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**Thirty Years after the Great Change.  
The Process of Social Transformation in  
Poland in Biographical Research  
Perspective(s)**

by

Kaja Kaźmierska

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**Kaja Kaźmierska**   
University of Lodz, Poland

## Thirty Years after the Great Change. The Process of Social Transformation in Poland in Biographical Research Perspective(s)

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**Kaja Kaźmierska**, PhD, Professor at the University of Lodz, head of the Department of Sociology of Culture, Institute of Sociology, Faculty of Economics and Sociology at the University of Lodz, Poland, and director of the Institute of Sociology. She specializes in biographical research, identity, and biographical memory. The author of books: *Polish Wartime Experiences and Shaping of Ethnic Identity. Analysis of Borderline Narratives* (IFiS PAN, Warsaw 1999), *Biography and Memory: The Generational Experience of the Shoah Survivors* (Academic Studies Press, Boston 2012). She has edited a selection of texts entitled *Biographical Method in Sociology. Anthology of texts* (Nomos, Cracow 2012). The co-author (with Katarzyna Waniek and Agata Zysiak) of the book *Tell the University. Academic Lodz in Biographies Inscribed in the History of the University of Lodz* (Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, Lodz 2015) and recently published (with Jarosław Pałka) *Soldiers of the Polish Army. Oral History* (Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, Lodz 2018).

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This year (2019) we celebrate the thirtieth anniversary of the great systemic change. The year 1989 has been symbolically set and accepted in the public discourse as the turning point for the political, social, economic transition. It is associated with two events—the Round Table in February 1989 and the partly democratic elections held on June 04. Poland became the first Eastern Bloc country where the representatives of the democratic opposition gained real influence over the government. This gave rise to political changes, which included “[t]hree components of the social system, that is, politics, economy, and social culture. And these components are known to be interconnected by a network of relations transmitting both the factor stimulating the development of the whole system, as well as the limitations determining the acceptable solutions. Attempts to evaluate the course of these transformations have been made many times. There is an almost continuous discussion and disputes over the results obtained, the costs incurred,

and the need for further reforms” (Pisz 2000:101-102). Although 19 years have passed since the quoted statements, the discussion has been continued up to now and, of course, from the very beginning, the Polish transformation has been carefully studied by sociologists. Until the mid-1990s, researchers dealt with change as such, describing the essence of crucial institutional reforms and only then dealing with the social consequences of systemic change (Kolasa-Nowak 2010:52). Even then most of the researchers concentrated primarily on changes perceived from the macro-social level. For instance, Juliusz Gardawski (2001; 2009) analyzed changes from the perspective of economy and sociology of work. Henryk Domański (1996; 2000; 2002; 2005; 2008) (relying on long-term quantitative research) pondered changes in the social structure, creation of the middle-class, or changes in the hierarchy of prestige. Andrzej Rychard (1996), Mirosława Marody and Anna Giza-Poleszczuk (2004), as well as Giza-Poleszczuk, Marody, and Rychard (2000) focused on the process of institutionalization, changing of social capitals, cultural dimension of the social transition, and the way social bonds were shaping after 1989. Sociologists, using profoundly quantitative research, began to describe individual ways of coping with systemic change and developing adaptation strategies (e.g., Marody 1997; 2002; Rychard 2005). Certainly, these are only some examples of sociological works—although deliberately enumerated here—that offered (macro)syntheses of the Polish transformation.

Still another field of research on the broadly understood processes of transformation in Polish sociology has been marked by the works of the

authors such as, to give as examples Maria Jarosz (2005; 2007; 2008), Elżbieta Tarkowska (2000), Elżbieta Tarkowska, Wielisława Warzywoda-Kruszyńska, Kazimiera Wódz (2003), Hanna Palska (2002), who dealt with the rich/poor, winners/losers of the transformation, or those included in or excluded from the elite. These studies were based on qualitative research of thematically oriented phenomena and with the use of classic sociological interview to collect empirical material providing knowledge about social facts.

Another group of studies represent research (there are not as many of them as in the case of quantitative ones) which have been based on biographical approach, in-depth, most often biographical and narrative, interviews. The most recognized studies relate to the problem of poverty and the sphere of work.

With regard to the first mentioned field, “[s]ince 1990 the sociologists from the University of Lodz have been conducting multidimensional analyses of poverty and social exclusion. In 1997-1999, within the framework of two projects, *The Social Cost of Economic Transformation in Central Europe—Social History of Poverty in Central Europe* and *Forms of Poverty and Social Risks and Their Spatial Distribution in Lodz*, family life histories of three generations of the families supported by social welfare agencies were collected” (Golczyńska-Grondas and Potoczna 2016:34). The qualitative material included narrative interviews, in-depth biographical interviews, and family life histories. In the first project, between 1998 and 1999, 90 interviews were conducted, involving at least two generations of 40 families in which a member of

the middle generation was a client of social work. In the second one, 90 persons, members of 49 families, were interviewed (Warzywoda-Kruszyńska 2001). Today, apart from the analytical input, the materials collected in the 1990s constitute a valuable source of data and record of social history processes experienced from the perspective of individuals, their biographies, and families affected by poverty.

The second mentioned field—the sphere of work—has been studied from the perspective of at least a few approaches. The research conducted by Adam Mrozowicki and Markieta Domecka (Domecka and Mrozowicki 2008; Mrozowicki 2010; 2011; Domecka 2014; 2016) within the projects *Coping with Social Change. Life Strategies of Workers in Poland and the End of State Socialism* and *Negotiating Capitalism in Central and Eastern Europe. Between Marginalization and Revitalization of Organized Labor* have been focused on various aspects of work subjected to systemic changes. The documentary effects of both projects include, among other things, a collection of about 200 autobiographical narrative interviews with workers and private engineers from the largest industrial plants in Silesia (Lower Silesia, Upper Silesia, Cieszyn Silesia, and Silesia Opole).

One more project recently guided by Adam Mrozowicki and focused on the work-related sphere (PREWORK—*Young Precarious Workers in Poland and Germany: A Comparative Sociological Study on Working and Living Conditions, Social Consciousness, and Civic Engagement* funded by the National Science Center in Poland and the German Research Foundation) has been devoted to the problem of precarious young people in Poland and Germany and

their life strategies influenced by the labor market (Mrozowicki 2016; Mrozowicki and Karolak 2017; Mrozowicki, Karolak, and Krasowska 2018; also see: Mrozowicki, Trappmann, Seehaus, and Kajta in this volume).

Another researcher who uses biographical narrative interview and has been focused on the sphere of work is Joanna Wawrzyniak, who has recently conducted two research projects *Privatization as a Biographical Experience. Long-Term Effects of Business Ownership Changes in Industrial Plants from the Perspective of Individual Lives* (funded by the National Science Center) (Gospodarczyk and Leyk 2012; Mikołajewska-Zajac and Wawrzyniak 2016), and is currently working through another project *From a Socialistic Factory to Multinational Corporation. An Archive Collection of Biographical Narrative Interviews with Industrial Workers* (funded by NPRH) (Jastrzab and Wawrzyniak 2017). The analyses conducted within these projects are focused on a collective and biographical memory of the past as shaped from the contemporary perspective.

One more project, *Poles in the World of Late Capitalism: Transformations of Biographical Processes in the Aspect of Professional Careers, Social Bonds, and Identity During the Transformation Period in Poland* (funded by NCN), focused on the reconstruction of varieties and dynamics of biographical experiences of three cohorts of Polish society entering the labor market during (and after) the political transformation in the sphere of 1) professional careers, 2) social bonds, and 3) individual, social, and cultural identity (Biały 2015a; 2015b; Kordasiewicz 2016; Haratyk, Biały, and Gońda 2017; Haratyk and Biały 2018).

The last project I would like to refer to is the research on *Experience of the Process of the Transformation in Poland. A Sociological Comparative Analysis Based on Biographical Perspective* funded by the National Science Center.<sup>1</sup> It represents the broadest research approach not limited to one selected sphere of social life (Burski 2016; Kaźmierska 2016; Waniek 2016; Wygnańska 2016; Andrejczuk and Burski 2017; also see Burski; Dopierała; Filipkowski; Kaźmierska; Waniek; Wygnańska in this volume). Its aim is to cover the widest possible spectrum of transformation experiences recorded in the life histories. The research is focused on the biographical perspective of ordinary people experiencing social reality before and after 1989. Such reasoning is based on the assumption that understanding transformation as a process requires reconstructing its dynamics, its natural history, which, according to one of the basic terms of the Chicago School of Sociology, means a certain series of events that, especially from the point of view of an actor, was impetuous and uncontrollable, but, at the same time—particularly from the researcher's point of view—predictable and governed by certain regularities (Szacki 1981:649). This statement supports the conviction that we are still entitled to talk about social transformation. Sociologists often expressed their opinions that transformation should be primarily defined in terms of economic and political

<sup>1</sup> The project *Experience of the Process of the Transformation in Poland. A Sociological Comparative Analysis Based on Biographical Perspective*, funded by the National Science Center in Poland, the NCN project number UMO-2013/09/B/HS6/03100, carried out in the Department of Sociology of Culture of the University of Lodz under the direction of Kaja Kaźmierska. Members of the research team: Katarzyna Waniek (University of Lodz), Piotr Filipkowski (IFiS PAN), Jacek Burski (University of Lodz), Joanna Wygnańska (University of Lodz), Maciej Melon (IFiS PAN).

changes—the transition to a capitalist economy and a democratic system. The transition, understood thusly, was completed at the end of the 1990s (e.g., Marody 1997; 2004; Ziółkowski 1998). However, if we take the perspective expressed above (that transformation is a process that has its own natural history), it can be concluded that it “continues” due to biographical consequences it had for the actors who have experienced it. The scope of these experiences and, above all, their interpretation is diverse and depends on the macro- and micro-structural circumstances. Moreover, this interpretation can change in the perspective of the duration of one's own biography. Thus, the aim of the project was to use methodology (biographical narrative interview) which enables such an analysis and to show the experience of transformation in the biographical perspective, that is, the perspective of social actors who have become active participants, or even co-creators, of the transformation and, at the same time, they have been subjected to the dynamics of this process. In order to get access to different aspects of the process, we conducted 90 autobiographical narrative interviews with informants belonging to three age groups (30 interviews in each), that is, persons born in the following years: 1960-70, 1970-80, 1980-89. We expected that being socialized in educational institutions at different times will be the crucial experience diversifying those groups. Thus, belonging to the first studied decade, means—from the perspective of informants—that they experienced their whole socialization in the educational institutions, as well as some part of their adult life in the People's Republic of Poland; the second decade comprises those who started education in the 80s, but (particularly

in the case of students) graduated after 1989 and gained professional experience in the 90s; the last group consists of those persons who could hardly have any encounter with the People's Republic of Poland.

As a result, we have identified three groups differentiated in various ways by their social rootedness of biographical experiences. The educational criterion is, to some extent, conventional, but it enabled having a starting point for interpretative frames unveiling the diversity of experiences of people under study. Thus, informants belonging to the first group were subjected to still ideologized education (e.g., history school books, compulsory Russian language courses, etc.), and, at the same time, they were brought up in the spirit of stability of occupational career, clear rules on the labor market. They encountered 1989 with a biographical baggage of experiences of socialist reality internalized in their childhood and adolescence. As to the second group, an in-between cohort, some people, particularly at the level of secondary and higher education, benefited from the transition in terms of unideologized curricula, but, at the same time, they were still brought up in expectation of stability on the labor market, which appeared to be more and more difficult. Although they entered their adulthood after the symbolic moment of transition, their memory and understanding of reality before this passage are still biographically grounded by individual experiences. The third group was socialized in a totally new reality (younger persons from this group—born in 1987-1989—have also experienced the current reform of the educational system in Poland); people from this group do not remember so-

cialism and mentally have been prepared for instability of their occupational career. Sometimes they are called the '89 generation (similarly to Germany where this group is described as *Mauerfall-Generation*). We assumed that incorporating this cohort to our project would help to capture a new, interesting image of the transition. Especially because our analysis had a comparative character from the very beginning—we juxtaposed, looked for commonalities and differences, compared, and contrasted biographies of these three cohorts. It should be added that the representatives of the first group were 29 years old in 1989 (so, generally, they either were about to start an adult life or they had already been working for a couple of years), while those from the third group were approximately the same age at the time of the research, which gives additional generational context for comparison. After having collected the empirical material, we can tell that our assumptions were right. The narratives of persons born after 1980 significantly differ from all others (Waniek 2016; also see: Waniek in this volume).

The assumption to expose the diversity of biographical experiences has been related to the fact that the main point of interest was focused on the so-called "ordinary man" or "man on the street," to use Alfred Schütz's (1964) term. Based on his own experience, the ordinary man is "the wide-awake, fully-functioning adult in the natural attitude." The "man on the street" operates according to his (or her) set of naive relevancies, for which "recipe knowledge" is adequate. An ordinary person, acting in the world, is in a biographically-determined situation, doing what he or she does according to the system of relevancies that enables selecting

from the environment and from interactions with others the elements that make sense for the purpose at hand. "The man on the street has a working knowledge of many fields which are not necessarily coherent with one another. His is a knowledge of recipes indicating how to bring forth in typical situations typical results by typical means. The recipes indicate procedures which can be trusted even though they are not clearly understood. By following the prescription, as if it were a ritual, the desired result can be attained without questioning why the single procedural steps have to be taken and taken exactly in the sequence prescribed. This knowledge in all its vagueness is still sufficiently precise for the practical purpose at hand. In all matters not connected with such practical purposes of immediate concern, the man on the street accepts his sentiments and passions as guides. Under their influence, he establishes a set of convictions and unclarified views which he simply relies upon as long as they do not interfere with his pursuit of happiness" (Schütz 1970:240). Sustaining this perspective, we did not interview well-known persons, for example, in the case of the first cohort, the representatives of those who were active creators or contestants of the system and whose activity was recognized in public (e.g., well-known oppositionists or members of the party establishment—still politicians today), and, consequently, in the other two cohorts, we did not search for well-known persons whose voice is present in the public discourse.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> It should be stressed that among not too numerous research and publications on the topic, those kinds of people who we can identify, according to Schütz's concept (1964), as "well informed citizens" or "the experts" were the research objects of interest of historians and biographers, rarely of

I devoted so much space to describe this project because the volume presented to the reader accommodates six articles based on its materials. I also believe that the assumptions presented briefly, although concerning the study in question, can be extended to most of the above-mentioned research based on a qualitative and, especially, biographical approach. I particularly have in mind the presentation of an ordinary man's perspective, although the enumerated projects differ in the way the biographical material is used—from treating biography as "a means" to exploring biography as "a theme." In the first case, the question of *what* comes to the forefront. *What* is told enables gathering biographical information and to answer typical sociological questions (e.g., about social structure, strategies on the labor market). Whereas biography as "a theme" is treated as an issue in itself, the researcher's interest is aimed at the structure (narrative/biography) and expressed in the question *how* is the narrative constructed, *how* do the interactive conditions of its production shape the story, *how* does the biographical reconstruction of the life course take place, et cetera (Helling 1990:16).

Apart from the differences at hand, the research mentioned here shows a qualitatively deepened analysis of transformation experiences and, in confrontation with otherwise valuable quantitative research, sheds light on the context of interpretation, experience, and meaning of both macro-social reality and the micro-worlds of individuals. This profoundly contextualized perspective allows, in

sociologists (e.g., Torańska 1994; 2004; 2006; Kondratowicz 2001; Mucha and Keen 2006; Grupińska and Wawrzyniak 2011).

my opinion, describing—after 30 years—the mechanisms of past and present social processes.

I began the text mentioning two events of 1989 regarded as the introduction of the Great Change—the Round Table and June Elections. CBOS (Public Opinion Research Center) has carried out periodical surveys on perception of these events. As regards the Round Table, the author of the recent report writes: “Thirty years after the Round Table Talks, the attitude of Poles towards these events is not clear. It is much more often positive than negative, but the majority of the respondents agree with some reservations regarding the arrangements made in 1989. They claim that the compromise with the communists was too far-reaching and that, as a result, it was possible that the failure to settle the main representatives’ of the past system actions took place, which enabled them to preserve their influence. It can therefore be said that Poles mostly see some flaws in the way the Round Table version of the transition is being implemented, but this does not change their rather positive overall attitude towards these events” (Głowacki 2019:12).

Whereas, in response to the question whether it was worthwhile to change the system, the respondents in 2019 answered: “The majority of Poles have never doubted the sense of the political transformation, and now 81% say that in 1989, it was worth changing the system. The social effects of the changes were worse evaluated five years after the Round Table and in the years 2001-2003. Also, in 2019, the assessments of transformation in terms of individuals, that is, the fate of the respondents

and their families, are much better than those recorded in the previous surveys” (Badora 2019:11).

A comparison of the respondents’ responses over several editions of these surveys shows the dynamics of assessments and collective memory about the events at hand—the overall positive assessment of the transformation is accompanied by a more critical (than in the past) attitude towards certain aspects of the transformation. Also, over time, the percentage of respondents answering “I don’t have an opinion” increases. What is important, they belong to the youngest group (< 37), that is, they do not remember (or very poorly remember) the times at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s. Thus, an obvious conclusion can be drawn that those who are/were its actors can tell the most about transformation. Thus, last but not least, the perspective of three decades shifts sociological reflection from commenting on phenomena *in statu nascendi* to *ex post* reflection. There are more and more historical studies, as well as self-critical statements by sociologists themselves (Król 2015; Domecka 2016; Giza-Poleszczuk 2018) regarding their own research and interpretative contribution to the scientific discourse of transformation. Slowly, although it is not yet very recognizable by social actors, the image of transformation will begin to be built from the perspective of memory. First, communication memory (Assmann 2008) by the participants/witnesses of this process, but in the background of the cultural memory creating social discourses (educational, cultural, historical, political, etc.) about the past. In my opinion, the materials collected in the above mentioned projects, showing the experiences of ordinary people, allow us to show “pure” bi-

ographical experiences,<sup>3</sup> the richness which is expressed primarily in the diversity of perspectives, judgments, assessments, and theories of oneself.

All the articles presented in this volume are based on biographical materials. Despite the diversity of the issues involved, the transformation process is a reference framework for all of them. The volume is divided into three parts. The first one is entitled *Between the Past and the Present* and contains texts that the starting point is the shadow of the People’s Republic of Poland, presented in different ways (by social actors and the authors of the texts). The discussed issues concentrate on different aspects of biographical experiences and social processes to show, above all, the processual character of social change and mechanisms of continuity in the dimension of experiencing one’s own biography and the related consequences throughout one’s life. This shows that it is impossible to understand the essence of social changes without rooting their past.

The first article by Danuta Życzyńska-Ciołek, *The Experience of Systemic Transformation in Contemporary Biographical Narratives of Older Poles*, explores whether—from the subjective perspective of people born before the end of WWII—systemic transformation brought about significant changes in their individual lives. The presented analysis shows clearly the

<sup>3</sup> Of course, there is no “pure” biographical experience in the social sense—it is always the result of individual and social processes. I used inverted commas for this term to emphasize that, first of all, the individuals talked about *their lives*, and, if they did not want to present it in the context of macro social events and processes, they simply did not do it. Among other things, Danuta Życzyńska-Ciołek draws attention to this fact in her article in this volume. Whereas in the mode of cultural memory, individual experiences will be worked out and put into discursive frameworks.

discrepancy between individual biographical experiences and public discourses, giving the meaning to transformation processes.

The second text by Renata Dopierała, *Life of Things from the Perspective of Polish Systemic Transformation*, analyzes the status and usage of things in the society of shortage economy and technological devices as harbingers of the systemic change. The material for analysis comes from the above-mentioned project when interviewees—talking about their life—quite often related to material aspects of the past and present.

Agnieszka Golczyńska-Grondas’ article, *The PPR, Systemic Transformation, and New Poland. Opportunity Structures in the Biographical Experience of Senior Social Reformers*, analyzes biographical narrative interviews with the oldest generation of Polish social innovators being active both under the socialist regime and during and post-systemic transformation. She focuses on opportunity structures which facilitate the professional and personal development of social reformers.

Rozalia Ligus, in the text “*We Are the Poles from Former Yugoslavia.*” *Transformation Processes Shifted in Time—The Biographical Perspective*, investigates a very interesting example of “new localism” based on the nostalgic image of homeland built on the basis of “the old” repertoire of symbolic universe values.

In *Migration as a Source of Suffering in the Context of the Biographical Experience of the Process of Transformation in Poland. Case Study of Weronika’s Life History*, Joanna

Wygnańska presents a case study analyzing the process of interpreting the past and present experiences through the prism of the generational experience of parents and their involvement in the previous system.

Anna Dolińska, in the article *Socio-Economic Costs of Systemic Transformation in Ukraine in the Lens of the Biographical Experiences of Ukrainian Female Migrants to Poland*, combines the contemporary experience of the migration of young Ukrainian women to Poland with the preceding transformational changes and their long-term consequences.

The second part of the volume is entitled *The Young Generation in the "New World"* and contains texts based on the analysis of the narratives with people born in the 1980s.

Katarzyna Waniek, in the article *The Precarious Life Situation Trap. The Case of "Zealous" Julia—a Proponent and a Victim of Neoliberal Reality*, discusses—based on a case study—the analysis of the mutual influence of the individual experiences and the collective processes that result in a precarious life situation being a stage of the trajectory of a suffering process.

Jacek Burski's article, *The Coping Strategies in Biographies of Polish Middle-Class Representatives of (Post) Transformation Period*, is focused on life strategies adapted by representatives of Polish middle-class and biographical experiences of this process.

Adam Mrozowicki, Vera Trappmann, Alexandra Seehaus, and Justyna Kajta present in their paper, *Who Is a Right-Wing Supporter? On the Biographical Experiences of Young Right-Wing Voters in Poland and Germany*, four

biographical cases of people declaring their political support for far right-wing parties. The analysis of the cases leads to the distinction of socio-economic and socio-political pathways to right-wing populist support.

The last part of the volume—*Discourses on Transformation and Biographical Experience*—contains two articles exploring the maladjustment of transformation discourses (in different ways) to the biographical experiences of social actors. This gap often results from imposing the ready-made rationalizations and macro-analyses on the micro-experiences of an individual's level.

In *Winners and Losers of the Process of Transformation as an Etic Category versus Emic Biographical Perspective*, Kaja Kaźmierska discusses the categorization of winners and losers as not only simplifying the description of social reality, but also difficult to be easily biographically justified, since the *etic* categorization is not relevant to the *emic* perspective.

Piotr Filipkowski, in *Narrative Agency and Structural Chaos. A Biographical-Narrative Case Study*, presents a case study where a life path turns out to be an unintended, dynamic journey between different professions, social worlds, and structural positions. This creates a complicated and ambiguous biographical model, which arranges itself neither in the socio-economic advancement of the "winner" nor in the degradation of the "lost" transformation.

I hope that this volume, rich in content and analysis, will become an interesting contribution to the process of reflection on the experience of changes in the perspective of individual biographies.

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*Part I*

*Between the Past and the Present*

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## The Experience of Systemic Transformation in Contemporary Biographical Narratives of Older Poles<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract** The aim of this article is to explore whether—from the subjective perspective of people born before the end of WWII—systemic transformation brought about significant changes in their individual lives, and if yes—what was the meaning of those changes for them. In particular, I examine how experiences related to the events that preceded systemic transformation in Poland or took place during its most intensive stage are reflected in contemporary biographical narratives of 49 persons aged 72 or more, for whom the period of professional activity, in whole or in major part, occurred in the times of the Polish People’s Republic. I perform the analysis in three steps. First, I investigate the place of systemic transformation in the narratives, and consider the reasons why it is relatively often absent or poorly reflected there. Second, I present thematic motifs prevailing in those interviews where references to the systemic change appear. In the third step, I investigate the meaning of experiences connected with transformation for the narrators, the accompanying emotions—some of them still persisting—and ways in which the narrators incorporated those experiences into their biographies. The underlying narratives come from people who were drawn for a nationwide quantitative panel survey many years ago, in 1987, and participated in it for the next 25-30 years.

**Keywords** Systemic Transformation; Biographical Narrative; Older People; Polish Panel Survey POLPAN

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The political, economic, and social changes which began in Poland in the 1980s and evolved with great intensity throughout the 1990s had a varied impact on individual biographies. Some people

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perceived them as a time when new opportunities and chances opened up, while others experienced a sense of uncertainty or social degradation; for many, the transformation brought about a mosaic of ambivalent experiences. The perception of, and adaptation to, these changes depended on many factors, well researched by macro-structural sociology, such as the place in the social structure (including different characteristics: from social origin, through education, to achieved status or position in the labor market), political views (often related to previous biographical experiences, one’s own or parents’), and psychological characteristics (authoritarianism, self-confidence, etc.).<sup>2</sup> In this context, a factor that undeniably influenced the type of experience associated with the most turbulent period of transformation was the age of the people who experienced the events. As Glen H. Elder Jr. (1994:6) wrote,

Especially in rapidly changing societies, differences in birth year expose individuals to different historical worlds, with their constraints and options. Individual life courses may well reflect these different times.

Systemic transformation created different opportunities and limitations for young people, who were

<sup>2</sup> Polish sociological literature on systemic transformation, both in the quantitative and qualitative paradigm, is extremely rich. The following works encompass numerous references to books and articles devoted to this topic: Kolasa-Nowak (2005; 2010; 2012; 2014), Doktor (2010). An edited volume containing a selection of sociological works from the 1990s (Krzemiński 2010) is also worth mentioning. As for the qualitative approach, I refer to selected works in footnote 17. Since empirical analysis presented in this article is based on (qualitative) data collected from the participants in the Polish Panel Survey POLPAN, I also want to mention those works based on the fundamental (quantitative) part of POLPAN that are most relevant to the topic of systemic change in Poland: Słomczyński (2000; 2002), Słomczyński and Marquart-Pyatt (2007); see also articles listed on [polpan.org/en/publications/articles](http://polpan.org/en/publications/articles).

just entering adult life,<sup>3</sup> as compared to conditions for mature people, for whom the period of the most intense professional activity and important personal decisions coincided with the times of the Polish People’s Republic. In the period of social and economic changes, younger and older people were at different stages of their personal life and professional career; they differed in their life experiences and motivations, which often had an impact on how they perceived and experienced the changes. Moreover, contemporary survey studies (e.g., CBOS 2019a) indicate that even today—30 years after the most intensive transformational changes—age is one of the most important factors differentiating the opinions of respondents as to whether it was worthwhile to change the system in 1989 and whether the introduced changes brought more losses or benefits. Survey methods, however, cannot provide an exhaustive answer when we are interested in sources of such opinions, especially in their biographical background. This kind of analysis can be conducted with the use of qualitative methods.

Over the last few years, Polish sociologists who study social changes from a biographical perspective have devoted many publications to the subject of systemic transformation (e.g., Domecka and Mrozowicki 2008; Mrozowicki 2011; Gospodarczyk and Leyk 2012; Kaźmierska 2016). Most of these works focus on investigating the life courses of people born during the socialist era. In contrast, in this article, I analyze contemporary biographical narratives (collected in the last five years) of people born in the years 1922-1942 who were aged 72 or over at the

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., Mach (2003; 2005), Tarkowska and Korzeniewska (2002), Tarkowska (2007), Rek-Woźniak (2016).

time of the interview. In the symbolic breakthrough year of 1989, they were between 47 and 67 years old and were generally at an advanced stage of their careers or had already retired. What is also important, a vast majority of the narrators can be classified as so-called “ordinary people”—they were not active actors in social and political life during the transformation period.

Systemic transformation is widely regarded by historians and social researchers as the most important socio-political event (or rather process) in the post-war history of Poland. Its evaluation is still a subject of public debate; it is also connected with the assessment of the previous period, that of socialist regime. The aim of this article is to explore whether from the subjective perspective of people born before the end of the WWII systemic transformation brought about significant changes in their individual lives, and if yes—what was the meaning of those changes for them. In particular, I seek to answer the following research question: whether and how biographical stories of 49 narrators born in the years 1922-1942 reflect the experience of the most intensive period of systemic transformation, that is, the events of the 1980s and 1990s—the emergence and development of the “Solidarity” movement, the introduction of martial law, the economic crisis of the 1980s, the revival of “Solidarity” in the late 1980s, the collapse of the socialist system and related political changes of 1989 and the early 1990s, the economic transformation of the 1990s and its social consequences. I perform the analysis in three steps. First, I investigate the place of systemic transformation in the narratives, and consider the reasons why it is relatively often absent or poorly reflected there. Sec-

ond, I present thematic motifs prevailing in those interviews where references to the systemic change appear. All three threads repeated in the largest number of interviews turn out to be related to the sphere of work and employment. In the third step, I seek to deepen the analysis by examining not only what the narrators are talking about, but also how they are doing it. I investigate the meaning of experiences connected with transformation for the narrators, the accompanying emotions—some of them still persisting—and ways in which the narrators incorporated those experiences into their biographies.

I consider my work to be a continuation and extension of the biographically orientated studies on Polish transformation that were carried out by the authors mentioned above. Due to presenting the experiences of older Poles, this article enhances the so far accumulated knowledge of the subjective perception of systemic change. The interviewees are over 72 and they perceive past events in a specific time perspective—the perspective of their long lives, which leads (at least some of) them to make summaries and undertake reflection on their entire biography. These facts allow us to see their experiences related to systemic transformation (or: the lack of such experiences) in a wide context of their life courses. Focusing on the narratives of the participants from one age group makes it possible to thoroughly analyze those aspects of their experiences from the period of systemic transformation that were related to their age and cohort(s) to which they belonged. The application of biographical approach leads to identifying some social and psychological mechanisms that are difficult to observe in survey studies, but are likely to contribute to the results obtained in them.

## Research Material and Method of Analysis

This article is based on 49 biographical interviews conducted in 2014-2019 with selected respondents of the Polish Panel Survey POLPAN ([www.polpan.org](http://www.polpan.org)), born in the years 1922-1942, that is, belonging to the oldest group of the survey participants. POLPAN is a quantitative study of social structure, repeated every five years among the same respondents, with the participants from the youngest age group being regularly added in each wave since 1998. Originally, in 1987, respondents selected to participate in the POLPAN survey were aged 21-65 and formed a nationwide representative random sample (Słomczyński, Tomescu-Dubrow, and Dubrow 2015).

The authors of the biographical research project<sup>4</sup> sought to select highly diverse interviewees in terms of education, belonging to socio-occupational categories (at the time of the interview or in the past), region, and size of the place of residence. As for occupational diversity, the “biographical subsample” consists of relatively many people with the experience of working in industrial plants, public offices, and institutions, or on a farm, yet there is only one artist and very few people who ran their own business during any period of their lives. This “imbalance” reflects—at least to some extent—the real occupational divisions that existed in the Polish

<sup>4</sup> All biographical interviews were conducted at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences, in three stages. The original project of the pilot biographical study was developed by Dr. Piotr Filipkowski in cooperation with Dr. Katarzyna Andrejuk and carried out with the participation of Danuta Życzyńska-Ciołek. The latter then continued this undertaking under two separate projects. Most of the interviews are available in Polish from the IFiS PAN Qualitative Data Archive ([www.adj.ifispan.pl](http://www.adj.ifispan.pl)).

society during the times of the Polish People’s Republic. The basic socio-demographic characteristics of the narrators are presented in the appendix at the end of this article.

The consequence of selecting narrators from among the participants drawn (formerly) for the POLPAN survey is that the “biographical subsample” consists of people who experienced systemic transformation in different ways, or even, in their own opinion, did not experience it at all. They were not usually active actors in social and political life during the transformation period. They did not belong to the elites (neither old nor new) that shaped the new reality at a supra-individual level. The reason why they were selected for biographical research was also not because they belonged to the category of “beneficiaries” or “victims” of the transformation (Pisz 2000), its “winners” or “losers” (Jarosz 2005). To a certain extent, their ways of experiencing transformation may therefore overlap with the experiences of other so-called “ordinary” Poles, although, of course, we cannot speak of any “qualitative representativeness” here.

Although participants of the biographical project formally belong to the category of “the oldest POLPAN respondents,” they do not represent a homogeneous age group and they certainly do not represent a *generation* in the sociological sense. The birth dates of the oldest and youngest narrators are as many as 20 years apart, which means that their socialization, education, and entering adulthood took place under very different historical circumstances: in the case of the oldest respondents, these processes had begun before WWII and were brutally interrupted by

it, while in the case of the youngest ones, those processes fell entirely within the first two decades of the Polish People's Republic. As a consequence, the participants of the biographical project differ significantly in their experiences during the most formative periods of their lives, that is, childhood and youth.<sup>5</sup> Also, the time of transformational breakthrough, which was conventionally set (at least until recently<sup>6</sup>) in 1989, "found" the narrators on various life stages: the oldest ones had already reached the age of 65 and sometimes had at least a few years of retirement behind them, while the youngest did not reach the age of 50 and had to face the labor market turbulences. Their experience and the way they lived through systemic transformation could therefore be varied also because of that reason, which probably has not been fully captured in this paper.

As the aspect of age is important for the analysis presented in this article, it is worth mentioning that there is a significant age difference between the narrators and the interviewees. The researchers who conducted the biographical interviews were in their 30s or 40s at that time, so they were at least 30 years (and sometimes many more) younger than the interviewees. I will refer to this fact in the next section of this article.

<sup>5</sup> In her book on adolescence of young people from intellectual families born in 1926-1930, Hanna Świda-Ziemia (2003) wrote about how the age difference of even one year could have significantly influenced the processes of socialization and education.

<sup>6</sup> In the CBOS survey of January 2019, the respondents were asked: "Which event can be said to mark the end of the communist system in Poland?" The highest percentage of those surveyed, 25%, chose, "The first completely democratic elections to the Polish Parliament and Senate in 1991," while 22% indicated the "Round Table Talks in the spring of 1989." Ten years earlier, the respective percentages were 9% and 40% (CBOS 2019b).

The intention of the biographical project's authors was to conduct the interviews using the method of Fritz Schütze's (1983; 2016) autobiographical narrative interview, which means that the first, fundamental phase of the interview should consist in the respondents' free-flowing narrative on their own lives. In practice, the conversation often took the form of an unstructured, in-depth interview, usually with longer narrative fragments (Filipkowski and Życzyńska-Ciołek 2019). Also, the research was not aimed (especially initially) at exploring any specific subject or sociological problem (in particular: the systemic transformation experience). The researchers did not have a predetermined list of topics to be addressed or questions to be asked, whether in the final phase of the interview (if the interview was conducted according to the planned pattern), or in the course of the interview (if this form was not retained). Nevertheless, as far as events such as significant historical and political changes are concerned, the researchers usually asked questions about WWII and the period of transformational changes (if the interviewee did not raise these topics him/herself).

For the purpose of this article, I did not conduct an in-depth analysis of interviews using the Fritz Schütze's method, although I sometimes invoke his terminology and assumptions. I treated the interviews in a cross-sectional way, looking for references to the events of the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>7</sup> In each case, however, before quoting or interpreting an interviewee's statement, I considered it in the context of the entire narrated biography. I focused on those fragments of the interviews that were narrative in

<sup>7</sup> I performed thematic coding (Gibbs 2007) using the MAXQDA software.

nature, that is, when the interviewees talked about events they took part in or events which took place in their immediate vicinity. These parts of the narratives were often accompanied by vivid emotions. I treated fragments which contained general opinions or comparisons (especially comparisons of the period "after the transformation"—or the narrative "present"—with the times of the Polish People's Republic) in a secondary way and I have not analyzed them in detail here. I assume that the analysis of narrative fragments allows us to get better insights into the interviewees' experiences at the time than the analysis of descriptive or argumentative parts. Although it seems appropriate to consider the "mediating aspect of time" (Piotrowski 2016a:239) and influences of public discourse(s) when collecting stories about events that took place 20 or 30 years ago, in this article, I decided to leave aside the issue of collective memory of systemic transformation, which has been already discussed by other authors (e.g., Bernhard and Kubik 2014; Breuer and Delius 2017; Laczó and Wawrzyniak 2017).

### (Non)Presence of Transformation in Biographical Narratives

The first thing that draws attention when looking for "transformation themes" in the biographical interviews with the POLPAN respondents is the small number of spontaneous references to the historical circumstances and events of the 1980s and 1990s. This "omission" is not limited to purely political events (such as the Round Table Talks), which some of the narrators could then probably view as something that took place "somewhere far away, in Warsaw," in the sphere of politics that they were not

interested in. It seemed more interesting to me that the interviewees relatively rarely spontaneously referred even to those social consequences of systemic transformation that were potentially felt in everyday life, such as, for example, the hyperinflation of 1989-1990 or unemployment rising in the 1990s. The narrators' stories about this period of their own biographies most often focused on situations from their family or occupational life, sometimes on health problems, and were devoid of a broader context, while the background for the events usually involved the closest social environment, co-created by the members of the narrator's family, friends, or co-workers. If we recall the distinction between two styles of narration developed in the 1990s by the Department of Sociology of Culture at the University of Lodz, one can say that the narratives discussed here were most often "inrooted in a *milieu*," while the cases of being "inrooted in history (theory)" were relatively rare (Piotrowski 2016a; 2016b).<sup>8</sup> Adam Mrozowicki (2011:125) uses the expressions "neutralization of history" and "private frames of remembering" to characterize such a narrative style that omits the broader social and historical background. However, if references to the socio-political situation spontaneously appeared in interviews, they usually did when the "grand" history became directly present in the narrator's life, or the lives of

<sup>8</sup> "Inrooting in history means...the narrator's tendency to place and interpret their own biographical and inter-biographical processes in the plan of historical and social macro processes and refer to theoretical categories (knowledge) and/or various ideological and historiographical models. From this perspective, the course of one's own experiences is presented as a case that illustrates a general regularity. Inrooting in a *milieu*, on the other hand, involves telling and interpreting one's own experiences in terms of the course of events and dependencies taking place on a micro scale of the immediate living environment" (Piotrowski 2016b:49).

their closest friends, which means that it was difficult for the narrator to explain their individual situation or the reasons behind their decisions without invoking history. It was often the case that the memories of these events were accompanied by emotions, still strong after 25 or 30 years. The kinds of situations and decisions that are meant here will be explained later on.

What happened when the researcher directly asked a question about the events of the 1980s and 1990s and their reflection in the narrator's life? Most often, the interlocutor recalled certain experiences and situations from their life or from the life of their immediate social circle that were connected with the transformational changes. Occasionally, these memories were placed in the context of collective identity, for example, the experiences of one's own socio-professional group. If the interviewee did not refer to the events from their own life when answering the researcher's question, they sometimes expressed general opinions and views on the changes that took place in the country (such reflections, not rooted in biographical experience, will be treated as a background in this article, since I am mostly interested in narratives about events). In a few interviews, however, the narrators clearly stated that—from their subjective perspective—they had not noticed systemic transformation at all, or had not been interested in it.

The absence or weak presence of historical circumstances in a biographical narrative may stem from various reasons. However, the issue of reasons suggests that this situation constitutes an exception that needs to be clarified. Perhaps the opposite

is true: the focus on the spheres of family,<sup>9</sup> work, and health is the norm, while the exceptions from this norm should be explained. However, in the discussion below, I will refer to the explanations I found in the empirical material.

Firstly, the narrators themselves sometimes explain their lack of interest in socio-political events by referring to their heavy burden of hard work that left neither time nor energy to look at their own lives from a broader perspective. Paradoxically, sometimes this justification coincides with a high value placed on such work. This factor would explain the absence of “grand” history in the narratives of the majority of farmers from our set of interviews, especially those who were poorly educated, sometimes struggling with difficult material situation, and sometimes simply attached to the idea of “hard work” as one of the central values of peasant tradition. One example can be a statement by Stefan,<sup>10</sup> a farmer who was also a manual worker of the railways:

I wasn't particularly interested...I wasn't interested in that or... Because there was no time, you know, to follow it, because I had, well, I had 16 hectares of fields here! It was waiting for work to be done, and the animals... Four cows, two horses... You know, I had a lot of work to do. [W2/19]

However, a similar focus on tasks related to work can also be found in the biographical story of a private entrepreneur with secondary education, who managed his own business until the age of 75 (and later

<sup>9</sup> As CBOS surveys (2017; 2019c) show, most Poles invariably point out that family is the most important value for them.

<sup>10</sup> The names of the interlocutors have been changed.

worked part-time). When asked about the transformation, he immediately recalled an investment he was making at the time, and moved on to discuss its organizational and financial details, without any direct reference to the broader socio-political or economic situation. As this example suggests, it may not always be about the external necessity to focus on the sphere of work, but, instead, it is sometimes about a more or less conscious choice of priorities in life or about highly internationalized values.

Secondly, the focus on events from everyday or private life can be temporary, for example, caused by unexpected, sometimes dramatic events that coincided with the period of systemic transformation (as in the case of the female narrator who became a care provider of a disabled grandchild at that time, and experienced serious family problems). The interviews conducted within other studies (Mach 2018) and by myself in other projects<sup>11</sup> indicate that the argument “I didn't have mental space for it at the time” is also used in relation to systemic transformation by younger people who started their adult lives during that period: they entered into relationships, started families, or were absorbed in their student life.

Thirdly, I believe that in the case of some interlocutors who fared quite well in the socialist system and held relatively high positions in it, the omission of the transformation as a topic may be due to their difficulties in surviving the collapse of the system and

<sup>11</sup> For instance, the project “RePast—Revisiting the Past, Anticipating the Future,” funded from the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Program (Grant Agreement no. 769252).

the concerns about today's evaluation of the narrators' previous role and attitudes.<sup>12</sup> In Fritz Schütze's terminology, we would be dealing here with the fading out of awareness (*Ausblendung*): whether unintentional (in the past) or intentional (currently).<sup>13</sup> Omission of difficult experiences may be connected with insufficient trust in the researcher, additionally reinforced by the current (as well as previous, existing in the early 1990s) public discourse, which stigmatized anything connected with the Polish People's Republic. Another reason for distrust may also be that the researcher—a person who is several decades younger—will not understand the complexity of the circumstances under which the narrator made his/her life decisions.

The fourth explanation would be related to the relativization of the importance of transformational changes: in the context of the narrators' other difficult experiences during their long lives, such changes may seem to be a relatively insignificant

<sup>12</sup> I suppose it might have been equally difficult for some people to talk about participation in ownership transformations (privatization) in the 1990s, but I did not find such references in the interviews.

<sup>13</sup> One example is the biographical story of Maria, a civil servant who worked for 35 years in one of the central government agencies. She retired in late 1989 under circumstances that were not fully explained in the interview. As she says, a new person was employed in the office at that time and she “reported to others.” The narrator presents the previous atmosphere and working conditions in the office with great sentiment, she also defends good opinions about Jerzy Urban, who was the face of government propaganda in the 1980s. At the same time, she answers the question about systemic transformation as follows: “You know, I have that character, my husband says I don't give a damn about anything...I didn't feel any such changes really” (W1/10). The interview reader can be struck by the contradiction between good memories of the socialist times and the narrator's marginalization (even banalization) of the experience of the collapse of this system. In this respect, Maria's story contrasts with that of another narrator, Elżbieta, who openly spoke about her membership in ORMÓ (volunteer citizens' police) and her role in blocking the establishment of “Solidarity” in the office where she worked in a management position.

historical turmoil. WWII, which ruined the childhood and youth of some interviewees, sometimes seems to be much more important in the contemporary narratives (despite the considerable distance in time) than any subsequent historical circumstances.<sup>14</sup> The *longue durée* perspective used by the older narrators to view their lives is evidenced by the fact that when asked about the general assessment of the socialist period in Poland, they sometimes use comparisons referring not to the years after systemic transformation or to the present day, but to the situation before WWII, and they do so in the context of their own biographical experiences. Traumas and turning points in personal life (e.g., death of a child, sudden death of a beloved spouse) also may push other experiences to the background.

Fifthly, it seems that people who were not associated with any institution or company during the transition period (e.g., those who were economically inactive at the time) usually experienced the effects of the transformation in a less intensive way in their own lives and, therefore, sometimes do not mention those events in their narratives, unless the consequences of systemic changes were manifested in the lives of their loved ones, for example, their spouse or children. However, as regards people who were employed at that time, it should also be noted that the effects of transformation, both those perceived as positive and those felt as negative, were experienced differently in different working environments. Obviously, the type of position occupied at work could

also have had an impact on the narrator's life trajectory in the transition period.

Sixthly, the inability to comment on the situation in the late 1980s and early 1990s may stem from the belief that the question about abstract "transformations" or "changes" is more about the world of "serious politics," which the interlocutor is not interested in,<sup>15</sup> has no influence on, or does not feel competent to comment on, and not about the experience of everyday life. The latter interpretation would be supported by a statement by Jacek, a foreman in a construction company, whose free-flowing narrative presented the reasons for his dismissal in the early 1990s as a coincidence of two circumstances: the manager's unfavorable attitude and the then poor economic situation in the country. However, when asked directly about the "transformation of 1989" and the accompanying feelings, Jacek answered:

[T]hat was a time when that unwanted man [not accepted by me] was my manager. And I was really so busy with my problems that I didn't care about the rest... [I] didn't care much...I was busy with myself...That's why I won't tell you anything about this topic. [W1/2]

<sup>15</sup> The POLPAN survey regularly asks a question about the respondents' degree of interest in politics. In 2018, a total of 17.2% of all respondents declared that they were interested in politics to a large or very large extent, 38.3% to a moderate extent, and 44.4%—to a small extent or not at all (weighted data). Among POLPAN participants aged 72 and over, the percentage of respondents interested in politics was slightly higher, but they were still the minority—the corresponding levels of interest were 23.6%, 38.9%, and 37.2% respectively. In addition, in 2003, the respondents were asked the following open-ended question: "Throughout your entire life, what was the most important political event for you, the one you felt or experienced the most?" Despite the question wording, suggesting a reference to personal experience, as many as 34% of respondents did not answer that question (Wysmułek and Wysmułek 2016). These data prove that many Poles feel a sense of alienation from the world of politics.

<sup>14</sup> Kaźmierska and Schütze (2013:125) also mention the memory of World War II, "still alive and dominant in the discourse of biographical and collective memory."

At this point in the conversation, the narrator treated his career problems (which were clearly the consequence of systemic transformation) as an experience that was separated from the political and economic decisions taken at the country level at that time.

To sum up this part of the discussion: most of the discussed biographical narratives revolve around important events in personal lives or careers of the narrators or their loved ones. During the narrators' long lives, family ties often proved to be more stable and guaranteed a greater sense of security than the changing social and political circumstances. In this sense, interviewees place the "grand historical events" at the margin of their lives. On the other hand, the interlocutors had either limited influence or no influence on the historical circumstances (WWII, post-war poverty, Stalinist years, economic crises, etc.) accompanying successive stages of their lives, but they had to deal with the consequences. In the vast majority of cases, their *individual agencies* manifested themselves in reactions to the "wind of history" rather than an active influence on the mainstream course of events. In this sense, the narrators' lives happened on the margins of "grand history." The political, social, and economic changes of the 1980s and 1990s do not generally seem worth incorporating among the central events from one's own biography, unless they had a direct, non-negligible impact on individual life courses.

### What Do the Narrators Talk About? Dominant Topics, Situations, and Events

In this part of the article, I will present three selected thematic threads concerning the period of systemic

transformation, which were raised by the narrators when talking about their experiences (about the events from their own lives). One common feature is that these threads were repeated in a relatively large number of interviews. They all concern the sphere of work and employment.

#### The Need to Make Career Decisions in Conditions of Great Uncertainty

The issues of the narrators' occupational situation in the context of the political events of the early 1980s, the economic crisis, personnel changes in institutions and companies, the labor market transformations in the 1990s, and the legal regulations changing with high frequency are present in almost twenty narratives. Many narrators were making important career decisions at that time, and did so in circumstances of considerable uncertainty. Some of them, seeing the deteriorating situation in their manufacturing plant or fearing that the reorganization of their institution would be detrimental for them, voluntarily applied for collective redundancies. Others, who had earned the relevant entitlements, opted for retirement or the so-called early retirement. The legal regulations at the time facilitated such decisions; there was a system of welfare benefits to help people who were only a few years from reaching retirement age (Cichon, Hagemeyer, and Ruck 1997). The narrators often present their decisions as a combined result of the situation at work and other factors, for example, care duties in the family (spouse's illness, the need to help in looking after grandchildren, etc.). A recurring topic in the interviews is that of changing legal regulations and uncertainty as to whether the moment of making a decision is good: in some cases, a difference of a few

days or weeks had measurable consequences, for example, it affected the amount of pension granted. In several cases, the narrators who voluntarily left their workplace to receive some kind of welfare benefit worked at the same place later, even for several years, usually on a part-time basis. Sometimes the managers of enterprises and institutions tried to circumvent the law to benefit the employees, as was the case with the factory where Maciej was employed:

Well, there was a transition period before retirement. Because then the laws made it easier, no special effort was needed. The enterprise was officially declaring that it was eliminating this position, even though it wasn't true. Often, you would continue to work for five years in the same position. But, your certificate of employment stated that you worked on another position or something. [W1/21]

Some narrators took up new jobs after retirement. However, they do not talk about this as a turning point which marked a new and important stage in their occupational path, but, rather, they view it as an "add-on" to their previous career, driven by the need to earn more money. Sometimes they were exposed to new organizational culture and work relations (often seen as inferior by the interviewees). This was the case with Tomasz:

You know, in these private companies, the atmosphere was completely different. No one trusted anyone, no friendly relations. [W1/19]

However, interviews also include stories of dismissal or forced retirement, not accepted by the employee. One of the most dramatic stories is that of Jacek,

who suffered a stroke after receiving a termination notice (during a period of intense unemployment in his region of residence). Paradoxically, however, he considers this to be a positive fact, since he received a disability pension as a result, which enabled him to survive until his retirement. Another narrator had been working in a low-status job for several years before his retirement. Although the narrators sometimes complained about the low amount of pension granted during the transition period,<sup>16</sup> none of them mentioned having a personal experience of long-term unemployment or total lack of means of subsistence.<sup>17</sup>

#### **Personnel Changes, Interpersonal Tensions at the Workplace, "Helping Hands"**

The changes experienced by the narrators in the 1980s and 1990s often had the "faces" of specific people who were involved. The themes concerning interpersonal relations are very diverse. Some memories concern antagonisms that appeared between the members of the Communist Party (Polish United Workers' Party, PZPR) or official trade unions and supporters of the "Solidarity" trade union (NSZZ Solidarność). In several interviews, one can notice criticism of specif-

<sup>16</sup> "The amount of benefits was kept low. This was due to a sharp increase in the number of pension recipients receiving a pension between 1989 and 1991. Many people were already sent to retire early before 1989 in order to reduce the extent of latent unemployment. In view of such a large number of beneficiaries, it became impossible to maintain the level of pensions" (Ziomek 1999:63-64).

