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Naked eye: the Belarusian press of the Second Polish Republic in egodocuments

Abstract

The article deals with the particular kind of documentary sources for the history of the Belarusians in the Second Polish Republic – memoirs and diaries. The memoirs of Liudvika Wojcik, Janka Bagdanowič, Marjan Pieciukievič, and also the diaries of Maksim Tank and Piotr Siaŭruk are reviewed. The article concludes that personal writings provide unique information about the Belarusian national movement and the Belarusian press that can be applied in further historical research.

Key words: Second Polish Republic – Western Belarus – Belarusian press – egodocuments.

„Z Badań nad Książką i Księgozbiorami Historycznymi” – Udział zagranicznych recenzentów w ocenie publikacji; Stworzenie anglojęzycznej wersji wydawniczej publikacji; Digitalizacja tomów archiwalnych rocznika w celu zapewnienia otwartego dostępu do nich przez Internet oraz wdrożenie i utrzymanie cyfrowej platformy redakcyjnej – zadanie finansowane w ramach umowy nr 653/P-DUN/2019 ze środków Ministra Nauki i Szkolnictwa Wyższego przeznaczonych na działalność upowszechniającą naukę.

Egodocuments are invaluable source materials as they deliver the insights into the lived experience of the people. The diaries and memoirs of the participants of the Belarusian national movement in the Second Polish Republic can be studied as a separate object of historical research, but also can back up historical facts from other sources, and connect them to create a more accurate picture of historical events and figures.

Belarusian population in the Second Polish Republic amounted to over 2 million people, making it the third biggest minority in the multinational country¹. The Belarusian national movement in interwar Poland faced a number of serious problems that it sought but failed to entirely overcome: economical underdevelopment of the Belarusian territories, poverty and illiteracy of the biggest part of the Belarusian community, and its religious division. One of the major influences on the movement was the communist ideology that was promoted by the USSR government through the Communist Party of Western Belarus. While the USSR politics in supporting radical pro-soviet movement among the Belarusians were mostly consistent, the Polish government fluctuated over time from mild support of the cultural side of the Belarusian movement to its full oppression (which became especially severe in the late 1930s).

The number of published memoirs and diaries of Belarusians, who lived in the Second Polish Republic, is fairly big and still growing. First published recollections (mostly in the form of the articles in periodicals) about the Belarusian national movement had already appeared in 1920s-1930s, but most of them had covered only the first years of the 20th century – before, during and right after the first Russian revolution – when the movement started to acquire wide scale. Some articles that summed up the achievements and downfalls of the national movement, appeared in the late 1930s², but none of them were personal writings. First memoirs were published after the World War II as early as the late 1940s – early 1950s (in the magazines “Ranica”, “Bačkaŭščyna”, “Žnič”, “Božym Šliacham”) by the emigrant Belarusians³. In the BSSR first memoirs of Belarusians who lived in the Second Polish Republic have started to be published only in the latter half of the 1960s when political climate had changed and the subject of the western Belarusian territories had lost its acute political meaning. Still all the memoirs and diaries concerning Western Belarus (name for the territories with the predominant Belarusian population within the Second Polish Republic, which was used both in the BSSR and by the Belarusians in the Second Polish Republic) were heavily censored until the very end of the existence of the USSR. Anything contradicting official viewpoint on the interwar history of Belarus couldn't have been published.

¹ A.M. Vabiščėvič, *Nacyjanalna-kulturnaje Źyccio zachodniaj Bielarusi (1921-1939 gg.)*, Brest 2008, pp. 12-13.

² See, for example: A. Stankievič, *Bielaruski chryścijanski ruch*, Vilnia 1939.

³ L. Ūrėvič, *Mėmuary na ěmigracyi*, Minsk 2005, pp. 21-85.

Belarusian periodicals have been frequently mentioned in various memoirs and diaries, but the writings of five particular authors provide interesting and detailed evidence concerning the Belarusian press in the Second Polish Republic.

