In this work, I will investigate the question of the intellectual sources which influenced Fleck in the development of his theory of 'thought-style' and 'thought-collective'. In this investigation, I develop the thesis that this influence was of a quite dominating philosophical nature, one exerted by the Polish philosophers working in Lwów between the wars.

The major theme of Fleck's philosophy of science was the question of the genesis and development of new knowledge. In order to answer this question Fleck undertook what was probably the first sociological investigation of the production of scientific knowledge. According to this approach, knowledge is bound up with the interactions of the people producing and possessing it. In short: knowledge and science are essentially social and cultural phenomena. On this view, the starting point of knowledge and of explanation of the world is not the individual but the collective. Fleck vehemently attacks the 'heroic legends' (1934: 181) which have traditionally been woven around new discoveries or inventions in the sciences in reporting them: "A kind of superstitious fear prevents us from attributing that which is the most intimate part of human personality, namely the thought process, also to a collective" (1935a: 60, Eng. 43). The individual is therefore elevated to a genius, to a "kind of conqueror like Julius Caesar, winning his battles according to the formula 'I came, I saw, I conquered'" (1935a, Eng. 84). On Fleck's view, very little can be explained, also in the sciences, with this kind of thinking: it is only when one takes the socially and historically conditioned thought-collective into account that the progress and achievements of science become understandable.

If one inquires into the historical development of this approach to explaining the development of scientific knowledge it becomes self-evident that it cannot be reduced to the genius of its author. Rather, we must ask what was the specific thought-collective in which Fleck took part, and which, on the basis of the make-up of its members, produced the interaction of thought out of which Fleck was able to formulate his well-known concepts.

However this does not mean that we should look for identical statements by scientists in touch with Fleck in order to prove that their theory was also his. Fleck's notion of the thought-collective was misunderstood in this way:

the members of such a collective are distinguished not only by intellectual similarities but just as much by divergent backgrounds. They bring these various orientations from other thought-collectives along with them into the thought-exchange: indeed, this is what first makes such a thought-exchange possible. The communication among a collective’s members, out of which new ideas are creatively formulated, is thus distinguished by the fact that each member interprets the thought of the other somewhat differently, transforming it and bringing it into different relations with other thoughts and then bringing it back into the discussion in a changed form.

The question of the developmental history of Fleck’s ‘theory of thought-style and thought-collective’ is thus first of all a question of the communications he maintained before and during that theory’s formulation. On this basis we can then investigate how this communication was interpreted by Fleck himself, and thus how it led to Fleck’s specific synthesis of it.

The biographical information we have on Fleck’s life and work (cf. my article in this volume, pp. 1–38) suggest that his philosophy was developed under the influence of three philosophers of Lwów, Fleck’s birthplace and home until the second world war, even if he never quoted them. They are Kazimierz Twardowski (1866–1938), Kazimierz Ajdukiewicz (1890–1963) and Leon Chwistek (1884–1944). Although all three were of greater importance for philosophy in Poland in general and beyond its borders, there is little known about them outside Poland.

The claim that it was precisely Polish philosophers who had a decisive influence on the person considered to be one of the founders of the sociological perspective in the philosophy of science at first sounds paradoxical: Polish philosophy between the wars is primarily known for its contribution to the development of neopositivism (Ajdukiewicz) and for its logicians (Łukasiewicz, Tarski, Chwistek). Fleck polemicizes vehemently against both of these directions in his publications. As shall be shown, however, it was precisely this background which had the decisive influence on Fleck’s theoretical development — and this despite the fact that Twardowski, Ajdukiewicz and Chwistek represented wholly contrary approaches: Kazimierz Twardowski subscribed to his teacher Franz Brentano’s descriptive psychology, Kazimierz Ajdukiewicz, with his ‘radical conventionalism’, maintained an extreme nominalist position in the period relevant for Fleck (1926–1936), and Leon Chwistek, finally, was known for a radical nominalism in formal logic.

We get a totally different picture if, instead of questioning the conceptions these philosophers developed, we consider their questions in the answering of which they developed these concepts. In this way a totally new perspective is