

The Researcher's Dilemmas: The Political Entanglement of Folk Art in The People's Republic of Poland

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This article discusses memory research on the political entanglement of folk art in the People's Republic of Poland (PRL), focusing on Zalipie, a village famous for painting floral ornaments. From the 1940s, researchers – often aligned with socialist authorities – played a role in shaping the phenomenon, reflecting the PRL's cultural policies. This alignment brought economic benefits for Zalipie's female painters, who gained opportunities to sell their crafts and travel abroad.

The 1989 political transformation marked a turning point, as state support for folk art declined amidst the economic challenges of the 1990s. This period, described in terms of the “trauma of great change” (Sztompka, 2000), had a profound impact on Polish folk artists. Contemporary research in Zalipie often revisits memories of the PRL which evoke mixed emotions and challenge the dominant critical narrative about socialist rule.

Anthropological studies of memory regarding the socialist past of folk art raise methodological questions. How should researchers approach politically charged histories? What narrative of the PRL emerges from interviews, and how do they align with archival records? How has the post-1989 transformation influenced these stories? These dilemmas highlight the complexities of engaging with the political and cultural heritage of folk art in Poland.

Keywords: folk art in Poland, memory and politics, Zalipie floral painting, socialist cultural policies, post-communist transformation, memory studies

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Introduction

During one of my fieldwork visits to Zalipie village, known for its folk art tradition, I sat with an elderly painter in her sitting room with walls decorated with colourful floral paintings. On the table, covered with a tablecloth painted in similar patterns, more and more photographs appeared – images from exhibitions, fairs, and my interlocutor's travels. Each photograph was tied to a story about a time when folk art enjoyed institutional support and widespread recognition.

At some point, the painter found a photograph that caused some consternation. The photo showed her in a folk costume shaking hands with Wojciech Jaruzelski – the then prime minister and general who, in 1981, declared martial law in Poland, citing the need to restore order amid growing political tensions surrounding the 'Solidarity' movement. The photograph was taken in 1984 during an official ceremony at the Palace of Culture and Science in Warsaw – a monumental building that still serves as a symbol of the communist era in Poland.

Upon seeing this photo, my interlocutor began to explain that it was a trip connected with the Stronnictwo Ludowe (People's Party)¹ and that she had been invited there as a folk artist. Her tone shifted as she hesitated, wary of the dictaphone, and added: *"I jest to zdjęcie tu. Tylko terazem zdjęła, bo taki to, wszystko takie dziadostwo, kuźwa, się robi. A to, jak kto rządził, to rządził, no, co będziemy mówić. To nie było tak."* (And here is the photo. I just took it down now because, well ... everything is turning into such a mess, damn it. And, well, whoever was in power was in power – what more is there to say? It wasn't like that.)

It was 2018. A few months earlier, the Polish parliament had passed a bill intended to symbolically strip Jaruzelski and other communist generals of their military ranks. Although the president ultimately vetoed the bill, the debate surrounding it once again exposed the deep divisions and complexity of Polish collective memory of communism.²

My interlocutor hesitated and asked whether I sympathised with PiS (the ruling party in 2018). She admitted that she had been reluctant to show me the photo because of the current political climate. This photograph had become an uncomfortable

1 In the 1980s, the Zjednoczone Stronnictwo Ludowe (the United People's Party) operated as a satellite party in communist Poland, formally representing rural interests. It traced its name and symbolic legitimacy to pre-war peasant movements, including the original Stronnictwo Ludowe, an independent political force advocating for farmers and village communities. After World War II, the communists co-opted the name and structure of the party, integrating it into the political framework controlled by the Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza (the Polish United Workers' Party).

2 Disputes over the interpretation of the past, as well as symbolic gestures directed at figures of the communist era, are part of a broader process of negotiating the symbolic frameworks of public memory in post-1989 Poland. Within the Polish field of memory studies, Anna Witeska-Młynarczyk examines how official memory programs influence the personal narratives of individuals – both those recognised as heroes or victims and those marginalised as perpetrators – and how their experiences are either incorporated into or excluded from the symbolic sphere (Witeska-Młynarczyk, 2014).

relic – a reminder of folk art’s prestige but also its entanglement with political power. This tension encapsulates the complexities of remembering and interpreting the past.

This moment clearly encapsulates the dilemmas I face when researching the memory of folk art in the Polish People’s Republic (PRL). How does one discuss the past when it stirs emotions? How should we interpret narratives renegotiated in shifting political contexts? These questions are closely tied to the relational and dialogical nature of memory, as emphasised by Olick, who argues that memory is not a static repository of facts but a socially situated practice shaped by the dynamics of interaction, positionality, and power (Olick, 1999). The meaning of the past is co-produced in concrete communicative settings – influenced by who speaks, who listens, and under what conditions. As a researcher, I find myself adjusting interpretative strategies in relation to the specific context and my interlocutors’ lived experiences. Memory, in this sense, is fluid – it may be emotionally charged or distanced, politicised or intimate, depending on the discursive and affective field in which it is invoked. These issues become even more complex when considering the extent to which folk art and ethnography were embedded within the structures of the political system, simultaneously shaped by and contributing to its ideological framework.