<sup>17</sup> Sometimes the narrators mentioned such experiences in relation to their children. Socio-economic consequences (especially those negative) of changes introduced in the 1990s have been widely described in the Polish sociological literature; see, e.g., Beskid (1992), Karwacki (2002), Palska (2002), Tarkowska (2000), Tarkowska and Sikorska (1995), Tarkowska, Warzywoda-Kruszyńska, and Wódz (2003), Warzywoda-Kruszyńska (1998).

ic people from the narrators' immediate social circle who joined the "Solidarity" movement, sometimes performing important functions there<sup>18</sup>; following the changes of 1989-1990, some of those people took up managerial positions in the narrators' institutions or enterprises. The narrators accuse these people of hypocrisy and double standards: in their view, some of them had previously actively supported the Communist Party, but when the political sentiments changed, they began to declare pro-Solidarity views with zeal. Such people were also sometimes accused by the narrators of denunciation, lack of solidarity with other employees, attempts to make an easy career, making financial gains from being a trade union activist, incompetence, or even immoral or illegal behavior in private life. All the narrators who expressed such opinions had been members of the Communist Party in the past, although—according to their own declarations—they were forced to join and were not actively involved in the party.

Sometimes new executives and managers faced mistrust not because of their specific political behavior or attitudes, but rather because of their young age:

Later on, when things changed, we went private [the enterprise became privatized], and the young people were promoted and became our bosses. Whoever spoke English, knew about computers, and was under thirty was promoted as a branch manager or a floor manager. Those people often lacked professional experience and, above all, life experience. [W1/21]

<sup>18</sup> Although this is not always explicitly stated, all these situations seem to concern the so-called "second Solidarity," that is, the revival of the trade union in the late 1980s.

Tensions between employees may also have been caused by a sense of threat due to potential redundancies or unemployment:

Well, later on, when the changes began, things changed a bit. Things weren't so nice anymore, there weren't good relations at work, things were different... An employee talking with an employee, you had to be careful what you say and to whom. [W2/6]

The interviews also include memories of specific difficult situations connected with interpersonal relations during the period of change. Janusz, who came to Silesia to find work in the early 1960s and joined the Polish United Workers' Party to obtain housing ("it was more of a room"), recalls the pacification of the workers' strike in the Wujek coal mine shortly after the introduction of martial law in Poland (December 1981):

At the workplace, even though they were colleagues, they would spit at my feet because I was a party member. [W2/11]

Barbara, the headmistress of a rural primary school, reported a situation when one of the teachers hung a cross in the school. The narrator was summoned to the municipal council to explain the matter. The whole situation made her so upset that she decided to retire (it was in 1987). Another narrator, Aldona, believes that her dismissal was facilitated by an unfriendly colleague who presented a negative opinion about her to the new manager.

However, the research material also contains stories about the narrators receiving assistance from friendly



people or simply competent officials, or about human bonds which brought about new experiences during the period of change. Elżbieta, a fairly high-ranking official in the town hall, recalls a phone call from a friend of hers employed by the Social Insurance Institution (ZUS), which helped her to retire at a favorable moment (as a result, her pension was higher<sup>19</sup>). This situation can obviously be viewed negatively as an example of a member of the former nomenclature using resources that were not available to others. However, the narratives also mentioned examples of support provided under more “democratic” rules, also by persons representing various institutions. Teresa, a cleaning lady, received valuable help from a legal advisor from the public employment services: following the advice, she wrote a letter to the Voivod (head of province) and obtained permission to extend her unemployed status for an additional year, which helped her to financially survive until retirement, taking advantage of unemployment benefits. Tomasz, a technician in a construction company, was offered a job in a private company after retirement: the company was headed by a woman who used to work in his former workplace and who “wanted to hire a trusted person” (W1/19) in her newly established company.

### Turbulent Times for Factory Employees

The narrators who worked in manufacturing facilities often mention what happened to their enterprises during the period of systemic transformation.<sup>20</sup> In

<sup>19</sup> At least for some time, because later, as the narrator mentions, the legislation that made this possible was considered unfair and a financial adjustment was made to the benefit.

<sup>20</sup> This is also done by people who did not work in such plants, but observed changes occurring in their place of residence.

more than ten interviews the narrators mentioned the liquidation of the manufacturing plant, the gradual limitation of output and workforce, or the privatization of the enterprise, sometimes involving a division into several or even several dozen companies, the plant’s assets being stolen or purchased by foreign capital. I will not provide here any quotes from the interviews because this type of narrative is widely known, and I will elaborate on this subject in the following section. The prevailing attitude towards those changes in the interviews is, of course, negative. Comments on positive outcomes of such transformation are very rare.

Of course, the three issues highlighted above do not exhaust all of the themes contained in the interviews. I decided to discuss only these three because, as mentioned earlier, they recurred in a relatively large number of interviews, and they also provide a good introduction to the last part of this article, devoted to the meaning of the events of the 1980s and 1990s for the narrators and different ways of dealing with them emotionally.

### The Biographical Meaning of the Systemic Transformation Experiences

How did the narrators see the significance of their experiences during systemic transformation? How did those POLPAN respondents who mentioned the transformation-related events from their own lives incorporate these experiences into their biographies? How did these experiences affect their sense of identity, the sense of life, or their own self-image presented in a biographical story? What kinds of emotions are present in those memories? I attempt to answer these

questions in this part of the article. Below I present selected “combinations” of the ways in which the narrators experienced systemic changes and how they incorporated them into their own biographies.

As I wrote earlier, many interviews lacked (extensive) references to events from the period of systemic transformation. Therefore, I decided to present here only three—in my opinion most distinctive—patterns that emerged from the research material, illustrated with quotes from selected interviews. When making a choice, I was guided by the following criteria: (a) in the chosen interviews, the material concerning the experiences of the systemic transformation period was relatively rich, (b) the narrators spoke about the events in which they personally participated, (c) judging from the content and structure of the interviews, these events were important for understanding the biographical path of the interviewees.

### Life “Put into Question”—Two Versions

“Indeed, communism was repressive, but for many people, it was the home they had learned to live in.” This statement, attributed to Jacek Kuroń by Zbigniew Mikolejko (2019:30), is a good reflection of the experiences reported by some narrators. In particular, the communist system became a “home” for some people from peasant or working class backgrounds, who took advantage of the educational opportunities and social advancement, usually associated with membership in the Communist Party (PZPR), where such membership was treated more or less instrumentally.<sup>21</sup> Even if they noticed the re-

<sup>21</sup> An interesting article on upward social mobility of women in the Polish People’s Republic was written on the basis of

pressive aspects of the system, their own biographical experience was sometimes so positive that they played down any contradictory information. One of the strategies to reduce the sense of participation in a system that was morally dubious could be to focus on working conscientiously and minimizing political involvement. That was the choice of Aldona, who had been employed as a city clerk for many years. For people like her, the change of political and economic system represented a threat. Indeed, the narrator was forced to retire early:

[I] retired after I turned fifty-five. I mean, I didn’t want to, but it was the whole, so to speak, transformation of these systems, and we were just... People like me, who performed some functions, especially in the home affairs department. People always said it was a political department. That’s where various things were arranged. Well, all of the people who worked there were chased away. So I retired at the age of fifty-five in 1990...I was very bitter because... I wouldn’t want to show you all this, but I was a highly valued employee, I received awards. I was awarded the Knight’s Cross, a Gold Cross of Merit, a Silver Cross. I collected the Gold and Silver Cross of Merit in Warsaw. I was extremely bitter, and my mother’s illness overwhelmed me so much that I decided not to do anything. Leave it the way it is. However, I still regret it because I did not deserve to be thrown out of the picture just like this; I had done thorough, honest work. [W1/6]

As we can infer from the last sentence (and from other fragments of the interview, not quoted here), the narrator has not managed to deal emotionally

selected interviews from the discussed collection (Andrejuk 2016).

with the forced retirement to this day. For her, systemic transformation brought about a breakdown of biographical order, or—using Schütze’s terminology—a beginning of trajectory.

Also Feliks, a long-term director of a technical college and a member of the Polish United Workers’ Party (PZPR), found himself in a situation where, in the second half of the 1980s, his entire career, and perhaps also his life, was put under symbolic assessment. As he recalls, he passed the “exam” at that time:

[Y]ou needed to renew your appointment once every five years. Towards the end of my service time I faced a dilemma. I wasn’t sure if they would appoint me for another term of office or not. But, strangely enough, the “Solidarity” trade union at the school wrote a long essay saying that, “he is the only guy.” The teachers approved it, saying: [the narrator’s name] will be the headmaster. [W3/4]

Together with the oldest school headmasters, Feliks was appointed to this position for an indefinite term. However, it soon became apparent that the new education authorities, related to “Solidarity,” intended to cancel the previous arrangements and introduce a periodic assessment of all school headmasters. At that moment (it was 1991), the narrator decided to retire. Since then, he has used his spare time to collect materials on the history of the school where he used to work and to write down his memories. Some of those materials have been published as a book. During the interview, Feliks was most happy to talk about his school and his past career. One could get the impression that he is mentally liv-

ing in the past. He mentions meetings with former students in the interview:

[T]here are such sentences that I hear. One of my former students would say: “Hey, you old commie.” But, many others say: “You are, or were, the foundation of respect, and you promoted respect for the school.” And that’s a beautiful end of my service as a teacher. [W3/4]

There is no room for in-depth analysis of both interviews, so I will try to provide a brief summary: both narrators deeply experienced changes brought about by systemic transformation. In their case, these changes were associated with the end of their professional careers. Moreover, for Aldona and Feliks, the arrival of the new system meant calling into question the life path they had chosen, and undermining its value. The transformation-related changes resulted not only in a change of the narrators’ status on the labor market, but were also perceived as an “attack” on the identity they had developed over the years, with essential components such as solid, reliable work done with commitment and dedication (“service,” as described by Feliks), as well as decency and making sure not to harm anyone. The narrators still defend this identity, also in front of the researcher who conducted the interviews.

However, there is another, more common form of “feeling at home” in the previous system. It was experienced not only by people who occupied managerial positions during socialist times, but also by those who worked in bottom-level positions and were not PZPR members. This feeling is connected with the stability of employment and, indirectly, sta-

bility of life guaranteed by the communist system. One striking element in the collected narratives was the long period of work in a single company or institution mentioned by the interviewees: this period often stretched over 30 or even 40 years. The prevailing pattern of an occupational career trajectory in the interviews is that of an “anchor” (Domecka and Mrozowicki 2008). Quite naturally, such a long period of employment was conducive to various relations with the workplace and the co-workers that were established and then developed over the years. The feeling of attachment (to the workplace and to the workmates) was strengthened by the emphasis on collectivism and the priority given to the “common good” in the official propaganda, as well as by the pride related to being part of the modernization of the country in those years. In this context, the “annihilation of communist order” (Golczyńska-Grondas and Potoczna 2016:25), resulting in redundancies in many enterprises and institutions or a collapse of those entities, and the destabilization of the labor market, generated a sense of regret, humiliation, rejection, and “cancellation” of important areas of people’s biographies. Perhaps this also stretched onto the sense of identity which consisted of such basis components as the belief in having made a personal contribution to the success of the organization and a sense of solidarity with colleagues.

The experiences of this kind can be illustrated with the case of Lucyna. She had worked her entire career as a skilled worker in large and prosperous plants manufacturing aircraft, helicopters, and their parts, for domestic and foreign markets. The narrator was strongly attached to her workplace. In the interview,

she recalled that before her early retirement the company had no other orders and, as a result, produced potato graters, among other things. Although Lucyna is very brief here, the context of her entire narrative indicates that the “potato grater” becomes a symbol of humiliation and a loss of the sense of dignity enjoyed by the workers of what used to be a flagship plant in the Polish People’s Republic.

In turn, Zbigniew, who was employed for many years as a carpenter producing furniture and other wooden products, talks about the construction of a new hall, which the employees volunteered to build without remuneration, and about the later history of the cooperative:

And the new plant was also in [the name of the town]...but it was a bit out of town. I had bad feelings about it. I had already left [the cooperative], but my colleagues would go there to work. The plant was nicely built in the 1980s. It went on until the 1990s, they sold the plant to some private guy for little money. And selling was not that much of an issue, but that guy fired half of the people. He sacked them. Only a half of them stayed on, and then, whenever I met colleagues, everyone complained. They said, “We had put so much effort into it...” Well, we volunteered to build that plant, for free. We just had our regular wages, and we, and we worked after hours to build that plant. We would gather in groups... Well, we did various things to build it as soon as possible, to... [Before] [i]t was like this: there was a plant here, downstairs, there were halls, and people were living upstairs. Yeah, in the town, in the old buildings. And it was a bit dangerous already and, secondly, it was horribly cramped. When we built the elegant halls, that was

quite a different story. But, we didn't enjoy it for too long. Things turned out differently. [W2/8]

Anselm L. Strauss (1959:93) called the turning points to be "critical incidents that occur to force the person to recognize that 'I am not the same as I was, as I used to be.'" The situation is different in the case of narrators experiencing the feeling that the value of their entire life was being undermined: with the systemic transformation, their identity was called into question by the changed social environment.<sup>22</sup> If they show nostalgia for the past, it can be not only an expression of the trauma they experienced, connected with the sudden and radical change (Sztompka 2000), or a tool for criticizing the present (Mikołajewska-Zajac and Wawrzyniak 2016), but above all an attempt to defend their own identity and preserve their self-image. As Krystyna Kersten (2006:152-153; cf. also Synak 2000) wrote, a positive attitude towards the period of the Polish People's Republic could stem from defending the sense of one's own life:

To put it simply, those who believed in the communist utopia, those who—after adapting to the unwanted, but real situation—were rebuilding Warsaw with great commitment, building Nowa Huta, according to their understanding multiplying the nation's wealth, lifting Poland from centuries-long civilization backwardness, serving the society as doctors, teachers, developing Polish culture and science, and finally those who owed their social,

material, and cultural advancement to the "people's rule," are less inclined to criticize the Polish People's Republic because this would entail depreciating their attitudes and contradict the image stored in their memory.

### Disappointment and Unfulfilled Hopes

Some of the narrators were more or less active in supporting the changes in the 1980s, but felt disappointed later. "Later" could mean very different periods: sometimes the disappointment occurred even before the first partially free elections in 1989, sometimes it coexisted with intense unemployment and liquidation of plants in the 1990s, sometimes emerged under the rule of the Civic Platform in 2007-2015, and sometimes appeared only recently, after the Law and Justice party started to implement its program called "Good Change" (since 2015). However, I will focus on the disappointments of the first period of systemic transformation. An example of a person with such experience is Antoni, who had worked as a driver in a poultry plant for 37 years. In the first minutes of the interview, he quotes an episode from his life, probably from the 1980s. Antoni was told to take the office workers from the plant, including the new director, "assigned" by the party, to a propaganda meeting held in a nearby city. Unexpectedly, the director invited Antoni to join the assembly (according to the narrator, the aim was to boost the number of attendees). During the meeting, the director told the participants about the need to "tighten the belt": they should not expect salary increases in the nearest future, but rather, unfortunately, price rises in the shops. Antoni describes the follow-up events as follows:

He finished the discussion, that's all. I got up. And I started preaching to him! I addressed him as "citizen," as I had been taught. I couldn't say "comrade" because I wasn't a party member myself. There were no "Misters" at that time [I could not use this word], there were only "citizens." So I said, "Citizen Director, you know, I was taught that under socialism we would achieve prosperity, and what kind of prosperity is here? You are giving us one kilogram of meat per month! Food coupons? Is this prosperity?! These are actually survival rations." Everyone applauded me! [He claps]. And one woman...she rushed towards me, kissed me on the cheek. I swear! They applauded me! The guys say, "Fuck, he's gonna fire you now." "No, he won't, I told him the truth!" Everyone knew it, but nobody would say it because everyone was afraid... [I] continued: "When I was a child, my sisters would take me to the forest, to pick blueberries, cowberries, we would gather them. When the forest was getting bigger and darker, and there were no blueberries, we'd go back because there was a wrong track. Same thing here: we went astray, stepped off the path to socialism. Socialism was supposed to lead to prosperity. But, there was no such thing as prosperity here." That's what happened, ma'am. [W2/2]

From the very beginning of the interview, Antoni presents himself as a person who was critical of the then political system and who, perhaps under the influence of an impulse, gained a great deal of civil courage and acted as a people's tribune, hurling "the king is naked" directly in the face of the man who represented the authorities: socialism was supposed to look different. The interview does not provide much more information about the narrator's anti-communism involvement. He emphasizes that

despite repeated pressure, he never joined the PZPR party, but was a member of the "Solidarity" movement. He says that during the period of systemic transformation, party members working in the factory "turned tails." But, soon Antoni gets emotional about what happened later to the plant. He sharply criticizes Lech Wałęsa and believes that the leader of "Solidarity" cooperated with the communist regime. The respondent also blames Wałęsa for not holding the communists, especially the UB (Polish Secret Police) members, accountable. He accuses the new political elites, as well as those who have taken over plants located in one of the cities of the region within the privatization process, of getting overly rich:

Look, three guys grabbed that company and turned themselves into millionaires. And they don't respect the people. [W2/2]

Antoni's outrage expressed in this fragment of the interview can be seen as echoing the media coverage because it cannot be a result of his personal experience. However, the narrator also makes references to the latter. The company he worked for was involved in the production and sale of chicken eggs. The narrator is proud to point out that the output was exported to Germany, Italy, and even Saudi Arabia during socialist times:

And the plant, not really a plant [sense: relatively small], but, you know, they generated so much revenue! Revenue for the government, but also people from the village would breed chickens and sell eggs. The eggs were good because the breeding was wild. Later on, people set up these industrial farms, and the eggs weren't the same anymore. [W2/2]

<sup>22</sup> In the article, I refer mainly to specific events that contributed to the emergence of this feeling among the narrators, but the anti-communist public discourse is a separate issue: some narrators argue against this discourse in the interviews.

When the narrator was retiring, the plant was already in decline, and was subsequently liquidated. This makes Antoni bitter.

Similar feelings were expressed by Lucyna, the aforementioned technical controller at the aircraft plant. Yet her biography is more complicated. Lucyna was active both in organizations supported by the former regime (Polish Youth Association, Polish United Workers' Party, and Women's League) and in "Solidarity." There is no clear moment in her biography when she would change her views; it seems that contradictory ideological currents often simply coexisted in her life. The experience that could have tipped the balance (but it did not) was the involvement of her son, a student, in strikes at a university and the resulting need to hide from the authorities during the martial law. Lucyna says that during this period she not only faced the militia looking for her son, but also took part in demonstration walks during the time of night TV news shows (these walks were supposed to show the authorities that the citizens did not accept the propaganda sent via the media). When asked about her "Solidarity" membership, she says:

Of course, I always had to get involved. That's how it was. I always had the urge to get involved. When there was Solidarity, ma'am, I was on the social committee, but then I quit Solidarity because I didn't like it. I was on the [Solidarity] committee, and so on. From the very beginning, I tried to help them organize themselves in the plant, help the people, because I always had some volunteering in the plant, some kind of social work. But, most of all, I was involved in the social sector—I organized children's camps, and kids would go there. All kinds of things. And there were all kinds of unions,

different societies, they always asked me to join in, to keep an eye on things...to attend the party [PZPR] meetings...I was always involved in things. [W1/3]

Lucyna quit "Solidarity" for several reasons. She did not like the people who became members of the works council and she was discouraged by the disproportionately high salary of the union chairman. As she says, she thought it was suspicious that the "Solidarity" members did not have membership cards (perhaps she was upset about the lack of transparency as to who is and who is not a member of that trade union). Much like Antoni, Lucyna expressed her mistrust of Lech Wałęsa:

I began to dislike Wałęsa's rule. Everyone knows Wałęsa, but you know what, I even started to suspect that he's not with us fully, not all the way. Whenever something was to happen, Wałęsa would get arrested. Why?... [T]hey knew things earlier, he was always covered, not by us, not by people, not by Solidarity, but he was shielded by the [communist] party. I didn't like it. [W1/3]

Both of these narratives come from the respondents with a working class background. Both correspond with phenomena which were discussed by researchers and journalists who analyzed the weaknesses and failures of the transformation process: mistrust towards the elites among the workers, a sense of distance from the actions taken by the elites, opposition to growing social inequalities, a desire for egalitarianism, no acceptance for radical economic changes. As Domecka (2016:60) writes,

[A]ll these changes hit mostly those who made them possible. *Solidarity*, which started as a trade union

and a broad social movement of people who wanted a better life, became a political power valuing other concerns over social justice.

In both cases, however, based on the broader context of the whole interview, I believe that the experienced disappointment did not cause a mental "latch" in the past for these two narrators. Their lives go on, now filled mainly with family matters and health issues, and the emotions associated with the transformation-related experiences return mainly when they watch TV news.

### Fulfilled Hopes. Life Gets "Confirmed"

Among the interviews analyzed here, Maciej's story is the most clear example of a successful adaptation to transformation-related changes (something he supported right from the start), which resulted in a sense of satisfaction and fulfillment. The narrator, born in 1940, completed a technical secondary school and immediately took up a job at a plant that manufactured electrical equipment. He worked in various positions there: as the "workshop planner," fitter, foreman, until he retired in 2000. He never joined the Polish United Workers' Party. In the interview, he repeatedly referred to examples of communist mismanagement and low ethical standards, which he knows from his own work at the plant:

There were many different positions and even if a lazy guy and a drunkard started working on the floor, he was tolerated, up to a point. Then he moved to floor B, and the halls were numbered up to G. So it took years for him to end up at floor G at the plant... Looking back, years later, we can see that many of these jobs were superfluous. [W1/21]

And so it was. At first, under communism, when there was a delegation going somewhere, to a coal mine or a power plant, people would always sign to confirm that the delegation stayed three to four days longer. People would return home, but would get the money to buy accommodation and per diems. That's how people would earn [extra] money. Maybe we should be ashamed of it today, but it's like this... You know, everyone did that. The engineer who went with that worker, he did, and some other employee did, too. It was customary to do so. [W1/21]

The plan was a sacred thing. There were so-called production meetings and then things were discussed, starting with the foreman, everyone expressed their opinion. "The plan is feasible, comrades, we just have to do the following..." And then the head of production would come and there was a casual conversation: "Boss, we can't manage, we can't do it." "Look, there's a plan, and there's an adjustment to the plan later." And then the generator, which was the apple of our eye, because it had a production cycle stretching over many months, was reported in December as ready, but it appeared on the conveyer belt, which is the final phase of the assembly, only in June of the following year. It was all fictitious. [W1/21]

Phrases such as "looking back, years later, we can see" and "we should be ashamed of it today" point to the critical reflection that Maciej has applied to his professional past as time passed and new experience accumulated; this indicates that he performed his biographical work (Schütze 2016) to reconcile and internally integrate his own experiences.

Maciej says that he was a member of two, if not three, Solidarity works committees. Asked by the researcher, he declares that he had no difficulties at

work because of his involvement, but he earned the opinion of “the crazy guy”:

Because they knew that when on the thirteenth day of every month<sup>23</sup> people would go out for a break and gathered at the main road, then nobody tried to stop me anymore because they knew I'd go there anyway. [W1/21]

The narrator talks about the visits of “Solidarity” activists to the plant, he also says that one of them was even employed by the company as his subordinate for some time. When asked how he perceived the changes that occurred in 1989, Maciej states that he looked at them with hope, like everyone else, including party members. “We all wanted something different,” he says. He adds, however: “Though later we said that was not what we had expected.”

In 1990, the plant was sold to a foreign corporation and divided into companies; a few years later, further organizational and ownership transformations took place. Maciej claims that he personally did not feel threatened with redundancy during the privatization period (although he acknowledges that others may have felt this way and confirms the researcher's suggestion that the employment figure actually decreased) and that he did not experience any stress related to change. He mentions training courses where the new management taught employees to admit a mistake right away. This was contrary to the previous practice, when errors were hidden and the plant incurred huge costs due to the detec-

tion of “imperfections” of the manufactured equipment only after some time, once it reached the user. The narrator views the changes positively:

**Maciej:** Certainly, higher culture and completely different products are being made now. They go out to the entire world and those are high quality products.

**Researcher:** And the atmosphere, the relations with people, was it better then, or perhaps it didn't change?

**Maciej:** It did change, it changed radically. There is perhaps a different [=better] kind of respect for work and different care. [W1/21]

Maciej also appreciates how the issue of overtime has been resolved: in the past, employees used to depend on informal pressure from their superiors, but later the system was changed.

Summing up his career, which began under socialism and ended under capitalism, the narrator says:

This is a plant that makes large electrical machines, so [it produced things] starting from some kind of motors for traction, fans for railways, drives for generators, and generators. Today, I am somewhat proud of it because [power plant in] Bełchatów, all ten generators, three hundred and sixty megawatts, that's partly my work. Opole power plant, four generators, three hundred and sixty megawatts... One, because there are... Right now, I forgot the name of that neighborhood. There's a piece of my own work in there, too. And in Africa, and India, and China. And somewhere on the Soviet ships that were built at the time. Because the shipyard in Gdańsk, usually had... When you walked along the waterfront, there was Ivan X, Sergei Y... It was made for Russia because they apparently had convert-

ed all their shipyards to work for the Navy. Civilian ships were built by Poland. There is certainly a grain of truth in there. The equipment, top class stuff, had to be bought in England, and so on. We didn't produce it. But, we made generators for ships... Because a navy ship is a naval unit. So we made generators for ships, and they are out in the waters somewhere, I don't even know [where]. Apart from Antarctica, where penguins walk around. I certainly won't find my contribution there. But, otherwise, I can find it everywhere. [W1/21]

Maciej says that when he retired, he said to the HR manager:

You know, I'm leaving with my head up high. I didn't have any argument, no drunkenness, no theft... So I'm leaving the plant in peace. [W1/21]

His “departure with his head up high” seems to be more than just a feeling that he did not break any basic moral principles in the course of his occupational life. This phrase probably also reflects the satisfaction with the systemic change that the narrator expected and viewed positively (though not uncritically). It also expresses satisfaction with being able to adapt to the new working conditions in a changed economic and social reality. Finally, despite verbalized criticism of the socialist era, there is also a feeling that the effort made throughout his whole career made sense, since the effects of his work can still be found in many places around the world.<sup>24</sup> The experience gained in the course of his life confirmed the accuracy and sense of Maciej's life choices.

<sup>24</sup> Piotr Filipkowski (2018) finds very similar “sense-making” themes for work in shipbuilding in the narratives of Gdynia shipyard workers.

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The above review of the narrated experience of the events of the 1980s and 1990s in Poland and the ways of coping with them is not exhaustive, obviously, even if we take into account only the material from the interviews that have been analyzed here. Other options are also possible, such as the feeling of peace and satisfaction with one's own choices despite them being called into question by the new reality. We can also find pragmatism that helps the narrators not to worry too much about various turns and effects of transformational processes, alongside a sense of being stuck in ambivalence with regard to the assessment of the past and the present, both collective and individual. Also, one can relatively often come across a firm view (positive or negative) on the outcomes of the transformation, despite having no significant personal experience related to the events of the 1980s and 1990s. As I wish to adhere to the criteria set out at the beginning of this section, I do not describe those alternative variants here.

### Conclusion: What Can We See through the Prism of Individual Experiences?

The author of the report entitled “Was It Worth Changing the System?” writes: “The social consequences of the changes taking place in Poland since 1989 have been seen through the lens of individual experience” (CBOS 2019a:8). By this the author means that those who believe that they and their families benefited from the transformation tend to assess the systemic change positively. Conversely, the respondents who declare that the changes brought them more losses than gains tend to see the transformation as a failure. The analysis of biographical interviews

<sup>23</sup> On December 13, 1981, martial law was imposed in Poland; the situations of going out to the street, mentioned by Maciej, were probably connected with the fact that the factory workers commemorated that date.

allows us to go beyond the “loss-benefit” dichotomy and to see the complexity and diversity of individual experiences mentioned in the CBOS report, as well as different ways of incorporating them in biographies. On the one hand, it makes it possible to see how these experiences “work” today in some person’s internal world and how deeply they are rooted. On the other hand, it suggests that many people may assess the systemic change, or at least its first period, on the basis of observations and external messages (coming

from the media or social networks) rather than based on their own experience. Last but not least, the narratives of older people give an insight into the specific experiences related to the stage of life at which they experienced a radical social change. What is the point of doing all this? The answer might be pragmatic and “academic”: to have a better understanding of election results, for example. However, I prefer a different answer, even if it may seem somewhat pompous: in order to understand each other better.

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## Appendix: Socio-Demographic Characteristics of the Narrators.

Characteristic	Frequency
Gender	
Female	28
Male	21
Year of birth	
1922-1926	4
1927-1932	17
1933-1937	13
1938-1942	15
Place of residence—region of Poland (NTS 1)	
Central	10
South	8
East	13
North-West	10
South-West	5
North	3
Place of residence—size of locality	
Rural	18
Towns below 20,000	6
Towns 20,000-99,999	7
Towns 100,000-499,999	6
Towns over 500,000	12
Education*	
Elementary or below	16
Basic vocational	8
General secondary	4
Vocational secondary	8
Tertiary-1: BA or equivalent / Post-secondary	6
Tertiary-2: MA, MD, or equivalent	7
Last job before retirement—socio-occupational category*	
High level officials and managers	2
Professionals	4
Technical specialists	2
Technicians	7
Administrative workers and middle-level specialists	6
Office workers	2
Sales and service workers	2
Skilled manual workers	8
Manual workers in elementary occupations	3
Unskilled workers in services and trade	2
Farm owners	8
Business owners	1
No job that would entitle the respondent to retirement benefits	1
No answer	1

\* According to POLPAN 2013 survey data.

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## Life of Things from the Perspective of Polish Systemic Transformation

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**Abstract** The main purpose of the paper is to present the “biography” of selected things which appear in autobiographical narrative interviews conducted within the project “Experiencing the Systemic Transformation Process in Poland. A Sociological Comparison on the Basis of Biographical Analysis.” The author discusses different social actions connected with things, for example, the migrations of things, emancipation through things, collecting things, and reconstructs the stages of life of such things as: notebooks, cassette, and video tapes. The considerations are mainly embedded in the context of the People’s Republic of Poland and the process of transformation of the 1990s. The sociology and anthropology of things are theoretical frames of the analysis.

**Keywords** Sociology and Anthropology of Things; Life of Things, People’s Republic of Poland; 1989 Breakthrough

Igor Kopytoff (2003) notes that things, just like people, have their biographies. “When building a biography of a specific thing, questions analogous to the questions about human biographies can be posed, for example, what are biographical possibilities, which

entail its status, time of existence, and the culture it belongs to? How do those possibilities manifest themselves?...Are the objects of different age, what are the stages of their life, and what do their culture determinants look like? How do things use up with age and what happens to the object when it stops being useful?” (Kopytoff 2003:251-252). The questions posed by the author—particularly relating to stages of life of things, their uses, and socio-cultural contexts where those processes take place—determine the structure of the paper which aims at analyzing the systemic transformation from the perspective of sociology and anthropology of things.

The article presents, first of all, stages of life of several things, which appear in autobiographical inter-

views conducted within the project “Experience of the Process of the Transformation in Poland. A Sociological Comparative Analysis Based on Biographical Perspective.”<sup>1</sup> Secondly, I discuss chosen aspects of the systemic transformation process in Poland in the context of the items described by the narrators. I refer to three interviews: with Szymon (born 1973, graduated from Higher School of Art and Design, academic teacher), Piotr (born 1975, engineer, corporate worker), and Michał (born 1982, majored in IT and econometrics, entrepreneur). The things in the interviews, for example, pieces of furniture, household appliances, and devices, are mentioned spontaneously (are not brought about by the interviewer’s questions), which points to the significance of those items in a biographical experience. Biographical memory is triggered by and focuses around things which change with time.

The text starts with a brief description on recognition of things from sociological and anthropological perspectives. The following part of the article deals with: (I) status and usage of things in the society of shortage economy and (II) technological devices as harbingers of the systemic change. Considerations on things are marked by three historical periods in the history of Polish society: late People’s Republic of Poland, 1989 breakthrough, and the modern era. It is not my intention, however, to carry out a classic interpretation and analysis of narrations in accordance with the principles formulated by Fritz Schütze, that is, to seek processual structures, reconstruct

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argumentative strategies, et cetera, but the applied theoretical categories were developed by sociology and anthropology of things, as well as sociology of media and communication.

### Sociology and Anthropology of Things—Selected Aspects

A life cycle of a thing is typically made of three major stages: creation (invention, development, manufacturing), usage (determined by time, varied), disposal (no longer useful). This general pattern is applicable when things are treated as basically the same objects. However, when we look closely at specific objects—isolated items—it appears that the same thing can work differently in varied contexts to manifest its agency (Abriszewski 2010:XXI). They need new ways to “make them speak, that is, to make them suggest their description, create a blueprint for their usage by others—humans or nonhumans” (Akrich 1992 as cited in Latour 2010:112).

Things cannot tell their own biographies—they are written by people (Kopytoff 2003). The life of a thing—linked to an item, its body<sup>2</sup>—manifests itself by actions and their consequences. The fact that things live means that they trigger, determine, and authorize actions, enable or prevent them, encourage, allow and suggest, but also stop or forbid actions (Latour 2010:101). Things require individuals to “do something with them”; such demands are

<sup>2</sup> Although things are interwoven with a body, they are somehow slightly separate from it at the same time; they are movable—the body can move them or set them in motion (frequently by means of other tools); they are related to social activities resulting from them or facilitating their coming into existence (Krajewski 2013:21).

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effective if they bring about desired effects (Gibson 1977; Mitchell 2005 as cited in Krajewski 2013:69). It means that things are not outside the social order, but they are its integral part and actively participate in it as actors or actants (Latour 2010).

Building a biography of things by actors requires considering a number of factors resulting from their mutual relation; things can be used as carriers of meanings, requisites in status games, instruments in classifying others (see: Goffman 2008; 2011). “Things are useful in a number of ways: they enable us to do what we want and need, facilitate communication, and establish suitable conditions for expressing our cultural ties, as well as our individual self within the community” (Dant 2007:26). Individuals create unique cognitive and emotional interactions with things, use them idiosyncratically, present diverse attitudes to the material world (Krajewski 2013). What those individuals share is inability to live without things “because we entrust things with our identity, our society strengthens and embeds its principles and values underlying our culture in things and through things, we give things responsibility for our everyday lives” (Sierocki 2008:175). At the same time, things create secret space where everyday events freely take place (Rakowski 2008:55). Their existence is a “secret language” of culture (Pearce 1995:49); things are unnoticeable parts of our lives, even though they are frequently closer to us than people.

Functions of things which are significant for their uses—symbolic, economic, esthetic, technical (material objects as tools), emotive (evoking emotions by items), socio- and ideo-functions (communicating so-

cial or ideological meanings), can change, move, or appear simultaneously in different stages of life of material objects (Krajewski 2013:49). It is also applicable to status (roles) of things, which can be (giving only a few categories): a tool, decoration, souvenir, collector’s item, useful thing. Depending on their use there are items used daily, occasionally, or on special occasions, for personal use or shared with others. In terms of their esthetic-functional categories, objects can appear as handy, pretty or ugly, one- or multiuse, durable or short-lived (Krajewski 2013:80).

Possessing and using things is determined by culture (in law and customs), similarly to the importance given to things in specific conditions of the collective life. They are not assigned to things for good (though such cases are possible), but they are rather subject to changes resulting from both dynamics of social life (macro level processes) and circumstances of individual biographies (micro level). Categories and characteristics of things, complex meanings attributed to things and interactions with them are socially determined by local culture codes (Pearce 1995), just as uses of those items in given circumstances. Values attached to material goods can be varied in different historical and cultural contexts; “things often act as stimuli evoking purely behavioral reactions or items evoking memories” (Krajewski 2013:32). Further layers of culturally and socially created meanings result from their different uses; reevaluations in the perception of things are also related to changes of their status (Waszczyńska 2016). Let me look at a few things which appear in the narrators’ stories to highlight actions they triggered and how they changed in various social-cultural contexts.

## Goods in the Economy of Shortage

With regard to time and culture in which the goods mentioned by the narrators exist, they refer to late years of the People’s Republic of Poland—it results from their teenage years back then. With reference to material goods this time can be described as dominated by two phenomena: permanent shortage of goods (both staple goods and durable goods) and their rationing (from 1976 to 1985) and, secondly, building strategies and practices which facilitated survival in such social-economic order, particularly creating informal nets of acquiring goods and exchanging goods and services.<sup>3</sup> Initially, from 1976, the only product whose trade was regulated was sugar. “The scope of regulation started to extend in 1981 when it was regulated to trade meat, butter, wheat flour, groats, cereals and rice, washing powder, cigarettes, alcohol, chocolate and other sweets, soap and many articles for infants, such as semolina, powdered milk, washing powder Cypisek, cotton wool, baby soap and olives” (Fuszara 2004a:120). The list is not complete because, due to recurrent shortages, their substitutes were launched, that is, articles which were available for purchase instead of those stated on the cards (e.g., it was possible to buy sweets or cacao or coffee instead of cigarettes or alcohol—these articles were considered both prestigious and hard to come by). Other products were also subjected to regulation and they included: “oil, shoes, carpets, tropical fruits, stationery items—notebooks, drawing pads,

<sup>3</sup> I refer to private and private-public markets for goods—developing informal networks of connections based on the social status of individuals, their professional status, social capital as values which facilitate mutual exchange of services and goods hardly available on the official market (see: Wedel 2007).

crayons, paper cutting pads, pencils, sharpeners, rubbers, modeling clay, paints and brushes...The situation began to change in 1983 when regulation of some articles was rescinded. Subsequently, trade of washing powder and soap, cigarettes and alcohol, sweets ceased to be regulated...Further changes took place in 1985 when regulation of trade of flour and grains products and fats were rescinded” (Fuszara 2004a:121).<sup>4</sup>

## Lack of Goods

Considering the level of deprivation above it is not legitimate to argue that the presence of goods was silent (Pearce 1995). Interpreting this description backwards—lack of goods was noticeable in the narrators’ stories. There are references to shortages of one of the rationed goods in the interview with Szymon, that is, notebooks and the whole range of stationery items, and in another excerpt to lack of wallpaper:

N: Even now I have err some notebooks, ‘cause we used to keep supplies. ‘Cause when they delivered/ there was a delivery of goods to the stationer’s, and you had to buy notebooks or some other devices or school materials, then we bought as much of it as we could, not as much as we needed, but as much as

<sup>4</sup> To ensure fair division of consumer staples, the authorities introduced the mechanism of regulation between 1976 and 1985 and in specific areas of the country and it embraced a range of grocery and industrial articles which entitled to do the shopping on the basis of rationing cards, stamps, and allocations. The regulation did not quite succeed, however, in realizing the “fair” distribution, there were malpractices concerning settlements of ration cards and fraudulent allocations (see: Zawistowski 2017:440-493); additionally, there were also multiple exemptions from the system because there were many categories of privileged people due to their profession, social function (see: Fuszara 2004b).

we possibly could get hold of. Therefore, I still have some notebooks, still blank, which I have kept since my primary school time, they are lying some place and they are nice. It'd be a pity to throw them away, it'd be even a pity to write in them now, 'cause they are, you know/ err I guess you can try to put them somewhere like Allegro and see if anybody takes an interest in it. Nevertheless, now they are souvenirs in a way we bought such notebooks, rubbers/ well, it's funny but now all products are Chinese err and they amount to shoddy quality, don't they/ I mean not only 'cause China produces almost everything. Electronic equipment and more and less advanced technologically. But, generally this flood of Chinese products is associated negatively. I remember that back then there were/ err there was a delivery of Chinese stationery materials, for example, and it was somehow attractive. Fragrant Chinese rubbers or some markers or some rulers or there were some 3D err gadgets and it was/ incredibly attractive. So it is incredibly changing, you know, its perception. I guess that back then err Chinese economy was functioning slightly differently, you know, but, but, but those Chinese products were delivered to Poland and they were a kind of wind from the world.

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N: I remember when the Martial Law was announced, it was when we were wallpapering in our flat and my mum's friend and her husband came over. It was Sunday and I remember that they were wallpapering because they had little time so we were wallpapering. I remember that wallpaper, it was ugly and had a brown flowery pattern. The wall was wallpapered/ because you had no choice back

then, you know, quite simply. Previously there had been some bathroom wallpaper in the living room, tile pattern, as ugly as it gets, it was coming off the wall. My mum would say she would have to pull it down and they stuck a brown flowery one.

Let me point out a few aspects of the life of notebooks. They were hardly available on the market back then which illustrates severe shortages in the economy of the People's Republic of Poland. The demand could not be satisfied, but it also entailed a set of phenomena resulting from an imbalance of supply and demand. The consequences of restrictions on availability of goods<sup>5</sup> result in, for example, longer consumption processes which consisted of several stages: looking for available goods (visiting many stores, searching information about deliveries to stores), wait time (long queues), unintentional substitutions (using substitute products), and resignation from purchase if obtaining a given product became too difficult or impossible (Mazurek 2010:19). Supply deficits were not merely an economic event, but also a social problem which reflected divergence between propaganda promises of satisfying people's needs and a real ineffective economic policy (Mazurek 2010:20-21).

<sup>5</sup> This experience, obviously, did not befall all members of society equally. Another narrator, Michał, says:

N: My err grandfather/ my granddad was err a director of an energy plant for some energy area so err in the time of PRL I don't remem/ I can't remember that err it was such a bad time. I don't/ I can't recall, can't recall such err big, you know, problems or err shortage of (.) (*smacking lips*) / Heck then, I guess, it seems to me that err somehow we weren't suffering from a lack of something, but, you know, I mean, everybody err all people didn't have such various err various elements, different articles, which are also available nowadays

**I: Hmm.**

N: So what, what was available then my parents well, well I can't remember if there were, if there were any / any problems, but err it got stuck in my mind, you know, such pictures of those/ pictures of that time.

Living in the economy of shortage (as opposed to shortages in the economy, see: Kornai 1985) called for inventing consumer strategies, which relied on "making supplies" (it did not apply only to stationery products, but virtually all kinds of goods: long- and short-lived). It showed foresight which made it necessary to buy whatever was available on the market in legally regulated quantities without much consideration for the current and real needs, thereby breaking the elementary mechanism of purchasing—need-realization-satisfying the need. (I leave aside the dominant, but by no means the only model existing in consumer societies: creating a need—purchase—disappointment—a new need, see, e.g., Bauman 2009). Such stocked articles were some form of material security (in case those products become unavailable on the market); they could also be used for exchange within informal social networks. Functionality of products, as well as their quality and esthetics (which is well illustrated by the statement on wallpaper), and their uses (bathroom wallpaper in the living room) were subordinate to their availability on the market. The thing that additionally draws attention in the narrator's statement are positive connotations linked with goods produced in China, which are currently associated with low-quality mass production. They also symbolize contacts with another culture through material objects. The life cycle of a product is related to the biographical memory of an individual which is visible in the way the article is perceived, its uses (desirable items vs. worthless things), and in assigning significance to them (attractive vs. shoddy), which result from biographical experiences and macro systemic transformations.

This excerpt illustrates a sentimental-nostalgic dimension of things—a network of meanings remembered from childhood/youth in particular. A notebook is an everyday use article which hardly ever deserves a mention. Notebooks, which would be a pity to get rid of, change from everyday use goods to symbolic items (which leads to suspension of their pragmatic function), and become collector's items. Loss of use value, whereas its primary function was actually never realized (after all, a notebook is for writing in it, so its rapid use due to its limited capacity makes it useless soon), paradoxically gave it an emotional function—the notebook became a keepsake. It is striking that it is a blank notebook which contains no content, and therefore it represents merely a potentiality. The value of a notebook usually stems from its contents written on its pages. As contents lose relevance, the medium become useless with the exception of contents of emotional or instrumental value (e.g., diary, memoirs), then it lasts a long time. Blank, unwritten pages saved the notebook from destruction and disappearance; passing time paradoxically enhanced its value. A used written notebook would probably be useless, waste paper (see: *Processing and Collecting Things* further in this article). Having gained a new status—a valuable item—it became an object for contemplation which brings back memories.

However, an intention to sell old notebooks on Allegro indicates another, different, commercial function of those goods. On the one hand, they are extraordinary, but, on the other hand, they could present market value (they could be sold or exchanged) which is applicable to ordinary goods (Kopytoff 2003:253). In the case in question, those categories

overlap—the owner expects that the market value attributable to this unique item will be the same to potential buyers. We also observe a process of fixing and negotiating the price (Latour 2010), which is influenced by the distance between culture where the article was created and the present day, when it gains new worth.

As regards actions triggered by notebooks which also illustrate their lifecycle, there are several stages: after being manufactured they were transported to retail outlets where clients bought them. Then they were being used to some degree (e.g., by Szymon) as originally intended. Each of those stages brings about human actions and interactions with the article (writing, buying, transporting); when the action is not taken, the product becomes an idle resource (notebooks lying around somewhere) and enters the transition period (to be discussed below).

### Processing and Collecting Things

Olga Drenda defines late PRL as practically wasteless culture. “There were hardly any plastic carrier bags, so if you happened to see one, it probably came from Pewex or abroad and was reused many times. I found it very interesting to read statements about collections of packaging which had decorative functions in Polish flats, whereas abroad they were regarded as ordinary rubbish. It applies particularly to cigarette or drink packaging. There are collections of beer or fizzy drink cans in the photos from 1980s” (Drenda 2016:34). Speaking about waste we mean “all things (or substances) which we would like to have to dispose of. Becoming waste, things lose their useful function. Waste materials

are an amorphous mix of things, which have *de facto* ceased to be things” (Izdebska 2017:32). Analyzing lexical transformations of the terms “waste” and “rubbish,” Roch Sulima (2015:90) refers also to *Etymological Dictionary of the Polish Language* which says that “rubbish”—since the 15<sup>th</sup> century—has been a discarded thing, ruined, worthless, useless, refuse. Waste, on the other hand, suggests that rubbish has been objectified.

An institution which contributed to the minimalization of waste (although it was not its primary goal) were to buy-back recycling centers (also known as waste paper recycling centers) that Szymon speaks about. This institution was a middleman where the client could receive some goods (e.g., toilet paper) in exchange for their waste materials (see: Lipiński and Matys 2014) or a voucher to pay for goods in specific shops.

N: And my mum first worked in glassworks, and then changed for an office work err and then when there were, you know, when it was possible err (.) to set up a private business she franchised a waste paper recycling shop. It was a moment when there were/ err (.) now it's obvious, but now you look at it quite differently, but back then, eighty/nine/ninety/ it was the beginning of the '90s. '89, '90, it was also a feeling of some discomfort, my sister and me thought it was a shame. It seemed to us that a waste paper recycling shop or waste materials was the biggest shame, you know. And it was the time when it was possible to earn well on it. And err mum took over that shop with someone and they collected not even from those people/ you know/ it wasn't even retail amounts. Of course, they were bringing it, got toilet paper for it/ because

it was hardly available, there were vouchers, they got coupons/ I was often spending time there, I was going there as a child, as a teenage err during the holidays or something I would stay there and take this waste paper and write out some coupons in exchange for some kilos. And it was possible to go and use that voucher to buy tape cassettes or tights or something else. Some stores offered products available only in exchange for vouchers for waste materials. It was, you know, it was an affiliated shop. You either got toilet paper, which was/ one roll for some kilos. So it was, you know, an equivalent. Err and err it was also from companies. We received from companies some, you know, and delivered it to paper plant and simply it was just possible to maintain a family on it and earn.

If Szymon's notebooks had been used as originally intended, they could have ended in a waste paper recycling shop. Their biography would probably have ended on a landfill site or in an installation for processing waste materials—even if they had been bought for a keepsake or used for writing in as intended.

It seems that waste management is awkward and embarrassing to the narrator, because it belongs to another axiological-normative order. Waste are considered spoilt, frequently flawed (Douglas 2007), and therefore it is removed from a close area of human affairs (Thompson 1979). They belong to a separate territory and occupy margins of social human and individual life (trash bins are typically placed in dark places).

