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REINHART KOSELLECK'S PERSONAL SLICES OF MEMORY AND SEDIMENTS OF EXPERIENCE*

Abstract: The article analyses selected aspects of the biography of Reinhart Koselleck (1923–2006), a German historian and theoretician of history. In particular, it brings to the fore significant traces of the Second World War experiences of the author of *Kritik und Krise*. Further, it looks at their influence on Koselleck's critical approach to the concept of collective memory and on the anti-utopian thrust of his historical theory.

Keywords: Reinhart Koselleck (1923–2006), biography, theory of history, collective and individual memory, criticism of utopia.

The most frequently quoted German historian today, Reinhart Koselleck (1923–2006) is experiencing — if we may say so — a *sui generis* boom of scholarly interest not only in his concepts, but also in his extraordinary biography, the understanding of which is enriched by new sources.¹ Fortunately, in Poland we have at our disposal excellently compiled editions of his most important theoretical works. Various issues of scholarly journals are dedicated to diverse, even relatively marginal aspects of the German historian's reflection — such as an edition of the University of Warsaw's semi-annual *Stan Rzeczy*, which is filled with texts on the 'political iconology' of the author of *Critique and Crisis*.² Thus, we do not need to give a broader presentation of the whole

* I have been able to develop my interest in this subject thanks to a scholarship (Józef Tischner Senior Visiting Fellowship) awarded by the Institut für die Wissenschaften vom Menschen in Vienna, where in November–December 2021 I occupied myself with Reinhart Koselleck's 'historical anthropology'.

¹ See, for example, recently Reinhart Koselleck and Carl Schmitt, *Der Briefwechsel 1953–1983 und weitere Materialien*, ed. Jan Eike Dunkhase, Berlin, 2019, p. 459.

² *Semantyka historyczna*, ed. Hubert Orłowski, transl. Wojciech Kunicki, Poznań, 2001; *Dzieje pojęć: Studia z semantyki i pragmatyki języka społeczno-politycznego*, transl. Jarosław Merecki and Wojciech Kunicki, intro. Jerzy Szacki, Warsaw, 2009; *Warstwy*

range of theoretical inspirations offered by his output, even more so as for some time now references to Koselleck and articles devoted to him have been appearing in almost every yearbook of the most important journals concerned with the theory of history (the 2020 and 2021 yearbooks of *History and Theory*, to give but one example).³ Let us add, however, that unfortunately in Poland, there is still no translation of the collective work which was extremely important for a lengthy stage of Koselleck's scholarly biography, namely, the monumental series entitled *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* — a historical lexicon of political and social concepts, which was written in German and edited and published under his direction and with his original participation for a quarter of a century (from 1972 to 1997).⁴

At this point, starting from a collective work of German researchers that has been recently published in Göttingen, which presents a systematic discussion of Koselleck's life path, his ideological 'affinity by choice' and theoretical reflections, I would like to single out a few threads (also Polish) that are still insufficiently present in the analyses of his biography, and, further, perspectives on the issue of collective and individual memory which are very closely related to his life experience.⁵

Hitherto, the most competent and exhaustive introduction to Koselleck's biography and world of concepts have been Niklas Olsen's monograph from 2012 and a collective volume (published a year earlier) by nineteen German authors who occupied themselves with the life story and theories of the creator of the term *Sattelzeit*.⁶ There is no doubt,

czasu: *Studia z metahistorii*, transl. Krystyna Krzemieniowa and Jarosław Merecki, Warsaw, 2012; *Krytyka i kryzys: Studium patogenezy świata mieszczańskiego*, ed. Marcin Moskalewicz, transl., intro. and comp. Jakub Duraj and Marcin Moskalewicz, Warsaw, 2015; cf. the entire edition of the magazine *Stan Rzeczy: Teoria społeczna, Europa Środkowo-Wschodnia*, 2020, 2 (19).

³ See, for example, Frank R. Ankersmit, 'Koselleck on "Histories" versus "History"; or, Historical Ontology versus Historical Epistemology', *History and Theory*, 60, 2021, 4, pp. 36–58.

⁴ See, among others, on the topic: Monika Widzicka, 'Semantyka historyczna w ujęciu Reinharda Kosellecka: Zarys problematyki', *Historyka*, 40, 2010, pp. 45–58; Hubert Orłowski, 'Reinhard Koselleck — szkoła bielefeldzka — semantyka historyczna', in Koselleck, *Semantyka historyczna*, pp. 7–27; Jerzy Szacki, 'Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Historyczny leksykon niemieckiego języka społeczno-politycznego', *Stan Rzeczy: Teoria społeczna, Europa Środkowo-Wschodnia*, 2016, 1 (10), pp. 35–82; Daniel Ciunajcis, 'O krytycznym zadaniu historii pojęć', *Sensus Historiae*, 3, 2011, 2, pp. 55–77.

⁵ *Reinhard Koselleck als Historiker: Zu den Bedingungen möglicher Geschichten*, ed. Manfred Hettling and Wolfgang Schieder, Göttingen, 2021, p. 461.

⁶ See Niklas Olsen, *History in the Plural: An Introduction to the Work of Reinhart Koselleck*, New York, 2012; *Begriffene Geschichte: Beiträge zum Werk Reinhart Kosellecks*, ed. Hans Joas and Peter Vogt, Berlin, 2011. Cf. also a new monograph — full of biographical

however, that the new work referenced here — *Reinhart Koselleck als Historiker*, the end product of a conference held at Bielefeld University on 6–8 December 2018 — is the most comprehensive and, to date, most in-depth portrayal of the person and thoughts of its titular protagonist.

It is difficult to critically discuss all aspects of this collective work, dutifully gathered under the editorship of Wolfgang Schieder (born in 1935 and a collaborator of Koselleck on *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, for which he compiled, among others, three key entries: 'Communism', 'Propaganda' and 'Socialism') and Manfred Hettling (born in 1956, a scholar of the history of concepts from Halle-Wittenberg University). To begin with, let us simply list the topics touched upon in its sixteen chapters, to extract from a few of them certain of the themes that have not been emphasized in earlier studies devoted to Koselleck's life experience and theories.