My research on the community of Zalipie painters initially focused on contemporary economic practices and the ways in which folk art functions in today’s cultural landscape. It quickly became clear that understanding these aspects requires delving into the history of local folk art and examining how memory and cultural heritage are negotiated in the realm of local politics. The political entanglement of folk art in the communist past is a crucial element of this process, shaping both the artists’ recollections and the ways in which their work is perceived today. Folk art was never an isolated phenomenon – it was continuously shaped by ethnographic discourse, which played a central role in defining its authenticity and cultural value. Folk art and ethnography were embedded in the PRL’s cultural policies, serving as tools for ideological representation and offering privileges to artists. Similar mechanisms of the ideological instrumentalisation of folk art in socialist regimes have been documented across socialist Central and Eastern Europe. This article explores the methodological difficulties, ethical doubts and dilemmas inherent in studying folk art within the historical and political context of the PRL. While the memory boom emphasises that individual recollections are shaped by broader socio-cultural frameworks and collective memories (Burszta et al., 2021; Irwin-Zarecka, 1994; Olick, 1999), the case of Zalipie highlights how these narratives were further influenced by state policies and academic discourses. The disciplinary shifts within socialist ethnography, influenced by both ideological pressures and surveillance mechanisms (Wróblewski, 2018), provide a crucial backdrop for understanding the role of folk art in legitimising cultural policies of the time.

My approach aligns with broader discussions on the political legacies of socialist ethnology and the methodological uncertainties it entails. Research on state influence on ethnography spans not only Poland but other Eastern Bloc countries (Alymov,

2022; Balaš, 2024; Blaschke, 2016; Boldāne-Zelenkova, 2019; Buchowski, 2011; Hirsch, 2014; Wróblewski, 2018). While these works examine the impact of state ideology on ethnographic knowledge production, my study offers a modest case-centred perspective, bringing folk artists and the complex history of folk art to the foreground. By focusing on Zalipie, I seek to highlight how folk art and its ethnographic representations were embedded in the political structures of the PRL while also contributing to a broader comparative discussion on cultural policy, memory, and role of folk artists as cultural agents in the former Eastern Bloc.

The Historical and Cultural Context

After World War II, the communist authorities in Poland sought to redefine the concept of “lud” (the people) as the foundation of the new socialist order. The word “lud” in Polish carries both a social and ideological meaning, referring to “the people” in a broad sense but also specifically to the working class and peasantry as the foundation of the socialist state. Its adjective form, “ludowy”, has a broad semantic range, encompassing meanings such as “folk”, “popular” and “peasant”. This versatility allowed it to function both as a marker of rural tradition and as a socialist ideological construct.

The PRL presented itself as a state of the working class and peasantry, with folk art playing a key role in this vision – it was used as a tool of political legitimacy. This pattern was not unique to Poland – across the Eastern Bloc, folk culture was elevated to an official status, serving as a carefully curated emblem of state ideology. Similar strategies of elevating folk culture to serve socialist nation-building and ideological representation have been documented in other Eastern Bloc countries (Kęncis, 2017; Feinberg, 2024; Gailite, 2024).

The very language used by the communist authorities reflects this entanglement. The term “sztuka ludowa” (folk art) and the state’s title “Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa” (Polish People’s Republic) reinforced the connection between the state and rural communities. The word “ludowy” was a recurring element in political slogans, aligning folk culture with the socialist project and framing artists as representatives of a broader political movement.

However, the use of folk art as a political and ideological tool was closely tied to the role of ethnography under socialism. This discipline was redefined to align with the objectives of the state, positioning rural communities as both custodians of tradition and essential contributors to the national culture of the lower social classes. Ethnographers were tasked with demonstrating the cultural value of the peasantry and documenting its customs. The alignment of state goals with ethnographic interests ensured that scholars were not only tolerated but actively encouraged to contribute to the socialist modernisation project (Buchowski, 2011). As part of incorporating Marxist–Leninist ideas into the curriculum and research agenda,

preferred research topics included material culture, class relations, and folk art (Jasiewicz, 2004).

While Marxism framed folk art as working-class expression, contrasting it with “cosmopolitan” elite art (Blaschke, 2016), not all ethnographers reproduced this perspective in the same way. Some, particularly those involved in cultural institutions and grassroots artistic initiatives, helped to promote a vision of folk art as both historically rooted and socially relevant to the goals of socialist society (Jasiewicz, 2004). Their work often extended beyond documentation to include artistic support, coordination of exhibitions, and mediation between local artists and state institutions. In contrast, academic ethnographers tended to approach folk culture with greater analytical distance, focusing on theoretical or comparative studies. Compared to other parts of the Eastern Bloc, such as the Baltic republics, this engagement was less institutionalised and more heterogeneous in its motivations and outcomes.³

Research on Polish folk art was actively shaped by state directives. In 1946 the Państwowy Instytut Badania Sztuki Ludowej (the State Institute for the Study of Folk Art) and its journal *Polska Sztuka Ludowa* (Polish Folk Art) were established to align folk art research with socialist propaganda (Jasiewicz, 2004).

This state-directed vision of folk art led to a paradox: while it was promoted as an authentic cultural expression, it was simultaneously subjected to significant ideological and aesthetic intervention. Official policies sought to protect folk art while also steering it towards themes that aligned with socialist realism. The introduction of artistic competitions, institutional patronage, and state-funded stipends meant that folk artists were increasingly creating works that conformed to state-sanctioned styles and narratives (Blaschke, 2016). As a result, ethnographers became active participants in shaping folk art rather than merely documenting its organic development.

These efforts were carried out not only within research centres but also through cultural institutions such as regional museums, where ethnographic departments were established. In addition to conducting research, they also promoted local folk traditions and served as intermediaries between artists and the state through exhibitions and competitions. The relationships between folk artists and these cultural representatives became a form of social capital, as securing institutional support could lead to financial and professional opportunities.

3 In the Soviet Baltic republics, the institutional engagement of ethnographers and folklorists was often more pronounced. While not all scholars operated as ideological agents of the regime, Soviet authorities actively encouraged their participation in propagating official narratives and shaping socialist national identities. Ethnographers were expected to contribute to Soviet modernisation efforts, including the invention of state-sanctioned traditions and positive portrayals of contemporary policies such as collectivisation and industrialisation (Jääts, 2019). In Latvia, for example, some folklorists played key roles in coordinating ensembles, organising staged performances, and promoting ideologically approved versions of folk culture through centralised cultural institutions (Boldāne-Zelenkova, 2019).