Both waste status and waste management deals remain unclear. The narrator admits that dealings

were profitable (though not always quite legal), but it was accompanied by stigma and negative emotions (apart from embarrassment he felt disgust—due to internalizing rules of order and cleanliness, see: Tokarska-Bakir 2007:27-31).

Referring to the thesis of no-waste and considering limitations of this analogy it can be assumed that PRL represented a common *zero waste/no waste* policy. It aims at minimizing waste or eliminating it completely from households, practicing moderate consumption of available resources. Today most of the time it is an element of the life of the new middle-class—focusing on conscious consumption, ecology, and healthy food, et cetera. Back then it resulted from life necessity, it was not a question of choice. Recycling resources (e.g., multi-use milk bottles) did not only limit amounts of waste, but also created a closed circulation of goods. This mechanism enabled to turn useless things into functional and even worthy articles, such as paper (not only toilet paper). It allowed to reduce useless things in their intended use by recycling and further use. Economic and effective management of scarce or hardly available products resulted in resourceful strategies. Vegetable and fruit pickles, sewing, fixing clothes, needlework, DIY—which are currently treated as, for example, minimal or zero-waste lifestyle<sup>6</sup>—were quite common skills then.

The status of plastic carrier bags from East Germany or received in packages from abroad should be

<sup>6</sup> The lifestyles above illustrate deconsumption based on two principles: *reduce* (intentional reduction of one's consumption and assets), *reuse* (another use of products), *repair* (fixing articles or their new use), *recycle* (recycling products), *redistribute* (exchange, sale, or giving away redundant things), see: Wilczak 2016.

also noted. There were very few of them and they were used not only to carry the shopping, but they had luxury value perception, privileged access to unavailable goods and a requisite impressing others (Goffman 2008:34-36). As Marek Krajewski (2013:181) noted, “plastic carrier bags have plenty of uses, which consumers discover and make carrier bags substitute other unavailable goods...Carrier bags are equivalent to modernity and western lifestyle in many social circles,” which accounts for their virus popularity. Since they were used multiple times, carefully stored, there were not too many of them (as they are considered a major threat to the natural environment today).

Reducing waste did not only stem from deficits in the economy, but there was a popular fashion in the 1980s among young people, especially boys, to collect things, which were regarded as redundant or had other uses in the West. Renata Tańczuk (2013) notes that the very essence of collecting is gathering items which are attributed with value, thereby transforming objects of everyday use into objects endowed with meaning. Such an object is “freed” from its original references and is included in the context created by the collector (its value in use is replaced by aesthetic value). “The items gathered in a collection have been excluded from ordinary consumption, have become objects of aesthetic experience, which means that belonging to a collection, they will not be used, but will be admired. Moreover, when becoming part of a collection, their value in use becomes secondary or even invalidated” (Tańczuk 2013:107). Jean Baudrillard (1996) proposed a system of objects in relation to their functions and divided things into those which are used and possessed. Szymon says:

N: there was an exchange of those addresses, you had lots of addresses, Western addresses, of different Western companies, firms from various countries, you sent the so-called requests to those addresses. The requests were in an informal language, prepared in English with four or five words. Perhaps four, five is too few, but let's say I don't know several, up to ten simple words, which said: send me, please, some prospectuses, stickers, anything. And you wrote it down on a postcard and, of course, you spent all pocket money or money you earned from selling some, I don't know, bottles, waste paper, anything, you spent it on sending postcards to different places. And I find it astounding that, of course, from the perspective of time when I think about it, that those companies were sending back.

**I: They did? That's interesting.**

N: They did. Those companies were sending envelopes with prospectuses, stickers, tags, letters to our home address. Well, I think now that it was err it was, I guess, their marketing maturity/ as if they were predicting some time. I think that in the '80s, it was, of course, still communism and socialist, and so on. But, for those Western companies it could be a potential market for their product in the future, even far in the future. So when we got Coca Cola stickers, we were over the moon. We were putting those stickers everywhere, or other brands, or, for example, from other firms. I remember that my biggest my kind of / treasure/ first of all, it was ridiculous that you were taking those addresses and sent them. You were sometimes sending those requests just about anywhere, to any company. So I remember that I got from UEFA or some companies from Switzerland. For example, some chocolate producers from Switzerland and they were sending color labels. Of course, it's all rubbish

now, but in the '80s this label err of a Western chocolate was precious, or, or, or some, err I don't know a sticker or whatever or a poster. Another type of print, there were some printed materials with some, I don't know, golden elements, letters. Everything was very colorful, glossy, err as I say now every chocolate bar is wrapped like that, but back then when it was totally different from everyday life, you know, when an envelope arrived, when an envelope arrived in the postbox/ a postman brought an envelope from the West we were extremely happy. I remember I got some stickers from Hong-Kong. And it's the farthest place which I keep thinking about/ So there was, in fact, such an element and I even don't know where I keep it, I've lost it. Because in the meantime, we were moving a few times so, so all those treasures/ and they were my incredible treasures, got lost somewhere, but it doesn't matter, because I was putting them from one place to another in my memory. I remember them, Korea, not Korea, but Hong-Kong, from Hong-Kong some colorful/ and it's some memory, because as I say we have it all around every day. Every silly chocolate bar wrapper or tea packaging is also well-printed, designed, better or worse. But, back then when you received some colorful brochures or chocolate packaging or Lego stickers or err...anything then it was a really big day. And incredible emotions were associated with it. And it was lasting through all my primary school (.) it was. Err perhaps more about the fifth, sixth grade, because primary school had eight grades then. And it, it lasted. And it was an attraction, when we received something, we brought it to school and boasted of it before one another.

Szymon's statement illustrates successive stages of life of things when they differ in their uses,

move between social-cultural contexts, where they acquire different status and meaning. Importantly, one object (e.g., label) can be categorized as waste-paper or sentimental fetish or a collector's item. It is the user who decides value and the use of an object—they specify social practices about it, considering “parameters” (potential) of that object. Things such as prospectuses, brochures, stickers, labels, which were primarily used for marketing-advertising purposes in capitalistic economic reality, represented cognitive (extending his knowledge) and emotional values (evoking ecstatic responses). They were used differently from their intended use; they served as decorations, helped to personalize space, facilitated identification on the basis of items collections.

Perception of Szymon's artifacts as potential items of private collections was influenced by their value which was unachievable in socialist economy and their prior experience with consumer culture (packaging after products unavailable in Poland). Although they did not present any (recognizable) esthetic value and practical functions, they were regarded as worthy. These collections signified that their owner had access to unique products, which raised his/her status in social circles. These goods were also used in interactive practices of building ME (Goffman 2011). Using those items for collecting extended their lives; before they became waste products, they went through multiply stages of use. And although they were eventually dematerialized (“vanished”), they remained in the same place each time the narrator moved house and thus became a durable item in the narrator's biographical memory.

Graphic elements, colors, design made them objects from another order than everyday use things. It can be said that “contact” with those goods was making the day in everyday life. The narrator defines them as “treasures,” ergo something attributed with high value (emotional and material), which requires special treatment (efforts and care), is (most of the time) unreachable to others, and (frequently) remains mysterious. Szymon, when speaking about his “treasures,” describes them as “extraordinary” (to amplify their significance), which indicates a different attitude to goods, which he admits are quite “ordinary” in terms of their availability today, transience, failure to evoke emotions and aesthetic experiences. Those previously desirable objects regained their intended functions in the capitalist economic system and, additionally, they became commonplace and plain.

Actions mentioned by Szymon prove diffusion processes in the core-periphery configuration (using globalization terminology). It is of interest that an impulse came from a peripheral culture representative. The narrator demonstrated his entrepreneurial spirit while acquiring goods—he used one category of goods (with PRL background) to gain access to other goods representing Western culture. Cashing in on redundant belongings, waste paper and bottles, he was “investing” in media of exchange (stamps and postcards) initiating processes of transfer of goods between varied cultural contexts. The uses of goods described above—differing substantially from the uses in their culture of origin—illustrate mechanisms of including objects into existing culture (in this case, it was prestigious functions of items) and their reinterpretation in accordance with local culture principles (Linton 2007).

## Goods as Medium of Transformation

The case related by Szymon shows that the organization of life described above did not result in closure or lack of cultural contacts. Family or friends living in the West provided access to its assortment of goods by sending packages with deficit products in Poland such as: coffee, chocolate, sweets, household chemicals, or clothes. In addition, the second half of the 1980s brought about intense economic emigration, both short- and long-term, legal and illegal. “Large scale and dynamic migration in the last decade of PRL, especially in 1980-1982 and 1987-1989, signified major political, economic, and social changes. Increasing emigration at the end of that decade might have contributed to the final ‘collapse of etatism,’ which determined Polish living conditions for the previous forty years” (Stola 2015:55). Comparing household goods in terms of durable goods in two time intervals (per hundred households) we note that “there were 24 passenger cars in 1965 while 20 cars in 1985. Radio sets respectively: 1965—77 pcs., 1985—110 pcs., TV sets: 1965—27 pcs., 1985—90 pcs., washing machines: 1965—45 pcs., 1985—75 pcs., refrigerators: 1965—9 pcs., 1985—80 pcs.” (Kulesza 1990:81). In spite of their rising popularity, the summary does not include articles such as tourist equipment, tape recorders, record players, hi-fi, camera films, projectors, slides, kitchen and other household devices, stocks of books, gramophone records, et cetera (Kulesza 1990:81). Foreign trips and proliferation of technological appliances show potential for modernization of goods, including attempts of individuals to differ in terms of possessions.

## Migrations of Things

The movement of elements of culture—material and nonmaterial goods—was a consequence of liberal-

ization of passport policy (1987-1988) and a collapsing economic system (see: Stola 2015). Trips to other people’s republics (particularly East Germany) became more common; Yugoslavia and Hungary were popular destinations, too. Those trips had different purposes, but their commercial aspect—a covert function of such declared tourist travels—was among major goals. Michał (1<sup>st</sup> excerpt) and Szymon (2<sup>nd</sup> excerpt concerns trips in the 1990s) speak about their parents’ foreign trips:

N: Then, in 1987, 1988, more or less, when we moved to [a town in south-east Poland]. Patents got a flat then./ And from that time

**I: Hmm.**

N: So I remember that all dad’s trips: to Turkey, Turkey, Bulgaria, Russia/ the former ones err opportunities to trade

**I: (laughing)**

N: abroad. They were also buying, I don’t know what they were buying. Still/ no, I remember that there were here/ in Poland they were buying, I guess, some (*smacking lips*) err calendars

**I: Hmm.**

N: and took those calendars to Bulgaria. They sold those calendars in Bulgaria and bought something, I don’t remember what. Then to Turkey, jeans and turbo chewing gums in Turkey.

**I: (laughing)**

N: And then to Poland. So he took trips like that (.)

**I: And there were cosmetics in Hungary, too.**

N: Oh. Cosmetics were also somewhere/ where were those cosmetics from? / No, those cosmetics were, they were Soviet, I remember. Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes.

**I: Well, my dad/**

N: Russian, Russian cosmetics, yes.

**I: (laughing) My dad used to go to Hungary and Czechoslovakia, too. (laughing)**

N: So we, we, Hungary, no. Hungary, Czechoslovakia, no. The route was to the Soviet Union, Bulgaria, Turkey. It went it went that way.

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N: So it was extremely poor everywhere and somehow people were getting by. Err I remember a little when I wasn’t admitted to [a large city in Poland] and I was getting about and somehow err there was a time when my mum started to travel to trade, it was the time when people were travelling abroad, Hungary, Turkey, and so on. Italy, so it was that/ from time to time she would leave her work, take time off to earn some extra because she was working and err and err to earn extra they were travelling to deal something small. So there was a time when, when, when Polish people started going abroad. I mean, they had travelled abroad before, to Hungary and so on, and brought some grocery products err food. Then there was also Turkey, some sweaters, some clothes, they went and brought back, and so on.

Travel destinations (apart from Turkey, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, the Soviet Union, Italy mentioned above) differed depending on the area of living (Michał—south-east Poland, Szymon—central Poland). Different products/goods were traded in each country. It was essential—to make the trip financially successful—to know what assortment was in demand in a given country. TV sets were often brought from the Soviet Union, watches, video players, and cameras from West Germany, clothing and cosmetics from Turkey (Lesiakowski 2015).

Circulation of goods in designated directions, regulation of this process by a set of rules and principles somewhat remind the tribal kula (see: Malinowski 1987). A major difference is that the transactions above were of commercial character (absent in the kula), and did not lead to creating lasting bonds between partners.

Referring to biographical experiences connected with a camp in East Germany, Piotr speaks about assortment of products available in shops there (this comparison does not always show advantage of foreign range of goods).

N: Well, at first sight, grocery stores were better stocked there. At least I wasn't too interested in other stores as a young man, perhaps I wanted to buy some tapes, too, and (.) they were of miserable quality compared to those you could buy in Pewex. But, they were available, I mean, it was cheaper and there was one more thing that err I mean cocoa was available there. I mean, stores were well stocked. It was also possible to buy film for the camera, also black and white. It wasn't so easily available here towards the end of the 1990s.

Trips to East Germany and other state-controlled economy countries, which did not suffer such severe shortages, brought substantial effects in private consumption. Commercial tourism was generating private import of goods to the country, which later found their way to resale shops. The effect was that private foreign trade was thereby legalized and the assortment of available goods in domestic shops became broader (Mazurek 2010). Thanks to tourist trade attractive products were appearing on the market and other complementary initiatives were developing in unofficial channels of production and distribution. Stola (2015) even writes about an explosion

of new forms of entrepreneurship and resourcefulness. Owing to articles brought from East Germany, Polish households boasted of new equipment and devices. "There were toasters, cameras—households were upgrading. Products from East Germany were just a sample of a better, consumer world of the West; they were made more carefully and became available for purchase on the Polish market, not only seen in advertising catalogues" (Mazurek 2010:123). They were also usually cheaper so it was possible to sell them at a profit (Kochanowski 2010). As a result, individuals raised their material status, but also gained prestige in social and family networks. Therefore, goods brought people together and contributed to the transformation (Abriszewski 2008; Latour 2010).

### Emancipation through Things

In their interviews, the narrators refer to radio and television, which played a significant role in their processes of socialization, and cassette and video tapes. The media and data carriers above enable looking at the systemic transformation of the late 1980s and early 1990s not only from a perspective of technological inventions, but also through the development of private entrepreneurship. Both of these phenomena were characterized by liberation of individuals from patterns of behavior imposed by socialism. Szymon and Piotr speak about the impact of radio and television on their lives:

N: there were two channels on TV, we had black and white TV set, old and damaged Ametyst.<sup>7</sup> The picture

<sup>7</sup> TV sets appeared in Poland in the '50s. "The first batch of 80 'Leningrad' TV sets was imported to Warsaw in 1953 while in 1955 about 10000 pieces were available on the market. They were

in Channel 1 was quite all right, but the picture of Channel 2 was hardly working and it was necessary to wave an aerial to see anything, there were days when nothing was working in Channel 2. But, there were days when the picture was a little better, but poor picture was usual. As a rule, the picture was poor. (.) So, for example, some program starts at some time in the afternoon, there were programs/ err there were fewer news bulletins so they were more accessible.

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N: It seems to me that I was largely influenced by TV in the '80s, but also by the radio. But, perhaps it was (.) well, it is difficult to say to what degree. The radio was a contact, some contact with the foreign world when it comes to music. (.) And there were some things on the radio which came from abroad, from behind the western border. Err there were fewer such things on TV.

The media work as a monopoly in a monocentric political system: the state-owned television controlled both TV channels (Channel I was available nationwide from 1958, Channel II from 1970<sup>8</sup>), the state-owned radio offered four channels,<sup>9</sup> launched over

imported from USSR and East Germany ('Rubens' cost 4600 zł a piece). The production of 'Wisła' (4000 zł), the first Polish TV set, was launched at the turn of 1955 and 1956. It was modeled on the Soviet set 'Avangarda,' which was no longer in production on account of its too tiny screen. For this reason, production of a more updated brand 'Belweder' was launched in 1957. Since January 1957 TV sets had to be registered (subscription fee was 40 zł), there were 21000 pieces" (Kozieł 2001:266).

<sup>8</sup> The first experimental program was broadcast in 1952; TV programs were available twice a week in 1955 and the first nationwide channel was launched in 1958. Channel 1 of Public TV had a reduced air time in 1981 whilst Channel 2 was suspended altogether then and restored in 1982 in limited available air time (Kozieł 2001:315-316).

<sup>9</sup> It was broadcast nationwide in 1945 and local radio stations were also set up in Cracow, Katowice, Poznan, Bydgoszcz, Gdansk, Lodz, Szczecin, Torun, and Wroclaw. In 1949

ten plus years. This organization of the media system that was realizing political goals of the ruling party called into question the credibility of news broadcasting—it raised antipathy and resistance ("it is difficult to assess the credibility of the news on TV and on the radio" [Piotr]).

The development of video tape players and VHS cassettes in the late 1980s and "video boom" between 1988 and 1992 marked a crucial event in the existing structure of the media system because it created new socio-cultural practices. The new technological inventions extended access to Western popular culture contents, which was severely limited in PRL. Piotr says:

N: I don't know, it seems that VHS were generally important in the late '80s and there were films on them, which I hadn't seen. But, for example, my sister was delighted. *Dirty Dancing* is something I still don't understand. And (.) this dance is so completely strange to me and so on. I know that some people are moved by it even today. When my wife met with my sister (.) some time ago they recalled it and all, but it, really, for me doesn't matter at all. I know there was such a phenomenon. For me, tape cassettes were more important, and they suddenly disappeared. It was probably sometime in the middle of the '90s when I started studying at the university. And (.) I was listening to music recorded on those cassettes, there was a lot of music which could be classified as Polish rock music from that time. Err there were many

Channel II (broadcast 24 hours from 1962). Channel III started broadcasting in 1958 on short waves and became available nationwide in 1962. Channel IV started broadcasting in 1976. The state-owned radio station was a monopolist until 1989, but it was possible to listen to programs broadcast for Poland by radio stations from the West: Radio Free Europe, BBC, Voice of America (Grzelewska 2001:246-260).

bands back then such as Maanam err Lombard err Budka Suflera, Lady Pank. (.) I hope not to overlook any band, but all those tape cassettes were recorded by someone, it was absolute piracy, 'cause, I don't know, I don't know at all what you had to do to get ahold of a real vinyl record. But, such things were really happening. And you could erase and copy music on those cassettes as much as you wanted. (.) it, you could play it afterwards. It was possible to swap those cassettes, exchange, listen to them together or alone through headphones. There was such a contraption as the radio and tape player, it was licensed by Grundig. Err my wife recalls Kasprzak, it was probably the same inside, I guess, but it had better design outside. And those cassettes fit there. (.) so, I guess, everyone was listening to those recordings on those tape cassettes. They were getting used up, let's say. I could point at the shops in [a large city in Poland] where they were located back then, where such tape cassettes were available, but I don't know if it is relevant. I mean, they mattered a lot back then. Err (.) oh, several days ago I heard there was a day of the shop, a day of the vinyl record shop. It's strange it could be celebrated now, 'cause everybody buys music pieces on iTunes today. So, so (.) it was needed, some effort, it was necessary to go to some shop, which was a private enterprise, that was the name for a little business then. And you could buy some cassette there, it was a little better quality than your own recordings. It was probably also a pirate tape, but it didn't matter then. I guess it didn't. I mean, I couldn't buy any other cassette but pirated ones, and nothing else was available.

Cassette tapes and tape players (Grundig and Kasprzak, which the narrator regards as reliable and long-lasting in another unquoted excerpt) occupy an

important part in the narrator's biographical memory. They provide some context for considering other factors in the media perception; first and foremost, a wide variety of the media reception situations—an individual can use the media on his/her own or use this opportunity to build social relations. The media also offer social functions such as integration or entertainment. Piotr discusses benefits and gratification gained thanks to definite media choices, for example, making/maintaining social contacts, emphasizing specific lifestyles, opportunities for emotional release, deriving cultural satisfaction (see: McQuail 2008; Maigret 2012). In addition, this excerpt illustrates privatization of the media reception, thanks to possible ways to record the picture or sound and reproduce them many times afterwards (it was possible to record/copy, etc.). Secondly, there was an aspect of creating social networks and circles around preferred kinds of music, bands, or musicians, which was further strengthened by exchange of cassette tapes here. It was of crucial significance in the political system in question, as it made it possible to free oneself from official cultural contents and the state-controlled media. Although the recorded pieces often came from the state-owned radio stations, creating personal music compilations was an act of individual reception practices, which were treated as subversive actions. Piotr enumerates several names of bands from the 1980s—Maanam, Lombard, Budka Suflera, Lady Pank—whose music contested and opposed the existing system. Listening to independent rock music from pirated cassette tapes was a generational experience of youths coming of age in the 1980s.

Looking at the life of things, Piotr says that cassette tapes “got tired”; it resulted from their multiple uses which led to a lower quality of recorded sound. Using

this formula the narrator defines a not-so-obvious psycho-physical state of this medium (more or less consciously). The resulting stage was when cassette tapes “got lost” and were replaced by CDs and then dematerialized in favor of digital sound recording symbolized by iTunes. It is interesting that exploitation does not apply to vinyl records which have not lost their vitality and have become desirable collector's items.

VHS cassettes did not play a significant role in Piotr's biographical experience, whereas Michał recalls them in the context of “very nice aesthetics of the 1990s and first VHSs.” We should note several phenomena stemming from growing popularity of video players in the 1990s.

Grzegorz Fortuna (2013) identifies three areas where changes resulting from the appearance of video were noticed. From an economic and political perspective, the video market was one of the first to be ruled by the forces of supply and demand (the government had no control of its development), from a cultural and social perspective, it was the time of the varied offer which was not provided by other mass media, and which shaped the taste and attitude of many participants of cultural life. “With the benefit of hindsight, an objective value of those objects is not too high, however, they carry great sentimental value. They remind of an intriguing period: budding capitalism, adventure of looking for desired titles on the shelves in the rental store, and the first film fascinations” (Fortuna 2013:43). By that means, viewers gained access to the medium which let them become independent of political authorities and film critics power who decided which films entered the cinema and television distribution (Fili-

ciak 2013). Films on VHS cassettes presented a variety of film genres and varied artistic levels—most of the time they were popular Western productions.

Taking into consideration the original cost of purchase, video players signified a high social status<sup>10</sup> and ensured material and social distinction. “Video players were status symbols to Polish people, but first and foremost, they were a source of contact with Western popular culture, a source of escapist pleasures, but also realization of modernization discourse and aspirations related to consumption. Nevertheless, in 1985, when the number of video players in Poland was estimated to be nearing half a million, there were merely ten films in official distribution...A steady supply of new film titles was provided by informal social networks—professional to some extent and somewhat community-based” (Filiciak 2011:72).

An informal market for cultural goods such as cassette tapes and VHS cassettes shows a scale of piracy then, but also growing entrepreneurship. “Illegal video cassette rental shops or stalls were usually in private houses and were not easy to find, so to be admitted it was necessary to know somebody who knew the owner—it was working completely underground and beyond the state control. Besides private houses, vid-

<sup>10</sup> “At the beginning of the 1980s video players were exotic and hardly available in Poland. Branded video players, available in Pewex and Baltona, cost from 800 to 1000 dollars in 1981. Although their prices were gradually decreasing (in 1985 Panasonic, Sanyo, or NEC video player was available for 430-500 dollars), but those amounts were still much beyond the financial reach of average Polish people, who earned from 30 to 50 dollars a month. They would have to spend their yearly earnings to buy a video player” (Fortuna 2013:28). As a result, a substantial number of video players available in Poland between 1980 and 1982 were smuggled from abroad. They were in the possession of wealthy or enterprising individuals, whereas legally purchased sets were mainly at schools or in state institutions.

eo cassette rental shops were often located in garages, bazaar stalls, or car trunks, from which cassettes were rented or sold on the local fair. There was still another popular method of distribution in the countryside and little towns which looked like the travelling cinema—the TV set and video cassette recorder owner arrived in some place and placed a TV screen in the back of the van and played a film to the viewers for a small fee” (Fortuna 2013:30). At first, VHS cassettes were available in unofficial video rental shops, fairs offering illegal films, or paid recording services on a blank cassette bought from Pewex or Baltona (Fortuna 2013:30). The Baltona store also offered original American films on cassettes, but “if somebody did not particularly care about an original edition—it was available in the car trunk sale from some enterprising man on the nearest bazaar,<sup>11</sup> typically recorded on two blank 180-minute tapes. The films were usually recorded from satellite TV with Polish dialogues or they were copied from foreign cassettes brought from foreign trips by relatives or friends” (Drenda 2016:121). Video rental shops were legalized in 1988 and then the market stabilized. In the early 1990s, the first private television stations<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> “Cassette stalls became popular in the 1990s. They are often in photos from 1989, 1990, 1991: Niewiadów caravans changed into a makeshift grocery store or small restaurant car offering toasted cheese sandwiches and pizza...They served ice-cream and fast food of late PRL—toasted cheese sandwiches and Polish versions of hot dogs, bread rolls with mushrooms...Then street sides were occupied by K67 kiosks—a tidy modular creation designed by a Slovenian Saša J. Mächtig” (Drenda 2016:109). They were an alternative to makeshift stalls, looked modern, esthetic, and tasteful, they are used for different purposes, for example, newsagent’s, kebab bar, janitor’s booth. The objects where private enterprises were developing appeared in Michał’s narration.

N: Err that time some 1989 when err there was certain economic freedom it was starting to look like that. There were those buses with err bus-bars or, or caravans err with bars inside (.) It was that those, those, those sausages ord-/ ordered from those buses on some fairs or some err some public feasts. Well, it terribly got stuck in my mind, you know.

<sup>12</sup> Polsat TV has been a licensed broadcaster since 1993 (Polsat Channel 2 was launched in 1997), TVN (formerly known as TV Wisła) began broadcasting nationwide in 1997, RTL7 has been

started broadcasting and the media offer became more diversified, which decreased popularity of video cassettes.

Apart from watching and sharing films on VHS cassettes it was possible to use them differently in the post-transformation media system (see: Mikułowski-Pomorski 2008). It became common practice to record films from TV channels and play them later on (another aspect of becoming less dependent on fixed hours of television programs). It was also possible to video everyday life, for example, family events (TV channels held competitions for funny videos sent in by viewers in the 1990s). Accordingly, collections of VHS cassettes became a sign of the times.

### Concluding Remarks. Ambiguity of Things

Transformation processes can be used to classify changeability of things and a variety of their categorization. I am speaking about things-waste materials and things-treasures, which appeared above in the context of processes of change and collecting items. It is difficult to define a strict criteria for the usefulness of a thing or lack thereof. A thing is useful if it is practically used, but also a thing which is useful and needed for various purposes (functions of material things). Within the framework of culturally constructed and socially regulated meanings, things go through three stages: they are goods, waste, and keepsake. The uses do not always change to the same degree. Those stages can overlap depending on individual attitude and mindset. It is clearly demonstrated in Michał’s interview:

working since 1996 (Świdorski 2002). Radio Zet, RMF FM, and Radio Maryja received radio licenses to broadcast nationwide in 1993 (Dobek-Ostrowska 2002).

N: Err so it was (*smacking lips*) hmm it was like at first (.) there were hmm/ at first we wanted to run a store here in [a big city in Poland] with (.) different crappy things, you know/ I mean, actually, they weren’t rubbish, kind of “precious rubbish,” because it was very

**I: Hmm.**

N: It’s very/ for somebody those things/ those things are just rubbish, for another person, they are treasures.

**I: Rare things.**

N: Rare things. We wanted to run a little store like that in [a big city in Poland]

**I: Hmm.**

N: Err with things gathered from the market a little big, a little from err from the family loft. Such things which err you remember from childhood.

**I: Hmm.**

N: For example err some err fairy tales err such fairy tales for (.) a projector, fit for a projector/ What was the brand’s name of those projectors?

**I: Err (*thinking*)**

N: Projector Jacek and projector, I guess

**I: Ania.**

N: Ania, that’s right.

**I: I know. I have Ania. (*laughing*) Ania.**

N: Yes, that’s right. Ania, I guess/ but probably there was also Jacek, I guess. Yes. Err or some err old post stamps, packaging hmm, posters, old car models, something that brings back childhood memories...Or err there were also mainly pictures. All kinds of book covers, which everybody used to have then, because everybody had the same books. It’s kind of scary, you know, how deep it was inside me.

**I: Hmm.**

N: Even these days I have those flashbacks and all the time, we, I mean, we, I mean [name of the shop]

want to use in our err in our products because this is something which is not available now, but back in the past err it was available and for me, it was hmm err what? Important, joyful, it wasn’t sad at all. So err I guess that is about it what I wanted to say about/ about (*laughing*) such memories

**I: Hmm.**

N: And using those memories today.

The narrator’s story focuses on two systems and rules for action aiming at opening a rubbish shop. It is not an obvious combination of words as the shop is typically associated with needed/desirable goods, whereas rubbish (in most cases) lacks these attributes. It may also be noticed in the ways of acquiring those articles: the market and attic work differently—the market is associated with cash transactions, money, while the attic stores things which are out of use to some degree: periodically, redundant, outdated, even though they can potentially be used later in the future. The attic also stores things whose life is in limbo before it is decided whether they are still needed or could be scrapped, and the attic is their repository (see: Thompson 1979). An article in the attic can “return” to its former functions, acquire/gain new ones (e.g., as a component of a new product, be renovated), or become completely useless.

This redefinition—an ongoing process of cultural changes of value of things: rubbish vs. treasures—occurs due to a variety of factors: market forces, changing aesthetic tastes of individuals, trendy lifestyles (Smolarek 2013:74-75). Articles, which have their origins in PRL, may be classified as useless and therefore “rubbish,” or they may be signif-



icant as they have sentimental value (“treasures”). Accordingly, neither of these definitions eliminates their potential commercial value (“taking advantage of memories”). The redefinition is illustrated by the popularity of items produced in PRL. Many pieces of furniture (e.g., armchairs) or electronic goods (e.g., record players) have revived and become fashionable today. They are valued for their design, functionality, durability, and reliability—they are not only indicative of a *vintage* lifestyle, but they also present an autotelic symbolic value. Popularity of those goods and devices is also related to their independence of politics and focus on their aesthetic dimensions (as explained by Michał<sup>13</sup>), economic aspects, and making those artifacts elements of folklore. Including them in the capitalist system triggers a range of actions which change their meaning, status, uses, and functions to mark another/new stage in their biographies.

<sup>13</sup> Michał speaks about bringing together objects of different eras and origins—he points to his household furniture which comprises items made in the ‘60s and ‘70s and modern industrial productions. It should be observed that he distances himself from PRL politics and focuses only on esthetic and sentimental aspects of articles.

**I: (laughing) Well, but if we, for example (.) / visited you at home, then you also have this, I mean, does it look like N: Yes.**

**I: a variety of items?**

N: Hmm.

**I: Does it look like that?**

N: Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. Well, err (.) well, then, doesn't it. So we have err p-posters, old Polish posters on the walls, err they are everywhere. I have a glass case with packages. I just like old Polish packages very much.

**I: Hmm.**

N: So it is arranged err hmm in this style / the furniture is also old, from the ‘60s and ‘70s, so it is set / arranged in a mixed style, a little old, a few Ikea pieces.

**I: So, am I right that although you cut off those political and historical, let's say, events, you are still aware of what those things are connected with and their history/**

N: You know what? Well, well, whether you want it or not, but it isn't a topic we talk about.

**I: Well, it's clear. But, still/**

N: We're only and exclusively into their aesthetic dimensions.

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## The PPR, Systemic Transformation, and New Poland. Opportunity Structures in the Biographical Experience of Senior Social Reformers

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**Abstract** The paper is based on preliminary results of the analysis of four pilot narrative autobiographical interviews conducted with members of the oldest generation of Polish social innovators (born in the 1930s—early 1950s) working in the human sector area CSOs. In this text, I use the concept of opportunity structures, reflecting over sets of structures which facilitate the professional and personal development of social reformers. I refer mainly to Institutional Opportunity Structures emerging in Poland under the socialist regime, during and post systemic transformation. The leading argument here is that the social innovator's career interrelates with the use of opportunity structures available in a political and economic system regardless of its type and prevalent ideology.

**Keywords** Systemic Transformation; Opportunity Structures; Social Reforming; Social Innovators; Third Sector; Human Sector; Helping Professions

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Let me begin with a personal, slightly auto-ethnographic statement about my inspirations underlying the brief analysis presented in this text: while studying biographical interviews of social welfare clients, I observed the relationships between socially excluded people and social policy institutions—the way in which the activities undertaken by welfare professionals influence (or not) their clients' lives, identities, self-esteem, et cetera. I have also been working with a few studies and analyses of social services interventions, and of social workers as an occupational category; which inspired my

insights into the attitudes of public sector social workers towards service users.<sup>1</sup> As a sociologist exploring poverty and social exclusion, I have been cooperating both with public institutions and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs). In the 90's, I was trained in just such an organization in the area of youth work and practical psychology, and I was working as a youth worker in a small local center run by CSOs. At the same time my husband was an active social actor in the field of alternative education. Thus—due to our personal involvement—I became familiar not only with social innovations, but also with social circles implementing them into the post-transformation reality in Poland. The results of my unstructured observations of non-governmental organizations actively engaged in providing professional help imply that, particularly in the 90's, the opinion was that the “non-governmental” attitude towards clients and the style of work was very different in comparison to reformed or “brand new” public sphere institutions. Social actors in the 3<sup>rd</sup> sector believed that the good quality and effectiveness of CSOs daily work stemmed from procedures of teamwork and the applied principle of “every-day democracy.” Although those CSOs were “not perfect,” the program texts of the Polish 3<sup>rd</sup> sector suggested that their work brought more positive results in clients' lives than interventions undertaken by public welfare agencies (*Elementarz III Sektora* 2005).

<sup>1</sup> For instance, the results of the study of social contract implementation in a municipal welfare agency in Lodz indicated that social workers not only constructed their relationships with beneficiaries in terms of power and control, but they also perceived the clients as unskillful, demoralized, and pretentious. Moreover, the clients were described and most probably treated as if they were passive objects or “naughty children”—immature, dependent adults (Golczyńska-Grondas and Kretek-Kamińska 2009).

In this project (at the moment still “under construction”), I have been dealing with narrations of Polish social reformers and individuals working in CSOs, with reference to their biographical roots, life histories, identities, their drives in social innovation implementation, models of activities, philosophies of work, and professional standards.<sup>2</sup> This scientific undertaking is rooted in traditions of biographical sociology, most of all in the tradition of the structural analysis of the Fritz Schütze School. Already in the 1930s Florian Znaniecki indicated the need for biographical studies on social innovators. He named culture-forming individuals as above-normal deviants. In “Contemporary People and the Civilization of the Future” he wrote: “There is a definite need to undertake thorough studies of deviants using biographical method with special attention given to abnormal deviants who have been scientifically neglected until now. Before exploring biological factors, one should first exhaust all scientific possibilities of capturing deviants as cultural personalities on the basis of their [life]-histories as active participants in civilization in which they live” (Znaniecki 2001:275). Although it can be firmly asserted that undertaking a social role by the reformer stems from one's personality (which constitutes the subject of psychology<sup>3</sup>), the biographical research creates an opportunity to consider social, cultural, and biographical conditions “generating” social innovators. Research of this kind has been attempted in sociology to a limited extent—among resources in English we can indicate studies

<sup>2</sup> At the moment (May 2019), the project developing towards teamwork is still limited to my individual research activities supported by The Dept. of Sociology of Culture, University of Lodz.

<sup>3</sup> Though Znaniecki himself often referred to issues of personality.

of the individual's role in social change (Hatcher 2013; Ulate-Sanchez 2014) or a monograph edited by Cnaan and Vinokur-Kaplan (2015) wherein thematic articles show socio-biographical contexts of social innovations. Life stories and biographical contexts are also present in the research of CSO activists and social entrepreneurs (Barendsen and Gardner 2004; Chimiak 2004; 2006; Palska and Lewenstein 2004; Weryński 2008; Wit 2008; Schütze et al. 2012; Chimiak and Iwińska 2015; Alber 2016; Sławecki 2016). The comprehensive account of issues pertaining to biographical conditions can be found in Jadwiga Koralewicz and Hanna Malewska-Peyre's (1998) work about Polish and French social activists. In 2011, Ilona Iłowiecka-Tańska (2011) published a book partly based on in-depth interviews with social change leaders presenting their role in forming the 3<sup>rd</sup> sector in post-transformation Poland. It is my intention to take it a step further—that is, **to analyze the biographies of people not only engaged socially, but who can also be described as a social activists' elite or better yet, social change leaders, authors of applied, model systematic solutions in the human sector** (broadly defined social work and education are the examples here). It is not only about examining the course of their biographical and professional careers. Fritz Schütze and colleagues (2012) stress that in the CSO narrations, one can find "a hidden biographical background" for a peculiar individual sensitivity towards others and towards social issues.

**The main purpose of this article is to reflect on opportunity structures<sup>4</sup> facilitating the professional**

<sup>4</sup> The concept of opportunity structures appears to be one of the most interesting descriptive categories in the biographical conditioning analysis of social innovators.

**and personal development of social reformers.** Using both the life histories of social innovators and source texts, I refer here to structures functioning not only during the Polish People's Republic (PPR) period, but also to those which emerged over the years of systemic transformation. The paper is based on preliminary results from the analysis of four pilot narrative autobiographical interviews conducted with representatives of the oldest generation of Polish social innovators.<sup>5</sup> The narrators, born in the late 1930s—early 1950s, initiated their reforming activities in the PPR; hence, they can be addressed as the creators and co-creators of alternative society structures during the communist regime and 3<sup>rd</sup> sector builders in the period of systemic transformation<sup>6</sup> (Leś 2000; Iłowiecka-Tańska 2011). It must be underlined here that, "sociologically," norms and expectations of "the social clock" would render Polish senior citizens professionally inactive. However, contrary to old age stereotypes, the narrators in their 70s and 80s appear to be active team leaders, advisers, mentors, and role models in their communities. At the same time, psychologically, the narrators are at the stage of their lives which enhances their tendency to summarize whole *Gestalts* of individual biography by means of identity and biographical work.

<sup>5</sup> Social reformers constituting researched population come from CSOs. Schütze, Schröder-Wildhagen, Nagel, and Treichel (2012) distinguish three cohort generations of CSO workers functioning right now in Europe: 1) older generation of "grandparents" who experienced the Second World War and "eclipse of humanity," 2) generations of "parents" growing up in a politically divided Europe, some of whom experienced "their more or less total seclusion within the state-socialistic societies" (Schütze et al. 2012:155); 3) generation of "grandchildren" born in a stabilized European culture. However, biographical experiences of the narrators place them closer to both grandparents and parents on this continuum.

<sup>6</sup> Narrators comprise of people with tertiary education (graduate and undergraduate) living in large Polish cities.

## Structures of Opportunity—Some Notions

The term "structures of opportunities" appeared in interpretative sociology at the turn of the 1950's and 1960's in the analyses of youth gangs functioning in the United States of America (Cloward and Ohlin 1961). Since then it has quickly risen in popularity among subdisciplines of sociology and consecutively in other social sciences. The concept relates to the most classic debate in sociology: structure vs. agency/choice or opportunity vs. constraints (e.g., Racko 2008; Loudon 2010; Cullen 2015) and is used to indicate collective activities. In particular, the term refers to: "constraints, possibilities, and threats that originate outside the mobilizing group, but affect its chances of mobilizing and/or realizing its collective interests" (Koopmans 1999:96 as cited in Suh 2001:441).<sup>7</sup> Opportunity structures present on various levels of social life (predominantly "macro and meso" structures) can be examined in the research of individual cases including studies of particular life-histories, as well as phenomena and social processes reflected in them. They seem also to assume the shape of a "surprise box"—since political opportunity structures determine institutional, discursive, or individual opportunity structures.

<sup>7</sup> Similarly to other terms of social sciences, here we are dealing with a considerable number of definitions and with the difficulty to draw sharp logical boundaries of the phenomenon to be defined. For example, Bondaroff and Burke, following the notions by Rootes, Joachim, and Swindler, state: "The literature on political opportunity structure generally takes the position that: [p]olitical actors make history, but they do not do so in circumstances of their own making. Instead, they encounter constraints and are presented with opportunities configured by the institutional arrangements and the prevailing patterns of political power which are the inescapable contexts of political action. There has recently been a tendency to refer to these contexts of action as 'political opportunity structures.'" (Rootes 1999 as cited in Bondaroff and Burke 2014:168; Swindler 1986, Joachim 2003 as cited in Bondaroff and Burke 2014).

In sociology, the concept of political opportunity structures (POS) appears predominantly in the analyses of dynamics and the transformation of social movements (Jeydel 2000; Suh 2001; Loudon 2010; Cullen 2015; Gleiss 2017). In general, they are described as (consistent) aspects, components, and institutional arrangements, but also as dimensions of the political system or the political environment that have an effect on social groups and movements ability to emerge, mobilize, and undertake their actions (Tarrow 1998 as cited in Bondaroff and Burke 2014; Jeydel 2000; Giugni 2009 as cited in Gleiss 2017). Among the elements of POS one can infer "the level of electoral stability, level of unity among elites, mass opinion, and powers granted to party leaders" (Jeydel 2000:15), as well as the degree of openness of international institutions, the presence of influential allies, and changes in political alignments and conflicts (Bondaroff and Burke 2014). POS are also characterized in terms of dimensions both based on simple dichotomies (i.e., institutional vs. cultural dimensions of political opportunities) and more elaborate, empirically based typologies (the relative openness/closure of an institutionalized political system, the stability/instability of the set of elite alignments undergirding a polity; the presence/absence of elite allies and a state's capacity and propensity for repression) (Gamson and Meyer 1996 as cited in Gleiss 2017; McAdam 1996:27 as cited in Gleiss 2017:234). National political structures or otherwise national culture create historically specific opportunity structures (Racko 2008). Concurrently, transnational opportunity structures are identified on a macro level as a result of unification and the process of globalization (e.g., Cullen 2015).

Opportunity structures function within the framework of institutions and formal organizations. With this in mind, one can infer: access to institutional resources, centralized leadership ensuring durability and continuity of actions, institutionalized theories and tactics (i.e., repetitive projects as an educational and mobilizing “tool,” as well as an identity information carrier) together with the creation of activist subculture (Reger 2018; see also Loudon 2010). Linked to both POS and institutional opportunity structures are discursive opportunity structures (DOS; also transnational discursive structures)—pre-given and fixed structures “articulating meaning in new ways,” which cover political and legal texts, socio-cultural discourses and mass-media discourses (Koopmans and Statham 1999 as cited in Gleiss 2017:235; Motta 2015). Thus, the assumption is that social activities are performed in two kinds of spaces—the political or institutional space and the discursive or cultural one. The key issues are subjected to “discursive struggle” relating to their different understandings claimed by participants of public life. DOS generate foundation for social valuing processes—policies and ideas, proposals and solutions are assessed in terms of sensibility, pragmatism, legitimating, et cetera. Therefore, “discursive struggle” influences not only reconceptualized meanings, but also attitudes and behaviors” (Koopmans and Statham 1999 as cited in Gleiss 2017:235). It can be said that it is POS together with DOS that shape historically specific opportunity structures. Thus, it is these structures that specify the broadest frame of actions which can be executed by groups or individuals for whom social change—including the introduction of reforms and innovations—is the aim. As Girts Racko (2008) emphasizes, in times of

transformation the battle is either about the transformation or preservation of historical opportunity structures.

On an individual level opportunity structures result from the functioning of primary groups in which an individual participates, especially family units or other social environments. They are treated, though, as external determinants towards social actors (external opportunity structures, i.e., Loudon 2010). The question of the functioning of the internal opportunity structures, which could be understood, for example, in the categories of internalized cognitive constructs and the disposition for activities associated with agency or resilience, is debatable.<sup>8</sup> It should be emphasized that, especially on the individual level, the use of opportunity structures may involve not only certain benefits, but also costs, since it is related to the socio-economic status of a person.<sup>9</sup> It can be assumed that every individual biography is uniquely marked with its own specific configuration of opportunity structures ingrained in dynamically changing reality (along with the course of life, historical processes, and structural factors) (Roberts 2009; Staunton 2015; Thompson 2017).

Opportunity structures (as well as constraints constituting their reverse) are dynamic, relational con-

<sup>8</sup> It seems that this term scarcely exists in sociological literature. For example, Catherine Begnoche Smith (1979) approaches internal opportunities structures as internal settings of formal organizations, not in terms of individual attribute.

<sup>9</sup> That is, Cloward and Ohlin (1961:85), commenting Merton’s notions on equal chances, state that: “the middle-class person can take advantage of educational opportunities despite their costs,” whereas the educational career of the working class child entails significant effort on behalf of its family, also financial one. It is elaborated further: “opportunities must be available to those who seek them” (Cloward and Ohlin 1961:102).

structs. They are shaped on all levels of social life through convergences resulting not only from historical processes, but institutional, individual, and collective behaviors as well. Opportunity structures are characterized in relation to their innate properties which affect social actors’ capabilities and their *modus operandi*. Open opportunity structures facilitate and promote human activities encouraging social actors responses to “favorable openings in the social structure,” increasing the impact of people, groups, and social movements exerted over institutions whereas closed ones—constrain such activities through differentiated barriers: means, techniques, or strategies of discouragement (Reger 2018:560; Tarrow 1998 as cited in Bondaroff and Burke 2014; Jeydel 2000; Suh 2001; Gleiss 2017). Transformations of opportunity structures are conditioned by a variety of factors, but processes and agents maintaining them can remain the same (Roberts 2009). Particular importance is given here to actions of individuals defined as active agents interactively changing structures of opportunity or “to exercise individual agency within their reshaped opportunities” (Roberts 2009:358). Transformations of opportunity structures can be linked to the introduction of new, absent from the discourse until now, themes, appearance of new forms of actions, or the emergence of counter-movements against those proposed by social actors who make use of current structures<sup>10</sup> (Bondaroff and Burke 2014:168; see also Thompson 2017; Reger 2018).

Opportunity structures are subject to interpretation and framing grounded in cultural and structural-

<sup>10</sup> For example, anti-hunt movement causes counter protest from hunters objecting against being portrayed as killers and murderers of the animals (i.e., Bondaroff and Burke 2014).

ly based “filters.” As Doowon Suh (2001:442, 443) states: “change becomes an ‘opportunity’ only if it is perceived as such by movement agents,” and indicates that only apparent opportunity can be described as casual. A specific way of perceiving and interpreting structures themselves and chances for success linked to taking advantage of them determines if or how they are to be used by social actors. Some structures can be taken advantage of only in certain phases of the life cycle, which was already noticed in 1960.<sup>11</sup> In addition, opportunity structures can be subject to either collective or individual interpretations due to historical or biographical events (Gamson and Meyer 1996, McAdam 1996 as cited in Gleiss 2017).<sup>12</sup> Such a conceptualization of opportunity structures sets them clearly in the domain of cultural phenomena and it seems hardly justified to differentiate between “objective” structural political opportunities and “subjective” cultural opportunities. In certain political, institutional, and biographical configurations, opportunities fluctuate, open, or close. History indicates that especially in times of systemic change both processes can be noted—simultaneous closure and opening of political and institutional opportunity structures throughout all levels of social structure and social categories. Characteristics of such transformations may be final and irreversible.

<sup>11</sup> “Some youths become hoodlums instead of businessmen, not because they lack the ability to succeed legitimately...but because they find out too late the relationship between school adjustment and [upward social mobility]” (Toby 1958 as cited in Cloward and Ohlin 1961:101)

<sup>12</sup> In the analysis of social movements the concept of cultural framing is used here. It is defined in terms of conscious, collective strategic efforts to construct shared understandings of the world and of the groups that will stimulate and legitimize supra-individual activities (which also means negotiation of meanings) (McAdam et al. as cited in Suh 2001:442; Mc Addam 1994 as cited in Gleiss 2017).

**The principal argument of the article is that the social innovator's career interrelates with the use of opportunity structures available in a political and economic system, regardless of the type of the system and prevalent ideology. Social reformers are not only active beneficiaries, but also creators of political and institutional opportunity structures.** It has to be mentioned that systemic transformation of the 1990s, on a number of levels, not only opened opportunity structures for social reforming, but caused certain structures to disappear, inevitably, as well.

### Opportunity Structures in Biographies of Senior Social Reformers

Witold, Zenon, Zofia, and Żaneta—narrators telling their stories in the project—are reformers embedded within the social world of human service professions at the grass-root level structures of both the alternative society of People's Poland and post transformation Poland. In the light of the dichotomic categorization of social activists formulated by Koralewicz and Malewska-Peyre (1998), who identified ideologically oriented and pragmatically oriented individuals, they represent the second category. Representing the latter are people working in micro and meso social worlds implementing their ideas in helping professions and alternative education. However, according to their clearly defined systems of values, they also shape public politics on the macro level.

