

Business History in Poland: Current State and Future Potential¹

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Abstract

Purpose: This article explores the gap in the business history literature devoted to Central and Eastern Europe and discusses the potential of conducting business history research in Poland.

Methodology: This is an explorative and tentative study based on a recently developed database of 387 Polish companies which are more than 100 years old.

Findings: The article explores the reasons behind the lack of business history debate in the Polish academia and discusses its future potential. We argue that given the size of population and a unique historical context, the Polish sample is worth studying as it can provide valuable contributions to well established debates in the field of business history debates covering issues such as continuity, longevity, and survival strategies.

Research limitations and implications: This is an explorative and tentative study and therefore has several limitations, including a limited scope of companies included in the database, sources of data, and poor quality of corporate archives.

Originality and value: This is the first article explicitly discussing the potential of conducting business history studies in the context of empirical data concerning Polish long-lived companies.

Keywords: business history, historiography, Poland, organizational longevity

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Introduction

In recent years we have witnessed a so-called “historical turn” in social sciences and organization studies (Clark and Rowlison, 2004; Bucheli and Wadhvani, 2014). Historical approach becomes increasingly visible in a number of academic fields, including neo-institutionalism (Suddaby and Greenwood, 2009) or evolutionary theory (Aldrich and Ruef, 2006). Among the growing interest in the issues of context, process, and past, one of the fields that is currently undergoing an unprecedented growth is business history. As of late, the field of business history has spread both thematically (Scranton and Fridenson, 2013) as well as geographically as more and more countries have discovered the value of comparative historical studies (Amatori and Jones, 2003). However, not all regions are equally represented in the literature on the subject. One of the regions where business history remains relatively underdeveloped is Central and Eastern Europe (Amatori and Jones, 2003).

In this article, we focus on Poland as one of the biggest countries in the region and discuss the potential of studies in business history. Interestingly enough, despite a well-established discipline of economic history (Kula, 1963; Kościak and Głowiński, 2006; Morawski, 2010; Matera and Pieczewski, 2011), publications which make a direct reference to business history remain scarce (Mączak, 1956; Jastrząb, 2011; Kostera and Sławecki, 2014; Mikołajewska, 2014). As a result, the entire field of business history in Poland remains virtually non-existent (Górski, 2014) or at least hidden within a wider field of economic history. The aim of writing this article was therefore to assess the potential of Polish business history studies by mapping the population of Poland’s oldest companies and discovering the contribution that exploring the history and qualities of each of these companies could bring into the international context of business history debate. In the course of this exploratory study we have managed to assess the condition of business history in Poland, discover a number of challenges and obstacles that have limited its growth in previous years, and evaluate its future potential. We will argue that a relatively large sample of old companies coupled with a unique historical context can result in meaningful contributions to topics such as business continuity, survival strategies, trust cooperation and networks, property, memory and identity, uncertainty and improvisation (Scranton and Fridenson, 2013).

In the following paragraphs, we will first present the overall theoretical context of business history in order to identify the regional gap occurring within the area of Central and Eastern Europe. We will then follow with a description of the condition of business history in Poland, identify the main obstacles in accessing data, and present a dataset of the oldest Polish companies. In the discussion part, we will focus on future

research topics and the potential contribution of the findings and implications of the research in an international context.

The origins of business history

Although history has been ever-present in the field of organizational studies (Bucheli and Wadhvani, 2014), it is not until recently that we have seen explicit voices paying more attention to historical analysis (Zald, 1993; Kieser, 1994; Clark and Rowlison, 2004). The so-called “historic turn” is itself a complex phenomenon that could be understood as a turn from scientific toward rhetoric and more contextual approaches; a turn from the present or the future towards the past; and finally, a turn from a state towards a process (Bucheli and Wadhvani, 2014; Clark and Rowlison, 2004). Amidst the great epistemic turn, researchers have faced and begun discussing a number of issues, including the definition of history itself and the nature of historical reasoning (Clark and Rowlison, 2004), the nature of time and temporal logic, or methodological challenges of longitudinal and contextual research conducted in the past (Bucheli and Wadhvani, 2014).

Although some researchers point out that “historic turn” is not synonymous with a turn towards the field of business history (Clark and Rowlison, 2004), it is precisely that field that has undergone the biggest development in recent years. The origins of the field of business history can be traced back to the beginning of the 20th century, with Norman S.B. Gras, the first dean of the department of Business History at Harvard Graduate School of Business Administration, being considered the founder of the concept. Business history had developed simultaneously and in isolation in France, Japan, and UK, but it was until the late 1950s that it achieved recognition in the academic community (Jastrzab, 2011). A major breakthrough came with the works of Alfred Chandler, which introduced the advantages of historical perspective to the academic community (Chandler, 1990). In recent years, business history has been attracting more and more researchers, with more and more courses on business history being offered in a growing number of business schools (Jastrzab, 2011). In the last decade we could see a number of publications taking up the challenge of summarizing the growing scope of business history. In *Reimagining Business History*, Philip Scranton and Patrick Fridenson provide a practical guide for business history researchers, including both cautionary tales and an overview of the most promising future themes and topics (Scranton and Fridenson, 2013). In *Organizations in Time: History, Theory, Methods*, Bucheli and Wadhvani (2014) take up a challenge of delineating the advantages and problems related to historical methodology. Finally, *Business History* (2014), edited by Walter

Friedman and Geoffrey Jones, collects the most important papers published in the field of business history in an attempt to present the evolution of the discipline and its relationship to business and management studies, economics, and mainstream history.