The volume opens with an essay of more than fifty pages, authored by the editors of the work. Entitled 'Theorie des historisch Möglichen: Zur Historik von Reinhart Koselleck', it is in fact a new take on the intellectual biography of the book's protagonist. Next, Steffen Kluck and Richard Pohle analyse the relationship between Martin Heidegger's philosophy of existence and the structures of historical situations which Koselleck reproduced under, among others, its inspiration. Christof Dipper presents the historian's correspondence with Schmitt.⁷ Richard Blänkner reveals how Koselleck's reflections on the relationship between language and the socio-political order were inspired by earlier studies conducted by the Austrian mediaevalist Otto Brunner.⁸ Wolfgang Schieder compares Koselleck's work to the concept of the history of ideas developed by Werner Conze, a researcher of social structures (similarly to Otto Brunner, Conze was a co-creator of *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* and an erstwhile ideological associate of National Socialism). In his most interesting essay, Harald Bluhm draws attention to Alexis de Tocqueville as the one who first described a change in the modern language of politics — that which was subsequently covered by the metaphor of *Sattelzeit*, from the period 1750–1850.⁹ Whereas Jürgen Kocka,

references — authored by the Italian researcher Gennaro Imbriano, *Der Begriff der Politik: Die Moderne als Krisenzeit im Werk von Reinhart Koselleck*, Frankfurt am Main, 2018.

⁷ See an extensive analysis of the significance of this source in the context of Koselleck's work: Andrzej Nowak, 'Reinhart Koselleck — intelektualna biografia historyka i jej odbicie w korespondencji z Carlem Schmittem', *DN*, 54, 2022, 4, pp. 5–23.

⁸ James Van Horn Melton highlighted these inspirations in a somewhat different context: 'Otto Brunner und die ideologischen Ursprünge der Begriffsgeschichte', in *Begriffene Geschichte*, pp. 123–37.

⁹ The relationship between Tocqueville's analyses of the new language of democracy and Koselleck's history of concepts has already been pointed out by Stefan-Ludwig

the head of the ‘school of social history’ at Bielefeld University, with whom Koselleck often polemicized, presents his older colleague as a social historian of Prussia. In a sense, Monika Wienfort continues this thread in her short article entitled ‘Koselleck, Prussia and Law’, based primarily on an analysis of his habilitation thesis from Heidelberg: *Preußen zwischen Reform und Revolution* (1967).

The next three articles/chapters follow the interest displayed by the volume’s protagonist in transformations of historical memory, and the forms, symbols and images of commemoration. Manfred Hettling focuses his reflections on Koselleck’s scholarly texts concerning ‘political cults of the dead’ (the fallen, heroes and victims) and a special research programme that was devoted to this subject in Bielefeld under the direction of the author of *Zur politischen Ikonologie...*¹⁰ Next are Bettina Brandt and Britta Hochkirchen, who present a painting as the subject of research into the ‘space of experience of possible histories’ — from an analysis of Albrecht Altdorfer’s *Battle of Issus* (in the essay ‘Vergangene Zukunft der frühen Neuzeit’ from 1968) to Koselleck’s hitherto unpublished manuscript *Bild und Begriff*. Finally, Tobias Weidner analyses the output of the volume’s protagonist as a photographer, no less of monuments and time, in an article richly illustrated with photographs taken by the historian.

The last five articles/chapters are a return to the foundations of Koselleck’s theory. In his erudite text, Peter Tietze gives a critique of ‘historicism’ in the very history of the concept and in Koselleck’s less frequently cited writings from the 1950s and 1960s. Reinhard Mehring presents an appraisal of the meaning of history, which was so important to the author of *Vom Sinn und Unsinn der Geschichte*,¹¹ as an expression of the ‘primary experience’ of a Wehrmacht volunteer, a veteran of Stalingrad and a prisoner of war in Karaganda camp — an existential ‘experience of the losers’. At the same time, he presents this assessment as ‘negative Kantism’, highlighting the influence exerted on Koselleck in this direction by Karl Löwith one of his most distinguished professors at Heidelberg and the co-examiner of his doctoral thesis. Koselleck holds a pessimistic opinion of Kant’s idealism and the chiliastic vision of the self-redeeming human species that is based thereupon; such is the definitive summary of this ‘negative Kantism’ of the historian-participant of the meaningless

Hoffmann, ‘Koselleck, Arendt, and the Anthropology of Historical experience’, *History and Theory*, 49 2010, 2, pp. 212–36 (pp. 215–17).

¹⁰ Reinhart Koselleck, *Zur politischen Ikonologie des gewaltsamen Todes: Ein deutsch-französischer Vergleich*, Basel, 1998.

¹¹ The first edition of this text of Koselleck’s in: *Merkur*, 1997, 4 (577), pp. 319–33, Polish translation in: idem, *Semantyka historyczna*, pp. 533–55.

history of the twentieth century.¹² In the next chapter, Sebastian Huhnholz places Koselleck's theory of history between methodology and political science. He combines the foundations of this theory with the concepts of Hanna Arendt. The starting point here is Koselleck's consistent opposition to the philosophy of history, historical teleology and dogmatic utopianism, which he traced with such a passion from the thought of the Enlightenment, that is, from *Critique and Crisis*. The key to a further analysis of the seemingly unobvious connection between the thoughts of the author of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* and the German creator of historical anthropology is their common reference to Hobbes's theory of politics and its lowest common denominator: mortality, the finiteness of life, as the basis of politics. Ulrike Jureit then enters the 'Attic' (*Dachboden*), as she calls it, of Koselleck's historical consciousness. In her article, she finds affinities with Arendt's concepts, but also traces of the influence of Edmund Husserl, who already in 1936 demonstrated the mutual tension existing between the categories of 'experience' (*Erfahrung*) and 'expectation' (*Erwartung*). Finally, in the last chapter of the volume, Dieter Langewiesche focuses on a certain paradox. It comprises on the one hand the twilight of the topos of *Historia magistra vitae*, presented by Koselleck as the inevitable consequence of the 'acceleration of history' and the separation of the 'horizon of expectations' from the 'space of experience' towards the end of the eighteenth century, and on the other Koselleck's quest for conditions for historical prognostication.

