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## LONGEVITY AND LEARNING FROM THE BIOGRAPHICAL PERSPECTIVE Two Case Studies - Locally Rooted and Globally Oriented

### ABSTRACT

*In the general imagination, old age and increased longevity do not correspond to learning. The fact that older adults are learning needs to be proven constantly. Longevity is considered to be more than passing time - it has advantages for learning. I agree that longevity is a challenge and I argue that it is also a time of learning. Consequently, my research interest in this paper is longevity and learning. I present two case studies (locally rooted and globally oriented) from a biographical perspective. The paper consists of two parts, a theoretical and an empirical one. In the first, theoretical section, I discuss longevity in the context of the body while considering the local and global worlds as places of living and presenting biography theory as a frame for the research. In the second, empirical section, I present the research background, as well as the research findings from Sweden and Poland.*

**Keywords:** longevity, learning, biographical perspective, women

### DALJŠA ŽIVLJENJSKA DOBA IN UČENJE S POMOČJO BIOGRAFSKE PERSPEKTIVE – POVZETEK

*V splošnih predstavah se starost in daljša življenjska doba ne navezujeta na učenje. To, da se starejši odrasli učijo, je podvrženo stalnemu dokazovanju. Daljša življenjska doba je več kot le minevanje časa – pomeni namreč tudi prednost pri učenju. Čeprav se strinjam s trditvijo, da daljša življenjska doba s seboj prinaša izzive, pa menim, da gre hkrati tudi za čas učenja. Predstavljam dve študiji primera (lokalnega izvora in globalne usmeritve), izvedeni z biografske perspektive. Članek je sestavljen iz teoretičnega in empiričnega dela. V teoretskem delu opazujem daljšo življenjsko dobo v kontekstu telesnosti, hkrati pa se navezujem na lokalni in globalni življenjski prostor ter predstavljam teorijo biografske metode kot okvira raziskave. V empiričnem delu predstavljam ozadje raziskave ter rezultate, ki so bili pridobljeni na Švedskem in Poljskem.*

**Cljučne besede:** daljša življenjska doba, učenje, biografska perspektiva, ženske

## INTRODUCTION

As the WHO indicates, “the number of people aged 85 and older is projected to rise from 14 million to 19 million by 2020 and to 40 million by 2050” in Europe. This means that we need to provide social, medical, and educational care for this portion of the population as well, not only for people 60 and older, but also for those much older (85 and older) whose number is rising quite rapidly. This is statistic data (quantitative research) and a measure of the quality of life of this percentage of the population (qualitative research). Because people now live to be 100 and older, interest in the phenomenon of longevity has peaked, in public discussions as well as in scientific publications (Straś-Romanowska and Frąckowiak, 2009; Frąckowiak 2012). However, compared to other studies on aging and old age, research on long-living people is still rare.

In this paper, I analyse selected narratives (referred to here as ‘long-living’ people’s narratives) from a biographical perspective. The structure of experiences of two long-living women – an elderly Polish migrant to Sweden and an elderly Polish adult from a small local community in Poland – comprises the research field of my paper. In performing the analysis of the data, I will outline how these two elderly Polish women learn and live longer in two different worlds and consider what it means and what is needed to live a long life. Using the research material of the narrative interviews, the life histories, is one of the ways to understand these individuals’ experiences. However, a narrative output is never an isolated product. There is always a close link between a narrative and other social, cultural, and ideological contexts. The story and the experience described in it by the narrator will only make sense if there is a good understanding of the broader contexts in which the story and the experience are embedded. Consequently, using biography theory as a frame for the research, I aim to explore how people (these two women) construct their lives from the perspective of longevity. Which message do the life stories of long-living women have for the younger generation? What can we learn? And what does living longer and learning mean from a biographical perspective? Does formal education matter to the quality and length of life?

## GENES, LIFESTYLE, BODY AND LONGEVITY

In the past, people did not live as long as they do today. On the one hand, the environment was cleaner and food was healthier, but some diseases which are now easy to cure were incurable and many people passed away at a young age. Living longer is a challenge for both the individual and for society.

