

REVIEWS

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BOOK REVIEW: HOUSING PROBLEMS IN POLAND IN THE 1970S IN THE LIGHT OF PERSONAL DOCUMENTS [PROBLEMY MIESZKANIOWE W POLSCE W LATACH SIEDEMDZIESIĄTYCH XX WIEKU W ŚWIETLE DOKUMENTÓW OSOBISTYCH]

Book review: This review discussed the book by Michał Jacek Jarmuż (2020), entitled *Housing Problems in Poland in the 1970s in the Light of Personal Documents* [*Problemy mieszkaniowe w Polsce w latach siedemdziesiątych XX wieku w świetle dokumentów osobistych*] which was published in 2020 by the Institute of History of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw. This publication is the result of the doctoral dissertation defended in 2014, written under the supervision of prof. Dariusz Jarosz at the Institute of History of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw, who has specialized and researched for many years, inter alia, housing issues in 20th-century Poland, doing so both through the lens of classic archival files and personal documents (Jarosz, 1996; 2006; 2008; 2010; Miernik, 2006). This fact undoubtedly influenced the choice of research topics and the type of historical sources used in the work.

<https://doi.org/10.14746/sho.2022.40.1.008>

SELECTION OF RESEARCH TOPIC, RESEARCH PUROPOSES, CHRONOLOGICAL SCOPE OF THE RESEARCH

The reviewed book deals with housing problems in the People's Republic of Poland during the rule of Edward Gierek, the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party (1971–1980). Dr. M.J. Jarmuż, who in the introduction mentions that “housing problems in almost every period of the functioning of the state of real socialism were an emanation of the economic and social condition of the coun-

try", and that "the weighty housing problem has not yet found its place in historiography, apart from a few exceptions," (Jarmuż, 2020: 8). It should also be added to the above statements that the solution to the housing problem had a strategic dimension, because the stability of the governments of successive party leaderships depended on the public mood. However, the entirety of tasks related to housing policy was controlled by the state and party apparatus, which, in order to achieve its goals, did not always choose methods of reducing the housing deficit that were beneficial to the general public. In the period selected by the author, that is in the 1970s, the shortage of flats increased, despite the general technical progress in housing construction, and 2.4 million new flats were built throughout the country (Kujawa, 2020: 64). The reasons for the persistence of the increase in this shortage, noticeable in the period in question, as well as in the entire period of the Polish People's Republic, should be seen primarily in the huge demand for housing caused by demographic pressure, as well as economic migration of rural people to cities in connection with the new stage of forced industrialization of the country. Therefore, it should not come as a surprise that from the very beginning solving the housing issue was one of the priority tasks of the state. With this in mind, the author set the first goal of his research to analyze the housing problems of Poles in Edward Gierek's decade, at the same time pointing out that the basic source base for the exploration of the topic will be new types of sources, i.e. preserved autobiographical documents in the form of letters, complaints and diaries, so far poorly or not studied at all in terms of housing or, more broadly, socio-economic issues. Due to the specificity of these sources, the Author also intended to obtain an answer about the usefulness of autobiographical documents in historical research, which should be considered as the second research goal set out in the reviewed publication, adding to it a great value of methodological and source analysis. In this way, the chosen topic naturally followed the path of research on social history, which, as the author writes, postulated to reach for some research methods in the field of sociology, e.g. perspective triangulation.

The exploration of these sources requires presenting the benefits and threats of using the autobiographical method in social history, because using it to this day divides the historians' community. The details of the disputes and controversies surrounding this method are presented by the author in the third chapter of the book, pointing to the features and attributes of epistolary and memoirs. The chronological scope of the publication was

designated as the title "1970s", which does not raise any doubts after analyzing the content.