The volume closes with a source: a previously unpublished paper authored by Koselleck while a student at Heidelberg in 1950, 'Der Jakobinismus und die Französische Revolution', a paper based on a book written by the American historian Crane Brinton on the Jacobins, which the young student was ordered to read by Alfred Weber (Max's younger brother). This text is more than a student's homework, however, for it constitutes a sui generis prologue to *Critique and Crisis* and to Koselleck's fundamentally anti-utopian interpretation of the historical experience of the eighteenth – twentieth centuries, which was already maturing at the time.

To better understand this construal, it is worth taking a closer look at Koselleck's life experience and path of intellectual development. And here it is necessary to return to the initial chapter of the collective monograph discussed above. Schieder and Hettling, basing themselves on preliminary research conducted on an unprecedented scale (in the historian's family archives and in university archives) and a detailed

¹² Reinhard Mehring, 'Negativer Kantianismus: Kosellecks sinnkritische "Primärerfahrung"', in *Reinhart Koselleck als Historiker*, p. 370.

analysis of his published output, have shed considerable new light on the biographical contexts of his intellectual choices. They were probably the first to give such an extensive presentation of the ‘space of experience of the educated (*bildungsbürgerliche*) family’, which shaped Koselleck’s initial view of the world. Thus, through their work we learn that the father of the future author of *Historik und Hermeneutik*, Arno Koselleck, born into a Protestant merchant family, was also a historian, graduating from the University of Leipzig, and had volunteered for service in the First World War. Having luckily survived, he completed his doctorate (devoted to the history of the Cologne bourgeoisie in the Middle Ages) and took a job as a teacher in Görlitz (where Reinhart was born). In 1928, he was appointed director of the Holy Spirit Secondary School in Breslau (now Wrocław), where the future author of *Sediments of Time* first went to school. On a side note, I would like to add that this school, founded in the sixteenth century, had among its directors (in the years 1804–11) Jerzy Samuel Bandtkie, an excellent Polish bibliographer and librarian, while one of its students (graduated in 1918) was Hans-Georg Gadamer, who later reviewed Reinhart Koselleck’s doctorate. Perhaps these shared memories of Breslau played some role in the young historian’s personal contacts with the creator of hermeneutics.¹³

Unfortunately, we do not learn anything more about the historical origins of the Koselleck family (who may well once have used the name Koziółek/Koziółek).¹⁴ Other sources indicate that Arno was born into a family from Madlow, in Lower Lusatia. Could associations with the Slavic past of these lands or, rather, with family roots have been disturbing for the Kosellecks? Reinhart himself described his family upbringing as ‘deutschnational bis in die Knochen’ (German-national to the core). Such were certainly the views of his father, ‘Völkisch-nationalist, but not racist’.¹⁵ His mother, Elisabeth Marchand, came from a Huguenot family with intellectual and academic traditions which had settled in Prussia (her father was a professor of anatomy at the University of Leipzig). She

¹³ Hans-Georg Gadamer, ‘Wrocławskie wspomnienia’, in *Gadameriana: Hans-Georg Gadamer w ‘Zbliżeniach Polska-Niemcy. Annäherungen Polen-Deutschland’*, ed. Karol Bal and Jadwiga Wilk, Wrocław, 2006, pp. 13–18; Henryk Barycz, *J. S. Bandtkie a Śląsk: Z dziejów pierwszych zainteresowań się nauki polskiej Śląskiem*, Katowice, 1936, pp. 12, 38.

¹⁴ See the reference to this ‘Polish’ — as he himself wrote — genesis of the surname: Reinhart Koselleck, ‘Gebrochene Erinnerung? Deutsche und polnische Vergangenheiten’, *Jahrbuch der Deutsche Akademie für Sprache und Dichtung*, 2000 [2001], pp. 19–32 (p. 19).

¹⁵ Both quotations from: Manfred Hettling and Wolfgang Schieder, ‘Theorie des historisch Möglichen: Zur Historik von Reinhart Koselleck’, in *Reinhart Koselleck als Historiker*, pp. 12, 17.

had originally planned to embark on a career as a violinist and taught all three of her sons to play the violoncello, creating conditions at home for practising chamber music at a high level. Science, music, reading — this was Reinhart's home circle. Home, however, moved from place to place. In this sense, we may define Koselleck's experience as — in a sense — *heimatlose*. In a sense — that is, he did not have the opportunity to attach himself to any particular 'little homeland'. For after two years of working in Breslau (where Reinhart began his school education), his father moved to Kassel, then Dortmund, and finally to Saarbrücken, where he was employed at a higher school as a professor of German history and a methodologist. He was not an enthusiast of National Socialism (he joined the party only in 1941). He raised his sons in the cult of Frederick II. Reinhart, like most of his colleagues, enrolled in the Hitler Youth, and as soon as he passed his secondary school-leaving examinations in Saarbrücken, he volunteered for the Wehrmacht with all his classmates.

It was the beginning of the summer of 1941 — and of the German-Soviet War. The experience of a volunteer gunner in the Wehrmacht (succinctly presented earlier by N. Olsen in his monograph) is additionally illuminated by the material gathered in Schieder's and Hettling's essay. First, a long road with an artillery unit to Stalingrad, which was luckily interrupted for Koselleck on the eve of the decisive battle, when in July 1942, after a serious accident, he was transferred to the rear, avoiding Soviet encirclement, and thus certain captivity or death. He then served in the anti-aircraft artillery in occupied France, and was finally transferred to Moravia in March 1945. On the road of retreat, in September 1944, when the Third Reich was shrinking rapidly, in a letter to his father Reinhart recounted — with a glimmer of hope — that combining the V rockets with the product of the 'splitting of the atom' may yet bring victory...¹⁶

Interestingly, while writing about the political process of re-education of a national-conservative veteran of both Wehrmacht fronts, the authors of this biographical introduction to the history of Koselleck's concept have completely overlooked the moment which he himself indicated years later as a breakthrough — namely, that when he became aware of the entire burden of crimes generated by the system of the Third Reich. This was indeed a singular experience. Captured in early May 1945 by the Red Army in Moravia, Koselleck was driven to the camp in Auschwitz, which he and his fellow prisoners were to 'clean up' — or, more specifically, dismantle the industrial installations that were to be transported deep into the Soviet

¹⁶ See Hettling and Schieder, 'Theorie des historisch Möglichen', p. 20.