I agree with Tomasz Frąckowiak (2012, p.113) that, despite “the development of civilization and technological progress the issue of human longevity is still a mystery and fascination”. Additionally, the question of what conditioned longevity does remains unanswered. There is much research that connects ageing and longevity with genetic roots (Browner, Kahn, Ziv, Reiner, Oshima, Cawthon, Hsueh and Cummings, 2004). I agree that genes condition longevity, but lifestyle matters as well. Where do we live (culture

and society)? How do we live (the rhythm of day and night)? What do we do for a living (job)? What kind of stressful life do we have? Do we have hobbies aside from our regular job? What do we eat and drink? Do we exercise our body and mind? Do we take care of ourselves in modern society? These questions came up after talking with elderly people and observing their style of life. Maria Straś-Romanowska's and Tomasz Frąckowiak's (2009) review of various available research data on longevity indicates that the ability to achieve longevity is largely dependant on a healthy lifestyle. This includes the following: a proper diet, physical activity (physical work as well), avoiding stimulants (alcohol, cigarettes, drugs), mental activity (e.g. hobbies), and an optimistic attitude towards life. Nevertheless, from the individual perspective, the body is quite important in the process of getting old. As Simon Biggs argues, "the Self grows and develops, whilst the body increasingly lets it down" (1993, p. 36). The body changes. The way of moving, speaking, and hearing is slower and less capable as compared to the body at a younger age. On the one hand, the body places limits on human potential and on the other hand, is somehow a gateway into the world (Biggs, 1993).

The pace at which the body ages depends both on genes and on one's lifestyle. Today, as research demonstrates (Straś-Romanowska, Frąckowiak 2009), people who live a long life are healthy and full of energy. Undoubtedly, aging brings about various disabilities and limitations, which can impact a re/construction of identity through the body/appearance. I observed a similar phenomenon tied to corporeality while engaging in research among adults who had developed a disability (Malec, 2008). For these people, the body is an important aspect of re/constructing the identity, especially when it undergoes a visible change. After some time, many of the people who had an acquired disability and experienced some visible changes in their bodies began to perceive their limitations and physical changes in a different way - more as a challenge and in terms of possibilities rather than as a loss. They learned to function in 'a new situation' and accepted it (a few of them). Life for people over 80 (and more frequently much younger, about 65), when the body becomes more and more disabled, looks similar. For many people, it is a completely new situation, which often brings about confusion or depression. However, there are people who are ageing in a constructive way, those who accept and overcome their limitations. That is the individual issue: just like the process of ageing, everyone experiences it in his or her own way. Nevertheless, the way we will function when we are old, also in longevity, depends on the lifestyle we have when we are adults and on how we learn to age (Malec, 2011).

## THE PERSPECTIVES OF THE GLOBAL AND LOCAL WORLDS OF LIVING

According to Wallerstein's theory (Rykiel, 2006), the social world can be divided into four worlds: first, there is the core of the global system which is made up of super mobile eternal tourists, secondly, the semi-peripheries of the global system, made up of mobile wanderers, thirdly, the peripheries of the global system which are inhabited by immobile drifters, and lastly, the fourth world – the background to the global system - consists of slaves attached to the ground. In the context of my research presented in this paper, I

would like to emphasise two of the four worlds - the second and the fourth. In my view, the women researched here in many ways belong to those two separate worlds. Jadwiga belongs to the second world and Aniela to the fourth world, which I will present more clearly in the next part of the paper.