USE OF LITERATURE AND SOURCES

The author of the reviewed publication used several types of historical sources, mainly kept in Warsaw archives. The basic ones include the personal sources in the form of memories, diaries, letters and complaints. The latter were largely addressed by citizens to the central offices of the Polish People's Republic, a large amount of which is currently deposited in the Archives of New Records in Warsaw, in the archival complex of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party - Letters and Inspection Office. The author also researched other, no less important archives presenting the housing problems of the inhabitants of socialist Poland, which historians usually ignore. These include, among others resource of the archive of letters, preserved in the collection of files of the Documentation and Propaganda Collections Department of Public Television, files of the Central Council of Trade Unions and the team of the Central Union of Housing Cooperatives. Undoubtedly, they enriched the source base on which the book was based. It should be noted, however, that people struggling with the broadly understood housing problem in the People's Republic of Poland also wrote letters and complaints to state institutions not mentioned in the introduction or bibliography by the author, such as the Office of the State Council, as well as national and local magazines and newspapers, in which the housing issue, however, reached a wider audience with varying degrees of frequency, depending on the action of censorship. In the case of magazines, the Author most often used the reprint of the "Przyjaciółka" weekly, published by Małgorzata Mroczkowska (Mroczkowska, 2004). Memories and diaries are another type of sources used more widely by the author. Especially valuable are the unpublished diaries of workers from the collections of the Kórnik Library. The author skillfully explored these sources, and demonstrated the awareness of the dangers facing historians who conduct scientific research on the basis of personal documents, writing, *inter alia*, about the fact that "the analysis of the correspondence requires special caution", as well as in the case of memoirs (Jarmuż, 2020: 197). At the same time, it clearly emphasizes that personal documentation is a full-fledged historical source that enables a diversified and non-obvious presentation of everyday life of ordinary people.

In addition to autobiographical documents kept in archives, the Author used several dozen of printed collections of letters and complaints, as well as memoirs and diaries. To create the book, compact studies were also used in the form of articles, chapters from books, as well as entire publications, constituting, as a whole, the literature on the subject. In the bibliographic list, apart from printed sources, there are 161 titles of various studies, including several foreign-language items, thanks to which the Author has acquired extensive source-free knowledge necessary to analyze and evaluate the phenomena considered in the pages of the reviewed book. The collected bibliography would be complete, if it had not been for the studies by Maciej Cesarski (in particular: Cesarski, 2011; 2016) and Marian Frąckowiak (in particular: Frąckowiak, 2008). Perhaps their omission results from the fact that they are both economists, not classical historians, who often use statistics in research on the historical and present problems of housing in Poland.

In conclusion, the Author conducted a thorough archival query, correctly selecting the sources, and correctly selecting (not counting the previously indicated deficiencies) and using the literature on the subject.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

The structure of the book is correct and does not raise any objections. It consists of a table of contents, an introduction, three chapters and a short ending. The publication has a scientific apparatus in the form of bibliographic footnotes, attachment bibliography, a list of abbreviations and an index of surnames. On the other hand, the lack of a list of tables is a minor breach, although it should be noted that there are not many (only three) of them in the study.

The structure of chapters is determined by the issues discussed in the order determined by the Author. Particular chapters are not the same in terms of volume, which results from the importance ("the weight") of individual research topics falling within the scope of the issues raised. Therefore, the chapters included in the publication consist of an unequal number of sub-chapters and thematic paragraphs. But the publication as a whole retains full consistency and transparency, which undoubtedly improves the reading of the book.

ASSESSMENT OF THE CONTENT

In the introduction, the author made some general statements, among other things concluding about the importance of the housing problem in the times of the People's Republic of Poland and the little interest in this topic among historians who focused their attention primarily on the political history of Poland after 1944. At this point, however, there was no information about the most important monographs on the subject under study, e.g. those listed in the bibliographic footnote at the beginning of the publication. Then Dr. M.J. Jarmuż explained the choice and application of the autobiographical method and personal sources in historical research. At the same time, he tries to prove the correctness of the choice of the chosen method and sources, writing about it in a way that is convincing even for a layman. After presenting a few research questions and the purpose of the research, the author proceeds to discuss the source database. It is a laconic, but at the same time clear description, defining the type and name of the historical source and its current keeper with great accuracy.

