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Critical Events as Factors Shaping Life Experiences: The Analysis of One Biography

Zdarzenia krytyczne jako czynniki kształtujące doświadczenia życiowe: analiza jednej biografii

Abstract: The article presents the life story of an elderly woman, the sense of the quality of her life, the critical events that shaped her life, and the lessons learned from her experiences. The study adopted a biographical paradigm, which explains the importance of individual biographies in the education process and indicates the need to study the history of life as a source of knowledge about man and his learning. The main aim of the undertaken research was to recognise the meanings that the respondent gives to critical events in shaping the quality of her life. The biographical method was used, and, within it, an autobiographical narrative interview.

The most significant events assessed as positive were the births of her children. The negative events were in particular: the deaths of close ones, a failed marriage and an accident. In coping with suffering, the woman was helped by: help from others, faith, strength, optimism, activity, activities for the benefit of others, and her value system. Lessons emerged from the subject's history, helpful in her life, which can also inspire others. The narrator tried to live in harmony with her conscience and the accepted principles, which gave her satisfaction. Biographical research has an educational function. Life stories can teach what is important in life, what is worth living for, and they can lead to reflections.

Keywords: critical events, life experiences, learning from biographies, quality of life in old age, biographical research.

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Introduction¹

Human experience has an educational value. Retrospection, especially important from the point of view of the autobiographical method, allows us to look at the life so far as a journey full of educational events. As time goes on, what influenced us remains in our memory. Events that changed us, taught us something and deepened our understanding.² A person who talks about their life develops a self-reflective ability, recalls events in their life that have seemingly been forgotten, associates ideas, facts and events, focuses on feelings to which they once did not attach much importance, discovers relationships between events by telling a small fragment of their life, and awakens an internal desire to independently reconstruct the past.³ The story about life enriches the respondent, researcher and readers of the study.

The article presents the life story of an elderly woman, the sense of the quality of her life, the critical events that shaped her life, and the lessons learned from her experiences.

Life experiences, critical events and quality of life in the light of literature⁴

Life experience is 'the sum of knowledge and experiences resulting from professional work, education and personal experiences of the individual acquired during the life. In other words, it is the knowledge of life, resulting from observation and life experiences, which affects the wisdom of life, his biographical

- 1 The text contains excerpts from the doctoral dissertation entitled "Critical events as factors shaping the sense of the quality of life of the elderly', the work was promoted by PhD hab. Zofia Szarota, Professor at the PU; the auxiliary supervisor was PhD hab. Artur Fabiś. The case report contained in the article was not published anywhere.
- 2 D. Demetrio, *Edukacja dorosłych*, in: *Pedagogika*, vol. 3: *Subdyscypliny wiedzy pedagogicznej*, ed. B. Śliwerski, Gdańsk 2006, p. 120.
- 3 Idem, *Autobiografia. Terapeutyczny wymiar pisania o sobie*, translated by A. Skolimowska, Kraków 2000, p. 143.
- 4 K. Sygulska, *Zdarzenia krytyczne jako czynniki kształtujące poczucie jakości życia osób starszych*, Kraków 2020.

competence and the ability to solve life problems.⁵ Periods of stability are relatively short in the history of human life. Life experiences are characterised by great diversity and variability, which relates to social roles and expectations, as well as tasks and personal goals.⁶ Life experiences are what a person has gone through in life and the consequences.

There are critical events in life experiences. Critical life events (life breakthrough events) are 'emotionally significant events, distinguished from the course of everyday life, forcing a change in the functioning of a person [...]. Such events may have a positive or negative emotional tone and force an individual to adapt to a new situation.'⁷ Changes in a person's life affect learning. The theory of Demetrio concerns adult education; it refers to the experiences in the life of an individual that involve the learning process. This concept shows that in human life there are so-called peak moments that generate learning (related to love, work, fun and death), and adaptation needs motivate adults to learn.⁸

Another category included in the text is the quality of life – it is indicated that this concept is multifaceted and ambiguous. It is identified with the concepts of well-being, happiness and satisfaction.⁹ In a narrow sense, quality of life refers to meeting the needs (material and non-material) of people and social groups. In a broad sense, it concerns the mental sphere – it defines the elements that enable the leading of a normal life with a sense of security and self-esteem, as well as the possibility of using abilities to achieve goals.¹⁰ The assessment of the level of the quality of life is a comparison between what is real and what is expected. If feelings match (or exceed) expectations, there is satisfaction. If there is a large difference between the actual state and expectations, we can

