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Yet the essence of a nation is that all individuals have many things in common, and also that they have forgotten many things... every French citizen has to have forgotten the massacre of Saint Bartholomew, or the massacres that took place in the Midi in the thirteenth century.
Ernest Renan, "What is a Nation?" 1882.¹

The photographic archive assembles in effigy the last elements of a nature alienated from meaning.
Siegfried Kracauer, "Photography," 1927.²

Zofia Rydet called her massive photographic project depicting people, their homes, objects, furnishings, and other aspects of domestic space and environments the *Sociological Record* (*Zapis Socjologiczny*). But when conceptually and physically integrated with her other photographic projects, artworks, memorabilia, correspondence, notebooks and so forth, it serves as a posthumous archive of an individual photographer's life and work. Simultaneously, if one considers exclusively her post-1958 photographic materials exemplified by the *Record*, begun in 1978, and putting aside the archive's other contents, it serves also as an *impersonal* visual archive. This double function is a common attribute of photographic archives, inasmuch as the content of the imagery is often at least as significant as the identity of the photographer. Especially with the passage of time, these archives come to be imbued with nostalgia or historical interest. Many of Rydet's photographs depicting the inhabitants in the poorest rural enclaves of Poland seem closer to the nineteenth-century than to other representations of the Polish People's Republic in the 1960s and '70s. Thus, whatever the motivations behind Rydet's *Record*, it had nothing to do

with a propagandistic celebration of a socialist utopia.

Had Zofia Rydet spent her entire career photographing only children (the subject of her first exhibition in 1961 as well as her first published book in 1965), it is doubtful she would have achieved the same prominence she now occupies in the annals of Polish photography. But by chronicling particular sectors of Polish society and their surroundings during more than two decades of economic, political, and cultural upheavals and transformations, Rydet's *Record* is now valued for its "scholarly relevance to researchers in other disciplines: anthropologists, ethnographers, sociologists, cultural theorists, and so on ...A banner headline or sweeping sociopolitical narrative, after all, loses historical weight if it isn't grounded in the sort of quotidian minutiae underpinning Rydet's *Sociological Record* tableaux."³ But the usefulness of the *Record* for social scientists or, for that matter, historians, is debatable. In this respect, the question of photography's utility for interpretive historical investigation has been long subject to debate, whereas its effectiveness for propagating dominant ideological formations is self-evident. As early as the 1920s, critics and theorists addressed the distinctions between the mechanisms of personal memory and those of photographic representation, most famously perhaps in Siegfried Kracauer's eponymous essay on the medium. In seeking to distinguish the nature of subjective/experiential memory (what he called memory-images) from what is provided by the historical photograph, Kracauer put some emphasis on the limitations of the atemporal and static appearance of a photographic image:

Memory—he writes—encompasses neither the entire spatial appearance nor the entire temporal course of an event. Compared to photography, memory's records are full of gaps... Memories are retained because of their significance for that person. They are organized according to a principle

that is essentially different from photography. Photography grasps what is given as a spatial (or temporal) continuum; memory-images retain what is given only insofar as it has significance. Since what is significant is not reducible to either merely spatial or merely temporal terms, memory-images are at odds with photographic representation. From the latter's perspective, memory-images appear to be fragments only because photography does not encompass the meaning to which they refer and in relation to which they cease to be fragments.⁴

Kracauer's photographic example, one that he returns to in several parts of the essay, is anecdotal; a photograph of a notional Grandmother, taken in her twenties, but viewed from a perspective of more than sixty years, long after her death. But his arguments have relevance to the status of photography if it is imagined to be a means of historical recovery, especially now in the context of "memory wars" playing out throughout Eastern Europe, and, of course, in other places as well. "History is the forcible illumination of darkened memories," the narrator T. concludes [in Gyorgy Konrad's novel *The Loser*]. Thus it is not only state-sponsored forgetting but individual remembering itself that can reconcile citizens with the system and foil their resistance.⁵ And as Richard S. Esbenshade observes, "Various totalizing claims on the construction and determination of the national narrative have called forth equally totalizing counterclaims."⁶ In terms of recent Polish history, and its conflicting versions of its own history, it is likely that the contents of the *Record* is received differently according to the age, the class, the politics, and indeed the personal memories of its viewers. But to take Rydet's subjects at face value, reducible to what the photographs literally represent, is to obscure important issues that exist at the intersection of photographic imagery, national history, collective (and selective) memory, and nationalist ideologies as these are elements in the making of the *Record*

and inform its current reception.

First conceived in 1978 when Rydet was 67, the *Record* continued to expand through the 1990s, although in the last years of her life, she was not sufficiently mobile to continue photographing *in situ*. As of 2017, nearly 19,000 of her photographs have been digitally scanned. By the time of her death in 1997, the *Record* alone had come to encompass approximately 27,000 negatives, many of which she had never printed. But whether designated as archive or *Record*, Rydet's project most closely resembles the venerable category of the photographic survey. If the category of "archive" is the most inclusive of applicable designations (anything relating to its subject may be placed within it), and if her chosen term—"record"—lacks the specific information normally expected of this more bureaucratic or administrative category, it is perhaps the notion of "survey" that provides a more useful frame with which to consider the nature, terms, and instrumentalities of Rydet's vast corpus.

As a noun, in its *Oxford English Dictionary* definition, the word survey derives from the Latin *videre*—to see. ("The act of viewing, examining, or inspecting in detail, esp. for some specific purpose; usually a formal or official inspection of the particulars of something, e.g. of an estate, of a ship or its stores, of the administration of an office, etc."⁷). Unlike the word archive, however, which may refer to written records or other texts, the root meaning of the survey is that which is given to see, even if surveys may, in fact, be non-visual, as is the case with polls, statistics, or topographic measurement. Nonetheless, because the *Record* is part of a larger ensemble and the production of a named subject, one can see why it is being discursively and practically organized to cohere as an archive and simultaneously, to be celebrated as an oeuvre.