Union. Previously, he had treated information about the mass murder of the ‘lower races’ on an industrial scale as mere ‘Soviet propaganda’. A former Polish prisoner of Auschwitz who supervised the prisoners swung a wooden stool at Koselleck (who worked in the kitchen), but abandoned his intention to kill one German, shouting: ‘And what will it help if I smash your head in? For you and yours have, after all, gassed millions’. Then the future historian, as he himself recalled years later, realized that it was true — that the Germans were in fact responsible for the gassing of millions. The recollection of that moment was perhaps the best example of what the author of *Sediments of Time* would later compare to an experience frozen in memory like boiling lava.¹⁷

He was then sent — like hundreds of thousands of other German prisoners of war — to a Soviet camp in Kazakhstan (specifically in Spassk, in the Karaganda coal basin). And again, just like before the Battle of Stalingrad, he was extremely lucky, for after a dozen or so months he was released from the camp and returned to Germany. In the camp, a classmate of his was a physician’s auxiliary, while the camp doctor was a former assistant of his grandfather, Professor Marchand of Leipzig: after operating on Koselleck, he provided him with a certificate attesting that he was completely unable to work, and — strangely, indeed inexplicably — the prisoner was sent home. Most of his comrades-in-arms (and then ‘comrades-in-misery’) did not experience such a miracle, and never returned from the Soviet camps. On the border between Poland and the Soviet occupation zone of Germany, the newly released prisoner was given the *Communist Manifesto* to start his re-education. He finally arrived home, which was then in the French occupation zone. Both his brothers were dead. One had perished under the rubble of the family home, bombed by the Allies, while the other had died on the front line just before the end of the war. His aunt had been gassed under the National Socialist ‘euthanasia’ programme. Two-thirds of Koselleck’s high school graduation class did not survive the war. But he survived.¹⁸

This was the experience of a certain generation, but at once special and unique. If, as Koselleck wrote years later, history is first and foremost a science of (or about) experience, then he cannot ignore the path

¹⁷ Reinhart Koselleck, ‘Glühende Lava, zur Erinnerung geronnen Vielerlei Abschied vom Krieg’, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 6 May 1995, p. B4; cf. Olsen, *History in the Plural*, pp. 288–89.

¹⁸ Hettling and Schieder do not write much about these experiences, but we can learn about them from, for example, a comprehensive introduction-cum-analysis by Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann and Sean Franzel: ‘Translating Koselleck’, in Reinhart Koselleck, *Sediments of Time: On Possible Histories*, Stanford, CA, 2018, pp. IX–XXXI (pp. XXVIII–XXX).

that he had traversed before he was twenty-three: the road to Stalingrad, through Auschwitz, right up to the Soviet camp in the Kazakh steppes and back to Heidelberg. After such a path, however, the question of 'Why did I survive?', 'Why me?', simply had to be the starting point for a reflection on history and the place in it of a specific man. The loss of faith in the utopia of the eternal Reich, or at least in the permanent triumph of the German state, the belief in which was imposed by one's home upbringing and school education, must have functioned as an additional premise for questions about the point and pointlessness of history, and about utopia and politics.

The next stage of re-education that the candidate returning from the prisoner of war camp to study in Heidelberg had to undergo in 1947 — a special course in Göhrde, in the British occupation zone — did not provide a convincing answer to these queries. Yet again, the authors of the initial, synthetic presentation from the most recent book on the author of *Critique and Crisis* have omitted this moment. And yet it is probably of interest if we reflect on the genesis of Koselleck's anti-utopian and anti-totalitarian thought. Therefore, I have allowed myself to recall here that in Göhrde the political officer/instructor was, as it happened, Eric Hobsbawm, who would go on to become the most famous defender of Marxist orthodoxy in Western historiography. But Koselleck's meeting with yet another follower of the Communist vision of history did not convert him to the new utopia. The only trace of his reaction to Hobsbawm's teachings is the subsequently famous caricature of the British historian, which the re-educated 'student' drew then and published years later in a larger collection. Hobsbawm himself described in his memoirs the strong impression made on him by the young German's report on the conditions of living (and dying) in the prisoner-of-war camp in Kazakhstan. The British historian considered it appropriate to emphasize only one aspect — his admiration for the heroism and endurance of... the Soviet guards.¹⁹

Schieder and Hettling, perhaps guided by the materials available to them, place somewhat less emphasis in their narrative on these actual (and not 'described') experiences of the young Koselleck, however they do provide much interesting information about the books and authors which resulted in the formation of a new historical perspective by the

¹⁹ See Willibald Steinmetz, 'Nachruf auf Reinhart Koselleck (1923–2006)', *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 32 2006, 3, pp. 412–32 (pp. 415–16); Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times: A Twentieth-Century Life*, New York, 2002, pp. 178–80 (cf. the German edition: idem, *Gefährliche Zeiten: Ein Leben im 20. Jahrhundert*, München, 2003, pp. 208–12).

future author of *Sediments of Time*. The sources which they extracted from the Koselleck family archive show the re-evaluation that occurred in the views of his father, Arno, and the texts from the post-war era which testify to this. Even more evident is the significant influence that would be exerted on the young Reinhart by the critical reflections on the history of utopia authored by his godfather and, from 1949, master at the University of Heidelberg, Professor Johannes Kühn.²⁰ A further analysis of Koselleck's 'academic socialization' follows the track previously marked out: meetings with Schmitt and encounters with Heidegger's thought, and a confrontation with the concepts of Karl Löwith and Gadamer (members of the young historian's doctoral committee), which in a sense countered the effects of the former.²¹ We will not recall here the next mini-chapters of this intellectual biography of the author of *Critique and Crisis* as written by Schieder and Hettling, for they repeat the moments and themes known in the increasingly rich 'Koselleckology'.

Rather, let us note what is perhaps missing from the new, huge volume, written by the most competent German researchers on this biography and the theory and methodology of historical research resulting therefrom. Apart from the index, the lack of which is very noticeable in such a detailed book, filled with various names and phenomena... Well, I would like to supplement the list of omissions — which, naturally, everyone who is so inclined may complete as they see fit — with two moments of Koselleck's historical reflection that I believe are important and strongly connected with his wartime experience, and at the same time inscribed, in a sense, in the Polish contexts of his intellectual biography.