As I mentioned above, the second world of Wallerstein's theory (Rykiel, 2006) consists of the semi-peripheries of the global system and is made up of mobile wanderers for whom migration is a part of life. Migration has a long history and people have been deeply involved in it for ages. Migration is a complex problem which must be analysed and researched from different perspectives: educational, political, social, cultural, and economical. Many Poles have migrated to Sweden. There are as many reasons for migration as there are immigrants. There are good and weak sides of every migration. Not living in one's country of origin is like being between two cultures and often triggers culture shock (Bron, 2007). There are many faces of migrants' worlds. The world of Polish migrants to Sweden is multifaceted as well. One of the migrants' worlds is the world of Polish senior migrants to Sweden. Their world seems to be quite different from the world of Polish migrants who came to Sweden a few years ago or those who came as children. By listening to the life histories of people who have been living abroad for many years, we can hear not only the patchwork of incredible experiences, but we can also learn about ourselves, about the others, about another culture, customs, superstitions, and stereotypes. The fourth world of Wallerstein's theory (Rykiel, 2006) consists of slaves attached to the ground in the local community. Time in this world runs slow and is measured by local events. It has no meaning anymore because nothing in this world changes within time. Inhabitants of this world are attached to their own village or small town. For them, the external world seems to be a source of dangers that perturb the social system and thus are a threat to them (Rykiel, 2006). Notional feelings of security provide them their nearest social community. They are often poor in this environment, but uncommonly happy, because they are at home and among their own (people and places), in the world in which they are familiar, and among established values and norms. The determinants of the locality are the birth places of their children as well as those of their own, cemeteries with graves of next of kin, and places that they built (chapels, churches, schools, day rooms, fire stations), as well as those which cannot accompany them in their global wandering - but can only be left and forgotten (Rykiel, 2006). The world of local community experienced by people rooted there is given to us not as a set of single and unique elements, but as a world full of meanings, symbols, and senses. Consequently, in attempting to understand the meaning of ageing and learning in a small local community, I listen to the narratives of older women living there.

In order to understand the episodes studied in the surrounding world (in a global and a local perspective), to understand the experiences and feelings of people we encounter in this world, it is necessary to trace their origins and place them within the structures and senses used by the individuals we study. Consequently, biographical theory is a good frame for my research.

## BIOGRAPHY THEORY AS A FRAME FOR THE RESEARCH

Biography theory is directly related to learning. Alheit and Dausien (2002, p. 6) claim that:

*Analysis of our biography provides the knowledge necessary to change ourselves depending on constantly changing life situations. Biographical learning takes place in social structures and cultural contexts of interpretation.*

Therefore, when analysing a learning process at an individual level, it is important to reach also to external structures, objective facts that create the course of life (Alheit and Dausien, 2002). Biographical narratives reveal how the continuity of “being oneself” is created. It is an opportunity to gain insight into the narrator’s past experience and to critically reflect on it. It is possible to reconstruct the past from the perspective of the present. Things or events take on meanings in the course of events or as they happen (at the earlier stages of adulthood: early adulthood, middle age) that differ from the meanings which are assigned to them in a narrative talk from the perspective of time, distance, and the experience of other events.

Each life is situated within a particular, limited period of time; therefore, in addition to the biological and social curve of life, there is also an individual curve containing the whole life. With great probability, we can discover in the biographies of people living in particular periods of time certain facts related to external events and to accepted social norms. Alheit and Dausien (2002) indicate that everyone has a unique biographical plan which is revealed while analysing narrative biographies.

As Agnieszka Bron (2006, p. 19) writes: “The theory of biographicity provides an interesting explanation of biographical activity as a result of interaction between different environments which at the same time are the product of biographical activity”. Social groups with which a person interacts on an everyday basis have important meaning for the biographical plan. This only confirms that biographical learning is situated in social and cultural contexts as well. This means that if we want to recognise and analyse biographical learning, we must know the biographies of different people. Consequently, the best way of gaining an in-depth perspective on peoples’ lives, about their way of thinking, their interaction with others, their beliefs, ways of learning, means of coping with problems, and ways of confronting new situations, is to listen to their narratives.