In this respect, an archival collection of an individual photographer's production, one whose scale is as vast as

Rydet's, confronts us with numerous contradictions and an array of epistemological complexities. All the syntactic and discursive distinctions between the words record, archive, and survey, as well as those of corpus and oeuvre, signal fault lines or incoherencies that appear when massive photographic outputs are variously organized under these latter, much older conceptual categories.

Accordingly, in proposing the category of the survey as a way to "think" Rydet's project, I would suggest that this permits us to better historicize her enterprise in terms of photographic history. Furthermore, considering it as a survey helps to situate it within the context of post-Second World War Poland and its "imagined communities" (as well as its effacement of those "other" communities, transferred, expelled, liquidated or otherwise eliminated from Poland's post-war official imagery).⁸

Where photographic survey projects have been of many types, purposes and subject matter and possessed of a long history, most often these have been the product of official commissions—often governmental—and were usually the work of multiple photographers.⁹ Although certain mid-nineteenth century photographers given official commissions worked alone—for example, Charles Marville (charged with documenting Baron Haussmann's transformation of Paris), or Thomas Annan, commissioned in 1866 by the Glasgow Town Council City Improvement Trust to document slum housing—most survey-type projects have been collective enterprises.¹⁰ As individual initiatives—think here of August Sander or Eugène Atget—these have various motivations. To a certain extent, and with the exception of Atget (who continued to use glass plates and a large format view camera) these ever-proliferating surveys, official or not, were progressively facilitated by newer technologies: faster cameras, magnesium flash and other lighting techniques for interiors, roll film, industrial processing of negatives, and

other technical advances.

Among the earliest of state sponsored photographic surveys was the 1851 Mission Héliographique, inaugurated by the Commission des Monuments Historiques to record a selection of French architecture, monuments, and historic sites and assigned to five photographers. This was succeeded by other survey projects of many types—topographic, taxonomic, ethnographic, colonial, medical, industrial, military and so forth—extending from the nineteenth-century on.

A number of these surveys were conceived by amateurs, such as that proposed by W. Jerome Harrison in 1889, a British geologist and teacher, enjoining amateurs to collectively produce “A True Pictorial History of our Present Day.”¹¹ As Elizabeth Edwards remarks in her study of the amateur survey movement in the Britain, “[It] was part of that much broader cultural matrix in which both a pride in history and a sense of the loss of Britain’s tangible past was entangled with shifting national identity in the age of rapid social and economic change.”¹²



Solomon D. Butcher, Sylvester Rawding house, north of Sargent, Custer County, Nebraska 1886 (source)

But other examples are readily found elsewhere, whether launched by individuals such as Solomon D. Butcher (1857–1927) in nineteenth century Nebraska (3,500 glass plates, many depicting homesteaders posed in front of their dwellings) or in large-scale projects originating with governments or industries, such as *The People of India*:

a series of photographic illustrations, eight volumes compiled by the British India office between 1868 and 1872, or the eleven-volume *The Bantu Tribes of South Africa: Reproductions of Photographic Studies* by A.M. Duggan-Cronin (1928–54) initiated by the DeBeers Mining Company.¹³ The desire to visually record any and all aspects of the world, its peoples, and its objects is thus part of an archival impulse that is anything but contemporary.¹⁴ On the contrary, it is fair to say that from the beginning, photography was fundamentally oriented towards both survey and archive, as is clear from the well-known text by François Arago introducing the new technology in 1839. It is perhaps also fair to say that in the broadest sense this archival impulse is underpinned by the binary of the “one” (us) and the “other” (them).



Solomon D. Butcher, *The Huckleberry house, near Broken Bow, Custer County, Nebraska 1886* (source)

Thus, the Mission Héliographique functioned as a form of nationalist *self*-representation of the French architectural patrimony whereas the *People of India* or *The Bantu Tribes of South Africa* were equally nationalistic representations of Britain's and South Africa's colonial subjects.

As one of the modern technologies of nationalism, photography can be a consolidation (or invention) of collective identity and belonging, or, somewhat crudely stated, it can implicitly support this project by representing what is outside, excluded, inferior and "other," but variously appropriated (or possessed) by "us." Whether this is literally the case, as in the photographic representation of colonial subjects, or purely ideological, does not alter the structure of what are in their various incarnations effectively regimes of representation. One approach is thus rooted in the honorific sense of nation and nationalism (i.e., "our" culture, ethnicity, language, patrimony, race, and so forth) as exemplified by the Mission Héliographique or the British amateur survey movement.¹⁵ Another approach might be categorized as the product of what Michel Foucault called "governmentality"—the organized practices and systems by which the state governs internally or externally, including its modes of information gathering, as with *The People of India*, or, for that matter, the Farm Security Administration's Photograph Division.¹⁶ These distinctions, as I would suggest, are worth considering in relation to the *Sociological Record* begun in 1978 in the Polish People's Republic, and continuing in the aftermath of



G. F. Williams Studio photograph of two women South Africa, c. 1870s (source)

the collapse of the USSR and the emergence of a new political order in Poland, capped with Poland's admittance into the EU seven years after Rydet's death.

As with any other photographic corpus, the acknowledgment of the interaction of meaning, function, and historical significance needs to be grounded in the context of its production. In this respect, we might note that it was primarily in the twentieth-century

that individual photographers have created immense bodies of work made outside of institutional or commercial assignments (e.g., Atget, or Gary Winogrand and the recently discovered Vivian Maier). In the case of Atget, the production was entrepreneurial, for Winogrand, it was an artistic project, and for Maier, a private obsession. This is not to deny the existence of aesthetic qualities that any of their works might provide, but merely to specify the material circumstances of its production, leaving aside the issues of dissemination and reception. And while the motivations or intentions of these photographers were different, such production, by virtue of its very scale, puts pressure both on the abstract concept of the archive and on the art historical notion of the oeuvre.