Firstly, the volume, which clearly aspires to the status of a working synthesis of Koselleck's output, leaves out, or at least treats marginally, the issue of the dispute between the theoretician of history and memory studies, which developed ever since the publication of Pierre Nora's study on sites of memory as a peculiar obsession with the organization of collective memory, sweeping from France through Germany and the rest of the Continent, first Western Europe, and then — as an intellectual import — Eastern Europe. This was an issue of personal importance for the author of *Sediments of Time*, and further, his standpoint on the matter positioned/contextualized his theoretical approach in debates on the possible meanings of history over the last forty years. I feel obliged to repeat that there is no place here to develop a theoretical analysis of this

²⁰ See Hettling and Schieder, 'Theorie des historisch Möglichen', pp. 25–29.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 30–36.

exceptionally interesting theme. I will only recall its first, theoretically important trace, and then its practical consequences — statements made by Koselleck in the internal disputes of the elites of the Federal Republic of Germany about memory and the commemoration of the Second World War. This trace, if I am not mistaken, disclosed itself for the first time at the aforementioned conference of the Polish Academy of Sciences, which was organized in Warsaw in 1984 and focused on a comparison of the experiences of the two world wars. There, Koselleck delivered a paper on the impact of both these conflicts on 'social consciousness'.²² Although the latter concept coincides with the subtitle of the presentation (the title introduced metaphors, that is, 'sluices of memory and sediments of experience'), the main axis of the argument was delineated not by the idea of social community, but by tensions between it and the experience of the individual — tensions between the specific and unique memory of the individual and the community of memory built top-down. Koselleck took two simple statements as his starting point:

Every man has in his own biography points of scission, dividing lines that open as if new chapters of life. [...] Both wars brought with them the destruction of [pre-war — A.N.] experience, and phases of [new, wartime — A.N.] experience of those afflicted thereby or therein involved, on a scale hitherto unheard of and unthinkable.²³

In his characteristic methodical way, he continued to reflect on what factors shape the consciousness that processes these experiences. Among others, he mentioned the following synchronous factors: 1) a specific language and the linguistic concepts and traditions contained therein, which 'sort the possibilities of experience', 2) 'religious beliefs', 'philosophical self-interpretations' and 'ideological projects' partly related to these traditions, 3) affiliation with 'entities of political action' (for example, citizenship of the Second Polish Republic, or the Third Reich, or the USSR), 4) generational affiliation (the First World War would have been viewed differently by a veteran of the Franco-Prussian War born in 1852, a conscript born in 1894, and a child born in 1910), 5) roles determined by gender and family, and, finally, 6) class criteria and stratification. 'Wartime experiences could have been brought into being and drawn to our attention solely because they fell upon the soil of historically earlier possibilities of

²² Reinhard Koselleck, 'Przepusty pamięci i warstwy doświadczenia', in idem, *Warstwy czasu*, pp. 241–62 (first edition: 'Der Einfluß der beiden Weltkriege als das soziale Bewußtsein', in *Der Krieg des kleinen Mannes: Eine Militärgeschichte von unten*, ed. Wolfram Wette, Munich and Zürich, 1992, pp. 324–43).

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 241.

their experience' — those mentioned above. At the same time, all these previously-shaped factors undergo change under the influence of the events of war. This interaction, in turn, influences what Koselleck calls the 'diachronic impact of war on the consciousness', that is, the way in which the memory of war is shaped after the conflict ends. And it is here that he emphasizes the importance of the division into the memory of the victors and the vanquished, also distinguishing the memory of countries who are 'more or less neutral, and whose political identity was [...] maintained during the wars'.²⁴ This is how the official memory of war begins to form: 'the political cult of the dead and its monuments'. At the beginning of his comparative analysis of this cult and its forms after the First World War and the Second World War, in both France and Germany (separately in the GDR), Koselleck clearly formulates his position — that of a man with a specific, completely individual experience of war: 'Everyone dies alone. Organized mass murder, however, leads to similarities and differences in the digestion of experience and in the memory of posterity'.²⁵ In the end, he expresses his fundamental distrust of authoritatively constructed political memories, which attempt to give meaning to an experience that the participants/victims of war ('organized mass murder') are entitled to perceive as meaningless. Koselleck emphasized this position with even greater force in his famous essay 'On the Meaning and Absurdity of History'.²⁶

Three years later, he developed his analysis of the relationship between the 'primary/primordial' experience of the individual, recorded in his body, irreplaceable and intransferable, and the 'secondary' memory created by the communicational practices of the family, school and state, as well as by professional historians, parties, churches and artists. He did so in a less well-known and less often quoted text, which he delivered at a conference organized by the Deutsche Akademie für Sprache und Dichtung in Cracow on 31 March 2000. As an aside, it is interesting to see Koselleck place this analysis in the context of the history of Polish-German 'broken memories', from the Grunwald battle of 1410 through the partitions to Edith Stein's special message.²⁷ Starting from his personal experience of war, in another important article, written in 1999, he

²⁴ Both quotations: *ibid.*, p. 247 and 249.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 250.

²⁶ Reinhart Koselleck, 'O sensie i bezsensie dziejów: Dieterowi Groh na 60. urodziny', in *idem, Semantyka historyczna*, pp. 533–55 (first edition: 'Vom Sinn und Unsinn der Geschichte', *Merkur*, 1997, 4 (577), pp. 319–33.

²⁷ *Idem*, 'Gebrochene Erinnerung?', pp. 19–32.

not only defended the indelible 'primary' experience against ideologically motivated attempts at an ex-post imposition of a common, 'just' memory by those fortunate enough to have been born later. Namely, in the text, concerned with the 'discontinuance of memory', he also presented a taxonomy of methods of creating memory — in this specific instance referring to the crimes of Nazi Germany. Although he acknowledged the importance of and need for all three of the distinguished methods: the scientific (by historians), the moral and the religious, he at once warned against the possible abuse of each of them. Science will not be the ultimate explanation of what has led to the deaths and sufferings of millions; neither will moral judgement impart any sense thereto, while the religious perspective may remain alien to non-Christians. There remains individual memory — with its right to veto any top-down interpretations.²⁸

