

Reading *The Memoir of a Clairvoyant* (1976): Divination, Censorship, and the Past in Late Socialist Poland¹⁴⁵

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ABSTRACT

Józef Marcinkowski (1905–1982), alias Akhara Yussuf Mustafa, was a Polish fortune-teller and clairvoyant. He began his career in the first half of the 1930s, gaining fame in the esoteric milieu in Warsaw. During World War II, he was a prisoner in the Dachau and Bergen-Belsen death camps. He described his experiences in *The Memoir of a Clairvoyant* [*Pamiętnik jasnowidza*], published first in 1976 and again in 1985 in an impressive print run of two hundred thousand copies. The manuscript was controlled by the Main Office for the Control of Press, Publication and Public Performances. However, the censors' comments did not concern supernatural aspects, but communist persecutions in the Stalin period, as well as some events at the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. The purpose of this article is to analyze *The Memoir*, to present the text and the life of Mustafa against the background of autobiographical documents of other fortune-tellers and clairvoyants active in late socialist Poland, and the reaction of the censors to Mustafa's book. The first part of the article outlines the main facts of Mustafa's biography and discusses the most characteristic features of *The Memoir*. The second part focuses on the socio-cultural context of the text, especially the audience's attitude towards paranormal phenomena, based on press articles and autobiographical accounts of other psychics, while the third part examines the censor's opinion from the perspective of communist memory politics.

Keywords: censorship, divination, Communist Poland, Second World War, Mustafa, *The Memoir of a Clairvoyant*.

Introduction

My path towards death is getting shorter and shorter. A typical symptom of this is that my memory returns to my childhood and to places related to this childhood. And I did not like those places. And childhood was cruel. Of my seven siblings, I was the only one to survive, and that with a broken spine. My father was killed by lightning. It fell from a very small cloud. And my father was a wizard [...] (Mustafa, 1985: 21)

— writes Akhara Yussuf Mustafa (born Józef Marcinkowski¹⁴⁶, 1911–1982) in his *The Memoir of a Clairvoyant* (Polish: *Pamiętnik jasnowidza*, 1976). The text offers a summary of Mustafa's¹⁴⁷ extraordinary life, and writing it was a challenge for several reasons. The author had to face the traumas of his childhood, revisit his war experience, and blandly present the

¹⁴⁵ This work was supported by the National Science Centre (Poland) with the grant “In Search of Another Knowledge: Western Esotericism in Communist Poland,” DEC-2020/37/B/HS2/00894.

¹⁴⁶ Akhara Yussuf Mustafa is probably a pseudonym adopted for the clairvoyant's career, inspired by the figure of Kara Mustafa (1634 or 1635–1683), head of government and commander of the army in the Ottoman Empire. The author stated in *The Memoir of a Clairvoyant*: “my name was Akhara Mustafa”, but this could not be confirmed (Mustafa 1985, 71–72).

¹⁴⁷ When writing about the author, I use the name Mustafa.



reality of the socialist state in order to win the favor of the censorship office—a difficult task for anyone without literary experience.

Mustafa divides his life into three periods, which in fact stand for three different worlds: Poland between the wars, a democratic country yet plagued by economic and social problems; then occupied Poland (he was a prisoner in the German concentrations camps Dachau and Bergen-Belsen); and Poland under the communist regime. A careful reading of his autobiography shows how an orphaned boy, devoid of any support from his family and the state, became a famous clairvoyant in post-war Poland, and how he perceived his practices and abilities. The censorship's reaction to *The Memoir of a Clairvoyant* provides, in turn, a good starting point for a discussion of the perception of psychics and other esoteric topics by the authorities in the 1970s and 1980s, and, more broadly, of Polish censorship policy.

The purpose of this article is to examine Mustafa's life narrative against the background of Polish psychics active at the time, and from the perspective of communist memory politics. In the first part of this paper, I outline the main facts of Mustafa's biography and discuss the specific features of *The Memoir of a Clairvoyant*. In the second part, I focus on the socio-cultural context of Mustafa's book, especially the presence of paranormal phenomena in the public discourse. In order to do this, I refer to press articles and autobiographical texts of other clairvoyants and fortunetellers active in late socialist Poland. In the third part, I analyze the censor's remarks on the manuscript of *The Memoir*, elucidating the state censorship's key role in the narrative organization of collective memory. This issue further invites consideration of the compromises authors were ready to make to have their works published¹⁴⁸.

Mustafa and *The Memoir of a Clairvoyant*

Akhara Yussuf Mustafa's life narrative is at times reminiscent of a picaresque novel. Obviously, some of the events described have certainly been embellished, as autobiographical texts are subjective and the mechanisms of memory and self-perception are complicated. Yet, the reader has no reason to doubt most of the events described. The narrative of the text is non-linear: The experiences of childhood and adolescence are interwoven with the experiences of war and incidents after 1945. Some help in reconstructing the chronology of events is provided by the daily and yearly dates given for some episodes.