In his important essay of 1983, "Photography Between Labour and Capital," Allan Sekula remarked on the essential contradictions that underlie all types of photographic archives.

Within their confines—he wrote—meaning is liberated from use, and yet at a more general level an empiricist model of truth prevails. Pictures are atomized, isolated in one way



A.M. Duggan-Cronin Bomvana Initiates
1930 ([source](#))

and homogenized in another...but any archive that is not a complete mess establishes an order of some sort among its contents. Normal orders are either taxonomic or diachronic (sequential); in most archives both methods are used but with different, often alternating, levels of organization. Taxonomic orders might be based on sponsorship, authorship, genre, technique, iconography, subject matter, and so on, depending on the range of the archive.”¹⁷ Diachronic orders follow a chronology of production or acquisition. Anyone who has ever sorted out or simply sifted through a box of family snapshots understands the dilemmas (and perhaps the folly) of these procedures. One is torn between between narration and categorization, between chronology and inventory.”¹⁸

Sekula was here addressing the contents of one particular photo archive, the twenty-year production of a commercial photographer, Leslie Shedden, based in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, whose photographs were made between 1948 and 1968.

Although Sekula was writing well before the advent of digitalized archives (which raise certain issues specific to this technology), much of what he has to say is as apposite now as when the essay was written. The vast photographic production of Rydet, still in the process of being catalogued and scanned, and notwithstanding its distance and difference from the work of Shedden, poses many of the same practical, material, interpretive, and indeed epistemological problems as his. Although Shedden was unambiguously a “professional” photographer who managed a brick and mortar photographic studio, and whose work was typically commissioned by individuals (e.g., portraits) collective entities (e.g., sport teams) and corporations (especially those of the mining industry that dominated the economy of Cape



Leslie Shedden, Machine Shop, Glace Bay, 1959 (source)

Breton), much of Rydet's activity, especially in the earlier years of her practice, is better characterized by the more amorphous category of amateur photographer. In the sense I am using the term, "amateur" does not imply any lack of vocation, commitment, or expertise. For this and other reasons, it needs to be understood in its particular temporal and national/cultural specificity. And, in the specific case of Poland during the years of Rydet's activity, it would describe those who produced both artistic and/or documentary forms of photography outside regulated bodies, that is state or party institutions.

It would seem that Rydet's initial photographic formation—begun seriously when she was middle-aged, when she became a member of the Gliwice Photographic Society in 1951—conforms in certain ways to Pierre Bourdieu's observations on the amateur photo clubs and circles that flourished in post-Second-World-War France:



Shop personnel in front and on top of the Dosco Continuous Miner (source)

But if the photography that [the members of the clubs and circles] want to make is not justified by this personal content, and the system of values to which it refers, what new function does the camera club fulfil? Apart from the desire for a certain consensus appropriate to any secondary leisure group, one would be tempted to answer that its purpose is to allow its members 'to take photographs', 'quite simply.' This answer would be neither wrong nor necessarily tautological. It is their interest in photography that unites the members of a camera club in the first place, and they have in common a rate of practice which is higher than that of the set of the population which takes photographs. The camera club provides a means of moving from a naive practice to a scholarly practice within a group which supplies formulas

and tips in order to intensify photographic activity”¹⁹

In a certain sense then, Bourdieu is describing a non-instrumentalized activity, which is by no means to say that it is outside issues of class or social relations. Certainly and according to the accounts of those who knew her, Rydet's assertiveness in entering the homes of those she wished to photograph (including the indigent, the ill, and the dying) suggests something like class privilege, notwithstanding the particularities of her personality or character. But given the various perspectives with which we might consider Rydet's photography, it is worthwhile to reflect on how photographers define for themselves the domain of their activity. In this regard, Rydet's technical formation was facilitated by her inclusion in the Gliwice Photographic Society, and her supportive relationships with its entirely male cohort. Rydet therefore occupies a fluid area between the photographic categories of "vernacular," "artistic," "official," and "documentary/survey" production depending on the nature of each body of her work. Working within the milieu of the Society, outside the salaried ranks of photojournalism (although from 1961 on, she was member of the Union of Art Photographers, the pinnacle of professional and artistic legitimization in Poland at the time, and sole official source of commissions), Rydet's encyclopedic project was of her own invention, and like Harrison's, it was essentially boundless. Moreover, and in regard to her stated desire to record the actuality of Polish life (in the *Record*, largely but not exclusively rural or *villageois*), it seems that despite the scale of the production, and given the absence of accompanying texts, recordings or ancillary description, the *Record* is consequently



Ashfield Photo Club, 1910 (source)

one of appearance rather than analysis.²⁰ While it is the case that the discipline of sociology and the invention of photography share the same birth date (but were only conjoined in the 1960s), they operate on very different registers of knowledge production.²¹

This accounts for some of the difficulty of assimilating the *Record* to a sociological study in its more professionalized or scientific sense insofar as it lacks the “thick” description that would enable analysis or interpretation of what is represented.

Judging from the evident freedom Rydet enjoyed as a photographer, the activities of both amateur photographers and those with artistic legitimation seem to have been fully tolerated—even encouraged—by the Polish authorities, even before the post-1956 thaw. At least as long they did not treat topics with clearly political implications. However, after the declaration of martial law on December 13, 1981 by general Wojciech Jaruzelski and the Military Council of National Salvation, there was a dramatic crackdown all aspects of cultural as well as civil life. It was during the three-year period of martial law that Catholic churches became venues for exhibitions of various types, including at least one where Rydet was included.

