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# Between History and Memory: Family Archaeology

## Pomiędzy historią a pamięcią: archeologia rodziny

**Abstract**: The article discusses the archaeological value of the heritage of the recent past taking a certain gold ring as a case study. The artefact provides a context for the analysis of two issues concerning the archaeological study of the recent past. The first issue concerns the perception of contemporary archaeology as a practice of memory rather than a history of past communities. The other issue is a discussion of so-called family archaeology as a research perspective where archaeologists explore their own past and family roots. The aim is to present archaeology as a valuable method of discovering, analysing, and restoring social and material memories of the near past.

**Keywords**: archaeology, history, memory, material culture

## Introduction

Archaeology is no longer *archaeology* sensu stricto. A far-reaching simplification today is to think of archaeology as a science of the socio-cultural reality of man from the times before the advent of writing (history itself). Currently, one of the most rapidly developing branches of archaeology is the study of the recent past (the nineteenth and twentieth centuries) (*The Oxford Handbook...* 2013; Harrison, Schofield 2010; *Contemporary Archaeologies...* 2009). Several terms can be found in the literature to describe such archaeological activities. They include archaeology of the present, archaeology of the recent past, and archaeology of the contemporary past (for more, see Kobiałka et al. 2015). They are not limited to the study of ancient material culture. In this understanding, not so much time, but the materiality of artefacts (and landscapes) is to be a constitutive element of archaeological practice (Lucas 2004). This approach has allowed us to move beyond the classical chronological framework of archaeological interest (Olivier 2011; Zalewska 2016).

Archaeology is a science not so much about the lives of people in the past and their remnants, but a field of study of material culture as such; its role and significance also in contemporary cultural contexts (cf. *Współczesne oblicza…* 2011). From this point of view, a Neolithic axe made of striped flint is an archaeological artefact. An archaeological artefact is also a leather boot of a Polish officer excavated by A. Kola's team in Kharkiv (Kola 2005). Both items have a cultural and historical value. Even things that were abandoned, forgotten; objects that some time ago were regarded as material unworthy of closer scientific attention (*rubbish*) are more and more frequently perceived as valuable heritage. This applies to both archaeological research and public demand for remains of this type (Kobiałka 2014; Zalewska 2013). This is where the genesis of archaeological attention to seemingly trivial, ordinary, everyday things from the recent past should be located (Buchli, Lucas 2001).

Things are part of the present and co-create it. This is why the fundamental questions of archaeologists of the present concern the issue of the nature (ontology) of things as material vehicles of memory that have a historical character. Objects, no matter how old or new, are part of the present and actively co-create it. As B. Olsen (2013) said, each present consists of many parts of the (material) pasts (in the plural). In other words, these archaeologies do not question the raison d'être of archaeology as a science that studies distant times based on artefacts. They are not a new perspective or even, more generally, a revolutionary "research paradigm". They constitute an extension of the previous field of archaeological reflection and research; a way of asking old research questions from the perspective of other theoretical concepts, using new source material. This perception of archaeology is the foundation on which the current opening up of archaeological initiatives to the material culture and landscapes from the recent past and the reflection on their role and significance in the present are based. Despite the increased attention paid to the very issue of the materiality of artefacts and landscapes as such, in archaeological analyses they are still mostly placed within broader socio-cultural contexts. The social and the material inherently intersect in archaeological analysis (Kobiałka 2014; Harrison, Schofield 2010; *Ruin Memories…* 2014). It is about a fuller, more balanced, symmetrical understanding of these entangled relationships (e.g. González-Ruibal 2014; Olsen et al. 2012).

The archaeological study of material culture and cultural landscapes from the recent past is also gaining a growing following in the Polish scientific community. For more than a decade now, new books and articles have been appearing systematically, which discuss the results of field research, excavations, and non-invasive research at sites related to the Second World War and the period of Stalinist terror (*Nekropolia z terenu…* 2010; Kola 2000; Ławrynowicz 2013; *Archeologia totalitaryzmu…* 2015; *Archeologia współczesności…* 2016). Also, First World War remains

are treated as an interesting subject of archaeological studies (e.g. Kobiałka et al. 2017; Rola et al. 2015; Zalewska 2013; *Archeologia frontu...* 2021). The situation is no different in the case of the material remnants of the Cold War (e.g. Kiarszys 2019).

Undoubtedly, this understanding of the archaeology of the present, which focuses mainly on the study of various material, landscape aspects of armed conflicts, is a very valuable research perspective. For example, it sometimes even succeeds in establishing the identities of those murdered by the Nazis and Communists. It is an archaeology that has very clear social implications. After more than 70 years, families of the murdered can finally arrange a funeral for their grandfathers, fathers, uncles and so on. Here, archaeology is literally a practice of memory recovery (e.g. Crossland 2000; Kola 2005; Konczewski 2015; Renshaw 2011).

In this paper, I argue for a broader understanding of the archaeology of armed conflicts – it is a form of an anthropologically oriented practice of seeing also the fates and stories of specific individuals constituting components of major historical events such as the First and Second World Wars. What is more, such attempts are already being made in the Polish archaeological community (cf. *Archeologia frontu...* 2021). Therefore, this text was conceived as an attempt, an experiment of sorts, to set an archaeological interest in material culture from the recent past in the context of the material heritage of one's own family. The intention is to go beyond the archaeology of the present, understood only as a branch of science that essentially studies the relics of two world wars (the archaeology of contemporary armed conflicts). It is an attempt at an archaeological look at the history and context of one object – a gold ring made over thirty years ago. The strength of Polish archaeology of the present should be its multiplicity, polyphony, diversity of research approaches, and reflection on various types of archaeological material.