5 A. A. Zych, *Leksykon gerontologii*, Kraków 2010, p. 46.

6 P. K. Oleś, *Psychologia człowieka dorosłego. Ciągłość – zmiana – integracja*, Warszawa 2011, p. 25.

7 A. A. Zych, *Leksykon gerontologii*, p. 85.

8 D. Demetrio, *Edukacja dorosłych*.

9 B. Tobiasz-Adamczyk, *Geneza zdrowia, koncepcje i ewolucja pojęcia jakości życia*, in: *Jakość życia w chorobach układu sercowo-naczyniowego. Metody pomiaru i znaczenie kliniczne*, ed. K. Kawecka-Jaszcz, M. Klocek, B. Tobiasz-Adamczyk, Poznań 2006, p. 9.

10 A. A. Zych, *Leksykon gerontologii*, p. 78.

talk about a negative balance.¹¹ The article adopts a multidimensional concept of quality of life in a modified form. It covers the following aspects of the situation: physical conditions (diseases, disability, ageing), mental condition, social activity and satisfaction with family life, continuing professional work, running a home, satisfaction with contacts with the environment, financial condition and structural aspects (e.g., participation in social life).¹²

Methodological foundations of the research¹³

The study adopted a biographical paradigm, which:

[...] indicates and explains theoretically the place and meaning of individual biographies in the education process, broadly understood as the process of development, upbringing and education, self-education and self-upbringing, as well as personality care and therapy, and as human learning processes accompanying him in the process of life. It points to the need to study biography as a source of knowledge about man and his learning, as well as content conducive to the self-formation of personality and the change of the world of human life in adulthood.¹⁴

The main aim of the undertaken research was to recognise the meanings that the respondent gives to the critical events shaping the quality of her life. The specific objectives, on the other hand, concerned getting to know the story of the narrator's life and how it is used to distinguish the critical events shaping her biography and recognising the sense of the quality of her current life. The aim was also to recognise what the studied woman had learned from her life.

11 M. Halicka, *Satysfakcja życiowa ludzi starych*, Białystok 2004, p. 23.

12 B. Tobiasz-Adamczyk, P. Brzyski, J. Bajka, *Społeczne uwarunkowania jakości życia kobiet u progu wieku starszego*, Kraków 2004, p. 17.

13 K. Sygulska, *Zdarzenia krytyczne jako czynniki kształtujące poczucie jakości życia osób starszych*.

14 E. Dubas, *Biograficzność w kontekście całożyciowego uczenia się*, in: *Biografie i uczenie się*, eds E. Dubas, J. Stelmaszczyk, series: *Biografia i badanie biografii*, vol. 4, Łódź 2015, p. 25.

The biographical method has been used.

Biography is a mental construct that organises, interprets and gives meaning to experiences that an individual has experienced during her life. The biography contains a memory of life experiences that relate to events and situations in the life of an individual that have been experienced and remembered by her, most often as important and significant, but are currently remembered, recalled or can be recalled, and which formed the identity of the individual over the course of the run of her life.¹⁵

The biographical method is of educational importance. The respondent is stimulated by the interview – she recalls her past, reflects, organises and verbalises memories. She must also be willing to speak, express opinions, and analyse and evaluate her words. The story about life contains information about the examined person, her past. The collected material describes the invisible environment that once existed. Information about the past enriches the respondent, researcher and reader of the prepared data.¹⁶ An autobiographical narrative interview was used in the research. Its advantage is ‘the possibility for the narrator to recreate in the story significant biographical processes experienced by her, which shaped her life in subsequent phases of her biography, experienced situations and the social framework in which her biographical processes took place.’¹⁷

Jadwiga is the examined woman. At the time of the interview, she was 70 years old, she had received a secondary vocational education – she graduated from a professional school of decorative fabric weavers and a high school for working people. She worked as a weaver, then in a district office, and later ran her own business (itinerant trade). She has been retired since 2004. Jadwiga is

15 E. Dubas, *Uczenie się z własnej biografii jako egzemplifikacja biograficznego uczenia się*, „Nauki o Wychowaniu. Studia Interdyscyplinarne”, 1 (2017) no. 4, p. 65, DOI: 10.18778/2450-4491.04.05.