The preface to *The Memoir* was written by Marian Pilot, a writer himself and, at the time, the literary editor of the publishing house Ludowa Spółdzielnia Wydawnicza. A preface by a certain person may have been suggested either by the publisher or by the censorship office. It is also possible that the author asked Pilot to write it, because the two men knew each other and even became friends. The purpose of the preface was to justify the publication of the book and to direct the readers to understand it in a "correct" way. Importantly, Pilot begins by recalling the traditions of parapsychology, and emphasizes the popularity of esoteric practices in Poland and Europe at the beginning of the 20th century. Still, although he is critical of the paranormal, noting the skepticism of numerous scientists towards occult actors and esoteric practices, he portrays Mustafa in a positive light. He depicts the clairvoyant as an exceptional figure who helped many people during the war and after 1945; in fact, he compares Mustafa

¹⁴⁸ The procedures used to obtain the data have been carried out after obtaining the consent of the carriers.

to a doctor:

[...] A man who undertakes to prophesy to another [...] is like a doctor who gives a diagnosis to a patient: by this act he assumes part of the responsibility for the further course of his life. [...]

Mustafa's sense of moral responsibility leads him to reflect on every case in which he suspects that, by saying one word too many, he may have contributed to someone else's harm; again, an attitude in line with the medical principle of 'primum non nocere' [...]. (Pilot, 1985, p. 10)

Pilot stresses the high artistic value of *The Memoir*. As a well-known writer, he lends legitimacy to the text in this way: "[...] a great sense of words, the ability to outline a situation vividly, to portray the human figure with a few lines, [...] a gift for observation [...]" (Pilot, 1985, pp. 11–12). Moreover, Pilot later called Mustafa his "friend" and made him a protagonist of the short story *Żart* (2017) [A Joke] from the collection *Niebotyki*. In it, he describes his first encounter with Mustafa, who was sitting in an armchair, surrounded by cigarette smoke and, in the eyes of the narrator, looked like the "king of the clairvoyants" (Pilot, 2017, p. 75). This scene contrasts strongly with several others, such as the misery of the concentration camps.

Mustafa wrote *The Memoir* at an advanced age, so the narrator looks back on some events from the perspective of more than fifty years. He claims to have noticed his extraordinary abilities, which he simply called "intuition", already as a child. However, before becoming a professional psychic, he took up various jobs. After leaving school, he sought his fortune in a number of towns in the Polish eastern borderlands, where he was born, suffering from poverty, unemployment and homelessness:

In May 1934 I left for Poland — to work. I walked, took trains without a ticket and sometimes even managed to drive a cart. In this way I reached Brest-on-the-Bug, Kovel, Lutsk, Rivne. And then I travelled further south. (Mustafa, 1985, p. 68)

Finally, he moved to Warsaw. The first months in the capital are remembered as extremely difficult, with nights spent at his friends', at the railway station, or in the street. Mustafa's career as a psychic began by chance. At first, fortune-telling was merely a pleasant way to earn additional money. Yet, encouraged by a friend, he decided to take psi phenomena seriously:

It was Wacek's idea. [...]

As a painter, Wacek saw in me a resemblance to Kara Mustafa, and since by a strange coincidence my name was Akhara Mustafa, he decided to take advantage of this coincidence. [...]

I agreed. On 29 November, dressed in the costume of the Emperors of the East, with a large cap on my head, I sat under a palm tree in a ballroom on the Kosciuszko coast, leaning my elbow on a table in front of me, pretending to be very thoughtful. Above me, at the back, was a black banner with white letters so large that they could be seen from at least a kilometer away: "Here sits the great magician and sorcerer Akhara Mustafa, descendant of Kara Mustafa, whom Sobieski defeated at Vienna, and for 50 pfennigs he will tell you what you had, what you have and what you will have, just show your hand". (Mustafa, 1985, pp. 71–72)

Initially, the narrator was not convinced of the accuracy of his own predictions, but they allegedly proved correct. For instance, he advised a client to avoid water, and a few days later the person fell asleep drunk in the bath and died. Sometime later, Mustafa was said to have

accurately described the appearance of a future husband of a female client and given the date of her wedding. In *The Memoir*, there are many examples of the protagonist's professional success that lend credence to his special abilities. At the same time, the stories are usually short and general, such as the following one:

I told her [a woman] [...] that she would soon be wounded in the leg in the street. The incident will be committed by a young military man, a close friend of hers. This will cause a scandal and it will hardly be possible to break up her marriage. (Mustafa, 1985, p. 93)

Mustafa stresses that he was right: a woman allegedly met an acquaintance whose revolver fell out of his pocket, discharged itself and wounded her in the leg. Moreover, the dramatic scene was presumably witnessed by her husband.

