discourses associated with new traditionalism and personal responsibility.

It is easy to see how the public interest in the wives and daughters of politicians is problematic from the perspective of gender politics, as it calls to mind conservative ideas of traditional womanhood. However, the *Lubimyczytac* reviewers do not embrace these concepts in an uncritical manner. The "mixed feelings" experienced by the readers suggest that they see the memoir of the political relative first and foremost as dealing with the paradoxes and contradictions of socialist and post-socialist lives. The reviews become a discursive space in which these incongruities are articulated and discussed, and in which the wives and daughters of prominent politicians appear not simply as the embodiment of traditional femininity but as contradictory figures who elude easy categorisation. Moreover, because the four texts of self-life-writing are closely linked to one other in time and by historical circumstances, and because the reviews compare and draw parallels between the different life experiences and social practices of the four authors, and between the multiple roles they inhabit across longer periods, the reading of one story fluctuates depending on the afterlives of the others. By constantly re-shifting the four life narratives within the changing contexts of socialist and post-socialist society, the *Lubimyczytac* reviews create new reference points and open potential new strains of conversation between the life stories themselves and between the life stories and the readers.

The findings of this paper raise further questions about the political spouse memoir and its reception, including the relevance of research on material that is not in English, and the extent to which reception should be studied separately from, or in combination with, textual analysis. In addition, public perceptions of the spouses and relatives of politicians under socialism and post-socialism warrant more scholarly attention than this topic has received so far.

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