16 O. Czerniawska, *Szkice z andragogiki i gerontologii*, Łódź 2007, p. 110.

17 K. Kaźmierska, & F. Schütze, *Wykorzystanie autobiograficznego wywiadu narracyjnego w badaniach nad konstruowaniem obrazu przeszłości w biografii. Na przykładzie socjologicznego porównania narracji na temat życia w PRL-u i NRD*, „Przegląd Socjologii Jakościowej”, 9 (2013) no. 4, p. 131.

married, has three children (she had four, but the first child died) and three grandchildren.

Research findings

Life experiences

The narrator was brought up in a large family – she describes her experiences from the family home as follows:

There were seven of us, nine of us with our parents, so the family was unbelievably large. My mum was an unbelievable tyrant, she had to work very hard in the field to tame it all, to keep the house, these children. My daddy worked outside the home [...] because he was a builder.

Jadwiga's childhood was filled with various responsibilities. In her family of origin, the financial situation was not good enough:

That childhood was like that, well, a lot of work fell on us. Mummy, to earn some extra money [...] to save money, she was walking 17 kilometres on foot, so it was a nightmare. I remember how we always waited for her, she would bring us sweet rolls, each for one zloty, so we were happy.

Jadwiga was born in a small town, where she also attended school. In elementary school, things did not go well for her. She was unfairly treated by teachers. Children, whose parents 'gave oranges' to the teachers, got better grades, and they 'did not know how to multiply'. It was only when the teaching staff changed (from sixth to seventh grade) that the narrator began to be treated fairly and felt appreciated.

In elementary school, as a teenager she had a friend who adored her and for whom she felt affection. However, the prospect of a relationship and having children scared her:

[...] I was somehow afraid, I had a vision that I would have six children and it started to scare me off, although I had feelings for him, really [...], because he was an unbelievably honest, respectable and, above all, caring and wonderful man. Well, but to end the relationship, I wrote him a letter

that I was leaving, I would not be around anymore, so that I believe that our relationship is over.

Then she attended a vocational school. She had a great passion for hair-dressing, but her parents could not afford to pay for a school with such a profile. **The choice of educational path** had a reference in the undertaken professional work. At the age of 17, she started working in a weaving factory, then decided to continue her education – she went to high school.

When she attended vocational school, at the age of 16, **she was beaten by her father**. It was only one time, but she would remember it all her life. It also changed her perception of her father. The reason was that she was home half an hour late; she was returning from a party:

[Father] took the cable [silence] and lynched me. I had marks everywhere. When I looked at myself, it was a nightmare. After three days, I think, I went to our meadow, a string... [her voice breaks], I found a tree to make a knot. But I guess I was too weak for that, because I think to myself: will I leave Mum in this anguish? And I came back home.

After that incident, she felt a great sadness towards her father. She could not understand that a father could do such harm to his own child. It affected her so much that she **thought about taking her own life**. Her father was an aggressive man; he was furious.

After graduating from school, a dramatic event took place in her life (she was 27 at the time):

[...] my sister was 20 and I received a message that my **sister had died of a heart condition**. My world collapsed, everything collapsed. In five days, she was about to obtain sewing qualifications, because she attended a tailoring school. I could not pull myself together. It was tragic for me. In such a situation, I was angry with God, I was angry with everything. When I saw people who were older, they support themselves with a cane... [break, crying]. Well, what was there to do?

This tragic event changed her life, leading to a (already her second) **suicide attempt**:

There was a moment in my life when I wanted to take my life [broken voice], because I did not see the purpose of my further life. I opened the gas in my apartment. [...] Suddenly I hear the bell ringing to my apartment and I say: Who is it at this hour? And my colleague from my office years says: I came to take you home so that you would not be lonely. [...] I did not really want to go with her, but she forced me, so to speak, and I left with her. Of course, I think I was saved thanks to her.

After her sister's death, she was unable to recover mentally, she says, 'she was constantly haunted by terrible thoughts'. Even though she believed in God, after this incident, she began to question his existence: 'God, you do not exist, you are not real, you would not do such a thing. For a 20-old girl to leave this world.'