In Chapter I, Dr. M.J. Jarmuż presents the housing problems of Poles in the light of personal documents. This is an introductory chapter to the actual research issues, which is a methodological and historical outline of this question. In the part on the importance of housing problems in personal documents, the Author, based on the available literature on the subject, writes that "housing anxiety was the most common reason for writing letters to the authorities and constituted 20–30% of all correspondence addressed in the 1970s to the Central Committee [of the Polish United Workers' Party - author's note]" (Jarmuż, 2020: 16). This is an important information, but at the same time incomplete and unrepresentative for the whole issue, because at this point the Author focused only on the supplications sent by citizens to the central party authorities, without presenting data, even estimates or fragments, in the case of the number of letters addressed to state institutions and the radio and press. The author notices that the intensity of written letters and civic complaints depended on the economic situation in the country, which, simplifying a bit, meant that along with the deteriorating public mood, there was an increase in complaints and complaints to the authorities and their decline when the government team promised to improve living conditions in return for public support. On this basis, it can be concluded that the waves of growth and decline in the popularity of party and state authorities in a given period, in

a way, determined the place and importance of personal documentation for the analyzed issues in the hierarchy of all matters raised by citizens in letters to the authorities. Finally, Dr. M.J. Jarmuż notes that housing problems were discussed more often in epistolographic sources than in memorial sources, in which the authors of the memoirs “presented their housing dilemmas with much greater distance” (Jarmuż, 2020: 18).

An interesting part of the first chapter of the reviewed publication is a sociological sketch of correspondents and diarists dealing with housing issues in the studied documents. I rate this fragment of the book highly because of the enrichment of the historical narrative on Polish housing with new information obtained through a sociological analysis. Thanks to the research of Dr. M.J. Jarmuż, we get to know the sex, age, profession, social status and place of origin of many citizens struggling with housing problems. The collected data made it possible to create a sketchy sociological portrait of the authors of the studied documentation, so they ceased to be anonymous, and at the same time it became possible to learn about their motivations when writing letters and diaries to party and state authorities.

Equally interesting is the subsection “Correspondence Format”, in which the Author examines the language and types of narrative in the sources studied. It is correct to say that the language of these sources over the course of the People’s Republic of Poland was not uniform in terms of rhetoric and gradually evolved towards its formalization, which was associated with a change in the attitude of citizens to their own state. He writes that the language used by citizens in supplications was largely related to the official propaganda of the state, which was the result of massive indoctrination of society from the Stalinist era, pointing out, however, that in the Gierek’s decade, “the place of homage addresses in letters was taken by polite, albeit firm official phrases” (Jarmuż, 2020: 26–27). The attempt to analyze the language of the studied documentation turned out to be a successful move, as a result of which it was possible, albeit as far as the sources allowed it, to learn about the mentality of the described group of correspondents who left traces of their personality traits and evidence of their behavior and social practices in the preserved personal documents, appropriate for the analyzed period of Polish history. Thanks to this, the author was able to give them greater historical subjectivity and at the same time confirm that regardless of the background and social condition, the housing problems played a key role in the lives of Poles in the 1970s.

In the next two subchapters, the author presents a significant problem of the credibility of the image of housing problems in personal documents. At the outset, it poses a question about the degree of objectivity and reliability of the explored sources. In the case of letters and complaints, the answer to this question is found primarily in the manner of implementation and handling of housing matters undertaken in the correspondence surveyed. As a result of the analysis of official documents, he presented a rather surprising conclusion that the central party and state administration responsible for contacts with citizens usually thoroughly verified the disputed issues raised in the letters, which contradicts the generally accepted judgment of arrogant and lazy bureaucrats indifferent to human hardship. The author also presents examples of complaints from citizens about the activities of local authorities and housing cooperatives, therefore the overall picture of the analyzed phenomenon is not uniform (Jarmuż, 2020: 119–129). But officials were very cautious about the matters contained in the supplications, because the way in which they presented housing difficulties was sometimes far from the truth, which the Author confirmed with appropriately selected examples from sources. When explaining this issue, he also admitted that “the percentage of authentic situations described in the letters was incomparably greater” (Jarmuż, 2020: 39–40). In the case of the study of diaries, verifying the accuracy of the information provided is much more difficult, as the Author is aware of. This is due to several factors mentioned in the reviewed book. Dr. M.J. Jarmuż notices that the diarists who wrote down memoirs after many years often presented their efforts to acquire their own apartment favorably, creating their own version of events, in which they most often overlooked the hardships and sacrifices. The author, analyzing the reliability of memoirs, mentions, in addition to the aforementioned subjectivity, also the activity of censorship, which preventively prevented the publication of memoirs that critically describe the social and economic policy of the state. As an example of a blatant interference by the censorship office, he mentions “Workers Memoirs”, the original text of which, kept in the Kórnik Library, differed significantly from the printed version.