Senior social reformers are witnesses and co-creators of contemporary history of post-war Poland. The origins of lives of the oldest narrators are painfully marked in various ways by the shadow of

World War II which sometimes dramatically shaped their childhood. "Impossible to forget images" anchored themselves in Zofia's memory: as a young girl she witnessed Gestapo soldiers killing Jewish children, she recalls her father, "a tough man," crying on the day Janusz Korczak was transported out of the ghetto to Auschwitz. She herself survived the execution carried out by German soldiers on the patients of the insurgent hospital, which was to be evacuated the following day. During the post-uprising mass exodus of civilians she watched burning houses, the suffering of people and animals. She lost her grandfather during the Volhynia Massacre<sup>13</sup> and her beloved brother in the Warsaw Uprising. Her grandmother, a resident of areas incorporated into the Third Reich, died in "despicable conditions" evicted from her flat because she refused to sign the Reich list. When Żaneta was born, the front line passed next to her town. She grew up in the Auschwitz vicinity, "about which little was known in those days. People kept silent. So it goes. In the shadows, of smoke, I grew up." Both Zofia and Żaneta "were lucky"—their parents survived and they grew up with them. Zenon's family fell apart—the mother, a teenage soldier of the underground state, was unable to take on the roles necessary for functioning in an adult life as a result of war traumas—the narrator first spent childhood and adolescence with relatives and later in care and children group homes. Only Witold, the youngest of the informants, mentions the war in the context of the loss of the pre-war, nationalized craftsmen's grandparents' es-

<sup>13</sup> For example, Portnov, Andrii. 2016. "Clash of Victimhoods: The Volhynia Massacre in Polish and Ukrainian Memory." Retrieved September 20, 2019 (<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/clash-of-victimhood-1943-volhynian-massacre-in-polish-and-ukrainian-culture/>).

tate, one of whom believed that "this [system] would one day turn on itself." The period of adolescence of the narrators and the time of their early adulthood is the period after the October Thaw and the years 1960 and 1970.

### People's Republic of Poland—The Structures of Opportunities

Although the post-war history of the Polish 3<sup>rd</sup> sector in the literature descriptions begins with the systemic transformation of 1989, it must be stressed that cultural and social capital, which was used in the establishing of its structures, was not created in a social vacuum. Also in the times of PRL, let's not forget—a highly oppressive state, there existed structures of opportunities shaping individual biographies, so that after 1989 innovators were ready to form the social reality in new political and economic conditions. First of all, there was a living practice of organic and "social" work at the base-line level. Koralewicz and Malewska-Peyre (1998) indicate that these traditions were rooted in environmental ethos referring to three basic themes: 1) activity for regaining and maintaining independence of Poland, 2) patron's missions of the landowners class and intelligence, and 3) organic work for the country—raising the standard of living, hygiene, education, et cetera. This last thread, which can be described in terms of modernization, is the most interesting, considering the content of this article and the narrators' accomplishments. Secondly, the Polish People's Republic itself, although not to assess the historical and social consequences of this period, was a great modernization project implemented in the post-war years (e.g., Zysiak 2018), whose declarative goal was to rebuild

the devastated country and shape a new social order—creating a space for making various innovative actions (not necessarily consistent with socialist ideology, especially in post-Stalin decades). Thirdly, the People's Republic of Poland, "the merriest barracks in the socialist camp" was not a closed system. Despite the Iron Curtain between Poland and the "West"—the flow of information and ideas was possible to a limited extent even before the October Thaw and became clearly visible at the turn of 1960 and 1970. The emphasis on mass participation in culture favored the intellectual development of people interested, for example, through access to relatively cheap cultural goods—publications, cultural events. Even in the most difficult years of Stalinism, there could have been circumstances conducive to the acquisition of skills by teenagers involved in social life.

**In relations of the narrators concerning life in the PPR, there appear sets of structures of opportunities within which their training towards biographical careers of social innovators took place.** These setups were related to: 1) functioning in **youth organizations**, 2) the use of **educational opportunities**, 3) participation in **counter-cultural movements**, 4) participation in **democratic opposition and alternative society structures**, and 5) the use of **opportunities existing on the outskirts of the system and its institutions**. It should be emphasized that these structures of opportunities were available primarily for people living in big cities; even if they did not originate from intelligentsia, they participated in those social circles.

Annot. 1. All narrators in the period of adolescence and early adulthood have been active for some time

in **youth organizations**—the Polish Youth Union (ZMP), the Polish Scouting (ZHP),<sup>14</sup> or the Union of Polish Students (ZSP). As a high school student, Zofia, enchanted with slogans of struggle for peace and social justice, signed up for ZMP and for a certain period of time was a very committed activist of this organization. Mocked during the meeting, when, as a practicing Catholic, she put the thesis about the cohesion of the idea of communism and Christianity, then urged to become an informer by the communist party activists (aiming at digging out dirt on one of the lecturers teaching “true” Polish history<sup>15</sup>), before college Baccalaureate examination she resigned from ZMP. Zofia, Żaneta, and Witold were also acting in scouting organization lead, to some extent, by pre-war scouting staff<sup>16</sup>:

Stalin died. Year 1956 [came]. And suddenly, it turned out that we could form a scouting troop...that there were such wonderful people among us...who were scouts before the war, during the war...I will never forget how we started to create scouting troops...we made a scouts' den [in the school basement] with our own hands...The first camps, wow, it's an amazing experience...We had to pitch our tents and these were heavy tents, military ones...We had to construct our beds, make them, build a latrine, and so on...It was again a period in my life, when I was getting something, well, I got an inheritance of these values, ideals, truth, respected by scouts, that is: “Fatherland, science, virtue”, and initiatives for the benefit of others and care for younger ones...These nursery schools in various villages, crèches, day care centers for children...It was very important to me. It is still very important today, as we are talking about social innovations. To go to camp in summer, we had to work all year to earn some money, because of poverty... So we collected scrap iron, various waste, we took it to those scrap yards. Well, we put aside funds there, financial means to go somewhere...usually somewhere close. And then, we were already involved in the initiatives, some wider projects: the rally at Grunwald<sup>17</sup>... we were also discovering [the] Trail of Eagles' Nests<sup>18</sup>... It was in this project that our activity was combined with the benefit for the local environment, historical education, although it was then called differently. And also nature education was very intense. Well, and community, great brotherhood, the evening came, sitting by the fire and singing. [SIB01 Żaneta]

<sup>17</sup> Scouting rallies held annually at Grunwald commemorate the anniversary of the victorious battle of Polish-Lithuanian military forces over Teutonic Knights in 1410.

<sup>18</sup> The route between Cracow and Czestochowa leading along the towns where are the ruins of Polish settlements and castles from the beginnings of Polish statehood.

Collected data reveal the formative significance of the structures of opportunities created by formal organizations, that is: task training, internalization of values and norms related to independence, responsibility, community formation, discovering the meaning of social ties, or—under “favorable conditions”—lessons in democracy:

In any case, at some point...we had just decided that we wanted to introduce democracy...“We want to elect a squad leader.”...the team leader said: “Choose him”...he handed it [responsibility] over to us. We chose Antoni Zieliński, who...was afterwards a member of [the name of the opposition organization], you know, he founded [name of the underground publishing house]...Then there was the question of the name of the squad, so we have chosen a very innovative name...Our team was called “US” ((laughs))...not Eagle Feathers, well, yeah...“US.” [SIB04 Witold]

It must be underlined here that participation in socialist youth organizations could also confront future reformers with the constraint of making choices and withdrawing from actions incompatible with internalized values:

[P]eople in power, however, realized that the scouts could run into contradictions [with rules imposed by the communists] and managed to use the back door to smuggle in indoctrination...And so you had to slowly withdraw from this scouting, even. There was no acceptance in me to change the method of pedagogy to which I was attached very much...Although sentiment and memories, very, very strongly got stuck in my psyche. [SIB01 Żaneta]

Annot. 2. An additional set of opportunities that emerged in the biographies described here are associated with **participation in educational institutions, primarily at the level of higher education**.<sup>19</sup> It is worth recalling here that despite the apparent openness of the system during socialism (free of charge studies, preferential system for youth of working class and peasant origin), only a few high school graduates took up tertiary education.<sup>20</sup> This elite also included the narrators, students of the humanities in the 1960s and 1970s. The formative influence of tertiary education is the most apparent in the interview with Zenon—for a time a student at the polytechnics, who undertook subsequent humanistic studies in a special “empty year” of recruitment (the result of school reform and the creation of 8-grade primary schools instead of 7-grade schools). At the time, “all remnants” set to the entry exams, at the age of graduating students, definitely more mature than their colleagues from older years, which established a special position of that year students amidst academic staff, thus motivating them to intensive efforts:

<sup>19</sup> Only Witold talks about the importance of secondary school, or actually contact with a prominent high school teacher as a formative significant other, and the value of peer relationships.

<sup>20</sup> In the work published in 1963, Jan Szczepański wrote about a few percent of the first-graders of primary schools taking up university studies at the end of their educational career. According to the Act of 1958, higher education institutions should ensure “such class composition and the moral and political image of the university youth so that they can best fulfill their tasks of educating and shaping/molding people's intelligentsia” (Szczepański 1963:45). According to data provided by Szczepański, for example, in 1959/1960, 12.6% of high school graduates took up studies. In the first years of socialism, recruitment procedures were successfully manipulated so as to equalize the chances of youth of working and peasant origin constituting in the 1950s and 1960s about 50% of the students. In the following years, this figure systematically decreased.

[There was] something called individual studies... If you looked at my index, you would be shocked because, first of all, I have twice as many subjects as there was a regular student quota, secondly, more than half of these are doctoral seminars...or some postgraduate [ones]...I was a member of four research teams...I was engaged very deeply in scientific activities ((with a smile)). I made money in this way, that...I was conducting research... for doctoral theses...S. [name of a colleague], which in turn was an absolvent of mathematics, we were the main... statistical and methodological consultants, at that time we both completed a postgraduate seminar under [names of professors], leadership—multivariate analysis, so I have, I have a powerful education...methodological and statistical. [SIB02 Zenon]

The years of studying provide enormous **opportunities to learn with and from outstanding teachers and mentors** who became significant others, and even “professional” biographical carers shaping aspirations and professional identities of the narrators: “it changed my life, because I went to meet him [the name of the lecturer].” Żaneta and Zenon also took on the role of active participants in social organizations supported by the communist authorities—they joined the Union of Polish Students (ZSP), quickly taking over the functions of the chairmen of the university/faculty councils.

Annot. 3. **The counter-culture trends** from the West reached not only the PPR, but also other countries of the Eastern Bloc,<sup>21</sup> “seducing” young people

<sup>21</sup> The socialist countries represented a specific type of industrial society with features independent of the political system (Toffler 1980). In the 1970s, faith in technological progress be-

with the ideas of freedom, authentic culture, and community. As Aldona Jawłowska (1988) writes, in the 1960s, ideological manifestations of youth were based on the slogans of changing the world through the reconstruction of oneself and the immediate environment. The change was to take place not through the destruction of macrostructures, but by blasting the whole system through alternative organizations “pushing into all the ‘slots’ of the prevailing organization of social life” (Jawłowska 1988:20). Humanistic psychology has been developing in the grey socialist reality, and the traditions of other (previously considered incompatible with communist ideology) orientations of “western” psychology were restored.<sup>22</sup> Alternative student theaters appeared and vanished.<sup>23</sup> They were inspired by the idea of “active culture” and the theater of Jerzy Grotowski’s Laboratory. The seeds of the future Buddhist sanghas were germinating, and the hippie contesting system shocked the “decent” citizens of the PPR with their looks and behavior.<sup>24</sup> During

came less and less pronounced and disillusionment with “favors of a large industrial civilization” was growing (Toffler 1980; Jawłowska 1988).

<sup>22</sup> For example, Hanna Strzelecka-Jaworska (2007) describes the return to the tradition of analytic psychology that took place in 1960 in Poland thanks to the efforts of Jan Malewski. Malewski, despite the censorship and blockade of scientific exchange with the West, managed to reach psychoanalytic literature. Following his experiences from scholarship in Prague he “smuggled” ideas of psychoanalysis into state medical care system.

<sup>23</sup> In 1970-80 there were several hundred student theaters in Poland (annually, on average, their number fluctuated around 200). Paradoxically, their functioning was possible thanks to the patronage of the (Socialist) Union of Polish Students, an organization involved in dealings with the communist authorities (Jawłowska 1988; Grupińska and Wawrzyniak 2011).

<sup>24</sup> Polish hippies appeared as a collective in 1967. The hippie movement was anti-systemic also in the political dimension: “The Polish hippies reminded the authorities that the Polish nation is still not looking in the direction in which it should. He breaks out of the ideological field of gravity; he is still looking for his center outside the devised orbits in the Kremlin” (Sipowicz 2008:94).

their studies Zenon and Witold functioned in communities similar to the hippie movement, but clearly situated on its outskirts:

They were not exactly hippie communes...We were learning therapy and...and we were working...I worked with [name of professor]...since the beginning of the second year [of studies]...At the same time, many things have happened...It is difficult for me to calculate how many hours there were in the day time... because I think close to fifty hours... Well, because I lived in a commune, where every day...in the evening, there were some activities... structured ones. There was either a vernissage or... paratheatrical activities or a community or a therapeutic group or dances...Of course, everyone flocked down together in the evening because everyone was working very hard...Having completed the first year of studies, I had my first [therapeutic] group of patients, just like I am thinking that...back then...the Earth was spinning much slower ((laughing))...We dreamed that maybe in ten years time we will have our own clinic, after five years each of us had a clinic...Life flew so much faster, you know, than imagination. [SIB02 Zenon]

Fascinated by Grotowski and acknowledging him as one of his masters, Witold<sup>25</sup> was also involved with student alternative theater; using the term coined by Stefan Morawski, he can be included in

<sup>25</sup> “Because the second current, extremely important, it was Grotowski...We went to ‘Apocalypsis cum figuris’ [one of the most famous performances of the Laboratory Theater] to Wrocław...And what was going on for me was like an encounter with the Absolute...After all, we were transported into a different dimension...I just stood there, with my friend, we were thunderstruck, we were...just shivering...When Grot came to Warsaw...we were such groupies, sat with him in the hotel, went to all meetings, I admired his way, actually, you can say—I took something in from him...this respect to people, that there are no stupid questions” (SIB04 Witold).

the category of “by-artists” (*przy-artystyści*) (Jawłowska 1988:8-9)—sympathizers and friends of the theater stemming from the circles of young intellectuals, informal co-authors of performances, reviewers, advisers. Witold regards his ties with both theatrical trends as one of the most formative biographical experiences:

I got into [name of the student theater]...You could get there, there was an exam, you had to audition on stage...they said, “You’re totally a rookie, you have to earn your stripes here.” And it was extremely formative for me...I also signed up to the group which was led by [the name of the creator], then he was a kind of a mentor to me for a long time, somebody to whom I dropped in to talk about life, get angry, you know, such a good adult figure, so much smarter, wiser man, it was amazing, how I used to roam around this theater, [the title of a play] I watched...fifty times or forty...from every side...I then thought that I would be a theater man, we would do different happenings and ventures...Even for a long time, as I was learning therapy and this, and so on, I did physical activities, pantomime classes, paratheatrical activities, therapeutic for patients, but along these lines. [SIB04 Witold]

Annot. 4. All of the narrators actively participated in the actions of **the political opposition** to a different extent, going through a specific training in empathy and practical skills. The narrators were involved in anti-system activities already as young adults. Witold, Zofia, and Żaneta recall their active participation in the events of March 1968—the student protests in particular, and, most of all, the deportation of people of Jewish origin, “a period of shame in the history of Poland”:



Suddenly it transpired that I have Jewish friends...my closest friend was a Jew...and suddenly...his father was fired, his mother is in trouble, he tries to wrap his mind around [hmm] his Jewishness and I just, I was ashamed that I'm Polish...there was this, from home [preconception], you know, "And like a Jew about an empty store"...such anti-Semitic comments...His [the friend's] suffering just hurt me, you know, too close to the bone...Suddenly my friends started to leave, forced by their parents, forced by the situation...it was as if you were tearing away a piece of your heart...[In] [19]69..., Antoni [a friend from scouting] approaches me, says: "Listen, the anniversary of 1968 is coming... Are you in?" "I'm in. What is it?" You just have to throw leaflets to the crowd in the city, remind them of this anniversary...I organized [people in] five pairs. The system was as follows...you only have a leaflet and glue...and I have a stack of leaflets. You just hold one, you go, and you stick it and leave. If they catch you, you have nothing [in your hands]...I follow you and when I see there is nothing happening [no danger], then we meet again and I give you another leaflet...there was all this methodology. [SIB04 Witold]<sup>26</sup>

This oppositional activism is most evident in the biography of Zofia who, after the October Thaw, was one of the initiators of the ZMP denouement. She defended her MA thesis as a twenty-one-year-old ("everything was happening so fast after the war") and became a school teacher. Her early career of school teacher rapidly ended in being blackballed (getting a "wolf ticket")—she refused to agree to the

<sup>26</sup> For Zofia and Żaneta, the participation in March events brought about the repression of the communist secret service. As for Witold, militia "got him" later, when, as a student of a Catholic university, he illegally distributed Leszek Kolakowski's "Thesis on Hope and Hopelessness."

demands of the Polish United Workers' Party secretary, who pressed her to change the final grades assigned by her to her students (high school graduates expressing views incompatible with the communist ones)<sup>27</sup> to insufficient. In the years 1956-89 she participated in many anti-system goings-on. During the uprising in Hungary she helped collect blood sent to fighters, participated in a network of help for Poles returning to the country who had been laid off from Siberian camps. As mentioned above, she took part in student protests in 1968, actively got involved in helping workers injured during the Radom strikes in 1976 and co-ran one of the underground publishing houses. In the Solidarity Carnival, she became one of the experts in the field of independent education. She did not give up her involvement with the opposition despite brutal repercussions from the Security Service. For many years, Witold actively cooperated with the opposition, performing tasks for them (distribution of independent publishing bulletins, conducting observations, and social research). Żaneta, a girl who dreamed of a career as a politician, quickly withdrew from attempts at political activity: "there was always a beginning to make, and then I kept on coming across... a blank wall of discord, a concession of a moral nature." She survived the time of professional drift, for some time working as a journalist. From the context of the interview it appears that she was keenly engaged with the future political elites of the new Poland. Zenon also mentions his active role in preparing opposition

<sup>27</sup> In the justification of the work ban, which she received from the director of the facility, it was written that she: "educates young people in the spirit of fideism and enjoys the adoration of young people because she favors their lowest instincts." Zofia became a doctoral student and an assistant researcher at one of Polish universities.

candidates for the June elections in 1989, which indicates his engagement. The activities and even the acquaintances themselves in social networks and circles created by the political opposition of the PPR during the systemic transformation will constitute access to symbolic and economic resources, as well as the possibility of creating neoliberal institutional opportunity structures.<sup>28</sup>

Annot. 5. Already in the 1970s and 1980s, adepts of professional help structures, Zenon and Witold, engaged themselves in activities that can be described as innovative professional work.<sup>29</sup> Having completed their internships in institutions run by their mentors, they (co-)created teams that in their own innovative way worked with so-called difficult youth and/or psychiatric patients. These undertakings animated social activities in local neighborhoods, establishing centers and even schools. From interviews, it appears that within the framework of innovative professional work in the socialist regime, **the institutional structures of opportunities and discursive structures existing at the outskirts**

<sup>28</sup> According to Palska and Lewenstein (2004), social activists who were active in political opposition in the PPR can be characterized as individuals strongly oriented towards social reforms.

<sup>29</sup> The concept of innovative professional work comes from Katarzyna Waniek who follows Everett Hughes' notions on professional work understood as a series of actions undertaken by individuals with theoretical expertise and long-lasting practical experience socially recognized as experts in their vocations. Innovative professional work is defined here as a series of novel interactional and communicative activities performed by social reformers in social worlds of human services towards the others defined as students, wards, clients, service users, or beneficiaries. It is the foundation of social innovations as the first stage of implementing novel, systemic solution oriented towards solving social problems and fulfilling social needs ("Innovative professional work in different logics of power. A comparative qualitative study on social worlds of reformers before and after 1989 in Poland and Eastern Germany" 2018—project in evaluation procedures of international grant contest).

**of the system** or even **shadow opportunity structures**<sup>30</sup> (constituting the invisible basis for actions) were used there.

The work of reformers in People's Poland can paradoxically be described as a "joyful creativity" or ingenuity combined with "scheming." In order to introduce innovative solutions, all possible ways were sought out: coalitions with like-minded professionals were formed and inventive actions were skillfully "smuggled" to formal institutions. Allies were sought in ministries and institutions, the officials' ignorance, as well as "gaps" in law and ideology were used to communicate with decision-makers: "it was such a contraband. It was not possible to 'do' upbringing, because the upbringing was to be socialist, but the therapy could be done." One could also use hospital set-up to run desired school activities, out of which more complex work systems or neighborhood club networks grew:

I began to deal with pulling people out of the drug addiction, home rehab...different things like that. And at some point...there [was] a professor S. at the moment, retired, the head of the hygiene clinic... And he had a small building...upstairs there were

<sup>30</sup> I would like to thank Magdalena Rek-Woźniak for the concept of shadow opportunity structures. They are depicted in the interviews in the example of the financing of Polish multi-annual research and implementation programs from funds subsidized by the US government as part of the settlement of the grain loan (which was commonly known information). Yet, during the transformation period, it was said that these funds were at the disposal of the CIA supporting the activities of Polish pro-democratic circles, to which the American services included, among others, new therapeutic trends. One may also put forward the thesis that—apart from the shadow opportunity structures—there are dirty opportunity structures—as an example it is possible to give funding for socially approved activities from means of illegal sources or crime. We would therefore deal here with the innovations in the classical Mertonian sense.

some empty rooms...and an attic. And we [a group of young therapists] went in and started talking to him... [that] you know [we want to] take care of these young people, who are senselessly on drugs, help them to get out. And I just do not have [enough] words of appreciation for him, that he just said to such a gang: "So, I am giving you this attic and...just go on." It was not that, you know, we worked for him...[Later on], at some point, our children did not get into school... so we went to [professor] S., we say: "Wouldn't it be possible to piece together some school here?" And he says: "Well, why not? We'll use hospital set-up for classes."<sup>31</sup> [SIB004 Witold]

The use of institutional, PRL opportunity structures was associated with **dilemmas regarding the definition of the situation and the social roles** assigned by the system:

I suddenly became a director in the education...we are full of enthusiasm, and finally we won [got our own center]...I have to hire people full-time, we will just do our job. At that time, there was such [a supervisory] institution [with] a well-known financial manager...And as the director, I had to report to her...I walk in, long hair, you know a little bit, slack, well: "Can I help you?" no ((giggle)), and I say that my name is Witold W., in connection with this center [name] which is to be opened. "But, this... Aaaaa, welcome, sir, director!" And I turned around because I thought someone came in. And...suddenly such goosebumps

on my back, I say: "Damn, she is talking to me! I am a director in the education ((with excitement))) it is impossible!" [SIB004 Witold]

Similar **cognitive dilemmas and interactional problems** in relations with people representing the alien social world for them were experienced by representatives of socialist authorities. And it was them who had a final word in the fate of innovative programs. If they decided that the project could pose a threat to the public or simply their personal interests, they undertook formal or informal actions to close them down:

Each year we celebrated...the holiday of the residential area...[The idea of] festivities which [shocked] the board [of the socialist housing cooperative]...They were completely stunned...it was of bigger dimension than the festival of "Trybuna Ludu" [communist daily] near the Palace of Culture, only that the celebrations...under the Palace of Culture cost millions of zlotys, and that...everything...the residents did it themselves...Asked if they could come to our meeting... Then it turned out that they had cash prizes and medals for us...They came—and they were witnesses of the scandal, [because] I said that I would be only a guest [during the feast]...but, of course, I was chipping in ((laughs)). And, of course, our team rolled over me like a lawn mower...Suddenly, they saw a bunch of people, who, with no inhibitions whatsoever, don't take any prisoners. And also that—without any respect, you understand, I almost got my head bitten off, that ((laughs)) that it was that. And they did not say a word...they did not acknowledge that these medals and bonuses were of their doings, but in the evening the secretary of the party came to me, a bit

woozy...in exasperation and said, "Mister, you must come to us"...I knew that I could not refuse him, although we have never been hanging out with them... That...all the apparatchiks and all of those secret service thugs, and they...said, "This is communism, what are you doing"...They meant...what... Marx and Engels went about...in their postulates, that honesty, openness, authenticity, yes? Full social control, yes... they thought beforehand that "I, head honcho, run the show with an iron fist"...And it was a matter of how to seduce me... They saw that this team is totally uncontrolled...that...I only have a chance [standing] if I manage to convince people to do something...Keep in mind, it was half a year before, you know, "Solidarity"...And since that day on it started, some massive obstruction in our work and so on, so it went. That if girls, for example, went on parental leave, then they lost their jobs and so on, that's how it was. Anyway... it turned out that eighty percent of our problems were not problems with the implementation of this program, only with the justification. And we thought that...it makes no sense at all. And, well, we moved away. [SIB02 Zenon]

**Towards the end of the socialist period, opportunity structures on the outskirts of the system continued to open.** Leaders introducing innovative solutions in education and work with children and youth or people socially excluded just after transformation were prepared for their roles already in the 1980s, including participating in trainings organized by narrators:

Hundreds, thousands of people came, such cycles, containing interpersonal training, in which [it] was included self-improvement work, preparing yourself to work,

to help...under the banner of sociotherapy. It spilled into different areas, one can say, at some point in time, I called it "the movement of psychological help in education" and it happened, in the whole country...And we told those people who were finishing the course... first of all, stay together as a group...There is integration, keep going, create something more, your reality. Secondly, if you need a structure, you can always say you are our colleagues from [name of the professional association], associated with a club, group, workshop... And in this way...from such powerful energy in the meetings of a group, such bubbles were created...People became heads of provincial counseling...because their competence grew in strength...Throughout the country there was such a movement formed, people knew each other, went to conferences...so that they would get to know one other, flow. In the meantime, new centers were created. [SIB04 Witold]

Concluding this part of the text, it is important to say that the use of socialist structures of opportunities was of considerable importance for the development of biographical careers of narrators. Participation in both socialistic formal organizations ("psychologically available" only for some young people) and structures of the alternative society prepared social reformers for functioning in the first years of transformation and the emerging neoliberal new reality. Narrators gained knowledge and skills used in various ways throughout their professional lives, and developed the assumptions and working procedures used today. It was in the PPR that they became independent, mature professionals. It was then that their beliefs and attitudes were formed, which did not always facilitate and do not now facilitate their functioning in neoliberal social order.

<sup>31</sup> Hospital classes/schools were organized in hospital wards in in-patients/walk-in clinics for ill students admitted there (to a hospital or a clinic), so that they could participate in school activities on a daily basis. In the case discussed in the interview, this form was used while working with so-called troubled (acting-out) teenagers treating them as SEN children.

### System Transformation—1989: The First Years of New Poland and New Structures of Opportunities

Systemic transformation in many dimensions completely changed the *modus operandi* of the opportunity structures in which Polish society functioned. As Piotr Sztompka (2000) wrote, in the first decades of transformation, Poles experienced traumas of great change. The change of political system was accompanied by the disappearance of some institutions of public life, the emergence, in their place, of new and far-reaching reconstructions of others. Life-styles, patterns of education, work, and leisure were being modified radically. The history of Poland was being redefined, language was evolving,<sup>32</sup> questions about the importance of subjectivity, citizenship were born (Sztompka 2000; Iłowiecka-Tańska 2011; Modzelewski 2013). The time caesura seemed to radically separate the times of socialism (“before”) from the new reality (“after”), and the transformation would become “a decisive element of collective experience” (Iłowiecka-Tańska 2011:50) of several Polish generations. According to Iłonia Iłowiecka-Tańska, builders of the 3<sup>rd</sup> sector of Free Poland (“PPR” social activists and opposition activists) attempted to create this sector consciously as a new formation based on new types of social relations arising from the self-organization of civil society. In the process of modernization that would make up for Poland’s civilization backlog, a “new man” was to arise, changing reality for the better in a different way, a man with new attitudes, behavior patterns, complete

<sup>32</sup> The discourse of real socialism was replaced by the discourse of the birth of capitalism (Alexander 1992, 1998 as cited in Sztompka 2000).

opposite of self-centered, passively subordinated to fate, and external coercion *homo sovieticus* (Tischner 1992; Koralewicz and Malewska-Peyre 1998; Iłowiecka-Tańska 2011; cf. Palska and Lewenstein 2004). Therefore, the builders of the 3<sup>rd</sup> sector were the followers of the “utopia, in which the social order was to support moral development and the fulfillment of which...seemed closer and more real than ever” (Iłowiecka-Tańska 2011:81).

Iłowiecka-Tańska’s analysis also shows that the 3<sup>rd</sup> sector builders kept on rejecting the models of functioning of the organization of the PPR period, both mass social organizations and the democratic opposition ones, recognizing both models as anachronistic, and the PPR itself as a negative reference point. The basis of their social project was to raise the society to participatory democracy by rebuilding social capital. The utmost significance was assigned to the independent, decentralized, horizontal structures and organizations which, from the bottom up, using innovative methods, were to solve social issues and problems. The emerging leaders of the third sector were advocates of collective actions based on the principles of solidarity, trust, and cooperation, activities regulated not by coercion, but ethical norms valid throughout the sector. In the new order, non-governmental organizations were supposed to be an equal, independent from the state, partner of social dialogue, subject to legal regulations of that state, including registration possibilities (Iłowiecka-Tańska 2011). Considering the 3<sup>rd</sup> sector statistics, plans, and dreams of Polish civil society were close to being fulfilled. In Poland, similarly to other post-communist countries, there was an “eruption” of civil society organizations. In the period of 1990-

93, about 67 thousand associations were set up every year, and the index of foundations growth was in the early 1990s at 500% *per annum* stabilizing at the turn of 1993/94 at the level of 115% (Elementarz III Sektora 2005; e.g., Racko 2008; Fabián and Dubnová 2018; Facts about NGOs<sup>33</sup>).

At the beginning of the transformation, narrators, then people in the Eriksonian phase of generativity, became very intensely involved in the activities of the non-governmental sector. In their biographies, from the **opening transformational structures**, the following opportunities are particularly visible: 1) the possibility of **establishing independent foundations and associations**; 2) **access to people of power** deciding on the political opportunity structures; 3) **economic opportunity structures**; 4) **dissemination of models and standards of innovative professionalism** on the supralocal level, including **shaping discourse opportunity structures**.

Annot. 1. In the early 1990s, the narrators established **civil society organizations and non-public institutions** that constitute the formal framework for their uniquely own actions. Zenon and Witold had at their disposal teams on which they could rely. The programs they implemented constituted in certain dimensions the continuation of professional activity dating back to the period of the Polish People’s Republic. Zenon, with the team, established a foundation that organized a network of community work

<sup>33</sup> In 2018, there were 117 thousand associations and 26 thousand foundations registered in Poland. It is estimated that about 65% of this number is active. Organizations operating in the human sector are probably about 20% of all organizations (7% deal with social services and social assistance, 13% with education and upbringing) (see: <https://fakty.ngo.pl/fakt/liczba-ngo-w-polsce>. Retrieved September 20, 2019).

centers in one of the districts of the big city. Witold joined the attempts to reform the education system by training, among others, employees of the ministries, education supervisors, and directors of the institutions. When it turned out that the “system gets bogged down” due to the resistance of the social environment to change, with its association created and implemented nationwide programs of activating the unemployed youth. Then he set up his own training facility with a semi-commercial profile. Zofia and Żaneta started an innovative activity in the human sector in the institutional dimension, in a sense “from scratch,” only in 1989. Zofia, just after the elections on June 04—implementing her values and ideals—created one of the first Polish non-public democratic schools:

[A]lready in June, eighty-ninth year, using the word of mouth, we announced the recruitment to the school that we wanted to set up...Under the cover of the university, the professor X agreed to make the room available to us. And they came, those who wanted to be teachers, those who wanted to have children in such a new school, and also the students themselves...And together we discussed the program, the principles of education, the educational program, and the didactic program. We wrote a pretty good program, where subjects were correlated...And this idea of school democracy was also born there, so that the students could influence the community. And so that in that way they could learn responsibility not only for themselves, but for the group they are part of. And all these postulates...we have integrated into the program of the school to be open and we had an unbelievable number of candidates. We did not have a building; we had no money, nothing but a massive

crowd of willing spirits...There were probably five candidates for one place. We...created four classes, no location was known, where it will be. [SIB03 Zofia]

Żaneta, for whom the communist political opportunity structures had been open for some time and who, for ethical reasons, abandoned the idea of a political career in the socialist system, quickly got disappointed with the political reality of the Third Polish Republic. After the fiasco attempts to influence the new order through expert work directed to the government authorities, aware of the costs of transformation, which were dramatically high for a part of the society, she decided to establish her own center:

I then cooperated with professor M. very closely. We wrote one program, then the next. Such a national program for youth, but politicians did not accept it. Well, it was a failure again...not frustration, as in the 68th year, but frustration, nevertheless, disappointment, I would say, and then it was such a turning point. So, if you cannot change the system, and it was very raw, personal pain, I was 100% convinced that this is a big mistake and later the following years proved it...Well, I decided...to set up my own space...Create, organize such a space that will generate conditions for those people who are hurt by transformational changes. It was somewhere around 1993, more or less, that is to say, the association was born out of this sense of defeat, failure, and refusal to accept it. [SIB01 Żaneta]

It is worth referring here to the statement formulated in the mid-1990s by Koralewicz and Malewska-Peyre (1998:150), according to which in the new Poland the choices of activists lost “the nature of moral imperative.” The content of interviews indi-

cate that the thesis was overly “optimistic.” Moral imperatives “evoked” by the increasingly visible, growing wave of social problems could continue to be a significant motive for the actions undertaken by the reformers. Only the contexts, in which choices and decisions were made, have changed,<sup>34</sup> which sometimes turned out to be the starting point for well-thought-out biographical projects. It should be emphasized that organizations and institutions established in the first years of transformation under these projects operate to this day, mostly with the involvement of narrators.

Annot. 2. **Access to the people of the “new power”** created the possibility for the innovators to **influence political opportunity structures**, constituting significant conditions for the professional innovative work of the interviewed narrators in the initial years of transformation. The narrators, who were embedded in the structures of civil society, personally knew the activists of the anti-communist opposition that formed the first post-transformation governments. For a certain period of time, some of the senior social reformers themselves were in performed functions in ministries, advisory bodies, expert teams, also at the central level:

Well, in the ninety-ninth year, when the Round Table talks began, I was invited to participate in talks by this Solidarity committee, at the so-called educational “sub-table”...We just outlined this postulate of the right to establish independent schools and social

<sup>34</sup> Ilona Iłowiecka-Tańska (2011:139) writes about the builders of the non-governmental sector, who, in the early 1990s, “stood at the crossroads, whose paths led in opposite directions,” occasionally merging around building a new style of work.

schools, which could be founded by other entities, different than the state. And that they could function in accordance with their programs. And we succeeded, that consent came out. [SIB03 Zofia]

Initially, the authorities seemed willing to use some of the innovative solution models developed by the environments centered around noteworthy social change leaders, who also **influenced discursive opportunity structures** by participating in debates on key social issues. Impacts of social innovators are visible, for example, in statutory provisions and regulations, for example, related to the reform of the social welfare system introduced at the turn of 1998/99. Over the years, the influence of senior social reformers on social policy processes became more and more limited; people from the 3<sup>rd</sup> sector became one of many social actors in a complex, political, multi-dimensional game of interests.

Annot. 3. Being embedded within the circles of the elite gave access to **the economic opportunity structures**. In the first years of transformation, this access could be related to the support of activities by politicians, for example, by facilitating access to technical infrastructure (like the using of a deputy computer) or transferring grants from the funds available to familiar decision-makers:

First elections, the fourth of June... citizens committees asked us for help in the elections and we were there to prepare candidates for two months...And all our candidates...won...in these elections by a large margin... bigger than the rest. And everyone suddenly appreciated us very much...and they told us that they would give us everything they could, but they could

not do much. Nevertheless...gradually...we got more and more money and as long as they were [there]... And until the end of 2000, we had a lot of resources. [SIB02 Zenon]

It was also possible to obtain fixed assets in the form of premises remaining after closures of institutions, including the liquidated property of communist parties whose resources, after transformation, became the property of the state treasury. And although this practice seemed to be quite widespread among emerging CSOs, again, personal relationships with people in power could have a considerable significance:

By the end of this eighty-ninth year...there was disbandment of Polish United Workers’ Party. And the place, which was a party activism school in Starowiślna street...[was] being vacated...I ran to the minister [surname] with a request to grant us this building for our facility, which has been functioning in such [very temporary] conditions for three months now...And we got permission to have it and that’s how we moved to [street name]. [SIB03 Zofia]

In the area of economic opportunity structures, a significant role in the development of civic society and the professionalization of the 3<sup>rd</sup> sector was played by **foreign aid programs** implemented since the early 1990s. These programs, to a large extent, were working as the opening opportunity structure, anyway—based on the principle of grant contest—they caused tensions on the procedures and the ethos of work. The freedom of action was largely limited, and their implementers had to prove that they acted professionally, deliberately, methodically, and effec-

tively, achieving effective results based on the principles of economics (Hłowiecka-Tańska 2011). The rules of the grants' contests forced the change of attitudes and identities, the transition from the symbolic space of spontaneity to the ordered and structured space in accordance with the principles of social engineering (Szacki 1994 as cited in Hłowiecka-Tańska 2011:100; see also Dudkiewicz 2002). It seems that at first the narrators were relatively resistant to these constraints. Their innovative projects were the effect of both personal (intellectual and emotional) and social capital accumulated over many years. Senior social reformers, embedded in their professional roles, with elaborated work procedures, do not need support of foreign experts, whose role in creating post-transformational institutional order is mentioned in literature (Hłowiecka-Tańska 2011); some of them even claimed that those experts "sell" the knowledge that Polish specialists have already possessed for years. The narrators carried out their activities maintaining and improving their own methodologies and work systems, efficiently adapting to the cumbersome formal requirements that limited access to the opening structures of opportunities:

We've got at least as much, from various international competitions, and so on. And there was a 20-year program [of community work]...We got Equal,<sup>35</sup> that gave us the opportunity to...support...our [wards]...in the period when they entered the labor market, but for us it was an opportunity primarily...to validate...our

<sup>35</sup> The EQUAL Community Initiative Program was implemented in the years 2001-2014 in the European Union. Financed by the European Social Fund and from the budgets of member countries, it was aimed at developing and disseminating innovative solutions and good practices (see: <http://www.equal.org.pl/equal.php?lang=pl>. Retrieved September 20, 2019).

results. And...like with all these programs [from the pre-transformational period], the effects were stunning. [SIB02 Zenon]

The **emergence of the 2<sup>nd</sup> sector** is also worth mentioning together with the economic opportunity structures—profit-oriented business organizations and private capital. Although in the first years of transformation the concept of corporate social responsibility did not function in Poland, gradually a group of people willing to support the actions of non-governmental organizations emerged:

[W]hile I was looking for the first venue...I had carefully worked out premises of this venture, the mission, the structure, even the organizational scheme... despite various difficulties [my association] keeps on developing like a *perpetuum mobile*...A businessman helped me, mmm, Mr. G., who ran a business here since his great grandfather's time...At some meeting he listened, listened, got up and said: "And, you know, you make sense. I will give you a venue... Free, without money, meaning, but only for three years. After three years you will have to get your own." [SIB01 Żaneta]

As it is apparent in research field observation (as well as in the interview with Witold), some social reformers in the area of the human sector, during the period of transition, founded professional companies that often provided highly expensive psychological and training services—thus, **shifting from 3<sup>rd</sup> sector to 2<sup>nd</sup> sector**. Probably exceptional was the attitude of one of the narrators, who in the first years of transformation ran his own profitable business company, from the profits of which he financed, for two years, the activities of his teams working with

socially excluded people; and the construction of a training center offering free or low-paid training cycles for adepts and professionals.

Annot. 4. **Dissemination of the models and standards of the innovative professional work** on the supralocal level stands for another very important set of opportunity structures. This dissemination took place through training implemented within the framework of projects that promoted vocational procedures standards, passed on knowledge and skills. One should emphasize the importance of extensive training cycles, based on training/meeting group procedures, which added value were changes in the attitudes and ethos of their participants' work and, above all, "copying" innovative solutions in places of residence and work of trainees. Also, both ephemeral and permanent new national professional associations, confederations, and unions of associations operating in similar professional areas established. Open environmental conferences and seminars were organized. Senior social reformers in these activities functioned and continue to function as trainers, supervisors, members of advisory bodies. It can be argued that in many dimensions of social policy disseminating activities created a new kind of institutional discourse referring to the idea of subjectivity, demarginalization, solidarity, and social inclusion.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>36</sup> For instance, the language structures concerning the institutionalization of children and young people have changed very significantly. In the early 1990s, placing children from multi-problem families, including simply poor families, was treated by the employees of the children and family care system as a completely legitimate or even obvious solution. Over the decade (the time of intensive training of foster care staff supported by social campaigns on deinstitutionalization run by prominent CSOs) the language of debating on this issue has changed—institutionalization started to be described as a "final outcome," possible after all other means and methods have been exhausted.

Although the transformation aimed at creating a democratic state of law, based on a strong civil society, in the case of the 3<sup>rd</sup> sector seemed to create conditions that were particularly conducive to innovative professional work, the opportunity structures that were opening up in a democratic state were not unlimited. On the contrary, as mentioned above, as the years passed, it became increasingly apparent that profiting from the opportunities was associated with many barriers, constraints, and coercions. Already in the first years of transformation at the macro-social level, dichotomous, discursive structures appeared—of a systemic optimism accepting a new order and a systemic pessimism containing a multidimensional critique of this order (Kowalski 2010). Senior reformers, despite their support for the emerging Third Polish Republic, were fully aware of the costs of transformation, encountering in their practice the rapidly growing unemployment and inequalities. Their dreams and illusions about Poland as a democratic state, created in the times of the PPR, quite quickly disappeared:

After the 89th year it could be clearly observed that the new order, new power, new Poland, for which... we dreamed of and sang songs about, is an evil stepmother. She is a stepmother and she is being built at the expense of those people who are the poorest, the weakest...especially the young ones, it was assumed by the politicians that either they would cope, or... simply drown. [SIB01 Żaneta]

Professional counteraction to the effects of transformation and social action towards (re-) integration also in the area of the 3<sup>rd</sup> sector were soon subjected to the rules of neo-liberal economy. The area

of the 3<sup>rd</sup> sector has been dominated by the logic of the free market together with the discourse of knowledge-based economy (or innovative economy) founded on the “grant culture” or “contract culture.” Grant contests rules along with the principles of competitiveness required new patterns of actions, forced confrontation of previously held values and attitudes used over the years. “The man of service” was to be replaced by a competent professional (Hłowiecka-Tańska 2011; Zarycki 2014) who managed projects, as well as their beneficiaries, whose attachment to values such as selflessness, spontaneity, and solidarity seemed to interfere rather than to help. The tensions resulting from the functioning of this logic in the case of senior social reformers can be associated with their axiological identity defined as a permanent commitment to change proof actions as a result of new circumstances or emotions, accompanied by a sense of freedom, values defined in opposition to power and privileges (Koralewicz and Malewska-Peyre 1998). Following Zenon’s statement, we can think about the narrators in terms of “old school,” inspired by the traditions of social reforms, social change, community work, cultural change, or even dreams about a better new world typical of 19<sup>th</sup> century social activists. It seems also that narrators are stable in their focus on working with specific groups of clients, and at the same time to some extent immune to “grantosis” (the common-sense term used to describe the phenomenon of chasing project after project with unclear, short-term results depicted mostly in statistics and ongoing evaluation, with no focus on clients’ specific needs, their situation). Two strategies seem to be crucial in the narrators’ biographies: one is the strategy of manipulating and working out the system “while

doing your own thing,” developed and perfected in socialist times; the second is the commercialization of actions combined with maintaining significant pro-social values—this thread requires, however, a separate study.

### Final Remarks

1. Social reformers of seniors’ generations differ in some important dimensions from their peers in the course of the life cycle (see, e.g., Zalewska 2016). Their biographies, both in the professional and personal dimensions, are certainly not standard. Social reforming is in their case a kind of lifelong, consistently developing activity, or referring to the concept of Fritz Schütze, a biographical plan of action in which retirement (understood in terms of the period of professional deactivation) was not foreseen—the narrators continue to be very active in their social sub-worlds.
2. Narrators certainly represent this generation of activists with whom axiological “I” resonate closely. Using the words of Koralewicz and Malewska-Peyre (1998), it can be stated that these individuals are different from Bauman’s postmodern man—their professional biographies are characterized by continuity, cohesion, and pro-social orientation.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>37</sup> It is worthwhile to acquaint oneself with a sentence by Bohdan Cywiński from “Rzeczpospolita” (April 2000) in the article “Premature Obituaries of Intelligentsia”: “without people from Żeromski’s world, without ridiculed ‘Strong Women,’ Judyms and Gajowiecs [names of social activists—protagonists of positivistic literature of the 19<sup>th</sup> century], all of this Poland will render itself an unbearable space, a dirty and boorish marketplace from which honest and decent survivors will have to flee” (Cywiński 2000 as cited in Hłowiecka-Tańska 2011:28).

3. The analysis of the first collected biographies of senior social reformers indicates that the concepts in which social change is described as a process occurring in the space of structural options defined in terms of limited opportunities for action are justified. These options result from the accumulative effect of earlier actions (Sztompka 2000). As Piotr Sztompka (2000:17) writes: “The process of social becoming takes place in the social context inherited from the past, that is, in a common pool of ready-made patterns of symbolization, interpretation, conceptualization, and narrative of current social practice.” Concurrently, the analysis seems to support the Gleiss’ assumption, quoted in the first part of the paper, about social activities performed in two kinds of spaces—the political/institutional and the cultural. The interlinks between POS and DOS are noticeable in the collected material.
4. The four cases presented in this text illustrate the individual processes of knowledge and

skills accumulation using the structures of opportunity existing in various political systems. The constellations of opportunity structures create both unique biographical patterns, as well as more general models. Here, two such models of biographic careers of senior social reformers are disclosed: 1) a consistent implementation of innovative activities regardless of political conditions (Witold and Zenon) and 2) undertaking innovative professional work only when post-transformational opportunity structures have emerged (Zofia, Żaneta). It is worth noting that the years 2015-2019 are a period of re-transformation of the political opportunity structures and discursive struggle in Poland, which clearly determines the activities of actors of the 3<sup>rd</sup> sector. The planned continuation of biographical studies covering both the generation of senior social reformers and their successors brought up in the neo-liberal reality gives an opportunity to verify the findings and the statements contained in this text.

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## "We Are the Poles from Former Yugoslavia." Transformation Processes Shifted in Time—The Biographical Perspective

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**Abstract** This paper is based on the first analysis of the 25 narrative interviews collected from March to November 2018 in small local communities in the Lower Silesia Region. All narrators belong to the families that were transferred from the former Yugoslavia in 1946 to the western lands which were incorporated to Poland. The socio-cultural conditions are significant for local development, so I present some features of localism after 1989 when the state transformation processes started. Next, I discuss the narrators' self-identity dilemmas and make an attempt to conceptualize "migrating biography" as one of the features of living in a postmodern world.

The aim of the whole project, but not described in this article, is to reveal the intergenerational adult learning processes seen from the insider's perspective, as well as to describe such lives in a psycho-social and cultural context.

**Keywords** Western Borderlands of Poland; "New Localism"; "Return Migration"; "Migrating Biographies"; Self-Identification

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The transformation in Poland after 1989 in different social areas influenced the processes of constituting local communities.<sup>1</sup> The "Western and Northern Lands" (*Ziemie Zachodnie i Północne*) or previous-

<sup>1</sup> In this article, when I use the terms "local community," "localism," "new localism," and "second localism," I refer to the categories described by Kurczewska (2006:88-129) who combines the traditional anthropological and sociological meanings with 20th and 21st centuries tendencies based on modern and postmodern discourses (p. 90) and elicits some hybrids of current pictures of local communities. By "local community" she refers to social ties or/and to the values, symbols, subjective interests that have existed in a "real local society" that is constructed through complicated individual and group communication processes that represent the local residents as a socio-cultural whole.

ly named "New Lands" or "Recovered Lands," in the meaning "taken back" (Strauchold 2012; Sakson 2014:149-150), have become a historical category. The process of constituting local communities and localism<sup>2</sup> in the Western and Northern Lands due to the accumulation of war and resettlement experiences differs from other regions of the country, and the dynamic within these local communities still differs further. As a result of the Yalta and Potsdam conferences in 1945, the region along the current western borderland was incorporated to Poland and then became one of the most ethnically mixed regions in the country (Kosiński 2000). The after-war period still has an impact on the current development of the local/regional image of localism and/or collective memories and identities (Halbwachs 1992; Nora 2009; Connerton 2012) in the west borderland of Poland (Sulima 2001; Theiss 2001; Kurczewska 2006; Słowińska 2017). Due to the post-war regulations, thousands of people were uprooted from their homeland,<sup>3</sup> resettled from their places of origin, and then for over fifty years their home culture was suppressed and dominated by the socialist national government that strove for the unification of culture in order to have power over public and private life (Leoński 1998; Mach 1998; Kosiński 2000;

<sup>2</sup> The hybridization of the types of local communities (see: footnote 1) brings some forms of the "localism" that does not need to have any territorial connection, but takes into consideration the dynamic and the structure of imagined symbols and values shared both either by the individuals or/and groups. A further type of "localism" consists of the mixture of both the concepts of local communities and the localism (real or imagined social ties and symbolic culture), but it differs from the other types because of contrasts in selected comparative features.