## RESEARCH BACKGROUND

This paper focuses on two case studies of women who have been living long lives. Both are Polish, but these women live in two different cultures, communities, and worlds. One of them lives in Sweden. In 2010 and in 2011, I conducted research among Polish senior migrants to Sweden<sup>1</sup>. In the spirit of symbolic interactionism, I wanted to approach subjects

<sup>1</sup> Thanks to the Swedish Institute (SI), I was awarded two post doc scholarships for a half year each at the Department of Education, Stockholm University.

who were as different from one another as possible. In particular, I interviewed people of different professional and educational backgrounds – gender groups (men and women), different religions (Jews, Catholics), and Polish older migrants to Sweden. All came to Sweden around 30 years ago, thus, they are familiar with both the Swedish and Polish culture. To find such cases, I used the snow-ball technique, which allows a researcher to find a case one by one, using the first one as an “opener” which introduced me to the next cases. The search for new cases was ceased due to data saturation. I interviewed 17 seniors, some of whom are people 90 and older - long-living people. I have chosen to analyse one of the interviews, the life history of a long-living woman, Jadwiga, born in 1921.

The other person is an old lady, a member of my family. She lives in a small local community in the south of Poland. She is my grandmother from my father’s side and turned 100 in 2013, so she was born in 1913. That event made me think about longevity and brought me to consider some issues in the context of longevity. I interviewed my grandmother, named Aniela, in 2011, when she was 98 years old. Moreover, I have been observing her for many years, not only as her granddaughter, but as a researcher as well.

There are different traditions among researchers in performing qualitative analysis of data. Researchers who use qualitative methods are often creative and flexible in their method of analysis. There is no ‘right method’ of analysis. I took some inspiration to carry out the analysis of my collected data from the model established by Strauss and Glaser (Glaser and Barney, 1992; Glaser and Barney, 1995; Glaser and Strauss, 2009) called grounded theory analysis. There are some steps of the analysis which should be followed to hold to the grounded theory method; I try to follow these after my own way of understanding and thinking. Therefore, I do not want to end the article with any theory or a model, but with more general conclusions and reflections which, in the future, will be theorised when more data appears.

These are the research questions which I consider in this paper: Which lifestyle do they (the women) present? How does their life appear from the biographical perspective? What kind of learning do they experience? What do/did they learn? What kind of learning opportunities do they have in a lifelong perspective? What is their everyday life like? How does longevity matter in their life?

## **BIOGRAPHICAL LEARNING IN AN EMPIRICAL VIEW**

The distinctions between formal, non-formal, and informal learning is not particularly important from the perspective of biographical learning. In biographical learning, the experiences of institutional and social learning become integrated and create a new construct of meaning. Consequently, my understanding of learning is close to that of the definition of Peter Jarvis. He describes learning as

*the combination of processes throughout a life time whereby the whole person – body (genetic, physical and biological) and mind (meaning, knowledge, skills,*

*attitudes, values, emotions, beliefs, and senses) – experiences social situations, the content of which is then transformed cognitively, emotively or practically (or through any combinations) and integrated into the individual person's biography resulting in a continually changing (or more experienced) person (Jarvis, 2009, p. 25).*

Learning takes place in different situations during one's entire life. We may or may not have an experience of formal learning, as I will present in the empirical part below, but we cannot escape from learning. We are lifelong learners. We consider longevity to be more about surviving, not learning. However, longevity is not free of learning. I would argue that we learn as long as we live. The institutional experiences of learning may be a way of developing and expressing what we want to share with others, but not having any of these does not deprive us of learning. I will present two cases of long-living persons whose lives are structured by learning. Analysing the life histories of two long-living women can present biographical learning from a long life perspective and provide answers to the questions mentioned at the beginning of the paper.

## THE CASE OF A POLISH SENIOR IN POLAND

Aniela, born in 1913, lives in Mokrus, a small village in the south of Poland, 70 kilometres from Krakow. She has lived in the small local community for her whole life. She has three children, two sons and one daughter. She gave birth to one more child, but this is somehow forgotten by the family. The child does not even have a grave. She has three granddaughters, two grandsons, six great granddaughters, and three great grandsons. She seems to be happy with her family. All of them live close to her. She lives in one house with her daughter, granddaughter, her husband, and her three daughters (three generations). Aniela's husband died when she was 60 years old. She married him when she was 23 years old, but she said that she regrets it to this day. She lives a comfortable life surrounded by her family.