Unable to deal with this situation, she searched for some explanation for what had happened. As a believer in God, she gave a meaning to the following, difficult to explain rationally, situation:

And lying on such a bed, I feel such an incredible bang. [...] When I woke up at 4 am, I looked at the wall and **the painting of Our Lady of Czestochowa that had slipped off the wall** and fell on the floor. It was unbelievable for me [emphasis] and I think to myself: nothing happened to this picture, and it was behind glass [...] I apologised to God, Our Lady. Apparently, she was needed there [my sister in heaven].

The loss of her sister was all the more painful as it was connected with the guilt that Jadwiga felt. She blamed herself for not going to the appointment where she would last see her beloved sister:

She was a wonderful person, wonderful. The worst thing was that she had something to say to me because she had written in a letter earlier that she wanted to tell me something important [...]. She died on May 2, and on May 1 I was supposed to go to her, we were supposed to go to have fun, that's why it bothers me to this day that I just didn't go then because my friend dragged me out and we went to have the so-called fun.

Jadwiga has always been an active, athletic person; she played volleyball, table tennis and tennis. She took part in the organisation of various competitions, tournaments, and at one of the clubs she attended she **met her current**

husband. As she says, it allowed her to 'stand on her feet.' After eight months, she got married and then became pregnant (at the age of 30). Then a dramatic event occurred in her life:

[...] **my first child was born**, so craved, but the doctor made an incredible mistake and I had a forceps delivery. He crushed the head and the baby lived only three days and died. Another terrible tragedy [...] I was not even able to leave this hospital and go to the funeral, because I felt terrible, all the windows were barred, because I tried various things, I just had to survive somehow. The worst thing was that **my child died on the third day**, and when walking down the corridor to the toilet I saw a girl, who was 14, giving birth, who said: It is crying, it is alive, what will I do with it? So, I say again: God, you take my child away and give a child to her who does not want it.

After this tragedy, she was unable to regain her balance for a long time, and later made efforts to get pregnant again. When these plans were realised and then two years later she **gave birth to another child, a son** (at the age of 32), her mental state improved and she felt happy:

[...] I gave birth to a daughter, so my world seemed to open up. God had something else for me that I can do in my life. Two years later, my son was born, so I was all happy, I was incredibly devoted to my children.

However, another tragedy happened in her life – nine years after her sister's death, **her brother died**. It was an unfortunate accident – the man choked on tap water. It was all the more tragic as he orphaned three young children (the youngest was 18 months old).

During this time, she **got pregnant again**, but there were complications. It turned out that she suffers from hydronephrosis and pyonephrosis. The doctor told her that she had to terminate the pregnancy in order to survive and raise the remaining children. It was a very difficult time for her; she could not imagine that she could have an abortion, the more so as the loss of her first child was a 'terrible tragedy' for her. Jadwiga, against the doctor's recommendations, did not terminate the pregnancy. A week before the planned surgery, her mother-in-law said that if Jadwiga died, she would send the newborn child to an orphanage. It was a terrible experience for her to learn this. This is how she describes her experiences related to high-risk surgery:

[...] I went with the attitude that I would die. [...] something is happening to me, I can only see unbelievable movement, respirators, connecting [...]. I hear this voice: save yourself, save yourself. [...] Then I hear the voice of the head of the hospital: God, we have her, **the surgery was successful.**

In 1999, another tragedy happened in her life – **another sister** died as a result of a disease. She orphaned two children. Three years later, her sister's husband 'drinks himself to death,' so the children were left without both parents, which Jadwiga describes as 'an incredible experience'.

In 2001, her eldest daughter told her that she felt very ill – her stomach hurt, so Jadwiga called an ambulance. The called doctor ignored the symptoms and made a wrong diagnosis. When the narrator heard her daughter: 'Save me, I'm dying,' she was convinced that something was wrong. She contacted an anaesthesiologist who told her to call the ambulance again – and so she did:

[...] thank God, because after the examination, she had surgery. The doctor said the stomach ulcer ruptured and everything was flooded. After the surgery, the doctor said: What we had to do, we did, and the rest is in God's hands. The next day, I went to the emergency room here, I saw the doctor and I told her: How could you act like this, [...] you acted horribly towards my child. To which she replies: Madam, she is no longer a child.