Liudvika Vojcik (pen name – Zoška Vieras) was a writer, a poet, a publisher and an editor of Belarusian periodicals, but she is best known for her unique role in the revival of the Belarusian cultural movement that started in the latter half of the 1960s.

She was born in 1892 in a small Ukrainian town, where her father, an army officer, was stationed. After his death in 1908 her mother and she moved to Grodno. During all her years in Grodno she was an active member of the Haradzien-ski Hurtok Bielaruskaj Moladzi, the circle of young Belarusians, who started it to promote Belarusian culture. L. Vojcik participated in all the activities of the circle (staging, reciting, and lecturing); she also held the position of the circle's librarian. That's how she got to know some of the Belarusian movement leaders who took part in publishing famous Belarusian newspaper "Naša Niva" – she wrote to them when she wanted a subscription. With some of them (Aliaksandr Ulasaŭ, Anton Luckievič) this acquaintance had become life-long.

One of the projects of the circle was to publish an amateur newspaper in the Belarusian language – "Kolas Bielaruskaj Nivy". L. Vojcik had written a poem for it, and also had tried her hand at printing. The whole print run of 100 copies was successfully sold out.

In 1923 she moved to Vilnius, and lived there until her death in 1991. Since she was well acquainted with Belarusian political activists, she was invited to work as an administrator on the editorial staff of Belarusian leftist newspapers that were published by the Belarusian deputies in Sejm and later by the Belarusian political party named "Bielaruskaja Sialianska-Rabotnickaja Hramada" (BSRH). Simultaneously she published on her own initiative the children's magazine "Zaranka" (in 1927-1931). She also had become one of the executives of the cooperative society "Pčala" (created to forward Belarusian honey trade). She held keen interest in botany, so she had published a Belarusian botanical dictionary (in which she provided names of plants in Belarusian, Polish, Russian and Latin) in 1924 and a book on the honey plants of Belarus in 1925. She had taken part in publishing the first Belarusian tear-off calendar; she had also published the first book of poems of Michaś Mašara.

Later in the 1930s L. Vojcik became an editor of another children's magazine "Pralieski"; she also was writing articles on agriculture for the magazine "Samapomač", and essays for children and youth for the magazine "Šliach Moladzi". In 1934 she became an editor of the magazine "Bielaruskaja Borć" published by the cooperative society "Pčala".

With the beginning of the World War II her participation in national movement stopped; great hardships in her life began after the war: her son

was arrested in 1945 (he was sent to a prison camp without a right to correspondence, so for all ten years he had been imprisoned L. Vojcik didn't know for sure whether her son was alive or not), and in 1948 her husband had suddenly died⁴.

In the late 1960s she was “discovered” by the new generation of Belarusian historians and journalists. Since then and almost until her death L. Vojcik continued to correspond with a big number of writers, scholars, students, musicians and artists (Larysa Hienijuš, Uladzimir Karatkievič, Arsień Lis, Jury Turonak, Hienadz Kachanoŭski among them). She also kept in touch with her friends and acquaintances from the 1910s-1930s (Siarhiej Novik-Piajun, Vanda Liavickaja, Nadzēja Šnarkievič, Michaś Zabejda-Sumicki, Marjan Pieciukievič, Janka Bagdanovič and others).

During the late 1960s and early 1970s she wrote a series of short memoirs (27 in total), each devoted to a certain person she knew or an event she had taken part in. Some of these memoirs depicted her editing and publishing work, namely memoirs about publishing the newspaper “Kolas Bielaruskaj Nivy”, publishing “Zaranka”, administrative work on the editorial staff of the BSRH newspapers, about publishing Belarusian calendar and Mašara's poetry book, and publishing the magazine “Bielaruskaja Borć”⁵.

