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FRAGMENTS OF BAUMAN'S TRAJECTORY: Review of the book My Life in Fragments

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Abstract

Critical review of the book My Life in Fragments (Bauman, 2024).

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Bauman, Z. (2024). *Minha vida: Fragmentos de uma autobiografia*. I. Wagner (Ed.), B. Vargas (Trans.). Rio de Janeiro: Zahar.

The work *My Life: Fragments of an Autobiography* (translated from the original *My Life in Fragments* by Berilo Vargas, Rio de Janeiro: Zahar, 2024, 238 pages), composed of autobiographical fragments by Zygmunt Bauman and organized by his biographer Izabela Wagner, presents (as the title itself suggests) passages and excerpts from the Polish sociologist's manuscripts spanning thirty years, in which he intended to leave for his family members of future generations records of his life's journey that he considered important. The book is divided into an Introduction, 7 Chapters, Notes, and Sources. Izabela Wagner, also a Polish sociologist, was a professor of sociology at Collegium Civitas in Warsaw until 2023 and the author of **Bauman: A Biography**. She is currently a full professor at Université Paris Cité, and her sociological research focuses on migration and the exile of scientists, intellectuals, and musicians. In the Introduction, the editor explains how the narratives were constructed using various texts written by Bauman over a period of three decades, and cites the book's main sources: a typewritten text by the sociologist from 1987 addressed to his daughters; a few handwritten pages from a 1997 diary that questions and reflects on biographies; and a text written in Polish that was nearly ready for publication, in which he details certain passages of his life. This second document cited by Wagner even briefly reflects on autobiographical writing (a first-person textual genre in which the author narrates his own life story, based on memories, real experiences, emotions, and reflections). I would like to point out and emphasize that before venturing into the work **My Life**, readers should have prior knowledge of Zygmunt Bauman's intellectual and scientific journey; therefore, at the end of this review, I provide reading suggestions in an order I consider important for a full understanding of this book. What makes this reading important, in addition to Izabela Wagner's work, is understanding—from the perspective of the subject of the biography, in this case the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman—how he himself felt, experienced, and described important moments in his life.

In Chapter *1, "The Story of Yet Another Life?*", Bauman reflects on autobiographical writing, debating—in his own style—with writers and intellectuals about the subjectivity of such texts. Autobiographical writing focuses, to a large extent, on subjectivity and self-assessment, allowing one to reframe the past and organize one's identity through psychological—and not always chronological—narratives. In these early manuscripts, the sociologist reveals that he has experienced the anthropologist's dilemma: when there is someone to ask, he does not know what to ask; and when he knows the question he must ask, there is no one left to answer. "When my parents were alive, I did not ask. When my head is full of questions, there is no one left to ask" (BAUMAN 2024, p.30). Bauman wonders if writing memoirs might not be an act of desperation, but admits that he does not know how to live without thinking, and does not know how to think without writing; therefore, he would be condemned to live by writing. Still in this first chapter, he confirms how much he disliked crowds or places full of people.

In the following chapter (*2. Where I Come From*), Bauman initially makes an effort to piece together fragments of memory about his parents' lives and speculates on how they might have met. He then delves into the marital journey of his sister (seven years his senior), reflecting on ethnic issues surrounding Jewish-Polish identities. Regarding many families, including his own, the sociologist reflects that they were "[...] Jewish by fate, Polish by choice; Polish in substance and form, though Jewish by origin" (BAUMAN 2024, p.57). When the city of Poznan became a Polish city once again—after World War I—many were able to choose between German or Polish citizenship, and so some Jews—mostly from wealthy families—chose to migrate to Germany, but were expelled about twenty years later and forced to cross the border again. In the second part of this chapter, Bauman recalls his difficult childhood and early school years, being bullied by classmates (and even teachers) and having to navigate anti-Semitic actions. Poznan became the driving force

and stronghold of National Democracy, a party that sought to influence the rest of the country with a vision of a life without Jews. Bauman does not recall having any toys in his childhood, and so, for years, books—which he borrowed from a nearby library—were his friends. "I had some good classmates, but very few friends" (p. 77). "The few friends I made were 'special cases' like me" (p. 78).