It is unclear how the years of martial law may have impacted upon Rydet or the Gliwice Photographic Society in terms of what they could or could not do (although they too exhibited in churches, *faute de mieux*). But as the author of the lauded 1965 book *Mały Człowiek (Little Man)*, featuring her photographs of children accompanied with excerpts from the pedagogical writings of Janusz Korczak and an innovative design by Wojciech Zamecznik, she became well known in Poland.²² By the end of martial law in 1984, Rydet had the freedom to travel widely and was ultimately accorded official, that is, state recognition.

Photographic archives are of striking diversity, and it goes without saying that they do very different kinds of work. There exist archives that have been assembled over time, even in

piecemeal fashion, there are those that contain materials from different sources, there are those that are repositories of the work of individual photographers, of studios, photography agencies, corporations, libraries and museums, governmental organizations—the list is vast. Once the generic photographic archive is folded within the generic archive (and it is this latter that has been primarily the subject of theorization) it takes on many of the Ur-archive's properties:

The history of the archive—Peter Fritzsche observes—is embedded in the recognition of loss. For archives to collect the past, the past has to come to mind as something imperiled and distinctive. This presumes a dramatization of historical movement that fashions temporal periods based on the radical difference between now and then, which, in turn, invites the recognition of radical difference between here and there. The feverish part of archival activity is to distinguish difference in order to create a bounded national subject characterized by a separate history that is held in common by contemporaries.²³

However, photographic archives (notwithstanding the extrinsic materials, including textual ones that may be integrated within them) and which are organized around an individual photographer, as with Shedden or Rydet, raise issues specific to this type of archive. Here too, the rhetorical questions Sekula poses in his essay are pertinent: "Are [Shedden's] photographs to be taken as transparent means to a knowledge—intimate and detailed even if incomplete—of industrial Cape Breton in the postwar decades? Or are we to look at these pictures for 'their own sake,' as opaque ends-in-themselves? This second question has a corollary. Are these pictures products of an unexpected vernacular authorship: is Leslie Shedden a 'discovery' worthy of a minor seat in an expanding pantheon of photographic artists?"²⁴

Substituting the name of Rydet for that of Shedden, and

with respect to the ongoing project of cataloguing, scanning, preserving, exhibiting, and, needless to say, funding these activities (especially the archiving of Rydet's *Record*), it appears that the Rydet archive has already been positioned within aesthetic discourse. Currently, five institutions are involved in these various operations: The Foundation for Visual Arts, the Zofia Rydet Foundation (responsible for maintaining the physical Rydet archive itself), the Museum in Gliwice, the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, and most recently, Raster Gallery in Warsaw. On their respective websites or mission statements, and in those catalogues that feature her work, Rydet's work is fully granted its "documentary" status as a now historical record of Polish life, but much of the emphasis falls on claims for her artistic significance. This is itself a complicated claim insofar it leaves unresolved the relation of content/subject matter, form or format, and that bugbear of photographic aesthetics—style. In much of the *Record*, Rydet employs a predetermined approach. For example, in many of the interiors, the individual or individuals are seated or standing frontal to her camera; according to available light, the exposure and focus were set in advance to encompass the maximum space of the visual field. In the interiors, which often had little light, Rydet used a flash and a wide-angle lens, and insofar as these were effectively default settings, this accounts for the formal homogeneity of so many of her pictures. Which in turn raises the question as to whether such a choice is an intentional "style" or a technical necessity. In those unpeopled photographs whose subject is décor, wall decorations, memorabilia, pictures and photographs mounted on walls, the ubiquitous photographs of the Polish pope, Karol Wojtyła (John Paul II), TV sets, and other elements of the living space (as well as the signs of modernization and increasing prosperity), it seems evident that her primary concern was with content. Nevertheless, much of the tenor of the writing on Rydet suggests that the institutional means of support for both preservation and

exhibition is predicated on the greater legitimacy of the category artist/photographer as opposed, for example, to an alternative archival categorization under historical, geographical, chronological or topical designations. In other words, heightened value is conferred on Rydet's photographs when they are seen as properly authorial: the product of individual intention, subjectivity, empathy and expression, rather than a partial and idiosyncratic documentation of Polish postwar society with a particular emphasis on rural and village communities.

As it happens, this epistemological trajectory—from archive to author—is well-traveled ground, for it is a discursive process that ultimately produced the canonical figures of Charles Marville, Eugene Atget, Timothy O'Sullivan, to take only three figures whose photographic production lay outside the purchase of artistic production or artistic discourse.²⁵ Rydet's position within Polish photography fell under the rubric of "artist," with respect to institutional legitimization, but this category has to be considered in relation to specific national, political, and cultural contexts. She herself was unsure about the status of her work but tended to emphasize its documentary aspects.

In his 1983 essay "The Library's Old, the Museum's New Subject," Douglas Crimp considered one of the ramifications of this process, taking as his example the New York Public Library's decision to cull photographs from multiple classificatory sites (including books and albums), thereby establishing a discrete photography collection based on photographers, not their subjects. As Crimp argued, such a reordering illustrated the passage of photography from discourse value to exhibition value. (And, of course, to



Zofia Rydet, *Mały człowiek* (source)

commodity value.)²⁶

Following the commercial success of her *Little Man*, which had numerous re-printings, Rydet produced several more photography books. Those reproduced in *Little Man* are in the photographic mode that characterized postwar, so-called humanist photography, a fully international approach popularized in NY MoMA's 1956 exhibition *The Family of Man* (exhibited in Warsaw in 1959 during its travels, and which she evidently saw).