A characteristic quality of business history is its tendency to fall outside any specific area of research. It tends to float suspended between history and management sciences (Ochinowski and Szukała, 2015). It stands in opposition to economic history, with the latter enjoying an established position of a sub-discipline of history despite that fact that it draws also researchers involved with various economic institutions (Ochinowski and Szukała, 2015).

The relation of business history with economic history seems to be unclear as well. Business history has always focused on studies of individual entrepreneurs, firms, and industries, while economic history has concentrated on “distant periods in time (ancient, medieval, early modern history), after which there is a quasi-division of labour as modern and contemporary economic history provides far-ranging syntheses and quantitative macro analyses, including assessments of virtual alternative developments by cliometricians, while also assessing national and international public policies” (Fridenson, 2008, p. 30). According to Fridenson (2008), the relationship between business and economic history varies geographically – some examples are given in Table 1.

Table 1. Relationship between business history and economic history around the world

Country/Region	Relationship between business history and economic history
United States	A large amount of intellectual contribution recognized as business history has been provided by economists and economic historians who do not identify themselves as members of the field.
Scandinavia	Business history deep-rooted in economic history
Greece	Strong ties between business history and economic history
Spain	Strong ties between business history and economic history – the subdiscipline has developed a noticeably quantitative dimension
Britain	Business history has been more powerful than economic history and business historians have increasingly worked in the fields of management and business studies; it has superseded economic history to a large extent
France	
Italy	
Netherlands	Due to the lack of academic institutionalization, business historians have been dependent on commissions from companies as their main source of employment

Japan	A sharp distinction between business history and economic history; a great number of business historians work and teach within the area of management and commerce.
China	Commissioned business history predominates economic history
Brazil	

Source: authors' work based on Amatori and Jones (2003) as cited in Fridenson (2008) and Lamoreaux, Raff and Temin (2008).

The situation is different when it comes to banking and financial history, which was one of the earliest to be studied by business or economic historians because of the fascination with capital. Nowadays, it focuses on history of the successes and failures of corporate strategies and structures in individual banking companies together with in-depth analyses of financial centers, national economies, and internationalization efforts (Cassis and Bussiere, 2005).

It is worth mentioning that as reported by Williamson (1966), research done by economic historians can answer a lot of questions asked by business historians, like e.g. what the impact of the social and economic environment on business success and failure is or how to identify entrepreneurial function.

The field of business history expands not only in terms of the content of its debates, but also geographically. Internationalization has been a part of the business history agenda since almost its inception. A French historian Marc Bloch contacted Norman S.B. Gras from Harvard Business School offering him cooperation in expanding the discipline globally (Jones and Zeitlin, 2008). Unfortunately, these early attempts were interrupted by World War II. It was not until the recent re-emergence of business history that the researchers around the world, who had been conducting historical research in relative isolation, were finally brought together. One of the first attempts to do that was a book entitled "Business history around the world" (Amatori and Jones, 2003). Editors aimed at bringing together researchers from around the world in order to assess the current state of historical debate and to find a way to push it forward. The book does, in fact, offer the widest geographical coverage of the state of business history ever published, including US, UK, Germany, France, Spain, Italy, Sweden, Norway, China, Japan, and Latin America (Amatori and Jones, 2003). In the introduction, the authors have stated that this pioneering book has some limitations, though:

"The geographical coverage is not comprehensive; the distinctive experiences of major Asian economies such as those of India and Korea, the Middle East, Turkey, and North

and Sub-Saharan Africa are not addressed. Nor are the substantial literatures on the business history of Australia, New Zealand, and Canada. The initial hopes of the editors to include essays on the eastern European transition economies were dashed". (Amatori and Jones, 2003, p. 2)

The last sentence is particularly intriguing as it indicates that the interest in business history in the region has not expanded much over the last ten years that have passed since the time of publication. It is evident in the number of publications devoted to Poland that can be found in two of the main business history journals, which remain scarce to this day (Meardi, Gardawski and Molina, 2015). A bibliographic investigation of Polish academic databases (namely: Central European Journal of Social Sciences And Humanities (CEJSH); IC Journals Master List and BazEkon database) produces similarly scarce results (Jastrząb, 2011; Jastrząb, 2013; Kostera and Sławecki, 2014, Mikołajewska, 2014). This research gap is especially curious in the case of Poland which offers, in turn, a well-developed body of literature on the process of transition (Kołodko, 2000; Koźmiński, 2008) and benefits from a well-established field of economic history (Matera and Pieczewski, 2011; Morawski 2010), including internationally recognized economic historians such as Witold Kula (Piłatowicz, 2008).

