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A Generation, or the Ordering of History— The Case of the Year 1968 in Poland¹

L’embarras de richesse

A generation was, and still is, one of the most pervasive categories with which we construct our stories about the past. The attractiveness of this concept is derived from, among others, the fact that it naturally directs attention to, and at the same time explains, the processual nature of history. Understood in this way, a generation is first and foremost a malleable metaphor for change, be it cultural, political or social, and the tensions associated with it. Importantly, this metaphor is used not only to explain what has already happened, but also to make diagnoses about the present and even the future as well. This persuasive power of the generational perspective determines its popularity in public discourse, above all in the media. As a consequence, we constantly experience the trivialisation of the issue of generations, which turns out to be a key to a quick understanding of the complexity of the surrounding world; a key that is commonsensical and accessible to almost everyone. The current overabundance of analyses which have at their core the exploitation of differences between the implicit worldview and lifestyles of the “millennials,” “zoomers” and “Gen-Alpha” makes it very clear that as a category by which we impose order on our knowledge of the past, a “generation” requires caution and deeper reflection. Fortunately, we have something to refer to; for decades now, in the humanities and social sciences both in Poland and worldwide, there has been a continuing, at times very lively discussion about what a generation is and how it can be studied.²

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² A. Kamińska, *Kategoria pokolenia we współczesnych badaniach nad społeczeństwem*

If in trouble, get Orłowski

The title of this essay refers directly to a collection of texts which illustrate the place of the category of a 'generation' in German scientific reflection. These texts had been edited and prepared for print by Hubert Orłowski and were published in a book form a few years ago. What is at issue here, however, is not simple inspiration provided by the intriguing title of that book, or at least not exclusively this, especially considering that in view of the increasing "overproduction of science" the title of a scientific publication should at least minimally arouse the interest of potential readers. On the contrary: the importance of that book, which is difficult to overestimate, as well as its usefulness for the issues which I consider have a much deeper foundation, and this is what I would like to briefly outline here.³

Firstly, Orłowski clearly directs our attention to the specific context in which the generational perspective is applied, especially today, namely to the question of how community thinking and group identities are constructed. He himself explains it as follows:

Finally, a strategic remark concerning the very conception of this volume. It is not intended as a documentation of contemporary German research on the category of a generation. The intention is quite different. It is based on the aspiration to penetrate the GERMAN IDENTITY DISCOURSE by tracing reflections and debates on the presence and usefulness of the category of a generation in the ACQUISITION OF COMMUNITY BINDERS AND THE TRACING OF NATIONAL TRAUMAS [all emphases mine—A.C.]. The selection of texts, in turn, is intended to provide the most pertinent documentation of the key moments of this discourse.⁴

In other words, Orłowski is concerned less with the empirical verifiability of this or that concept of a generation than with drawing our attention to the fact that the discussion around generations—not only in Germany, after all—is inevitably entangled in the problem of collective perceptions regarding the shared past. In this sense, let it be added, generational narratives become an important form of collective memory, which many see primarily through the lens of its identity-forming and legitimising functions. In sum,

i kulturę—przeгляд problematyki, "Kultura i Historia" 2007, issue 11, www.kulturaihistoria.umcs.lublin.pl/archives/113 [accessed 10 Nov. 2020]; W. Kudela-Świątek, M. Saryusz-Wolska, *Pokolenie*, in: *Modi Memorandi. Leksykon kultury pamięci*, ed. M. Saryusz-Wolska, R. Traba, Warszawa 2014, pp. 372-76; H. Jaeger, *Generations in History: Reflections on a Controversial Concept*, "History and Theory" 1985, issue 3, pp. 273-92.

³ *Pokolenia albo porządkowanie historii*, ed. H. Orłowski, Poznań 2015.

⁴ H. Orłowski, *Pokolenia albo porządkowanie historii. Wprowadzenie*, in: *Pokolenia albo porządkowanie historii*, ed. H. Orłowski, Nauka i Inowacje, Poznań 2015, p. 13.

the generational perspective on the ground of historiography appears here rather as an issue in the area of “second-level history.”

Secondly and just as importantly, in referring to the thought expressed a while ago by the German historian Martin Sabrow in the context of the divisions of historical time, Orłowski suggests that a “generation” may exist in two overlapping dimensions, i.e. as a “caesura of experience” and a “caesura of interpretation.” In other words, a “generation” can be related to an individual/personal experience of past events, as well as to a historiographical category imposed top-down—a category through which (retrospectively and externally) this past is ordered. In doing so, Sabrow, and Orłowski after him, emphasise that in the context of recent history we are dealing, in most cases, with situations where the orders of “experience” and “interpretation” intersect. Analysing the problem of the ‘68 generation—a problem which is by definition multidimensional, of which I shall write in more detail below—we should certainly bear this important intersection in mind.⁵

Thirdly and finally, Orłowski devotes a large section of his essay to the fundamental role which Karl Mannheim’s text, now almost a century old, had played in the development of scientific thinking about generations. An analysis of both the origins of the concept proposed by the German sociologist and philosopher and the meandering course of its reception leads Orłowski to conclusions which to me, too, have been important clues in the reflections offered herein (whether they were also successful I leave to the readers).