In the immediate prewar period, 1935 to 1939, Rydet worked for the Orbis Polish Travel Office under her brother Tadeusz and it was with his encouragement that she began to photograph in the 1950s, initially the children in the villages of the Huculszczyzna region, now part of present-day Ukraine. In these same years,



Zofia Rydet, *Mały człowiek* (source)

Rydet ran a stationary shop in the town of Bytom owned by her brother, but in 1962, having been accepted into the Union of Polish Art Photographers, she closed the shop and moved to Gliwice, obtaining a job at the Silesian University of Technology teaching photography. After her membership in the Gliwice Photography Society, her work developed in various forms of synergy with the more established men of this milieu: Jerzy Lewczyński, Władysław Jasiński, and Piotr Janik. As the lone woman in this group, she was truly anomalous, but the available bibliography in English does not elaborate on the circumstances that enabled her to be integrated within this all-male cohort.

After she started work on the *Record*, Rydet also experimented with other styles, such as photocollage, the creation of photo objects, self-consciously "artistic" approaches and surrealist-influenced compositions, manipulations of negative or print, and

the like.

But if the *Record* is now taken as her key work (and this not necessarily because it contains the greatest number of images, although this aggregation is a factor), rather, and as is often the case with a photographic archive, insofar as no individual photograph can be considered a singular “masterpiece,” it is the ensemble itself that constitutes the “work.” This is the case with Atget, Sander, Winogrand, Maier, et al., and entirely in keeping with Rydet’s own open-ended conception of her project *qua* project. But whether this vast accumulation of imagery has a real sociological function, much less a relation to historical events, is, as I have indicated, open to question, especially that given the lack of aural recordings, textual, or other informational components, it is difficult to imagine their use for actual sociological or ethnographic research.²⁷ As an image repertoire, the *Record* offers only the mute testimony of what the subjects, their houses, their furnishings, and their interiors looked like at a certain moment in time.

The Rydet archive, of which the *Record* constitutes a discrete part, exists in sites both virtual and material, and is fundamentally plural in terms of its contents, its different media (books, prints, ensembles of pictures she herself organized, correspondence, notebooks, etc.). Moreover, photographs made in other circumstances could be rerouted into the *Record*. That any of various projects can be said to constitute an artistic unity, that is, an oeuvre, secured by the author/artist’s name, opens up to larger issues, insofar as archive and oeuvre, corpus and collection, author and producer



Zofia Rydet, 1950s. Meeting of the Gliwice Photographic Society, 1950s. Clockwise from top left: P. Janik, J. Lessaer, St. Skoczeń, A. Zieliński, J. Lewczyński, W. Jasiński, Z. Rydet, A. Górski, A. Sheybal, M. Janik. Gliwice Photographic Society, 1950s.> (source)

are not necessarily synonyms for one another. Framing Rydet's archive so as to place emphasis on its authorial components—subjectivity, vision, point of view, empathy with her subjects and so forth—does not necessarily accord with Rydet's own view. In at least one interview, Rydet dismissed the designation of her *Record* as an artistic project as if acknowledging that what was at stake was an endeavor closer to that of a collector or archivist than to that of the self-discriminating and self-critical practice of an artistic creator.²⁸

Be that as it may, to my own way of thinking, one of the most interesting aspects of this life and this archive are to do with the obsessiveness that animates its production. It is sheer coincidence that one of the women photographers whose work I recently addressed was Vivian Maier, who notwithstanding the secrecy with which she hoarded her photography and her extreme social isolation, was equally obsessive in her photographic production. According to the accounts of those who knew her, Rydet chafed at the realization that given her age, her self-defined project could not be completed. But what would have been a "completed" *Sociological Record*? What fantasy of comprehensiveness or totality could inform this kind of documentation? Realistically, it would seem that by definition the *Record* could only be an ongoing and never-ending pursuit, a race against time and her own mortality. It is as though Rydet herself became a functionary of her own overarching archive.

Any sustained aggregation of photographs, as I have indicated, is necessarily shaped by time, place, and circumstance—all that comprises the specific context of a specific practice. In placing some stress on both the contradictions and complexities that constellate around photographic archives constructed under the author-function (as Sekula did with Shedden, Rosalind Krauss with Atget and O'Sullivan, Crimp with the NYPL), we touch on an issue that constantly arises when archive or survey-type photographic projects become, so to

speak, re-archived. And here it is necessary to distinguish the concept of the archive as a theoretical object from actual, existing photographic archives, be they individual, institutional, or commercial. That said, it is very much the case that even if we are to focus only on the *Record* from its launch in 1978 and its continuation through the 1990s, we run into the difficulties of reconciling notions of “style” (the index by which authorial/artistic sovereignty is conventionally secured) with its relation to contents, especially when the “contents” are a priori determined by the project itself.

Archives, including photographic archives, obviously have very diverse origins, purposes, instrumentalities, and uses. Archives in their most abstract sense have informed the work of both Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida—the former describing the rules governing the emergence of enunciations in the discursive field; the latter proposing psychoanalytic theory as itself a theory of the archive, and hence formulating an “archival” theory of the subject. These conceptualizations have engendered an immense corpus of commentary and interpretations. Specific archives, or specific types of archives have equally been subject to both scholarly and historiographic investigation. This field of inquiry now boasts a substantial bibliography as well. The interrogation of archives has expanded well beyond sociology, anthropology, ethnography, and historiography to become a “discursive object” for geographers, post-colonial theorists, as well as a topos for at least three generations of visual artists, with older artistic precedents located in surrealism and in the work of Marcel Duchamp and Marcel Broodthaers. This is by no means to endorse some notion of Rydet, at least her *Record*, as a proto-conceptualist project, akin to the American conceptualist artist Douglas Huebler’s grandiose project, *Variable Piece #70 (In Process), Global, November 1971*, whose stated aim was to photograph every human being in the world.²⁹ On the contrary, I think that one aspect of Rydet’s enterprise (despite her claim of

recording—memorializing—what was about to vanish) could be interpreted as a conscious or unconscious forgetting, or, at least, a form of not remembering.