Polish traditions of business history originate from the environment of economic history. One of the pioneers in the field was Kołodziejczyk, who in the 1950s explored and developed the issues of the past of business in Poland (Ochinowski, Szukała, 2015). The author described the functioning of the best Polish businesses of the time (Kołodziejczyk, 1962). Kołodziejczyk (1993) emphasizes that in the era of the Polish People's Republic, it was hard to acknowledge businesspeople, considered then exploiters, as national heroes. "I tried to save the pioneers of innovation of the time from sinking into oblivion among the Polish readers" (Kołodziejczyk, 1993, p. 3). Works by Polish historians and economists (Zaleski, 1930; Puś and Pytlas, 1979; Badziak, 1991; Bartczak, 1999; Januszkiewicz and Wejchan-Kozielewska, 1996) feature studies into the history of particular organizations. But Sobczak (2015, p. 120) argues that "these works are marked by significant dispersion as the said issues had been analysed as secondary matters, additionally to conducting research in the scope of economic history". Moreover, the author points out that the Polish reference books are dominated by studies "into the history of individual organizations, covering mainly the economic aspect, and focusing less on organization and management related issues. The Polish body of knowledge lacks works devoted to analysis of specific issues covering the scope of organization and management in a historical perspective" (Sobczak, 2015, p. 120).

One of the possible reasons behind this research gap is the fact that looking at the origins of business history internationally tends to be a domain of business schools rather than of economic departments of universities, as it is focused on understanding individual case studies and describing histories of individual businesses rather than on explaining and exploring macro trends. Given the extremely late development of the business school model of education in Poland in the beginning of the 1990s, it should come as no surprise that business history has not had enough time to develop.

Another explanation is offered by economic historians, who have found that due to political reasons, the field of business history in Poland is virtually non-existent (Górski, 2014), even though the need for such research was signalled as early as in the 1950s (Maćzak, 1956). In the following years, due to unfavourable political climate, the term of “business” was associated with adverse ideologies and therefore banned from the academic debate (Pietrzak-Pawłowska, 1967), even despite the fact that some researchers continued to point out that “microanalysis of economic enterprises” was a valid and valuable research approach (Kula, 1963, p. 221).

Moreover, there has been a decline in the interest in social history, economic history, or the history of technology over the recent years in Poland. The current interest centres only on political history or the history of little homelands, locality, which is of lesser significance to the history of organization and management. Moreover, even programmes of studies do not signal a necessity for introducing subjects covering social or economic history (Górski, 2007).

Another reason for such state of affairs may be the very history of Poland, which has left a major negative impact on the condition of archives of particular companies (Sobczak, 2010).

To sum up, Polish economic and business historians have focused on industry studies rather than on individual companies, which can be seen in publications on various broader topics such as transport (Głowiński and Klementowski, 2014), finance, or different industrial areas (Chumiński and Zawadka, 2012). In more recent times, there has been a renewed interest in historical methods. For example, Kostera and Sławecki (2014) argue that a historiographic approach to organization theory offers an attractive, holistic understanding of entrepreneurial processes, while Jastrząb (2011) argues for its significance to business education and analyses (2013) the content of university courses on business history to answer the question whether business history courses raise matters related to social responsibility.

Although the bibliographic search for academic articles has proven to be rather disappointing, a similar inquiry made in the National Library of Poland in the matter of business stories written by companies themselves has provided some astonishing results. As it has turned out, out of 387 centenarian companies only 159 have published a so-called “corporate history” that summarizes their organizational achievements chronologically. The majority of these corporate histories were published only once during 1970s and 1980s, and do not reflect the current situation of the Polish business. Given the wealth of the empirical data accumulated by Polish companies, the underrepresentation of the region in the international business history debate, as well as the lack of historical curriculum in Polish business education can be considered as a significant gap.

The aim of this article, apart from describing the state and condition of business history in Poland, is to describe what steps have been taken so far to address the gap at least partially. Due to the lack of sufficient literature sources, we have decided to focus on empirical research focusing in particular on the population of the oldest Polish companies. In the following paragraphs, we will describe the origins of the project and the methods we used to develop the dataset of the said companies. In the discussion part, we will focus on the qualitative findings and the potential insights that analysing the history of the oldest Polish companies can bring into the context of international business history.

Methods

This article presents some preliminary findings of a research project initiated in 2013, entitled “Sources of Human Capital in Organizational Management Practice”, financed by the National Centre for Research and Development. Although the original aim of the project was to create the first database of Polish business case studies, in order to identify the potential target companies for future cases, the research team members began searching for the oldest Polish companies understood as companies operating for more than 100 years. Since there was no database of such companies readily available in Poland, researchers started looking for other sources and came across a dataset developed by prof. Fujio Goto, based on keyword Internet search performed in the early 2000s as an extension of the Long Lived Family Firms in Japan (LFFJ) database (Goto, 2006). The dataset consisted of 100-year old companies from different countries, including 152 such companies from Poland. The Polish dataset obtained from professor Goto was then verified through desk research and cross-referenced with data obtained from the Central Statistical Office of Poland and the National Court Register. As a result

of this verification, 125 organizations from the original database were confirmed, and additional 262 were further identified, which led to development of a database of 387 Polish companies which were more than 100 years old. The database includes organizations registered in Poland (private companies, NGOs, political organizations, banks, public entities, universities), including companies taken over by or merged with foreign entities while continuing their business activity. Two organizations went bankrupt, but they still operated longer than 100 years counting from the year of establishment till the day of bankruptcy. Twenty nine of them are in the state of insolvency. The structure of the database includes e.g. company name, year of establishment, geographical location, ownership status, and classification of business activity. Table 2 presents the structure of the database and the 10 oldest Polish companies.