Orłowski warns us, therefore, against the temptation to ritualise or trivialise Mannheim’s thought, that is against making very superficial references to his works with the sole aim of validating our own, not very well thought-out analyses conducted allegedly from a generational perspective. At the same time, in my view, Orłowski’s essay can be read as a warning against an overly rigid and unreflective use of the same generational perspective. To simplify matters greatly, we may assume that Orłowski says: Mannheim had undoubtedly been the father of a “generation” as an analytical category that is important and inspiring to this day, but we should treat his (and his successors’) reflections merely as a signpost in our own research. To sum up: we should not forget that Mannheim’s “generation” is a certain “ideal type,” and although this is no small a thing, it is no more than that.⁶

⁵ Ibid., pp. 18–9; cf. M. Sabrow, *Zäsuren in der Zeitgeschichte*, www.docupedia.de/zg/sabrow_zaesuren_v1_de_2013 (accessed 13 Dec. 2022).

⁶ H. Orłowski, *Pokolenia albo porządkowanie...*, pp. 41–3. Mannheim’s conceptualisation of the problem of generations has, of course, been subjected to extensive criticism over the years—interestingly, especially in Germany. The Polish reader is in the fortunate position of finding a synthesis by Oliver Neun discussing the main threads of this debate in the

The Mannheimian breakthrough

It is not my task to refer to the entirety of Mannheim's conception, which was first presented in print in 1928.⁷ Naturally, I will focus only on the aspects that I consider crucial to my own reflections on the '68 generation in Poland. The enduring value of Mannheim's proposal, one that has resisted the passage of time, lies in the fact that it is coherent and, through references to specific historical events and phenomena, it does not "dangle in the void." Moreover, it has been formulated in a way that is clear and therefore accessible to the reader. At first glance, of course, Mannheim's definition of a generation seems to complicate matters by means of the added details, but over time it becomes apparent that these details form a coherent whole and, in addition, facilitate the subsequent application of his theory in research practice.

At the heart of Mannheim's approach to the issue of a "generation" is the distinction he introduced between the *GENERATIONAL LOCATION*, *GENERATION AS AN ACTUALITY* and *GENERATION UNITS*. To risk an oversimplification, we can think of each of those as successive moves of a camera's zoom in order to closely focus on an object under analysis, in this case the historical/social reality.

The most general condition for the existence of a generation is the biologically determined similar age of its participants. This is our basic view, a broad panorama. However, it does not mean that all those born at a similar time form a "generation." In the search for the correct generation, we must therefore narrow our perspective for the first time and couple age with another factor, which Mannheim called a "generational location," explaining its essence as follows:

Members of a generation are "similarly located," first of all, in so far as they all are exposed to the same phase of the collective process. This, however, is a merely mechanical and external criterion of the phenomenon of "similar

cited collection edited by Orłowski. It is worth emphasising that Neun's text presents an interestingly argued defence of Mannheim's concepts; see O. Neun, *Krytyka pojęcia pokolenia Karla Mannheim'a*, in: *Pokolenia albo porządkowanie historii*, ed. H. Orłowski, Poznań 2015, pp. 130-55. In contrast, the notion of presenting a reading of Mannheim's "generation" which, while critical, would not disown the concept as a whole was pursued by two Portuguese scholars, who a decade ago proposed its reinterpretation, in their own words, "as discursive formations in the Foucauldian sense;" see S. Aboim, P. Vasconcelos, *From Political to Social Generations: A Critical Reappraisal of Mannheim's Classical Approach*, "European Journal of Social Theory" 2014, issue 2, pp. 165-83.

⁷K. Mannheim, *Das Problem der Generationen*, "Kölner Vierteljahreshefte für Soziologie," pp. 157-85, 309-33. In the current text I made use of a 1950s English translation from the German original, *The Problem of Generations*, in: idem, *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge*, London 1952, pp. 276-322.

location.” . . . The fact that people are born at the same time, or that their youth, adulthood, and old age coincide, does not in itself involve similarity of location; what does create a similar location is that THEY ARE IN A POSITION TO EXPERIENCE THE SAME EVENTS AND DATA, *etc.* . . .⁸

Belonging to the same “generational location” still does not decide on whether we can speak of a “generation as an actuality.” The latter, according to Mannheim, is created “only WHERE A CONCRETE BOND IS CREATED BETWEEN MEMBERS OF A GENERATION by their being exposed to the social and intellectual symptoms of a process of dynamic de-stabilization.”⁹ Here, naturally, arises the problem of how to verify that the aforementioned “concrete bond” has actually been created. In order to solve this dilemma, we must zoom in one last time, in this case on the analysed slice of reality, in search of the phenomena that Mannheim called “generation units” and whose essence he defined as follows:

These are characterized by the fact that they do not merely involve a loose participation by a number of individuals in a pattern of events shared by all alike though interpreted by the different individuals differently, BUT AN IDENTITY OF RESPONSES, A CERTAIN AFFINITY IN THE WAY IN WHICH ALL MOVE WITH AND ARE FORMED BY THEIR COMMON EXPERIENCES.¹⁰

In other words, in Mannheim’s proposed approach, “generation units” formed on the basis of shared formative experiences are the necessary building blocks of a “generation as an actuality.” Equally importantly, at this point Mannheim drew attention to the fact that within the same generation we may be dealing with several “generation units” (which, let it be noted, may be mutually opposite) and it is only together that they “constitute an ‘actual’ generation precisely because they are oriented toward each other, even though only in the sense of fighting one another.”¹¹

Problems with the sixty-eighters

The “recap of Mannheim” as proposed above is, in my view, particularly relevant when we try to apply the concept of a generation to the events of

⁸ K. Mannheim, *The Problem of Generations...*, pp. 297-8.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 303.

¹⁰ Elsewhere, Mannheim elaborates on his understanding of “generational units” in the following way: “Individuals of the same age, they were and are, however, only united as an actual generation in so far as they participate in the characteristic social and intellectual currents of their society and period, and in so far as they have an active or passive experience of the interactions of forces which made up the new situation;” *ibid.*, p. 304.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 307.

1968, both in their global and national contexts. To begin with, let us look at the former.

For many years, there existed a *sui generis* consensus about what the '68 generation had been in the West. This consensus encompassed both scholarly studies and journalistic statements and was undoubtedly cemented by pop culture, which vigorously exploited the "Summer of 68" motif. The image of the '68 generation consisted of components such as youthfulness, questioning of prevailing social and cultural norms, refusal to obey the authorities, affirmation of freedom and love, condemnation of the hypocrisy of their parents' generation, non-conformism, and rejection of consumerist lifestyles.

Those commenting on the events of the time also largely agreed that while the inherently left-wing revolution of the sixty-eighters failed as a strictly political project, it was at the same time a cultural success that was difficult to overlook. In this perspective, it is the revolutionary shift in social mores carried out by the baby boomers, a shift encompassing the hitherto existing family model, the division of social roles between the sexes, the sphere of sexual life or the rights of ethnic minorities, that appears to be the most lasting fruit of the year 1968.¹²

Of course, the above consensus did not by any means imply a consensual assessment of the changes initiated by the sixty-eighters. To this day, some see the year 1968 as the symbolic beginning of an end, a powerful tsunami that swept away the foundations of modern civilisation and caused its now ongoing regression. For others, on the other hand, the same events represent the symbolic opening of a new chapter in human history, and a far better one, too, because it is inclusive and democratic. It is not my task to decide which side of this argument is correct, but only to point out that the legacy of the "1968 revolution" aroused, and still continues to arouse, sharp ideological and political disputes.¹³

As has already been said, the majority of commentators, regardless of their worldview or political sympathies, unanimously and unequivocally

¹²M. Klimke, *Revisiting the Revolution: 1968 in Transnational Cultural Memory*, in: *Memories of 1968: International Perspectives*, eds. I. Cornils, S. Waters, Bern 2010, pp. 41-3.

¹³In the realities of Poland, the most recent example of the "black legend" of the changes in Western culture symbolised by the year 1968, one that resounded far and wide in the media, was the case of a new textbook on modern history by Wojciech Roszkowski—id., *Historia i terażniejszość: 1945–1979*, Wydawnictwo Biały Kruk, Kraków 2022, pp. 332-51. See also: P. Osęka, *Siedem błędów i manipulacji o buncie 1968 roku na 21 stronach podręcznika Roszkowskiego*, "Oko.Press," 24.09.2022, www.oko.press/siedem-bledow-i-manipulacji-o-buncie-1968-roku [accessed: 02.01.2023]; A. Leszczyński, *Historia i terażniejszość Wojciecha Roszkowskiego jako prawdziwy koniec polityki historycznej*, "Przegląd Historyczny" 2022, issue 4, pp. 717-29.

associated the generation of young people protesting in 1968 with left-wing convictions. On the margins of the mainstream discussion concerning the phenomenon of the sixty-eighters, however, there were those, shy at first but increasing in numbers over time, who offered a more nuanced picture of the changes then occurring, including strong ideological divisions among the young people. Anna von der Goltz, who researches this phenomenon in its theoretical as well as empirical dimensions, notes that the problem of “the other side of the sixties” was initially raised mainly in the USA, to reach Europe only later.¹⁴ In fact, quite contrary to popular opinion, the issue of the at least dualism of the ‘68 generation, i.e. the question of the attitudes taken “around 1968” by young people with conservative or even right-wing convictions, currently appears in the mainstream of research concerning that generation.¹⁵

From the perspective adopted herein, the above remarks are all the more relevant considering that recent research on “the other side of the sixties” refers both to an in-depth reading of Mannheim’s concept of a generation and to the tools of oral history. Moreover, since one of the key concerns of this type of research is the question of “generational belonging” and the construction of collective identities, this research naturally also refers to issues in the field of memory studies.¹⁶

Problems with the year 1968 in Poland

The above-signalled sensitivity to a more comprehensive approach to the issue of the sixty-eighters is, in my opinion, of great importance when the Polish realities are reviewed. This is because the events which played out in the spring of 1968 in Poland, and which are collectively called the March ‘68 there, had several overlapping dimensions. Scholars studying *polski rok*

¹⁴ A. von der Goltz, *A Polarised Generation? Conservative Students and West Germany’s ‘1968’*, in: “Talkin’ ‘bout my Generation:” *Conflicts of Generation Building and Europe’s 1968*, ed. A. von der Goltz, Göttingen 2017, pp. 195-97.