Importantly, is that neither before nor after the war did Mustafa advertise his extraordinary skills in the press (Mustafa, 1985, p. 99). Instead, he relied on clients' recommendations, and although he had strong competition in Warsaw at first, he gradually acquired acknowledgment and met many influential people¹⁴⁹. However, he did not escape unpleasant situations, such as accusations of fraud (Ibid., 91), for attempts to disclose unreliable clairvoyants were common at the time (Mikołajko, 2019, p. 106).

After the outbreak of the Second World War, the narrator witnessed armed clashes, bombing raids and manhunts (Mustafa, 1985, pp. 102–103). In spite of the dramatic situation, he stayed in Warsaw and continued to work. Among other things, he was to anticipate the assassination of a lawyer, whose identity he hid under the letter M., and to help a German man escape punishment for intimate contact with a Jewish woman (*ibid.*, 139). At the beginning of September 1944, he was arrested and deported to Dachau, where prisoners were kept in deplorable conditions. There were more than 30,000 people in the camp and a typhus epidemic was spreading. In this regard, Mustafa's text does not differ from autobiographical texts by other prisoners, except where the clairvoyant's premonitions are discussed. Needless to say, such passages should be regarded with due distance, as the narrator may have expounded this issue to enhance his credibility:

Throughout the occupation, my greatest fear was the word 'Dachau'. And there I was deported.

The journey [...] took two days. We travelled in freight cars, 60 prisoners in each. [...]

In Dresden, through the gaps in the wagons, we could see the street and the boys walking in rows, dressed in uniforms and carrying swastika flags [...].

We arrived in Dachau at two o'clock in the morning of 10 September 1944. Through the gate we entered a large square and waited until 7 a.m. to see what would happen next. Out of boredom, fear, the cold and natural need, we formed random groups. Huddled together, we warmed ourselves with our own bodies, as the bonfire of the 'Młynarki'¹⁵⁰ soon died out. Those who had bread and lard did not eat, but devoured it, convinced that it would be confiscated from them. (Mustafa, 1985, pp. 175–176).

After two weeks in Dachau, Mustafa was taken to another camp. This gave him time to learn the camp routine and survive the Allied air raids (Mustafa, 1985, p. 179). Furthermore,

¹⁴⁹ Unlike Ossowiecki, Mustafa did not usually reveal their personalities. At most, he would give a brief description or an initial.

¹⁵⁰ Banknotes issued in occupied Poland by the issuing bank set up by Governor General Hans Frank.

passages in which the narrator talks about his intuition and the reactions of his fellow prisoners to the news of his abilities are interesting:

— Well, a psychic after all — Thomas was clearly pleased. — But I warn you. While you are here, avoid fortune-telling. There are many spies and informers among us. We must be very careful. And what the people you came with might be like, you'll find out tomorrow. Now, show us what you can do. How do you divine? Cards, your hand or writing? (*ibid.*, 182).

In Dachau, he also demonstrated his paranormal abilities on several occasions. Two weeks later he was sent to the Adler Werke factory in Frankfurt am Main. Forced to do hard physical labour, he remembers Dachau, paradoxically and ironically, as a “lost paradise” (Mustafa, 1985, p. 185). In Frankfurt, too, he divined from his palm, had visions and gave horoscopes to his fellow prisoners. On 23 March 1945, he was transferred to Bergen-Belsen, where he remained for only three weeks, as the camp was liberated by the British on 15 April. According to his memoirs, Mustafa foresaw this last event (*ibid.*, 207).

After a long journey, he returns to his homeland and this moment is particularly significant in his autobiography: “[...] on Friday, at 12.45 p.m., on 29 June 1945, I stood on Polish soil, and I have stood on it to this day, and I will stand on it to the end of my days. I have never regretted it and I do not regret it” (Mustafa, 1985, p. 213). The comment that characterizes post-war Poland is telling:

Frankly speaking, it was an act of great courage, because we were greatly intimidated by emissaries from the West who claimed that any Pole who returned to the country would be deported to Siberia, and from there was no return. (*ibid.*, 213)

The above sentence has clear propaganda overtones and does not seem to fit in with the general tenor of *The Memoir*. It may have been added by the author in the final stages of work on the book at the suggestion of the publishing house, or it may have been part of the publisher's strategy to get the manuscript accepted by the censorship office.

In communist Poland, Mustafa worked as a teacher, tutor and manager of a center for young people from dysfunctional families, among other things, and it is in the context of these activities that he is most willing to talk about his parapsychic activity. For example, he claims to have performed a “miracle” by calming a boisterous group of children that he even called “boys from hell” (Mustafa, 1985, p. 218). More specifically, he put them to sleep by ‘suggestion’, with supposedly excellent results, although this was against the law (*ibid.*, 220).