Results

A relatively rich content of the database makes it possible to perform an analysis of some basic characteristics and geographical distribution of the oldest Polish companies. The following paragraphs and figures present the results of such preliminary analysis.

Age groups and areas of activity

First of all, since the database consists of the oldest Polish companies, it is reasonable to divide them into age groups of 100>200 years, 200>300 and more than 300 years old (Figure 1).

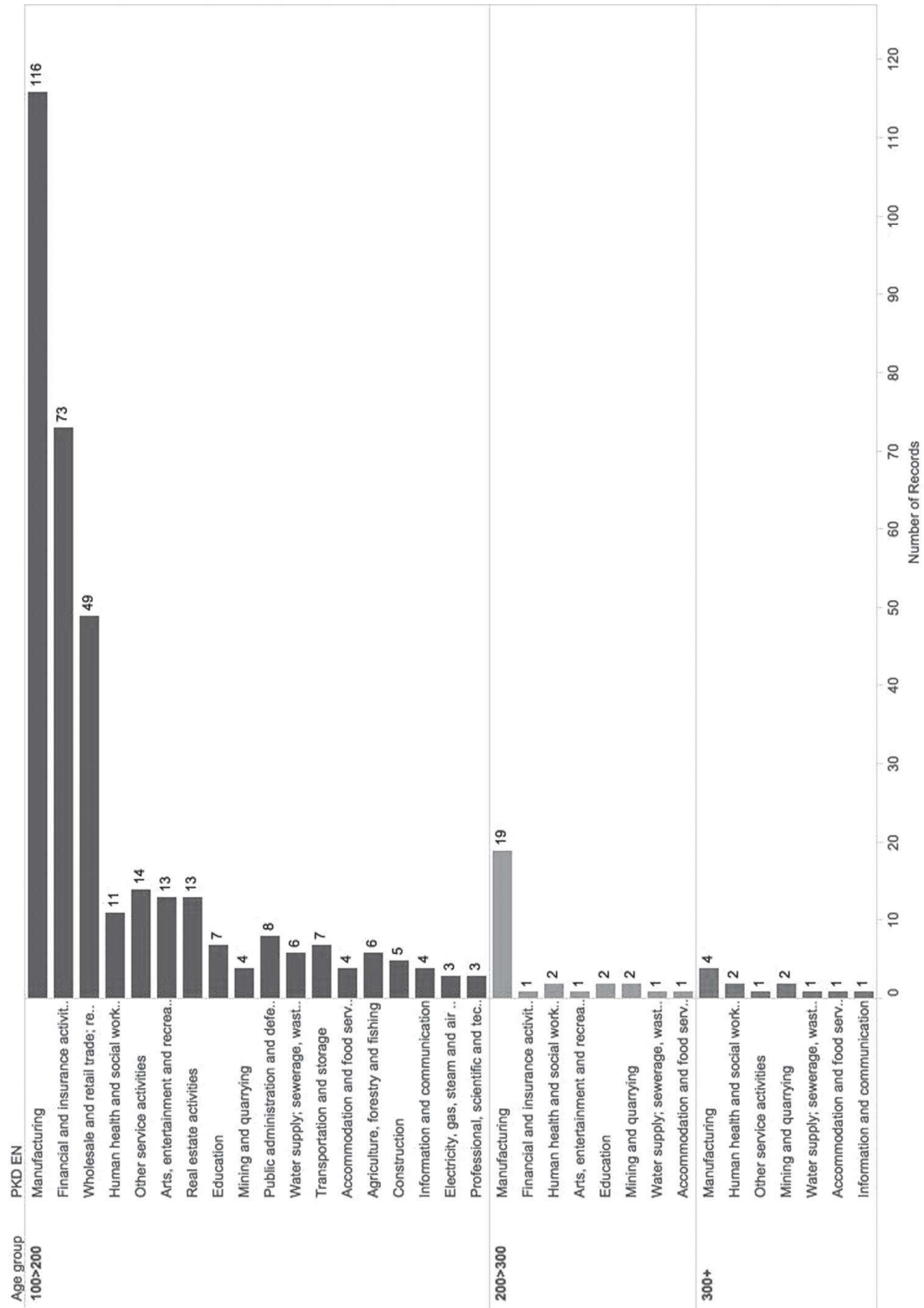
Unsurprisingly, the majority of the 346 companies belongs to the 100>200 age group, followed by 29 companies belonging to the 200>300 age group, and 12 companies belonging to the age group of companies existing longer than 300 years. A further subdivision of age groups by areas of activity reveals that manufacturing seems to be the dominant activity for companies in every age group. In the case of the over 300 years old age group, the group includes some of the most traditional industries and businesses, such as mines, health resorts, postal services, waterworks, breweries, and restaurants. In the case of companies belonging to the 100>200 age group, manufacturing (116 companies) is followed by the second most popular area of activity, i.e. finance and insurance (71 companies), and then wholesale and retail trade (49 companies). This distribution of the types of economic activity is mirrored in the entire population for all age groups.