Even though L. Vojcik wrote a considerable number of memoirs she have never told her own life story: she always focused on prominent persons and important events she had been a witness or a participant of, mentioning her personal life only when it was necessary for her narrative. Her friends suggested more than once that she should have written an autobiography, but at first she was too busy with collecting evidence on the history of the Belarusian movement in the 1910s-1930s, and later she became discouraged by how badly her already published memoirs were redacted by soviet censorship.

Partially her autobiography was created in her correspondence. By her own estimations she received about 5000 letters which means she wrote roughly the same amount because she never left a letter unanswered. About 1000 letters of L. Vojcik are now published in three separate volumes⁶. She had been receiving many requests to expand her memoirs, to add up more details, but she had also been asked to write about herself. Many of her letters include her recollections about her grandparents and parents, her childhood

⁴ G. Vojcik, *Zos'ka Veras*, Vil'na 2002, p. 15.

⁵ “Kolas belaruskaj nivy”, [in:] Z. Veras, *Pakul' ruka pàro trymae. Uspaminy, listy*, Minsk 2015, pp. 32-33; *Ák vydavalasá “Zaranka”*, [in:] Ibidem, pp. 11-15; *Praŭda ab rëdákcyi grama-daiških gazëtaŭ*, [in:] Ibidem, pp. 15-19; *Gistoryâ belaruskaga adryŭnoga kalendara*, [in:] Ibidem, pp. 20-22; *Ák vydavaŭsâ zbornik [Mihasâ Mašary]*, [in:] Ibidem, pp. 33-36; *Belaruskae kaapera-tyŭnae tavarystva “Pčala” i ágoorgan “Belaruskâ borć”*, [in:] Z. Veras, *Vybranyâ*, pp. 171-186.

⁶ Z. Veras, *Á pomnŭ ŭsë. Uspaminy, listy*, Minsk 2013; idem, *Pakul' ...*; idem, *Vybranyâ...*

in Ukraine, school years in Grodno, about her stay in Warsaw, and her early years in Vilnius. Therefore her letters should be regarded as memoirs too.

L. Vojcik had very sharp memory, she accurately collected documents concerning her various jobs, and she also had a habit of noting down her daily affairs. For these reasons she provided in her memoirs lots of particular details that can't be found in other documentary sources and that allow readers to get a glimpse of her individual experience. She liked to be scrupulous in her descriptions: when she gave address, she also described how the place had looked; she often gave a short bio and family history of a person she mentioned. L. Vojcik have always stated that her recollections were true in every aspect, but like any other memoirs, hers were bound to contain some mistakes and biases. For example, she called all the newspapers, published during her administrative work, BSRH newspapers. But she had started her job in 1923, and the BSRH was organized in 1925. Of course, those newspapers were published by the very same Belarusian deputies, who had founded BSRH, so she (or her contemporaries) wouldn't see a mistake here. Yet her statement is historically inconsistent as it is.

One of the constant topics in her memoirs was the hard mundane work of regular participants of the Belarusian movement such as herself. She emphasized the importance of that work, complained that it was often overshadowed by political fighting of the leaders of the movement. Financial scarcity, one of the greatest struggles of all Belarusian periodicals, was in her opinion the consequence of the state of division in the Belarusian movement. She pointed out that political squabbles engulfed all of the attention of Belarusian activists while the actual work, such as publishing non-political periodicals and books, was neglected. She expressed disappointment in the lack of unity in Belarusian society where it was needed the most – in developing, promoting and protecting Belarusian culture, and in upbringing of the younger generation.

She also showed the practical side of editing and publishing Belarusian periodicals and books: in her memoirs we can follow up the process of publishing from the first stage of collecting content material through managing the printing process to the final step of mailing out printed copies to subscribers. L. Vojcik had experience with all of these steps, she also bought paper, maintained accounting records, placed advertisements; she knew personally all workers of the Belarusian printers.

She described the censorship and confiscation procedures as well, because the BSRH newspapers were regularly confiscated and closed and their editors tried for anti-state propaganda.