There is thus a paradoxical element in the *Record*. On the one hand, we are given a collective representation of what seems to be “Polishness,” (especially in those parts of the country such as Podhale region, remote from the metropolis), and judging from many of the habitations, extremely poor. But on the other hand, this implicit affirmation of Polish identity obscures not only the historical heterogeneity of Poland overwritten by the affirmations of an integral Polish nationality and ethnicity, but equally the circumstances of its demise. Instead, what if we hazard the notion that this ambitious survey/archive project was a form of overwriting the most traumatic aspects of Poland’s pre-1946 histories?

Writing in 1989, Pierre Nora grasped the centrality of archive formation to contemporary life.

Modern memory is, above all, archival. It relies entirely on the materiality of the trace, the immediacy of the recording, the visibility of the image. What began as writing ends in high fidelity and tape recording. The less memory is experienced from the inside the more it exists only through its exterior scaffolding and outward signs – hence the obsession with the archive that marks our age, attempting at once the complete conservation of the present as well as the total preservation of the past.³⁰

There are echoes here of Kracauer’s arguments, but where both of these essays are relatively abstract in relation to photographic archives, Rydet’s *Record* should be situated within the historical context of her life and work in Poland. In her efforts to register the actuality of the Polish present, a present that in the very act of photographing instantly becomes the past, there thus hovers around Rydet’s project another past that is an invisible but haunting presence. I refer both to Rydet’s own

biographical past, as a woman who lived through two world wars, consecutive occupations by Germany and Russia during the Second World War, the liquidation of Polish Jewry, several changes in the geographical borders of Poland, including that of her natal town, forced expulsion or displacements of ethnic Polish, German, Ukrainian populations at the end of the war, the imposition of communist rule (including the declaration of martial law in 1981), the rise of Solidarity, and in 1989, the collapse of communism—the list is easily extended. There is nothing in Rydet's *Record*, or in any other of her photographs that provides the barest traces of these epochal events. It is precisely here where one may identify the limitations of photographic imagery in general, especially when devoid of textual supplement, and thus it is incumbent upon those in the present to supply what could not be represented in a photographic survey like Rydet's.

During the war years, Rydet, her parents and brother lived in Stanisławów, a town subjected to successive Russian and German occupations. Stanisławów was duly incorporated into the Ukrainian Soviet Republic in 1947, but prior to that, over 18,000 Polish civilians died there in massacres committed by the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) together with the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN).³¹ In 1944, Rydet's family moved to Rabka, a well-known spa and the "City of the Children of the World," after Poland's borders had been redrawn as a consequence of Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Nothing in Rydet's photographic projects, and little in the biographical information available in English refers to traumas of war, the Holocaust, or any of the subsequent upheavals in Poland that marked her or her work.³² Was it possible for a bourgeois provincial family to live "normal" lives under German and Russian occupation? Is it possible that Rydet's imagery of rural misery or middle class prosperity, kitsch religious images, the display of family photographs on walls, the omnipresence of the Polish

pope, folk decoration, disappearing crafts, and of course, children in all their diversity, operated as a form of denial of what she herself, or those close to her might have experienced directly or indirectly? What if Rydet consciously wished to reconstruct, or invent, or affirm a reassuring image of the everyday, of everyday-ness (even amidst grinding poverty) that while refusing the propaganda imagery of communist Poland, and its sentimental celebration of *völkisch* culture, the heroic worker, and other icons of socialism, wished to redeem the notion of "Polishness"? And if this was so, was it perhaps overdetermined that the only "differences" in Poland in the 1960s and '70s that she would represent were regional and economic, rural or urban, traditional or modern? Did such a project occlude the ethnic cleansings of the war and the postwar order in the desire to produce a unified realm of unproblematic, Catholic, Nationalist Polishness? Were the photographs of Roma people, or those of poor rural folk that Rydet made in other Eastern Bloc countries Rydet's substitutive "others"?

In the particular case of Rydet, there exist competing, or even incommensurate narratives around the work, the biography (such as it is), and thus the discourses within which it is variously positioned. In the pre-*Sociological Record* years, and with respect to her biographical representation, much of her life remains elusive. For a non-Polish reader like myself, it is unclear from the various sources in English (I have not found any in French) whether she had an independent income, made sufficient money from her stationary shops or later, her teaching, that enabled her to travel widely, to support herself; what kind of income she gleaned from her photographic activities; how significant was her religious identification, what were her relations with her family (only her brother is mentioned); what were her relations with officialdom (especially during the period of martial law), with the communist party, what was the nature of her teaching activities (technical? artistic?), how much of her

work was reproduced in the press or magazines, was she was ever married or otherwise partnered—all the basic information one would expect to be in the public record of a recognized figure is not yet available.³³ And while the origins of her obsession to take pictures, manifested so late in her life, is ultimately impossible to understand, it would seem that the larger issues I have outlined here—discursive, political, historical, and contextual—are the more substantial ones to consider.

As critics and theorists from Kracauer to Pierre Nora have observed, a visual archive—in this case, that of Zofia Rydet's—is as much about the loss of memory as its recovery, for these can be cleansed of the more problematic aspects of its history, as Renan indicates in his notion of obligatory forgetting. Although many of the villages whose inhabitants and homes Rydet photographed did not have significant Jewish communities, there were many others whose Jewish populations were destroyed. But from the *Record*, in terms of its visual evidence, no one would ever know that there had previously existed other ethnic or religious communities within these villages, or that the very map of post-war Poland was the result of forced expulsions, transfers, and expatriation of diverse communities. Not to mention the enduring legacy of anti-Semitism, manifest in postwar pogroms and easily summoned into new life by successive reactionary political formations. Poland today, with its right-wing government and its fanatic Catholicism reminds one of the enduring tension between what Adam Michnik called "Polonophiles" and "Europhiles."³⁴ This too involves a memory war in which nationalism papers over the complexities, awkwardness, and guilt of others' memories.