Table 2. Database structure and TOP10 oldest Polish companies

No.	Status	Name	Year of establishment	Age as of 2017	Age group	Province	City	Ownership (public/private)	Business activity	Business type	Website	Corporate history
1	Existent	Kopalnia Soli "Wieliczka" S.A.	1044	973	300+	Małopolskie	Wieliczka	public	Mining	Salt Mining	http://www.kopalnia.pl	yes
2	Existent	Kopalnia Soli Bochnia sp. z o.o.	1248	769	300+	Małopolskie	Bochnia	public	Mining	Salt Mining	http://www.kopalnia-bochnia.pl/	yes
3	Existent	Browar Namysłów sp. z o.o.	1321	696	300+	Opolskie	Namysłów	private	Manufacturing	Brewery	http://www.namyslow.com.pl	no
4	Purchased	Restauracja Wierzynek	1364	653	300+	Małopolskie	Kraków	private	Catering services	Restaurant	http://wierzynek.pl/historia.html	no
5	Existent	Związek Pracodawców Cech Krawców i Rzemiosł Włókienniczych	1380	637	300+	Mazowieckie	Warsaw	private	Other service activities	Society of tailors		yes
6	Purchased	Browar Warka	1478	539	300+	Mazowieckie	Warka	private	Manufacturing	Brewery	http://warka.com.pl/	no
7	Existent	Star-Wik sp.z.o.o.	1514	503	300+	Pomorskie	Starogard Gdański	public	Water supply	Municipal utilities	www.star-wik.a-ds.com	no
8	Purchased	Zakłady Piwowskie w Leżajsku	1525	492	300+	Podkarpackie	Leżajsk	private	Manufacturing	Brewery	http://www.grupazywiec.pl/	no
9	Existent	Poczta Polska S.A.	1558	459	300+	Mazowieckie	Warsaw	public	Information and communications	Postal services	www.poczta-polska.pl	yes
10	Existent	Uzdrowisko Iwonicz S.A.	1578	439	300+	Podkarpackie	Iwonicz-Zdrój	public	Human health	Hospital	http://www.uzdrowisko-iwonicz.com.pl/	yes

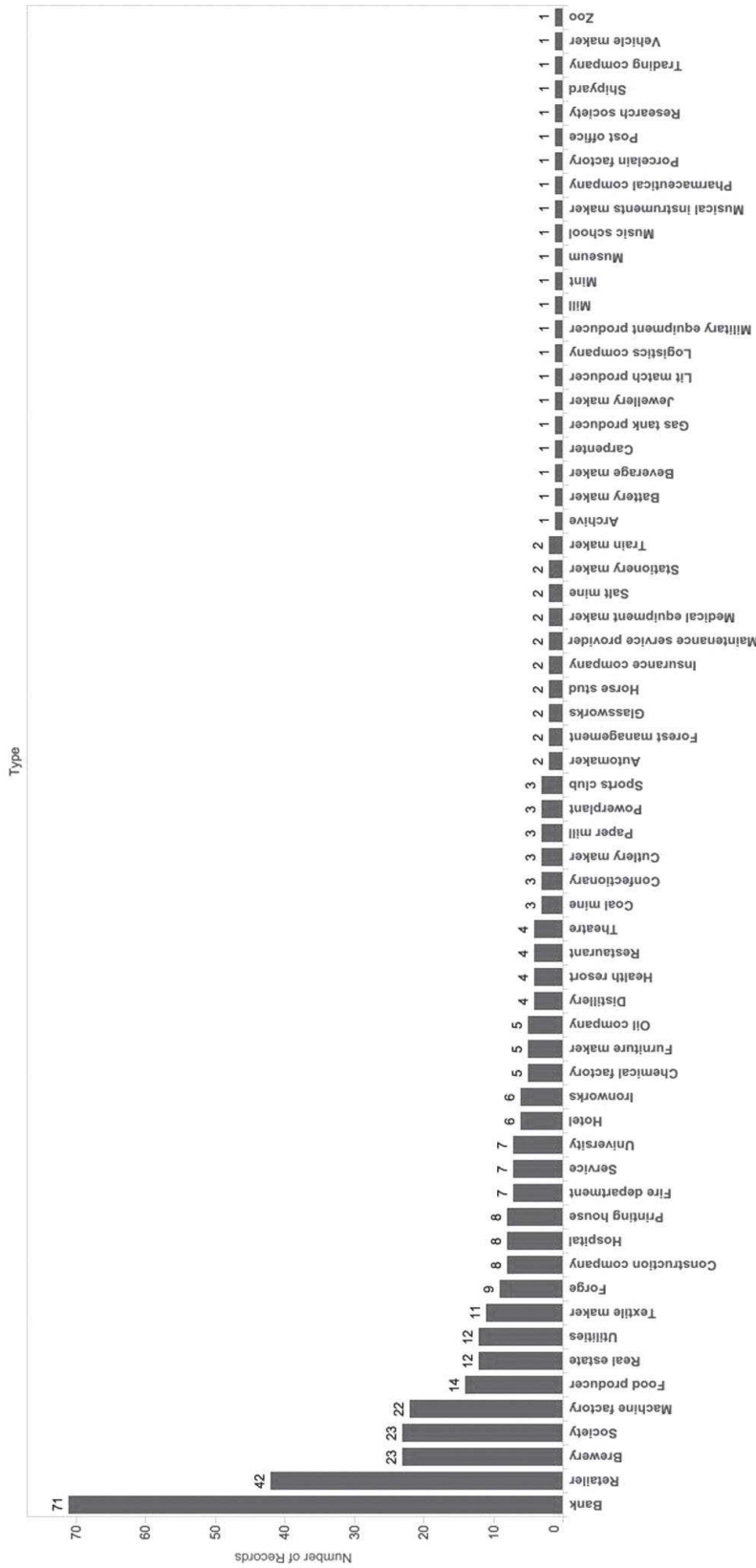
Source: authors' work based on results of analysis.