In the following sections, I briefly discuss the perception of archaeology as a variant of the (pre)history of pre-literate times and an active form of memory creation. I then take a closer look at the current of archaeological research known as *family archaeology* as an extension of the main understanding and practice of the archaeology of the present. The fate of the gold rings that my grandfather smuggled from Belgium to Poland in 1955 serve as a case study. The aim of the text is to analyse the meaning and functioning of a specific category of things – family heirlooms – in the contemporary cultural context, and to draw attention to the fact that they constitute interesting heritage (cf. Harrison 2013). The artefacts I write about are such heritage through the entanglement of local/small and global/great stories, social and individual memories, matter and time, people and things. In this article, I try to present and support the following thesis: as archaeologists we should not limit ourselves to analyses of (pre)ancient material culture. Items from the recent past also may, or even should, be of archaeological interest. Hence the growing archaeological discussion of the role, meaning, functioning, and being of

material culture in the present and an attempt to answer the question of how things become part of the present and actively co-create it. This is the path of thinking and practising archaeology that I follow in this work.

## Archaeology between history and memory

Usually, in the context of European archaeology, its close relationship with history is emphasised. It can even be said that archaeology was meant to be a (pre)history of pre-literate communities (cf. Trigger 2006). Undoubtedly, such understanding and practice of archaeology had its positive aspects. It was a kind of basis from which academic archaeology stemmed (Schnapp 1996). However, over the last two or three decades, numerous limitations of this way of understanding and practising archaeology have been pointed out (e.g. Hodder 1995; *Archaeologies of Europe...* 2002; Thomas 2004).

Neolithic flint axes were made several thousand years ago. However, by virtue of their materiality, in many cases they continue to exist to the present day, for example until such an object is discovered by an archaeologist during excavations (cf. Holtorf 2002; Kobiałka 2008). The materiality of things is inherently entangled in cultural contexts, both prehistoric and contemporary, while being a vehicle that links these things from the past to the present. Archaeological reflection on the nature (ontology) of the things studied, their role and meaning is by no means ahistorical. Archaeologists do not underestimate the cultural and social contexts of man-made objects (cf. Domańska, Olsen 2008; *Rzeczy i ludzie...* 2008). The cited example of a Neolithic axe may be helpful again. It meant something else for a Neolithic farmer than for, say, a nineteenth-century peasant believing that flint/stone axes were the result of a lightning striking the ground (cf. Johanson 2006). Neither Olsen (2013) nor Olivier (2011) deny the crucial role of interpretation in the archaeologist's research process. Rather, they argue that through their material properties (affordances), things in many cases outlive their creators and persist through subsequent decades, centuries, millennia, etc. They become inherent components of various social and cultural worlds. Therefore, archaeological disregard, ignoring the contemporary contexts in which material culture functions, is in fact an ahistorical approach. Paradoxically, it was the recent archaeological emphasis on the material dimension of the past as well as the present that provided the basis for archaeologists to reflect more fully on the relationship between humans and things.

The archaeological emphasis placed on the materiality of things is crucial here. Archaeologists do not dig up the past (history) as it really was, but rather work on what remains of that past *here and now* (Shanks 2012). These material relics are but a pale shadow of the past. According to this view, the archaeologist works more on matter, rather than with a strictly defined time frame (a particular period, era, etc.).

Things last. Hence it can be said that material culture is multitemporal in that it lasts for hundreds or thousands of years, through different periods (times). And this temporal, historical entanglement of material culture is derived from its concrete, material properties. The archaeologist does not disregard the chronology of the creation of the objects in question (Lucas 2004: 117). Rather, the archaeology of the present emphasises how things from different places and times make up part of the present and constitute an element of the complex relationships linking people to the world around them (for more, see Solli et al. 2011). At this point, the title of the work by Olivier (2013), one of the main advocates of an archaeological opening to material culture from the modern times, is particularly telling. The French archaeologist argues that it is in the interest of archaeology itself to explore the materiality of the contemporary world, how things are components of today's socio-cultural worlds in all their diversity and richness (the business of archaeology is in the present).

Archaeologists do not dig up people, they uncover their remains. Archaeologists do not find functioning settlements, they study their relics in the form of postholes, semi-dugouts, rubbish pits, fragments of ceramic vessels, etc. And it is precisely the fragmentary nature of the things excavated by archaeologists and their multitemporal dimension that provided a pretext for Olivier (2011) to put forward the thesis that archaeology can be thought of not so much as a form of writing the (pre)history of past human communities, but rather a kind of practice of memory. In the most simplistic terms, memory is also fragmentary and non-linear; it is not a reflection of what really happened in the past; elements from different places and times permeate and persist in it (Kobyliński 2014). Things discovered at an archaeological site are of exactly the same nature. One might even venture to say that memory, like archaeological practice, is a form of collecting different things from disparate contexts into some unique collection (an assemblage) (Pétursdóttir, Olsen 2014: 9).