> In that classroom, there were five of us (or at least that's how the rest of the class decided it). One of the five would die in the Holocaust; one still lives in Warsaw today. The other three, including myself, left their country. At least physically. [...] And since Berger High School was the only one in the city that did not practice *numerus nullus*, only two Jewish boys had entered secondary school that year in all of Poznan. (BAUMAN 2024, p.81)

The highlighted excerpt from the reviewed work reveals, to a certain extent, the extent of prejudice the young Bauman faced in his early years of schooling. *Numerus nullus* was one of the forms of discrimination adopted in Poland during the interwar period and refers to the total exclusion or prohibition of access for a specific group (historically, Jews) to educational institutions, professions, or public office.

In *3. The Fate of a Refugee and Soldier*, the sociologist recounts his memories of World War II beginning with the German invasion of Poland in September 1939. Since Poznan was only 95 kilometers from the border and was one of the largest cities in that region, the Bauman family found themselves forced—or rather, literally "dragged"—eastward in their flight for survival. Zygmunt briefly recounts how he was separated from his sister—who, along with her daughter and husband, obtained British passports and chose to migrate to Palestine—while he, his father, and his mother first took refuge in Molodeczno (before passing through various points between Poland and Soviet territories). There, Bauman experienced a brief acceptance of his identity, as the language spoken was a mixture of Russian, Polish, Yiddish, and a peasant dialect that some intellectuals dreamed of elevating to the status of literary Belarusian. The category to which each person belonged was either accidental or by choice. "I found my Zion in Molodeczno. I joined the local equivalent of Hashomer Hatzair—the Komsomol" (BAUMAN 2024, pp.103–104). However, the breakdown of the Hitler-Stalin Pact sent the Baumans even further away: to Gorky (now Nizhny Novgorod, Russia). There, the sociologist spent his youth enduring immense hardships in unsanitary labor camps.

> I was starving. I would live in hunger for the next two and a half years, until my life in the army began. Not hungry from time to time, but hungry 24 hours a day, seven days a week. I was hungry while waiting for food, and hungry after eating. [...] To this day, I cannot sleep if there is no bread in the house. And I have never been able to get as excited about any food—no matter how refined—as I am about bread. Bread, after all, is what matters. (BAUMAN 2024, p.108)

It is worth noting the great difficulties his father faced in finding any job and how much his mother's culinary skills (with them, but especially with the soldiers for whom she cooked) ensured the little food they had during this period. Upon completing high school, Bauman enlisted and anxiously awaited the draft notice, which came only when he turned eighteen. He was recruited into a rather strange division, initially responsible for managing traffic in Moscow. "We were, so to speak, thugs recruited to guard the vault. It was impossible to imagine people like us sympathizing with the Muscovites if there were any trouble..." (BAUMAN 2024, p.116). Later, on the front lines, he helped liberate Poland from the Germans, but "It took half a century for me to learn, from the newspapers of my homeland, that everything I was doing with my comrades-in-arms was done in the name of enslaving the homeland, not its liberation" (BAUMAN 2024, p.129). In this passage, the sociologist offers a brief, veiled critique of the fact that Poland was "handed over" to the Soviet regime after the end of World War II.

In Chapter *4, "Maturation*," Bauman briefly examines the diverse experiences of Polish Jews during World War II and how, subsequently, the return of some (refugees) and the continued presence of others (who had escaped the massacre by hiding and/or living on the run) once again caused unease among those who believed themselves to be "pure Poles." Bauman did not wish to remain in the army, but he eventually willingly accepted a position assigned to him for the reconstruction of Poland, now under the Soviet socialist regime. He held a position that allowed him to study, but when he wanted to resume his academic life, his transcripts

from Gorky University, where he had been a physics student, were denied; and so, as he already felt drawn to studies directly involved in "fixing society," he enrolled in the Warsaw Academy of Political Sciences, where he met Janina. "And it was certainly no accident that I never stopped loving her over the next sixty years" (BAUMAN 2024, p.149). However, his Zionist stance caused him to lose his job in the army, representing a mixture of tragedy and relief.