¹⁵ One of the most recent examples of this type of research is von der Goltz’s study entirely devoted to the 1968 experience of West German students holding centre-right views: A. von der Goltz, *The Other ‘68ers: Student Protest and Christian Democracy in West Germany*, Oxford—New York 2021.

¹⁶ Apart from the works by von der Goltz cited above, at least some of the texts from the volume edited by her are worth mentioning in this context, including, e.g., O. Matějka, *Uses of a ‘Generation’: The Case of the Czech ‘68ers’*, in: »Talkin’ ‘bout my Generation«: *Conflicts of Generation Building and Europe’s 1968*, ed. A. von der Goltz, Göttingen 2017, pp. 116-36; H. Nehring, *‘Generation’, Modernity and the Making of Contemporary History: Responses in West European Protest Movements around 1968’*, in: »Talkin’ ‘bout my Generation«: *Conflicts of Generation Building and Europe’s 1968*, ed. A. von der Goltz, Göttingen 2017, pp. 71-94.

sześćdziesiąty ósmy, the Polish year 1968, agree that even in purely political terms it cannot be confined solely to the formula of a youth revolt. In addition, brutal anti-Semitic campaign on the one hand, and fierce political struggle within the communist apparatus of power on the other, were integral components of what is called *wydarzenia marcowe*, the March events, in Poland.¹⁷ Thus, it seems clear that the central/main event stimulating the emergence of the Mannheimian “actual generation” in Poland, namely the March ‘68, was itself composed of several equally important processes/phenomena, and this situation naturally fostered the emergence of several potential versions/variants of this generation.

Of course, I was not the first to point out that in the aftermath of the March events there emerged specific generational formations, understood in the spirit of Mannheim as a community of experiences. This issue was analysed by, among others, Jerzy Eisler, the precursor of research on the events of 1968, and above all by the sociologist Hanna Świda-Ziemba as well as, recently and most thoroughly, by Piotr Osęka. What these scholars share are undoubtedly a Mannheimian definition of a generation and a primary focus on the political dimension of the Polish youth revolt. In this perspective, the generation of ‘68 is, first and foremost, a generation of protest, and consequently a very important stage in the history of the Polish democratic opposition.¹⁸

The cited scholars are, of course, aware that we can also speak of the generation of “post-March émigrés,” i.e. those contemporaries of the “March rebels” who left Poland in the wake of the brutal anti-Semitic campaign of the year 1968. Thus, the latter originated from the experience of the anti-Semitic campaign followed by forced emigration and, as a result, the experience of making a new life in a reality extremely different from the socialist one. In the case of the former, the basis for the formation of a specific generational bond was their participation in a protest against the oppressive authorities, with all the consequences of this involvement.¹⁹

¹⁷ J. Eisler, *Marzec 1968: geneza, przebieg, konsekwencje*, PWN, Warszawa 1991; id., *Polski rok 1968*, IPN, Warszawa 2006; A. Friszke, *Anatomia buntu: Kuroń, Modzelewski i komandosi*, Znak, Kraków 2010; P. Osęka, *Marzec ‘68*, Znak, Kraków 2008; D. Stola, *Kampania antysyjonistyczna w Polsce 1967–1968*, Instytut Studiów Politycznych PAN, Warszawa 2000.

¹⁸ H. Świda-Ziemba, *Młodzież PRL: portrety pokoleń w kontekście historii*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 2010; P. Osęka, *My, ludzie z Marca: autoportret pokolenia ‘68*, Wydawnictwo Czarne, Warszawa—Wołowiec 2015. See also: K. Jasiewicz, *Generation ‘68 in Poland (with a Czechoslovak Comparative Perspective): Introduction*, “East European Politics and Societies” 2019, issue 4, pp. 817–32; I. Grudzińska-Gross, *1968 is not what it used to be*, “East European Politics and Societies” 2019, issue 4, pp. 833–42.

¹⁹ Studies on the experience of the “post-March émigré generation,” written with the

March at the periphery?

An innovation I would like to propose here is an attempt to reflect on whether and, if so, then to what extent. Mannheim's division of the "actual generation" into "generation units" may prove useful in analysing the variety of ways in which March '68 had been experienced in Poland. Importantly, the research on the generation of revolt as presented by both Świda-Ziemia and Osęka focused primarily on the perspective of those participants in the March events who came from Warsaw. For me, on the other hand, the point of reference is the memories of students who experienced March '68 in Łódź, at that time the second-largest city in Poland, one with a traditionally industrial profile and fresh, then only 20 years old, academic traditions. It is therefore natural for me to be interested in the question of a possible specificity of March '68 generation in Łódź, as is noticeable in the accounts of its members.