Former clients gradually returned to him, as well. One such visit took place in 1971, when a woman allegedly confessed to Mustafa:

— I met you in 1942 and since then everything in my life has happened as you predicted. Even such a detail as the cause of the cancer. The doctor, after examining me, said that the cancer had come from a beating. And you said, 29 years ago: “They will abuse you and beat you, and this will one day become the cause of an incurable disease that doctors call cancer”. (*ibid.*, 222)

However, *The Memoir* lacks more detailed descriptions of Mustafa's fortune-telling activities, especially when it comes to the period after 1945. The reader can only speculate as to where his office was located, what it looked like, and who exactly visited him (there are hardly any full names) and how often. All we know is that he was a tarot and palm reader, an

astrologist, and that his extraordinary abilities often got him out of trouble and earned him the respect of others. The clairvoyant's biography seems to have been presented in such a way as to highlight the unabashed reality of the interwar years, then to fit into the established, acceptable narrative of war and occupation, and finally to present Communist Poland in a positive light.

The Memoir of a Clairvoyant was published in 1976 and 1985 in a total of two hundred thousand copies. Why did the publisher think it could attract such a great audience? First, if his statements are to be believed, Mustafa enjoyed significant popularity as a clairvoyant in the 1970s. This was confirmed by Marian Pilot, who called him in the preface “a veteran of the art of fortune-telling”¹⁵¹. Second, some readers remembered the famous psychics of the inter-war years: Julian Ochorowicz, Stefan Ossowiecki and Franek Kluski. Esoteric issues fascinated the public again. Moreover, Mustafa does not only offer accounts of séances and his reflections on clairvoyance and other psi phenomena. His biography was compelling and, as regards his war experience, a large number of readers could have identified with the narrator to some extent.

Psychics in communist Poland: from Ossowiecki to Klimuszko and Mustafa

The services of clairvoyants were particularly popular in Poland in the second half of the 19th century and during the interwar period. The most famous psychic of the time was Stefan Ossowiecki (1877–1944), an engineer and medium. Born in the Russian Empire, he probably settled in Poland in 1919 and quickly became famous for his séances and prophecies, which he claimed were often accurate¹⁵². In 1933 he published an autobiographical book, *Świat mego ducha i wizje przyszłości* [1933, *The World of My Spirit and Visions of the Future*], which found many readers¹⁵³.

Why do I mention Ossowiecki in connection with Mustafa? Well, I think that the memory of the former was important for post-war thinking about the paranormal and, in a way, paved the way for talking about the occult under socialism. In fact, between 1970 and 1971, a series of publications on the clairvoyant appeared in the pages of *Tygodnik Demokratyczny*¹⁵⁴. The author of the articles was Jerzy Jacyna, who had personally met Ossowiecki and recalled with the benefit of hindsight his activities in the 1920s and 1930s. He also referred to the history of esoteric practices in Poland (Jacyna, 1970, p. 8). At the same time, Jacyna was not uncritical of his hero¹⁵⁵. It cannot be ruled out that a certain skepticism towards paranormal phenomena

¹⁵¹ Still, Marian Pilot writes with conviction about the declining demand for the work of fortune-tellers in Poland, as well (Pilot, 1985, pp. 8–9).

¹⁵² Among his greatest successes were the location of the remains of a Polish plane lost in Bulgaria and his alleged ability to bilocate. A serious blow to Ossowiecki's fame, however, was his wrong prediction about the second half of 1939. According to the clairvoyant, the war would not break out — as is well known, he was drastically wrong.

¹⁵³ This autobiography was reissued in Poland in the 1980s (Ossowiecki, 1983).

¹⁵⁴ The article series “Fakty i legenda o Stefanie Ossowieckim” [Facts and Legend about Stefan Ossowiecki] was published in *Tygodnik Demokratyczny* from July 12, 1970 to May 23, 1971 (no. 28–52/1970 & no. 1–21/1971).

¹⁵⁵ Here is a quote from one of the articles: “Unfortunately, as far as I know, there are no protocols for these archaic experiments, protocols in which one could find the signatures of the people mentioned by the clairvoyant. In

was desired by the censors and made it easier to gain their approval. After all, the editors of the periodicals consulted the censors about the texts to be published, paying particular attention to those that might raise doubts on philosophical or moral grounds. In his series of articles, Jacyna evoked the arguments of both proponents and opponents of paranormal phenomena. He gave a detailed history of Ossowiecki and his family (including his mother and sister, who were also said to have extraordinary abilities). He also quoted accounts of the most interesting séances¹⁵⁶.