In conclusion, dr. M.J. Jarmuż showed in Chapter I that the authors of letters and memoirs, especially those for competitions, usually presented their housing problems in a different way. These differences resulted from both the nature of these sources and the intervention of omnipresent preventive censorship. The author is aware that the use of personal documentation is difficult, but abandons the idea of eliminating them

from the historian's workshop. He is close to the assumption according to which, after rejecting the most extreme descriptions of the subject matter in the sources, that is, those that do not find confirmation elsewhere, he should have revealed "an objective image of the reality they describe" (Jarmuż, 2020: 45).

Chapter II deals with the picture of housing problems presented in the light of personal documents. It is the most extensive part of the publication, consisting of as many as 7 subsections, which includes the thesis of the entire book. Dr. M.J. At the beginning, Jarmuż briefly describes the housing policy in the 1970s, and shows here two tables with statistical data. In my opinion, these tables, as well as the text itself, lack a more precise presentation of the housing situation of the population according to the division of their residence into rural-urban categories. The author then describes selected cases of housing distress and intergenerational conflicts related to poor housing conditions. It also shows a whole range of strategies and tricks aimed at acquiring or replacing an apartment, used by citizens of the People's Republic of Poland both through legally sanctioned activities and through illegal practices. The author creates a picture of the above phenomena on the basis of meticulously collected personal documents, which he cites abundantly in his book. This picture is a condensate for his research assumptions, showing the tragedy of the housing poverty of many people from different regions of Poland, who directed their anger and frustration, as well as waiting for help, towards the party and state authorities. It is important that the publication also cites positive aspects of the "housing revolution" of the 1970s, because a large part of the demand for housing was satisfied by state-controlled housing cooperatives, although the plague was the untimeliness and the quality of housing units provided. On the one hand, the author notices that the housing construction in the analyzed period brought an improvement in the housing situation for hundreds of thousands of Poles, and the urban standard of the flats built was higher than during the reign of Władysław Gomułka, on the other hand, he rightly mentions the increase in housing hunger, i.e. the gap growing every year resulting from the shortage of new flats in relation to the demand for them. However, the statement that "the increasing housing hunger in Poland in the 1970s slowly turned from a problem of individual citizens into a serious social problem" (Jarmuż, 2020: 66) should be considered inexact. The housing shortage was not an "individual citizen" problem and had existed *en masse* before. As proof of this, it is enough to state that in 1970

alone, about 750,000 people waited for their own apartment, and therefore the number of people waiting in the housing queues in the earlier period had to remain at an equally high level, which was a serious and unresolved social and economic problem, burdening the image and politics of the communist authorities of Poland. The existence of catastrophic housing conditions in the previous decades of communist regime is confirmed by various independent sources, including personal documents, which refer to the constant problem of overcrowding in dwellings, tenant houses, cornering, and the occupation of substandard spaces – especially in the period 1944–1956. The genesis of the so-called housing poverty lies in the distant and difficult times of the partitions, which then became a pressing and ultimately unsolved social problem during the Second Polish Republic. The reviewed chapter also includes the extremely important issue of housing poverty among adolescents and young married couples, which, neither in the People’s Republic of Poland nor later, was comprehensively solved. That is why I do not share the author’s optimism when he states that the most important related housing initiative, i.e. patronage construction, the implementation of which took place in the 1970s, “brought unexpected good results” (Jarmuż, 2020: 93). This is contradicted by the quotations from the letters and complaints of young Poles, full of disappointment and frustration, as well as a number of unrealized investments in this area throughout the country. Besides, it was not only young citizens of the People’s Republic of Poland that were to constitute a reserve of workforce for the rapidly declining housing industry, because from 1978, as a result of the collapse of investment in housing construction, the practice of self-finishing of flats by their future buyers started to spread in housing cooperatives, as well as that of finishing the flats that came from the new housing stock by members of cooperatives as part of community actions. Such behavior of the cooperative and local administrative authorities aroused dissatisfaction among candidates and members of housing cooperatives, traces of which could be found in intervention letters and in complaints written by them to the Party and central state institutions. In subsection IV “*Per fas et nefas*: ways to get a flat”, the author confirmed the fact, known from other studies, that the most resourceful and agile citizens who were able to find themselves in the maze of complex provisions of housing law (often the law was also broken) and had connections and social contacts. He draws attention to the development of bureaucracy and bribery of the housing authorities as well as various acrobatic strategies of people looking for a new apartment.