Therefore, the different variants of archaeology that examine – as they declaratively state – the contemporary (Buchli, Lucas 2001) or recent past (*Ruin Memories...* 2014) can be seen as a kind of interdisciplinary approach to learning about the world around us. Such archaeology seeks to make creative use of the achievements of history, ethnography, or memory studies (e.g. Kajda 2013). It is a complementary approach, analysing source material of various kinds (for more, see Harrison, Schofield 2010). Historical documents, ethnographic interviews, and living memory allow us to show the complexity and multifaceted functioning of material culture in the present, along with its significance and value for specific individuals and local communities (Kajda, Kostyrko 2016). This observation also applies to special cases where the archaeologist analyses things related to their own socio-cultural context; to their own family. This, too, is a specific aspect of practising

archaeology of the present (Stępniewska 2015) as such a science incorporates one's own entanglement in history, culture, and society into the field of interest.

## Towards family archaeology

As early as in 1981, American archaeologists R. Gould and M. Schiffer (*Modern Material Culture...* 1981) argued that archaeological methods could be used with equal effectiveness to study various contemporary social and cultural processes. They referred to archaeology oriented in this way as the archaeology of us (cf. also Zalewska 2016).

Exactly two decades after the publication of the book edited by Gould and Schiffer, another groundbreaking archaeological work was published on the potential of archaeological methods to document and explore recent times. In *Archaeologies of the Contemporary Past* it was argued that archaeologists can and should also study the processes of which they are part and which they co-create. This was the direction pursued by V. Buchli and G. Lucas, the editors of the volume, who outlined a framework for archaeological interest in relics of the recent past. They wrote that (Buchli, Lucas 2001: 9):

> Traditional epistemology asserts the gap between past and present, between archaeologists and the society they study; if this epistemological distanciation has a temporal implication what does it mean when this temporal distance collapses? To a large extent, the archaeological method (as science) can sustain the distance – as it does in ethno-archaeology or more generally sociological and ethnographic work, where the epistemological issues remain much the same. However, there is a sense in which turning our methods back onto ourselves creates a strange, reversed situation – a case of making the familiar unfamiliar.

The above quotation indicates a key premise of archaeological research into broadly understood material culture and landscape change from the recent past. What archaeologists do, what they use every day, is part of history as such. It is an approach that historicises and contextualises their own work (e.g. Holtorf 2014). Archaeologists do not claim that through in-depth reflection on the nature of the things they excavate and study they will get to *the things themselves* (Olsen 2013). In fact, archaeologists are interested in a fuller understanding of the complex and multifaceted relationships that connect people and things, and what (active) role material culture plays in this process. A niche variant of such an archaeology of the present, an archaeology of us, is *family archaeology*. It does not involve the study of kinship based on human remains, DNA analysis, etc. Family archaeology is an archaeology in which the researcher (archaeologist) traces the past of their own

family; their own heritage, the things left behind by their parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents (Ulin 2009). Such archaeology is a form of experimentation halfway between science and fiction (Campbell, Ulin 2004). It exemplifies – referring to the work of F. Campbell and J. Ulin (2004) – the practice of creative narrativisation of the specific category of material remains that are things related to the past of one's own family.

Archaeologists also study the things, places, and practices that are part of their lives and their families. They study the complex relationships between people and things functioning within the framework of a socio-material reality, such as the home, the material culture used daily by their grandparents or father. They ask questions about the ontological status of such objects: what are they? These things *live their own (social) lives* in different times that overlap, forming a palimpsest of memories (cf. also Appadurai 1986). Some things outlive their owners; they become legacies, heirlooms, souvenirs, relics of a bygone era, or they find new uses and actively participate in the everyday life of subsequent generations.

One of the few examples of family archaeology research is the work of Swedish archaeologist Ulin (2009), who excavated the relics of her grandparents' house in northern Sweden. The text of the Scandinavian researcher is highly emotional, moving, and poignant. It is even an intimate, personal narrative in which *the material* and *the social* co-create local history and heritage. The objects excavated, used by Ulin's grandmother and grandfather, preserved family photographs, and vague childhood memories of the author herself are, for the Swedish archaeologist, archaeological materials (sources). They make up a narrative that goes beyond the classic description of scientific research. It is an archaeology that transcends the boundaries of scientific (archaeological) discourse. It is also an archaeology of writing and storytelling, experienced from the perspective of one's own entanglement with the world and the past.

Such archaeology does not so much learn about the past, the event-driven history of the Ulin family. Rather, such a practice is a form of active creation of memory; its recovery and narrativisation in the present. Ulin (2009: 146) describes her experience of archaeological work on her grandparents' property as follows:

> I rewrite the silent words of the past in order to make sense. When descending into the memories of times long gone, it is as if I sense my memories through somebody else's eyes. It is as if there is someone else standing in front of the looking glass, viewing, seeing me, there, as a transparent image, as an illusion. Everything is blurred and out of focus. It is as if the things I remember never happened. It is as if they are somebody else's memories, not mine. This work is a 'memory-work', a practice where the body of material consists of remnants excavated from the home-place of my great-grandmother as well as my own recollections, family photographs, family

> stories, lies and secrets. It is a method and a practice of unearthing and making public untold stories and unseen material remains.

A text in a similar vein of poignant personal reflection on the family and the things left behind by a deceased father is *My Father's Things* by Norwegian archaeologist H.B. Bjerck (2014). In 2009, Bjerck's father died alone in his sleep at his home. He was buried a few days later. But he left many things with which Bjerck did not know what to do: what to throw away without sentiment, what to leave, what to give to friends and so on. The Norwegian archaeologist treated the collection of objects left behind by his deceased father, this specific *material assemblage*, with archaeological curiosity (cf. Shanks 2012), trying to reconstruct the last hours of his father's life. The things are filled with memories. To throw away one's father's item is like throwing away a part of him, a fragment of his life story. These things are in fact material memories of the father, embodying the past in the present. As the Scandinavian researcher writes (Bjerck 2014: 112), it is like experiencing thing theory firsthand: how things and people are inextricably intertwined and mutually constitutive.