The first half of the 1970s was also the time when Czesław Klimuszko¹⁵⁷, a Franciscan friar, medium and herbalist, came to the attention of the mainstream media. Articles about him and his autobiography were published in the magazine "Literatura" in 1974 and 1975. Texts on parapsychology had already appeared in the same weekly magazine (Freedom Long, 1974, p. 8; Manczarski, 1974, p. 8; Konarzewska et al., 1974, pp. 2-3; Rejda, 1975, p. 3). The editors justified this with on the grounds of a growing public interest in similar issues. Wanda Konarzewska wrote, for instance:

[...] I would like to remind you that currently 245 laboratories in 30 countries around the world are working on parapsychology, and several dozen magazines and several hundred books on the subject are published annually. So far, science has very little to say about the mysterious phenomena of the psyche. It is true that the phenomenon of clairvoyance, for example, does not fit in with our picture of the world, with the theories of science to date. But can we turn our backs on a fact that exists? (Konarzewska, 1974, pp. 2-3)

The culmination of the topic of psychic perception in "Literatura" was Klimuszko's own autobiography¹⁵⁸. In September 1974, the first part of the article series *Moje jasnowidzenie świata [My clairvoyance of the world]*¹⁵⁹ was published. It describes, among other things, the circumstances under which, as an eleven-year-old boy, Klimuszko became interested in herbalism and, without knowing the names of individual plants, he recognized their healing properties (Klimuszko, 1974: 1, 4). In the next part of the autobiography, he recounts meetings with experts who confirmed his abilities: "[...] a scientific experimental session was organized with me. I was given in turn a series of photographs of persons unknown to me and was expected to describe their character, state of health and some facts from their past lives" (Klimuszko, 1974a, p. 9). He also spoke of responsibility and the dilemmas it entailed: "Were there no bitter mistakes in my practices?" and factors that hindered and facilitated clairvoyance¹⁶⁰. He did not avoid difficult subjects, touching not only on successes

fact, during the period in which I was in personal contact with Ossowiecki, he did not demonstrate these telekinetic abilities, which are difficult to recognise as real" (Jacyna, 1970a, p. 2).

¹⁵⁶ Among Ossowiecki's visitors were Józef Piłsudski, Ignacy Paderewski and Karol Szymanowski.

¹⁵⁷ Like Ossowiecki and Mustafa, Czesław Klimuszko (1905–1980) spent the Nazi occupation and the war mainly in Warsaw. He was arrested by the Gestapo but then released. After the Second World War, he lived in a number of monasteries and hid his identity for some time because of the interest of the secret police in his activities.

¹⁵⁸ The material was published between 26 September 1974 and 30 January 1975.

¹⁵⁹ On the front page was a quote from Klimuszko: "It sometimes happens when I am in the company of several people that I suddenly begin to see the story of their lives..." (Klimuszko, 1974, p. 1).

¹⁶⁰ He mentions, on the one hand: "the unfavorable attitude of those present during the séance, [...] the fear of a failed outcome, [...] the clairvoyant's indisposition". On the other hand, he mentions as 'favorable' factors 'the friendly atmosphere of the surroundings' or 'the freshness of the photographs' (Klimuszko, 1974a, p. 8).

but also failures as a clairvoyant (“Literatura” no. 41 & 42/1974). He was keen to introduce the reader to the arcana of his work, discussing in detail how he analyzed photographs of unknown people (no. 43/1974) or “How clairvoyance arises” (no. 44/1974). Klimuszko also described his experiments in telepathy (no. 47/1974), hypnosis (no. 48/1974) and biocurrents (no. 4/1975). In one of its subsequent issues, “Literatura” published the letters of readers, who gave examples of how he had helped them, for example by showing a family where the body of a missing person had been hidden (no. 4/1975). Klimuszko is also mentioned in the introduction to *The Memoir of a Clairvoyant*, but in a rather malicious way. Marian Pilot ironically called the monk “the court clairvoyant” (*ibid.*, 9). In this way he probably wanted to point to the fact that Klimuszko, unlike Mustafa, was written about extensively and appreciatively in the media.

Articles devoted to the paranormal also appeared in the popular weekly magazine “Przekrój”. They dealt not only with fortunetellers and clairvoyants, including Ossowiecki, but also with reincarnation, yoga and extrasensory perception (Wilkosz, 1956, p. 11; Jaworski, 1966, pp. 1, 11; Kalkowski, 1970, pp. 10–11). Accounts of exotic journeys related to spiritual development in the broadest sense were also eagerly published (e.g. to India – Winnicka, 1978, pp. 6–7; Winnicka, 1982, pp. 18–19). On the one hand, the pronouncement of the articles was often skeptical, and questions were raised about deception or fraud (no. 1560/1975). On the other hand, researchers from Poland, the USA and the Soviet Union were readily quoted, definitions of parapsychological terms were given, unexplained examples of psychics’ work were cited, and the latest publications in the field were discussed (Wroński, 1971, pp. 16–17; Lessmann, 1973, p. 11; Lessmann, 1975, p. 11). Importantly, scientists from the USSR appear in almost all these press articles. Communist Poland, politically and economically dependent on that country, and following certain patterns of censorship and propaganda, was prone to give the green light to the paranormal, as the same was happening across its eastern border.

The Memoir of a Clairvoyant was thus preceded by publications on the parapsychic abilities of other psychics and commentaries by experts, including the engineer Stefan Manczarski (“Literatura” no. 32/1974), who had been experimenting with telepathy since the interwar years. Mustafa’s book certainly contributed to the normalization of parapsychology in communist Poland and paved the way for similar texts, including Izabela Węgierska’s autobiography *Moje przygody z duchami i nie tylko* [1993, My adventures with ghosts and more], and Józefina Pellegrini’s book *Moje widzenie losu* [1996, My vision of destiny]—both published after the fall of communism.