The most significant initiative aimed at promoting folk art on a large scale and ensuring a market for folk artists and craftsmen was Cepelia (Centrala Przemysłu Ludowego i Artystycznego – The Central Office of the Folk and Art Industry), established in 1949 at the request of the Ministry of Culture and Art. This state-run economic organisation centralised the production and distribution of folk art, managed networks of folk artists, operated handicraft sales, and played a key role in promoting Polish folk culture both domestically and internationally (Korduba, 2013). Its activities exemplify the state's dual role as both patron and regulator – supporting folk artists while simultaneously shaping and restricting their creative expression (Klekot, 2021).

Within Cepelia, ethnographers also played a crucial role, as they oversaw ethnographic and artistic aspects of folk products within the organisation's affiliated cooperatives (Klekot, 2021). Acting as intermediaries between folk artists and the institution, ethnographers were also tasked with evaluating artists' work when they applied for official folk artist status – a designation that provided them with stable income and institutional recognition (Kroh, 2014).

Zalipie as a Model Folk Art Centre

One of the most prominent centres of folk art in Poland, Zalipie is a village in the Powiśle Dąbrowskie region (Lesser Poland), known for decorating interiors with floral patterns, a tradition dating back to the late nineteenth century (Bartosz, Bartosz, 2013). It gained national recognition after World War II.

State interest in Zalipie as a model folk art centre emerged in the late 1940s, with the first ethnographic research in 1946 (Jackowska, 1983) and a folk painting competition two years later (Szewczyk, 1948). These early initiatives signalled the state's investment in promoting and shaping folk art.

The 1950s to the 1970s marked the golden era of Powiśle Dąbrowskie painting. It was also a time when Zalipie became a strong centre of folk art in the region, thanks to the efforts of the local activist Felicja Curyłowa (Bartosz, Bartosz, 2013). Folk artists from the village gained international recognition, commissions, and stipends, reinforcing their professional status.

Until the late 1980s, local artists benefited from the state-supported system. However, the collapse of the communist regime in 1989 triggered profound socio-economic and cultural transformations that directly affected folk artists in Zalipie and across Poland. The dissolution of state-controlled institutions such as Cepelia resulted in the loss of institutional support, leaving most artists without stable sources of income. The 1990s were marked by economic uncertainty and the transition of folk art from a state-supported sector to an open market.

At the same time, the perception of folk art itself underwent a transformation. No longer an ideological asset, it became subject to new mechanisms of valuation.

Post-transformation Poland distanced itself from folk culture, which was associated with the PRL era. The term “Cepelia” took on a pejorative meaning and became synonymous with kitsch with a rustic touch and commercialism. Years later, Antoni Kroh, a Polish ethnographer, would bitterly summarise the early cultural policies of the Third Republic of Poland, writing that folk art was discarded onto the trash heap with vengeful satisfaction (Kroh, 2016). The experience of Zalipie exemplifies what sociologist Piotr Sztompka has described as the “trauma of a great change” (Sztompka, 2000) – a sudden shift that disrupts existing social and economic structures, forcing individuals and communities to renegotiate their place in a transformed reality. The consequences of this transformation, as well as the strategies employed by artists to navigate the new landscape, constitute a crucial part of my research on the Zalipie painters’ community. At the same time, the political and economic transformation serves as a crucial lens through which my interlocutors and I look back at the past of folk art.

Methodology

Studying the memory of folk art in the PRL requires a methodological approach that goes beyond historical reconstruction. Memory is not a static record of the past but a dynamic process shaped by contemporary political, social, and economic contexts (Burszta et al., 2021). As such, my research combines ethnographic fieldwork, archival analysis, and a critical reading of ethnographic texts.

My studies are based on long-term ethnographic research conducted since 2018, which included extensive fieldwork in Zalipie. Through participant observation, I examined how folk artists engage with cultural institutions, heritage discourses, and everyday narratives about the past – often in ways more revealing than formal interviews.⁴

In addition, I conducted interviews with Zalipie painters and cultural representatives, combining semi-structured and narrative approaches. The semi-structured format enabled me to explore themes central to the study – such as artistic recognition, institutional affiliations, and local economic strategies – while the narrative approach uncovered personal and often affectively charged stories through which informants situated folk art within broader processes of memory and identity work, revealing how individual trajectories intersect with shifting political and cultural contexts (Każmierska, 2016).

To complement oral testimonies, I engaged in archival research, analysing documents related to folk art policies, institutional reports, and materials from

4 The value of observation and participation in memory research has been emphasised by Dariusz Nikiel. Portraying the research process as “reliving the past”, this Polish anthropologist highlights the presence of the researcher and their emotional involvement, along with the resulting moral and interpretive dilemmas (Nikiel, 2022).

ethnographic studies conducted during the communist period. But most importantly, I critically examined ethnographic writings from the PRL, considering their role in shaping how folk art was framed and institutionalised. Given the close relationship between ethnography and state cultural policies at the time, these sources require careful interpretation – particularly in cases where they reflect ideological expectations rather than lived experiences.

Researching politically charged memories presents a unique set of ethical and methodological dilemmas. These aspects in anthropology are deeply intertwined, particularly when working in small communities where researchers build close relationships with their interlocutors. This intertwining becomes especially visible when local actors are embedded in overlapping systems of loyalty, memory, and symbolic status, as shown by Monika Golonka-Czajkowska and Dariusz Nikiel, who emphasise the anthropologist's responsibility in navigating memory conflicts (Golonka-Czajkowska, Nikiel, 2021).⁵ Over the course of my fieldwork, my interactions with Zalipie painters extended beyond the traditional researcher–participant dynamic, developing into bonds of familiarity and even close friendship. While this level of trust allowed me to access sensitive information and nuanced narratives, it also raised ethical concerns regarding the responsibility of the researcher in representing interlocutors' voices (Nowicka, 2012).