I would also like to add that the source basis for my analysis is a total of 45 narrative interviews with participants in and observers of the events of March '68 in Łódź, which were collected between 2008 and 2020.²⁰ Due to the volume limits of an academic article, in the following text I will refer directly to only some of them. In addition, it must be noted at this point

application of the tools of oral history, were published, among others, by Joanna Wiszniewicz, Teresa Torańska, Mikołaj Grynbeg—see J. Wiszniewicz, *Z Polski do Izraela. Rozmowy z pokoleniem '68*, Karta, Warszawa 1992; ead., *Życie przecięte: opowieści pokolenia Marca*, Wydawnictwo Czarne, Wołowiec 2009; T. Torańska, *Jesteśmy: Rozstania '68*, Świat Książki, Warszawa 2008; M. Grynbeg, *Księga wyjścia*, Wydawnictwo Czarne, Wołowiec 2018. In addition, we have at our disposal important studies by Marcin Starnawski and Marek Szajda analysing interviews with post-March émigrés; see, e.g., M. Starnawski, *Socjalizacja i tożsamość żydowska w Polsce powojennej: narracje emigrantów z pokolenia marca '68*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe DSW, Wrocław 2016; id., *Przestrzenie wygnania w autobiograficznych narracjach emigrantek z pokolenia Marca '68*, "Przegląd Kulturoznawczy" 2017, issue 4, pp. 537-56; id., *Pokolenie Marca '68 na wygnaniu: wzory integracji i zmiany identyfikacyjne*, "Kwartalnik Historii Żydów" 2019, issue 2, pp. 389-416; M. Szajda, *Obraz Polski wśród polskich Żydów w Izraelu. Narracje przedstawicieli aliji gomul'kowskiej i emigracji pomarcowej*, "Wrocławski Rocznik Historii Mówionej" 2018, volume 8, pp. 143-77; id., *Żydowska pamięć o Polsce lat 1967-1968. Analiza doświadczeń i emocji na podstawie wybranych wspomnień*, "Śląski Kwartalnik Historyczny Sobótka" 2019, issue 1, pp. 43-79; id., "Out of Poland, Not to Israel, but Out of Poland: Factors Influencing the Decision to Leave Poland after March 1968: On the Basis of Research from the 1970s," "Kwartalnik Historyczny" 2021, issue 5, pp. 105-29.

²⁰ I must add a further clarification here. In the group of 25 interviews collected between 2008 and 2016, only a part were conducted by myself. In the remaining cases, the interviews were conducted either by Paweł Spodenkiewicz or by us both jointly. The remaining 20 interviews from 2017 to 2020 were conducted by myself. Transcripts of all the collected interviews are currently in my possession.

that this is not my first attempt to deal with this material.²¹ Finally, I must point out that the study by Zbigniew Romek was published as my research entered the final phase. Seeking the Mannheimian generation understood as a community of experiences, Romek based his work on, among others, interviews with participants of the March '68 events in Łódź. However, he is primarily interested in the perspective of participating in the 1968 student revolt, whereas the other dimensions of March '68 are in his book clearly relegated to the background.²²

“Revolt generation”

In my search for possible location-specific differences in the testimonies of the March '68 generation coming from Łódź, I necessarily focused on two themes in their statements which in my opinion are of key importance. Since the foundation of Mannheim's “actual generation” is, as has already been said, a specific community of experience, I thought it worthwhile to look at how the Łódź rebels perceive the sources of their involvement at the time and how they explain the meaning of the March revolt. In other words, I focused on those parts of their testimonies where they explained why they had become involved in the protest and how they perceived its aims.

Conducted in the contexts outlined above, an analysis of the collected statements of the participants in the March '68 events in Łódź reveals, in my view, a considerable conformity with the results of the research conducted by Świda-Ziemia and Osęka. For example, the key to understanding the phenomenon of this section of the “revolt generation” which became a seedbed of protest seems to be a combination of its participants' drive for knowledge and their critical analysis of the surrounding reality. In the case of Łódź, the group of young people who first felt the need to react to what was happening in Warsaw and to take action were mostly ambitious students of Law and Sociology at the local university. They were well-read and curious about the world, they had broad horizons, and long, profound discussions were their element. Importantly, they also knew one another on a personal

²¹ A. Czyżewski, *The Myths of March '68: Conflicts of Memory in Contemporary Poland*, in: *Unsettled 1968 in the Troubled Present: Revisiting the 50 Years of Discussions from East and Central Europe*, eds. A. Konarzewska, A. Nakai, M. Przeperski, Routledge, Abingdon—New York 2020, pp. 163-187; A. Czyżewski, *Marcowe mity a pamięci komunikacyjna polskiego społeczeństwa*, “Sensus Historiae” 2023, issue 2, pp. 15-28.