Then an extremely difficult situation developed in her life – her **son was imprisoned for drug trafficking.** She recalls how the police came to search their apartment – it was a difficult experience for her. The narrator feels a sense of guilt in connection with the arrest of her son:

[...] it was a terrible moment when I have a lot to complain about in my life, because he found himself in a room where I had to visit him every month. It was a nightmare for me, as if I had not passed the exam in my life, but what to do, it happens. I blame myself for it until today.

Jadwiga blames herself for devoting too much time to professional work and not enough time to domestic matters. The financial situation at home was not very good, so she wanted to earn to improve it. She says her children had to 'get along' in this situation.

Another difficult situation the narrator recalls was the **threat to her older daughter's life** caused by evaporating carbon monoxide (2004). The girl blocked the air vents in the bathroom and they later found out that the chimney was blocked. Jadwiga remembers this event was a nightmare:

[...] when I opened the door, she was unconscious, so it was a nightmare. [...] The ambulance arrived and they got her out of that tub. Carbon monoxide started to be released and we were just not aware of it. [...] They took her to the hospital, and she regained consciousness a few hours later. When I go to the bathroom now, this is all I can see.

In the further story, the narrator mentions another premature death of a close family member:

[...] **my brother**, whose wife passed away, three years later, in 2006 he went to Bagry [the reservoir], **dived in and never came out again**. He was 55 too, that is also not for dying, right? There were seven of us, only three remain [silence].

This dramatic event coincided with a joyful event. The day before her brother's death, Jadwiga's **son was released from prison**. It made her feel happy:

It might sound not too cool, but it was such a shock absorber, because I was happy to see him out. [crying] I always told them to tell me the truth. I was saying: Son, you lied to me, I was not aware of anything. It was a nightmare for me. He said: Well, as you always said, you have to pay for evil. So, he paid and I don't think it will happen again.

The narrator has always been active in her life; she says that she could not 'sit still at home.' After retiring, she became involved in a natural cosmetics business, which gives her joy. She likes to meet others and advise them.

Three years ago, the narrator had **an accident – she was hit by a car** – when she was riding her bicycle. She describes this event as a 'nightmare' – it is associated with great suffering and limitation of activity:

[...] I did not leave the house for over a month. Before I got myself back together somehow and all, months passed. Well, but I thank God that

I was saved [...]. These menisci [meniscus] broke and I am still undergoing treatment, I spent a lot of money [...]. It was just such a problem that I haven't got on the bike for three years, so it is a nightmare for me.

A sense of quality of life

Health condition

The narrator has health problems caused by the bicycle accident – it limits her efficiency and functioning in everyday life. In addition, she has high blood pressure and her spine hurts. She tries to take care of her health and exercises: 'I have a stick, I have a mat, I try to spend half an hour in the morning on that. You have to do something, you have to do something for yourself.' However, she does not want to have regular check-ups with the doctor: 'They persuade me to do the mammograms, and I do not want to know. What awaits me will not pass me by, I am old.'

Activity

Jadwiga is an active person. She is now retired and takes care of the house. Household activities are not limited to cooking and cleaning, but also include renovation work (she painted the apartment herself). She is interested in healthy eating and preventive health care. She conducts meetings and shows up at promotion events for natural products.

Relations with the family

Jadwiga has been married for 41 years, but her relationship is not going well. She has a grudge against her husband for various reasons, for example, insufficient involvement in home and family matters, raising the children. She calls him 'hot-tempered' and says that when he gets angry, it is 'better not to get in his way.' When asked if she loves her husband, she replies:

All this has passed and many things have contributed to it, but I try to respect him as a man, as my husband and the father of my children. I have never offended him. He abuses my trust by telling me nasty things. It's good that I have kept myself cool. I have my own room, he has his own room and we do not live as husband and wife. It happens, unfortunately.

Relations with other people

The surveyed woman has friends, acquaintances, and regularly meets people from the company with which she is associated. She is satisfied with these relations.

Living situation

The narrator describes her financial situation as 'not very beautiful.' Both she and her husband are living off their pensions. The surveyed woman appreciates the value of money, does not throw away food (*bread is sacred to me*). The source of this lies in the family of origin, where there was a shortage of funds for living: 'When in the countryside my mother sent us to get five loaves of bread for nine people, I could only buy two.'