I mention Izabella Węgierska and Józefina Pellegrini because of their acquaintance with Mustafa. Born in 1938, Węgierska became interested in esotericism at an early age. Sick since childhood, she underwent two major operations on her head in the 1960s, after which, she claimed, she experienced clinical death. It was then that she decided to become more involved with paranormal phenomena (Węgierska, 1996, p. 30). In early 1982, Mustafa is said to have persuaded her to study astrology and become her spiritual guide, and before his death he is said to have predicted to her that she would be his successor (*ibid.*, p. 137). Indeed, Węgierska gained some fame as a clairvoyant and exorcist in the late 1980s and into the 1990s (*ibid.*, pp. 36–71). She was mainly active in Warsaw, where she gave lectures at the headquarters of the Polish Psychotronic Society, but she was also said to have helped many

clients by letter, responding to requests for advice in the pages of magazines.

Józefina Pellegrini (1921–2001), for her part, was a popular fortune-teller among Warsaw artists, and an actress and singer by profession. At first, she told fortunes in the dressing rooms of theatres at the request of her friends. In the mid-1970s, after the death of her husband, she began writing horoscopes for newspapers, radio and public television. Since this work brought her tangible financial rewards, she focused on it and fortune-telling, which made her famous. At the age of over seventy, she also completed a course in bio-energy therapy¹⁶¹.

Pellegrini's and Mustafa's paths crossed in the early 1980s and, as she recalls, the fortune-tellers would visit 'competitors' incognito to test their skills:

I am moved [...] by visits from people in the same profession as me [...]. Years ago I was visited by an elderly man who wanted me to answer some questions about his life. He replied with the words: "Yes, that's right". After a while he said: "Actually, I came to ask you to tell me what the future holds for my son". I concentrated and gave voice to my intuition and the cards. Today I do not remember what was in them.

The man thanked me and left. The next client in line told me that he was the famous Polish fortune-teller Marcinkowski [Mustafa – W.G.]. The meeting had taken place shortly before his death. He had sensed its proximity and was worried about the fate of his son. It may seem strange, but those who read the future are very reluctant to do so for their loved ones. You don't tell fortunes for your own children. (Pellegrini, 1996, p. 83)

From an early age, Pellegrini had a "serious attitude towards post-sensory phenomena" and her parents knew the famous clairvoyant Stefan Ossowiecki¹⁶². If her memoirs are to be believed, her abilities were also highly valued by friends and clients.

What is remarkable about both Pellegrini's and Węgierska's memoirs is that, like *The Memoir of a Clairvoyant*, their books contain relatively little information about their esoteric practices. Both texts were published after 1990, when censorship was no longer in force, so the authors could have revealed much more than Mustafa, but they clearly chose not to do so. Węgierska described her life story in detail, including her chronic illnesses and suffering. Yet, although she reports extensively on her experience as a shaman and an exorcist, she does not reveal what went on behind the scenes, for instance how and where she acquired the knowledge or the skills necessary to advise and heal people. She prefers to quote letters from the readers of her press articles. These are full of supernatural elements: moving objects, testimonies of the presence of a ghost, or a phantom urging someone to commit suicide. Moreover, Węgierska does not add her own comments to the letters, but instead quotes from Wilhelm Otto Roesermüller's booklet *Ostrzeżenia z tamtego świata* [Warnings from the Other World]. The only part of the book in which the author addresses parapsychological matters is the chapter "My Patients". Among other things, she gives the example of a man who felt the presence of another, invisible person beside him (*ibid.*, p. 92), but the description of the client's 'healing' process itself is relatively vague. We only know that hypnosis was applied.

Pellegrini writes similarly perfunctorily about her own abilities and the effects of her

¹⁶¹ Pellegrini was one of the first people in Poland to register a fortune-telling business. He does not give an exact date, but it is known that this type of profession was registered in Poland in 1993 (Pellegrini, 1996, p. 113; Editors, *Przewodnik po zawodach*, 2003, I-525–I-527).

¹⁶² He also writes about a certain clairvoyant, Pełka Pełczynski. I could not find more information about the latter.

divination:

When a person seeking help sits across from me, I look at them, listen and FEEL what they have come with. Many people try to hide the real reason for their visit, sometimes they are ashamed to talk openly about painful things. I feel every falsehood. [...]

So the visit is about talking. Most of the people who come to see me are lost, looking for guidance, often with a sense of hurt. They need to get it off their chest, they need a listener (*ibid.*, p. 37).