Figure 1. Number of the oldest Polish companies by age



Source: authors' work based on results of analysis.

Figure 2. Distribution of the oldest Polish companies by business activity



Source: authors' work based on results of analysis.

Looking closer at the distribution of the oldest companies by specific fields of business activity, we will find that despite the dominance of manufacturing, the most numerous group of specific businesses are banks. The majority of these institutions are local cooperative banks established in the late 19th or early 20th century during the surge of cooperative movement. The second most populated group includes retailers followed by various types of companies belonging to the field of manufacturing such as breweries, followed closely by machine factories. Other popular types of business activity include food production, textile manufacturing, and metal forging (Figure 2).

Geographical distribution

Some interesting – although not surprising – findings are offered by an analysis of the geographical distribution of the oldest Polish companies. Figure 3 shows that the majority of these companies is concentrated in provinces which functioned as strong economic, political, and industrial business regions in the past, such as Masovia, Greater Poland, and Silesia.

Figure 3. Distribution of the oldest Polish companies by provinces



Source: authors' work based on results of analysis.

Looking at the geographic distribution from close-up, it becomes apparent that the population of the Polish centennial companies is highly concentrated in cities only

Ownership

When it comes to ownership structure of the population of Polish centennial companies, these companies appear to be predominantly private, with 310 private and only 77 public companies in the whole set. A further analysis of ownership by type of activity reveals some additional patterns. It turns out that publicly owned centennial companies dominate some specific areas of economic activity, such as: health and social welfare, education, mining, social security, water supply, transportation, agriculture and forestry. At the same time, manufacturing, finance and insurance, wholesale and retail trade, real estate, accommodation, and construction remain dominated by private sector (Figure 5).

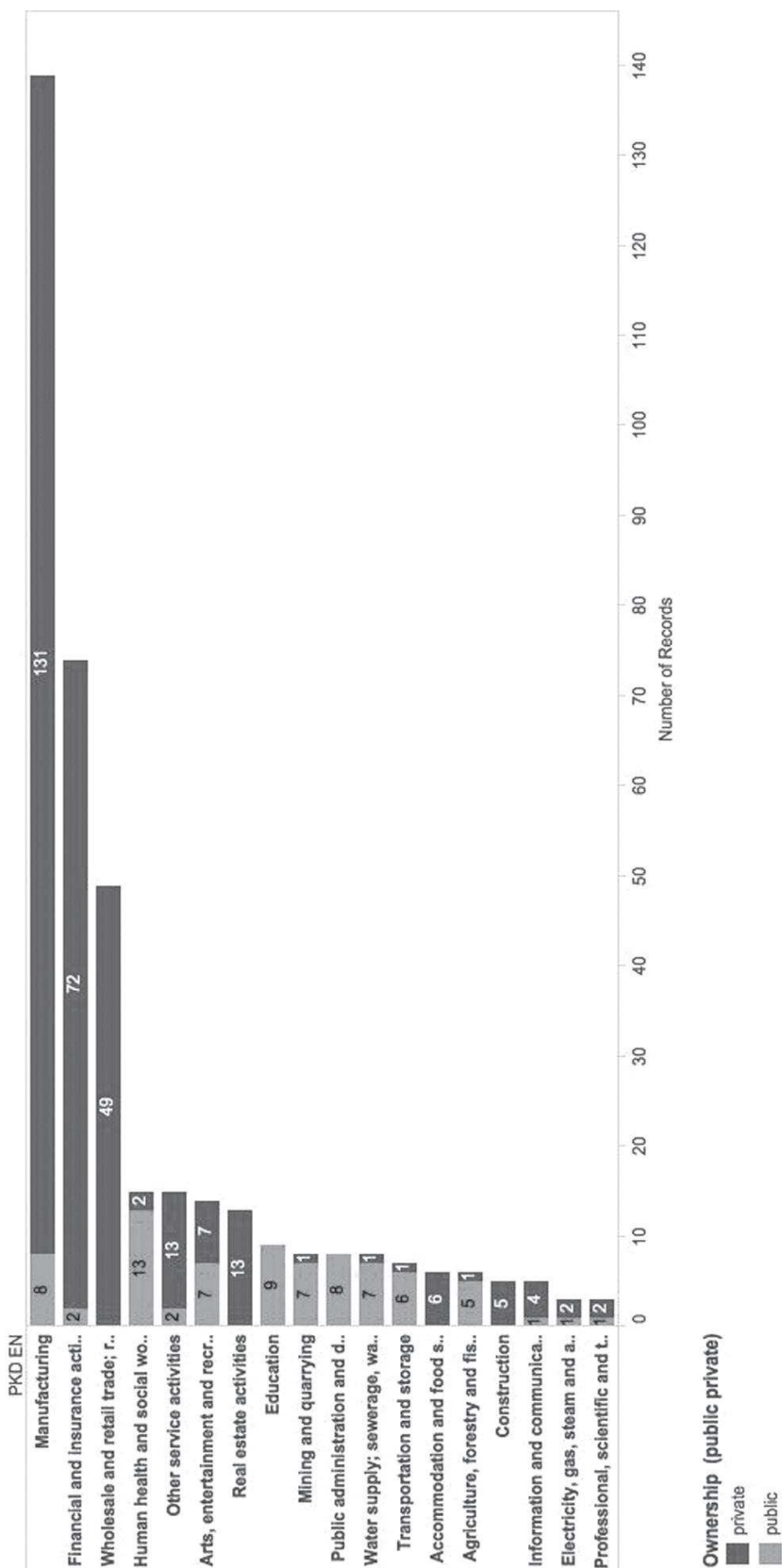
The future potential of business history in Poland