In this case, artefacts are not objective archaeological sources. They are filled with all sorts of memories, sorrows, joys, childhood events, etc., which are not usually brought to light during specialist archaeological analyses. As Bjerck (2014: 109) describes it:

> As if this was not bad enough – I was soon to realize that I had lost more than my father. Overnight, his home, the place where I was born and grew up, which I still recognized as pivotal in my own being in the world, was no longer a home. My father's home had changed to a construction of things and material structures – an early phase of an archaeological site. I came to realize that a 'home' is a complex integration of human-thing-relations, and that the human component represents some kind of coherent force that keeps this material realm in place as a functional whole. Without my father, my former home was like a huge orchestra without a conductor.

Or, in the words of Buchli and Lucas (2001), the well-known suddenly turned into the unknown.

Examples of family archaeology can be found not only in the discourse of Scandinavian archaeology. Also in the case of British science, there are known works in which authors discuss the heritage of their own families. Such a text is, for example, an article by J. Joy (2002), in which a British archaeologist discusses an heirloom from a deceased grandfather. This artefact is the Distinguished Flying Cross, a medal that his grandfather received for his actions during the Second World War. Again, the artefact itself, its existence (materiality) in the present, was the

connecting point between the material and the social, the present and the past, the living and those who have already left us. As J. Joy (2002: 132) argues, such an archaeology has its considerable value, because *The archaeology of twentieth-century conflict can seem very impersonal and detached, often involving the assessment of battlefields or military installations on the basis of standard criteria*. In a word, the worries, the sorrows, the joys, and the vague memories of the past are inextricably linked to family heirlooms – a specific category of material remains from the recent past. In short, Joy treats his grandfather's medal as if it were a fully-fledged archaeological artefact. In describing the medal, he also outlines the wartime and post-war history of his grandfather. In this way of thinking, people and things constitute each other, they are parts of the same processes.

Family archaeology has not been thoroughly discussed and applied in the field of Polish science so far (cf. Stępniewska 2015). This does not mean, however, that Polish archaeologists have not conducted activities that can be understood as specific variants of family archaeology. Two of the most painful examples are related to Polish archaeological research in Katyn, Mednoye, Starobilsk, and Kharkiv. After all, the murdered Polish officers were husbands, fathers, and grandfathers of specific people. For example, archaeologist M.M. Blomberg participated in research in Katyn. One of the Katyn victims was the Professor's father. For the Łódź archaeologist, the search in Katyn was a kind of family archaeology; the most poignant example of the archaeology of us, the search for her father's grave (for more, see Blomberg 2016). In turn, A. Nadolski, an eminent archaeologist and military historian, took part in the excavations in Kharkiv and Mednoye. The corpse of Nadolski's father was supposed to have been thrown into one of the death pits in the Kharkiv cemetery (cf. Głosek 2013). In such cases, the archaeology of the present overlaps with the themes of family archaeology.

The above examples give rise to a key question: archaeologists in this way of thinking are interested in things from the recent past. Attempts are made to reconstruct their roles, symbolism, sometimes also the technology of manufacture, etc. However, these specific things are so interesting to the given researcher (Ulin, Bjerck) by relating them to a broader socio-cultural dimension; in this case, the fate of their own families. They are important to the authors because they are remnants of their grandparents or their father. Thus, it can be said that family archaeology is a variant of the archaeological reflection on the nature of man's relationship with things, what they are to the individuals concerned, what they mean, and how their functions change. These issues have also plagued prehistoric archaeology for decades. They are questions that can be posed in the context of material relics of the recent past, even when these are things directly related to the archaeologist and their family heritage. To use anthropological language: this is a deeply emic approach.

In the following text, using the example of investigating the fate of a gold ring – a trivial family heirloom and legacy left by grandfather Gustek, I try to apply the assumptions and methods of family archaeology, which emphasises the study of the (un)common: it highlights how ordinary, small objects from the recent past are part of extremely complex historical and cultural processes.

## A Family heirloom as a legacy

On March 15, 2016, I was given a collection of original documents relating to the life of my grandfather Gustaw (Fig. 1–7). These materials provided the impetus for memory work, conversations, reminiscences, and a form of an ethnographic interview about him. K. Piekarska, among others, shared her personal stories with me. Below, I recount a few that were brought up in the course of our shared conversations. These are excerpts, single scenes, vague places, people, things from the past – memories related to her father, and my grandfather.

It was Grandpa's custom every Sunday, while cooking broth for dinner, to return to his experiences of the Second World War and the first post-war years. Of course, the family treated these stories as part of every Sunday, a kind of repetitive ritual, something seemingly devoid of a historical dimension. *At the time, we didn't pay any attention to it* (J. Piekarski, oral information, March 15, 2017). These stories, these – as the historian would say – oral histories, (e.g. Kurkowska 1998) are not just family stories. They are part of history itself, a fragment of people's fates during the Second World War and the difficult post-war years. Similarly, the things associated with the life of Grandpa Gustek are not just family heirlooms. They can be seen as archaeological material, identically to what archaeologists do during fieldwork at the sites of the First and Second World Wars (e.g. Ławrynowicz 2013; *Miejsca pamięci…* 2019). Family archaeology tells such untold stories; it unveils and exposes the unnoticed objects that are part of these human stories (Ulin 2009). Following the practice of family archaeology, it can therefore be said that any family heirloom can be more than just a personal object for the archaeologist. Such an item has sentimental value. But the archaeologist should also add that such an object has a historical and cultural dimension (Fig. 1).