<sup>3</sup> 1,5 million Poles were relocated to the western borderlands from the eastern parts of Poland which were incorporated into the Soviet Union; over 500 000 Ukrainians, Belarusians, and Lithuanians were compelled to live in Poland; over 3 million Germans were displaced from the territory that used to be Germany, but had become Polish in 1945 (Derwich 2004).

Niedźwiedzki 2000; 2003; Derwich 2004; Strauchold 1995; 2012; 2016; Strauchold and Nowosielska-Sobel 2007). After three decades of transformation processes in Poland, including the western borderlands, the question, "Where are you from?" is still significant, except that it no longer stigmatizes, but allows for the expression of personal identification. In contrast, shortly after the war and for the next several decades, the question of origin caused social conflicts (Mach 1998; Niedźwiedzki 2000; 2003; Ligus 2009a; Strauchold 2012; Wylegała 2014). Now, the need to answer it may be one of the manifestations of both post-war individual and collective "biographical work"<sup>4</sup> (Kaźmierska 1999; Schütze 2012a:148-150; Strauss 2012:517-527) done by both the individual residents and the local communities as a whole. Ideas, values, symbols, collective images, collective convictions and opinions gathered over a long period, and commonly shared experience taken from various ideologies of the modern and postmodern world (as Kurczewska [2006:88-129] suggests some can be taken after Bauman and Szacki's concepts) have become sources of the "local ideologies" that in turn construct the social or/and cultural program for the locals and shape their understanding of the localism in a country that has

<sup>4</sup> For more, see: Anselm Strauss (2012:515-527) and Kaja Kaźmierska (2014a), but, in this article, I follow F. Schütze's (2012a:148-150) explanation of "biographical work" that is quite a hard task to be done by a person / a group of people that covers a few dimensions: work to understand the positive attitudes of the uniqueness of self-identity which has been under permanent construction; work to discover the strongest self-potentials through recalling the own life-history; work to discover the past "dead ends" and false understanding of self; to discover if there have been any other possible modes to act; work to deeper self-understanding of the developing self-identity and the ways to estimate such options. Work to become self-directed and supportive for oneself and in a way that the unique identity deserves (Schütze 2012a:148-149). For more, see: Schütze (2012a:148-150).

been influenced by transformation processes since the 1990s. So, the concept of “new localism”<sup>5</sup>—apart from the symbolic heritage—also carries tangible aspects, space attributes, and consists of different social groups that may also be consolidated or scattered. That is why the notion of “social ties” is taken into consideration again, but differently than it used to be in the traditional approaches. According to Kurczewska (2006:92), from the perspective of current community studies, the old definition of “social ties” that used to relate the individual and group belonging to the surrounding environment or territory has now become the most problematic category to be described. Community ties are strongly influenced by both global and local processes. The “second new localism,” especially after 2004 when Poland entered the European Union, is a parallel one with two overlapping processes: regaining sovereignty by the state, society and culture overlapping with increasing participation in European and global structures (Kurczewska 2006:106). The first after-war revival of localism related to democratic movements started a decade before the state transformation in Malopolska, Podhale, and Kaszuby in the early 80s (Kurczewska 2006:105). In contrast, the small local communities in the incorporated lands were dominated by collectivist centralism and suppressed by the political rules, and this could be a reason why they were not able to start the democratic movements before 1990 (Hałas 2001; Łukowski 2002; Machaj 2005). So, a specific type of new localism that appeared all over the country

<sup>5</sup> “New localism” in 1990 resembled an old type of regionalism directed to values and symbols, but not promoting democracy. Anyway, it has become the engine for bottom up social activities.

translated as “little homeland”<sup>6</sup> in Lower Silesia, the North-West Pomeranian Region and Lubusz (Western and Northern Lands) and awakened an “indigenous spirit” for the local communities and the need to come out from the shadow of the former “unification” time. Subsequently, the concept of “little homeland,” on the one hand, became the driving force for locals to take up grassroots activities (Kurczewska 2006) and brought to light both the cultural richness of local communities, as well as their collective trajectory<sup>7</sup> (Kazmierska 1999; 2008; 2018; Rokuszewska–Pawełek 2002; 2016). On the other hand, however, it has mostly resembled the model of traditional regionalism which was a bit rigid, conservative, and based on nationalism (Kurczewska 2006). The process of revealing the local identities in many communities of the Lower Silesia, Lubusz Land, or Pomeranian Region did not occur simultaneously with the systemic transformation processes, but a number of political changes triggered conditions for the slow revitalization of the social fabric (Ligus 2009b).<sup>8</sup> In 1990, one of the measurable signs of revitalization of the socio-cultural fabric of the

<sup>6</sup> The concept of “little homeland” elaborated by C. Robotycki and then R. Sulima has become a special kind of “connector” of various elements of socio-cultural and economy-political reality, of everyday and festive social practices, of humanities and social disciplines, of conceptual strategies and explanatory schemes, of reflection on national culture, and is one of the meanings of localism in a postmodern perspective (Kurczewska 2006:110-120).

<sup>7</sup> By “collective trajectory” I refer to one of the structural processes according to Schütze’s procedure that represents the state of being overwhelmed by the “outside pressure” that the individual or group experiences as a permanent pain that cannot be avoided, but stops people from taking control of their lives (Schütze 1997; 2012a:180; Rieman and Schütze 2012).

<sup>8</sup> In 1998, in the North-West communities in Poland there were only 12 NGO associations, while in the districts of South Poland there were 42-48, that is, four times as many. In 2000, in the North-West part there were 11 associations organized by parents to keep the local schools, whereas in the South-West there were around 50 (see: www.fio.org.pl, retrieved November 20, 2018).

incorporated lands<sup>9</sup> was establishing socio-cultural associations referring to the territory inhabited before World War II, as well as the popularization of related traditions. As research data show, the number of associations in the 1990s was not very big in the peripheral areas of the western lands nor was it a sufficient impulse to launch grassroots civic initiatives, especially where the local population felt a minority in a given community.<sup>10</sup> The heterogeneity of localism began to reconstruct collective identities and started the slow process of “recovering” the symbolic socio-cultural heritage (Strauchold 2007 and Nowosielska-Sobel; Ligus 2013). The change in attitudes towards themselves and towards “Others” can testify to the long and cautious process of transformation of these post-war communities influenced by becoming a member of the European Union (in 2004).

When the process of rebuilding local ties began in 1989, one of the first fears the settlers had to face and overcome was the fear to make their origin public (Ligus 2009a; 2013). The images of contemporary local communities are embedded in individual and collective biographical experiences, and their future image is unpredictable and can be influenced at any time by interactions with the “glocal”<sup>11</sup> world. Łukowski (2002), in relation to the

<sup>9</sup> The biggest movement in 1988 was the establishment of the Society of Lovers of Lviv and Eastern Borderlands with the headquarters in Wrocław. In 1989, at the Congress in Cracow, 57 local sections were registered all over the country. Currently it has 44 sections that give the image of how important the association is for the families of the former re-settlers from the Eastern Borderlands (*Kresy*).

<sup>10</sup> A Greek community, the after war minority of Lower Silesia District that “hide” themselves from the public space is described by E. Nowicka 2008; M. Gołębiak 2016; D. Sturis 2017.

<sup>11</sup> I refer to Roland Robertson’s concept (1995) as cited in M. Kempny (1998:244).

Western and Northern Lands, describes the phenomena of symbolic closing of the past experiences by local communities and taking up new ideological concepts of localism rooted in the inherited territory, material artifacts, and own self-identity of the inhabitants of the North Lands. In the light of the introduction of the different dynamics of collective identities of local communities along the western borderland, it raises the question of why those groups (i.e., the participants of the project) felt unable to reveal their true identity until the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## Entering the Field

### Project’s Participants and Methodology

Despite the fact that over seventy years have passed since 1946 (when the resettlement processes began at the incorporated lands along the western borders of Poland) and Yugoslavia has not existed on the world map for 25 years (since 1995), still in 2018, four generations of the inhabitants of the Bolesławiec district and its surroundings, repeat, “We are Poles from Yugoslavia,” These are the facts that have drawn my attention to the group of people who introduce themselves officially as “Stowarzyszenie Reemigrantów z Bośni, ich Potomków i Przyjaciół” (the Association of Re-Emigrants from Bosnia, Their Descendants, and Friends), but not all people from the families transferred from the former Yugoslavia are members of the Association, so I also met the descendants of the former colonists “privately” to conduct the interviews. The interpretive-constructivist paradigm has been followed by the chosen approach, that is, the autobiographi-

cal narrative interview elaborated by Fritz Schütze (1997; 2012a). It is a theoretically and methodologically coherent conceptual and interpretative grid that can be used in a double way as a method or/and a technique (Kaźmierska 2012:111). The empirical material consists of 25 narrative interviews conducted from March to November 2018 in the local communities located 60 km from Wrocław, in Bolesławiec, and the surrounding area. The narrators (aged 20-82) have been chosen deliberately and all come from the families that were resettled from the former Yugoslavia to the western lands in 1946. The methodological barriers appeared while conducting the interviews and finally only 10 of them can be classified according to the pure methodological approach of Schütze. The other 15 are narrative interviews, but their interpretation can be supported by some of Schütze's theoretical figures and instruments (Prawda 1989; Włodarek and Ziółkowski 1990; Kaźmierska 1996; 1999; 2008; 2012; 2013; 2014b, 2016; Czyżewski 1997; 2016; Schütze 1997; 2012a; 2016; Rokuszewska-Pawełek 2002; Gałęziowski 2019; Waniek 2019). Among the 25 interviews, there are 5 given by the members of the Association and 20 were collected from "private" people. Because of the specific nature of the narrators' backgrounds, some basic information about their families' history is needed.

### History in Brief

At the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, from 1882-1905, around 15,000 Poles (with families) migrated from Galicia (an Austrian partition of a former Poland) to Bosnia and Herzegovina due to poverty (Lis 2016). Both Galicia and Bosnia at that time were

under the rule of the Austro-Hungarian Empire<sup>12</sup> (Kwaśniak and Orlovac 2008:11-12). In 1946, immediately after World War II, under the mutual Yugoslavian and Polish political agreements, Poles who were living in Bosnia and Herzegovina were in danger of ethnic genocide, so they collectively decided to leave their homes and, under the mutual Yugoslavian and Polish governments agreements, were resettled in the "West Lands" of Poland (Drljača 1997; Strauchold and Nowosielska-Sobel 2007; Strauchold 2016; Lis 2016). Who exactly were those 18,000<sup>13</sup> people coming to Poland in 1946? They were the third generation Polish colonists, but with Yugoslavian citizenship, who felt Polish and were brought up according to Polish traditions (Lis 2016).

### Research Questions

The socio-biographical experience of the narrators raises many questions which I try to answer while interpreting the empirical material: Is the presence in the public space of a previously unnoticed group an attempt to (re)construct identity at the individual and/or collective level? How do the descendants of Bosnian colonists interpret both their own and their grandparents' experiences and what meanings do they give to their biographical identity? How is collective knowledge formed? What ties, social

<sup>12</sup> Based on XXV article of Berliner Contract established in Berlin Congress on 13.06.1878, seven empires, Great Britain, France, Austro-Hungary, Germany, Russia, Turkey, Italy, agreed that Bosnia and Herzegovina would be ruled by Austro-Hungary (Kwaśniak and Orlovac 2008:11-12). The colonists were offered 10-12 ha of lands (forests) for free, but obliged to grub up the forest themselves, in three years to build a family house, accept Bosnian citizenship (*Landesangehörigkeit*), and pay 1/10 of the collected crops, but after 10 years to pay taxes (Bujak 2017:36-37).

<sup>13</sup> The number of Poles who came from Yugoslavia is estimated between 15,000 to 18,000 people (Kwaśniak and Orlovac 2008; Lis 2016:40; Strauchold 2016:8).

practices, and cultural practices favor the creation of (postmodern) individual/collective identity in a specific group? What intergenerational learning processes are launched in such a (re)constructed environment? In this article, I discuss the questions the project's participants asked themselves and were asked in each narration: "Who are we? Where are we from? Who are they? Where are they from?" and then discuss the concept of "return migration" and conceptualize the category of "migrating biographies" (Appadurai 2005; Aspitzsch 2012).

### "Our Neighbors Who Were Resettled from the Eastern Borderlands Called us 'Serbians'"

The participants' questions can be asked from two different perspectives. One is from the perspective of the subject involved in a reflexive process of constructing/constituting his/her/their own identity, and the second perspective comes from the Other(s), that is, the "observers." Both perspectives bring different interpretations according to the individual/collective experience that had constituted the social knowledge of both groups of the current inhabitants of local communities in the western borderland. Hence, the bundle of the above questions suggests a division between "us" and "them" that is found in the interviews of both the younger and older narrators.

"Our neighbors who were resettled from the Eastern Borderlands called us 'Serbians' and even my wife after so many years calls me Serbian. Why? We were never Serbians, we were from Galicia **and we returned here...**" (An/82).

Naming those people who introduce themselves as "We are Poles from Yugoslavia" depends on various, complicated contexts. In one of the publications, *Z Bośni do Polski* (Lis 2016:5-6), a collection of the "terms" appear as follows: emigrants, Yugoslavian Poles (*jugosłowiańscy Polacy*), Poles from Yugoslavia, former colonists, 3<sup>rd</sup> generation of the colonists, repatriates, Polonia from Yugoslavia. In the official Polish and Yugoslavian documents of that time, all comers from Yugoslavia are called "repatriates," according to the formal institution that coordinated the resettlement and was the Polish Repatriation Mission in Belgrade (*Polska Misja Repatriacyjna w Belgradzie*). In Polish documents of the State Repatriation Office (*PUR Państwowy Urząd Repatriacyjny*), the letter "R" ("repatriate") stands only for those who came from Yugoslavia. Two more marks were used: the letter "O" belonged to a settler (*osadnik*), that is, those who came from different regions and countries to settle voluntarily and "P" (*przesiedleńca*) for those resettled by force from the Eastern Borderlands.<sup>14</sup>

But, when a voice is given to Poles who returned from Yugoslavia in 1946, they say, "We are the Poles from Yugoslavia" (Lis 2016:5).<sup>15</sup> In 2018, in collected interviews, there are some attempts of self-identification: "I was born as the subject of King Peter II" and "I always came back to **Polish Bosnia**, every year, every summer, every holiday. It was **my own land...We are the Sons of Bosnian Lands**. This is **our Bosnia**" (An/82). "We are the human beings of

<sup>14</sup> See: <http://www.archeion.net/atom/index.php/> (AP we Wrocławiu, Sygn. 239, Nr Zesp. 345, Bolesławiec 1945, Listy imienne repatriantów i przesiedleńców). Retrieved October 10, 2019.

<sup>15</sup> A speech in Bolesławiec, of a man from the first transport of Poles from Yugoslavia, April, 1946 (Lis 2016:5).

two hearts, the first one lives in Bosnia and the second is beating in Poland" (Ed/80).<sup>16</sup>

The above phrases illustrate the great difficulty of identification that the project's participants experienced when answering the questions "Who are we?" and "Where are we from?" Nowicka (2008) confirms that it is an observed ubiquitous manifestation of relations between groups and their territories of origin, a complex, but infinitely vivid importance of the place of birth, early age as the background of both individual and collective identity of the groups all over the world.

Drljača (1997:20-21) commented that in Poland no "return migration" was recorded or maybe it does not exist, in contrast to internal migration which was registered quite often. He added that this was the opposite situation to what was observed in the former Yugoslavia (Drljača 1997:20-21). The conceptualization of "return migration" is one of the latest discussions that has been growing since 1980 (Babiński 2008:21; Kaźmierska 2008; Nowicka 2008:20). Nowicka (2008:9) stresses that the concept of "return migration" is still neglected as when Kubat described it in 1980. She also underlines that "return migrations" are diversifying along the changes of socio-cultural and economic conditions, as well as along the dynamic changes in migrants' profiles. Nevertheless, she tries to apply the concept of "return migration" to different Polish past and present contexts, times, and spaces. One of the examples she introduces is the transfer of Poles from the contemporary territories of Ukraine, Belarus,

<sup>16</sup> The symbols in brackets as: (An/82), (Ed/80), (Cz/68) represents the interviewees.

and Lithuania to the western and northern parts of Poland in 1947 during the so called "Akcja Wisła"<sup>17</sup> (Nowicka 2008:10). Analogically, the concept of "return migration" could be applied to the return of Poles from former Yugoslavia in 1946, and in that way the name "re-migrants" could be replaced by "return migrants," but the question is if those people who were "coming back" to their ancestors' country felt like "return migrants." As Nowicka (2008) mentions, to understand the process of re-migration, the social, economic, and psychological contexts must be taken into consideration and it is possible that "return migration" can last years or even centuries. It is not, however, clear for the narrators/current descendants of the Polish colonists from Bosnia and Herzegovina if they identify themselves as "returning" because those who moved to Poland as children (now older adults) had never migrated before. Again, following the above author, the personal aspect of "return migration" means that the return may refer to a person, also his/her children, grandchildren, or further descendants, so that maybe for the narrators a familiar name "re-emigrant" is equal with the "return" and that is why "re-emigrant" is in their association name (*Stowarzyszenie Reemigrantów*). The geographic aspect should be considered and it is important if the return is exactly to the same place or the same region or the national state territory. In the case of Poles who were transferred to their home country after 50 years of their family having lived in Bosnia and Herzegovina (till 1990 known as Yugoslavia), who perceived themselves as "re-emigrants from,

<sup>17</sup> In 1947-50, in "Akcja Wisła," people were resettled by force from the Eastern Borderlands to the western incorporated lands. See: footnote 3.

in fact, Yugoslavia" ("We are Poles from Yugoslavia"), but as they have explained, to be politically correct, they resigned from the word "Yugoslavia" and replaced it with "Bosnia" so that it is an "Association of the Re-Emigrants from Bosnia, Their Descendants, and Friends." Therefore, in their case, if one agrees that it is a "return migration," one can discuss the complexity of both the private and ideological homeland as Ossowski (1967)<sup>18</sup> proposed, but in a very complicated double constellation. Those homecomers<sup>19</sup> had to face, in fact, two images of their (private) homelands. The first one is that imagined by their grandparents and parents embedded in their stories that recalled living in Galicia and leaving their (private) homeland at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, in 1946, the homeland of their grandparents was a completely different place. Devastated by two World Wars (1914-18, 1939-45) and subsequently gaining political independence made it impossible to recreate the image of the homeland from their ancestors' memories. There was also the picture of the second (private) homeland that was constructed by their own imagination created by the image based both on their Bosnian and Herzegovina living conditions, landscapes views, smells, tastes, and their own experiences and memories. The group leaders in the years 1945-46 made a great effort while negotiating the contracts between the Yugoslavian and

<sup>18</sup> I refer to the typology of S. Ossowski—the private or/and ideological homeland means that individual or a group is bound to. With private homeland, people are bound through personal, everyday relations, habitual ties. The ideological homeland means imaginary bonds, beliefs, and ideas.

<sup>19</sup> "A home comer" in Schütz's (1964) concept combines the social and psychological state of a person who expects to come to the place he/she used to know and predict to come back to the space that he/she is familiar with, but, in fact, he/she experiences a kind of cultural shock (as cited in Nowicka 2008:17).

Polish government to attain the most similar conditions to the ones in Bosnia. For the "homecomers" from Yugoslavia returning to the homeland meant maintaining group ties, family connections, and to move together to the new land and to have conditions as similar to the Bosnian conditions as possible. In their narrations, they underline that the region in the western lands was chosen deliberately according to the geographical conditions (warm climate, a landscape with hills and mountains, land quality to grow similar crops), and, finally, to "be at home." Returning to Poland was meant to fulfill their ancestors' dream and fulfill a duty, but the dream was to be completely different from the reality. In that sense, their return appeared much more as the coming to the ideological homeland than the private one because they placed great emphasis on reconstructing their great grandparents, grandparents, parents' (and what some of them personally experienced as children) beliefs and ideas, symbols which were the source of their power and motivation to come back, especially after the war time. The reality disappointed them: "We were sitting at those German courtyards...looking around...we had never seen such big buildings, it was the first time we saw such a beautiful city...and we were told all those brick houses and the towns, villages will be ours forever and it is Polish...Nobody believed it. Everything was strange for us" (An/82).<sup>20</sup>

So, who are they? Poles from former Yugoslavia or Bosnian Sons? Descendants of former Polish colonists who "returned home" or the descendants of re-emigrants?

<sup>20</sup> An/82—an interview conducted on November 15, 2018.

In their interviews, there were two strong reference points. The first one focuses on the 19<sup>th</sup> century migration of their ancestors from the Austrian Partition (Galicia) to Bosnia and Herzegovina in the years 1882–1905. Despite the fact that none of my narrators participated in this 19<sup>th</sup> century "exodus," the transmission of the experience from family member(s) seems to be so strong that their children and posterities cannot tell their own stories without including the long passages and episodes from their great-grandparents' lives. The narrators express the need for reconstructing the experience of their families having lived in Bosnia and Herzegovina for fifty years. In particular, the narrators over seventy years old stress the first coming of their grandparents who dug in the forest without any tools and who lived in primitive mud huts for the first year. They speak about their grandparents' everyday hard work cultivating the offered land from the scratch (just the forest) and to finally achieving prosperous farms with their own small vineyards, bees and honey, self-collected linden flowers for tea, fruit trees especially for plums for "baking rakija,"<sup>21</sup> farm animals for the milk and meat, fields of corn, and family houses made of wood or bricks. That mediated experience (Giddens 2001:314) is borrowed from the ancestors and included in their own life histories.

The second reference point, which the narrators witnessed as children, that is, experienced personally, was their parents' decision about the "homecoming" made in 1945 and which then took almost one year's preparation for this journey. They re-

member all being gathered at the same neighborhood village waiting for the transfer and listening to their parents' perplexities and dilemmas about sacrificing two generations' achievement of creating so much from almost nothing and only by the work of their hands, the support they gave to each other, and their community ties. The year 1946 is mentioned in all the interviews, when resettlement of 18,000 Poles from former Yugoslavia to the "West Lands" appears as a "double bind." They wanted to come (back) to Poland, but they did not want to lose what they had worked for through two generations in Bosnia. Finally, the journey "home" lasted only a few months, from 01/07/1945 to 28/03/1946.<sup>22</sup>

The narrators speak about their parents and grandparents who decided to return as if they, the grandchildren, "took the responsibility to return to the country of origin" (Cz/68),<sup>23</sup> even if it was not the same place from where the ancestors had left. This underlines how strong the emotional ties are of belonging to both a nation and territory. As Aspitzsch (2012:609) states, all the migrants' families members experience the collective trajectory of their family. In the biographical narrative rarely does the narrator include only his own individual life experience, but he/she includes the experiences of a specific group (Aspitzsch 2012:609). In the narratives of the adult children of the former Polish colonists in Bosnia, it is seen as the symbolic duty towards the ancestors with adoring their engagement in protecting the family, cultivating the farms in Bosnia, but

<sup>22</sup> More information about the context and conditions of leaving Bosnia from the biographical perspective will be provided in another article.

<sup>23</sup> (Cz/68) an interview conducted on May 07, 2018.

also being torn apart when involved in World War II fights mostly by force, often against themselves, but without any choice.

### Conceptualizing "Migrating Biographies" and the Summary

One of the interpretations of the narrators' action taken individually, but mostly together and with the Association since 2011, is that they wish to save the life histories and the collective experience of their ancestors (specifically from the previous two generations) from the oblivion. This is why the Association has taken up different forms of work and produced the artifacts that, in their opinion, are a guarantee of not being forgotten by their descendants.<sup>24</sup> These actions may also be seen as an attempt to gain a better, fuller understanding about "Who they are." One of the explanations for the process of sentimental, nostalgic return to the lost, idealized world of childhood or family roots is the need to embed your own life history in space, time, and the socio-cultural tradition of ancestors, which is one of the elements constituting personal identity. According to Łukowski (2002), in the postmodern world, the nostalgic movement of commemoration results from the need to satisfy the hunger for rooting, the disappearance of transparency of the structure of the world, the loss of confidence in building to what is distant in opposition to what is close, seeking support points that stabilize identity, mobility without time to recognize the new. "The multilocal effect becomes an

<sup>24</sup> The collection of the actions, publications, projects, films, festivals, regular traditions, et cetera that commemorate the history of the locals from Boleslawiec district can be found here: <http://reemigrancizbosni.pl>. Retrieved October 10, 2019.

antidote to the feeling of loneliness in space. Polycentrism in creating the network of 'our places,' pluralization of homelands reveal that 'homeland' as a tame space is a link between subjective experience of reality and the need to give meaning to life and to form one's identity in the process of externalization, objectification, and internalization" (Łukowski 2002:73-101). Bauman (2017) has interpreted this phenomenon as retrotopy which strengthens those who are living nowadays towards the unpredictable future as opposed to the tame past. Appadurai (2005) links the power of imagination with the migration of modern man and his repeated return to places distant in the geographical sense, but which are carriers of meanings in the symbolic sense. The complexity of self-identification processes encourages a critical review of the "collective visits" of ancestral places and draws attention to the diversity of interests, quality and type of activity of each person who, although came together to the same place and combines their type of shared experience, but those are individual goals that they all followed after the arrival and the final results differed significantly (Appadurai 2005). This may apply to the birth places of ancestors (known to the narrators personally or not), symbolic rooting in milieu and/or history (Kaźmierska 1999; 2008; Schütze 2012a; Czyżewski 2016; Piotrowski 2016). Apitzsch (2012:613) goes further and says that biographies of migrants are themselves the transnational spaces.

Migrating biographies is a term, a code, and maybe a future theoretical category that describes the lives of people living today, in which the narrators make the point of reference in their own biography to the experience of migration of earlier generations, under-

<sup>21</sup> Rakija—this is a homemade alcohol popular in the Balkans. When the narrators talk about it, they use the verb "to bake" rakija (in Polish: *piec rakije*).

lying various types of compulsion: economic, political, ethical.

The term "migrating biographies" at this stage of research is the result of preliminary, analytical descriptions and listings of features that I can assign to my narrators based on the collected interviews. In describing "migrating biographies," I combine the anthropological concept of (post)modern "imagined biographies" by Appadurai (2005:89) and Bauman's (2017) description of "retrotopy." I also include the findings of the sociologists from the University of Lodz, who have analyzed the experience of "being cut off from the roots" (Czyżewski 1997; 2016; Kaźmierska 1999; 2012; 2018; Rokuszewska-Pawełek 2002; 2016; Bokszański 2016; Piotrowski 2016), and I take into consideration the phenomenon of "return migration" (Nowicka 2008). The carriers of "migrating biographies" undertake biographical work and refer to the experiences of earlier generations, whose doubled identity becomes "an obstacle" in constructing their own biographical identity (Goffman 1963; Schütze 2012b; Strauss 2012), and include a "personally un-lived" past, but it gives meaning to their own lives. This is probably why "the Poles from former Yugoslavia" have started feeling ethical coercion, an inner need and taken up the challenge of rebuilding the "missing" continuity in their ancestors' life stories by identifying themselves with them and interweaving their own life history with the life stories of their ancestors. The narrators emphasize that they "feel deep emptiness in themselves" because they are not able to reconstruct precisely the conditions in which their families left the Austrian partition, and it makes them look for pieces of the remains from both the material and symbolic world. Hence, witness memo-

ries from Bosnian neighbors have great significance, as do the remains of the houses owned in the former villages and old cemeteries which they stress need to be protected from the encroaching forests. Thus, "migrating biographies" are closely related to the work of "imagination in action" whose presence in the social world, according to Appadurai (2005:28), is documented, among others, in the prose of the genre of magical realism, which reflects the contemporary experience of collective entities and is embedded in one type of "second localism" that is quite symbolic and mythical (Kurczewska 2006).

The term "migrating biography" seems to be the one that synthesizes the condition of postmodern man's migrations that is part of the biography of those who experienced it personally or through the family trajectory, influences of global forces, symbolic roots of the homeland, a sense of familiarity with history/past compared to the unknown future. It describes the stories of people living today, whose experiences are saturated with family memory, with the stress on the experience of the repeated migration of ancestors, rooted in a milieu and/or history, and using a specific symbolic universe in the process of constituting their identity. People whose experience corresponds to "migrating biographies" experience a multiplication of biographical experiences because when they collect stories about family dynamics, memory, voluntarily or not, but with some regularity return to the places of their "roots," they themselves discover that they become part of the confusing networks of these "migrated biographies" of their own. Appadurai (2005:87-89) calls this process "contemporary imagination in action" that moderates our current life projects.

The "Association of Re-emigrants" from Boleslawiec and the other acts taken up by the locals may illustrate the long-term transformation processes that gradually reveal the hidden collective experience of the narrators who are the posterities and "heirs" of 18,000 Polish colonists from former Yugoslavia, but who only in 2007 finally decided to come out of the shadow and eventually appear in public in 2011 as the Association.<sup>25</sup>

The processes of state transformation created the conditions for the development of many forms of "new localism" which is accompanied by "modern dignity" and the construction of identity. This is deeply associated with individual biographies that constitute us as human beings. What is underlined by my interviewees is the fact that biographies of local communities along the west borderland in Poland differ greatly from one another and from others in the country. "Native minorities" (such as the post-Greek community or Poles from former Yugoslavia) slowly emerge from the shadows. It is still possible that one day the voice given to the minority communities will become louder and those who have not yet divulged their identity will—in more favorable social conditions.

Among the many theoretical analyses, I wish to highlight the concept of "modern dignity" by Charles Taylor. Dignity and identity have become mutually interpenetrating concepts and are inextricably related. They do not, however, exempt any person from discovering his/her source identity, that is, the "inner self." Reaching to the inner self to articulate its most indigenous authenticity is the condition of "being

<sup>25</sup> See: <http://reemigrancizbosni.pl/>. Retrieved November 05, 2018.

true to oneself" (Taylor 1994:43-47; see also Ricoeur 2005). "Being true to myself" means being true to my own originality, which is something only I can articulate and discover. In articulating it, I am also defining myself. I am realizing a potentiality that is properly my own. This can be one of the possibilities of a background understanding to the postmodern ideal of authenticity, and to the goals of self-fulfillment and self-realization in which the ideal is usually couched" (Taylor 1994:45). The Poles from former Yugoslavia, as well as the Greek and Lemko communities, may open the way for the possible emergence of other "native but minor" groups in the former western lands of Poland. To support this idea with my personal experience I will share a short story. In 2007, when I was moving from the North-West Pomeranian Region to Lower Silesia, from a small town "A," I was informed that a tiny village in my neighborhood, located 6 km from "A," is fully inhabited by Lemko. For almost 20 years of me having lived there, nobody ever mentioned this, even though the children from that village attended the local school and we had everyday interactions with them. This is only an example of how difficult it is to recover dignity, the "indigenosity" and authenticity and come public with all the features of who we really are and how significant the socio-cultural and historical context is to developing in small local communities.

Now the collected interviews need deep biographical analysis to reveal the individual self-identifications of the narrators of different generations<sup>26</sup>

<sup>26</sup> By "generation" I refer to both, but not simultaneously, the common meaning when we speak about generations in a family; and secondly, the social generations which are the cohorts of people born in the same date range and who share similar cultural experiences (Mannheim 1952).

and ways of constituting their identity along their life course. The family remains, including land and housing, language, social values and aspirations, as well as the strategies of accepting the new

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## Migration as a Source of Suffering in the Context of the Biographical Experience of the Process of Transformation in Poland. Case Study of Weronika's Life History

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**Abstract** The article focuses on the case study of the life history of Weronika, a person biographically experiencing the consequences of the transformation process in Poland. On the one hand, the text concentrates on showing the change in the status of the narrator's family from a privileged position in the socialist period to the experience of unemployment and poverty after 1989. On the other hand, the text analyzes the necessity of the narrator's mother's emigration to Italy in the mid-1990s. Thus, the article focuses on the narrator's experience in the context of being a migrant woman's child. This experience is related to the time of socialization and education, which was difficult for the narrator, and the consequence of which is shown in the text in connection to the narrator's persistence in trajectory. The text also presents the perspective of transnational motherhood within the framework of Polish women's migrations after 1989. Also, an important perspective adapted in the article is the experience of migration by the narrator, who at the time of the interview has also been living in Italy for 10 years. Permanent emigration of the narrator is associated in her life history with high biographical costs. The article is, therefore, an attempt to present migration as a source of suffering in relation to the context of being a migrant's child and being a migrant oneself. The analysis of Weronika's case is also an attempt to show the relationship between the individual experience of the narrator and the mechanisms of collective influence. Thus, the text treats the analyzed life history as one of the biographical accounts reflecting the biographical and social processes assigned to a specific time frame. In this perspective, the text aims to reconstruct the complexity of these processes and to interpret the experienced social reality in an individual biography.

**Keywords** Case Study; Biographical Analysis; Transformation Process in Poland; Migration; Experience of Suffering

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This text focuses on an analysis of the autobiographical-narrative life history<sup>1</sup> of Weronika, who is biographically entangled in the experience of the transformation process in Poland. The aim of the article is, primarily, to show the influence of collective transformation mechanisms on the change in the status of the narrator's family after 1989. This interview will be analyzed through the prism of the difficulties experienced by Weronika's parents during the transformation process, which lay mainly in the deterioration of their social status. In the new logic of power, the political (belonging to the party) legitimacy of the privileged Weronika's family, which was important during the communist era, stops playing the role assigned to it and, as a result, stops securing the lives of its members. In this situation, the interviewee's parents are faced with a deepening problem of unemployment, resulting from their lack of adaptation to the new rules of the labor market. An obstacle to finding employment is not only the lack of education<sup>2</sup> and competences, but, above all, the immersion of the narrator's parents in following the "old" rules. It is expressed in their efforts to use patterns of action which were developed during the socialist times (e.g., "systemic arrangement" understood as benefiting from unofficial connections), which were inadequate in the new social transformation reality.

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<sup>2</sup> In the interview, the narrator explains that her parents did not graduate from secondary school and did not take the Polish school-leaving exam (*matura*).

On the other hand, in this article, I try to show how the change in the status of her family during the transformation is connected with the necessity of emigration of one of her parents. In the analyzed interview, we are dealing with the context of transnational motherhood (Urbańska 2008; 2015), and thus the story of a child of a migrant woman. The influence of this experience on Weronika's biography and her family history is the second important axis of this text.

An additional aim of the article is also to analyze the way Weronika tells the story of the time of transformation. The narrator does not attempt to capture her own individual story in a wider perspective, focusing mainly on a nostalgic description of her family's situation before 1989. There is not any macro social commentary on the subject of social change, nor any attempt to inscribe individual good memories in a broader narration about the period of the People's Republic of Poland and the time of transformation present at the level of public discourse. The lack of such references in the history of Weronika is analytically interesting. Therefore, in this text, I try to show how the interviewee talks about the transformation process in Poland, how she reconstructs it in her life history.

Thirdly, the article also focuses on the experience of being a migrant inscribed in the adult biography of Weronika. The narrator has lived in Italy for ten years<sup>3</sup> with her husband and two daughters. As I will show in the text, the case of Weronika thus presents a combination of two threads: the experience of

<sup>3</sup> At the time of recording the interview, in 2015.

migration and persistence in trajectory. Both of these important analytical aspects are explained in a more detailed way in the second subchapter of the article. In this part of the text, it can be briefly point out that, for the narrator, migration is a source of suffering. In addition, in the case of Weronika, the suffering is of double character. First, it is caused by the emigration of her mother to Italy in the 1990s, then it is connected with the decision of the interviewee to live in exile herself.

In this optic, the article also aims to include the migration of Weronika's mother and then the migration of the narrator as consequences of the transformation, and to perceive them as such. I also show both experiences of migration in the dimension of the biographical costs incurred, and not within the framework of the story of success. The text is, therefore, an attempt to derive a reflection on the migration of women based on the analysis of the experience of this phenomenon from the perspective of a migrant's child and from the position of being a migrant. At the same time, both contexts present in the history of Weronika's life are linked to the above-mentioned aspect of the narrator being in trajectory (Riemann and Schütze 1991; 2012; Schütze 2012; Waniek 2016).

The research decision to study Weronika's biography can be justified by the multitude of socio-historical phenomena mentioned above, which affect the history of Weronika's life. As Nevâl Gültekin, Lena Inowlocki, and Helma Lutz (2012:660) point out in their text on the analysis of a biographical interview with Hülya, a Turkish worker in Germany, the proper basis for the theoretical generalization of an in-

dividual case is based on the understanding of the case within its social and historical context. In this way, while interpreting the biographical story chosen in this text for analysis, it must be considered as one of the biographical relations reflecting certain biographical and social processes, not forgetting the social, political, and historical context in which this account takes place.

Moreover, as Roswitha Breckner (2007:115) stresses: "Qualitative biographical approaches share with qualitative research that they are case-oriented. The emergence, constitution, and construction principles of social phenomena are analyzed by empirically and theoretically focusing on single cases." The perspective of research which undertakes case studies is aimed at reading the complexity of social processes, from which individual patterns of action and interpretations of experienced social reality emerge (Breckner 2007:115). It is about extracting from the analyzed material the ways of reacting to the problems, which are subject to scrutiny, in individual life contexts. By entering into an in-depth case study, it is possible to interpret patterns of conduct and reconstruct their legitimacy in a specific social field.

From this perspective, the analysis of Weronika's story should be treated as an attempt to interpret this biography in its historical and social dimension. In other words, the case study in this article is based on a conclusion immersed in the biographical analysis. This research approach aims primarily at capturing the relationship between the individual biographical experience and the mechanisms of collective influence and the reconstruction of macro

social processes in the story of individual life (Schütze 2008; 2014; Kazmierska and Schütze 2013).

## The Theoretical-Methodological Framework of the Case Study

### Characteristics of the Selected Methodology

The interview analyzed in the article was conducted in accordance with the assumptions of the biographical method as understood by Fritz Schütze, who turned towards the conclusion represented by the Chicago School when working out the concept of the autobiographical-narrative interview and the methodology of its analysis. In this approach, he highlighted the importance of undertaking studies of individual cases and their interpretation in the context of biographical and historical processes (Prawda 1989:83). As Alicja Rokuszewska-Pawełek (2002:15) notes, the process-oriented approach presented by the Chicago School emphasized the experience of people participating in the processes and their interpretations of social reality. Thus, in the assumptions of the researchers of this approach, "the category of experience meant taking into account the identity (biographical) side of social phenomena" (Rokuszewska-Pawełek 2002:15).

Referring to the analysis of the biographical story of Weronika presented in the article, according to Fritz Schütze and Kaja Kazmierska (2013:131), it is worth pointing out that:

The main advantage of an autobiographical-narrative interview is, in accordance with theoretical and methodological assumptions, the possibility for the

narrator to recreate in his/her story the significant biographical processes that shaped his/her life in subsequent phases of biography, experienced situations, and the social framework in which his/her biographical processes took place. A significant source of cognition here is the correspondence between the sequential structure of organization of the improvised biographical story and the biographical accumulation of experiences and experiences in the context of the biographical-historical constellation of events.

In this view, the relation between individual biography and collective processes and mechanisms of joint influence is therefore crucial for a deeper analysis of the case. Moreover, assuming that this relationship is a tension between the standardization of lifetime (through the institutionalization of life course) and the subject's aspirations to develop and manage his/her own life independently (i.e., the tension between socialization processes, on the one hand, and individualization processes, on the other hand), the analysis of a single case also allows us to show the correlation between the control of life course and submission to the compulsions of the external world (Rokuszewska-Pawełek 2006:41).

In the understanding adapted for this text, it is important to point out the meaning of life history told by the interlocutor. As Fritz Schütze claims (2008:164):

We can say that the autobiographical narrator or "autobiographer" is retrospectively shaping her or his own biographical identity, but the task of the meaningful ordering of pieces of biography originally evolves from life historical experiences. She or he is

the biography incumbent or the carrier of the history (or story) of her or his own life, and by telling it, or at least episodes of it, she or he is bestowing it with an elementary and systematic layer of meaningful order—offering a partial integration of chunks of meanings originally stemming from the formerly actually ongoing involvements within the concatenation of life-historical events themselves. The meaningful order of one's own life history has at its center the unfolding of one's own biographical identity in relationship to the overall "gestalt" of concatenated and coexisting life historical processes.

In this understanding, the narrator in the process of telling the life history gives meaning to the facts of his/her life. The life history can be recognized as "a narrative *gestalt* that must be envisioned as an ordered sequence of personal experiences and that orderliness implies the inner identity development of the biography incumbent. The most important ordering principles of life history are biographical process structures" (Schütze 2008:168). Among these structures,<sup>4</sup> apart from biographical action schemes, institutional expectation patterns, and creative metamorphoses of biographical identity, Schütze also distinguished trajectories of suffering, which he analyzed in-depth together with Gerhard Riemann.

The reflections of the two German scholars treat trajectories of suffering as a process of biographical ex-

perience which, although resulting from a growing disorder, is internally ordered in its course (Riemann and Schütze 1991; 2012; Schütze 2012; Waniek 2016). This process consists of the following sequences (Riemann and Schütze 1991:449-352): "(1) build-up of trajectory potential; (2) crossing the border from an intentional to a conditional state of mind; (3) precarious new balance of everyday life; (4) breakdown of self-orientation; (5) attempts at theoretically coming to terms with the trajectory; (6) practical working upon or escaping from the trajectory." The concept of the trajectory of suffering is a very important analytical figure. As I will show in the next part of this text in the biography of Weronika, the experience of suffering is a key component of her biographical memory and identity.

Also, apart from the trajectory of suffering, the second important analytical category, to which I refer in the case study of Weronika's life history, is the concept of biographical work. After Fritz Schütze (2008:160), I understand it as:

Recollection, reflection about alternative interpretations of one's life course tendencies, self critical attempts of understanding one's own misconceptions of oneself and self-chosen or self-erected impediments, a circumspect assessment of impediments superimposed by others and by structural conditions, imagining future courses of life that support the overall "gestalt" of the unfolding biographical identity as essentially one's own, deciding on the next concrete steps of that unfolding and permanently evaluating the outcomes in terms of the overall distinguished gestalt worked out by recollection, analysis, and imagination.

Schütze refers here to the reflections of Anselm Strauss, assuming that biographical work is done through reflection on alternative interpretations of the course of one's own life. Schütze (2008:160) emphasizes that: "Biographical work is basically an inner activity of the mind and emotional psyche, and this inner activity is essentially constituted by a conversation with significant others and oneself." This type of biographical self-reflection in situations of biographical crisis can become an action scheme based on the purpose of emotional and cognitive arrangement of one's life course.

Bearing in mind this perspective of understanding the concept of biographical work, in the analysis below, I try to explain the reasons for Weronika's inability to undertake it. At the same time, I try not to go beyond the sociological analysis of this biography to avoid subjectivist conclusions about the psychological condition of the narrator. In a situation of researching the life history of people living in a trajectory, it is easy to fall into the trap of assessing the psyche of narrators, which is undesirable for scientific reflection, and which should remain the domain of psychologists and doctors, not social researchers.

### Transformation in Poland—Understanding Transformation as a Process

The aim of this article is not to thoroughly review the approaches and trends in transformational studies, but it is worth outlining the main research attitudes that problematize this phenomenon. In this way, it will be easier to export the scientific point of view presented in the article.

First of all, it is worth noting that many researchers of transformation, by exploring its social and political dimension, perceive it mainly from the macro social perspective (Rychard 1993; 1996; Domański 1996; 2000; 2002; Mach 1998; 2003; 2005; Giza-Poleszczuk, Marody, and Rychard 2000; Tarkowska 2000; Gardawski 2001; Krzemiński and Śpiewak 2001; Palska 2002; Domański, Rychard, and Śpiewak 2005; Giza-Poleszczuk 2005; Jarosz 2005; 2007; Krzemiński 2011). An important aspect of reflection on transformation is also the presentation of the cultural experience of its participants. In this perspective, one can mention Mirosława Marody's (2010) research on the analysis of individuals' behaviors in the new social reality. Also, the studies by Jadwiga Koralewicz and Marek Ziółkowski (2000), which touch upon the conclusions on the changes in the mentality of Poles after 1989, come to mind. Hanna Świda-Zięba (1997) also undertakes a cognitively valuable reflection on the cultural and mental heritage of socialism. The above-mentioned, often very extensive analyses of the time of transformation in Poland focus mainly on its experience in the collective dimension.

While searching for transformation analyses within the framework of biographical research methodology, one should mention Adam Mrozowicki's (2011)<sup>5</sup> publication devoted to the presentation of this process in the individual experience of workers (employees of the largest industrial plants in Silesia).<sup>6</sup> The biographical perspective is also present in the

<sup>4</sup> Due to the limited volume of the article, I only list here the biographical process structures distinguished by Fritz Schütze. At the same time, due to the problematic nature of my deliberations, I turn to the explanation and analysis of one of them—the trajectory of suffering, in reference to the life history of Weronika.

<sup>5</sup> The collection of 174 biographical interviews with workers collected by Adam Mrozowicki in the years 2001-2004 was archived as part of the IFiS PAN Quality Data Archive. Site address of the Archive: [http://www.adj.ifispan.pl/o\\_archiwum](http://www.adj.ifispan.pl/o_archiwum).

<sup>6</sup> An interesting publication on this subject is: Mrozowicki Adam (2010).

transformation studies conducted by Joanna Wawrzyniak.<sup>7</sup>

An interesting research proposal is also the texts devoted to the study of the transformation process within the framework of the methodology of discourse analysis. A publication worth mentioning is, among others, a collective work entitled *Discourse and Transformation in Central and Eastern Europe*, edited by Aleksandra Galasińska and Michał Krzyżanowski (2009). It is a collection of texts undertaking the reconstruction of discourses related to transformation in the Polish context and to the experience of this process in other former socialist republics. An important element of these articles is the thread of the relationship between control and power in public and semi-public discourse on post-communist times.<sup>8</sup>

After a short presentation of selected approaches in social sciences concerning the analysis of transformation time in Poland, it should be stressed that the research study of a single case, undertaken in this article, fits into the scope of biographical research. Thus, as a researcher, I seek in it the types of connections between biographical processes and

collective social processes from the perspective of the bottom-up—subjective perception of ordinary people involved in the socio-historical process of transformation. Thusly, I try to reconstruct the process of socialization and the educational career of Weronika in relation to the period of the People's Republic of Poland and the changes after 1989. I am also interested in the history of the narrator's family and the consequences of the time of transformation for her parents' lives. In the text, I try to capture, analyze, and understand the dynamics of the transformation process from the perspective of an individual biography.

### Migration Phenomenon—The Perspective of Women's Migrations

The study of the history of Weronika's life is also part of the research on the subject of migration. On the one hand, this biography is marked by the context of being a migrant woman's child. This is related to the migration of Weronika's mother to Italy in the 1990s. On the other hand, the narrator at the time of the interview has also been permanently living in Italy for ten years, and is therefore involved in the biographical experience of being a migrant herself. These aspects make the analysis of the case of Weronika part of not only the perspective of migration studies, but also, and above all, of the interest in women's migration which has been growing since the 1970s.

Krystyna Slany (2008a:9) states that: "migrations... temporarily or permanently destroy the canonical world of social order for women and construct it anew." Migration in this sense is defined as a so-

cial change manifesting itself, inter alia, "in the assuming of and bearing the economic responsibility for the fate of the family by women," as well as "familization, but also defamilization" of family ties (Slany 2008a:10). These aspects are related, among others, to the phenomena of transnational motherhood and euro-orphanhood. Transnational motherhood "refers to a situation in which a mother temporarily or permanently resides in another country, but despite the territorial separation, becomes involved in the care and upbringing of the child; she is present *here* and *there*" (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997 as cited in Urbańska 2015:12). Additionally, the perspective of motherhood at a distance concerns individuals functioning within the framework of "social expectations, cultural values, and social interaction patterns shaped by more than one social, economic, and political system" (Glick-Schiller 2003:189 as cited in Urbańska 2008:82).

The second phenomenon mentioned above, euro-orphanhood, derives from the discourse on motherhood "at a distance," and is created mainly by the media. This discourse seeks the negative connotations of maternal absence, emphasizing the blame for the child's upbringing problems on the part of the emigrating mother. It also highlights the shift of the educational role in the traditional approach assigned to mothers and to other family members, as well as aid institutions. It focuses on emphasizing the destructive dimension of migration of women, who, in a way, leave their children behind. As Sylwia Urbańska (2015:300) points out, "migration of a parent thus becomes an act of abandonment," while all other social phenomena affecting the fate

of a child cared for at a distance (e.g., poverty, unemployment of the other parent, alcoholism, violence) are not included in the diagnosis of the fate of migrant women's children.

In the analysis of Weronika's case, I present the perspective of transnational motherhood with reference to her mother's emigration since the 1990s. Thus, I focus on the dimension of Weronika's fate in the context of her adolescence inscribed in the motif of maternal "absence" (Urbańska 2008; 2015). On the one hand, I am trying to show the migration of Weronika's mother as a consequence of the transformation. On the other hand, I try to reconstruct the influence of the phenomenon of transnational motherhood on the biography of the narrator.