When her mother was 35 years old, her husband died, so she had to take care of four children alone. At that time, Aniela's family suffered greatly from poverty. They did not have anything to eat or wear. The children only had one pair of shoes each to wear. Hence only Aniela's older siblings could go, every second day each, to some houses (schools did not exist there) to learn writing and reading, but Aniela could not. Consequently, to this day, she is unable to read and to write - she is illiterate. As a small child, Aniela had to be a servant at a rich family mansion. She remembers it very well, when her hands were bleeding because of hard physical work. From the grammatical point of view, her spoken language is incorrect. Some words are difficult to understand for people who are unfamiliar with her way of speaking. Her talking is reflective and truthful.

Aniela is a small woman, but I would say she is a person with a strong personality. She is stubborn, always doing what she has planned, even now, as she turns 100 years old. She has her own opinions, even if she does not express them loudly. Aniela loves nature, walking



in the forest, and working in the field. Aside from some problems with hearing (but she does not have a hearing aid), she is healthy and in very good mental and physical condition.

Analysing the story of Aniela's life reveals a few main categories to her narrative: poverty as a stigma, learning without formal education, time lost in history, no fear of death, and work as an engine of life, which I will present here.

*Poverty is like a stigma* for Aniela. She suffered from poverty as a child, a teenager, and in her marriage. She did not want to talk about it with me. She did not want me to know how much she suffered. Although now she lives a good life with everything she needs, her behaviour is reminiscent of her former poverty. She never throws food away; she eats even food that tastes bad. Most likely Aniela will not experience poverty again, but as she said: I'm afraid of the poverty from which her grandchildren and great grandchildren could suffer. Poverty is hidden deep inside her. She cannot escape it. On the one hand, it was a difficult experience for her, but on the other hand, maybe it made her not expect too much from life. Her simple life without hurry and stress allows her be happy and strong.

*Time is lost in history* for Aniela. On the one hand, she is conscious of her age and how many years she has lived, but on the other hand, time has stopped for her. For example: she refers to the First War World as 'that war' and the Second War World as 'this war'. Her tough experiences have had significant impact on Aniela's perspective of time. She recalls mainly tough experiences. The years do not mean a lot to Aniela. Seasons measure her life. She dies during the winter and awakes in spring and summer. She follows the signs of nature.

*Learning without formal education.* Formal education did not take place in Aniela's life. As she said: *I didn't spend one single day at school.* As an illiterate person, she has not read a single book. Her knowledge is based on informal learning. She learns only from experiences of everyday life. One source of selected information used to be the television which she watched, but not anymore. She does not follow or understand what is on TV (there is too much information and everyone speaks too fast). Aniela spends a lot of time thinking about life, being with others, and observing nature. Learning is unexpected, unplanned, occasional and experimental, and not named as such by Aniela. Her sentences are simple, but wise and premeditated most of the time. For many of us, it is hard to believe that someone can live for 100 years without the ability to read and write and be happy and healthy. Today formal education dominates our lives. A good school means a good life and long life. Is it true, however, looking at Aniela's life?

*Aniela is not afraid of death.* She wants to pass away. As she said, *I'm not needed here, in this world.* She thinks that it is fine to go to infinity. Purgatory is a place where we go after death in Aniela's imagination. In her opinion, purgatory is like a waiting room where we get information about where we go next, because we could go to different places all over the world. Aniela thinks that she will go to the forest because she likes walking in the forest very much, thus she would be directed there. Death is not the end; it is a beginning of something better. It is a next step.



*Work as engine of life.* Work is a crucial part of Aniela's life. Work keeps her alive. As she said: *I couldn't live without work.* She likes to be busy. Aniela has been doing physical work all her life. She was running the farm and worked on the fields. She did not practise any sports, but she is still in good physical condition. Everyday duties keep her active and fit. Even now, when her family does not allow her to do anything around the house, she has her own ideas and own duties to do. Being active, either physically or mentally, is essential for life and maybe longevity as well.