Both Węgieńska and Pellegrini outline the beginnings of their work as mediums, yet, they do not indicate any breakthrough moments, for example, at what age they noticed their unusual abilities and when they won notable recognition from the public. The books also lack descriptions of where they worked—in their apartments, in offices, or perhaps at their clients' home—and how much they earned. It is also unclear what the sessions they conducted were like. Only some general terms are used, such as 'conversation', 'hypnosis', 'exorcism', or 'spiritualist séance'. Perhaps both fortune-tellers were reluctant to reveal too much about the background to their activities in order to avoid too many visitors, or they did not want to reveal too much so as not to have an excess of less credible competitors.

Censorship and the paranormal

Esoteric topics tended to go unnoticed or at least tolerated by the censors in particular in the 1970s and 1980s. Paranormal phenomena were apparently not seen as a major threat to the Marxist worldview and to readers, who thus had the chance to learn about a sphere that functioned outside the mainstream. This, at least, is what emerges from an analysis of censorship documents¹⁶³. I was also unable to find any instructions on the subject from representatives of the ruling party. As publications on psi phenomena gained more and more popularity in the 1970s, e.g. books by Krzysztof Boruń and Stefan Manczarski (1977) or Lech Emfazy Stefański and Michał Komar (1980), it can be assumed that the censors approved them without major deletions and gave their consent to print them.

The Memoir was read by the censor on 2 August 1976¹⁶⁴. The review is short, but interesting because of the proposed changes:

Ludowa Spółdzielnia Wydawnicza reported on Akhara Yussuf Mustafa's book *Pamiętnik jasnowidza* (50,000 copies), which contains the memoirs of the Warsaw clairvoyant Józef Marcinkowski—"professionally active" to this day. More than a dozen deletions were made to the book, including the removal of:

— an excerpt containing details of the unjust arrest and conviction of one of the book's

¹⁶³ As part of my work on the project "In Search of Another Knowledge: Western Esotericism in Communist Poland", I compiled 109 archival units from the documents of the Main Censorship Office (Główny Urząd Kontroli Prasy, Publikacji i Widowisk, collection No. 1102) in the Archive of New Acts in Warsaw (AAN) from 1945–1989, including the overviews of censorship interventions such as "Daily Information [on Censorship interventions made]" (from various years), "Monthly Information on Censorship Interventions" (from various years), "Censorship' instructional information..." , "Censorship Interventions in Journals" and others.

¹⁶⁴ A brief review can be found in an archive file entitled "Information No. 74 on Current Interventions". The overviews of interventions were compiled once a week. They contain the titles of literary texts and press texts that had been stopped in whole or in part at the censorship office and include the most explicit passages, along with a commentary on why they were removed from publications. This material served as a guide for the censors.

protagonists in the early 1950s; this excerpt also contained information that this person had also been “imprisoned and mistreated by the gestapo during the occupation” for activities in the resistance movement;

— information that inmates of the Bergen-Belsen camp, Poles, strangled other inmates in order to obtain gold teeth extracted from a deceased colleague¹⁶⁵.

Although the document mentions more than a dozen deletions, it can be assumed that they were of the same nature as those mentioned above. This is because the censors’ reports usually contained the most representative and important examples of the deletions that had been made. The final decision of the censorship office was influenced by such factors as the author’s biography, the subject matter of the text, the current political situation and the instructions of the authorities in the field of publishing policy.

The remarks concerning Mustafa’s text are conspicuous examples of the office’s crucial role in shaping the Polish collective memory. The first comment relates to the Stalinist era. It was not uncommon, even many years later, for critical statements about the period 1945–1955 not to be published, even if the crimes of the security service and the terror that prevailed in the country at the time were widely known. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, many people accused of acting against the communist regime were sentenced to prison or even death. The woman mentioned in *The Memoir* was also oppressed, first by the gestapo, and then by the Polish secret police. She was arrested and imprisoned, as Mustafa had supposedly predicted. Although she was eventually freed, the mention of these events in the text is significant.

Other objections regard the Second World War. It is worth noting that censors were obliged to remove from fiction and non-fiction texts elements that contradicted the image of heroic Poles, particularly scenes of indifference and cruelty towards sick or dying fellow prisoners in concentration camps, or the looting of property, especially Jewish property. However, such passages were not always removed. *The Memoir of a Clairvoyant* also contains several sentences that throw into question the politically desired positive image of Poles:

I saw a paramedic running. And when they started to get down from their bunks, even those who could barely walk, and walked towards where Mr. D. was lying, I went too, I don’t know why. Before I got there, they had already returned to their places. Mr. D.’s clothes had been torn off, his mattress had been patched up, and the bag in which he kept his bread lay empty beside him. A paramedic stood over the naked body and cursed the world. I thought he was going to kick the poor body in anger. But he restrained himself and crawled back to his bunk. (Mustafa, 1985, p. 30)

We laid him down in the middle of the room and treated him like a corpse. One of the prisoners took off his striped clothes, because they were clean and not very shabby, and appropriated them for himself. In the morning, to our great surprise, [the man who had been declared dead — W.G.] sat down on the concrete and began to curse in all the languages of the world. And especially those who had stolen his cigarettes. (*ibid.*, p. 31)