One of the key dilemmas I encountered was discussing politically sensitive information. Some of my interviewees had connections to communist-era cultural institutions, and their participation in official events or unofficial actions leveraging the status of folk artists to negotiate advantages with the authorities – once a source of pride – had become a potential point of controversy in the post-socialist context. These tensions recall what Golonka-Czajkowska and Nikiel identify as conflicts between “hidden transcripts” and dominant symbolic orders – situations where individuals selectively recall or obscure elements of the past in response to contemporary frames of legitimacy.⁶

Given the prolonged nature of my fieldwork, my active participation within the studied community became significant as well. It was not uncommon for me to confront interviewees with information I had obtained during previous conversations and meetings. The memories shared by the painters or family stories told by the daughters and granddaughters of artists who once worked in Zalipie are sometimes

5 Golonka-Czajkowska and Nikiel (2021) examine similar ethical and methodological challenges in ethnographic work with communities shaped by divided memory landscapes. Drawing on fieldwork in Poland, they reflect on how overlapping systems of memory, loyalty, and symbolic authority complicate the researcher's position, particularly when the boundaries between private recollection and public responsibility are blurred.

6 Polish anthropologists refer here to the concept of the “hidden transcript”, introduced by James C. Scott to describe the offstage discourse of the oppressed – narratives that are silenced or marginalised in the public sphere but maintained in private settings, often as a form of resistance or self-preservation (Scott, 1990).

controversial even for other Zalipians. This reveals a complex structure of memory, in which family memory operates as the most intimate and immediate layer, coexisting – and at times clashing – with local collective narratives and official or institutional versions of the past (Irwin-Zarecka, 1994).

The question then arises: To what extent should the researcher disclose such details, particularly when they could impact the reputations of those involved? Anthropologists must navigate the fine line between transparency and ethical responsibility, ensuring that their work does not unintentionally expose participants to social or political consequences.

Another challenge is the tension between oral narratives and public discourse. Should nostalgic recollections of the PRL be read as genuine expressions of longing or as strategic adaptations to shifting social contexts? This is an example of how post-socialist transformations have led to narrative ruptures, forcing individuals to reconcile past experiences with new political realities (Sztompka, 2000).

Ultimately, the methodological challenges I encountered highlight the complexity of studying folk art in post-socialist contexts. My long-term engagement with the Zalipie community shaped not only the research process but also my understanding of memory as a lived and negotiated experience – a view aligned with Paul Ricoeur’s conception of memory as an interpretative and relational act, continuously shaped by interaction, narrative, and the tension between remembering and forgetting (Ricoeur, 2004). Rather than treating these challenges as mere obstacles, I recognise them as integral to the ethnographic process where both researcher and participant are implicated in the act of remembering (Nikiel, 2022).

The Political Entanglement of Zalipie Folk Art Discourse

The early interest of both researchers and authorities in folk art was evident as early as the 1940s. The first studies were commissioned by the Ministry of Culture and Art, led by ethnographers Roman Reinfuss and Zdzisław Szewczyk. In 1948, the authorities of the Kraków Voivodeship Office approved the organisation of the first competition for the best interior polychrome and the best *dywan* (a decorative painting on paper).⁷ The initiative was carried out by representatives of the Towarzystwo Uniwersytetów Ludowych (Society of Folk High Schools).⁸ An exhibition

7 *Dywan* (lit. “carpet”) refers to large-scale paper (occasionally fabric) paintings created by Zalipie women, typically hung above beds as an alternative to decorative tapestries or gobelins. These were not floor rugs, but wall decorations imitating textile art.

8 The folk high schools were grassroots adult education institutions rooted in the Danish Grundtvigian model of lifelong learning. In Poland, they emerged in the early twentieth century as spaces for civic, cultural, and agricultural education, especially aimed at rural youth. After World War II, their development was coordinated by the Towarzystwo Uniwersytetów Ludowych, which formalised their structure and curriculum (Maliszewski, 2021).



Picture 1: Helena Nawrocka, Maria Janeczek, and Rozalia Zaród – winners of the competition in Podlipie, 1948, photo by R. Reinfuss, inv. no. III/7109/F, from the collection of the Ethnographic Museum in Kraków.

of *dywans* submitted by local women was held at the Dom Ludowy (People's House) in Podlipie (Szewczyk, 1948).

The ideological climate of the time and the state's approach to folk art were reflected in the competition jury, which, in addition to "specialists" such as ethnographers, included representatives of local governments and social organisations. The political significance of folk art was also apparent in the speeches delivered during these events. A speech from the event underscored folk art's role in the socialist state:

On the day of the Competition results announcement and prize distribution, a large crowd of local peasants gathered in front of the People's House in Podlipie. Several speakers, including both competition organisers and invited guests, addressed the audience. Among them were Comrade Ignacy Henner from Warsaw and the regional secretary of the Polish Workers' Party, Comrade J. Starzec from Kraków. Both emphasised the role that traditional Folk Art was to play in the new Poland. Under the care of the democratic government, folk artists were no longer anonymous creators whose work was neglected and undervalued. They now had the opportunity for full development; talented young peasants had access to education, and folk art, once hidden under thatched roofs, was now welcomed into the realm of national culture. (Szewczyk, 1948: 44, transl. by the author)

This passage serves as evidence of how ethnographic texts reflected the entanglement of ethnography in the cultural politics of the PRL. It is difficult to determine whether the vision of young folk artists being supported by the government was a direct quote from the speech or the opinion of the article's author. Many texts from the late 1940s and 1950s ritualistically referenced Marxist–Leninist theory. Others engaged in a more subtle dialogue with the dominant ideology. The same was true of writings on folk art in the Powiśle region.