> Tragedy: the three of us—Jasia, me, and three-year-old Ania—were practically left without bread and threatened with losing our service housing. [...] And relief: years of fear, of a life of constant readiness and subject to the same rigid standards to which everyone was subject, were finally left behind. (BAUMAN 2024, p. 152)

The solution was to apply for an assistant professorship at the University of Warsaw, where he was accepted into the Department of Philosophy. However, his revisionist articles cast doubt on his political positions, leading to intense and constant surveillance of Bauman and causing him certain professional setbacks. "The home phone, which had been tapped for some time, rang incessantly with anonymous threats [...]" (BAUMAN 2024, p. 166). Even years after leaving Poland and while living in Leeds (England), the sociologist recounts two distressing instances of persecution targeting his family. The 'agents' were after documents belonging to Janina and her grandson Michal Sfard, at the time a young lawyer who was beginning to get involved in political activism, specializing in international human rights law.

In the short following chapter (*5. Who Am I?*), Bauman again reflects on the Polish-Jewish condition and how his entire life journey has shaped his identity. These are further fragments of his autobiographical writing. There are two passages I consider important in this chapter:

> I feel responsible for my Polish condition in the same way that I take full responsibility for my communism, for my lifelong socialism, for my rejection of Israel, for my decision to end my life as an exile, an extraterritorial, and a loyal subject of the Crown. (BAUMAN 2024, p.173)

Perhaps the real issue is to stop comparing, once and for all. I think the evil lies in the very compulsion to choose, and in the curse of being chosen. When one desires to belong, there is no way to avoid excluding those one does not admit as belonging to the same kind. Belonging can only mean dividing, and establishing double standards. Where standards divide, morality ends. By drawing the line between us and them, we erase the line between good and evil. (BAUMAN 2024, p.177)

In the penultimate chapter (*6. Before Dark Falls*), the sociologist takes a sort of journey through time and assesses the 'wounds' left by both German Nazism and Soviet communism in Poland, and how this also hindered subsequent generations in their search for an identity, causing new forms of segregation in the country.

> Hitler's occupation left many wounds on the body and soul of the nation, but hypocrisy was not one of them. However, that was precisely the wound that Stalinist totalitarianism sought to inflict, and, to an even greater degree, the authoritarianism that followed. The mass production of hypocrisy was an inseparable, albeit unintentional and unacknowledged, characteristic of Soviet communism and of those regimes that this communism was prepared to tolerate within its "sphere of influence." (BAUMAN 2024, p.196)

Bauman assesses Poland's contemporary political situation beginning in the 2000s, and how religion has been intertwined with this context. "The contemporary trend of scaring people with the 'politicization of religion' diverts attention from the real objective of today's Polish struggles and those being waged in the rest of the world" (BAUMAN 2024, p.207). The sociologist concludes this section by stating that the routine that makes the world unchanging and boring also makes it safe.

"It is time to reflect on the lessons that result from all of this" (BAUMAN 2024, p.219); thus, Bauman begins the final chapter (*7. Looking Back—for the Last Time*), in which he offers brief comments on the advantages of still being a child when we are, with the entire future ahead of us and infinite possibilities. In this final text, the sociologist also offers a brief reflection on his own choices and those of his nation.

I conclude this review by recommending the reading of the work *My Life: Fragments of an Autobiography*, with the caveat for readers who wish to delve deeper into the life and thoughts of Zygmunt Bauman that prior reading of Bauman's works is necessary. Among the sociologist's theories, the main one concerns "Liquid Modernity," elaborated in detail in the book of the same name, which gave rise to other titles in which he discusses analogies regarding liquidity and the postmodern condition of societies. In short, 'Liquid Modernity' is a condition of total fluidity in habits, political and social stances, thoughts, and institutions in general, in contrast to the solidity they exhibited in the recent postwar past. Therefore, the book reviewed here is primarily intended—at first—for Bauman specialists. Another important theory of the sociologist's to be familiar with is the 'Consumer Society,' in which he characterizes people themselves as products to be consumed daily and, as this contemporary situation causes permanent anxiety for any individual to become an attractive commodity. Thus, reading *My Life* sometimes requires knowledge beyond the explanatory notes and presents certain historical gaps. As such, I emphasize that Izabela Wagner's work, *Bauman: A Biography*, ends up being much more comprehensive. What the book *My Life* adds is the biographee's own perspective. To the list of suggestions below, I add the book by his lifelong companion, Janina Bauman—*Winter in the Morning: A Young Woman in the Warsaw Ghetto* (Zahar, 2005)—for a better understanding of the horrors that befell Polish Jews during World War II.

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