But Koselleck does not underestimate the collective memory. On the contrary, he heatedly enters the debate about which of its elements he considers as most necessary for the German memory of the Second World War. His well-known article, printed in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* on the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the war (and in reference to an exhibition presenting the Wehrmacht's crimes, which was passing through Germany at the time), an entire series of articles published between 1997 and 1999 regarding a monument to the victims of the Holocaust in Berlin, and one of his last interviews, which Koselleck gave in 2005, all manifest the resistance of this uniquely experienced author to the simplifications and claims of state memory, and — even more broadly — of collective memory. Summarizing his position, we may point to three main suggestions. First: not to reduce the official German memory of the Second World War to the commemoration of victims — Germans must necessarily remember the perpetrators, and it is to this, the German perpetrators, that their policy of remembrance ought to be devoted. Secondly: do not reduce the memory of victims to the single largest 'category'. This problem cannot be 'resolved' by a single central monument dedicated to the victims of the Holocaust. For where, then, would we locate the memory of the extermination of the Sinti and Roma, the memory of the millions of Poles (non-Jews) and Soviet prisoners — all killed in the name of the Third Reich — of the hundreds of thousands killed because of the German occupation of the Balkans, Greece, Italy and other countries, including northern Europe, and of the millions of victims of Nazi occupation policy in Ukraine and Belarus?

²⁸ Idem, 'Die Diskontinuität der Erinnerung', *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie*, 47, 1999, 2, pp. 213–22.

Koselleck demanded separate monuments for each of these groups, or a joint monument to all of them. What caused the old historian to display such stubbornness? It seems that this was a manifestation of persevering with his own experience, with his own individual memory of the war, which did not comprise Jewish victims alone (sought out exclusively by the authors of the Bielefeld volume along Koselleck's path through the Second World War). He defends it against the reduction made by politics of memory, the 'collective memory' that is created years later with all its hierarchies and simplifications, which erase individual and even mass crimes.

As a nation of perpetrators, when constructing a national monument in Berlin we are obligated to remember every victim. As perpetrators, we cannot take responsibility for establishing the hierarchy of victims. Neither many individual monuments nor a group of diverse monuments for different groups will provide that which is needed, namely, an exhaustive commemoration of the totality of crimes committed by the National Socialists.²⁹

I consider the last sentence — taken from an article written in 1999 — to be particularly important for Koselleck's position. This is the third, and perhaps most important suggestion which he introduced to the debate on German memory at the end of the twentieth century.

He generalized it in an extensive interview given in 2005 to the scholarly journal *Contributions to the History of Concepts*. He stated with special emphasis:

My personal position on this issue is one of decided opposition to collective memory, given that I was subjected to the collective memory of the National Socialists for 12 years of my life. I am not satisfied with any form of collective memory, for I know that actual memory is independent of so-called collective memory, and my standpoint on this matter is

²⁹ Idem, 'Die Widmung', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 3 March 1999, p. 45; cf. earlier key texts, among others: idem, 'Glühende Lava, zur Erinnerung geronnen Vielerlei Abschied vom Krieg'; idem, 'Der 9. Mai zwischen Erinnerung und Geschichte', *Borussia*, 38, 2006, pp. 25–32; see also the most insightful analyses devoted to this aspect of Koselleck's reflections: Margrit Pernau and Sébastien Tremblay, 'Dealing with an Ocean of Meaninglessness: Reinhart Koselleck's Lava Memories and Conceptual History', *Contributions to the History of Concepts*, 15, 2020, 2, pp. 7–28; Jan Eike Dunkhase, *Absurde Geschichte: Reinhardt Kosellecks historischer Existentialismus*, Marbach, 2015, pp. 37–52; Christina Morina, 'Reinhart Koselleck und das Überleben in Trauer nach den Umbrüchen von 1945 und 1989', *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft*, 63, 2015, 5, pp. 435–50; Olsen, *History in the Plural*, pp. 271–301; Robert Traba, 'Druga strona pamięci', *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 12 April 2009.

that my memory depends on my experience and nothing else. No matter what people say, I know my personal experiences and I will not renounce any of them. I have the right to preserve my personal experiences exactly as I remember them, and the events that I preserve in my memory constitute my personal identity. The memory produced to fit the 'collective memory' comes from the seven German 'ps': professors, who generate this memory, parish priests, politicians, poets, the press... in short, from people who consider themselves guardians of the collective memory, who pay for it, produce it and utilize it with the intention of instilling a sense of trust and security... – to me it is nothing but ideology.³⁰

I have allowed myself to quote these emotionally charged words, because they appear to emphatically sum up the meaning of the foundation of Koselleck's reflection, which cannot be discovered based on his writings or the impact of meetings with other German thinkers (and this is the perspective – excessively narrow, as I think – that the collective volume from Bielefeld, discussed above, adopts). This is testimony to the importance that the author of *Sluices of Memory* attaches to the biographical, if one may say so, key in the interpretation of the ideas. Especially his own ideas, marked by the hot lava of the experiences of the Second World War, which, although cooling down, deposits itself in the layers of the individual experience, from which it cannot ever be removed. Next, reading, intellectual influences and rationalization pass through these layers, but they never endow history – especially as monstrous as that experienced by the generation of the Second World War, the perpetrators and especially the victims, the victors and the vanquished – with rationality.

Finally, it is worth noting one other important (or so I think) moment in Koselleck's intellectual history, which has also not been hitherto presented in studies devoted to him; in any case, it has clearly been omitted from Schieder's and Hettling's Göttingen volume. In a sense, this moment is related to Poland. I am referring here to Koselleck's participation in the seminars organized for Pope John Paul II and with his participation at Castel Gandolfo. Let us recall that it was initiated by two Polish thinkers: Krzysztof Michalski and Father Józef Tischner, whose papal seminars, conducted on behalf of the Vienna Institute of Human Sciences in the years 1983–98 (the last without Tischner), gathered the most eminent personalities of the world humanities and social sciences. Koselleck delivered

³⁰ Javier Fernandez Sebastián and Juan Francisco Fuentes, 'Conceptual History, Memory, and Identity: An Interview with Reinhart Koselleck', *Contributions to the History of Concepts*, 2, 2006, 1, pp. 99–127 (p. 113).