Selected critical events as factors shaping the sense of quality of life*Being beaten by her father*

The narrator describes her father's beating as the event that had an impact on her further life. Immediately after this, she attempted suicide. It changed her perception of her father forever – she felt a great grudge against him. A father, by definition, should give a child love, warmth and a sense of security. Her father caused not only physical pain, but also mental pain:

I received such a spanking only once, but so that it will never leave me. That is why I think to myself, when I have children one day, I will never hurt them, because it causes the degradation of the child. There were wounds cut with a cable, they were blueish red, he was hitting me blindly. You have to be a sadist, my father had it in him.

The narrator attributes importance to this event in the context of raising her own children. Having survived the beating herself, she could not imagine that she could hit her own child. When her husband used to argue that she should 'spank' her children, she was strongly opposed to it. She says that she could forgive him anything, but not if he hit the children. She herself experienced physical violence and would not like to cause such pain to another person.

Death of a child

For Jadwiga, one of her most traumatic experiences was the death of her child. This event had a very strong influence on her further life and still causes mental pain. She describes her experience saying that there is nothing more horrible than the funeral of your own child:

My mum, after [the death] of her twenty-year-old daughter, said that she could not imagine that she is such a strong person, that she is not a human, but a stone, because there is nothing more horrible in life than walking behind your child's coffin.

After this incident, in despair, the narrator had somatic symptoms such as nausea and vomiting. When she saw a small child in a pram, she would cry loudly; it was difficult to self-control.

The births of children

For the narrator, the births of her children were the most positive events in her life. Undoubtedly, having children influenced and still affects the sense of quality of life. Jadwiga talks about motherhood with great tenderness:

I love my children, they are wonderful, beautiful, healthy. I have always prayed for them to be healthy and every day I say: God, I am begging you, lead them, lead them, so that they do not fall on the wrong path of life.

When her last pregnancy was at risk and the doctor indicated the need to terminate it, the narrator was under great stress. The suffering was all the greater because she already had the experience of losing a child:

And I say to myself: God, if you take her away from me, the world will end for me, it will collapse, because the doctor even told me that I would not give birth, that I will make my two children orphans. And I said that there is no way for me to remove it [...]. I would not be able to live with this.

Placing her son in a correctional facility

Another critical event in her life was her son's placement in a correctional facility. Jadwiga remembers it as one of the most painful experiences. It was terri-

rying to know that her child was in prison and suffering. It is even difficult for her to utter the words 'prison' and 'correctional facility' – she calls it 'solitude' in the conversation:

My son's solitude was the worst thing that could happen to me. I reproach myself for not being home enough, the children could walk their own paths, and in retrospect, I will only tell you this: modestly, bread and butter, potatoes and just to know each step of the children and maybe it would not have happened.

After the sentence was over, the narrator's son began to lead a 'normal' life – he started a paid job, his daughter was born. Jadwiga emphasises that she is proud of him and that she is glad that he returned to the "good path". However, the described event left its mark on her present life, and more precisely on the sphere of her psyche. She struggles with remorse – she has a strong sense of guilt that her son was arrested. She says that she has not fulfilled her parental function properly ('I have not passed the life test'). She regrets that she devoted too much time to paid work and was not involved enough in the lives of her children.

Getting married

The marriage was undoubtedly a very important event in life. At first, the marriage was going well, but over time, the narrator's husband ceased to meet her expectations. He moved away from the family and blamed her for educational failures, which she felt was painful and unfair. Currently, she is not satisfied with her marriage, which reduces her quality of life. She describes her experience with her husband as follows:

My husband and I met and I was very much in love with him, and he was probably in love with me too, although he has never told me that so far. [...] At the beginning, it was going very well, because [...] when my husband was working, he had little time left. As long as the children were little, the first ones, he played with them [...]. Well, when the children started to grow up and created difficulties, my husband distanced himself a bit, because he thought that I was at home, I set the tone for this home, upbringing and it is my fault.

Accident

A critical event that currently affects the sphere of health and activity is the accident in which the narrator was hit by a car. She has always been an active person, practicing various sports. When she was already retired, she especially liked to ride a bike:

I need an activity, such as a bike. When I get on my bike, I feel like a free bird. I have always been active, I went to the swimming pool, to the pool for almost two years, I had a swimming certificate.