²² Z. Romek, *Pokolenie Marca '68: wariant łódzki*, Akademia Finansów i Biznesu Vistula, Warszawa 2022. Interviews analysed by Romek had been collected in 2018 by the ŚLAD Association—Multimedia Documentation Studio (Stowarzyszenie ŚLAD—Pracownia Dokumentacji Multimedialnej).

level, often spending holidays together and going to the same parties. A former sociology student recalls her circle of friends from her study group, most of whom, including her, became involved in the March protests:

Those were the kind of people to whom studying was an important matter. This was studying, not just spending time having fun. So, a sort of mutual support groups evolved. You would go to the others' places. People came to my place very often, because I lived close by, in the city centre. Well, the flat was quite big, but well-peopled. This was not a true salon; my parents would receive their guests and I mine. So, there, . . . something was happening all the time, someone would pop in, someone would come along.²³

While sociologists integrated as a group within the framework of the science club and field classes, law students heavily involved in the March protests could be found, among others, at the Theory of the State and Law seminar held by Professor Wróblewski. In the memories of the regulars of this group, the seminar appears as a space for free discussion; a discussion by definition interdisciplinary and oriented towards going beyond a narrow understanding of law as a rigid set of rules. It was also a place where, unsurprisingly, issues at the intersection of law and politics would arise and be debated. Years later, one of the regular participants in these meetings recalled:

Professor Amsterdamski, for example, occasionally appeared in our circle . . . Associate Professor Ija Lazari-Pawłowska came, her husband, too [philosophers from the University of Łódź—A.C.]. There was a mathematician whose name I no longer remember So there was an awful lot of those critical impulses coming to us. So that was one of the spheres, or groups, or environments, that shaped my views on the matter. The second very serious milieu were the sociologists. We were surrounded by an interesting social world, hence came that law theory, to go more beyond the norm; but also the whole social background. So I went to sociology classes with passion and there I got to know all that sociological society. The two groups intermingled in different ways.²⁴

Thus, in Łódź, just like in Warsaw, the core of the '68 generation were groups of young people united by their "critical formation," as one of my interlocutors called it; a formation rooted in mutual trust and growing from free exchange of ideas. In the words of one of the leaders of the Łódź rebel milieu, who long before March had already made an attempt, promptly quashed by the authorities, to set up a political discussion club:

²³ Interview with Maria, 2015.

²⁴ Interview with Cezary, 2015.

Well, we were looking for any pretext to go to a meeting; . . . such were the times. And that gave us the opportunity to sort of live consciously in that system, because if not for that, it [life in the system] was an overpowering, total lie.²⁵

The strength of the March “revolt generation” lay in the fact that the protest initiated by members of the “critical formation” was joined by their peers. Previously quite indifferent to politics, adrift in the socio-political realities of Poland in the era of Władysław Gomułka, the young people decided that this time the situation required their active involvement. This regularity, noted at the Warsaw level, was also noticeable in Łódź. This is how one of the “rank-and-file” rebels explains its essence:

. . . I did not play any special role in March, but March had an enormous impact on me, because I saw from up close that something historical was happening and that history was unfolding, I was being as if absorbed by it, and I could try to start doing something that would have some influence on what was happening. And only then did I start to get interested in politics.²⁶

Thus understood, the cement that binds the ‘68 generation together are the universal values shared by its participants. This is how another of its minor (in the organisational sense) members explained his participation in the ‘68 movement:

After all, I had been taught that Mickiewicz was the most national writer and so on, and here they suddenly ban something. There was some kind of contradiction [in this—A.C.]. And the driving mechanism in this case, on my part, was the slogan of individual autonomy . . . Not even freedom, but autonomy—that no one will decide for me: if I want to get drunk, I’ll get drunk, and if I want to go to a rally, I’ll go to a rally. And here it turned out that this was not allowed.²⁷

At this point, March became a formative event to all its participants, regardless of where they lived, what they were studying and with what baggage of experiences they entered the year 1968. A community of experiences was

²⁵ Interview with Jerzy, 2008.

²⁶ Interview with Stefan, 2015.

²⁷ Interview with Mieczysław, 2020. Mieczysław refers here to the decision of the communist authorities to take the performance of Adam Mickiewicz’s *Dziady* (*The Forefathers’ Eve*) off the billboards of the National Theatre in Warsaw. The authorities believed that this staging, directed by Kazimierz Dejmek, of one of the most important works of Polish Romanticism contained strong anti-Russian (read: anti-Soviet) accents. The decision, announced in January 1968, triggered a grassroots protest action by Warsaw university students, which proved to be a very important impulse for the outbreak of an open revolt of the Polish young people in March of the same year.

born, which included, for example, participation in protest rallies, secretly copying and distributing leaflets or participation in a sit-in strike inside their home university. On the other hand, a generational experience understood in this way includes, for example, the fear of verbal or physical violence from the authorities or the uncertainty of one's own future in the face of disciplinary proceedings brought by universities against students deemed to be the instigators of the protests. As can be seen, the perspectives of those who participated in the 1968 protest at its centre (which was undoubtedly, and in many dimensions, Warsaw) and of those who experienced it on the implicit periphery had more common points than differences.²⁸