Using the example of letters written by citizens to the central authorities, it also illustrates the shortcomings of new housing in the form of, *inter alia*, scarcity, poorly developed social infrastructure, lack of green areas and small architecture in housing estates. I highly appreciate the part of the reviewed chapter devoted to the housing situation of the rural population. The author considers the housing situation of the rural population from the perspective of the problems of the development of individual housing (private investors) and state housing, mainly financed by the State Agricultural Farms (PGRs). In the case of a private initiative, he notices and explains the phenomenon of its high construction activity, despite the permanent underinvestment of this form of housing by the state. In order to build a dream house, individual farmers had to overcome many administrative and supply-related obstacles, and the author rightly points to the deficit of basic building materials as the most important barrier. From the reviewed book we learn that the citizens also complained, *inter alia*, on the lengthy procedure of obtaining a building permit or difficult access to cheap construction projects. When discussing the issue of housing conditions in the countryside, the Author has kept an important balance here, presenting both cases of housing poverty and enthusiastic opinions of citizens about their housing situation (e.g. employees of state farms). The part of the publication that deals with the issue of furnishing new apartments in cities with the necessary furniture and household appliances is also valuable. In the latter case, the purchase of basic goods for the construction of a new accommodation was usually quite a challenge, because most of the goods were scarce and they were regulars were forced to stand in long lines in front of shops to buy anything. The author shares an interesting observation at this point that

contrary to appearances, it was not the lack of equipment, but the excess and inconsistency in the selection of which constituted the biggest problem of the housing of the People's Poland [because] socialism, being in its nature a system of constant shortage, forced a constant accumulation of supplies, not only for current needs, but also for an undefined, but always uncertain tomorrow (Jarmuż, 2020: 170–171).

Chapter III is theoretical and methodological in nature and organizes the available knowledge on the use of personal documentation in social research. Dr. M.J. Jarmuż showed a good knowledge of the literature on the subject, which turned out to be necessary in the presentation of the history, development and description of the scientific activity of the precursors of the personal document method: William I. Thomas, Florian

Znanięcki, and Józef Chałasiński, less known here, but greatly contributing to the research problem. Undoubtedly, the described method and the way it is used are derived from sociology, and then become an inspiration for researchers of social history (e.g. Krystyna Kersten, Tomasz Szarota, Janusz Żarnowski). The author also shows research methods in the field of researching personal sources and the controversy they cause among researchers. The conclusions regarding the place, role and significance of letters and competition diaries in the study of everyday life are valuable, with the author's justification why it is necessary and worth using this type of written source.

CONCLUSION

In my opinion, Dr. M.J. Jarmuż managed to convincingly answer the research questions posed in the introduction to the reviewed book. Thus, he achieved research goals that mark the narrative and methodological axis of his publication. He showed not only the scale of the housing problem in the light of the available personal sources, but also the spectrum of legal and illegal actions taken by citizens of the People's Republic of Poland to lead them to their own home. The creation of a sociological picture of correspondents and diarists writing in various ways about their housing trials was essential for getting to know the problem. On the methodological level, however, he proved the legitimacy and benefits of using sources and the autobiographical method in historical research.

Dr. M.J. Jarmuż has demonstrated a reliable research method. This fact is not canceled out by certain gaps in the literature on the subject and occasional inaccuracies in the description of the housing situation of Poles in the People's Republic of Poland. The author used the available sources with great sensitivity, skillfully building a historical narrative on their basis. The research results were presented in an understandable and accessible way. However, some findings could also be compiled in tabular form, which would have made them more synthetic.

Considering the above, the publication by Dr. M.J. Jarmuż deserves high marks. The reviewed book significantly enriches the state of research on housing issues in Poland in the 1970s with new knowledge. At the same time, it is addressed not only to a small group of historians dealing with the subject matter, but also to all those interested in the social history of People's Poland.

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