## THE CASE OF A POLISH SENIOR MIGRANT INTO SWEDEN

*Jadwiga*, born in 1921. She came to Sweden as a teenager for a summer course for the first time. During that time, the Second War World started and she had to stay in Sweden longer. After the war, she came back to Poland to rebuild the destroyed country. *Jadwiga* has a Jewish background. Only she survived. Her entire family died in the ghetto. She received a scholarship and went to Moscow to study theatre. In 1957, her son was born, a great happiness in *Jadwiga's* life. They lived in Poland until 1968. After the political events in Poland, *Jadwiga*, like many Jews and scientists, was persecuted and somehow obliged to leave Poland. *Jadwiga* wrote a letter to the family where she used to work when she was in Sweden the first time. The family from Sweden sent an invitation to *Jadwiga*, so she and her son could migrate to Sweden. The lack of money made the beginnings in Sweden hard, but *Jadwiga* overcame those problems. She worked as a housekeeper again for a few families and when her work situation was stable, she began to study again. When she finished her degree in theatre studies, she was hired at the university, where she worked until she retired. Her son went to the USA, where he contracted HIV and died as a young man, which was a difficult experience for *Jadwiga*. After her son's death, she became a volunteer in HIV/AIDS organizations. She wrote and published three books and did some translation into Polish. *Jadwiga* has been living in Sweden for many years. Some people call her Swedish, but she denies it. *Jadwiga* is interested in classical music, theatre, literature, and poetry. She likes to be culturally active. Lately, *Jadwiga's* health and body have not cooperated properly. She has some health problems, but the main one is the lack of balance. She needs to walk with a walker. It probably makes her prefer to stay at home and read a book than to go outside. She has friends of different ages.

The analysis of the story of *Jadwiga's* life reveals a few main categories: formal education and non-formal education as a compass through life, learning from experiences, work as a bridge, the experience of emigration, being between two cultures, culture, and lack of fear of death.

*Formal and non-formal education as a compass through life.* Formal education is an important part of *Jadwiga's* life. For almost all of her life, *Jadwiga* was/has been eager to develop herself, to learn, and to acquire and to share knowledge. She has earned two Master's degrees, as well as a PhD degree. She began her formal education at a Jewish school. From the time perspective, *Jadwiga* appreciated it very much. This is because the

friendships she made survived for many years. She has friends all over the world. Just before the Second World War, she was awarded a scholarship for a summer school to Sweden to learn Swedish. When she was in Sweden, the war started. Thus, as a teenager she had to stay in Sweden longer and had to find a job. In the meantime, she finished a house-keeping course and continued work as a housekeeper. After the war, she came back to Poland. She decided to study and she received a scholarship to study theatre in Moscow, where she lived for five years. After emigrating to Sweden in 1968, she wanted to study again. Consequently, she became a student of philosophy. Returning to formal education opened a new chapter in Jadwiga's life. This time she received a Master's degree in theatre. Someone noticed her talent and Jadwiga was offered a job at the University of Stockholm, which enabled Jadwiga to develop on the educationally formal level. She became a researcher and wrote three books, one of which is her PhD thesis. The PhD degree was the last level of her formal education, but her non-formal learning continued. After the death of Jadwiga's son from HIV, she became engaged in volunteer work. She educated herself about HIV/AIDS and shared this knowledge with others (students, nurses, doctors) at different places (schools, hospitals, NGO organisations) in Sweden and in Poland as well. Formal and non-formal education were the main determinants in Jadwiga's life. In spite of many difficulties which she encountered on her trajectory of life, she always found the solution, "the path" to find education.