Memoirs of L. Vojcik are complemented by the memoirs of Marjan Pieciukiewiĉ and Janka Bahdanowiĉ – she knew both of them since the 1930s, and the three of them stayed in touch all their lives. Memoirs of M. Pieciukiewiĉ

and J. Bahdanowič were inspired by L. Wojcik's active work on collecting documentary materials about the Belarusian national movement in the Second Polish Republic.

J. Bahdanowič was born in 1906; during the World War I his parents died, and he was taken in the the Belarusian Orphanage in Vilnius. The orphanage was created in 1919 together with the Belarusian Gymnasium, which all orphans attended. J. Bahdanowič lived there until his graduation in 1927. Right after that he started an apprenticeship as a typesetter at the Belarusian Francišak Skaryna Printer. It was the printer founded by the Belarusian Christian Democracy Party (BCD), it printed among other materials such periodicals as "Biela-ruskaja Krynica" (the official newspaper of the BCD), "Chryscijanskaja Dumka", later – "Šliach Moladzi", "Samapomač", "Kalossie". He worked at the print shop until 1939. During his work at the printer he got to know closely a number of active participants of the Belarusian national movement, especially some of the younger generation – Jazep Najdziuk, Aľfons Šutovič, M. Pieciukievič. Together they decided to publish "Šliach Moladzi", the magazine aiming for the promotion of the Belarusian culture among the Belarusian youth.

In 1952 J. Bahdanowič was arrested, tried for publishing an "anti-soviet" magazine and sent to the prison camp in Vorkuta. In 1956 he was rehabilitated and returned to Vilnius, where he worked as a teacher. He wrote his memoirs in the 1970s, but haven't seen them published – he died in 1990, and memoirs came out in 1992.

J. Bahdanowič wrote his memoirs in the same way L. Wojcik did – he scarcely told about his personal life, and paid most of attention to various events and people. A big part of memoirs was devoted to the life in the Belarusian Orphanage, its routine, teachers and pupils. He described how the printing process in the Belarusian Francišak Skaryna Printer was organized too, what materials they published, who worked there. He carefully listed all times when the print shop changed address. He also wrote about his post-war teaching and his imprisonment.

M. Pieciukievič was born in 1904 into a peasant family, after graduating from the Belarusian gymnasium in Vilnius he entered the University of Vilnius where he studied ethnology and history; he joined the Belarusian Student Union there. He was one of the publishers and editors of the magazine "Šliach Moladzi", which was issued from 1929 till 1939. At first its target audience was the catholic youth, so the magazine was printed in the Latin script, later some texts within one issue were printed with the Cyrillic script.

In 1930 The Institute of the Eastern Europe Scientific Research was organized in the University of Vilnius, and M. Pieciukievič joined it, he also acquired the position of a librarian in the Institute library.

In 1949 he was arrested and tried for being “kulak” (affluent peasant), and in 1952 he was tried again for his participation in the “anti-soviet” national movement in the 1930s. His sentence was recalled in 1956, and he went to live in Toruń where he worked at the ethnographic museum.

His memoirs, just as the memoirs of J. Bagdanowič, were published only after his death – in 1998. He wrote mostly about his compulsory military service and his studying, but he devoted one chapter to the magazine “Šliach Moladzi”, where he outlined who and with what goals started it. In this chapter he emphasized the constant pressure that was put on the Belarusian national movement. He described major troubles with publishing Belarusian periodicals: censorship, confiscations, trials and fines, the police surveillance. He also showed the financial struggles that were characteristic for the Belarusian press: everyone who worked on the editorial staff of the magazine did so for free, subscription money was spent on the paper, the printing and the penal fines – “Šliach Moladzi” had been confiscated several times, and the editor had either to pay a fine, or to go to prison⁷.