The results presented in the preceding paragraphs show clearly that Poland offers a rich dataset of centennial companies, which might constitute a valuable matter for research activities in the field of business history. The real value of population of such companies lies not so much in the size of the dataset but in the qualitative characteristics of each company and their unique historical experience. In the paragraphs below we will discuss the preliminary observations we have made about the companies in the sample, and try to match them with the research topics identified by Scranton and Fridenson (2013) as the potential future paths of business history development.

Research on property

First, let's focus on the topic of property, which constitutes the basis for conducting any type of business. Scranton and Fridenson (2013) characterize property as a social, relational source of conflict, valued, empowering, exclusive, and anchored in legal systems. They call for more efforts aimed at researching the issue of property in order to understand how its different definitions and deconstruction of basic assumptions about property may influence business. Poland can appear to be an ideal testing ground for deconstruction of the concept of property as companies that have survived more than 100 years had been established under three different foreign rules during the period of partitions, then re-nationalized or privatised in the mid-war period, then subject to acquisition by occupation forces, re-distributed to communes during the early 1950s, nationalized again, privatised in the 1990s, and partially acquired by foreign capital after joining the EU. Poland, especially during the booming years of the real estate market, was riddled with cases of reclaiming property amidst legal and admini-

Figure 5. Ownership structure of the oldest Polish companies



Source: authors' work based on results of analysis.

strative chaos. The possible areas of research could focus on how such instability and functioning on mere assumption of property influenced individual entrepreneurs and business operations. An example of the Potocki distillery is an interesting case of how descendants of a noble family try to reclaim their business through taking advantage of brand and intellectual property despite being deprived of physical infrastructure. Other interesting research could focus on the mind of a Polish entrepreneur and whether its current short-term orientation results from centuries of experience of instability in terms of property.

Research on memory and identity

Memory, both individual and collective, as well as identity are other topics that could become dominant themes in Poland's business history. Scranton and Fridenson (2013), quoting Hayden White, state that "history is memory cultivated in the interest of producing a collective past on the basis of which a collective identity can be forged". They also note that "history is as much about forgetting as about remembering" (p. 212). Understanding the interplay between individual and different levels of collective memory and identifying the main "memory building" institutions such as courts, banks, archives, or newspapers could be crucial for emergence of the identity of Polish business. Initiatives such as "economic patriotism" are, in fact, already in place, brought on by journalists and business press (Koźmiński, 2016). Based on our exploratory research, it would be interesting to understand why some companies have decided to develop a corporate history, and, more interestingly, why others have not and how has it influenced their identity. Many mature companies we have come across in our research are currently undergoing a process of rebranding during which they have chosen to abandon their past in order to position themselves as modern, innovative, and future-oriented. Such approach, however, was not welcomed by long-term employees, who felt they were deprived of their corporate identity. On the other hand, as market becomes more and more saturated with global brands and Polish consumers are getting older, more of them become nostalgic for the brands and companies of their childhood. This results in spectacular comebacks or brand revivals aimed at rekindling the lost elements of a collective memory. Finally, a topic that should not be forgotten involves changing narratives of the Polish collective memory and the influence of these narratives on the perception of business. Given the fact that Poland has made its way from a nation state through socialism to modern European market economy, it would be extremely interesting to see how the perception of business and its objectives has echoed in corporate narratives such as, for example, corporate histories published in different time periods.

Research on improvisation

Entrepreneurship and the ability to improvise seem to be perceived as one of the main Polish traits and specialities. Scranton and Fridenson (2013) define these qualities as flexibility and creativity the employment of which have helped businesses deal with “fogs of confusion” and “swamps of unknowing” (p. 75). Improvisation can have different faces. It can either mean improvisation in the face of scarce resources or time, where one has to come up with ingenious solutions to “make something out of nothing”. It can also mean improvisation in the face of risk and uncertainty, when rules and actors change almost constantly and neither organisation nor institutions existing in the environment can guarantee any form of stability.

Both of these approaches seem to be applicable to the experience and history of the oldest Polish companies, whose life-cycles have been riddled with a constant transition and interrupted by wars. In fact, the ability to improvise might have been the driving force behind the survival of the oldest enterprises and the rapid rise of modern Polish business empires.