*Learning from experiences.* In addition to all of her formal learning, Jadwiga learned a great deal from life experiences. Her life consists of many wonderful events, situations, and things, as well as difficulties to overcome. It made her strong and helped her to be a learner all of her life. There are a few events which shaped her life as a learner. First, the scholarship for the summer school in Sweden that probably saved her from death in the ghetto. As a teenager, she had to find a solution to survive abroad and it pushed her to learn things which she had not done before – housekeeping. The next important event in Jadwiga's life was giving birth to her son. Motherhood was/is Jadwiga's meaning of life and by being a mother she learned very much. Emigration to Sweden after 1968 also taught Jadwiga much, in many contexts: cultural, political, sociological, and also psychological. Just as having a son was the best thing in Jadwiga's life, as she said, his death was a painful one, a crushing loss. That drew her closer to people with HIV/AIDS and taught her a lot not only about the disease, but also about life, prejudices, tolerance as opposed to acceptance, and that *the world is so interesting, but very complicated and difficult to cover*, as she said. The next categories I am going to present below are also not free of learning.

*Work as a bridge.* Jadwiga has changed her job several times and has done different kinds of work throughout her life. She was a housewife, an administrative worker at different cultural institutions, and an academic teacher. Every job done by Jadwiga was a new one for her and she had to learn many new things. The diversity of work made her appreciate any work experience. She treated every job as a challenge to learn and to gain good experience. In Jadwiga's life, work is on the same level as education. Sometimes work was not only a means of earning money for a living, but also a bridge to education.

*Experience of emigration.* For almost all emigrants, emigration is a wholly new, insecure situation, mainly because of the language. Although Jadwiga already knew Swedish, she felt insecure. In a way, she was bound to leave Poland. It may have helped a lot of different feelings, emotions, desires, and thoughts to emerge. At the beginning of her emigration process, Jadwiga woke up at night and she did not know where she was. For a couple of years, she had a vague fear. There were some things which amazed Jadwiga, like sweet bread and the honesty of Swedish people (they did not call home from work, but went to the public phone box so as not to use company money). After many years of living in Sweden, Jadwiga finds Sweden a very good country in which to live and to age. She is in touch with the Polish community in Sweden - Polonia. She attends events organised by the Polish Embassy or the Polish Institute. On the other hand, however, she will not return to Poland, as she has good care in Sweden and she feels comfortable. As she said: (...) *compared to Poland, big luxury (in Sweden) (...).*

*Being in-between two cultures and learning.* I would say that culture is an important informal field of Jadwiga's learning. Jadwiga likes both Polish and Swedish culture, but prefers the Polish one. She reads a lot of books on different subjects and afterwards she discusses them with her friends. Jadwiga finds a way to learn about the places to which she cannot travel now. She reads books about these places. As she said: *it gives pleasure, pleasure to read about that.* She is also deeply interested in theatre. She likes to watch plays on TV or to go to the theatre. She is well informed about what is good or what is new in the field of theatre or poetry. She likes classical music. Every year Jadwiga watches the competition of Frederic Chopin concerts and listens to the expert discussion afterwards. She reads the *Dagens Nyheter* newspaper every day, so she knows what is going on in the world and in Swedish culture as well. One of her TV channels is a Polish one, so she is well informed about Polish culture as well. Her knowledge of culture is developing all the time. As she said: *The human being... can always learn something new.*

Now Jadwiga is *not afraid of death*, but she does not know if she will not be when death comes. She thought about death when she was a child, but not any longer. She remembers when, as a small child, she was falling asleep, wondering if she would wake up the next day. Jadwiga assisted dying people many times, especially her son, and she knows where she wants to be buried. She is conscious that everyone has to die, that dying is part of our life. As she said: *I don't want to have a second life, this one is enough.* She claims that she wouldn't be herself if she had not done all those things she had done, even the stupid ones.

## REFLECTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Living longer is a challenge for some people. Some people wonder how to live longer, and some are scared to live longer. It is difficult to indicate what determines the length of our life. The research conducted by T. Frąckowiak (2012) of three groups of elderly adults (352 researched people – people between the ages of 60-74, people 75-89, and long-living people over 90) indicates that quality of life in the age of longevity changes its structure.

The case study of the long-living Aniela and Jadwiga gives an insight into the changes (or rather the lack of them) of structure of life from the individual level. It can be regarded as the deeper recognition of the problem and treated as the justification of undertaking qualitative research on a wider scale. The analysis of the two cases of long-living ladies from the perspective of biographical learning allows for some reflections and conclusions.