Why were the quoted passages saved? Probably the censors thought that the removal of a few other drastic scenes was enough. Similar interventions were made in other works in at the time, for example in Agnieszka Barłóg’s novel *Przystanek Agaty* [*Agatha’s Stop*], from which descriptions of Poles taking over Jewish property were removed, or in Władysław Szlengel’s poetry collection *Co czytałem umarłym* [*What I Read to the Dead*], from which

¹⁶⁵ AAN: Archiwum Akt Nowych – Warsaw, collection No. 1102, sign. 3566.

the poem *Klucz u stróża* [*Key at the Watchman's*], which used similar motifs, was deleted¹⁶⁶. The above-mentioned interventions in *The Memoir of a Clairvoyant* thus illustrate how the communist authorities shaped Polish memory politics.

Simultaneously, the censor was probably pleased with the critical portrayal of Piłsudski's Poland in Mustafa's book. The narrator's childhood and youth fell into that period, and the communist regime tried to make it seem ridiculous and disgusting, especially for the youth. Was the introduction of images of poverty and homelessness a condition for allowing *The Memoir* to be printed? It is difficult to answer this question today, but some parts of the text may have been added later, perhaps on the advice of someone in the publishing house or the censorship office.

Another important issue was the way communist Poland was depicted. Although censorship in the 1970s was not as restrictive as before, there was strong pressure to present the state in a positive light. There are many such statements in *The Memoir of a Clairvoyant*, beginning with the passage quoted above about returning to Poland from Western Europe. In later parts of the book, Mustafa describes life under communism in a peculiar way, avoiding references to the events of 1956, 1968 or 1970 (yet, it has to be added that such mentions may have been removed without comment). He speaks in general terms about meeting some party members at a political congress and praises the reconstruction of Warsaw and the quality of life in the new Poland (Mustafa, 1985, pp. 217, 239). However, propagandistic elements definitely do not play a major role here; their aim is rather to please the censors.

Concluding remarks

The Memoir of a Clairvoyant was probably the first autobiographical work by a professional Polish psychic to be published under communism. Earlier, from the early 1970s, a wider audience could read about pre-war and contemporary psychics, but these were short press texts. Klimuszko's autobiography was published as a book in 1980 by a small publishing house specializing in parapsychology, which three years later also published a reprint of Ossowiecki's memoirs from 1933. Akhara Jussuf Mustafa's work was therefore pioneering in several ways. Some traces in *The Memoir* in particular the positive comments about the communist country and a clearly negative description of pre-1939 Poland, suggest that the author was advised on how to comply with the expectations of the censorship office. This could have been done by a censor or by editors in the publishing house who were aware of the current political guidelines.

The book presents the protagonist's biography against the backdrop of the realities of inter-war Poland, the Second World War and, finally, communist Poland. Crucially, the censor's objections refer exclusively to particular events from the war and Stalinist years that were regarded as contradictory to the official representation of the past, while the main theme of the book is not questioned at all. No derogatory comment was made on the narrator's profession, nor was there any evidence of the censor's concern that less sophisticated readers might become interested in the paranormal. Certainly, questions of extrasensory perception

¹⁶⁶ I write more about this in the article currently under review: *Censoring the Past? The subject of the Holocaust in the documents of the GUKPPiW in the second half of the 1970s* — as a paper presented at the conference in the series “Żydzi Wschodniej Polski” [2022, Jews of Eastern Poland].]

and related issues were of far less concern to the authorities than were labor strikes, growing political opposition, or the emergence of an independent publishing circuit. Moreover, publications dealing with the paranormal often appealed to the authority of Soviet scientists working in the field such as clairvoyance, UFO or Out-of-Body Experience (Jaworski, 1966, pp. 1,11; Mostowicz, 1977, pp. 10–11; Donimirski, 1982, p. 20). Thus, the USSR—along with the USA—was shown as the forerunner of parapsychological research.

However, publications devoted to parapsychological practices remained at a high level of generality, and this fully applies to *The Memoir of a Clairvoyant*. The reader of Mustafa's book does not find out what clairvoyant practices looked like in detail, who visited him and how often, or what the psychic felt and how he behaved during the 'vision'. The text apparently wants to fit into the acceptable narrative of war and to emphasize positive aspects of communist Poland. This was probably a deliberate strategy: to touch upon an attractive topic from a personal perspective, but to avoid major problems with the censors. The censors' approach to the years 1939–1945 was a consequence of socio-political fluctuations, with repression being tightened or loosened depending on the situation. By controlling literary works dealing with the war, the occupation, and the Stalinist era, the censors sought to shape historical memory and create a positive image of the Communist Poland. As the analysis of archival materials has shown, these activities were carried out consistently over the years. From the censors' point of view, a small reference in a text could be potentially 'troublesome' and politically interpreted. Hence the numerous interventions in literary works: single words, sentences or entire paragraphs were crossed out.

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