One example is an article by Zofia Cieśla-Reinfussowa, published in *Polska Sztuka Ludowa* in 1950. She praised the beneficial influence of state “care” over the folk art of the Powiśle region, approving of the fact that folk painters had ceased creating realistic paintings inspired by “petty-bourgeois” postcards and had instead returned to “traditional” designs:

This year's competition revealed the positive impact of the care that has recently been extended to artistic creativity in the Powiśle Dąbrowskie region. Previously, among the dywans painted by women from Zalipie and the surrounding area, one could often find naturalistically rendered floral motifs, frequently copied from postcards and wallpaper, as well as figurative themes depicting dancing highlander couples – clearly borrowed from painted kitchen tapestries, which still “adorn” the walls of petty-bourgeois homes. Such motifs are no longer present today. In the decorative painting of Powiśle, we can observe a return to earlier, traditional patterns, although these designs continue to evolve and be enriched with new elements, both in terms of composition and colour schemes. (Cieśla-Reinfussowa, 1950: 151, transl. by the author)

At the same time, Cieśla-Reinfussowa praised the socialist realist painting by Leokadia Kosieniak. The painting depicted a tractor driven by a woman, pulling a trailer with two more women sitting inside. In the background, two trees and a white dove – a symbol of peace – could be seen. At the bottom of the painting, the slogan read: “MY PRACĄ ZBUDUJEMY PLAN 6-LETNI” (With our labour, we will build the Six-Year Plan). For Cieśla-Reinfussowa, this painting was proof that “the village has emerged from its old parochial way of life and is vividly engaged with contemporary issues” (Cieśla-Reinfussowa, 1950: 152, transl. by the author). She further argued that “this painting is an apotheosis of peaceful farming and highlights the new opportunities opening up for women in this field” (Cieśla-Reinfussowa, 1950: 152, transl. by the author).

The researcher's internally contradictory stance toward the post-war painters of Powiśle was closely linked to an ideological imperative. On the one hand, folk artists were expected to embody progress and modernisation, while on the other, they were simultaneously required to maintain a sense of rooted tradition (Klekot, 2021).



Picture 2: Maria Mosio and Janina Lizak with her mother, Janina, at a folk fair in Płock, 1972, photographer unknown, from the private archive of Janina Lizak.

Economic and Symbolic Benefits

While much has been said about the ideological bias in such texts, if we return to the passage from Szewczyk's article, we also see a promise of development and social elevation for those who engaged in folk art. Beginning in the 1950s, painters from Zalipie leveraged their position within the cultural policy framework of the state. They were well aware of the significance of folk art in official discourse, and their status as folk artists brought tangible benefits. In fact, the material conditions of these women changed significantly. The painters travelled abroad as ambassadors of Polish folk art – not only within the Eastern Bloc but also in the West.

The process of discovering oneself as a “folk artist” was also linked to direct economic advantages. Women from Zalipie sold handicrafts at fairs and engaged in state-supported endeavours, such as painting playrooms aboard the transatlantic liner *Batory* or collaborating with the Instytut Wzornictwa Przemysłowego (Institute of Industrial Design).⁹ Artists often recalled trips to folk art fairs, emphasising the rare

⁹ The MS *Batory*, alongside its sister ship MS *Piłsudski*, was one of the most iconic Polish passenger ships, often referred to as the pride of the Polish fleet. In the postwar period, it was used not only for transatlantic voyages but also as a symbolic space for showcasing Polish culture abroad. The collaboration with the Instytut Wzornictwa Przemysłowego – established in 1950 as the country's central institution for design research and innovation – reflected efforts to integrate folk aesthetics into modern applied arts. Both initiatives signalled a high level of state recognition and positioned folk artists within prestigious national projects.

travel opportunities. They also highlighted that they were not required to pay for renting exhibition stalls, and the full revenue from their sales went directly into their household budgets. A stable source of income for Zalipie painters came from their collaboration with the Millennium Cooperative, a branch of Cepelia, facilitating the direct sale of folk crafts from the region. Millennium was based in Kraków, and its folk art gallery was managed by the ethnographer Teresa Komornicka-Rościszewska.

Beyond economic security, these opportunities provided the painters with a strong sense of agency. In their recollections, they consistently refer to the 1970s as the golden years of Zalipie art. Their elevated status as artists was also linked to political engagement for the benefit of the local community. Stories about their contributions to the village's development continue to be an important part of local narratives today.

Memory and Post-Transformation Narratives

Romanticised stories about the communist era are also present in the official narratives of local cultural institutions. Felicja Curyłowa (1903–1974), Zalipie's most renowned painter, was also a local activist devoted to promoting folk art. Today, her house and yard serve as an open-air museum. Her granddaughter, Wanda Racia (b. 1959), frequently tells visitors that thanks to her grandmother's activism, Zalipie was electrified much earlier than the surrounding villages.

One widely repeated story recounts Curyłowa's meeting with Prime Minister Józef Cyrankiewicz. According to this account, she brought a flower-painted oil lamp to an official event and refused to leave the stage until the prime minister promised to bring electricity to Zalipie. This anecdote is emblematic of the narrative framework that presents folk artists not only as cultural figures but also as intermediaries who leveraged their recognition to secure benefits for their local communities.

Similar motifs appear in personal recollections. One of my oldest interlocutors, Janina Kruk (b. 1941), fondly recalled how, as a member of the local gas committee, she took matters into her own hands to secure gas pipes for Zalipie. Aware that the necessary materials were difficult to obtain and expensive to import, she travelled to Warsaw with a small delegation. As she recounted, the visit to the Ministry of Mining and Energy was a carefully orchestrated effort – an official meeting softened by gestures of goodwill, including the symbolic offering of a hand-painted vase. Eventually, their persistence paid off, and the minister arranged for the required pipes to be delivered. The painter framed the event as an example of the resourcefulness and determination of local activists, who, through their connections and negotiation skills, were able to leverage their status as folk artists to benefit the community.