Only a small number of diaries written by the Belarusians in the Second Polish Republic have survived. Two of them are relevant to the history of the Belarusian press in the Second Polish Republic: the diary of Maksim Tank, a poet and a member of the Communist Party of Western Belarus, and the diary of Piotr Siaŭruk, a member of the Tawarystwa Bielaruskaj Školy (Belarusian School Society).

M. Tank (real name – Jaŭhien Skurko) was a prominent Belarusian poet and writer highly acclaimed for his singular use of *vers libre*. He was born in 1912 in a peasant family. Somewhere around 1930 he joined the Komsomol (Young Communist League) of Western Belarus and became the member of its Central Committee. His pen name first appeared in the illegal ephemeral newspaper “Bielaruskaje Žyćcio”. In 1932 he was arrested for the first time, and in 1934 – the second time. He spent overall 2 years in the famous Vilnius Lukiškės prison. There he participated in composing the hand-written newspaper of the political prisoners “Kraty”. In 1936 M. Tank joined the Communist party of Western Belarus. Two books of his poetry were published in the 1930s; both were confiscated by the police. His poems and translations were published in the Belarusian periodicals and in the leftist Lithuanian and Polish literary magazines.

M. Tank started writing his diaries in 1932 and never stopped until his death in 1995. But the notes from the first years were lost when he was arrested by the Polish police, so the diary starts from 1935. It was first published in 1966 in the literary magazine “Polymia”, and in 1970 it was published as a book. Unfortunately today the original manuscript is considered to be lost, as well as the first typewritten copy.

⁷ M. Pecŭkevič, *U pošukah začaravanyh skarbaŭ*, Vil'na 1998, p. 104.

M. Tank's diary had two recurrent topics: his creative process and his strive for self-education (primarily in the fields of literature, theatre and music). He regularly listed all the books he had read, or was going to read; he had a wide range of interests – from medieval poems to modern popular novels. He also read many periodicals, Belarusian and Polish.

The diary has not only followed the daily life of the young poet but also has created a vast presentation of the life in Vilnius in the late 1930s. M. Tank noted all the part-time jobs he had to take to provide himself, his walks through the city with the detailed depictions of people, architecture, and even commercial posters on the walls. He described various annual festivities held in the city, his regular visits to his native village, his travels to Warsaw and Gdańsk.

M. Tank was well-acquainted with Rygor Šyrma, Belarusian musician and the editor of the magazine “Bielaruski Lietapis”; and with Janka Šutovič, the editor of the literary magazine “Kalossie”. He also was good friends with some Polish and Lithuanian leftist writers, editors and translators. Even though he never officially worked on the editorial staff of a periodical until 1939, he was involved in publishing various Belarusian periodicals and had a good understanding of a general situation in the Belarusian press in the Second Polish Republic. He constantly criticized all non-communist press for being politically meek, provincial, and behind the times. His opinion was evidently influenced by the communist ideology, but his vast knowledge of all periodicals published or sold in Vilnius added weight to his statements. His diary allows us to see the Belarusian press in a bigger picture of the multinational press of the eastern region of the Second Polish Republic.

While the diary of M. Tank may provide an abundant data on the history of the Belarusian national movement, it demands careful criticism. A number of minor mistakes and inaccuracies in his diaries had already been pointed out by his contemporaries when the diaries were first published⁸. He redacted his diaries too, right before and during publishing, but today we can't find out what exactly he had changed because the original manuscript is lost. He also hid lots of names behind nicknames and monograms, or just didn't give any name at all – for safety reasons. In the introduction to the 1970 edition he wrote that he himself couldn't decipher some of them because he simply couldn't remember⁹. Some of those monograms are now uncovered by Belarusian historians and literature scholars. For example, M. Tank mentioned a few times that he was able to get his hands on soviet periodicals and books, which was normally not possible, with a help of a librarian, without giving any name¹⁰. It was confirmed

⁸ S. Kalādka, “Dzënnik – gëta šläh z verstavymi slupami-pakazal'nikami...”, [in:] M. Tank, *Zbor tvoraŭ*. Vol. 9, Minsk 2009, pp. 9-14.