Research on continuity

Continuity is a good example of a theoretical concept whose customary meaning is much clearer and more pervasive than its scientific definition (Ajdukiewicz, 2006). There is a limited body of scientific works that implicitly apply this concept, and these include diverse areas such as supply chain and risk management (Waters, 2011; 2014), succession in family business (Drozdow, 1998; Konopaski et al., 2015), and organizational change (Sztompka, 1993; Streeck and Thelen, 2005). It is important to point out that also the Oxford English Dictionary defines continuity as “the state or quality of being uninterrupted in sequence or succession, or in essence or idea” (The Oxford English Dictionary, 1989). Hence, continuity does not rule out change, but it rather denotes a specific type of it – a continuous change. In other words, the outcome of change has enough similarity with history to be recognized as its continuous successor. As can be rightly expected, it might be extremely difficult to draw a clear boundary line up to which continuous change is about continuity and where a major or radical change starts. This leads to a paradoxical outcome that change implies continuity, and continuity implies change (Sushil, 2013). The question whether change can be regarded as continuous can therefore only be answered from a perspective of organizational history (George and Jones, 2000). Approaching continuity from a historical perspective can offer a number of interesting insights and raise a number of questions. For example,

does history predetermine which changes will be regarded as continuous and which changes will be regarded as discontinuous? If an entrepreneurial organization continuously expands and becomes a mega corporation, can we then say that the continuous process of change resulting in a major change should be treated as continuity? Also, when we consider different dimensions of change, such as ownership, legal form, strategy, location or core business, historical approach will challenge most of them. For example, continuity of legal form will rarely extend more than a hundred years when modern corporate form has been established, while continuity of location or core business in the case of the Polish salt mines might extend to nearly a millennium. How many dimensions should therefore be continuous for an organization to claim historical continuity? Finally, when we consider the rate of change, which might have been low at some stages, whereas in certain others it might have been quite high, we come to some other related questions. Do all types of continuous changes imply continuity? Should a continuous change with a very high rate be treated as continuity? This implies that continuous change may itself unfold into discontinuous change at some stages. For example, an organization acquiring continuously other organizations may treat mergers and acquisitions as an ongoing activity and may form thus a part of its continuity. But a large number of acquisitions over a period of time may actually change the essential identity of the organization. All these questions remain unanswered until this day. The problem is that although continuity constitutes an important topic within the field of business history, it has not yet become a sole topic of research and studies conducted so far, often mimicking the existing debates on matters such as continuity and change (McKinlay and Starkey, 1994; Wright and Zammuto, 2013) or organizational identity and memory (Anteby and Molnar, 2012; Scranton and Fridenson, 2013), which can be treated as a historical equivalent of a debate about organizational culture. As a result, business history does not yet offer an overarching theoretical approach that could support studies into the concept of continuity.

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to present preliminary findings concerning the state and condition of business history in Poland, based on empirical research focusing on a population of the oldest Polish companies and potential insights that analysing the background of these companies can bring into the context of international business history.

Due to the fact that it is an explorative study, it has several imitations. First of all, there are a number of companies that are less than 100 years old and have not been included

in the research population; there is also an entire population of companies that have not not survived till this day. Another limitation is related to sources of data as neither the National Court Register nor the Polish Central Statistical Office possessed reliable and comprehensive information on the time of company establishment. It is therefore expected that the number of 387 companies will grow as a result of further empirical research. Finally, the pilot studies conducted in some of these oldest enterprises have revealed that the current state of archives of the examined companies is in a critical condition. Out of 387 Polish companies that are more than 100 years old, 159 published their corporate histories. Additionally, out of these 387 companies, only a dozen possesses professionally managed archives (e.g. Saltworks Museum in Wieliczka, Museum of Poczta Polska, etc.). These archives usually come in a form of state-owned museums, and are not managed directly by the company, and offer only a fraction of their corporate records. The remaining corporate records are very often missing or are dispersed across various locations, including: private or family collections, libraries, museums, local communities and organizations, churches, etc. Additionally, the 2015 amendment to the National Archival Resource and Archives Act (Official Journal of Laws of the Republic of Poland of 2015, item 1446) states that the only archival records corporate entities are obliged to store and manage are those related to salaries and personnel files. This leaves an entire range of archival records such as products, corporate reports, marketing campaigns, transcripts of management board meetings, etc. beyond the scope of archival data management. As a result, the majority of these important records are not properly stored, managed, or secured, and in recent years, as the content of business activity has become more and more digitalized, archival records have been more and more threatened by the routine practice of erasing historical records deemed less relevant. This trend is nothing new or particular to Poland, and was noticed by Western researchers as early as the 1970s (Turner, 1978).

Despite the said limitations, the main contribution of the article involves providing valuable insights into the population of the oldest Polish companies, which can serve as an interesting topic for future studies. One of the main practical contributions of the study is the development of the first database of the oldest companies in Poland and, possibly, in the entire region. This database will be used as a starting point for any future research. In the article we have also identified the future paths of exploration and the potential topics in line with topics covered in recent business history literature. Identification of the research gap is merely the first step into initiation of historical research of Polish business and there is a number of challenges and obstacles that lie ahead. We are, however, quite positive that a growing interest of the business community in their own roots as well as the increasing maturity of Polish business will inevitably lead to development of the field of business history in Poland.

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