These narratives – alongside memories of the economic benefits tied to the socialist system – are often framed against the backdrop of the loss of those privileges. The women I interviewed are keenly aware that folk art will never regain the status

it once held. Their recollections fit within the category of nostalgia, understood as a longing for a lost reality that will never return. However, nostalgia is not just about the past – it is deeply connected to the present condition of the person remembering (Brocki, 2011).

European studies on post-socialist nostalgia (Todorova, 2010; Boyer, 2010) emphasise that what is often labelled as longing for the past should be understood as a selective, contextual form of social memory – not a romantic desire to return to socialism, but a critical lens on the conditions of the present. Dominic Boyer takes this a step further by framing Eastern European nostalgia as part of “the politics of the future”. According to him, idealised representations of the socialist past are used to assert a claim to future self-determination – a right perceived to have been lost in the transition to capitalism (Boyer, 2010).

Gerald W. Creed, in his ethnographic study of the Bulgarian village of Zamfirovo at the beginning of the twenty-first century, similarly observed that expressions of socialist nostalgia function as a form of critique against current socio-economic realities (Creed, 2010). Crucially, nostalgia did not emerge immediately after the fall of socialism but only after residents came to terms with the irreversibility of the past. As he puts it: “The timing also confirms that nostalgia is experienced in relationship to the present: it is the disadvantaged who feel nostalgic, but their nostalgia is evoked by recognition of the possibilities or inevitabilities of the present” (Creed, 2010: 37).

Similar conclusions have been drawn by researchers working in the Polish context. Małgorzata Roeske, drawing on the work of Polish anthropologist Marcin Brocki, argues that nostalgia for the PRL stems from the abrupt transformation of cultural codes that once structured social life. With the fall of socialism, these codes became “foreign languages” (Roeske, 2014). Brocki emphasises that nostalgia for the PRL is not merely a longing for youth but a response to the present – a context in which the skills and competencies that once enabled stable social functioning have become obsolete (Brocki, 2011). In other words, the transformation led to the collapse of a shared cultural idiom, bringing economic, social, and cultural upheavals.

The sudden change in the political system resulted in a profound shift in the cultural framework – one that required individuals to develop an entirely new habitus (Sztompka, 2000). For folk painters, who had spent nearly half a century operating within the structures of the PRL, their established creative and professional strategies suddenly lost their relevance.

This decline in the status of folk art is particularly evident in the way painters recall the 1990s. Many emphasise that under socialism they were invited to festivals, had opportunities to travel abroad, and were recognised as representatives of national culture. After 1989, however, “folk” became a marketable commodity, often dismissed as kitsch.

The generational shift is striking. Women born in the 1970s and 1980s recalled that as children in the 1990s, they were embarrassed to accompany their mothers to folk art exhibitions and fairs. They were reluctant to wear folk costumes and saw folk

art as something outdated. Meanwhile, the older generation, raised during the period when folk art was prestigious, had internalised the idea that folk aesthetics provided a path to success. They therefore insisted on dressing their daughters in traditional Kraków skirts and bodices, seeing it as a way to secure their futures.

It is worth noting here that in Zalipie, the intergenerational transmission of artistic knowledge is largely kin-based – skills are passed down from mothers and grandmothers to daughters and granddaughters, or, occasionally, from older to younger neighbours. Families with an unbroken line of painters often express pride in this continuity. Although since the 1970s the local primary school has supported educational activities in folk painting (Komornicka-Rościszewska, 1977), and today the local cultural centre, Dom Malarek (the House of Painters), also trains women who do not come from painting families, these efforts have not replaced domestic modes of learning. This emphasis on lineage also surfaces in local discourse: some Zalipie artists privately question the authenticity of painting styles taught by instructors at Dom Malarek. Such comments reflect an understanding of authenticity rooted not only in aesthetic forms but also in the embodied and relational character of vernacular transmission.¹⁰

While the younger women's stories are often light hearted, the recollections of older painters can be tinged with sadness. Janina Kruk, for instance, once told me that she had received the Silver Cross of Merit, a prestigious state decoration. However, she added with regret that she would never receive the Gold Cross.

A small consolation for her was a diploma from the Minister of Culture, which was presented to her by Komornicka-Rościszewska in 1998. As she handed it over, Komornicka-Rościszewska remarked: "*Pani ma od tamtej władzy, a teraz ma pani od tej władzy*" (You have one from the old government – now you have one from this government).

This anecdote highlights the fact that the transformation of the cultural code had consequences beyond the economic sphere. Folk art ceased to be a relevant element of state cultural policy, and ethnologists – who had once acted as intermediaries between the authorities and the artists – lost their institutional significance.¹¹

10 For a contrastive example, see Nakienė (2024), who shows how in Soviet Lithuania artistic knowledge was transmitted through folklore clubs and academic institutions. Similarly, Cash (2024) describes how in Soviet Moldova training for state folklore ensembles followed highly institutionalised and state-controlled pathways.

11 After 1989, the utilitarian role of ethnography and ethnology was abruptly rejected as part of a broader critique of the cultural policies of the Polish People's Republic (PRL). In addition, disciplinary transformations and the emergence – already in the 1980s – of what is now referred to as "new Polish ethnology" introduced a more critical and reflexive orientation, accompanied by a temporary distancing of scholars from the very notion of folk culture. In recent years, however, there has been a partial institutional return to folk-related themes in public policy. Ethnologists are once again being invited as experts to government-affiliated cultural bodies, such as the Narodowy Instytut Kultury i Dziedzictwa Wsi (the National Institute of Culture and Rural Heritage), established under the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development in 2019.

Folk painters had invested in relationships with researchers. During my fieldwork, I heard stories about the private lives of key figures such as Teresa Komornicka-Rościszewska, Roman Reinfuss, and his wife, Zofia Cieśla-Reinfussowa. These accounts reveal the close ties between ethnographers and the Zalipie community – and the importance of those relationships.