During the exhibition of the *Sociological Record*, in Warsaw, which featured a selection of 486 prints and 505 slides, I was struck by the way both old and young viewers were clearly fascinated by Rydet's photographs (organized in the exhibition according to her own categories). My visit coincided

with a weekend of pro- and anti-government demonstrations following Jaroslaw Kaczynski's Law and Justice party's virtual takeover of the country's broadcasting system, claiming the right to appoint and dismiss TV and radio broadcasters, one of a series of continuing attempts to curb democratic processes. Peering intently at each image it was as though the viewers felt that in the act of intense scrutiny, the picture might yield up a meaning that lay behind its nominal subject. What old and young viewers may have been looking for the pictures to reveal may not have been the same thing, but it is in the very nature of the photographic image that there exists nothing "behind" what is given to see. Nevertheless, the experience of viewing photographs from the *Record* cannot but evoke the ways by which the "imagined community" of post-war Poland can draw upon the photographic record to establish a sanitized and nostalgic representation of a national "Polishness" that effaces its unresolved past, whether during German or Russian domination. How Rydet's *Record* will figure in the ongoing project of constructing or reconstructing Polish history and identity is inevitably contingent on the larger political forces that are always active in constructing the mythologies of nationhood and the determinations of who is "us" and who is "them."

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- 1 Ernest Renan, "What is a Nation?," trans. Martin Thom, in *Becoming National: A Reader*, eds. Geoff Eley and Ronald Grigor Suny (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 45.

- 2 Siegfried Kracauer, "Photography," [1927] trans. Thomas Y. Levin, *Critical Inquiry* 19, no. 3 (Spring 1993): 435.
- 3 "Zofia Rydet: *Sociological Record*," *LensCulture Projects*, accessed August 9, 2016, <https://www.lensculture.com/projects/5572-zofia-rydet-sociological-record>.
- 4 Kracauer, "Photography," 431. Italics in the original.
- 5 Richard S. Esbenshade, "Remembering to Forget: Memory, History, National Identity in Postwar East-Central Europe," in "Identifying Histories: Eastern Europe Before and After 1989," special issue, *Representations*, no. 49 (Winter 1995): 75.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 84.
- 7 The French language does not employ survey as a noun, but in English it derives from the Middle English *surveyen* and from Old French, *sourvoir*, and *surveer*.
- 8 The term is, of course, from Benedict Anderson's important study, to which I will return to at a latter point in this essay. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1983).
- 9 Massive survey projects such as the U.S. FSA, the British Mass Observation, the French Mission photographique de la DATAR, or The Standard Oil project are exemplary of these official enterprises.
- 10 See in this regard, John Tagg, "God's Sanitary Law: Slum Clearance and Photography," in *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1988).
- 11 This project and others are discussed in Elizabeth Edwards, *The Camera as Historian: Amateur Photographers and Historical Imagination, 1885–1918* (Chapel Hill: Duke University Press, 2012).
- 12 *Ibid.*, 9.
- 13 The full title is *People of India: a series of photographic illustrations with descriptive letterpress, of the races and tribes of Hindustan*. With respect to Solomon Butcher (1856–1927) and apropos of his own concept of a photographic survey, there exist striking parallels to Rydet's conception of her *Record*: "Somehow, Butcher hit on an amazing idea—he would produce a photographic history of Custer County. He must have realized that he was living in a time and place that were important to the history of the country. There is also evidence that he thought this was an idea he could sell. For whatever reason, it was an idea that seized him. From the time I thought of the plan, for

seven days and seven nights it drove the sleep from my eyes. I laid out plans and covered sheet after sheet of paper, only to tear them up and consign them to the waste basket. At last, Eureka! Eureka! I had found (sic) it. I was so elated that I had lost all desire for rest. Beginning in 1886, Butcher began to travel all across the county by horse and wagon, taking photographs of his friends and neighbors. These are the photographs that now illustrate many history texts about the settlement period.” “Solomon Butcher Photographs the Sod House Frontier”, http://www.nebraskastudies.org/0500/stories/0502_0100.html, accessed October 10, 2016.

- 14 I refer to a bibliography that identifies an “archival turn” with recent art and photography, as opposed to its normative histories. See, for example, the useful survey provided by Cheryl Simon “Following the Archival Turn,” *Visual Resources* 18, no. 2 (2002): 101-107. See as well Hal Foster, “An Archival Impulse,” *October* 110 (Autumn 2004): 3-22; Ingrid Schnaffney and Matthias Winzer, eds., *Deep Storage: Collecting, Storing and Archiving in Art*, exh. cat. (New York: P.S. 1, 1998); *Interarchive: Archival Practices and Sites in the Contemporary Art Field* (Koln: Walter Konig, 2002); Charles Merewether, ed., *The Archive*, Whitechapel Gallery’s Documents of Contemporary Art Series (London: Whitechapel Ventures, 2006); Okwui Enwezor, *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Photography* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2008) and Krzysztof Pijarski, ed., *The Archive as Project* (Warsaw: Archeology of Photography Foundation, 2013). The recognition of the way archives can function as a form of raw material for artistic purposes was emphasized in such major exhibitions as Okwui Enwezor’s *Documenta 11* and many others.
- 15 As Anderson remarks, one of the difficulties of theorizing nationalism is its too-easy assimilation to concepts of ideology: “Part of the difficulty is that one tends unconsciously to hypostasize the existence of Nationalism-with-a-big-N (rather as one might Age-with-a-capital A) and then to classify *it* as an ideology...It would, I think, make things easier if one treated it as if it belonged with ‘kinship’ and ‘religion’ rather than with ‘liberalism’ or ‘fascism.’” Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 5.
- 16 The U.S. Resettlement Administration and later, the Farm Security Administration developed photography projects between 1935 and 1944. The Information Division of the FSA, under Roy Stryker, was responsible for providing educational materials and press information to the public. See, for example, Maren Stange, *Symbols of Ideal Life: Social Documentary Photography in America 1890-1950* (N.Y: Cambridge University Press, 1992).
- 17 Rydet’s own organization of her material was generally topographical, and then

defined and organized by subject matter.