An example of such a family heirloom is the item in Figure 1. It is a small gold ring with a diameter of two centimetres and a weight of just over one gramme. The ring's stone is pink and is made of cut glass. The ring is decorated with circular motifs made of gold wire. For me as an archaeologist, it was not the time of creation of this particular item (1984) that was decisive in treating it as an archaeological artefact, but rather how this object, through its materiality, creatively *intervenes in the present*, combining the material with the social in one collection (assemblage). In a word, this object connects the past and the present of my family.

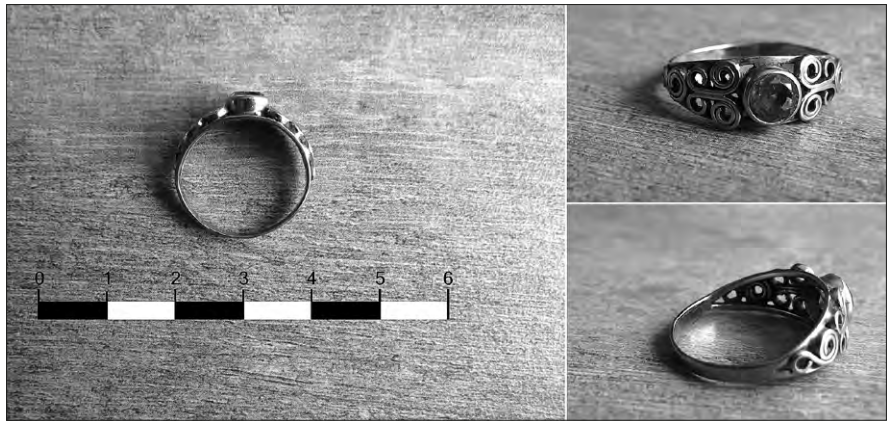


**Fig. 1.** A family heirloom: a gold ring made in 1984 (photograph by D. Kobiałka).

The ring looks completely inconspicuous. It is not a unique example of jewellery-making skills. However, the combination of an archaeological interest in material culture with the use of historical documents and the ethnographic method of in-depth interviews shows the complexity of the fate of objects from the recent past studied within the framework of family archaeology, where the starting point is a single item – a family heirloom. This small object is linked to the memory of my grandfather Gustek, his childhood, growing up during the Second World War, forced labour for the Third Reich, mining coal in a Belgian mine for almost a decade, sweat, tears, sorrows, joys, finding a wife, the birth of four children, working the land from dawn to dusk, and so on. This gold ring constitutes the memory and the fragmentary recollection of all these things, places, people, and practices.

I remember Grandpa Gustek as if through a haze. Just a few characteristic and recurring images: how we throw wheat together in the yard to the pigeons that were Grandpa's love; how we drive the cart together to the meadow to mow grass for the rabbits; how we pick wild mushrooms together in the pasture; how I help feed the horses named Kuba and Maciek. My grandfather died when I was only eleven years old. This is why these few, blurred, fragmentary memories are so valuable to me. They are fleeting shreds, remnants of the past. After my grandfather's death, his farm was sold. As in the case of Bjerck (2014), the family did not know what to do with the vast amount of material culture left behind by my grandfather. Some of the items were thrown away without sentiment. Others, such as a beautiful accordion, were sold for a paltry sum. In the end, it is fair to say that more than twenty years after my grandfather's death, literally a few memories, documents, and photographs remain of him (Fig. 2–7). As it turns out, one of the few objects that materialises the convoluted and difficult life of grandfather Gustek is that gold ring from Figure 1.