The decline of these connections aligns with Sztompka's concept of systemic transformation as a "great change" in which social bonds atrophy (Sztompka, 1999). He describes this transformation as a "cultural trauma", arguing that trauma arises not just from collective suffering but from the moment when discomfort becomes part of a group's identity (Brocki, 2016).¹²

This element of trauma is particularly present in the memories of the oldest generation of Zalipie painters, who entered adulthood when folk art was actively supported by the state. Sztompka lists shifts in social hierarchy and the resulting sense of insecurity as key traumatic factors (Sztompka, 2000). While he does not explicitly mention folk artists, the loss of prestige emerges in the painters' narratives as a significant source of distress.

For Sztompka, trauma is the reaction of those who feel "helpless in the face of great change". While his references to "civilisational incompetence" can be critiqued (Brocki, 2016), his observations about the sense of degradation and loss of agency remain valuable. The longing for folk art's former role is closely linked to the absence of a sense of control and the difficulty of adapting to new conditions – often due to already established life trajectories.

The younger the painter, the less she experiences this sense of loss and helplessness. Among the youngest generation – those who grew up in a post-socialist, free-market reality – this shift is particularly evident. These women, now actively branding themselves and their work, creatively engage with their local identity and skilfully utilise "mnemonic capital" passed down by their mothers and grandmothers.

In discussing collective memory trauma, Sztompka introduces the term "post-communist hangover" (Sztompka, 2000). He describes it as a form of cognitive dissonance accompanied by strong feelings of shame and guilt, arising from questions about the necessity and means of reckoning with individuals entangled in the communist system – from high-ranking politicians to ordinary party members.

In the context of Zalipie, this kind of post-transitional discomfort can be observed in how certain historical figures are evaluated. The legacy of Felicja Curyłowa, for instance, remains ambivalent among Zalipie's residents. While official narratives – featured in guidebooks, brochures, and contemporary ethnographic studies –

¹² The aforementioned Gerald W. Creed also frames post-socialist disorientation in terms of collective trauma in his study of Zamfirovo, Bulgaria (Creed, 2010). Similarly, Piotr Długosz, based on a secondary analysis of early post-transition survey data from several Eastern Bloc countries, identifies the experience of systemic change as a form of socio-cultural trauma universal across post-Soviet societies in Central and Eastern Europe (Długosz, 2019).



Picture 3: Felicja Curyłowa in her home in Zalipie, 1950, photo by W. Kondracki, inv. no. III/7153/E, from the collection of the Ethnographic Museum in Kraków.

celebrate her as an outstanding painter and cultural activist, local perspectives are often more critical. During my fieldwork, I encountered opinions suggesting that Curyłowa's artistic talent was not particularly exceptional and that her success stemmed largely from the institutional endorsement she received from ethnographers. Some informants expressed scepticism about her activism, with one interlocutor remarking that her connections with Cyrankiewicz cast a shadow over Zalipie's history – that this is not something to be proud of.

Similar narrative tensions emerge in the personal memories of folk painters. Their recollections of the PRL period are deeply ambivalent – on the one hand, they express gratitude for the opportunities it provided, while on the other, they adjust their accounts to align with contemporary political discourse. The artists are well aware of the prevailing official narratives about communist authorities. The “great change” brought about a sense of disorientation, compelling individuals to reinterpret their past within a new social and political framework.

In my interlocutors' narratives, memories of folk art in the PRL era are shaped by various negotiation strategies – some painters deliberately omit aspects of their past, while others reframe their experiences to avoid conflicting with contemporary historical policies. This raises critical ethical questions for researchers. To what extent should one confront personal accounts with alternative sources? How should one

present these interpretations within the academic community and to a broader public?

The Researcher's Dilemmas and Ethical Considerations

Conducting research on the memory of folk art in the PRL has required ongoing negotiation between ethical responsibility, methodological rigour, and personal engagement with the studied community. The challenges I have encountered are not only tied to the political entanglements of folk art but also to the ways in which my role as a researcher influences the narratives I collect and interpret.

One of the central dilemmas I face is how to study a past that is both a source of pride and a reminder of loss for my interlocutors. Nostalgia plays a key role in their recollections, shaping how they construct their experiences of folk art under socialism. As Brocki notes, nostalgic narratives often amplify the agency of the narrator, positioning them as central figures in the past they recount (Brocki, 2011). This raises questions about how to interpret such memories, for example, to what extent do they reflect historical realities, and to what extent are they shaped by contemporary concerns?

Complicating this further is the absence of certain narratives in official records. My attempts to verify the institutional significance of folk artists through archival research – so far in the Instytut Pamięci Narodowej (Institute of National Remembrance) archives – have yielded limited results. With only sparse documentation of the painters' foreign travels, the lack of records raises questions about whether folk art held as much political weight as local memory suggests. This discrepancy between personal testimony and archival silence forces a reconsideration of how we construct historical significance. Is the absence of documentation an indication of marginality, or does it reflect selective archival practices that overlooked folk artists? In the post-socialist context of Central and Eastern Europe, such omissions have been read not merely as gaps but as ideologically shaped archival silences that reproduce existing social hierarchies. As Veronika Pehe notes, the process of archiving in the region has long reflected dominant narratives, often marginalising actors or practices associated with lower social strata (Pehe, 2018). Another major challenge has been the ethical responsibility of handling politically sensitive material. Some of my interlocutors participated in official cultural initiatives under the socialist government – opportunities that once symbolised artistic prestige but are now viewed with scepticism. The photograph of a Zalipie painter shaking hands with General Wojciech Jaruzelski, for example, encapsulates this tension – once a sign of recognition, the image now evokes discomfort.