The experience of living in exile in Italy shared by Weronika and her mother is presented with reference to Krystyna Slany's (2008b) research on Polish migrants in the United States and Italy.<sup>9</sup> In this context, the dimension of biographical costs deserves special attention, which I try to reconstruct when analyzing the life history of Weronika. At the same time, the context of being a migrant manifested in the biographical experience of the narrator's mother is an intermediate story; therefore, it is impossible to fully interpret her feelings about the phenome-

<sup>7</sup> The scholar conducted two research projects in line with the outlined perspective. The first one was entitled: "Privatization of Biographical Experience. Long-Term Effects of Ownership Transformations in Industrial Plants in the Perspective of Individual Fate" (NCN, no. N116 639740), implemented in 2011-2012. The second one, entitled "From a Socialist Factory to an International Corporation. Archival Collection of Narrative Biographical Interviews with Industrial Workers" (NPRH, no. 11H 12 0215 81), done in the years 2013-2017.

<sup>8</sup> The publication presents an interdisciplinary approach to the analysis of the transformation process in Central and Eastern Europe. The texts explore the process of discursive construction of social change after 1989 in Poland, Lithuania, Eastern Germany, Romania, Russia, the Czech Republic, Slovenia, and other former Yugoslav republics.

<sup>9</sup> This research was part of a wider project entitled *FeMiPol: Integration of Female Immigrants in Labour Market and Society: Policy Assessment and Policy Recommendations*. It was a STREP Project of the 6th Framework Program of the European Commission Scientific Support to Policies SSP4—Contract No. 022666. It was conducted in years 2006-2008 by the Institute of Sociology at the Jagiellonian University (Cracow, Poland), University of Florence (Italy), Intercollege Cyprus, Institute of Social Research at J. W. Goethe University (Frankfurt am Main, Germany), Center for Research on Women's Issues (Athens, Greece). Project summary and research report are available at: <http://www.femipol.uni-frankfurt.de/>.

non of migration. Nevertheless, the analyzed narrative allows us to place the fate of Weronika's mother in the perspective of the analysis of the migration stream of (Polish) women after 1989 (e.g., Zamojski 2005; Slany 2008b; Urbańska 2015).

In this part of the text, it is also worth noting that the biographical method enables capturing the dimensions and levels of migration processes. Following Roswitha Breckner (2007), one can also point to the importance of biographical research in the analysis of complex migration experience. The author mentions four perspectives of the "image" of migration in the biographical story: "(1) migration as experience of suffering, especially as loss of orientation and existential security (e.g., Maurenbrecher 1985); (2) migration as experience of transition between traditionality and modernity (e.g., Schiffauer 1991); (3) migration as experience of intercultural learning (e.g., Apitzsch 1990 and Lutz 1991); (4) migration as experience of transcending (national) borders—that is, of transnationality (e.g., Kreuzer, Roth 2006)" (Breckner 2007:119). The analysis of the history of Weronika in this text is an attempt to present migration as "an experience of suffering." Migration in this sense is "an event that brings loss, fear, and horror in the face of traumatic migratory experiences" (Slany 2008a:10).

At the end of this outlined theoretical and methodological perspective, it is important to stress that the analysis made in the text touches upon three dimensions emphasized in the studies of the phenomenon of migration, which are: (1) the individual dimension manifesting itself in "linking the sub-

jective experience of migration with the axio-normative sphere"; (2) the microstructural dimension understood in relation to the network of relations created in the country of origin and the country of inflow; (3) the macrostructural dimension presenting global processes and social phenomena connected with them that affect the experience of migration (Slany 2008a:11-12).

### Between the Seduction by the Past and the Consequences of the Time of Transformation

#### Methodological Note

The analysis of Weronika's life history should begin with a short ethnographic commentary on the situation of the interview. I met the narrator, who permanently lives in Italy, during her visit to Poland in 2015. We both participated in international research workshops, during which Weronika had an opportunity to listen to a presentation devoted to the project: "Biographical Experience of the Transformation Process in Poland. Sociological Comparison Based on Biographical Analysis," (supervised by Professor Kaja Kaźmierska, University of Lodz), in which I was working. On the last day of the workshops, Weronika asked our team if she could take part in our research and tell her life story. This is not a typical situation encountered by biographical researchers. The way of recruiting interviewees is fundamentally different and rarely do the narrators know exactly the aims of the research. In addition, at that time, Weronika was finishing her doctoral thesis at one of the Polish universities and was scientifically connected with the field of social sciences. This as-

pect could have influenced her preparation for the interview, focusing her story on specific topics.

Despite the fears that such a situation may hamper the spontaneity of the narrator's story, desired in a narrative interview which is supposed to be improvised, we decided to record the story of Weronika. In this way, I managed to conduct the interview, which is in the focus of this text.

Very soon the doubts I had about the interview with Weronika turned out to be unnecessary. The narrator treated our meeting rather as an opportunity to share her story. Thus, the subject matter of the indicated research project, although undoubtedly resounding in the interview, was not the main axis of the narrator's account, which she clung to as she was familiar with the assumptions of our research.

As a researcher, I did not feel that Weronika had prepared for the interview, that she had been wondering what to say, and had planned in some way how to present her biography. In the interview, we find many moments in which the interviewee talks about her feelings by presenting subsequent detailed fragments of biographical events (Rokuszevska-Pawełek 2006:19; Schütze 2008; 2014). The motif linking the successive phases of Weronika's experience is a structure of trajectory which involves the narrator in undertaking a reflection on herself in relation to her life difficulties. Thus, in the analysis below, I try to show the reasons why Weronika is unable to work through her biographical experience of crisis. I also observe here the connection with the events that marked the narrator's biographical identity during her education and early adulthood.

### Old Patterns of Action and the New Logic of Power

Weronika was born in the early 1980s in one of the largest cities in Central and Eastern Poland. Until the beginning of the 1990s, she was brought up in a privileged family. Her grandmother on her father's side was a high-profile party activist, which at that time enabled her to provide her relatives with economic and social capital. Using this resource, Weronika's father and mother worked in a large state-owned company operating a chain of stores throughout Poland. In addition, thanks to the kindness of one of the friends of the aforementioned grandmother—aunt Ida, the narrator's parents had the possibility to live (with this aunt) in her spacious three-room apartment. This provided Weronika and her sister with the comfort of growing up in very good economic conditions, and the work of her parents meant that the family had no shortage of material goods.

The interviewee often emphasized in her interview that an end to this "good life" situation came in the year 1989. At that time, the narrator's parents, due to the free market competition for the state enterprise in which they were employed, lost the possibility to continue working in its structures. They also encountered great difficulties in finding a new job and experienced the inadequacy of the patterns of conduct adapted during the communist period to the new post-communist social reality.

Anita Miszalska (1996:8), referring to the optics of the first half of the 1990s, comments that it was characterized by:

First of all, internal polymorphism, resulting from the co-existence of elements of the old and new order, that is, continuation and change, in the collective life, in its institutional and conscious dimension. Both in the economy, the political sphere of life and in the system of values, in the attitudes and habits of people, in the public custom, et cetera, on the one hand, there are phenomena genetically related to the over forty-year history of real socialism, on the other hand, we observe a slow formation of institutions, patterns of action, and interests related to the rules of the market economy, to the ethos of a democratic society.

In this perspective, the experience of Weronika's parents can be considered on two levels. Firstly, from a broader perspective, as a result of a change in social relations after 1989. In other words, as a consequence of a shift towards the elimination of the deficit economy and the development of political and economic freedoms. Secondly, it points to the "genetic" rooting of the mental resources of Weronika's family in the rules of the socialist system. Miszalska (1995) sees the difficulties in the implications of the new "transformational mentality" as micro-obstacles or micro-blockades of transformation. Bogdan Mach (1998:37) points out that "such reasoning assumes that there is a negative relationship between mental resources derived from state socialism and socio-economic achievements in the new system, and the development of attitudes expressing support for the political principles of the new system." I will now quote a longer passage from Weronika's narrative about the situation of her family after 1989.

**Narrator:** A tragedy at our home, because I see it in terms of tragedy in general, well, our whole world had

collapsed. In 1989, when the Communist regime collapsed and [the name of the place where parents were employed] no longer existed. So my father lost his job and my mother lost her job. And there was a very big problem with working anywhere for my parents.

**I:** Yhmm.

**N:** Because my grandmother no longer, I mean, she was still alive, but she didn't have those rights to protect them anymore. Because, I think, she had a lot to say here...that she was protecting her children...And I think it was a big problem for the whole family. Because they, all the brothers, including my father, could not find themselves in this new reality, they were not prepared for it. Because there was always this grandmother who helped them in case they needed. And then it turned out that the grandmother no longer had any power, of course, proverbially speaking, and so she cannot help them. And so, came a search for a job for my parents...It was also very, very painful for me because there was a lot of talking about it in my family. Because my father couldn't find a job anywhere, my mother even more so. Especially since the past haunted them, so, you know that at the beginning everyone separated themselves from it as much as they could. And here many things couldn't be hidden, like the fact that my dad couldn't manage in the army, so my grandmother got him some papers [which let him leave the army due to an untrue psychological opinion, written on the request of his mother]. And that's what's haunting him. Despite the fact that he was not mentally ill, but in order to get him out of there, one had to have such a bypass. And today it resonates, that my father couldn't get a job. Besides, he didn't finish school, he didn't have a high school diploma, my mother didn't graduate from high school either, because she was eighteen years old [when she

got married and started a family]. And she didn't have the Matura exam. And I think it had a great influence on our family, because my parents, especially my mother, did everything to make sure we had the Matura exam. And that's how the problem with work arose, my father didn't have a job. And I remember how he looked for a job. And the discussions were quite heated at home: "So, I should have experience, I am supposed to be young," because he was already in his forties, "So, I'm supposed to have experience, speak five languages" [he was saying]. And, for him, it was such a terrible shock...So he didn't find this job. And they had to make a decision, so my mother said that she would go abroad [to work there].

The quoted fragment can be referred to the assumptions which Mach (1998:25) makes about family categories or family resources in the context of researching the transformation process. The author emphasizes that: "In the period of departure from the system of state socialism, the influence of family resources shaped in the outgoing system on current achievements and attitudes becomes particularly clear" (Mach 1998:25). This concerns economic, organizational, cultural, and psychological (in other words, mental) resources. Considering Weronika's family experience in such a way, in the passage of her biography quoted above, we are dealing with a story about the elimination of the significance of family resources in the period of leaving the system of state socialism.

The feelings of loss of stability and helplessness resulting from the initiation of transformation processes are transformed into the experience of real consequences of functioning in the new logic of

power. In the case of Weronika's family, they are connected with the degradation of their social status. The loss of their long-lasting privileged social position is linked to the growing problem of unemployment among the narrator's parents. It also manifests itself as a disturbance in the transfer of mental resources, immersed in the ideas of the past social formation. In the case of Weronika's life history, it is clear that the (political) party's support for her grandmother, which was important until 1989, allowed her to "play out" the associated benefits in accordance with the rules of reality in the People's Republic of Poland. The time of transformation, on the other hand, is a "meta-game whose subject are the rules of the *transformation game*" (Giza-Poleszczuk, Marody, and Rychard 2000). In the new reality, the narrator's grandmother's connections not only lose their meaning, but also cease to function within the whole family. Other members of the family, like the parents of the interviewee, lose their familiar access to social and economic resources.

The consequences of the time of transformation in Weronika's biographical experience are the lowering of the social status of her family and the aspect of unemployment faced by the narrator's parents (especially her father). That being said, the transfer of transformation capital, which is a barrier to the functioning of Weronika's parents on the labor market, translates into the necessity of labor migration of her mother. I will develop this topic in a moment.

First of all, it should be noted that Weronika's mother, who, in the narrator's story, seems to be more responsible and resourceful than her father, after unsuccessful attempts to find a job in Poland, initially

went to former socialist countries where she was involved in petty trade on street markets. Then, while maintaining this livelihood, she and her husband were engaged in itinerant trade, but in small towns and villages in Poland. This was an attempt to break the deadlock in their experience of impoverishment and unemployment, but at the biographical cost of the lack of time for the family's everyday life.

As a result, when her parents were absent, aunt Ida took care of Weronika and her older sister. In this situation, she played the role of a foster grandmother, being not only the guardian of the girls, but also a significant other during their socialization. Katarzyna Waniek (2016:121) notes that in such a situation, grandmothers play the role of significant others, not only taking over part of the burden of busy parents, but also "reducing tensions between two almost mutually exclusive orders—modernity and postmodernity." For Weronika, aunt Ida played a similar role. The narrator repeatedly invokes her in the interview, emphasizing how many of the features that define her identity today she owes not to her parents, but her aunt. She also attributes to this aunt her safe and idyllic childhood, which ended with the advent of the new logic of power connected with the ideas of capitalism (Czyżewski 2009a; Waniek 2016).<sup>10</sup>

In this part of the text, I would like to show how Weronika relates the period before 1989 as her good

<sup>10</sup> Marek Czyżewski (2009:91), whose deliberations Katarzyna Waniek (2016) refers to, writes about the special role that "economizing" rhetoric plays in the new reality (here the author puts emphasis especially on the second decade after the fall of the People's Republic of Poland), which translates into a sense of the need to be creative, efficient, and consequently entrepreneurial.

memories. Below I quote an analytically important fragment of her narrative.

**N:** I had Mars, Snickers bars, Donald bubble gum, tons of them in my house. I remember that there was a big container in the corner room and Mars bars were lying there. And nobody ever explained to me that the children on the street didn't have that. And here funny situations emerge, because my husband, he was also born in the early 80s, a completely different case, a completely different story, that his father would go to Hungary and bring chocolate-like products, and until now he tells me: "And here the lady had Mars bars, Snickers, Donalds," because it was all over at my place. I still remember the price tags with the sign [name of the company in which Weronika's parents worked].

**I:** Yhmm.

**N:** And he just didn't have it, so such a comparison till today, when we talk about those years, he says: "But, what do you know about communism, my dear, you didn't have to stand in queues." For example, I remember perfume at home. For me, that was really commonplace. Ehm and like ehm...I remember that my mother used to wear one kind of perfume. Such a specific smell, and I ask mom, what was the smell. And she tells me Poison by Dior, yes. And I walked around the perfumeries I was looking for it and it's not the same smell I remember anymore. It was such a huge purple bottle with such press, such... swish! Not like today, but such, such pressed. And I remember this and I try to recreate it in my memory, I remember that smell, but it's not what I'm looking for in perfumeries anymore. Ehm and life was good, I'll tell you honestly, life was good, although I didn't understand this world...For example,

a lady from the countryside came to us once a week and brought us meat. And there was also a lot of this meat in our house because you know that barter trade was going on, and today I know that. I didn't know before and I didn't understand why she was coming to our house...Ehm and these were the most beautiful times/ well, of course, I didn't tell anyone at school, because I didn't know about it. I thought it was normal, that these Snickers, Mars bars/ That it is ok and so every child has it. Besides, my parents never gave me these things for school, I had it at home, but outside it was as if I was protected. And I didn't realize that, and I lived that way, yes, I lived. I went to school. I didn't like going to kindergarten, I always preferred to stay with this aunt, with this aunt Ida. And I really remember those times as fantastic ones.

Weronika's biographical memory of her childhood is full of symbolic references characteristic of people manifesting nostalgia and longing for the past. That is why the narrator focuses mainly on evoking further snapshots of memories in which she seeks familiar images, smells, but also feelings she would like to return to. She is also strongly emotionally connected with the places of this memory. In another fragment of the interview, she devotes a lot of time to describing her attachment to the city she grew up in, to its streets, buildings, history. At the same time, what can be seen in the above-quoted passage of her biography, despite the presentation of her safe and the truly beautiful experience of those times, in the narration, there is no wider perspective. By telling about that period from the biographical perspective of "now," Weronika does not refer her history to the specific-

ity of the social change that took place in Poland. I do not mean here the need for her to build a commentary in the shape of a scientific reflection, but rather the lack of any attempt to relate her story on a wider scale to, for example, the issue of her family being privileged.

The lack of macro social commentary also resounds in a comparative perspective, on which the narrator puts the filter of her experience. The only point of reference for explaining the difference between her everyday world and other people's experiences is the reference to her husband and his different memories of that period. Here the interviewee agrees that she did not experience many hardships of the reality of the People's Republic of Poland. However, this reflection remains here only on the level of quoting the different optics in which her husband and his family functioned. The narrator turns this important thread more into an anecdote and shortens it considerably, without taking up the perspective of her husband. The lack of such a deeper reference means that this fragment, showing a certain uniqueness of her biographical experience within the framework of the People's Republic of Poland, is treated very superficially. Thus, Weronika does not problematize her life history before the change in the context of the biographical experience of the time of transformation. It is only in the moment of the aforementioned experience of the 1990s that the narrator, although she does not say much about the social change, points to its consequences for her family.

In both quoted passages of the narration, the main axis is the distinction between the pre- and post-

1989 period, without a broader reflection of the narrator. This division is determined by historical and social contexts. The first one is the duration of the communist era, which was dominated by disciplinary power. The second is a period of dynamic transformations initiated after the collapse of the People's Republic of Poland and connected with the implementation of the free market economy and neoliberal ideology. In addition, Czyżewski (2009a:88) referring to the reflections of Michel Foucault<sup>11</sup> comments that neoliberalism:

Aims to create a society that is neither fully disciplinary (enforcing regulatory submission and motivating the zeal of workers, officials, soldiers, students, and other groups of subordinates of various institutions) nor normalizing (based on a strict distinction between what is normal and what is abnormal), but it is a new type of society which leaves a large margin of freedom to individuals, respecting the principle of tolerance of various types of minorities, does not want to influence the participants in the game, but only its rules, and intervenes not through internal subordination of individuals to the institutional plan, but taking into account their own social environment.

In this perspective, it can be said that Weronika's parents, when confronted with a new type of economy, are experiencing the beginnings of "governmentality flourishing under neoliberal forms of ruling" (Czyżewski 2009a:90). The counter-proposal of a new social reality for the already recognized

<sup>11</sup> Czyżewski (2009) refers here to the text by Foucault, *Die Geburt der Biopolitik*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main.

principles of functioning within the framework of state socialism is to deprive the state of the power and control of the market and to turn towards the subjectivization of the market as a "principle organizing and regulating the state" (Czyżewski 2009a:90). In such social conditions, as can be seen from the example of the history of Weronika's family, the narrator's grandmother's valuable anchorage in the state apparatus of power, which generates a field for managing family resources, does not bring the desired results.

Due to the inability to act without a lack of connections and education, Weronika's parents face the consequences of transformation. The methodology selected in the text gives the possibility of insight into the processuality of an individual's experience. Therefore, in the analysis of Weronika's case, one can see the relation between the experience of transformation time in the history of her parents. What is important, however, the example of this biography shows that it is the narrator born in the 1980s who experiences (which I am trying to show in further analysis) a much fuller repertoire of difficulties related to her biography being embedded within this new (neoliberal) logic of power.

This is evident in the adult life of Weronika when the narrator is entangled in the inability to take up a permanent job at the universities of Italy. This is due, first of all, to her problems in implementing the biographical scheme of action associated with emigration. Here, as I will show later in the text, the experience of Weronika related to her mother's emigration to Italy in the 1990s plays an important role. The second reason is that the narrator has to

face the context of being a migrant (also in Italy). In addition, Weronika, still strongly located in the symbolic universe<sup>12</sup> of the People's Republic of Poland, encounters difficulties in constructing her biographical identity from the perspective of a new "governmentality" perspective, whose rhetoric in the field of economy is represented by elements of the neoliberal "newspeak" (Czyżewski 2009a:93; Waniek 2016:119, 123, 140).

Summarizing this part of the analysis, which is an attempt to combine the biographical experience of the time of transformation in the history of Weronika's life with the collective mechanisms of influence inscribed in the process of transformation which took place in Poland after 1989, one can notice that this time caesura plays an important role in the biographical story discussed here. Referring to the still available symbolic cultural products reminding Weronika of her "good childhood" as she says herself, the narrator comments: "It is fantastic for me that I will sit down...I will turn on a cartoon, a film... and I am in my past." A moment later, referring to the situation in Poland after 1989, she states: "[But, now] I'm not coping, nobody taught us, my parents couldn't cope with this different reality and I can't cope." Despite the good memories of the first years of her childhood, the narrator, in the final phase of her spontaneous improvised narrative, says: "So, this is my story...but this past...of my parents, my grandparents, I think it has a big influence on who I am today and why I am coping or not."

<sup>12</sup> According to Berger and Luckmann (1966:88-90), symbolic universe shapes the elementary premises of attitude towards the world and provides integrated meaning for individuals and collectivities. It also frames the dependencies between person's collective life and individual biography.

## Migration as a Source of Suffering

### *Part I: The Context of Being a Migrant Woman's Child as a Biographical Cost of Transformation Time*

As I tried to show in the previous subchapter of this text, the costs of transformation that Weronika talks about in relation to the history of her family after 1989 concern: the change of her social status, unemployment, and also what will be the subject of this part of the article—the necessity of migration of the narrator's mother. Due to the limited account of the subject of Weronika's mother's feelings about migration, and the more elaborate thread of the experience of a migrant woman's child present in the analyzed biography, the text focuses on the development of the second aspect.

According to Sylwia Urbańska (2015:26), transnational motherhood in the context of the migration experience of Polish women is part of the history of the period between 1989 and 2004. The author emphasizes that:

These migrants' biographical trajectories are shaped by social change in Central and Eastern Europe and emerge from the socio-economic context of Polish transformation, which consists of: disparate experiences of different social groups, new phenomena such as mass unemployment, inflation and related inability to pay off loans and debts, rapid impoverishment of many social groups, pauperization of peripheries, difficulty in finding one's place in the new market reality. [Urbańska 2015:26]



The biographical experience of the migration of Weronika's mother is inscribed in the socio-historical context of the migration of women from Poland between 1989 and 2004. Additionally, Krystyna Slany (2008b:330) notes that at that time "women constituted over 70% of Polish emigrants staying in Italy." The author, making a comparative analysis of the research on Polish migrant women in Italy and the USA, emphasizes that in the first socio-cultural context, Polish migrant women are often assigned to the possibility of working in three spheres: care for the elderly, childcare, or sex work (Slany 2008b:334-335).

From Weronika's biography we learn that her mother has been working in Italy for 20 years as a cleaner and caregiver. She, therefore, belongs to migrant women "who do hard work for the benefit of women from the host country in the name of a *kind of reciprocity*—I give you remuneration for your work and you give me your services" (Slany 2008b:334-335). As I stress in the next subchapter of the article, Weronika tries to fight against such attribution of migrant women to physical jobs. She tries to break the status, which, in her opinion, is assigned to Polish migrants, of the women who are necessary to satisfy the needs of the host country.

Returning to the history of Weronika's mother's emigration, she decided to go to Italy in the mid-1990s, first for short stays of up to three months. With time, due to the unchanging unemployment situation of the narrator's father, the stays in Italy become longer and longer. This combination of events strongly influences the biographical experience of transformation in the history of Weronika's life. On the

one hand, the narrator comments and remembers that her "mom was not there," which contributed to her experience of suffering. On the other hand, the methods of taking care of daughters living in Poland, in the case of Weronika's mother's conduct, were in line with the old patterns of action already mentioned in the text. Their use in the process of remote care of Weronika and her sister deepened the trajectory experience of the narrator. What I mean here are such kind of arrangements connected with using unofficial ways of "getting things done." This does not necessarily mean that in the new logic people were not using such ways to deal with their issues. It must be emphasized, however, that Weronika's mother did not follow the patterns connected with new logic, but she was trying to organize her activities in the way which had brought her profits in the socialist system.

Discussing the context of being a migrant woman's child during the transformation, I will look at the fragment of the interview linking Weronika's childhood and early adulthood experience. Analyzing the narrator's biography we can see that in this phase of her life history we are dealing with a "cumulative disorder of biographical trajectory" (Riemann and Schütze 1991:349). Thus, the main rhetorical figure in the biographical memory of Weronika of that time is suffering. I quote here a passage from the interview:

I started primary school as a very good student...Later, I was doing worse and worse, because my mother was not there for me, and I am such a sensitive and gentle child. And I was attached to my mother. I'm saying I was because we have drifted apart. But, yes,

I was here and she wasn't there for me. And I had trouble coping with it, so somewhere there was this need for motherly love. And, well, it had to be vented somewhere. My father didn't make sure that Weronika, for example, read something or did something. My father was, well, he was/ although he is such a big fan of history and I think that what is happening to me today is also thanks to him. But, then he couldn't do it with those children...I am grateful to him because I came from school and I always had a warm dinner on the table. And I appreciate it very much and I am very grateful to him for that. But, for example, all the trips around [the name of the city in Poland where she was born and lived until she emigrated], or the cemetery [the name of the cemetery], I went to collect chestnuts at the cemetery [the name of the cemetery] before it was fenced off and you could still go inside. Dad showed me a lot of things in [name of the town], he taught me this place. That's why I have such a great love for this city today. I say that nowhere is there such a good place to live as in [the name of the city]. But, hmm this primary school, I was later falling behind, I had only D marks from top to bottom. But, my mom said that we had to have high school diplomas. And I don't know how it happened, but she came to some/ I don't know if it was through her friends that it turned out that there was a teacher in high school, of course, I'm saying it with great/ for me it wasn't a teacher/ to whom my mother paid money. I mean, maybe not real money, but she gave her gifts like gold rings so that my sister would first get accepted to that high school, then she would stay in that high school and graduate. And the same situation occurred in my case, when I was in high school/ later when they moved me to [the name of the street] to the primary school, it wasn't high, it was

just/ well, people went there. I don't want to say now that it was an area, but [the name of the part of the city] here was an area that didn't fit my vision of the world. Because in my family it was always said that studying, was always such a strong topic, that my father didn't have the Matura exam and, "Look how he ended." My mother didn't have the Matura exam, and she was wandering around the world. And it turned out here that I didn't like this world, this [name of the street], I didn't feel it. Girls in primary school would cut themselves, yes, on their hands, I didn't fit in at all. I, I'm saying, this is not my world, these are not my circles. And I never had any friends in this matter, I didn't feel good. And then, of course, I followed in the footsteps of my sister, because I wanted to go to art school. I was even quite gifted, but my mother said that she had no connection there and no. And that I would not go to art school, because I was told so, because I always had problems with my back. I am now after surgery, I mean ten, almost twelve years ago I was operated on and I have implants in my back. Now it turns out that I have problems with my eyesight. And it was because I was born prematurely. But, then nobody thought about the rehabilitation of the newborn, everyone only prayed that the child would survive...Later it turned out that my mother pushed me into the same high school as my sister, because, well, for her, she wanted me to have the Matura because she hadn't succeeded and she was afraid that we might also fail. She didn't trust us at some point. And, today, I'm not judging her harshly for that. I am grateful to her, but...she locked me up like this, I mean, maybe she didn't lock the doors for me, because I later opened up these doors myself and on my own account, but she didn't give me such a benefit of trust.

The quoted fragment shows, first of all, the embedding of Weronika's mother in the rules and patterns of action attributed to state socialism. She acts by subordinating her concern for the education of her daughters (which is important in the new logic of power) to the action pattern of "getting things done." It means that the action pattern she uses is the form of an unofficial arrangement which she considered as the only option of providing the social benefits for her children. However, such an emphasis on support has a highly destructive effect on the development of Weronika's identity. The traumatic situation for the narrator, deepened by the years spent in high school under the "eye" of a school teacher, results in her failure to pass the Matura exam. She still—at the time of the interview—connects the reasons for this event with the activities of the pedagogue who "took care" of her education. The motif of the necessity of retaking the Matura exam and the physical absence of the narrator's mother at that difficult time impacted her persistence in the trajectory. In the course of this process structure, Weronika's "organization of everyday life" and her "orientation towards herself" collapsed (Schütze 2012:429).

At the beginning of the above-quoted fragment of the narration, Weronika notes that she was a good student and that it was the absence of her mother that was the first reason for her situation at school to deteriorate. Unfortunately, the mismatched methods chosen by Weronika's mother (such an important figure in the biographical experience of the teenage girl) to support her education directly resulted in the inhibition of the development of her positive biographical identity. Losing her aunt Ida, who died at that time, and her mother who was

far away, Weronika becomes more and more lonely, unable to count on her father's or older sister's support.

In the quoted passage, the narrator also refers to her illness. At this point, it should be explained that Weronika was born as a premature baby with osteopenia. The failure of taking immediate action against this disease while Weronika was physically growing resulted in the necessity of conducting several surgeries on her back to prevent the loss of her ability to walk. What is important, based on the knowledge of the whole interview with Weronika, it can be concluded that the thus far stages of the disease have been normalized by the narrator. For this reason, this aspect of her biographical experience is not marked by trajectory potential.

Returning to Weronika's educational experience, its processuality can be indicated by a short interpretation of her mother's intention to "take care" of her children's education. The interviewee's mother, who, in her biography, pays the price associated with the difficulties of taking up employment in Poland, strived at all costs to protect her daughters from such experience. In her understanding, the stake in the "transformation game" was education, which she and her husband did not have. Thus, the relationship between actions resulting from the recognition of the principles of the new neoliberal logic and, at the same time, the lack of reflection on the change in patterns of action, can be outlined as an interesting phenomenon. In this way, the behavior of the narrator's mother derives from the rules characteristic for the previous system. In this constellation of events, Weronika bears

the biographical costs of her mother's behavior. It should be pointed out that the mother's actions are also the consequence of her emigration, and it can be assumed that they result from the fact of doing "distant care." This can be understood as a situation in which the obtained economic benefits compensate for the separation. At the same time, Weronika's mother's behavior and her migration to Italy in the 1990s are the consequences of her mismatch with the new logic of power.

In order to describe the narrator's story until her emigration to Italy (in 2005), I will clarify a few important issues. It was not until the time of her undergraduate studies, which she successfully pursued having passed the school-leaving exam, that the narrator was able to make attempts to free herself from the trajectory. The narrator was a very good student and, as she emphasizes, "finally felt that she was doing well." Unfortunately, the practical "gaining control over trajectory and/or trying to break free from its ties" (Schütze 2012:430), which was possible at that time, was disrupted by her decision to migrate to Italy. In this view, Weronika not only fails to work through her sense of low self-esteem and the difficult past, but also falls into a new dimension of trajectory experience. In the new situation, it is caused by the suffering connected with everyday life abroad.

### *Part II: The Context of Being a Migrant in Relation to Biographical Tensions and Costs*

The experience of migration to Italy is another very difficult stage in the narrator's biography. The moment and the way Weronika decided to leave the

country deserve analytical attention. Despite her plans to continue her Master's studies in Poland, the interviewee agrees to her husband's proposal to go to Italy for a few months. She was convinced to choose this location by the possibility of spending time with her mother, perhaps making up for the years of separation and, what is important, by the assumption that they are leaving Poland temporarily and not permanently. In this optics, Weronika was convinced that she would only temporarily postpone her scientific plans and would soon return to Poland.

Weronika's husband, however, as she emphasizes in the interview, "from the very beginning he planned to stay in Italy for longer." In addition, unlike Weronika, he fit very well into the Italian culture and labor market. The versatility of his profession—working in the IT industry—enabled him not only to quickly find a well-paid job, but also to develop professionally. In the interview, Weronika comments that the experience of her husband's emigration is positive, without any difficult situations or suffering.

Investigating the context of Weronika's decision to emigrate, it can be pointed out that she was motivated by her significant others (husband, mother), who introduced Italy to her as a place of living a better life. At the time of her departure, she believed that she could return to her childhood sense of security, the "good past," as she puts it. In addition, this apparent sense of security at the time of departure was provided by the idea that she and her husband were going to see her mother, who had been living in Italy for years. This was due to the belief that she had a network of contacts and was able to support

Weronika in finding her way in a new country without any knowledge of the language or the cultural codes. At the moment of her decision to leave, although Weronika has plans in Poland (Master's degree and academic career), she decides to emigrate, seeing this idea as an opportunity. In this perspective, referring to Andrzej Piotrowski, Kaja Kaźmier-ska, and Katarzyna Waniek's (2011) reflections on the biographical experience of gainful employment outside the country of origin, one can notice that Weronika is not driven by the traditional impulse to go abroad for better earnings. In this case, work is a secondary motif. This decision is rather characterized by the desire to meet her mother and the belief in a temporary framework of staying abroad.

Looking from the biographical perspective of "now" at this episode of her life, Weronika comments on it thusly: "I got married too early, I left [for Italy] too early." Moreover, she feels that this trip was necessary, to a large extent, for her husband and that despite being assured of a temporary stay in Italy, he did not intend to return to Poland. Overwhelmed by the new reality, she sinks into loneliness. I will now quote a long fragment of interview showing her experience as a migrant:

**N:** So, after the wedding, I was in love, I loved deeply, I left for a completely different reality, I couldn't find myself there. And, and I felt like my parents at that moment, who also couldn't find themselves in their own country at that time [time after year 1989]. I was in another country, this language barrier, those stereotypes of women. He, as a man, managed to cope without any problems. And the world of information technology is governed by different laws than the hu-

manities one. I could not find myself there, I wanted to go back. I was crying, he was shouting that I was no good for anything, that the worm had come out again, that I'm a parasite, that I didn't have a job, I'm doing nothing, and so on, and so on. "You're like your father," because my father didn't find a job in the end. My mother went abroad, my father stayed at home, took care of us. And my mother's whole family was resentful of that fact. And that's what they called him, a parasite, that he doesn't do anything, and so on. And it was all like that, like a bomb that dropped on me.

Being abroad is not easy. I always say that this is a terrible country, terrible people. To go on vacation for two weeks, yes. But, to live there, it's especially for me, as a woman/ because they have a stereotype of the woman at home. And when she goes out and goes into education, it's a completely different story. And here, too, there was a problem with me. My husband was used to his mother working in [name of place], his father in [name of place], so they had those state jobs. And they never had this problem with the job, so he doesn't know what it means to look for a job. So he has those other values in his head and he got a good contract because he's a computer scientist, so he got it without a problem. And he got a permanent contract, just like his parents. And I didn't, because I just got to the point of what to do. Because I am seen as neither a babysitter, or a caregiver for the elderly, or a prostitute. And there's no month I would not receive such proposals of prostitution. And, and this is so hard to go through...And I couldn't find my place at work as a nanny, because I don't like children. I love mine, but they are children who know the rules. But, to raise someone else's children in such a way, it's beyond my strength. I don't like them screaming, crying, being so bad, no, no, no, it's

beyond my strength. My children, yes, because they are my children who are longed for, loved. But, not other people's children. They exist, because they exist, someone wanted them, so let them do the child-care. I have more feelings for older people and I have a lot of respect for older people because I was raised by an older person. I was with her when she died, I know what it looks like [she means aunt Ida here]. And I'm not put off by the fact that something goes wrong with a human body. But...I have no health for that, I had spine surgery, so I can't carry someone, and the [old person's] body is much heavier, it looks different. So, in such jobs/ not that I think they're worse, God forbid, I have great respect for the people who do it. But, I can't, uh, I can't, uh, I can't, uh...  
**I:** Do this kind of job.

**N:** Do this. And what happens, and what happens is that after my bachelor's degree I realized at some point that my husband and I were arguing a lot, especially since we bought a flat there [in Italy]...And, in our house, there are arguments about money because my husband requires me to do this kind of work. I worked as a nanny, I worked, I cleaned houses, and I was also a companion for the elderly, but these were never contracted jobs. Yes, it was an unofficial job market. And I understand that he is afraid of what will happen to me. I'm in my thirties and have no experience. I mean, I have experience, but I don't have it documented, so, at some point, I'll probably be starving when I'm an old grandmother, and I'm aware of this if nothing changes. Or, I don't know, I will work for the rest of my life.

In the experience of migration, Weronika's main theme is the difficulty in taking up a permanent job. Very soon it turns out that the narrator does

not have sufficient competences nor professional experience. Like her parents in the 1990s, she fell into the trap of a mismatch with market rules. However, there is also a barrier to Weronika's assimilation of two cultures: Polish and Italian. Krystyna Slany (2008a:23), referring to the concept of cultural valence of Antonina Kłoskowska (1996), describes the model of the migrant's identity developed in this way as a two-way identity. It generates: "Double integration. The migrant's strategy consists of searching for new values so that they become useful and own, and, at the same time, do not force a leave from the original heritage" (Slany 2008a:23). Weronika, strongly connected with Poland and considering returning to this country, is not inclined towards the integration of the Italian and Polish cultural contexts.

At the same time, she struggles with having to fit in the Italian labor market as a caregiver for the elderly, as a nanny, or as a sex worker. In her life's history, she confronts the professional roles assigned to her by the Italians with a desire to pursue academic work. During her ten-year stay in Italy, she obtained a Master's degree at an Italian university. At the time of the interview (the year 2015), she is a participant of a doctoral course at one of the Polish universities. She justifies her decision to get a doctorate with the aforementioned intention to find an academic job in Italy. This stage of her biographical experience is also connected with the need to eliminate tensions between the aspirations of the narrator and the attitude of her husband, who requires her to "go to normal work." Moreover, her obstinacy in her efforts to take up employment at a university in Italy is confronted with the Italian

academic reality, in which obtaining a full-time contract is not easy, according to Weronika.

In addition, it should be noted that Weronika gave birth to her first daughter during her Master's studies in Italy. The second one was born when the narrator started her doctoral studies. In this way, the biographical experience of being a migrant fits into her life history, as well as the biographical experience of being a mother. What is important, Weronika's story about migration in the context of having and raising children, despite the hardships of motherhood abroad, is also full of positive references. All the other dimensions of her biographical experience of migration: marriage, work, family and friendship ties, integration with the new historical and social context, are connected with building a narrative about the costs of migration. In the interview, we often encounter difficult fragments in which Weronika emphasizes that she is suffering. Below I quote one of such passages.

**N:** I had Professor T. here, he is here, I mean, he was a translator of literature...It was he who pushed me like this and he says to me: "Mrs. Weronika, I'll help you, because I see the potential, I see that you want and know how." I owe these studies to him, that I got there at all and that I finished them in time...Because, in July, I graduated from these studies [Master's studies] so that he could push me for a doctorate. He says: "You have to go to Poland for your doctorate." And I promised him this, and promised that my daughter would speak Polish. Because then I had only one daughter. And I didn't attend classes later, because it was difficult for me having a child. I was alone, my husband didn't help me either. And it was terrible be-

cause I really wanted this child and suddenly I got a small, small/ small baby in the hospital, I don't know how this human works. A foreign language, strange/ which bothered me very much at first, not today, but for me, it was, how does it work? What's going on? So, a strange environment, here a husband, who has to sleep, because he goes to work, there me, doing my Master's thesis. Everything at once, I decided that I would manage, yes. Although I had moments when I was standing on the balcony with my daughter and saying and, "It will end soon, yes. This emigration will end." I'm sorry. [The narrator is crying]

**I:** No, it's okay, it's okay...

**N:** That's how it turned out.

Shortly after Weronika took up her doctoral studies, Professor T., unfortunately, died, leaving the narrator without the much-needed support in her academic career. In the above-mentioned fragment, the interviewee also points to her feeling of loneliness in Italy. The final passage of the quoted story in which the narrator admits to suicidal thoughts: "Although I had moments when I was standing on the balcony with my daughter and saying, and, 'It will end soon, yes. This emigration will end,'" proves the destabilization of the new precarious balance in the sphere of everyday matters maintained by Weronika. The narrator's experience also manifests itself in "using the energy to somehow sustain this precarious balance" (Schütze 2012:428-429). This can lead to a growing state of biographical disorder in the presence of suffering markers.

Weronika, as a migrant, finds herself at a time when an overwhelming amount of duties is coupled with clearly visible issues in her biography:

marital problems, lack of support for her aspirations, inability to take up permanent paid employment. What is significant, the relationship between Weronika and her mother, which was to be revived by their living together in Italy, has not significantly improved. Therefore, the context of being a migrant woman's child, which the narrator mentions in terms of suffering and longing for the mother, has not been worked through by Weronika. This multitude of complex and difficult aspects causes chaos in Weronika's biography, which "is sometimes even more intolerable than the mechanisms that set the trajectory in motion" (Schütze 2012:425).

At the end of this part of the analysis, it should be stressed that the narrator first experiences the trajectory of her mother's emigration to Italy in the mid-1990s, and then the one in which her personal experience of emigration is involved. In the context of her biography, the difficulty of undertaking biographical work also plays an important role. In the case of Weronika's life story, I see the narrator's attempts to shape her reflection on alternative paths of her own life, but they do not lead to an interpretation of her own biography within the framework of her own ideas about herself. They are rather suppressed by her strong sense of deprivation and loneliness. Also, taking up biographical work is difficult due to the loneliness felt by the narrator most of the time in her biography. Such a state of affairs not only makes it difficult to control the experience of trajectory, but also to construct a positive image of one's own biographical identity. At this point, it is worth referring to the beginning of the interview, to the preamble, which is formulated by Weronika:

I was born in the first half of the 1980s, and that's a story too, because I'm from the end of the fifth month, the beginning of the sixth month. I don't remember those times, of course, it's from my family's story, especially my mother's. I'm from the end of the fifth month, the beginning of the sixth month. So it was a struggle for life in my case and I'm really fighting all the time, for everything. Nothing comes easy to me, I was not born under a lucky star, and, indeed, even my husband, who met me later, noticed that in everything I manage to do ehm how much work I put into it and I'm always struggling.

The "eternal struggle" referred to by Weronika is connected with the above-mentioned difficulties of the narrator in constructing her biography. Her trajectory experience is visible in her life story on three levels. First, the physical one, connected with an illness due to which the narrator underwent many difficult spinal operations, has problems with lifting, and now (the time of the interview) learns that she is losing her eyesight. Secondly, the mental one, connected with her illness, but also with low self-esteem, which began at the time of Weronika's education and socialization, when she strongly felt the lack of support of meaningful others and their faith in her potential for "being talented." Thirdly, it manifests itself in her experience of being a migrant and in her efforts to get used to the new Italian social reality. This feeling of a certain mismatch and the need to fight for oneself, especially to increase one's self-esteem in the eyes of others, accompanies Weronika even in the present perspective (at the time of the interview). Thus, the narrator, in the context of the biographical experience of migration, makes a constant effort to keep a "precarious new

balance of everyday life" (Riemann and Schütze 2012:349).

## Summary

The time of transformation resounds in Weronika's biographical experience as difficult on several levels. First, because of the aforementioned change in the logic of power, whose consequences are: the loss of a sense of stability in the life of her family in exchange for the precarious professional situation of her parents, and the extreme transition of her family from affluence to poverty. What is important in this perspective is the aspect of deprivation of the possibility of satisfying the need for work, analyzed in the text, which is clearly visible in the fate of Weronika's parents.

Secondly, Weronika's mother's decision to emigrate in the mid-1990s contributed to her taking economic responsibility for the fate of her family. This put her in the role of "distant mother" (Urbańska 2015), while the father of Weronika was delegated to taking care of the house and bringing up the children. Thus, the role of the breadwinner of the family is transferred to the mother of Weronika and the traditional marriage roles were reversed. The mother's migration also coincided with the narrator's period of education and socialization. In this view, the analysis of Weronika's case correlates this dimension of her biographical experience with the impact of the transformation process and the motif of being a migrant woman's child. As I tried to demonstrate in the article, the narrator did not manage to take control of the experience of the trajectory, which, due to the migration of her mother, she experienced during her education.

This stage of Weronika's biographical experience was connected with the disturbance of the ontological security (category used by Anthony Giddens [1991]), the essence of which is the sense of order and continuity of events, including those outside the direct experience of an individual, external to him. For Giddens (1991:53), the essence of individual's ontological security is "trust in existential attachment points, in an emotional and, to some extent, cognitive sense, based on the certainty acquired in a child's early experiences that others can be relied upon." For Weronika, who had experienced a strong sense of alienation and trauma from the lack of such "others" for many years of education, the sense of ontological security was undermined at that time.

I also think that, in the case of the analysis of this biography, an important rhetorical figure is the metaphor of imprisonment. In a physical sense, from the corset that Weronika had to wear for many years because of several serious back surgeries. But also, in the mental sense, imprisonment: (1) in exile in Italy, where it is clearly difficult for her to function; (2) in her memory of the past—in the interview she repeatedly returns to the time before 1989, perceiving that time as when "being truly happy"; (3) in the difficulties associated with her undertaking academic work in Italy and integration with the local culture.

The analysis conducted in the article aimed to show a certain connection between Weronika's experience and the history of her parents in the dimension of the difficult experience of the transformation period in Poland. Moreover, my intention was also to

capture the processuality of transformation in the narration of the migrant woman's child and in the context of women's economic migrations after 1989. In such a perspective, we obtain an account of the phenomenon of transnational motherhood supplementing the previous reflections on "distant mothers" and the euro-orphanhood discourse with the analysis of the biographical experience of a migrant woman's child. Additionally, an interesting aspect of the text is the fact that Weronika has entered the same migration context as her mother has been functioning in for 20 years. At the same time, the

costs of being a migrant in the life history of the narrator may be an interesting case for the researchers of the problems of migration of women.

Another research motif, not explored in this article, could be a comparison of Weronika's history with another narrative whose author also experiences a negative image of the time of transformation in Poland. The point would be to focus on individual biographical experience, connected, as in the case of Weronika, with the collapse of a certain whole world in which the narrator was embedded.

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## Socio-Economic Costs of Systemic Transformation in Ukraine in the Lens of the Biographical Experiences of Ukrainian Female Migrants to Poland

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**Abstract** The aim of this article is to discuss the socio-economic costs of the post 1990 transformation process in Ukraine resulting in the chronic feeling of discontent with one's life, which results in the individuals and whole families' decisions to migrate. I analyse the factors which account for the individuals' subjective perceptions of their life situations and how they manifest themselves in the biographical experiences of the Ukrainian female migrants to Poland after 1989.

**Keywords** Migration from Ukraine; Poland; Transformation; Quality of Life

The turn of the 1980s and the 1990s was in many ways a turning point in the post-World War II history of Eastern Europe and the mobility of its peoples. The collapse of the Soviet Union meant that its former republics, as well as the allied satellite states such as Poland embarked on new

trajectories of transformation into (non, partly, or fully) democratic societies and free-market economies. Those countries, which had been centrally managed and kept their westward borders shut for decades (Stola 2010; Fedyuk and Kindler 2016), despite the lack of civil liberties and shortages of products on the market provided their citizens with work, social security, welfare, and more or less equal (lack of) opportunities. As of the 1990s, they embarked on the path of systemic changes, which brought about stress and economic uncertainty to the majority of their citizens. The hardships of coping with everyday life forced people to adopt a proactive approach in order to provide for their basic needs, yet the states abandoned them in their struggle for survival. Migrating in search of work that actually paid became one of the viable alternatives.

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Abbott and Wallace (2010) remark that most analyses of the transformation shock(s) from the centrally planned to the free-market economies focus on the quantitative variables, and rarely (if ever) take into account the bottom-up experiences of the people subject to the swinging changes. "In these explanations, the situation of individuals is 'determined' by external and inevitable economic forces: individuals' perceptions are considered irrelevant or at best as offering colourful illustration" (Abbott and Wallace 2010:654). Some newer research suggests, though, that discontent with one's financial situation can be of lesser importance than the overall dissatisfaction with life when it comes to the migratory push factors<sup>1</sup> (Lapshyna and Düvell 2015).

The aim of this article is to look behind the curtain of the financial motivation pushing people across the borders to make ends meet, and to see how the chronic feeling of discontent with one's life, resulting from a variety of socio-economic costs borne throughout the transformation process in Ukraine, propels both individuals and whole families to migration. I will analyse the chosen factors which account for the individuals' subjective perception of their life situation and decision to migrate, and how they manifest themselves in the biographical experiences of the Ukrainian female migrants to Poland after 1991. The paper is divided into the following sections: first, I outline the theoretical

<sup>1</sup> In different migration theories, starting with Everett Lee's (1966) push-pull, the factors influencing the mobility of the people are often described as the push and pull factors, where the push factors are those which motivate or force individuals to migrate (such as unemployment, fewer opportunities, natural disasters, political instability, religious persecution, etc.), and the pull factors are those which attract migrants to the new country (such as job opportunities, higher wages, better living conditions, political/religious freedom, etc.).

background and present the analytical framework within which I analyse the empirical material. Secondly, I explore the socio-economic context of the historical period (1991-2018) that I put under scrutiny.<sup>2</sup> Then, I describe the methodology of my research and the characteristics of the researched group. Finally, I analyse the socio-economic factors influencing the interviewees' subjective perception of their life situation resulting in their migratory decisions.

### Theoretical Background & Framework

There have been many attempts at formulating theories of migration, yet they all fail to offer a comprehensive model that would encompass all the reasons why people decide to leave their country of origin. Traditionally and for a long time, the study of migration was strongly linked to the macro-economic factors such as unemployment and wage differences. It stemmed from the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>-century assumptions that a migrant was someone poor and uneducated who left their country in search of better economic conditions (King 2002). This micro-level motivation was thoroughly researched within the neoclassical or the new economics of migration theories. The dual market theory (Piore 1979) shifted the research focus on the demand for the immigrant physical labour force in the industrialised societies and the state-sponsored recruitment campaigns (Massey et al. 1993). Various sociological approaches that tried to grasp and describe the

<sup>2</sup> The justification for such choice lies in the fact that 1991 was the year when Ukraine gained independence due to the dissolution of the USSR, and 2018 is the year when I conducted the last interview whose findings are considered in the empirical part of this article.

principles of migration came down to the assumption that migration is a kind of anomie, a deviation from the norm, as the vast majority of people, even having the opportunity to migrate, do not do so. Sociological theories postulated that migration is the result of structural tensions and that it is firstly the result of an individual's subjective perception of their situation, and proactive approach to minimise such tensions while achieving greater social balance. Therefore, in theory, each person whose expectations towards the standard of living and the possibility of realising this vision go beyond one's present situation is a potential migrant (Górny and Kaczmarczyk 2003:40-44).

Towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in the Western world migration started to become not an exception but the norm, with the notion of mobility as the embodiment of the postmodern condition. "To the traditional economic motivation of labour migration we add other rationales: excitement, experience, leisure, seeing the world. Migration itself becomes a desirable act rather than an economic means to an end" (King 2002:95). Hence, since the 1980s, transnational and mobility theories came to the fore, with a number of intersecting approaches (encompassing a variety of converging disciplines, such as sociology, economy, politics, social psychology, geography, anthropology). Therefore, it would be only rational to adopt an interdisciplinary approach, using the output of different disciplines and theories depending on the aspect of migration under investigation.

In the case of (post) transformation countries, such as Ukraine or Poland, in order to explain and un-

derstand better the nature of the outflow and influx of millions of its citizens to the West, Abbott and Wallace (2010) suggest adopting the interdisciplinary Social Quality approach. It puts the individual (the active subject) in the focal point, who is immersed in "the social," understood as "a dialectical tension between self-realisation and forming of collective identities" (Beck et al. 2001:12). The latter quote Heinz-Herbert Noll and argue that "quality of life" is the new, complex, and multidimensional goal of social development (Beck et al. 2001:9), and so they raise the question: "What constitutes a good life or a good society?" if we assume this to be the pursuit of the post-modern individuals. The proposed theoretical framework encompasses two levels—the individual, with its subjective, perceptions and satisfaction of the social conditions measurable through qualitative methods, and the societal level, with its objective, quantitative indicators. "The essence of social quality is determined in human" praxis (Beck et al. 2001:17) and "it is defined as: 'the extent to which citizens are able to participate in the social and economic life of their communities under conditions which enhance their well-being and individual potential'" (Beck et al. 2001:25). As Abbott and Wallace (2010) conclude, it is the subjective experience which impacts the individuals' agency and ability to take control over their lives (Beck et al. 2001:655), which in turn determines one's (dis)satisfaction with life. The social space within which the individuals realise their agency revolves within four pillars:

1. economic security (provided by social policies and access to resources such as income, pension, social security, housing and living secu-

urity, health maintenance, food safety, which all allow one to have long-term future perspective),

2. social cohesion (understood as bonds that link the society together realised through collectively accepted values and norms, which manifest themselves through trust in others, in social institutions, solidarity and commitment to the common good, having a sense of identity and collective consciousness, social status, social capital and networks, but also provided by public safety, political and economic cohesion),
3. social inclusion (supported by institutional order and infrastructure resulting in individuals and groups being part of the society; this can be achieved through citizenship, social networks and family structures, employment, access to and support from social policies, a sense of identification with the community),
4. social empowerment (which stands for the individuals' capacity to control their lives and participate actively in society, through seizing democratic opportunities, education, good health) (Beck et al. 2001; Abbott and Wallace 2010).

Therefore, social quality is understood not as material products of a given society, but it is treated as a processual concept in which the individual (quality of life) overlaps and interacts with the collective (quality of society).

The applicability of such framework to the study of migrations from post-transformation societies

such as Ukraine or Poland is particularly relevant, because this interdisciplinary approach encompasses various aspects—political, social, economic, biographical, making it possible to put under scrutiny the various micro-level motivations of individuals seen through the prism of the subjective perception of well-being which is (not) realised in the greater social, political, and economic context. In this way, it also allows the analysis of the collective processes through the experiences of individuals.

In this article, I will refer to the Social Quality framework and the chosen notions it takes into account as the matrix for migration aspirations and choices of the Ukrainian female migrants to Poland, and show how these notions are reflected in their biographical accounts.

### Socio-Economic Context

In the pre-transformation times, Ukraine was not only the third biggest entity of the USSR, but was also reported to be one of the most developed and prosperous Soviet republics with the mining and heavy industry, as well as efficient agriculture among other assets. Nevertheless, it was much more severely affected by the systemic transformation than, for example, Belarus or Russia. In 1989, towards the end of the Soviet Union, Ukraine recorded its highest ever GDP per capita (Lapshyna and Düvell 2015), which later on fluctuated depending inter alia on the hyperinflation, two economic crises (1998 and 2008), and political unrest, never (thus far) reaching the state of the late 1980s.



One of the quantitative indicators which can be referred to in order to show the difficulty of the socio-economic situation in Ukraine is the Human Development Index (HDI). This is a statistic composite index comprised of four major factors: life expectancy at birth reflecting the ability to lead

a long and healthy life, mean and expected years of schooling, and gross national income per capita reflecting the ability to achieve a decent standard of living, and it is used for ranking countries in four tiers: very high, high, medium, low (UNDP 2016).

**Table 1. Human Development Index value 1990-2015 for Belarus, Poland, Russia, and Ukraine.**

	1990	2000	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	position in 2015 ranking
Poland	0,712	0,784	0,829	0,834	0,838	0,85	0,852	0,855	36
Russian Fed.	0,733	0,72	0,785	0,792	0,799	0,803	0,805	0,804	49
<b>Ukraine</b>	<b>0,706</b>	<b>0,673</b>	<b>0,734</b>	<b>0,739</b>	<b>0,744</b>	<b>0,746</b>	<b>0,748</b>	<b>0,743</b>	<b>84</b>
Belarus	no data	0,681	0,787	0,793	0,796	0,796	0,798	0,796	52

Source: Compiled by the author based on the data from UNDP 2016.

The data above show that within the 25 years of the systemic change Poland made steady progress with the HDI progressively rising (especially after joining the EU in 2004), Russia suffered some period of regress, but then managed to successfully rise, and in 2015 both classified among the top 50 countries (out of 188 countries in the ranking) with “very high” HDI. Belarus, though had a worse starting position and is slower in its development, also shows a progressive tendency leaving Ukraine quite far behind, and is at the top of the ranking of the countries of “high” human development. Ukraine is in the most difficult, unstable situation, struggling to “get back on its feet” yet the ever-fluctuating HDI clearly shows that uncertainty and unpredictability is still part and parcel of the everyday life.

The length of this article does not allow for a full comparative analysis of the situation in Ukraine with other post-Soviet republics or Poland, and this is not to say that the hardships generated by the transformation process there were of a unique nature. However, many factors make Ukraine an exceptional case study, among them the scale, the length of duration, the uncertainty and instability caused by the fluctuating economic situation, the ubiquitous corruption which has flourished as one of the strategies and tactics of coping with the difficult material situation (Lapshyna 2014), the decline in life expectancy, the long-term inability to provide for the basic needs (Abbott and Sapsford 2006), as well as the new forms of migratory practices.

The reason why I direct my research attention to women is that mobility is a gendered practice, just as the labour markets and practices function along the gender lines. In the case of Ukraine, though the unemployment was reported to be of an egalitarian nature, on average it took females longer to find a job, and their salaries were lower than men’s (Fedyuk 2016:75). At the same time “it was often women who sought out alternative work first, partly for pragmatic reasons as the household needed an income, but also because ‘women’s’ work was more freely available, especially in the newly emerging service sectors” (Round and Williams 2010:185).

Naturally, the migration which boomed at the onset of the 1990s was not a new phenomenon as such. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the demographic growth, scarcity of land, and lack of work made Ukrainians (just like Poles) migrate to the Americas, during the Soviet times seasonal labour migration to Russia and other Soviet Republics took place, or people were forcefully deported for ethnic reasons (Lapshyna and Düvell 2015; Fedyuk and Kindler 2016; OSW 2017). However, what was new in the migrations that started in the 1990s were two things. Firstly, the directions—Ukrainians engaged in different forms of migration (first seasonal, circular, and usually illegal, then legal, educational, and professional) exploiting and exploring the new possibilities of European destinations: Poland, but also Italy, Spain, Portugal, Greece, Czech Republic, and Germany. Secondly, roughly since the twenty-tens there has been a rapidly growing, previously not very widespread trend to migrate to Poland for educational purposes,<sup>3</sup> there

<sup>3</sup> According to the statistics published by the Polish Central Statistical Office (2016), over a decade 2006-2016 the number

are also more and more young specialists, entrepreneurs or family members that join their kin who had immigrated to Poland earlier (OSW 2017:11). However, whereas in destinations such as Italy, Spain, or Portugal, the Ukrainian migrants are typically middle-aged women prevailing in the care-work sector of the economy (OSW 2017:40), in Poland, the occupational profile of a Ukrainian migrant is more diverse, and the gender division less obvious, and will depend on the time period and age,<sup>4</sup> which in turn requires a more varied analysis. What is more, since 2010 Poland has become the most popular migration destination for Ukrainians within the EU countries, and it is the only EU country where since 2014 one can observe a dynamic increase in their number, the prognoses being that the numbers will rise. Statistics provided by the Office for Foreigners regarding permanent residence permits issued also show that women are increasingly deciding to settle,<sup>5</sup> therefore becoming the present and future citizens. It is therefore valid for this group to be researched more thoroughly, taking into account the more diverse characteristics of migrants and such factors as

of foreign students in Poland has risen by 5,7 times and currently amounts to 57,119 undergraduates, 53% of which are Ukrainians. The second largest group are Belarusians who make up 8% of the total number. This has resulted in coining the term of ‘Ukrainization’ of the Polish higher education.

<sup>4</sup> In 2008 and 2012, two major studies were conducted in Ukraine on a representative group of 20,000 households, whose aim was to estimate the size of migration. In 2012, among the younger migrants (25-49 years) 2/3 were men and 1/3 women, but among the 50+ age group females outnumbered men significantly, and Poland was the second destination of immigration (14,3%) after Russia (43,2%) (OSW 2017:6-7). Even if in statistical terms, within 2010-2012 in Poland men accounted for 89,205 and women for 79,150 Ukrainians working abroad, in comparison with other destinations it can be seen that almost 20% of all Ukrainian female migrants worked in Poland, whereas only 11,5% of all the males did so (OSW 2017:8).

<sup>5</sup> In 2016, 47% permanent residence permits were issued to women, in 2017—49,6% and in 2018—50,2% (Office for Foreigners 2016; 2017; 2018).

gender, education, high-skills, to name a few. Especially that concerning Ukrainians, if the analyses adapt a gendered perspective, there is little focus on the other-than-the-family context (Fedyuk 2016).

What made Poland attractive as a destination were several factors. The most obvious one is the geographical and cultural proximity, but there were also a number of other measures facilitating mobility, such as the agreement on small border traffic from 2008, allowing the people residing in the border zone to enter Poland without a visa to a distance of 30 km (Malynovska 2016:11), Karta Polaka from 2007 which came into force in March 2008 (literally meaning Pole's Card, also translated as Polish Card or Polish Charter). It is a document which originally could have been granted to a person from the former 15 USSR Republics<sup>6</sup> who submitted a written declaration of belonging to the Polish nation (and met other conditions<sup>7</sup> specified by the Act of Law). This was not equal to obtaining Polish citizenship, but did put the cardholder in a privileged position, by, for example, allowing them to: obtain a national visa entitling to multiple crossings of the Polish border, to apply for permanent residence/citizenship (both free of

charge),<sup>8</sup> to study, and above all it granted them open and equal access to the labour market. Another conducive factor was the simplified rules for the employment of foreigners from Eastern Partnership countries, the so-called "declaration system"<sup>9</sup> of 2015<sup>9</sup> (OSW 2017:27).

### Methodology

In general, research into the highly-skilled migrants—the privileged elite of migrants—will more often concentrate on the quantitative aspect—either on enumerating them (Salt 1992; Docquier, Lowell, and Marfouk 2009; Blitz 2010; Kofman 2000; 2012) or on researching those professional groups that are numerous enough to be statistically significant. There is also a strong "economic bias" of analyses and the male-hegemonic approach (at least in symbolic terms) towards the "world of skills," usually understood as the male-dominated and knowledge-based sectors of the economy such as finance, science, and technology (Kofman 2000; Iredale 2005). On the other hand, qualitative research into migration which adopts the biographical perspective tends to focus on the intra-EU migrants and does not consider the gender dimension as a factor differentiating the migrants' experiences (Każmierska, Piotrowski, and Waniek 2012; Piekut 2013; Ryan and Mulholland 2014)

<sup>8</sup> In 2016, the Act was amended, and from then on the holders of the Card who came to Poland with the intention of settling permanently would be granted permanent residence free of charge, and after one year they would receive the Polish citizenship.

<sup>9</sup> It granted foreigners the right to work for 180 days without the need to obtain a work permit, and until January 2018 such declaration was free of charge. As of 2018, it costs 30 PLN which is still a rather symbolic administrative fee.

even if female migrants tend to outnumber male migrants in most developed countries (Dumont, Martin, and Spielvogel 2007). The aim of this article is to put under scrutiny the experiences of the highly-skilled Ukrainian females who have thus far received scarce attention in the migration literature, if any at all.

The analytical section of this article is written on the basis of my research sample—I have chosen 16<sup>10</sup> (out of 29) unstructured interviews with biographical, narrative elements with Ukrainian female migrants, and to some extent I also use the observations I could make while engaging in casual conversations with 2 of the women. They all came to Poland as (young) adults having obtained tertiary education in their home country (except one interviewee who came to Poland after finishing secondary school and did the whole course of her studies at a Polish university) and have been living in Poland between 1-19 years (at the time of the interview). The diplomas held by the interviewed women ranged from Bachelor's to Master's and even a few PhD degrees, yet most of my interviewees at some point continued their education in Poland, for example, doing post-graduate studies which would equip them with additional qualifications needed at work. What is crucial, however, is that, firstly, most of them have already had work experience before coming to Poland, and, in theory, were able to provide for themselves in their home country. Secondly, after migrating, they all took up employment rel-

<sup>10</sup> I have chosen those interviews that were the richest in the empirical content which is the focus of this paper.

evant to their education and/or expertise<sup>11</sup> and have had no experience of working in the secondary "migrant" segment. Moreover, the women I talked to came from all parts of Ukraine<sup>12</sup>—the western region (historically linked to Poland<sup>13</sup>) and cities like Lviv, Lutsk, Uzhhorod, Chernivtsi, Ivano-Frankivsk, a small town in the Ternopil Oblast, the capital city of Kiev, the southern areas like Odessa, or Sevastopol on the Crimean Peninsula, and the eastern part and cities of Bachmut, Dnipro, or Berdiansk.

Most of the empirical material was collected between March 2015 and September 2016<sup>14</sup>—the interviews were recorded with the consent of the interviewees, then transcribed and anonymised. 12 women lived in the Warsaw area, 3 in Cracow, and 1 in Szczecin. Most interviews were conducted in Polish, as the women spoke it fluently, and in 2 cases of the interviewees who at the time of the meeting had been in Poland the shortest (1 year), we talked in English.

<sup>11</sup> 9 of the interviewees work in private companies or multi-national corporations (in finance, banking, research, sales, logistics, and other), 4 are engaged in non-government institutions (they have created a niche where they use their high qualifications, for example, a lawyer, and work in intermediate positions among the Polish and migrant communities), 2 women work for the Polish public sector or in science/teaching, 1 works for the mass-media.

<sup>12</sup> The reason why this is significant is that the east part of Ukraine has always been more Russia-oriented and migrating westward from that region was less common (Lapshyna and Duvell 2015:4).

<sup>13</sup> The western part of Ukraine bears more historical ties with Poland. Some cities, for example, Lviv or Ivano-Frankivsk had been under Polish rule a few centuries ago, then became part of Galicia, one of the crown lands of the Austrian Empire, which also covered the south-east regions of Poland until 1918. Afterwards, they were again part of Poland until 1939. Another western area bearing historical ties with Poland is the Volhynia region.

<sup>14</sup> One interview was conducted in February 2018.

Since my target research participants do not work in a migrant “niche” and they largely function outside migrant networks, I had to seek contacts in a few ways. First, I contacted my personal acquaintances, then I wrote directly to the women I knew from the media, next I got in touch with the interviewees who were recommended by my friends. After that, I started looking for contacts on various social media fora for expats and in some migrant-related institutions, for example, NGOs, and the remaining potential interviewees were indicated through the snowball method through my other respondents.

### Socio-Economic Factors Influencing Migratory Decisions

In this section, I will put under scrutiny the chosen aspects of the four major prerequisites to one’s satisfaction of life as laid forward by Beck and colleagues (2001), namely, the economic security, social cohesion, social inclusion, and conditions for empowerment, and how (the lack of) these contributed to the interviewed Ukrainian women’s migratory decisions.

#### Economic Security

As I had shown in an earlier section of this article with the example of the Human Development Index, Ukraine’s socio-economic situation is far from optimistic. In the 1990s, the hyperinflation wiped out savings, the wages went unpaid, and whenever the economic figures would improve, a major economic crisis would hit (especially in 1998 and 2008) and acutely affect the people (Burakovsky and Movchan 2011; Lapshyna and Düvell 2015). In the

case of my interviewees, it can be observed how migration at a given period was determined by those different factors. Polina, who came to Poland in 1997 at the age of 21, recalls:

I was already a year after graduation and in Ukraine, there was the situation that they were not paying salaries, especially to teachers...I finished English Studies, I tried to teach for a year...I was a young girl, and that somehow did not suit me. And at that time it turned out that in Poland the Russian language emigrated from schools as a foreign language, I do not know if it was in ‘97, probably a bit earlier, and that on the peripheries there is a shortage of teachers of English in large numbers, and I suspect, I mean, I do not suspect, I am sure that I am one of many people who came from Ukraine just to teach English, mainly in some villages, smaller towns. [Polina, 40y.]

She recalls that her parents were both doctors, so in fact she could have stayed and been financially supported by her parents, but for her migration was an act of maturity and gaining independence—she soon realised that being only 22 she can work in her profession, and have enough money to be independent, to travel, to buy clothes, and even to put some money away. She says that in Ukraine for a long time a teacher could not afford to go to the seaside or skiing, and that once she got a taste of a better life, she did not want to return.

I do not know how to explain it. You know, if you are a tourist, perhaps you do not feel it. It’s different [in Ukraine]. Here [in Poland] you just breathe more easily, and you cannot see such, there are not so many tired people. [Polina, 40y.]

Twenty years later, when international corporations have already established their branches in East Europe and internal corporate transfers became a career option, the migration motivations became more than monetary. Here I would like to refer to the life story of Yuliya, who came to Poland at the age of 28 by relocating within the same international corporation from the Kiev branch to the Polish office. In Yuliya’s case, migration was part of the whole family’s long term plan, which dictated her choice of studies and learning foreign languages from an early age. She recalls:

My parents were a young couple with kids with most... how to say... hard struggling time in Ukraine, beginning of 1990s., and they just decided, that was why, it was if you set such goal, life in the EU or the US, whatever you will choose, will be much more comfortable and easier, and better... That was the approach. [Yuliya, 29y.]

Therefore, she had been investing in her future migration for years, fostering contacts, jumping at every opportunity to take part in international projects. Back in Ukraine, she pursued a career in the financial sector in one of the major international companies, yet as the 2008 crisis came, she lost her job along with 80% of her colleagues. She reports using the time of unemployment to reassess her life, and as she got employed again in the corporate sector, she kept communicating her pro-migratory approach to her managers:

I was all the time saying that if you have any opportunities of going abroad, keep in mind that I’m ready to go. I’m free and nothing is keeping me so much. [Yuliya, 29y.]

Poland was not really her deliberate country of choice, but it was the one where the offer of transfer came from, so she jumped at the opportunity, even if within the company hierarchy it was a demotion as she had to assume a lower position. Nevertheless, she did negotiate the financial conditions in order to have a satisfying ratio of her earnings and life expenses:

These conditions here for work are much better as working hours are lower, they are paid, even over hours are paid, and relationships with clients maintained better by the partners and managers, distribution of work is better quality and all these things... What is the bad side is that now my salary is...3 positions higher than in Kiev so when I’m senior here, a senior manager in Kiev has a lower salary because of exchange rate, and that’s what I feel people [in the Kiev office—A.D.] don’t like, they, like one year ago we were at the same level, now I’m much higher than senior managers with my salary and I’m saying, “Guys, I’m spending my salary there, which is, I’m absolutely on the average level of life, if I could spend that salary in Ukraine, yes, it would be much better.” [Yuliya, 29y.]

On the one hand, she gained economic security, which is not only manifested through higher earnings, but also by the stability of the currency, which allows, for example, to make exotic travel plans, as well as spontaneous city breaks in European destinations. On the other, it creates resentment among her former Ukrainian colleagues, who feel that she is *betraying and leaving people with problems*, with her former managers giving her negative campaigning, spreading rumors that she was *sold like a slave*,

so as to prevent others from following her example. Yuliya no longer shares the common fate and burden, and therefore the price she pays is the loosening of the social bonds with her Ukrainian friends and colleagues who stayed in Kiev.

### Social Cohesion

Values and norms are notions which relate to two different orders—the moral and the social one—yet inseparably lay the foundations for the functioning of a given society, helping build trust, solidarity, and a sense of common good. Bribery and corruption are examples of a violation of such cohesion, as both the donor and the recipient abuse the collective rules, practices and standards for private gain. Such practices occur in every country and on every continent, so Ukraine is no exception, yet the scale—the ubiquity of corruption in almost every sector (Lapshyna 2014), the social acceptance of such proceedings, and the importance of such informal income to the everyday life is what makes it virtually impossible to maintain any standards. Round and Williams (2010:190) quote the results of a Transparency International (2005) survey, which stated that “in Ukraine 82% of respondents had recently paid a bribe to access services or goods that they were entitled to, the highest figure in the world.” In the pre-transformation times, corruption was also present, yet on a lower scale, and went in line with the culture of gift-giving as an expression of gratitude or expectation of a favour. It manifested itself through giving a bottle of good alcohol or a box of chocolates in return for a fast-track procedure (Lapshyna 2014). However, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, it has evolved

into a regular and expected system of hard currency payments encompassing every sphere of social life.

Bribery is said to be difficult to observe and study empirically, hence most research on corruption focuses on its determinants rather than manifestations or practices (Lapshyna 2014; Shaw, Katsaiti, and Pecoraro 2015). The strength of doing qualitative research and conducting unstructured interviews lies in the fact that the interviewees are asked to tell a spontaneous story of their life, therefore the topic of corruption and accounts of such practices arise naturally in their biographical narrations. As already said, corruption translates into many areas of life, but in the following passage, I will focus on education (since this topic frequently appeared in the stories of my interviewees) as an example of a social institution where it prevents individuals from fulfilling their need for social cohesion.

Education is the one human development aspect that Ukraine can boast about, with 85% of the population having at least secondary education. However, at the same time, there is said to be a mismatch between the accessibility and the quality of schooling (Burakovsky and Movchan 2011:36). What can also be seen from the gathered empirical material and should be added to maladies is the extensive and sanctioned system of bribes. One of the interviewees recalls how she had wanted to study International Relations—the most prestigious department at her university—yet had to study Banking, because of corruption. She recalls her entry exams:

When I passed Ukrainian Literature and Language I answered all possible questions, and they created and they started asking me all possible Ukrainian rules, and I answered everything, they were really surprised because they could not...fail me, and they asked one question which I didn't answer, and the answer was, “Ok, you don't know anything,” it's like 3 out of 5, and with 3 I could not pass...and the lady who originally examined me, after all, she met me and asked, “And how are you? Did you manage to enter the university?” and I said, “No, because of you” and she felt pity...Finally, I met then with the Dean of the department which I targeted and they said that I successfully did exams, like written exams, 95 out of 100 for math, and he said, “Which good student we're losing just because of this system” and I said, “But, this is YOUR problem, do something with that” and basically I finished my school, university with excellent marks. [Natalia, 29y.]

Natalia was an exemplary student, yet she did not pay for her place at the university so she could not study at the faculty of her choice. Her example illustrates that not only do the individuals' dreams and plans get shattered, but also the schools admit not necessarily the best students, but the most profitable ones, hence the “prestige” of such institutions becomes rather dubious, followed by the inflation of diplomas, and in the long run the country is losing its most prominent graduates as they seek and find better jobs abroad.

Research has shown that corruption is a strong and important migration driver and that almost 50% of the Ukrainian population aged 18-39 reveal aspirations to live and work abroad, at least for a period

of time (Lapshyna 2014). Such systemic problem translates into the migratory decisions of the whole families and their biographical plans, for example, Lesya decided to migrate to Poland in 2013 at the age of 35 with her husband (who as a result had to undergo deskilling himself) and two kids as she perceived her children's future in Ukraine as a “waste of money.” Such decisions to invest into the education of children outside Ukraine get confirmed in the words of a Polish private university official. In a casual conversation with a Polish professor, the scholar recalled a Ukrainian father who had said that he would rather cover the full costs of a 5-year tuition at a Polish private university as it is countable and more predictable—at least he knows from the onset how much it would cost him, with no additional expenses on the way, and that it will probably still be cheaper than the education in Ukraine with all the additional, informal payments considered.

Some of my interviewees have had the chance to study in both Ukraine and Poland. Lidia studied abroad for 10 months with a scholarship, but then returned to her home country and recalls:

In Ukraine, I wrote, I finished the MA, but it all started to, it was 2013, everything started with this [the Euro] Maidan, I was not ready, I did not want...because before Maidan I had to pay for the MA defense as if unofficially, it is known and this, the system was already very difficult to fight with. I am just such a person that I have never given bribes in my life, and decided that it just probably does not pay off from the moral perspective, to pay for being, for defending my MA, and I was waiting that something will change

after [the Euro] Maidan,<sup>15</sup> but really not much has changed in this respect, because this system is just like this, you know, in this society so deeply rooted, unfortunately. [Lidia, 28y.]

Lidia decided not to continue doing her research in Ukraine and came back to Poland in 2014 to pursue PhD studies, as there was a government-funded programme for foreigners and no unofficial payments were required. This could be interpreted as a conscious, moral act of rebellion against the system in which bribery and corruption constitute a monolithic social structure which Lidia does not want to be a part of, and as the expression of bitter disillusionment with yet another revolution (in this case, the Euro Maidan protests of 2013-2014), which turned out to be a lost hope for change.

However, to show the acute pathology of the system, it is worth quoting fragments of the interview with Valeria, a 33-year-old historian holding a PhD diploma, who also had a chance to study both in Ukraine and in Poland, and gives a testimony of self-reported bribing. Valeria was an exemplary student and finished secondary school with merits (with a silver medal). Her dream was to study law, but as she recalls, it was unfortunately impossible

due to different corruption reasons, because in her times only the financially privileged ones with connections could study law or medicine. For this reason, she chose to study history, which was not free of bribery either:

At the Faculty of History in the fifth year of studies [2007—A.D.], everyone [80 people—A.D.], even those who did not want to admit, everyone confessed...“I paid so many dollars and I paid that many dollars,” and so on, it depended on who and where he had to go through, such chains and connectors. And what also counted was that I had a silver medal, so I did not have many examinations, I did not have to take one in Ukrainian language, only historical subjects, so it was probably cheaper for one exam too [laughs]. In my case, it was USD 600, it was the year 2002 and what is interesting, my parents did not have this kind of money, my mom was earning maybe USD 200, so we had to borrow from my sister’s husband, who at that time sold a car...Only two guys in my year did not admit [that they had to pay a bribe—A.D.], including my husband and one more friend from western Ukraine...they had to pay too, but didn’t confess. [Valeria, 33y.]

Lapshyna (2014:118) reports that “at least 30 percent of Ukrainians enter colleges by paying bribes while many others use their connections.” However, from Valeria’s narration, we can see that the figure can rise to 100%. Corruption seems to be a vicious circle encompassing all levels of education—bribes are paid for securing a place at a state institution, exam scores, final grades (Shaw et al. 2015), but money or connections are also needed to land a job as a teacher or lecturer (Lapshyna 2014).

In my times, meaning until I left in 2008, if I did not know the right people, it was impossible to get a job, even at a private university where I worked. I got [that job] thanks to my tutor, who just knew that I was not from [name of city], who helped me, in a human way, without any money. There was no such thing [bribery—A.D.] here, and the Dean was involved in it, because they knew that there must be a place for me in these doctoral studies, and there was no place because the Dean’s son and his deputy’s grandson had it [secured]. [Valeria, 33y.]

What Valeria describes as a simple, human gesture is a situation which bears the hallmarks of sanctioned systemic pathology, and would otherwise be referred to as nepotism. She cannot pursue PhD studies immediately after obtaining an MA diploma due to the fact that all the places are already “booked” for the authorities’ relatives, but she is granted the opportunity to work for a year as a lecturer at a private university. Two years later Valeria comes to Poland to do a special MA programme dedicated to students from the East at a university, and she recalls how shocking it was to defend her diploma in Poland:

Here [in Poland] the defense of the Master’s thesis, there was a date set especially for me...there were four professors, I came and they asked me questions from different areas, I went out, in 5 minutes they called me back, greeted me, shook my hand and said, “Congratulations on your success,” then they gave me a book which they had signed in remembrance, and so on. In our country, it was done in a different way. In Russian, we say *nakryvat polanu* which means laying the whole table with vodka, wine, food, and so on, we all chipped in and it was

in this way...first thing [in Poland] you do not need to pay anyone to study, and they pay YOU a scholarship. [Valeria, 33y.]

The individual approach, the fact that she was the main focus and the subject of the exam, that the date was set for her and she was given an occasional gift or paid a scholarship to study was a mirror-reflection of the reality she knew and experienced back in Ukraine.

Taking all the above into consideration, it comes as no surprise that the Polish authorities took advantage of the competitiveness of the domestic education system and launched regular recruitment campaigns in Ukraine, in order to compensate for the shortage of Polish students due to the demographic decline and a partial outflow of young people to universities in the European Union countries, offering various scholarship programmes.

### Social Inclusion

One of the major institutional limitations to the post-modern, mobile people are borders and the constraints of the visa regimes, which is particularly acute to the non-EU nationals from countries bordering the EU member states. The paradox of citizenship and ethnicity in the case of some Polish-Ukrainian families is that sometimes the factors determining an individual’s status are purely historical, and to some extent accidental. One of my interviewees, Ksenija who comes from the borderland area of the former Polish city of Lviv, recalled that the World War II had separated her grandmother, who had stayed in Lviv, from her brother, who had been living in Warsaw at that

<sup>15</sup> The Euromaidan, also referred to as Ukrainian Spring, was a series of pro-European protests that started in November 2013 in Kiev at the Maidan (The Square), which met with violent reaction of the Berkut riot police. They evolved into revolutionary nationwide demonstrations, escalating in February 2014, with over 100 protesters killed by the pro-government forces. The initial manifestations were sparked off by the government’s decision to postpone the signing of an association agreement with the European Union. As the clashes and violence intensified, the citizens were calling for the president’s resignation and a change of the government and the corrupted system, whose symbol was the president V. Yanukovich (Zhuk 2016).

time. Two generations later Ksenjia is considered a Ukrainian whereas her cousins are Polish, even if the geographical distance between them is merely 450 km. For such reasons (among other ones as well) there have been a number of measures facilitating travel, work, and studying for Ukrainians, which I elaborated on in the socio-economic context section. Nonetheless, it was as late as June 2017 that Ukrainian citizens holding a biometric passport could finally travel visa-free to most European Union countries for up to 90 days. However, since all of my interviewees had come to Poland before that regulation came into force, and all of them are working full-time, some of them also required a work permit. It is worth adding that when Poland joined the EU in 2004, this resulted in a massive outflow of the Polish workers to the immediately opened labour markets, especially in the UK and Ireland<sup>16</sup> and as a consequence highlighted the growing and urgent need for replacement migration.

Virtually all of the interviewed women indicated that the administrative hassles constitute one of the principal problems connected with relocating. Getting all the documents, scheduling appointments at the offices for non-EU nationals is a lengthy and stressful process. Therefore, those ones who were holders of *Karta Polaka* pointed to it as a significant institutional facilitation. Anastasiya, who had done postgraduate law studies in Germany, worked in major international institutions, inter alia, in Brussels, recalls that despite having achieved a lot at some point, she was just

<sup>16</sup> This exodus is estimated to have reached upwards of 1 million people by 2007 (Castles and Miller 2009).

tired of the bureaucratic matrix of reapplying for a work permit in Belgium every 6 months, which was at the same time blocking her possibilities of getting a new job there.

I found out that people who have *Karta Polaka* do not need a work permit and for me...I had this card and in fact I had never treated Poland as a country where I would like to work, because I always had some bigger horizons, New York, London, Brussels, but I was really tired of these bureaucratic issues and I thought maybe I will take some break to settle down, not to wait every six months what will happen with these documents, and to change jobs every six months, I will move to Poland. [Anastasiya, 27y.]

Having a regulated legal situation and permanent employment, one can take full advantage of the offer of possibilities that open up. Most of my interviewees mentioned the possibility to travel visa-free and having access to inexpensive transport as a great asset. In Ukraine, even if one can afford it, planning holidays abroad is a lengthy, inflexible, and stressful process:

You need to have a visa for all your travels, so you cannot just go somewhere where you want. You cannot plan your holidays on an ad hoc basis, because you just have to buy everything a month in advance, book it, apply for your visa...according to our law... you have to book [the holiday] earlier and you cannot change it...and if your visa does not come...you will not go on vacation where everything was booked, the tickets will be lost, well, that's about what I'm talking about... [Diana, 27y.]

The interviewed women, having satiated their European appetite open up (as long as they have such wish and enough financial resources) to more exotic destinations. Anastasiya had gone on a spontaneous holiday to Brazil, Natalia to the Philippines. Valeria, who tries to go somewhere exotic at least twice a year, and has already been to a few countries in Asia, the Pacific, or the Caribbean, says that living in Poland she can spend her free time even without leaving the country in a much more proactive way:

[In Ukraine] you cannot because for now there is no such infrastructure...First of all, Ukraine is bigger, if you'd want to go from Lviv to Kharkiv, you have to spend the whole day, if by plane, it will be faster, but in Ukraine, if you look at earnings in Ukraine and, for example, later convert them into flight tickets, it would be much more expensive, it is easier here in Poland. In Poland, you can take a car, and here, for example [sightsee] Teutonic castles, and there are some cycling routes, and other, plenty of everything and all the infrastructure. [Valeria, 33y.]

As for other qualitative infrastructural improvements, it is, for example, the efficient public transport system and other city facilities (public bikes, cycling paths, street lighting) that get quoted by the Ukrainian interviewees. Diana devotes much of the interview to praising the Warsaw public transport—buses which have air conditioning, reliable timetables, cheaper tickets, public bicycles. In Dnipro, where she comes from, there are only overcrowded expensive private minibuses, with a flat ticket rate per ride regardless of the duration of the ride, but they are only good for those who are not in a hurry, as she says.

There is no space, it does not arrive on time, and sometimes it does not stop at my stop at all, and, of course, there are traffic jams. And then you come to work so terribly tired, pissed off, you are in a bad mood, because everyone was treading on your feet, everyone else is also pissed off. It's good that you caught it at all, you do not know whether you will be able to get to work on time. When you arrive, you do not have such a good mood, because you had lost everything in those bus rides, and then you return home in the same conditions later. [Diana, 27y.]

She also mentions that in contrast to the Ukrainian public offices, in Warsaw everything is well organised and transparent, one gets a number in the queue, the clerks are (usually) polite and helpful. She recalls that the first time she visited the tax office she was literally shocked to see a children's corner and took a photo, as she did not know such things existed.

You think, "Oh my God!" here is such a civilisation, and you came from such wildness, wow! Children's corner... after 3 years, of course, you get used to it...you are starting to approach it in the way that you expect, it is not just wow, but that's the way it should be. [Diana, 27y.]

Diana, whose younger sister migrated to the US, concludes that everyone in her circles is just simply looking for a better quality of life.

### Conditions for Empowerment

The last category I will consider in this paper is, in fact, an intersection of the previous three aspects. If individuals are to be able to assume agency and have the capacity to control their lives, they need

to have material security, which they can pursue, enjoy, and realise in predictable conditions with commonly accepted values and norms that are supported by institutional order and infrastructure. In order to show how migrating to Poland is conducive to creating such conditions for an individual's subjective perception of empowerment, I will refer to the story of Natalia, a corporate transferee like Yuliya, and a single mother of a 6-year-old.

Back in Kiev, Natalia used to work extremely hard, for example, recalling one day when she had spent 27 consecutive hours in the office, and decided that this is not the quality of life she wants to have for her and for her child. As she had cooperated on different projects with the Polish branch of her company, once she got an offer, she decided to take advantage of the opportunity and relocated first herself, and 4 months later the child. She, just as Yuliya, emphasized that despite also working a lot in the Polish office, the conditions are more favourable, and that while in Poland she still does overtime, it is not to the extent that she used to do in Kiev. For Natalia, empowerment is realised through having the financial means and infrastructural possibilities to manage all the aspects of her life—work, business travel, childcare, and active leisure. She recalls the situation when she experienced the qualitative change in her life:

When we discussed how old I am, I'm 29 and she's 25 [the Polish babysitter—A.D.], she said she thought I'm much older than she, and the comment was that because I'm just 4 years older than her and I have a good position, and not bad money, and I travel a lot, because our first meetings were like I asked her

to come when I had like a day I started at 5 o'clock in the morning, I left keys to my friend to come and put the child to school because I was going to Vienna. So, in the morning, I went to Vienna before I left keys to my friend. Then the nanny came and stayed, took a child from school and stayed till 9 o'clock. At 9 I came back. But, during the day I was in Vienna, I took from Vienna a taxi to Bratislava, in Bratislava I had a meeting, it was like breakfast in Warsaw, lunch in Bratislava, and then I came back to Vienna and flew back, so, it was the first day of, let's say, organising everything, it was first time when I left my child for a nanny, and for me it was very important that I can be independent, that I have a person to whom I can delegate my child, I can organise everything without support of ANYBODY, but just relying on myself. [Natalia, 29y.]

She finally has the time, means, and structural opportunities to shape the reality she is living in:

I created, let's say, like an own world...I have my shop, my swimming pool, my work, my flat which is very close to each other, and basically, 10 minutes walk from one place to another, everything is very convenient. At the beginning I started, for example, I had more free time, I started normally reading, I started make some sport, swimming, running, everything, and I can say, moving here [to Poland], personally for me, was an increase in quality of my living, let's say, because, as I said, in Kiev I had very few time for my child. [Natalia, 29y.]

Natalia also mentions that migration to Poland allows her to make use of the untapped potential for the spontaneous enjoyment of life, which she recalls

was more difficult back in Ukraine. She can decide in the morning about a weekend cityscape travel in the afternoon, or leave the office at 5:30 p.m., take her child, and at 8 p.m. be sitting on a bus to Kiev in order to celebrate her birthday with family and friends. However, when she asks her mother to visit her in Warsaw in a similarly spontaneous way, she hears, "No, no, no, it's not possible." Even if in fact it is possible, it is a difference in the mental approach that one does not simply have to plan everything in advance, anticipating problems that will arise, but just enjoy life here and now. Yet, just as Yuliya, she pays the social price, as she stopped sharing information about her trips on social media in order to not make people back home jealous.

## Conclusions

In Eastern Europe, the systemic transformation of the 1990s came about as a shock, individuals and households were not prepared either mentally or formally for what was to come. There was no plan, no support, no transfer of the know-how how to function within the free-market economy. Naturally, some individuals did manage to take advantage of the new opportunities arising from the legal loopholes and through personal contacts with the state apparatus, yet the vast majority was left to cope with the everyday hardships on their own.

Ukraine is in many ways a unique case study, it is an example of a country which was once a prosperous and thriving republic, but since the 1990s underwent a triple transformation—"the formation of nation states, the collapse of the non-market command economy, and the introduction of elements of

a market economy (including employment insecurity and market prices) and the collapse of a social structure" (Abbott and Sapsford 2006:252), which resulted, on the one hand, in the decline of the standard and quality of life of many individuals, families, and household, and, on the other, in massive migration outflow. In the beginning, it was largely in the pursuit of paid work as an ad hoc response to the economic uncertainty. However, with the prolonging instability and bleak prospect of constructive changes, migration has become a permanent tactic of almost half of the population who wish to work or just live abroad and experience a better quality of life (Lapshyna 2014).

The Social Quality approach allows us to look beyond the economic migration motivations, as in fact none of the interviewed women pointed to a higher salary or the need to support remaining family members as the primary incentive to relocate abroad. It was rather the overall better working conditions, the lack of the ubiquitous corruption, the flexibility of travel resulting from their regulated legal status, the developed infrastructure, and the transparency of the social system allowing for greater self-realisation and for assuming agency, which in general translates into the capacity to actively take control of their decisions and life choices. The interviewed women express gaining a sense of European dignity, manifesting itself, inter alia, in the possibility to choose and enjoy a lifestyle they want and value.

On the other hand, as I wrote at the beginning of this article in the theoretical section, in the study of migration there is a wide spectrum of approaches

which are at best middle-range theories, which can and should complement each other depending on the research problem. For this reason, the Social Quality approach will not suffice to explore all the waves of migrations of Ukrainians to Poland, especially that, for example, as of 2014 there have been more men coming and this is attributed to the escalation of the armed conflict in eastern Ukraine.

To conclude, the socio-economic costs of systemic transformation in Ukraine are multidimensional, and the length of this article does not allow for an exhaustive analysis, yet the overall and chronic life

dissatisfaction, especially among women (Abbott and Sapsford 2006), and the more educated ones (Lapshyna 2014) constitutes an important migratory push factor. At the same time, this outflow of the educated and skilled ones results in human capital loss so much needed for sustainable economic and social development of Ukraine (Lapshyna 2014). As for Poland, which was chosen here as an example of the receiving country, due to the influx of Ukrainian students and migrants, can compensate for its own human capital outflow to the European Union markets, and the demographic decline.

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## *Part II*

### *The Young Generation in the "New World"*

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## The Precarious Life Situation Trap. The Case of “Zealous” Julia—A Proponent and a Victim of Neoliberal Reality

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**Abstract** The analysis of Julia’s (b. 1984) case, empirically grounded in the autobiographical narrative interview method, will discuss the mutual influence of the individual experiences and the collective processes that result in a precarious life situation being a stage of the trajectory of suffering process. It will be argued that the generation born between 1980-1990 that entered their adolescence period (and, at the same time, labor market) in a very specific socio-cultural context, framed by the dynamics of interrelated processes of political transformation, vibrant modernization, globalization, and, last but not least, development of neoliberal ideology, has been the first one in Poland to be exposed to the deep and overwhelming biographical changes. They have been oftentimes connected with the feeling of biographical trap and the experience of precarious balance of everyday life that—to a large extent—is a consequence of belonging to intensively multiplying social worlds with their divergent stocks of knowledge at hand, clashing ideologies, conflicting moral standards, dissonant rules of conducts, and expectations. Additionally, in the discussed case, I will deal with a biographical irony: Julia is both—a zealous propagator of allegedly universal attitudes of neoliberalism and a victim of this subtle mode of power. All these contradictions and tensions are clearly seen in the formal features of her (as well as many other people born in the 80’s last century) renderings, which are nonlinear, incoherent, emotionally overloaded, and full of fading-out phenomena.

**Keywords** Biographical Trap; Trajectory of Suffering; Political Transformation; Precarious Balance; Autobiographical Narrative Interview

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Usually taken for granted “typologies” of contemporary Poles (for example, these related to the distinction into transformation “winners” and “losers”) in their simplified version do not really reflect extremely complex, multi-layered, and ambiguous biographical processes and their feedback to social processes, although they have a real impact on social policies and media ways of explaining social reality.

A meticulous and rigorous analysis of narrative interviews gathered as part of the project “Experience of the Process of Transformation in Poland. Sociological Comparative Analysis Based on Biographical Perspective”<sup>1</sup> basically verified this binary, schematic image and allowed to capture paradoxes, tensions, ambivalences, and biographical traps, which often result from a more or less conscious inability to deal with the expectations which contemporary people face through numerous and diverse social worlds and inability to meet the requirements mainly articulated in the form of ubiquitous discourse of agency and self-responsibility. Clearly, the assumptions of the project take into account that it is not without significance in which phase of the individual’s life course the process of moving from the discourse legitimizing the oppressiveness of the socialist social formation to the language promoting the attributes of the neoliberal subject took place. The case analyzed in the text below is an improvised autobiographical account of Julia,<sup>2</sup> who was born in

<sup>1</sup> The project “Experience of the Process of Transformation in Poland. Sociological Comparative Analysis Based on Biographical Perspective,” financed by the NCN program OPUS V UMO-2013/09 / B / HS6 / 03100), was implemented in 2014-2017 by the Department of Sociology of Culture at the University of Lodz.

<sup>2</sup> Most of the names in the text are fictitious.

1984 in Nałęczów as the penultimate of five of her parents’ children. She graduated from the faculty of political science and sociology in Warsaw; she is currently a doctor of political science operating in the coaching and training industry. Thus, she belongs to the generation, colloquially understood as the one which grew up after 1989 and which is said to have their entire conscious life fully in conditions of freedom, which allegedly makes them the first full beneficiaries of systemic and political changes in Poland. This harmful, simplified, and thus falsifying the reality thesis will be subjected to criticism here in the light of an individual (but compared to other cases) life history. What is more, attention will be paid to the chaos of orientation typical of contemporary complex societies which results from “the dissonant concert of social worlds” (Schütze 2002:75) and irritation caused by the inability to see one’s own life as a whole (Schütze 2002:75), which, most probably, was the first time fully experienced in Poland by people belonging to the cohort born in the eighties of the last century.

Many of the general features of Julia’s biography, ways of experiencing events in life and their social framework can be found in the autobiographical narrative interviews of Hanna (medical doctor) and Inga (visual artist) discussed elsewhere (Waniek 2016a).<sup>3</sup> Among the most important ones is the fact the narrators belong to the cohort of people born in the first half of the eighties of the last century, whose process of adolescence and entering into early adulthood (and thus the labor market) took place in the context of dynamic and interrelated processes

<sup>3</sup> All interviews were conducted by Joanna Wygnańska.

of political transformation, entry into the structures of the European Union, intensive modernization, globalization, et cetera,<sup>4</sup> while the parents were absent—absorbed with work, grandmothers took care of the narrators, all of them have siblings, all of them were good students, active volunteers, and all of them got higher education. None of them has children, though Julia—married as the only one of them—thinks very seriously about motherhood. However, if the cases of Hanna and Inga (in a certain simplification and with caution in adapting Bourdieu’s statements to Polish reality) can be considered as examples of parents’ social position reproduction (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Bourdieu 1986) in the conditions of a vividly changing political and social framework, then Julia’s case shows a strong orientation on improving social position thanks to the education and the possibility structures offered by a capitalist market economy. In contrast to both narrators, Julia does not come from a bourgeois-intellectual family, and spent her childhood and early youth in a small town. Thus, the life history analyzed here will be another (contrasting) theoretical variation of the biographical entanglement in neoliberal reality giving an illusory sense of freedom and control over one’s own life, while in fact it only blots increasing disorder, anomie, and self-alienation (Riemann and Schütze 1991;

<sup>4</sup> It should be added that in the project mentioned above interviews with people born in the years 1960-1970, 1970-1980, 1980-1989 were carried out. The latter group—analyzed in this article—is distinguished by two features: the first is “the process of socialization within an educational career,” which was no longer based on ideological messages related to the socialist era, but at the same time was not strongly rooted in project thinking, creativity, or expectations of multifaceted development. The second feature is: the weakening sense of “stability of occupational career, clear rules on the labor market.”

Schütze 2012).<sup>5</sup> Julia goes a step further, unlike Hanna or Inga, who are subordinated to the expectations of the new capitalist order in their professional activities. Convinced of the necessity and importance of “project me”-self (Bröckling 2016:189-191), she becomes an expert who actively promotes and implements this order, a coach supporting the adaptation of individuals to free market realities or an instructor “producing compliant subjects” (Foucault 2008:178). In the canon of values regulating her daily experience in both the sphere of work and private life, we find among others: the need to invest in development, monitoring, and rigorous implementation of her own life plans, being flexible and resourceful, being immune to constant changes and difficult situations, as well as being rational. However, the point is that—as the text below is meant to prove—a significant part of these values constitutes, so to speak, the biographical equipment of the narrator, perfectly embedding into “governmentality,”<sup>6</sup> while the basic rule of this situation, the rule of self-confidence, creating (often illusory) self-image and selling (even apparent) skills on the free market can hardly be implemented by her. A detailed analysis of Julia’s life course also reveals a systematic contradiction visible in the fact that she is a zealous propagator of allegedly universal attributes of neoliberalism—including the supreme idea of “entrepreneur of the self” (cf. Foucault 2008; Stachowiak

<sup>5</sup> Other cases approaching the maximum contrast can be read about in the articles by Jacek Burski (2016) and Joanna Wygnańska (2016).

<sup>6</sup> “Governmentality” is understood as a “neoliberal variant of the art of government,” which, as Jerzy Stachowiak (2013:144) explains after Nicolas Rose (1998; 1999), “is oriented...to governing through freedom”—managing the actions of entities convinced about their autonomy, independence, and self-determination” (see also Czyżewski 2009a).