⁹ M. Tank, *Listki kalendara. Fragmenty dzënnika*, Minsk 1970, p. 5.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 91.

later that this nameless librarian was M. Pieciukievič. It is likely that M. Tank remembered who the librarian was, but didn't want to connect himself to a man who was tried and sentenced for anti-soviet actions.

P. Siaŭruk was young too when he wrote his diaries. His life was filled with dramatic events, and it ended very early: Siaŭruk was born in 1905 and in 1929 he died from the tuberculosis. His parents were peasants, who had to evacuate from their hometown Skidzieł in 1915, when Russian army retreated and the front line moved to the Belarusian territories. When in 1921 P. Siaŭruk had returned with his family to Skidzieł, he found himself in the oppressive situation: there was no library in the town, he couldn't afford buying books; any cultural activities were regarded as suspicious by the local police. He was first arrested in 1924 when the police found Belarusian newspapers among his papers. P. Siaŭruk started to correspond with the Belarusian national activists; he sent his short novels, poems and essays to the Belarusian periodicals. Soon he was asked to organize a local circle of the Tawarystwa Bielaruskaj Školy (TBS); he also founded a library and gathered signatures under a petition for opening a Belarusian school in Skidzieł. In 1927 he became the head of the TBS district office in Grodno. He was arrested multiple times for his national activities, because the police viewed the Belarusian movement as essentially communist. In 1928 he resigned from his position due to his illness but continued to work in TBS. Despite his young age he earned great trust and respect from the people of Skidzieł and its neighborhood. When he died in 1929 his funeral was attended by such a great amount of people that it was considered a demonstration¹¹.

P. Siaŭruk wrote his diary in Russian, but never stopped considering himself a Belarusian. His essays and literary works were all written in Belarusian. Some of his poems were first published in 1980s, but his diary, letters and essays were published only in 2008.

P. Siaŭruk started his diary in 1921 and continued to write it until two month before his death. Its entries show his path from a teenager striving for education to a local leader of the national movement; the diary also shows how he gradually grew tired, disappointed in the movement, and his pessimistic regard of the situation in the Belarusian society in the Second Polish Republic.

He always held interest in the Belarusian press, and in his diary we can observe an opinion of a reader, an outsider – unlike the points of view of previously discussed authors. In the diary entry from 1924 he stated that he subscribed to a Belarusian newspaper because “it is more truthful”¹², which can be regarded as a reflection of an opinion that was spread among the Belarusians

¹¹ P. Săũruk, *Nebyccă ne ismue*, Garodnâ-Wrocław 2008, p. 15.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 186.

(at least a part of them), who lived in provincial towns and villages. But later he pointed out that the Belarusian periodicals were neglecting their most important task – enlightening people and spreading the Belarusian culture – in favor of political squabbles.

The conclusion: egodocuments may to some extent reflect general public opinions. An author as a member of society can't help translating its moods and convictions into their writings, no matter if they share them or not. Three of the five aforementioned egodocuments (memoirs of L. Vojcik and the diaries of M. Tank and P. Siaŭruk) translate in one way or another a certain impression: Belarusian community in the Second Polish Republic was torn into parts; pro-soviet Belarusians aspired to unite the Belarusian territories under the aegis of the Communist party, others sought Belarusian independence both from the USSR and Poland, but couldn't agree on the methods of achieving it. This division affected the Belarusian press too, which in turn led to further spreading of division into the reading audience, and thus turning this process into a vicious circle.

Even though personal writings can't be used separately and indiscriminately as documentary sources for historical research, they might help to see unique personal experiences of various participants of the Belarusian national movement in the Second Polish Republic, and let scholars integrate those separate records into wider and deeper image, which eventually helps to grab the thorough understanding of the subject.

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