Initially, I approached such accounts with relative neutrality, focusing on the factual circumstances of artists' involvement in state-sponsored projects. However, as my fieldwork progressed, I became increasingly aware of how deeply these issues

resonate – not only among the artists themselves but also within academic and public discourse. I have since adopted a more cautious approach, prioritising the privacy of my interlocutors while recognising that even historical events, when publicly recalled, can carry unintended consequences.

This shift in approach leads directly to broader methodological reflections on the ethics of disclosing ethnographic data. These issues are explored in depth by Monika Golonka-Czajkowska and Stanisława Trebunia-Staszal in their research on conflicts of memory (Golonka-Czajkowska, Trebunia-Staszal, 2022). Unlike the cases they discuss – where the passage of time allows the researcher to engage primarily, though not exclusively, with post-memory – my fieldwork involves living witnesses whose recollections remain embedded in ongoing social relationships. Although the subject of folk artists' participation in state-sponsored initiatives during the socialist era may seem less emotionally charged than post-war memory conflicts – such as those concerning the Goralenvolk or the so-called “Accursed Soldiers” – the publication of personal narratives or archival photographs may still carry significant social consequences. These include the potential to affect neighbourly dynamics or even familial relationships in the present. I have not taken the route of full anonymisation, as Anna Witeska-Młynarczyk has in her work on similarly sensitive topics, which focuses more directly on political alignment with or against the communist regime (Witeska-Młynarczyk, 2014). Instead, I have involved my interlocutors in decisions about anonymity and the use of collected materials. Given the long-term nature of my research, I often revisit previously gathered data, especially when its interpretive context has evolved, and revisit the question of consent prior to dissemination. This dilemma extends to the question of confrontation: should a researcher challenge or verify personal memories against historical sources? The divergence between archival materials and oral testimonies is particularly pronounced when discussing relationships between folk artists and the authorities. While institutional records may suggest strategic alignment with state policy, personal narratives often frame these interactions as pragmatic negotiations rather than ideological commitments. Anthropologists must therefore balance the desire for historical accuracy with the ethical imperative to respect the agency and self-perception of their interlocutors.

A useful interpretive framework here is offered by Dariusz Nikiel, who proposes that fieldwork involving contested memories can be understood as a process of reliving the past (Nikiel, 2022). His approach, grounded in phenomenology and interpretive anthropology, emphasises the importance of witnessing memory as an embodied, emotionally situated act. In this light, I approach my interlocutors not merely as sources of data, but as individuals actively reliving the past of Zalipie folk art – a past that resonates in contemporary local narratives and intersects with national memory politics. These symbolic frames – cultural, social, and political – shape how such reliving takes place and must be analytically reconstructed with sensitivity to context. At the centre of this research process, however, I continue to

place the folk painters themselves and their narratives, acknowledging them as both bearers and interpreters of memory.

The ethical dilemmas I navigate in my research are closely tied to questions of anthropological advocacy. Hastrup and Elsass discuss the delicate balance between “presenting” and “speaking for” research participants (Hastrup, Elsass, 1990). While I do not consider myself an advocate in a political sense, my research inevitably amplifies the voices of a community whose experiences are often marginalised in dominant historical narratives. This has become particularly evident in my interactions with the academic community. Some scholars have criticised my work for allegedly idealising the PRL, reflecting a broader tendency to foreground the failures of the socialist period while overlooking its complexities. These critiques expose power dynamics within academia, where discussing the past can be seen as ideological bias.

Such critiques compel me to remain critically aware of the distinction between my interlocutors’ emic (insider) perspectives and my own etic (outsider) analysis (Harris, 1976). My empathy for the painters and their struggles in the post-socialist era does not negate the necessity of maintaining analytical distance. At the same time, it forces me to reflect on whether I have internalised aspects of my interlocutors’ perspectives to the point of shaping my interpretative lens – a challenge many ethnographers face when embedded in close-knit communities (Nowicka, 2016).

Another layer of complexity emerges from my evolving institutional role. Initially conducting this research as a student, I was perceived as an independent observer. However, since becoming affiliated with an ethnographic museum, I have found myself positioned as a mediator between the community and cultural institutions. This shift mirrors the historical role of ethnographers who once facilitated relationships between folk artists and state institutions. How does this dual role shape my research, and to what extent does it reproduce the dynamics of the past?

Looking ahead, there are several avenues for expanding this research. Future archival inquiries – particularly in regional repositories – may provide additional insights into the institutional treatment of folk art in the PRL. Moreover, conducting interviews with ethnographers who studied Zalipie during the socialist period could help bridge the gap between past and present narratives, shedding light on how scholarly interpretations of folk art evolved under state influence.

On a broader level, this study underscores the importance of critically engaging with post-socialist memory and its intersections with cultural heritage. The experience of Zalipie painters exemplifies how shifts in political ideology reshape collective memory, challenging researchers to navigate the fluid boundaries between historical fact, personal recollection, and academic interpretation.

In conclusion, the dilemmas I have outlined here reflect the broader struggles of ethnographic research in politically charged contexts. How do we study a past entangled with ideological legacies without reinforcing contemporary polarisations? How do we represent personal narratives while acknowledging their constructed

nature? These questions remain open-ended, demanding continuous reflexivity from scholars working at the intersection of memory, art, and politics.

While these dilemmas remain unresolved, they underscore the broader methodological and ethical considerations of studying politically entangled cultural practices. As my research continues, new questions emerge – particularly regarding the evolving relationship between folk art and political power in contemporary Poland. Following the economic downturn of the 1990s, Żalipie has experienced a revival, driven by tourism, social media, and the grassroots initiatives of local artists. Once again, folk aesthetics are being harnessed for political representation, as contemporary authorities eagerly adopt the imagery of rural tradition for public appearances. Examining these ongoing entanglements reveals that the intersection of folk art and politics is far from a closed chapter – rather, it remains a dynamic and evolving process that demands further exploration.

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