papers at two meetings: in 1985, when the topic was ‘Crisis’, and in 1987, when, within the general slogan of the conference — *Europe — and what next*, the German historian spoke about ‘the shifting of the borders of emancipation’. Apart from John Paul II, the debates were participated in by, among others, Czesław Miłosz, Leszek Kołakowski, Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker, Clifford Geertz, Charles Taylor, Ernest-Wolfgang Böckenförde, Bernard Lewis, Ernest Gellner, Fritz Stern, Edward Shils, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur and George Soros. Both Koselleck’s papers were of course published in German, in volumes presenting the intellectual output of the conferences (and, naturally, were also later translated).³¹ A unique opportunity to take a closer look at the thought of the German theoretician of history in action, in response to important polemics, occurred during the second of these conferences, and the materials published following its conclusion include a record of the discussion. What also needs to be emphasized — in this situation, with conversations being held in the presence of the Pope — is that the author of *Sediments of Time* goes beyond the limits naturally assumed by the historian and not only analyses the past, but also dares to say what may (and even what *should*) result from this for the future. In a sense, he returns to the topos of *Historia magistra vitae*, and even to the role of a utopian (!). This topic has not yet been elaborated on in ‘Koselleckology’.³² So let us look at how it was developed at Castel Gandolfo.

On the one hand, the lecture given in August 1985 presents a succinctly expressed *Begriffsgeschichte* of the ‘crises’, but on the other it goes beyond this historical distance. Perhaps Koselleck was so provoked by the very site of the debate:

An element of the finiteness of all people is that they consider their own situation [and therefore the ‘crisis’ which they observe — A.N.] as more important than all and any preceding situations. But precisely

³¹ See Reinhart Koselleck, ‘Einige Fragen an die Begriffsgeschichte von “Krise”’, in *Über die Krise: Castelgandolfo-Gespräche 1985*, ed. Krzysztof Michalski, Stuttgart, 1986, pp. 64–76, and idem, ‘Grenzverschiebungen der Emanzipation — Eine begriffsgeschichtliche Skizze’, in *Europa und die Folgen: Castelgandolfo-Gespräche 1987*, ed. Krzysztof Michalski, Stuttgart, 1988, pp. 51–70 (Polish edition: idem, ‘Kilka pytań na temat historii pojęcia “kryzys”’, *Dzieje pojęć*, pp. 221–35, and idem, ‘Przesuwanie się granic emancypacji: Szkic historii pojęcia’, in *Dzieje pojęć*, pp. 199–220, and also: *Rozmowy w Castel Gandolfo*, ed. Krzysztof Michalski and Wojciech Bonowicz, Warsaw and Cracow, 2010, pp. 182–91 and 297–309).

³² Except, perhaps, for Anny Friberg’s essay, ‘Venturing beyond Koselleck’s *Erwartungshorizont*: On the Category of the Utopian’, *Rethinking History*, 25, 2021, 3, pp. 263–80 — in my opinion, however, this wrongly compares Koselleck’s concepts with Ernst Bloch’s ‘philosophy of hope’.

because of the teaching about the Last Judgement, this exaggerated human self-esteem should not be regarded as a purely perspectival error. When it comes to saving one's life, it may well be that many decisions turn out to be final decisions. 'Krisis' in the Greek sense of the compulsion to judge and act in the absence of time remains a concept that is necessary even in the complex conditions of modern society.³³

Towards the end of the twentieth century the acceleration of time, which Koselleck analysed as a concept that first appeared in the eighteenth/nineteenth century, demonstrates that finding a boundary for, among others, the galloping growth of the world population and the exploitation of resources is a very real problem. 'Perhaps the answer to the crisis lies in searching for stabilizers that may be discovered in the long duration of human history'.³⁴

In a sense, the lecture given in August 1987 continues this search in the context of the history of the concept of emancipation. From the legal emancipation from the authority of one's father, in the Roman tradition, to the Enlightened idea of self-emancipation, through instances of political, social, economic and religious emancipation in the nineteenth century, to the belief in the possibility of man 'emancipating himself' from all limitations and from all authority — for Koselleck, the dynamics of this change are an opportunity to once again express in his work a warning against the utopia of total liberation. He recalls how individual and group claims for equal rights mutually support each other, but can also lead to irremovable contradictions.

The postulated freedom from authority, inferred from the possession of equal rights by all, is opposed by all previous experience. Therefore, the concept [of emancipation — A.N.] as a designation of the goal must be differentiated. We need to recognize the different factors influencing heterogeneous actors within the framework of authorities capable of taking decisions of political importance and between these authorities. Rational politics can only be pursued if we consider the pluralism of existing communities. To reduce apocalyptic threats at least initially, we cannot suspend the rules of the political account.³⁵

At the same time, however, he states that challenges of a global nature, related to the ecological crisis, the 'ubiquitous threat of terrorism' and the still insurmountable nuclear threat (it was, after all, 1987), are

³³ Koselleck, 'Kilka pytań na temat historii pojęcia "kryzys"', p. 232.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 235.

³⁵ Idem, 'Przesuwanie się granic emancypacji', p. 217.

very real. This new reality makes the postulate of emancipation, reduced to its core — making all men equal in their right to survive on this Earth, ‘a minimum which we must preserve from the notion of emancipation handed down to us to be able to act rationally in politics’.³⁶ The addition of ecology to the determinants of human existence and the necessary common response to a possible catastrophe, which we must attempt to reconcile with the existence of inevitable divisions and differences of objectives between people — this is a new tone in Koselleck’s reflection. Analysts of his thinking often discern it only in the final years of his life, and especially in his frequently commented text for *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* of May 2005.³⁷ Going back to his participation in the Castel Gandolfo conferences, we can see that this ‘breakthrough’ in his thought had occurred earlier.

We can also engage in a more in-depth analysis of the anti-utopian tendency in this thinking: does it stop here — come to an end? During the discussion which followed the presentation of his paper, Koselleck, perhaps with a hint of self-irony, stated thus: ‘you can say that I have become a utopian’.³⁸ He explained that he was not concerned with the realization of some universal idea in the future, but with survival, attempts at securing which should be made today; and not with the promise of global salvation (which he mocked in his correspondence with Schmitt), but with the organization of political co-operation based on a rational prediction of the global threat. After all, in the discussion he recalled his own remark (from the essay on the semantics of asymmetric opposing concepts)³⁹ that ‘the unity of humanity is not ideologically neutral’, that any attempt to politically fulfil such unity is beset by the spectre of the concept of the ‘non-human’, excluded from this community, or of the ‘superman’, who places himself above it. He continued to explicitly term the hopes (and even programmes) of universal freedom from authority — and therefore from politics — that form part of the emancipatory projects of uniting humanity ‘a utopia that magnifies the threats to peace’.⁴⁰

³⁶ Ibid., p. 220.