Conclusion

The narrative focused mainly on the family of origin and her own family, education, work, activity, free time, living conditions, and relationships with people. The woman described her life experiences from childhood, adolescence and adulthood. The most significant people in her life are her mother, father, children, husband and siblings. The assessment of the quality of life of the respondent differs in terms of specific areas relating to the life situation (health, activity, relations with family and other people, and living situation). Jadwiga says that she is satisfied with the current situation, because she has children, grandchildren and she is calm. Critical events changed the situation of the respondent, for better or worse. The most significant events assessed as positive were the births of her children. Having children is a life goal and a source of satisfaction for the respondent. Events that have negatively shaped the life situation are, in particular, the deaths of loved ones, a failed marriage and the accident.

There are factors that helped the respondent in coping with suffering: faith, strength, optimism, performing activities that give pleasure, helping others, and following her own hierarchy of values. Dramatic experiences can transform into a positive state such as peace, satisfaction, personality development, and a sense of security. In the process of transgression, inner strength, adaptability, acceptance and humility are necessary. Lessons emerge from the subject's history, helpful in her life, which can also inspire others. The narrator always tried to live in harmony with her conscience: "Try to live in such a way that you do not owe anything to anyone. The most important thing is

the comfort of your own conscience.' She has rules by which she lives, which give her satisfaction: 'I have stolen nothing from anyone, I have not hurt anyone. Although I helped a lot, I tried to live in harmony with myself and with nature.' At the same time, she emphasises that each person is an individual and cannot be forced to live a specific way. The respondent has very difficult experiences behind her, but she tries to see some sense in them: 'Sometimes you have to stumble over your own misfortune in order to perceive this world differently.'

Thanks to biographical research, it is possible to gain knowledge about people, situations, events, processes, and about the meaning given to them by an individual. They perform an important educational function. The elderly – because they have the most years behind them – share their life experiences and rich knowledge with others. You can say that life has taught them many things, and they can now share these facts. Their stories can teach what is important in life, what is worth living for, what you can sacrifice yourself for. These stories can act as a warning – things to avoid. Other people's biographies can make us reflect on our lives.¹⁸

Seniors can act as guides, which contributes to the increase in the value of the final stage of life. The ageing process motivates us to look for the right lifestyle and adopt the right attitude towards various life events.¹⁹ We also learn from our own biography. The result of 'this process is the discovery of new knowledge: about oneself, about others, about the world and the universe, which is conducive to reconstruction, redefinition and modification of one's own identity. As a result of this process, the individual regains the meaning of their life and a sense of life agency.'²⁰ Thanks to the knowledge that comes from life, a person can guide it better and have greater life satisfaction.²¹

18 K. Sygulska, *Zdarzenia krytyczne jako czynniki kształtujące poczucie jakości życia osób starszych*.

19 J. Semków, *Learning Old Age and Learning in Old Age: an Individual Perspective*, „Polish Social Gerontology Journal”, 13 (2017) no. 1, p. 31, DOI 10.24917/24500232.131.2.

20 E. Dubas, *Uczenie się z własnej biografii jako egzemplifikacja biograficznego uczenia się*, p. 82.

21 K. Sygulska, *Zdarzenia krytyczne jako czynniki kształtujące poczucie jakości życia osób starszych*.

Streszczenie: Artykuł przedstawia historię życia starszej kobiety, poczucie jakości jej życia, krytyczne wydarzenia, które ukształtowały jej życie oraz wnioski wyciągnięte z jej doświadczeń. W badaniu przyjęto paradygmat biograficzny, który wyjaśnia znaczenie poszczególnych biografii w procesie edukacji i wskazuje na potrzebę studiowania historii życia jako źródła wiedzy o człowieku i jego nauce. Głównym celem podjętych badań było rozpoznanie znaczeń, jakie respondent nadaje zdarzeniom krytycznym w kształtowaniu jakości jej życia. Wykorzystano metodę biograficzną, a w jej ramach autobiograficzny wywiad narracyjny.

Słowa kluczowe: wydarzenia krytyczne, doświadczenia życiowe, uczenie się z biografii, jakość życia w starszym wieku, badania biograficzne.

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