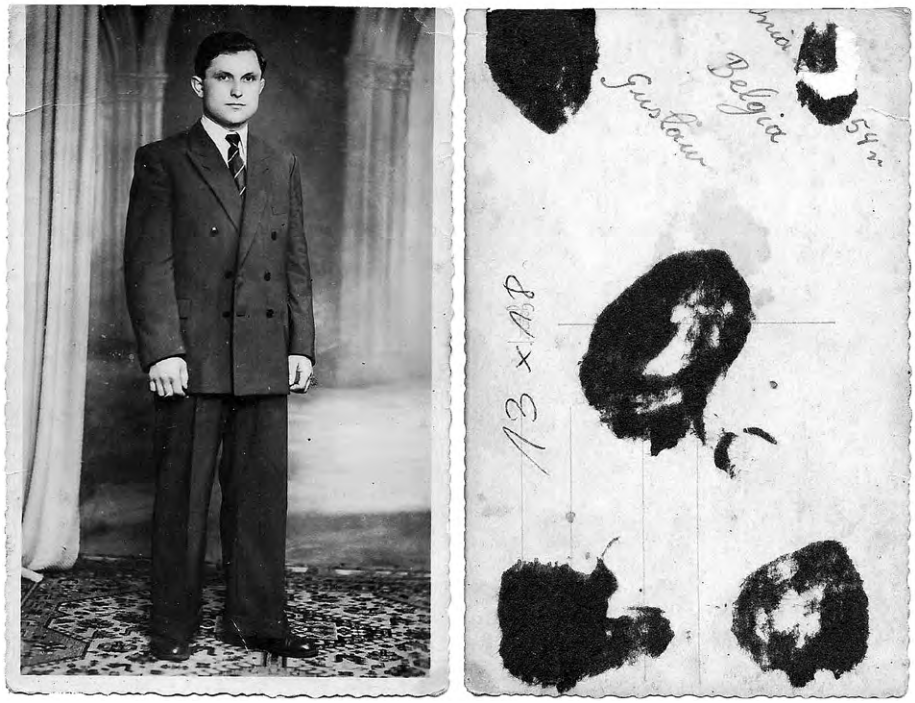


**Fig. 2.** Gustaw Kobiałka: a photograph taken in a Belgian photographic studio (most likely in Liege) in 1954 (D. Kobiałka's private archive).

The history, or even better, the biography (Kopytoff 2005) of the gold ring dates back to the second decade of the twentieth century and a small village called Kwapinka (today's Myślenice District, Lesser Poland Province). This is where Gustaw Kobiałka was born on March 8, 1925 (Fig. 2). In the 1930s, together with his parents and siblings, he was resettled in Gdańsk Pomerania, in a village called Racławki (today's Chojnice District, Pomerania Province) (Fig. 3).

The story of my family is, in a way, a typical story of Poles who lived in the first half of the twentieth century: the Second World War breaks out and, with the initial successes of Nazi Germany, forced resettlement begins. My grandfather's family ended up in a small town called Chęciny (today's Kielce District, Świętokrzyskie Province). Hunger and poverty are also common memories of people who experienced the horrors of the Second World War. The only thing remembered from that period by Genek, grandfather Gustek's brother, still alive in 2016, a boy of a few years during the Second World War, was *unimaginable hunger; when you found a peel in the soup, not a whole potato, but just some peel, you were happy* (Fig. 4) (oral information, April 28, 2016). After these words, Genek, who was nearly ninety during the interview, burst into tears.

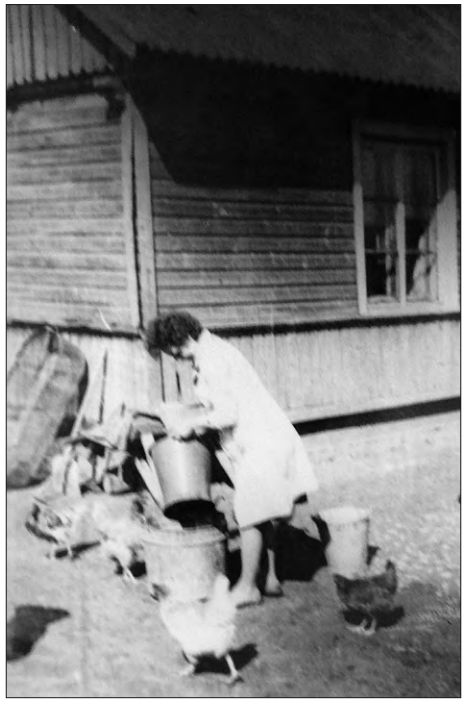

**Fig. 3.** *People, things, places*: the former family home of grandfather Gustaw in Racławki. The blurred and out-of-focus photograph metaphorically conveys the vagueness and fragmentary nature of the heritage of recent decades in the present (D. Kobiałka's private archive).

**Fig. 4.** Genek Kobiałka during the ethnographic interview (photograph by D. Kobiałka).

For me too, talking to Uncle Genek was an extremely emotional experience. It was a moment of learning about and discovering a family past. Importantly, it was the kind of experience that an archaeologist does not have access to when excavating a prehistoric burial ground or settlement. The situation is often quite the opposite when archaeological work is carried out on relics of the recent past.

Archaeological research in Kharkiv or Katyn – in the context of Polish archaeology – is the best example demonstrating the enormity of human emotions, which are, after all, part of fieldwork and the practice of science as such (Blomberg 2016). These conversations about my grandfather, questions about the gold ring (Fig. 1) were a form of metaphorical excavation work: uncovering successive layers of the past.

The material excavated from the ground remains nothing more than a relic of times gone by, completely devoid of emotion. The archaeology of us, and especially its variant in the form of family archaeology, is able to bring out these elements