As I mentioned before, how long we will live depends on many factors. I agree that genes condition longevity, but as the analysis of the cases has proven, lifestyle matters as well. I would say that Aniela and Jadwiga live in and come from two different worlds. Although both are in good physical condition, Jadwiga's health is worse than Aniela's. Maybe physical activity, not smoking (Jadwiga smokes, though now only seldom, Aniela doesn't), a less stressful life in a small, local community and simple, fresh, good food have kept Aniela's body healthy and fit. In view of this, lifestyle is an important factor for our body, overall health, and longevity. Nevertheless, these two do have some things in common, for example: they are not afraid of death; they are reflective, stubborn, and have accepted what life brings. This might prove that personality and one's attitude towards people and the surrounding reality has meaning for the long-living as well.

Going more into detail, I would say that Aniela is locally rooted, without a formal education. Her whole world is contained within the local community and the family. Her local roots and work keep her alive. Her structure of life does not seem like an up and down; it is more a life track on the one level. She is like a conifer. The global world seems to her an unrealistic one – it makes her scared and means danger. The other woman, Jadwiga, is globally oriented and a well-educated person. She has traveled extensively all of her life all over the world. She experienced few very dramatic situations which brought her down. She is like a deciduous tree – to lose “everything” and be born again. The curiosity of the world pushes her forward in life. For both of these women, life has not been easy, but, on the contrary, consisted of hard work. However, at the end of their long lives, they are happy and fulfilled. Aniela represents an oral culture and Jadwiga a written culture. Jadwiga's life is shaped by loss and there seems to be un-lived life. Aniela's represents ongoing life. Aniela's knowledge is based only on informal learning, as she has learned only from her and others' life experiences. She has learned from nature, with which she is in synergy. During the 100 years of Aniela's life, many things have changed (electricity, multimedia, transport, living standards, food). It means that Aniela must learn and keep learning, even at 100. Formal and non-formal learning did not take place, however, informal learning has helped Aniela to stay in very good condition to the age of 100. I think that Aniela is a good example of a mirror of desires to look at and consider what we need in order to live. Jadwiga's education is quite the opposite. Jadwiga has done a lot of formal and non-formal learning and keeps learning informally, but lost her interest in physical activity. Aniela used to be a very physically active woman. Jadwiga faces the death of her son - the happiness of her life, which pushed her to do volunteer work and live more for others. Aniela did not go through such painful experiences, but she has her own constant worries about the family and the harvest. Both women are happy and

strong-willed. They have their own well-constructed vision of life where there is a lot of space for others – family (Anieli's case) or friends (Jadwiga's case).

It can be concluded that, if the world changes, transforming constantly, the same changes occur in knowledge about the world and in the people who live in it. One living in this kind of world discovers it, gets to know it in action, in experience, and in interaction with others. Longevity makes the world seem to be interesting, but very complicated. The individual being in their "own world" refers to their knowledge about it, meaning that this person possesses his or her own knowledge (Niżnik 1983). The knowledge of the world depends on culture, where one lives, life experiences (difficulties, problems, and happiness), and acceptance of life. The boundaries of our knowledge are therefore the boundaries of our reality. Extending these boundaries of the world surrounding us, we extend the boundaries of our reality. The reality might be limited to the local space (Anieli's case) or be open to the global perspective (Jadwiga's case). This makes no difference, however, from the lifelong-living perspective, at the end of the life course, to be reflective and accept the reality of living life. As the analysed cases demonstrated, lifestyle and personality matter the most from the biographical and long-living perspective. Maybe it is a message for us how to live if we want to reach longevity in a good condition?

To sum up, referring to the definition from Jarvis (2009) quoted above, I would say that long life is the combination of learning throughout one's entire life which engages the whole person: body (genetic, physical, and biological) and mind (meaning, knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, emotions, beliefs, and senses). From the perspective of longevity, formal or non-formal education do not matter so much for a good and healthy life. In this view of things, the core of life is different for everyone. It is important to find it and to keep learning (to remain active) in that field as long as we live.

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