The “generation of post-March emigration”²⁹

The case of the second generation that grew up on the March '68 events, that is, the generation of the post-March emigration, is similar. The experiences of those who made the difficult decision to emigrate converge, regardless of where the anti-Semitic campaign found them. A frequent theme in their memories is a sense of injustice and alienation from a world they had hitherto treated as their own. At the same time, the interview with Lilianna makes us realise that the same events that constitute the “generation of rebellion” — in this case, the occupation strike at the Faculty of Law of the University of Łódź — could have been experienced in an extremely different way by persons who had Jewish roots:

My friend came to me not only to inform me about this form of demonstration . . . but also to tell me that I should rather not be there. I asked why, was it because I had the flu? I was very sick, I had a high temperature. And he says: “It's not only that, I think that there are reasons you shouldn't show up there, because everyone who goes in is being watched. Names are probably being recorded. You may get in trouble because of that.” I was quite surprised and very curious as to why. Why others could come in and not be worried about any consequences. He somehow made it clear that this was about my background. I can't describe the feeling, because on the one hand I thought he was a good friend of mine [so] he was probably sincere in advising me this

²⁸ In this aspect, my findings undoubtedly coincide with those of Zbigniew Romek, who examines the “Łódź variant” of the '68 generation from the perspective of the participants in the contestation at Łódź universities at the time. Romek, however, focuses primarily on substantiating the thesis that March '68, understood as a youth revolt, means not only the implicit centre of the events of the time, i.e. Warsaw, but also (again implicitly) other, less important centres, such as Łódź.

²⁹ The term “post-March emigration” in the context of persons who left Poland in the wake of the “anti-Zionist campaign” is used here following Dariusz Stola; see. id., *Emigracja pomarcowa*, Instytut Studiów Społecznych UW, Warszawa 2000.

way; and on the other hand I was utterly shocked that my good friend could say something like that to me in the first place. It was my first exposure to this political aspect of all that; that when there were events taking place among students, demonstrations and so on, then I was an “other” person, a person who might get into some trouble or would have a record. This was very upsetting for me.³⁰

In the case of Krystyna, who was a teenager at the time, the sense of shock and disbelief was compounded by the fact that up to that point, her parents had concealed from her the fact that all her relatives had Jewish roots. Suddenly, almost overnight, her parents lost their jobs and she had to face a completely new situation. In her story, therefore, March '68 is, first and foremost, the traumatic experience of the arduous and insulting procedure of obtaining a permission to leave Poland, which required the persons in question to, among others, renounce their Polish citizenship. From her perspective 1968 turned out to be, above all, a cycle of harassment that previously had been completely unimaginable:

. . . I also remember what you were allowed to take with you, what you weren't allowed to take—you would make lists, and books—there were certain restrictions. And of course these things were later handed over [to them—A.C.] and they were packed in some crates. And it was terrible, all of it . . . —at the customs they could, for example, say: you people have too many dessert plates. And they chose [for confiscation—A.C.] those dessert plates that were, for example, from the service, and not those that were sort of extra.

The culmination of Krystyna's extremely distressing experience came with the so-called “handover” of the flat:

. . . later we also had to hand over the flat. The flat had to be handed over a few days before, they did an inspection. It was very unpleasant when people from the house administration came. I was there at the time and they said such unpleasant things, I remember that, because Mum was very, very sad. But that was the end of it, we handed over our flat and later we stayed . . . at the neighbours' for a few days . . . before we left Poland. It was all very, very sad.³¹

³⁰ Interview with Lilianna, 2015. The interview with Janusz (who, like Lilianna, was a student of the University of Łódź at the time) even more eloquently demonstrates the phenomenon of the fluidity of the various dimensions of the March experience. It should be noted that in his story, the experience of student revolt and the experience emigration complement each other. Interview with Janusz, 2015.

³¹ Interview with Krystyna, 2015.

In the vast majority of interviews with the “post-March émigrés” from Łódź—and the cases of those who left other Polish cities were similar—the descriptions of the harrowing events they experienced in the aftermath of March ‘68 while still in the country are accompanied by extended passages devoted to the challenges that awaited them after their arrival in the West.³²

So perhaps “generational units,” after all

Do the above comments mean that in the context of the March generations, Mannheim’s remarks about internal tensions and conflicts within generational formations are quite useless? It seems to me that this is not the case. However, their cognitively interesting application is only possible when, in our search for a more comprehensive picture of the Polish generation of ‘68, we perceive the self-portrait of the March ‘68 generation emerging from the collected testimonies of its participants in a manner suggested by Sabrow, that is, in the context of the “caesura of interpretation” rather than the “caesura of experience.”

This approach turns out to be particularly fruitful in the context of the memories of the members of the “March Rebellion generation” coming from Łódź, since a closer look at their statements reveals that while they share a similar set of basic experiences of the March ‘68, they may differ significantly in the ways in which they assign deeper meanings to these experiences.