³⁷ See idem, ‘Was sich wiederholt’, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* 21 July 2005, p. 6.

³⁸ ‘Dyskusja (fragmenty)’, in *Rozmowy w Castel Gandolfo*, p. 319.

³⁹ See Reinhardt Koselleck, ‘O historyczno-politycznej semantyce przeciwstawnych pojęć asymetrycznych’, in idem, *Semantyka historyczna*, pp. 226–82 (text originally published in: idem, *Vergangene Zukunft: Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten*, Frankfurt am Main, 1979, pp. 349–75).

⁴⁰ ‘Dyskusja (fragmenty)’, in *Rozmowy w Castel Gandolfo*, p. 313.

Emphasizing the strength and at once the ambiguity of the slogan of emancipation, Koselleck sparked an extremely heated discussion. The German historian's paper was criticized by Ernest Gellner in an astonishingly sharp — even aggressive — manner. The British sociologist considered the approach of the author of *Critique and Crisis* as excessively 'idealistic', 'intellectual', prescinding from the realities of social change, whose essence is not emancipation, but homogenization as a reaction to the instability brought on by economic change. In short: modernization. The debate was also participated in by: Bernard Lewis, Ernest-Wolfgang Böckenförde and Leszek Kołakowski (who pointed to the disturbing possibility of emancipation from freedom and warned against the acceptance of every form of self-realization, for example, à la Hitler), clearly defending the German historian against Gellner's attack, as did Edward Shils and Charles Taylor. Here is not the place to summarize this fascinating discussion. Rather, I intend to point out in Koselleck's response certain premises that are of interest for interpreting his political thought. The essence of this answer was thus: complete homogenization is not a verdict of modernity; it can even be a dangerous utopia.

In my opinion, it should be possible to allow for a minimal dissimilarity, guaranteeing individual freedom and at the same time constituting a prerequisite for the mobility of industrial society. Within this premise there is hidden a demand for the recognition of groups, of minimal links to traditional ways of behaviour, for example, of the Bretons or Basques, which in turn conditions the possibility of individual equality.

Emancipation, understood as equality of rights, can be realized not as a utopia of the freedom of all individuals from the entirety of authority, but through the 'recognition by groups living on this globe of pluralistic, federalist opportunities. Religious pluralism, political pluralism, economic pluralism are probably prerequisites for finding at least some minimal agreement'.⁴¹ Koselleck's position regarding common challenges for humanity, threatened as it is with disaster, has been finally summarized in the following sentence from the Castel Gandolfo conference: 'It is possible to define minimum universals with respect to which there would be general agreement, and which would have to be fought for in spite of pluralistic empiricism'.⁴²

⁴¹ Ibid., pp. 314, 319.

⁴² Ibid., p. 318.

Here, he does not display any naive or fanatical faith in overcoming all the conflicts that arise from our anthropological determinants (from the divisions of 'before/after', 'higher/lower' and 'within/without', which cannot be removed — as he emphasized in one of his last essays — even from the framework of the project of a united Europe).⁴³ In one of his last interviews, Koselleck confirmed his pessimism, ever-present since at least 1945: in interpersonal relations, 'a conflict ends when the next conflict begins. Conflicts can never be ultimately resolved; instead, they are simply replaced by conflicts with different structures'.⁴⁴ A responsible policy, based on the recognition of the plurality of human communities and values, which limits the scale of conflicts and has an ambition to resolve them only at a certain time, and not 'once and for all', is a concept that Koselleck rarely expresses straight out. But it is this idea, voiced with exceptional clarity during the debates held at Castel Gandolfo, that seems to communicate the political position of the German historian — his political thought, one might even say.⁴⁵

A deeper reflection on this aspect of Reinhart Koselleck's intellectual heritage seems to be a postulate for research, the omission of which from the Göttingen volume should probably be pointed out. In fact, just like the chance of fulfilling this postulate precisely through further analysis of the thoughts of the author of *Critique and Crisis*, not only within the framework of German intellectual history after the Second World War, but also from the angle of the historian's participation in the broader — indeed civilizational — debate of Europe at the end of the twentieth century. Also in the Polish contexts, which are important for Koselleck's biography and thought, and have been specially emphasized in the present text.

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(Proofreading Jan Czarniecki)

⁴³ Reinhart Koselleck, 'Patriotyzm: Racje i granice pewnego nowożytnego pojęcia', in *Dzieje pojęć*, pp. 236–58 (pp. 253–58) (the first edition of this text — from 2003 — in: 'Patria' und 'Patrioten' vor dem Patriotismus, ed. Robert von Friedeburg, Wiesbaden, 2005).

⁴⁴ Reinhart Koselleck, 'Histories in the Plural and the Theory of History: An Interview with Carsten Dutt', in *Sediments of Time*, pp. 250–66 (p. 254); cf. Reinhardt Koselleck and Carsten Dutt, *Erfahrene Geschichte: Zwei Gespräche*, Heidelberg, 2013.

⁴⁵ We may add that a political interpretation of the standpoint of the author of *Sediments of Time* is being disputed by, among others, Imbriano (*Der Begriff der Politik*, passim), Olsen (*History in the Plural*, pp. 69–72, 190), Timo Pankakoski ('The Long Goodbye. Recent Perspectives on the Koselleck/Schmitt Question', *History and Theory*, 60, 2021, 3, pp. 558–72).

Summary

Having as its backdrop an extensive collective volume devoted to the life and work of the German theoretician of history Reinhart Koselleck (1923–2006), published in Göttingen in 2021, the article examines selected aspects of his biography. It brings to the fore significant traces of the Second World War experiences of the author of *Kritik und Krise*, which have been omitted from the reviewed tome. Further, it looks at their influence on Koselleck's critical approach to the concept of collective memory and on the anti-utopian thrust of his historical theory. In this context, it also shows the significance of his presentations at Castel Gandolfo in 1985 and 1987 (which have also not been included in the literature concerning Koselleck).

(Translated by Maciej Zakrzewski)
(Proofreading Jan Czarniecki)

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