- 18 Allan Sekula, "Photography between Labour and Capital," in *Mining Photographs and Other Pictures: A Selection from the Negative Archives of Shedden Studio, Glace Bay, Cape Breton 1948–1968*, eds. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh and Robert Wilkie (Halifax: NSCAD/UCCB Press, 1983), 197.
- 19 Robert Castel and Dominique Schnapper, "Aesthetic Ambitions and Social Aspirations: The Camera Club as a Secondary Group," in *Photography: A Middle-Brow Art*, ed. Pierre Bourdieu, trans. Shaun Whiteside (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 104.
- 20 Asked in an interview why she didn't use a tape recorder to record something of the individual lives she was photographing, she remarked that "A tape recorder makes people freeze up." Answering the question whether she kept records with names, locations, or descriptions, she said "Unfortunately, I have no time for that, but every picture has its data: year, full name, location." Zofia Rydet, interview by Krystyna Łyczywek, *Conversations on Photography 1970–1990* (Szczecin: Voivodeship Council in Szczecin and the Union of Polish Art Photographers [ZPAF], 1990), 33–37; accessed August 9, 2016 at <http://zofiarydet.com/zapis/en/pages/sociological-record/discussions/rozmowy-o-fotografii>.
- 21 Auguste Comte coined the term, with the idea of unifying history, psychology, and economics to produce a scientific understanding of society and social relations. With respect to the integration of photography with modern sociology, see Howard Becker, "Photography and Sociology," *Studies in the Anthropology of Visual Communication* 1 (1974): 3–26.
- 22 One of the stranger aspects of *Little Man*, whose book design was considered to be highly innovative at the time, was Rydet's choice of author to accompany the photographs. Janusz Korczak, the pen name of Henryk Goldszmit, was a Polish-Jewish pediatrician, writer, and educator, who during the Second World War directed a Jewish orphanage that was relocated to the Warsaw ghetto. He and approximately 190 of his orphans were killed in Treblinka in 1942. No reference is made in *Little Man* to his life or fate. Andrzej Wajda made a film about Korczak in 1990.
- 23 Peter Fritzsche, "The Archive," in "Histories and Memories of Twentieth-Century Germany," special issue, *History and Memory* 17, no 1–2 (Spring–Winter 2005): 13–44.
- 24 Sekula, "Photography between Labour and Capital," 198.
- 25 See in this regard, Rosalind Krauss, "Photography's Discursive Spaces: Landscape,

- View," in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Twentieth-Century Myths* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1984).
- 26 Douglas Crimp, "The Library's New, the Museum's Old Subject," in Douglas Crimp and Louise Lawler, *On the Museum's Ruins* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993).
- 27 Rydet noted the place and date of her photographs, but little other information. However, Ewa Klekot has argued eloquently for the *Record's* use value for an ethnological approach using its emphasis on material culture. See Ewa Klekot's essay "Between the Ethnographic and Material Culture" in the upcoming book devoted to the *Record*, see:
<http://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/distributed/O/bo26326870.html>.
- 28 Consider the difference between Robert Frank, who selected only eighty-six of more than a thousand exposures for the making of his 1956 book *The Americans* as opposed to Rydet's entirely inclusive relation to her own photographs.
- 29 In his own words: "Throughout the remainder of the artist's lifetime he will photographically document, to the extent of his capacity, the existence of everyone alive in order to produce the most authentic and inclusive representation of the human species that may be assembled in that manner." Mark Godfrey, "Across the Universe," in Matthew Witkovsky, ed., *Light Years: Conceptual Art and the Photograph, 1964-1977* (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 2011), 62-63.
- 30 Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Memoire*," in "Memory and Counter-Memory," special issue, *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989): 13.
- 31 See Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (Basic Books, 2012), Kindle edition, Chapter 10 - „Ethnic cleansings.“
- 32 Here is Uilleam Blacker's succinct description of what occurred in Poland after 1942: "During and after the [Second World] war, many cities, villages and towns were moved from one state to another, and entire populations were transferred. Towns that had been Jewish *shtetls* for centuries suddenly became entirely Ukrainian or Polish. The cities of Poland's eastern borderlands were no longer dominated by a Polish majority and a large Jewish minority, with Ukrainians usually the third group by size, but became almost entirely Ukrainian, while German cities and towns in Poland's "recovered territories" became entirely Polish. Similar situations arose in Lithuania or in postwar Czechoslovakia. Ukrainian villages in Southeastern Poland also saw their populations vanish as a result of deportation in 1947, and were resettled by Poles or abandoned." Uilleam Blacker, "Living among the Ghosts of Others," in *Memory and Theory in Eastern Europe*, ed. Uilleam Blacker, Alexander Etkind, and Julie Fedor,

(London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 45.

33 The forthcoming volume on Rydet's *Record* tries to fill many of these blanks, see Adam Mazur's, Agnieszka Pajęczowska's, and Krzysztof Pijarski's contributions.

34 Cited in Ebenschade, "Remembering to Forget," 86.