As I tried to show in my essay on the “myths of March,” adopting such a perspective allows us to perceive that in the interviews with those participants in the March ‘68 events for whom it was, above all, an experience of revolt there exists a certain tension in interpreting its ideological face at the time. Also, it seems to me that the division between the “myth of a revolution” and the “myth of an uprising” as outlined in the cited essay can be considered, in the spirit of Mannheim’s proposal, to be two “generation units” that together constitute a single generation built upon a shared experience of protest against authority.³³

³² Ibid.; Interview with Lilianna, 2015; Interview with Janusz, 2015; Interview with Maria, 2020.

³³ A. Czyżewski, *Marcowe mity a pamięć...*, pp. 121-39. In this context, I cite, among others, a passage from the interview with Włodzimierz, containing the following words: It seems extremely funny today, but I wanted to say that March, and that whole rebellion, and everything that was done then was really under the banner of socialism, that we are not for socialism, but for a better face of it. So [our] singing the Internationale was supposed to symbolise a return to the source, a rejection of that evil, and the Internationale is such a song, after all. That’s how I justify it, because today . . . it’s funny, but back then it wasn’t. The whole

In other words, the “generation of the March rebellion” may comprise a “generation unit” with a distinctly left-wing profile, for whom March ‘68 was a farewell to the project of the socialist utopia, but, concurrently, the same generation may contain a “generation unit” whose members strongly believe that their protest of that time was not a manifestation of naïve faith in the hope of repairing socialism, but a consequence of the insurrectionist tradition deeply rooted in Polish culture.³⁴

To sum up, shifting the centre of gravity of the discussion on the “generation of the March ‘68 rebellion” from the central to the peripheral positions makes it possible to obtain a clear grasp of its internal differentiation, as well as tensions and disputes related to this differentiation. What is more, the above analysis allows us to pose a preliminary research hypothesis that the analyses of the “generation of the March rebellion” conducted so far, mainly from the central perspective, are dominated by the testimonies of men and women associated with the circle of the “commandos,” who at that time were still strongly left-wing, and, consequently, that the “insurrectionist” perspective of this “generation unit” is potentially underestimated.³⁵

roots of March are leftist;” Interview with Włodzimierz, 2015. I juxtapose Włodzimierz’s statement with the recollections of Jerzy, for whom it was clear that his “March rebellion” was not an attempt to reform the oppressive communist system, but to overthrow it. Interview with Jerzy, 2008.

³⁴The fact that in the collected materials I did not find clearly outlined tensions within the broadly understood “generation of post-March emigration” does not, of course, mean that they are certainly not there. Perhaps, in searching for them, it would be necessary to broaden the analytical field and, following the suggestions offered by Wiszniewicz and Grynberg, to juxtapose, for instance, the experiences of those who left Poland as a result of “the anti-Zionist campaign” with the perspective of those among Polish Jews who stayed in the country nonetheless. Although in the interviews I had analysed, where the interviewees would fall into this particular group, the issue raised here did not emerge, I nevertheless think that the problem undoubtedly requires further research and it is worthwhile to signal it at this point.

³⁵The epithet “commandos” (Polish: *komandosi*) was used in reference to a group of several dozen young people who during the 1968 events were students at Warsaw universities and who were united by strong ties of camaraderie and left-wing convictions. The name of the group originated from the custom, practised by its participants even before 1968, of attending official discussion meetings and showering the speakers with inconvenient and politically incorrect questions. The group included Barbara Toruńczyk, Teresa Bogucka, Seweryn Blumsztajn, Jan Lityński and others; its informal leader was Adam Michnik. The group’s intellectual mentors, Jacek Kuroń and Karol Modzelewski, were both about a decade older than the “commandos” themselves; they were authors of the famous *Open Letter to the Party*, containing fundamental criticism of the political system of the People’s Republic of Poland from the position of Marxist orthodoxy, for writing which they were imprisoned in 1965. For more on the topic, see, above all, A. Friszke, *Anatomia buntu: Kuroń, Modzelewski i komandosi*, Znak, Kraków 2010.

Andrzej Czyżewski

A Generation, or the Ordering of History — The Case of the Year 1968 in Poland

Abstract

The main object of this article is to examine to what extent the concept of generations applies to the Polish 68ers and their oral testimonies. To provide a deepened analysis of this problem, I divided my text into two major parts. In the first one, I drew both methodological and historical context of the '68 generation controversy, including, for example, long-lasting discussions about the advantages and limitations of using “generation” as an analytical tool in social science and humanities. The second part of my article consists of the original analysis of oral testimonies — gathered mostly by myself — of the participants of the so-called “March events” from Łódź. Here I seek to find answers to such questions, for example, as: to what extent does the dominant narrative about the Polish '68 generation apply to more provisional circumstances? Is Mannheim's distinction between “generation” and “generation unit” a possible solution to a problem of different, and in many cases even opposing, generations rooted in the same historical events?

Keywords: Karl Mannheim, generations, generation units, 1968, Poland, Łódź.