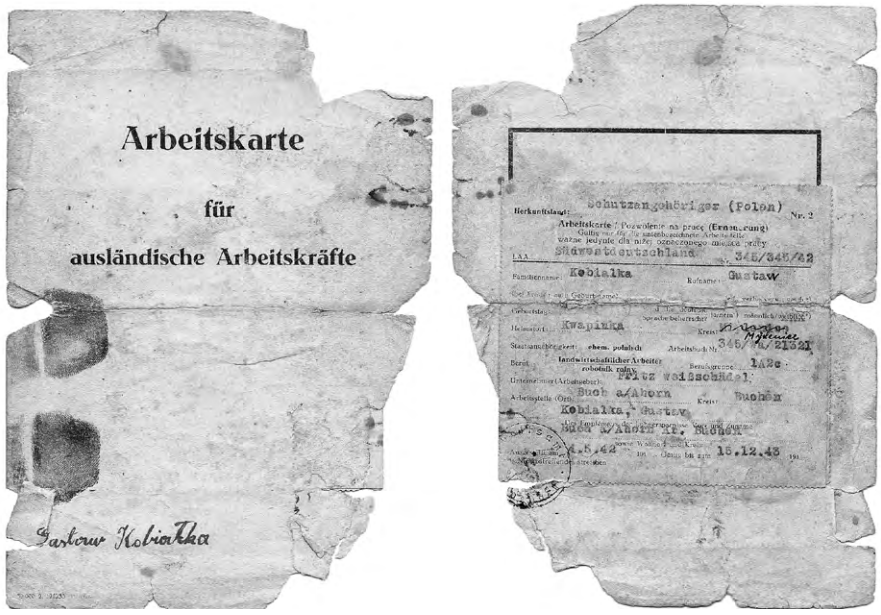


**Fig. 5.** My grandfather's *Arbeitskarte* (D. Kobiałka's private archive).

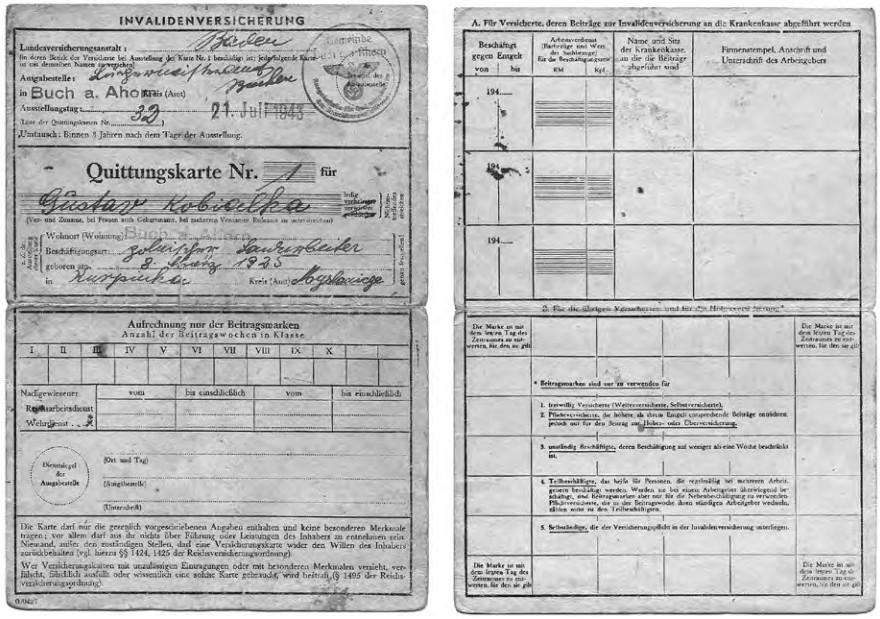


**Fig. 6.** My grandfather's *Invalidenversicherung* (D. Kobiałka's private archive).


**Fig. 7.** My grandfather's Belgian passport (D. Kobiałka's private archive).

and appreciate their individual and social dimension. Family archaeology makes it possible to experience the past through direct contact with its living witnesses and material remains. Material heritage from the recent past is constituted at the same time by the carriers of memory and artefacts active in the present, constantly intervening in the present.

Gustaw, as the oldest of his siblings, was deported to Germany in 1942 for forced labour. He ended up in the town of Buch, where he worked, among others,

on the farm of Frtiz Weißschädel (Fig. 5–6). He was a forced agricultural worker in the Third Reich until the liberation of West Germany by the Allies. However, my grandfather did not return to Gdańsk Pomerania after the end of the Second World War. He made his way to Liege (Belgium), where he worked under very difficult conditions in a coal mine for the next 10 years (cf. Fig. 2).

He only decided to return to the country in 1955 (Fig. 7). All the money he had earned while working in Belgium was, at that time, worthless in the Polish People's Republic. Like many other people working abroad after the Second World War, and familiar with the realities of the new government, my grandfather decided – as K. Piekarska claimed – to buy gold for all the money he had earned in the Belgian mine. It has been established that this included at least two gold wedding rings and one gold ring with a red stone (ruby?). My grandfather – according to the interviews – was said to be a prudent person and did not want to have such a quantity of gold with him on his return journey to Poland. He was to – as he often recalled after the war, according to K. Piekarska – go to one of the local shoemakers who had an establishment in Liege and ask him to make a secret compartment in the heel of his just-purchased leather shoes. The shoes and the letter were then sent to the family living in Racławki.

The letter sent could not have said that the shoes had a secret compartment in which gold rings were deposited. Letters arriving from abroad were read by the authorities at the time. My grandfather was aware of this. Therefore, the message was only to say that he would soon return to the country and – as K. Piekarska recounted – *the shoes were to be waiting for him and his parents were not to give them to anyone because they were priceless* (oral information, March 15, 2016). And so it was to happen. My grandfather returned to Racławki in 1955, the shoes and the gold itself were fine.

In the same Racławki, some time later, Grandpa Gustek met his future wife, Anna. Interestingly, they were both born in Kwapinka, but only met for the first time in Racławki, Pomerania, almost at the other end of Poland. The engagement ring that my grandfather gave to my grandmother was the gold ring hidden in the heel that had been smuggled out of Belgium. My grandparents got married in church on November 27, 1957, in Gdów (today's Gdów District, Lesser Poland Province). The wedding rings used were the two other rings purchased in Liege.

Asking specific questions about the rings and grandfather Gustek, looking at and analysing the object from Figure 1 was in fact – as Ulin (2009) argued in the context of her research – memory work. It was its active restoration; raising questions about one's own family heritage. As it turned out, it was only in the course of detailed questions about the history of the rings that it was possible to establish that the ring that K. Piekarska wore all the time on the finger of her right hand during our conversations was made of the same Belgian gold smuggled by grandfather Gustek.

For me as an archaeologist, someone who is interested in material culture, the key issue was to locate the two wedding rings. The stories around things are important,

as much as the material objects themselves. K. Piekarska was certain that my late grandparents did not have wedding rings on their hands when their bodies were placed in the grave. After conversations with surviving family members, it was established that my grandfather and grandmother had their wedding rings melted down in 1984. This fact is like another important stage in the biography of these items. A goldsmith from Chojnice undertook the task of melting down the ornaments given to him. Three rings were made from the gold obtained, one for each of the three daughters. Only one of them, the one handed over to the eldest daughter Krystyna, has survived to this day. This is the item from Figure 1. The other two, made for the daughters Maria and Barbara, were later sold. In this way, the Belgian gold melted down for gifts and souvenirs for the daughters ended up in the hands of other people, other families, probably unaware of the complex history behind these inconspicuous objects.

It is worth noting that the only surviving ring in the family, which is the legacy of grandfather Gustek, is still in use. K. Pierkarska wears it on her right hand. She even said during the interview that she would give the ring to her future granddaughter. And so the Belgian gold, smuggled by grandfather Gustek in 1955, remains in the family as a memento and material memory of the hardships of post-war period in Poland, of the extremely difficult ten years of work in a mine abroad, but also of the joyful time of reunion, marriage, family building, and passing on the ornament – the legacy – from generation to generation. And all this is the inconspicuous ring discussed here. What is material and what is social, one might say, co-create the value of heritage on a symmetrical basis.

Gustaw Kobiałka died on August 10, 1996. His memories were never written down, like those of millions of other participants in the Second World War and post-war events. Only a few photographs, documents from his time as a forced labourer, and a gold ring have survived from his life to this day. These few memories now constitute material of historical and anthropological significance worth documenting. Such family archaeology is essentially the telling of untold stories, a form of memory work. Both people and often completely banal, ordinary objects were part of these stories. The components of such stories were our parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents.

## Conclusions

The archaeology of Gustaw Kobiałka's family and its wider historical context is to some extent very everyday. There are many more similar unrecorded, untold fates of people and things, affected by the experience of the Second World War, living in the harsh times of communism. However, with each passing year, there are fewer and fewer direct witnesses of these events and the associated memories


**Fig. 8.** The grave of my grandparents (photograph by D. Kobiałka).

(Fig. 8). *History is becoming archaeology*. Archaeology can come to the rescue of such stories and things by tracing the complex relationships between people and material culture. In this way, archaeology, the science supposedly about ancient times, becomes part of a common field of research that includes, among others, oral history, memory studies, and cultural anthropology.

The combination of archaeological interest in material culture with materials of historical and ethnographic dimension is a form of memory practice. In other words, such archaeology is a form of recovering and creating memory about things, places, people, and practices from the recent past. As it turned out in the end, even my father, the only son of Grandpa Gustek, did not remember most of the events described in this text. They only became interesting in the context of my questions about my grandfather, the history of his life, and the fate of the gold rings. Again, this is the moment when, as Buchli and Lucas wrote, the ordinary suddenly becomes extraordinary, the everyday is at the same time unusual. My questions and work with historical material (documents) and photographic material (grandfather's photographs) in the context of this particular artefact enabled the work of memory – memories of Grandpa Gustek. Of course, such family archaeology will not change the archaeological discourse; it will not redefine the way we think about the Second World War and everyday life in the Polish People's Republic. That is not really its goal. Family archaeology, however, allows us to reach the level of a particular individual, their fate, and their material heritage. This happened in the case study described here. Such archaeological reflection is an extension of the dominant understanding and practice of archaeology of the present.

Following the fate of the gold ring was an extremely important experience for me. It was a moment of encounter with the family past in the present day and discovering it thanks to the direct relations of living witnesses and the material

heritage in the form of (un)ordinary family heirlooms, documents, and photographs. Telling this kind of narrative can also be one of the tasks of archaeology of the present.

To sum up, items from the recent past also may, or even should, be of archaeological interest. Hence the increasingly clear archaeological discussion on the role, meaning, functioning, and existence of material culture in contemporary cultural contexts and an attempt to answer the question of how things become part of the present and actively co-create it (Olsen et al. 2012).

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## Streszczenie

Artykuł omawia archeologiczną wartość dziedzictwa niedawnej przeszłości, biorąc za studium przypadku pewien złoty pierścionek. Artefakt stanowi kontekst do analizy dwóch zagadnień dotyczących archeologicznych badań nad niedawną przeszłością. Pierwsza kwestia dotyczy postrzegania współczesnej archeologii jako praktyki pamięci niż historii minionych społeczności. Drugi problem stanowi omówienie tzw. archeologii rodziny (family archaeology) jako perspektywy badawczej, gdzie archeolodzy badają własną przeszłość i korzenie rodzinne. Celem pracy jest prezentacja archeologii jako wartościowej metody odkrywania, analizowania i przywracania społecznych i materialnych wspomnień z bliskiej przeszłości.

**Słowa kluczowe:** archeologia, historia, pamięć, kultura materialna

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