2013:141-161; Bröckling 2016:20-40), and, at the same time, she becomes a victim of this subtle and imperceptible form of power. This antagonism within her life history, which the narrator is not aware of, leads to many tensions, a sense of confusion, and a significant limitation (or suspension) of biographical work. In this aspect, Julia’s biography reveals many features typical of a modern complex society that are a consequence of entanglement of individuals into numerous social worlds.<sup>7</sup> Not only are these worlds constantly growing (often competing for members), but they become more and more fluid (their borders are blurred) (Schütze 2002). Thus, nowadays people not only have to deal with various (often contradictory) styles, logic of behavior, and moral standards of social worlds to which they belong, but also with the dynamics of internal changes and disputes regarding the authenticity of core activities in each of them. In addition, all of them—requiring specific knowledge resources, creating their own “We”-cul-

<sup>7</sup> Adele Clarke (1991:131) defies social worlds as “groups with shared commitments to certain activities, sharing resources of many kinds to achieve their goals, and building shared ideologies about how to go about their business.” Any social world is characterized by communication and activity (Strauss 1978; 1982) and it is based on common experience, mutual interest, shared symbolizations, shared perspectives on “reality,” and, what follows, constitutes its own universe of discourse. It neither has its formal boundaries nor is connected with formal membership and authority relations among participants, but is bounded “by the limits of effective communication” (Shibutani 1955:566). Clarke (1991:131-132) stresses that: “Through extended communication, participants in social worlds characteristically generate, or adapt ideologies about how their work should be done and debate about both their own activities and other’s actions that may affect them.” As Fritz Schütze (2002) emphasizes, social worlds are in their creation, organization, and change immensely flexible. Therefore, the social world is either a national or religious community, a political party, a non-governmental organization, it can be created by Michael Jackson fans, music connoisseurs, postage stamp collectors, subscribers to certain YouTube channels, football fans, vegetarians, anti-vaccine supporters, Polish immigrants in England, advocates of alternative medicine, protagonists of specific psychiatric therapies, et cetera.

ture and awareness (Schütze 2002:63)—create a sense of moral commitment to achieve common goals and oblige to loyalty. It seems that this process intensifies significantly among people born in the eighties of the last century,<sup>8</sup> in the life histories dominated by the sense of confusion, tension, disorientation, and irritation caused by the cacophony of logic, moral orientations, standards and ways of organizing work, criteria for assessing undertaken actions, ideologies, values or obligations characteristic of different social worlds (cf. Clarke 1991; Strauss 1993; Schütze 2002).

Actually, Julia’s story shows growing uncertainty and confusion resulting from the overwhelming arrangement of various social worlds, where participation, it should be noted, is the consequence of either institutional expectation patterns (e.g., various only money-making job worlds), biographical action plans (e.g., the social world of academy, non-governmental organizations, the world of trainers and coaches), and the trajectory of suffering (e.g., the social world of medicine). It can also be said that an increasingly intense feeling accompanying the narrator of being pushed as a consequence of both precarious and precarious life situation (Szarfenberg 2016), resulting from the special configuration of her own and her husband’s trajectory of illness (Riemann and Schütze 1991; Schütze 2012) and unstable, multi-format employment, forms. Thus, her autobiographical account is not a story about the path to success, but about continuous efforts to maintain the state of

<sup>8</sup> It does not mean that such phenomena did not occur before, but only that the autobiographical narrative interviews collected in the autobiographical research projects show that in the years 1980-1990 there was a significant change in both the content and the form of the story.

unstable equilibrium (Riemann and Schütze 1991; Schütze 2012), controlling (often excluding) logic and moral standards of different social worlds, and attempts to remain (at least to a minimal extent) loyal to each of them, as well as the constant necessity to suspend her own biographical plans, which require huge amounts of physical and emotional work, and bring the potential of an unexpected breakdown of everyday life organization (Riemann and Schütze 1991; Schütze 2012).

### Shortly on the Socio-Political Frame of Julia’s Experiences

Before we analyze the life history of Julia more thoroughly, let me outline the social, political, and cultural framework of her biographical experience. These, as Fritz Schütze (2008a; 2008b) argues, influence and sometimes even condition the course of the biographer’s experience and, in turn, are shaped by the biographer.

A lot has been said and written about systemic transformation in Poland, examining it mainly from the macro level and subjecting it to analysis in the theoretical-methodological frame of the normative paradigm.<sup>9</sup> The description categories and definitions related to the process of changing the political order for which 1989 was agreed as a breakthrough date (although this issue is also debatable) were often uncritically and carelessly accepted and included in public discourse, and thus in social awareness. Initially, as Andrzej Piotrowski (1997:329) shows, a specific “hope-based pattern of thinking” prevailed,

<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, Krzemiński and Raciborski 2010; Leder 2014; Rychard and Federowicz 1993, Ziółkowski 2015.

carrying the message that systemic transformation as “the abolition of anti-order brings order in itself, because it simply restores it.” The image of order was imported from the West often uncritically and unreflectively, that is, with no regard to political, historical, and cultural differences, or symbolic constructs of collective identity (Piotrowski 1997:328). It was based on the often illusory conviction promoted in all the countries of the Soviet bloc after its collapse, that the free market economy guarantees success to all undertakings basing on its rights. In the public discourse, the systemic transformation was presented primarily as a collective process of change associated with the emergence of new creative possibilities, and with unveiling previously stifled potentials of own initiative and entrepreneurship. Certainly, for many people the sequences of events in life were of such kind, but for dozens of them that period was associated with the experience of disorder and suffering. As shown by numerous empirical data in the form of autobiographical narrative interviews,<sup>10</sup> individual biographical processes interweaving in different configurations, and with different strength of experiences of political, social, and cultural reality at that time, often led to a sense of disorder—chaos of values, interpretation schemes, or orientation systems. For dozens of people it was—if you recall Émile Durkheim’s (cf. 1952) reflections on anomic suicides—the crisis situation understood as distur-

<sup>10</sup> Apart from the OPUS V project, this thesis is also confirmed in the collection of the autobiographical narrative interviews gathered as part of the project “The People’s Republic of Poland and the German Democratic Republic in Memory and Biographical Experiences of People Born Between 1945-55. Sociological Comparison Based on the Biographical Comparison” by the Polish-German Scientific Foundation (PNFN 2012-03) implemented in 2012-2015 by the Department of Sociology of Culture of the University of Lodz and the Otto-von-Guericke University in Magdeburg, funded by the Polish-German Foundation for Science (cf. Kaźmierska and Schütze 2013).

bance of balance which appears always when there are major changes in society—regardless of whether they are caused by a sudden increase or an unexpected cataclysm. Unexpectedly, the orientation structures changed, the values that had been underestimated or suppressed, such as: own initiative, competitiveness, economic success, or continuous development, became normative rules and constraints organizing social life. As Marek Czyżewski (cf. 2009a:91) showed, “economizing” rhetoric and “economizing” legitimations were triumphing. They spread to all fields of social activity (including family and school) and almost “sanctified” being entrepreneurial, creative, and resilient. The routine methods of conduct known up to that time proved to be unreliable, the horizons of expectations vague, the mechanisms governing the world of everyday life unobvious (they ceased to fulfill their nominal, regulating function). This led to growing and encompassing new areas of social life anomie, which meant chaotic social processes associated with deep cracks in the world of values and expectations, disorientation in everyday life, and weakening of social ties. In sum, this was the period in which a sudden social change shook or seriously destroyed the existing symbolic universum allowing for giving sense to everyday reality and thus outlined the framework conditions for the emergence of collective and individual trajectory processes. A significant role in the transition between such culturally different worlds and languages could be played by symbolic elites (Czyżewski, Kowlaski, and Piotrowski 1997; Czyżewski et al. 2014) by introducing a liaison work open to the perspective of an “ordinary citizen,” but they stopped mainly at paternalistic giving instructions and reprimands.

### Julia’s Life History

Julia’s biographical experiences constitute an extremely interesting case of the collision of expected and propagated (in family pedagogues, curricula, or public discourse) attitudes and life orientations,<sup>11</sup> which changed dramatically along with the process of political transformation in Poland. As much as for a socialist social formation based on disciplinary power the pattern of an obedient, amenable, diligent, and zealous man was useful in the “marketized” neo-liberal reality and the “governing through freedom” domination, creativity, flexibility, innovation, self-responsibility, and social commitment are required from the empowered individuals (cf. Czyżewski 2012a:118; 2012b:90).<sup>12</sup> Therefore (taking into account the previously mentioned cases of Hanna and Inga), we can point to a certain variant of the experience of transformation process characteristic of people who were socialized in communist Poland in the eighties of the last century, their early educational career took place in an experimental attempt of education reform according to the western model, early youth fell in the period of Poland’s

<sup>11</sup> Referring to the method of autobiographical narrative interview, we can talk here about the different normative and procedural requirements of institutional expectation patterns (cf. Schütze 1981; 1984).

<sup>12</sup> Moreover, Marek Czyżewski (2012a:118) emphasizes that in the conditions of the multi-faceted “governmentality” complex a rapid problematization of identity takes place and their fundamentally impermanent and uncertain “social construction”; the term “identity,” which appears only in this syndrome, is often used in scientific discourses (including “sociology of identity”), journalistic and political; in the social sense, the narcissistic focus on one’s own identity may be accompanied, on the one hand, by the fear of permanent identity and, on the other hand, by the sense of the disappearance of identity; the liberation of identity from the obvious, imposed realms and the flexible outline of the preferred identities paradoxically lead to the formation of a limited set of “licensed” identities (“a creative worker,” “an active citizen,” “a responsible parent”).

entry into the European Union and the promotion of various forms of civic activity, and the time of entering the labor market was already dominated by the logic of neoliberal world. The course of Julia’s life history is distinguished by—leading to increasing trajectory potential—disharmony between the zeal gained while in family home and lack of self-confidence: the tension between faith in reliable knowledge and the requirements of the external world in which creation of illusion, dramatization of own actions, and creating one’s own image counts (Goffman 1990). However, the paradox in this case is that being a member of the social world (Strauss 1982; 1984; 1993; Clarke 1991) of trainers and coaches working in favor of “molding and producing compliant subjects” (Stachowiak 2013:142) desired in the “knowledge economy” and propagating allegedly inalienable abilities<sup>13</sup> she began to notice the game of appearances in this area, but not so much in the key activities and ideologies of this world as in executive technologies (Strauss 1993:212). I will return to this issue later.

The interview with Julia took place just before her thirtieth birthday, which the narrator says herself at the beginning of the forty-nine page transcription.<sup>14</sup> She states that she has earlier talked to her husband, Andrzej, about taking part in this research and, as she says, she told him: *Well, OK, we will close a certain*

*period of life.*<sup>15</sup> This is an atypical situation of starting an autobiographical narration in a double meaning. First of all, we deal here not so much with the “standard” preamble, in which the narrator usually tries to describe—yet not entirely clearly, even for himself or herself—the general global form of his or her own biography, as with a kind of metacommentary concerning the summary “function” of this event for—and this is the second extraordinary element—their (i.e., Julia and her husband’s) previous life. On the basis of the form of this preliminary statement, we can conclude that, to a large extent, the course of her life has been shaped together with or in relation to Andrzej, and that undoubtedly he is the key figure of the drama (*dramatis personae*) (Schütze 2008a:173-174; 182), an important event carrier and the significant Other in the sense of George Herbert Mead (1934).

Julia’s childhood memories revolve mainly around her father’s alcohol problems, which most likely led to the fact that shortly after her birth he lost his job as a construction manager and looked after his little daughter (which, in her opinion, resulted in a much stronger bond between them later in life).<sup>16</sup> At that time, the mother became the main supporter of the family. Three or four years later her father left for France, where his family lived, to

<sup>15</sup> All statements of the narrator are in italics, symbols introduced in the text mean respectively: (.) short pause, / unfinished, infinite, or corrected statement, () brackets contain additional nonverbal reactions of the narrator such as laughter or crying, (...) dots in brackets mean cut out, insignificant excerpts of a narrator’s or researcher’s speech, [ ] square brackets contain additional contextual information.

<sup>16</sup> However, one should take into account that in episodes of biographical meaning, or in situations requiring support, the narrator speaks of parents in general terms, and in a while the mother appears to be as an interaction partner, a commenter, or a supporter.

look for a job there. The goods brought from there “shaped” the image of the West she had; by the way, atypical for many people whose childhood fell in the late eighties and the early nineties of the last century<sup>17</sup>—as the land of “milk and honey.” Julia recalls the return of her father from France: *I saw them for the first time in my life, Mars bars, Bounty bars, such tiny ones in the boxes and French cheese (...)* And then she mentions three colorful school backpacks, and how her father talked about *huge areas with shops where you just walk around and you look at them, yes. And there were so many of them and everything was so colorful and you could buy whatever you wanted [laughing]*. A counterbalance to the colorful world of all sorts of easily available goods (of course, those important for the child) was the image of the PRL<sup>18</sup> queues “to everything,” in which Julia as a child had only one task *to stand in a line and look at the shop assistants with big eyes, take the goods, and come back to the queue again (laughing)*. This experience of contrast between the sad reality of the real socialist economy and the colorful world of capitalist prosperity may have had its repercussions on the image the majority of contemporary Polish society had of the “betterness” of the Western world and the unproblematic, thoughtless acceptance of its patterns.

The grandmother helped in maintaining the house and taking care of the children when the “busy” parents were not at home. This is another common

<sup>17</sup> Hanna, for example, describes her first trip to her uncle in Denmark in 1993 as *a clash with prosperity, with chips and candy walls* (Waniek 2016a:134).

<sup>18</sup> The Peoples’ Republic of Poland: the post-war Polish republic existing till 1989, economically and politically dependent on the Soviet Union.

denominator in the accounts of Julia, Hanna, and Inga.

*Actually, my grandma brought me and my older sisters up (...). My mum was at work all the time, my father was at work all the time as well. And, to tell you the truth, my childhood! I’ve got vivid memories (.) only of having teas with my grandma. I came back from school, had dinner (.) and then at 5, at 5 o’clock I used to come to my granny for tea. She put a lot of sugar into my tea and she used a lot of lemon, so the tea made by her! I’ve never managed to prepare such tea.*

An extremely strong and emotional relationship with her grandmother and elderly people in her family is evidenced by the passage in which the narrator talks about the traumatic period in her life related to primary school (further on) and says:

*when I look at my life now, the most, the most important was eee the most the most (.) the most difficult time was the time of primary school between ‘95-‘96 when my grandma died. Ymm my grandpa died. And five months later my grandma died and five months later my uncle died. He was the only man with whom I had close relations. And the loss of these three people made my relations with people weren’t so deep any longer (.) Actually, I stopped mourning my grandma (.) oh, wait, I think I haven’t yet. And I stopped mourning my uncle last year. And it’s strange that their deaths affected the whole family, because it was, you know, like a set (she snaps her fingers), wasn’t it? When you get/ the only granddad, the only grandma who raised us all and the uncle who was a part of our family.*

It should also be mentioned that at that time Julia’s parents were building a house for which, as she

<sup>13</sup> When explaining the concept of coaching, Tomasz Bogolebski (2014:180) writes that: “on the declarative level...it is—based on the collaboration and cooperation model—a way to extract their potential from individuals in order to maximize profits (understood broadly and without limiting them—explicit—only to the financial perspective).”

<sup>14</sup> The entire translation includes fifty-one pages. It means that the first part of the interview based on a spontaneous autobiographical narration was extremely long.

explains, they *didn't get a loan for the house, but they had to build the house with the money they had earned. They didn't have time for their children. And later they had to earn money for every renovation of the house.* In spite of significantly different political and economic conditions, Julia always tried to keep to the principle that all goods should be bought with the savings, not the money borrowed from the bank. Let me note that the narrator does not problematize, firstly, that obtaining credit in the period of the PRL in the form in which it is presently possible was unrealistic and, secondly, that the work involved parents to such an extent that *they didn't have time for their children.*

The first issue—especially in the light of later narrator's decisions—seems particularly interesting as it is the proof that (leaving aside any assessment) a certain fixed pattern of acting and understanding how the economy works did not undergo profound changes, as the symbolic elites of political system transformation wished for. Let me add that this is just one of several areas in Julia's experience in which she almost “stiffly” refers to principles internalized in the family which order the world, when she has to face the contemporary free-market reality and the pressure of capitalist rationality.

Let me look at the way the narrator talks about her primary school experience and extremely difficult relations with his peer group, which contributed to the sense of inferiority, lack of recognition, and a sense of isolation. She talks about this period: *and primary school is not easy when you are a good student. I remember I didn't have many friends.* This theoretical-argumentative commentary is often repeated by her as the explanation of lack of sympathy among

classmates and reproduces the simple condition that being considered “nerdy” is associated with lack of acceptance among peers. But, when the narrator mentions enigmatically, *in the fifth grade, when there were/ there were strange relations between the girls in my class,* she adds: *some of them laughed at other people's clothes, that they are poorer* which eventually cost her *a nervous breakdown,* this suggests another, though not yet under reflection, account of the existing state of affairs. In other words, Julia sees, but does not notice (or does not want to notice) (Garfinkel 2002), other or additional reasons for being disliked and postponed. However, looking at her biography as a whole and applying the procedure of pragmatic refraction,<sup>19</sup> we can, at least partially, uncover these imperceptible conditions. We already know that the family was large, the mother worked “in the budgets,” Julia's father struggled with an alcohol problem, which probably (as the narrator admits herself) was the reason for his dismissal,<sup>20</sup> he had a tendency to give money away; and when Julia was born, the family moved to a newly built, but not fully finished, house. Undoubtedly, all this contributed to the significant impoverishment of the family. Julia shows her parents as extremely economical, who *didn't spend money on rubbish* and the children wore clothes one after another, but perhaps they were just

<sup>19</sup> Mieczysław Marciniak (2016:192) writes: “It means the necessity of analytical binding these formally separate units of expression with those reproduced on the basis of ‘proper narration’ with biographical processes. This allows us to understand better the biographical process itself and sometimes penetrate what is consciously and unconsciously obscured by the narrator, which created deeper sources of tension in the biography—and thus makes it easier to penetrate into the biographical process.”

<sup>20</sup> Julia explains that her father, as a plumber-installer, was working on the construction site at that time and *the construction sector in Poland was strongly allied with alcohol.*

poor at that time.<sup>21</sup> In this perspective, we should look at Julia's relationship further, in which her desire to be recognized and accepted was devastated in a dramatic way. It is reflected in the analytically significant linguistic phenomena that interrupt the flow of narration—the background construction.<sup>22</sup> It contains a story about her tenth birthday party, at which none of the invited guests showed up. This distant-in-time event has an unusual emotional charge—recalling it during the interview, the narrator begins to cry<sup>23</sup>:

*I remember, I still remember (.) When I was in the fourth grade of primary school, my mum let me have a birthday party. (...) And it was the first time I could invite my friends to the party. (.) But, it is such a strong memory, be-*

<sup>21</sup> One more detail from her childhood may speak in favor of it: *And what else I remember from the free-market economy are crisps. My friend could afford buying crisps. And she bought a packet every day and she shared with me. (she laughs) These were Star Chips, Starbacks (.) no, not Star Chips, just crisps, yeah, that's right. Pizza and cheese flavored. And she could afford buying them. And she bought crisps and she shared with me. I envied her so much. She might afford it/ as I've told you, there were four kids in my family and we didn't have such a possibility. You remember such strange things. Today I'd never buy these crisps (with a smile)[...] But, I remember that Magda [Julia's friend] could always afford buying these crisps and it was amazing for me. I thought she was so extra rich.*

<sup>22</sup> A background construction means a sequence introduced later than the sequence of events in the life would require. It signals that the combination of experiences was either extremely complicated and it was difficult for the narrator to recapitulate it in a linear order, or too painful or shameful and, therefore, the narrator tries to neglect it. However, the power of narrative constraints forces him/her to go back even to emotionally difficult experiences, to give sense and authenticity to his/her biography in the eyes of the listening researcher. The latter option is called a fading-out phenomena. In this passage, we deal with a background construction which takes the form of a documentary (*Belegerzählung*), which is to justify the narrator's claim that *she remembers every purchase of a new thing* (cf. Schütze 1983). In order to do this, the narrator must go back in the chronology of the presented experiences and recall the traumatic event related to the purchase of shoes that she originally wanted to neglect.

<sup>23</sup> Apart from crying, detailed recapitulation, accumulation of pauses, and finally the reconstruction of internal dialogue are the formal markers of the significance of the mentioned event for the overall Gestalt of her biography (cf. Schütze 2008a:2006-2008).

*cause (.) nobody came (she cries). Mum took me in a car! (.) we were waiting in front of the school. Nobody came to my party. (...) (she cries) And mum went with me to buy shoes for me and I remember till today what the shoes looked like. (.) But, it is such a memory which, you see, which hurts even today. (.) But, it was a bit like this: it was the fourth grade, I was a good student, so nobody liked me. It was clear and obvious. I was able to say to myself: OK, I can't help it (.) I've got my first new shoes then. They were bought in a very exclusive shop in a sense, you know, it was a shoe shop opposite my primary school. So, I said it was exclusive, because it was. I guess it was in '96. Yeah, it should be? My fourth grade, '95-'96, more or less. And I remember this feeling: “new shoes,” well, you know (.) later // You know. I don't have nice memories from primary school. No warm feelings. It was a normal, mainstream school, where you got rejected if you were a good student. You just got rejected. And I couldn't share it at home, imagine what could I say?—that my friends didn't like me?*

Let me concentrate on what happened then (her friends did not come to her birthday party, she was disliked by them), the narrator again explains it referring to the common sense rule: *I was a good student, so nobody liked me.* However, we should ask once again if this is the only possible explanation of this situation and whether there were any other reasons for which the classmates disliked Julia. The most likely seems to be, as I have already mentioned above, the negative image of her family in the local community. We can deal here with “the tendency of stigma to spread” (Goffman 1986:30-31); a situation in which people avoid relationships or completely break up not only with stigma bearers (the parents), but also people from their closest surroundings (Julia) (Goffman 1986:30-31). However, we can only

speculate whether this stigma was related only to poverty, alcoholism, or other factors. Another intriguing issue in the above quotation is how her mother compensates Julia for what had happened. She did not make any attempt to explain this difficult situation of humiliation to her daughter, nor did she suggest how to deal with it emotionally, but she bought her the first new pair of shoes in her life. It will later become Julia’s only acceptable form of justifying spending money on new things: a kind of substantive compensation for moral and emotional losses (buying a flat, for example, would be a reward for the hardships of writing a PhD).

However, coming back to the school period: Julia was in the sports class (according to a quite controversial idea of gathering the best students in it) and she suffered constant failures in this field, which was associated with the incessant experience of humiliation, degradation, and exclusion: *I was terribly bad and nobody wanted to play with me. They didn’t choose me to their teams, and, you know, I couldn’t catch the ball at all. (...) Of course, I didn’t take part in any competitions, you know, because in general I was hopeless.* She also took part in the mathematical group meetings (and, once more, she gets there—as a result of the “experimental” educational policy of the early nineties—as a person who cannot cope with mathematics). Here again she was the worst one, but later she did very well in the competence test. Initially, these poignant feelings were reinforced by experience at the music school, to which parents sent her when their financial situation stabilized (it was around 1993). The first piano teacher was so horrible that Julia had nightmares and her sense of inferiority increased by being repeated constantly that she

was *stupid and hopeless*.<sup>24</sup> Fortunately, the next music teacher turned out to be nice, thanks to which the narrator stayed in this school. Today she is convinced that attending the music school allowed her to gain specific skills such as, for example, *the ability to share your attention, to share concentration between things, to do many things simultaneously* and general development in these classes that caused *the stimulation of her brain*. It is worth asking a question here: if she were not a diligent, hard-working person, with divided attention and managing her time skillfully would she be able to complete the music school? Julia is convinced that the acquired (or rather improved) competences constituted her present knowledge, which—let me add—can be used to train people in neoliberal virtues such as: entrepreneurship, self-discipline, creativity, innovation, responsibility, or personal development.

The sequence of events in Julia’s life brings us to the seventh grade of elementary school and, let me say, the epicenter of the maturation process. At that time the narrator found a soul mate—a friend with whom she created a tandem as she recalls it: *We were mean bitches (...). Everyone was afraid of us. And we did what we wanted, you know. I was very much concerned with what others thought of me. But, since they thought bad, I stopped being interested in their opinion. I just did what I did.* It becomes clear to us that the main youthful concern of Julia (mitigated slightly only later) was

<sup>24</sup> And she adds: *but, damn it, I’ve learnt to play the piano. I’ve learnt it to her anger (...) I’ve really learnt. (...) And I was pretty good at it, although she kept on repeating I was hopeless and the like.* This excerpt is noteworthy because of the specific formal feature of Julia’s story: whenever, due to the narrative dynamics, the narrator re-experiences situations of humiliation and helplessness or extreme competence uncertainty, her language becomes vulgar.

her image in the eyes of others and the fear of failed performances (Goffman 1955; 1990; Riesman 1989; Gergen 2000), so becoming adolescent (as most teenagers) she decided to take a rebellious attitude, different from the role of a polite, good student assigned to her so far. Her new identity was first manifested in a vulgar judgmental commentary (*we were mean bitches*) and then with regard to more and more arrogant or aggressive actions which can be detected in the hints given by her interactive partners (*Everyone was afraid of us*). It was also a period when Julia’s situation in terms of establishing relationships with people began to change significantly: she joined the school’s self-government (teachers appreciated her communication skills), prepared discos, fundraising, and she was engaged in voluntary work. All the time she concocted and organized something, because—as she emphasizes—*I liked doing something, I liked when something was going on around.* She took part in the competitions in Polish language, history, but also in physics—she never won any of them. As she comments now she had some successes in science: *didn’t prevent me from choosing a class of humanistic profile.*

And that is how Julia went to high school, which she comments: *it was one of the most amazing periods in my life where she met people who wanted to develop, people who appreciated intelligence. People who had crazy ideas, and they realized them.* It seems that she finally found a group of friendly people with whom she shared interest in rock music and liked (with mutuality) to spend her free time with. She became a member of the social world which was based on the sphere of her authentic inner spontaneity (Schütze 1984). It was only then that her desire “for securing a recog-

nized, enviable, and advantageous social position” (Thomas 1969:31) was fulfilled. She still went to music school<sup>25</sup> and she was active in volunteering, where she looked after elderly people. Since she was seventeen she spent weekends, holidays, and days off working at a guest house (she found this job herself). She was constantly busy. She was only worried about insufficient knowledge of English, which she realized during the competition organized for high school students from European Union candidate countries. She persuaded her parents to provide her with a very expensive English course.<sup>26</sup> As the narrator claims, education was *the only thing on which my parents didn’t skimp money.* It is worth stopping here to pay attention to parental pedagogy, which was based on systematic message that education guarantees work, allows for achieving a certain and permanent social position, and thus guarantees stability in life. In its clues and instructions, this message was to prepare for middle-class life. That is why they supported their children financially, even if it was with a considerable effort. This theme repeats throughout Julia’s story, starting from elementary school, when she explains that: *I was quite a good student, because my parents used to repeat education was important. That if I studied hard, I’d get/ I’d get a good job. And I believed this illusion [laughing];* till the time she completed doctoral studies (which we will look at further). Let me take a look at one more principle Julia learned in her family home and, what’s important, the principle she mentions talking about

<sup>25</sup> Julia graduated from the second degree of music school, to which she had to commute 30 km. What is more, while she was studying and working in Warsaw, she regularly commuted to her hometown, where she sang in the choir.

<sup>26</sup> Most probably it concerns widely advertised on the Polish market at the turn of the century sets (books and CDs) for home language learning.



the events of her teenage life: *In general, yyy my parents taught me one more thing, namely (.) what you do actually depends on you. And it was/ eee they trusted me a lot.* This principle has, however, a hidden implication (common with the rules of “governing through freedom”): it involves taking almost complete responsibility for one’s own actions, or at least carries a sense of such necessity. Returning to the period of Julia’s high school, we must mention two important issues that affected her whole life. Firstly, she went through difficult experience with her boyfriend, future husband—Andrzej, who suffered from eating disorders, was emotionally unstable, and had suicide attempts. These problems were later subjected to therapy, but they still have influence on their life. Secondly, she was diagnosed with diabetes, for which she mainly blames stress related to the complicated relationship with Andrzej and extreme fatigue (she was still in a music school, worked in a guest house, volunteered, organized school events and trips). Her attitude of that time towards the disease is expressed by the following statement: *fuck you, diabetes, I’m going to live my way anyway. I mean, I’m going to do thousands of things, I’m going to be active, and I’ll show you I can.* As we can see, Julia expected a kind of disorder in everyday life (Riemann and Schütze 1991:342), which, however, she did not intend to give in. Most probably, it was related to an attempt to trivialize or fade out the destroying trajectory potential (Riemann and Schütze 1991:349), which increases the feeling of losing control over one’s own life and intensifies the threat of exclusion from the normal world of everyday existence (Schütze 2012:420). The above statement can be read as an attempt to preserve the narrator’s active attitude towards her own life and identity, but

the vulgarity of language she introduced (*fuck you, diabetes*) seems to reveal the trajectory of suffering. Vulgarity of the narrator’s statements—which I have already noticed—always appears when the recapitulated memories “draw her back to the orientational principles and the emotional mood” (cf. Riemann and Schütze 1991:342) related to the irritating sense of helplessness and irritability as a result of deepening alienation towards herself.<sup>27</sup> Another empirical evidence for destabilizing trajectory potential of the disease will be obtained by looking at the whole of Julia’s biographical experience. Then it turns out that diabetes forced a specific way of organizing ev-

<sup>27</sup> However, a few words of explanation are necessary, because many misunderstandings arose about the trajectory of suffering (Riemann and Schütze 1991; Schütze 2012). It is one of (along with the institutional expectation pattern, biographical action scheme, and biographical metamorphosis) process structures (i.e., ways of experiencing events in life), which on the basis of the analysis of dozens of spontaneous, improvised stories about their own lives was distinguished by Fritz Schütze and his colleagues (Schütze 1981; 1983; 1984; 2008a; 2008b; Prawda 1989; Kaźmierska 2016). It is characterized by a sense of loss of control over one’s own life, chaos, fear, paralyzing disorientation, and a terrible loss of sense in the face of new overwhelming external circumstances, from which there is no escape. An individual touched by it loses confidence in himself/herself, becomes alienated from the world of life, falls into even deeper existential despair. Being a structural process of growing disorder, the trajectory of suffering is paradoxically usually ordered—phased from the accumulation of trajectory potential, through the inability to act intentionally and conditioned response to external circumstances, attempts to regain control over one’s own life giving a sense of precarious balance, to the total breakdown of self-orientation, to the theoretical and practical going through suffering and its acceptance (cf. Riemann and Schütze 1991; Schütze 2012). Not all of these stages and not always in this order appear in an individual course of suffering people. Not always events that would be sensitively inclined to be interpreted as a trajectory are experienced in this way and vice versa: sometimes seemingly “normal,” trivial biographical episodes or their sequences are treated by the biographer as an overpowering fate. This is because of individual and subjective experience of suffering, which in the narrative interview is given not so much by its name, but primarily in the characteristic activities of linguistic representation (cf. Schütze 2012:180), which very often express “complicated, difficult, subtle socio-biographical experiences only quite indirectly, symptomatically, and incompletely, since the latter might be ambivalent, cognitively or emotionally painful, shameful, or simply incomprehensible” (Schütze 2008a:171).

eryday life (especially in terms of meals, quality and regularity) or a hierarchy of importance in a modest student budget: [financially] *diabetes killed me, you know. I could spend the money on cigarettes and vodka or insulin. (...) You know, you can either go to a party, to the cinema, or buy insulin. And the stripes.* Moreover, whenever the narrator disregarded the constraints imposed by the disease and lost herself in stressful and manifold activities, she ended up in hospital *in a rather poor condition.* Such a situation took place at the beginning of studies and when she started another commissioned job, this time for a large State-owned company P-Poland. I will come back to the latter situation later.

To sum up this part of the narrator’s life course, I can say that from the family home, school, and out-of-school experiences connected with the need to combine activities in general and music school and other social activities, she mastered the ability to save (to manage money in a rational way), self-management, efficient and effective time organization, and the belief in the necessity of constant self-development and civic engagement. The disease increased her ability in self-discipline, resourcefulness, and resilience, or—last but not least—awareness of the need to bear (biographical) costs and “optimize” the attitude towards herself. At this point, attention should also be paid to seemingly minor details in her statements. Well, regarding the music school, Julia recalls: *I was a student who learns, but has no talent,* and about her matura<sup>28</sup> exam (passed in 2003) she says: *one more form of an exam, which we were not prepared for, as it was based*

<sup>28</sup> The secondary school exit exam in Poland that must be passed in order to apply to a university.

*on reading texts and understanding them.* In fact, these are strong signals related to the narrator’s competence uncertainty, lack of self-confidence (evoked and sustained by the teachers), and an error caused by the education reform of that time, which subordinated the education system (in its assumption reflecting objectively the level of education and equalizing students’ chances) to the test exams. Leaving aside the assessment of the education system and the direction of its change, we must take into account that Julia passed the matura exam, and then went to university without being fully prepared to read the texts with understanding and I may risk an assumption that she was not prepared to a more abstract way of thinking. Biographical situation of the narrator brings to mind the reflections of Basil Bernstein (1971; 1996)<sup>29</sup> over the developed code and the restricted code and their relationship with the middle class and the working class respectively. And so, while Julia’s origin would indicate a certain—conditioned by her parents’ origin—form of the restricted code, in the cases of Hanna and Julia, used as a reference here, we would talk about the developed code. The question arises, how do these speech systems determine the way of understanding the complicated contemporary world of life and influence the way the individuals act. We must leave it unanswered here. However, we can question the reasonableness of such a direction of the reform of the education system, because, contrary

<sup>29</sup> As a result of harsh criticism (often emerging from misunderstanding), this concept has been repeatedly modified by Bernstein himself. The categories themselves: the restricted code and the developed code, considered mistakenly as evaluators, have become extremely controversial. However, Bernstein wanted to indicate the sources of failure of students with lower socio-economic status and to show why the school system still favors middle-class children (Bokszański, Piotrowski, and Ziółkowski 1977:107 and on).

to expectations, it still gives an advantage to middle-class children (cf. also Zahorska 2009).

Let me look from this perspective at the sequence of events in the period when the narrator had to choose her studies. Julia talks about the process of making a decision on choosing the faculty:

*I was a member of the [youth] Lublin voivodeship sejmik. And we had trips, workshops, meetings, voluntary work, et cetera. It was a great experience. Political studies graduates were our leaders. And I thought it must have been a cool faculty after which people have such a cool job, running these workshops.*

Already at the starting point, the narrator shows that in choosing political science, she primarily took into account the *cool* way of communication in the form of trainings and workshops, not the substantive content of the university's curriculum—she did not know anything about politics, as she says, she could learn it thanks to her studies. Her choice of UKSW<sup>30</sup> reveals also a huge competence uncertainty: *I was afraid to take entrance exams to the UW (The University of Warsaw). I thought I was too stupid to go there.* It may be a consequence of Julia's social origins—although her mother completed extra-mural studies after the birth of her first child and both she and her husband, which I have signaled repeatedly, supported the education of their children, they certainly lacked the insight in the field of the academy typical for intelligent culture capital (Bourdieu 1986; Zarycki 2009). According to their view (at least

partially transmitted on Julia), studying was, first of all, supposed to raise the professional qualifications (translated into life stability and better material situation), and, only secondly, if at all, widen cognitive horizons, provide intellectual and moral development of the individual, teach deep reflection on one's own attitudes, and express a critical opinion on the existing social reality (cf. Czyżewski 2009b; Kaźmierska, Waniek, and Zysiak 2015). The very way of choosing the field of study shows that for Julia much more important was the external form than substantive content, which, as can be presumed, could have its source in a variant of the restricted code. However, political science did not fully meet her expectations, and following her friend's advice after the second year of studies, she decided to apply for sociology. This time, having gained some knowledge in the logic of the university's world, she decided to study at the University of Warsaw, where she was admitted under the condition of making up for two years which meant twenty-seven subjects in a year. At that time, she made a strategically important decision: *I'm going to get a scholarship at political studies, and actually learn something at sociological studies.* Despite such an aggravating plan of duties, Julia continued to engage in the activities of many youth organizations associated with the idea of developing a democratic state (let me remind that these were the years just before and just after Poland's accession to the European Union) both in her home town and in Warsaw. At the end of high school, for example, she started to train for the association operating at the Nałęczów City Council, as she says: *I would say, I absolutely don't know why.* And she adds that she prepared the first training at the request of one of the officials:

*about how to deal with stress. And seven people came to my first training. Among them there were six teachers. So, I had a very demanding group, I'd say. I got a real brain-wash at start. But, I managed somehow. Other trainings I ran were about stress, managing oneself in time, because it was, I mean, it was something that fascinated me.*

For our further inquiries, two pieces of information from this part of her autobiographical account seem valuable. First of all, that the beginning of her experience in the field of "selling" so-called soft skills took place without any professional preparation, but most probably on the basis of imitations of training in which she had previously participated in and probably in relation to the knowledge acquired thanks to pop-psychological tutorials giving the illusion of being an expert which flooded the market at that time. This is an interesting point, because later Julia clearly stigmatized such attitude, that is, running trainings based on a minimum knowledge and maximum "art of impression management" (Goffman 1990). Secondly, this event was a turning point, in which the narrator became convinced that she could make a confession, which resulted in rebuilding or even creating a sense of personal independence and positive self-identity (Strauss 1969:89-118).

Coming back to studying, it seems that in sociology the narrator could finally spread her wings: she began to cooperate with the scientific group, she was fascinated by qualitative research, she began to participate in scientific projects that later translated into marketing and image strategies of the university, she was delighted with working with the team, which she was training in *soft skills, time*

*management, knowledge verification,* and at the same time prepared scenarios of focus studies, individual interviews, analyzed the collected quantitative data. She also dealt with trainings of project teams, ran workshops to activate the civic attitude of young people, including the ability to write European projects, and finally she was involved in the Youth Democracy and Self-Government project for a few years. Her understanding of social sciences (political science and sociology) was, as it seems, in line with the dynamics of transformations that Marek Czyżewski follows with concern. He says that contemporary cultural, economic, and political changes are supported by:

A compliant and opportunistic transformation of sociological discourse, which does not focus on a critical analysis of reality, but tries to serve it. In sociology, but also in economics, pedagogy, and many related sciences, there is an avalanche spread of research projects, theoretical considerations, expert recommendations, and directions of education regarding creativity, responsibility, trust, flexibility, innovation, autonomy, and the like. [Czyżewski 2013:16]

Talking about her educational career again, Julia decided to undertake doctoral studies in political science, which she considered *humiliating and withdrawing in development,* and in her work she intended to combine qualitative sociological research with political science issues. At the same time, she began a two-year work in a research project based on qualitative research. Julia considered the group analysis of the data obtained in it as *a big plus, which in a sense combines quality with trainings, research with running workshops.* Again, we meet the motive of combining

<sup>30</sup> UKSW is an acronym for Uniwersytet Kardynała Stefana Wyszyńskiego (Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University)—one of state universities in Warsaw.

or mixing orders (or, in other words, social worlds, intersecting with all the consequences of this process): the teaching method typical of a traditional “dusty” and “old-fashioned” university and “modern” strategies taken from the field of organization and management when the narrator talks about accepting with joy the possibility of running political thought classes as a substitute teacher with students at UKSW:

*For me [i.e., a former student] these classes were like this: the seventh page of the eighth text of the thought this and that, you know. So, I said to myself: wait, you've got the whole training workshop at hand. Let's take it and use it in the classes. So, I started group work yyy many types of cases. There was work based on Oxford discussions or debates. And yyy preparing drafts, schemas, fitting various thoughts in schemas. Sometimes we worked on a chosen article and we analyzed it on the basis of political thought. And we did other things, you know, what came to my mind.*

Again, we deal not only with—in no way problematized—colonizing of the scientific research language by the language of entrepreneurship and human resource management, but also with admitting uniqueness and priority to certain, in fact transformed, but developed at universities, forms of education such as debates or workshops. However, she states this experience was of great importance: she was convinced that if she could work at the university, and thus fully engage in the world of science, it would have been like a fairytale and her PhD thesis would be much better then.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Julia was ultimately very disappointed with the supervision of her doctorate: initially her doctoral advisor had only comments on typing and punctuation errors and in no way

However, it did not happen. Julia, like thousands of doctoral students in Poland, had to work to be able to maintain herself. She carried out commissioned research, conducted various types of trainings, was a research project evaluator at the Warsaw University of Technology, had a small position at the University of Warsaw, in the summer she left for Germany<sup>32</sup> to work in a career of elderly people, but only in primary school near Warsaw, where she worked for one-third of the full time teacher of social studies, she had an employment contract. In this sense, Julia became the victim of an external structural lack of possibility of full, long-term, and stabilizing employment. In this sense, she suffers from precarity (Standing 2011). Jan Sowa (2010:102) defines it as:

referred to the content of the thesis. Later, in an almost complete thesis, he noticed only the lack of reference to his publications from the nineties. The narrator assesses it this way: *on the one hand, it was just funny, but, on the other hand, it was tragic. And embittered, she adds: I have a wild impression that nobody—except a friend who made her language correction—read it. I mean, you know, there are many controversial points. My whole professional work. I feel that nobody read it.*

<sup>32</sup> The comparison of the money earned at that time with the “scraped up” income in Poland was a source of depression for Julia. She comments on this in the following way: *Thanks to the work in Germany I could save some money. When I came back I could buy a computer. It was quite interesting, you know, the difference between how much you could earn in Poland for hard intellectual work, where you really needed a lot of knowledge and experience, and how much you could earn in Germany cleaning floors and making dinners. / it was when I graduated from the UKSW (...) I can't remember exactly, but I think I was in the second year of my PhD studies (...) So this difference shocked me.* As for Hanna and Inga, Europe became an element of a contrast set transforming the resources of cognitive knowledge, interpretation systems, and reference patterns of the narrator (cf. the concept of the European mental space: Schütze and Schröder-Wildhagen 2012; Schütze et al. 2012). A comparison of the high earnings of a physical laborer in Germany and low incomes of a white-collar worker in Poland contributed to re-contesting the career path she had chosen. Luckily, later Julia took part in a conference in Great Britain. She got to know another way of doing science, related to the fact that at the university you just talk about the methodology of how to do science, and you do not actually talk about how you do it. This trip (opening up a chance for potential cooperation) again restored the sense of her efforts in completing her doctorate studies.

the state of uncertainty, consistency and stability is the chronic impossibility of predicting the future and constant fear that it will bring only a worsening of the current situation. It is the condition of the fragile and uncertain existence which is experienced by a large part of the world's population, also in the countries of the capitalist center. It concerns people who are temporarily unemployed, living on casual or undeclared employment, employed for short-term contracts, migrating in search of income, working part-time or forced to sign in blanco a notice of termination together with a contract of employment (a practice quite common in large corporations). It means a life full of uncertainty and difficult to plan, a life in which you have to change not only your workplace, but also your profession, and even the best position can be lost from day to day.

This situation—contrary to what the narrator's parents assumed—also affects people, such as Julia, young and of high educational resources (Mrozowicki 2017:42). In the world of work, in which, as Richard Sennett (1998:22) shows, “the traditional career progressing step-by-step through the corridors of one or two institutions is withering” and in which, as he adds: “deployment of a single set of skills through the course of working life is no longer possible” one's biography is organized by the slogan “no long term.” This condition, which Adam Mrozowicki (2016) pays special attention to, is surprisingly often normalized, that is, considered obvious and not subject to problematization, or not always consciously rationalized.

Characteristics of work precarisation, dynamics of its course, as well as the way of impacting the

whole human life in its essence is extremely often the experience of the trajectory of suffering. It takes the form of a trap set by overwhelming external structural forces. Their impact paralyzes the individual's actions to undertake or implement long-term biographical plans, exhausts its physical and psychological forces, and finally makes it apathetic and unable to engage life energy in any counteracting of cumulative disorder dynamics. In the case of Julia, firstly we deal with the phase of the trajectory of strong attempts to maintain the unstable balance and, secondly, with a vicious circle of interaction of the trajectory resulting from a difficult position on the labor market and her and her husband's chronic illnesses, which significantly worsens her life situation. Let me note the narrator's experience when the only mainstay that gave her a sense of stability, supporting the fragile construction of life (an employment contract in a primary school), was shaken. However, it is necessary to mention that, for Julia, the work at school was a huge organizational effort: first of all, she had to commute twenty kilometers, and, secondly, she had to write it into her busy schedule. At first, she treated this job too idealistically and she collided with a disappointing reality, as many beginner teachers do:

*I always had such an ideal because as I was writing a thesis in political science, it turned out that it is really bad to teach social studies and kids knowledge about how the country and the society function, their own role in society is none. And I had such a fixed idea to be a great teacher, and that I would prepare people for being active. And it turned out that I won't, because there's the school curriculum, the head teacher watches me, and I, the kids don't want to do anything. And all my attempts to encourage them to be active,*

*maybe not all, many of my attempts to encourage them to be active failed.*

Despite the difficulties mentioned above and the initial disappointment, Julia worked as a passionate, loved-by-her-students, and respected by their parents teacher for three years—that is, till the headmaster indiscriminately decided to change her employment contract to a commissioned work contract. In this way, he destroyed her biographical action scheme,<sup>33</sup> made just after her marriage to Andrzej (which took place a few months earlier), namely, becoming a mother. The narrator herself says: *I really needed to plan my life somehow, you know. She felt not only cheated, but also extremely aggrieved. She mentions that just after leaving the headmaster’s office she just burst into tears. Again, without her fault, she had to revise the concept of her life and postpone her motherhood for later. Admittedly, Julia’s decision coincides with the strategies of Polish women described, for example, by Anna Matysiak (2009),<sup>34</sup> which in general may be expressed by the formula “job position comes first, and only then a baby”; however, as I have al-*

<sup>33</sup> The biographical action scheme (or plan) is one of the ways of experiencing events in life in Schütze’s concept. It takes its origin in impulses from the inner sphere of the spontaneity of an individual and takes the form of a long-term plan in which both the goal and the manner of its implementation are of an autonomous nature. This structure is expressed by the systematic and active attitude of an individual to his/her own identity of the “I” and the world of life (Schütze 1981; 1983; 1984; 2008a; 2008b; Prawda 1989; Kaźmierska 2016).

<sup>34</sup> To determine how much these strategies result from the imposed institutional pattern of expectations, and how much the intentional plan of action or the mutual interactions of both of these process structures a subtle and sophisticated analysis would be required. Ryszard Szarfenberg (2016:11) is right stating that there are many hypotheses that recognize a decrease in fertility of women in precarious work conditions. However, it should not be forgotten that the family planning, so strongly subordinated to the work, was possible when the issues subjected mainly to fate began to be controlled.

ready mentioned, an additional aspect must be taken into account while considering the temporary suspension of parenthood by Julia (made by the narrator herself), and that is the trajectory of her (and her husband’s) illness intensifying the feeling of uncertainty and anxiety. It is also necessary to mention in this context that since the beginning of studies in Warsaw, after a short episode of renting a flat with friends, until the time of completing the doctorate, Julia lived in a dormitory. Every now and then she shared it with her partner, Andrzej, who, overcoming some obstacles (as we can suppose, related to his psychological state at that time), eventually graduated from ethnology, and later—basing on skills springing from his passion and not knowledge—he got a job in a company that sells professional music equipment. In the segment preceding the coda (pre-coda segment), the narrator says about the purchase of a flat (of course, without a bank loan, but thanks to the huge effort of long-term systematic savings supported by loans from family and friends) which stabilized her biographical situation and set her in a positive, optimistic mood typical of a biographical action scheme, here in the form of a “nest building” (see excerpt below). If we make the life course of their acquaintances a reference frame, the decision that ended her and her husband’s long-term “wandering” was made relatively late. Julia says: *And, you know, all friends of mine already had flats. All of them. It was so depressing, lack of the feeling of safety and comfort, fucking shit. This prolonged the terrible period of living in a dormitory, however, the narrator rationalizes referring to the current situation of many of her colleagues who took credits in the boom (...) and now have credits amounting to 600-800 000. In Euros or in*

*Swiss francs. First of all, Julia states that they are not jealous of this situation, and secondly, she is glad that Andrzej decided to wait for a while. Eventually, as she emphasizes: We didn’t get into debt like idiots. We had our own contribution and we could have some loans on quite good conditions (...) but I’ve got the feeling of safety, I mean, you know, nobody will take the flat away from me.*<sup>35</sup> This balance, however, has an incomplete or shaky character conditioned by work instability, illness, and, above all, the must of suspending a strong desire to become a mother. Let me look at the narrator’s statement:

*And, you know, I’m happy that I could buy a flat. It’s essential. And here further problems appear concerning having a baby with not being permanently employed. I’m 30, I’ve got diabetes, and I should have had a baby three years ago. I finally have the place to raise it in. But, I have no physical possibility to do so because I don’t have a private business, only a start-up. So, in fact, nobody would pay ZUS<sup>36</sup> premiums for me. I’d be happy to pay them by myself, but I can’t. According to our law, I may be self-employed, but I’m not sure if I want to do that.*

In the light of this statement, it is worth looking at a certain event in Julia’s life, which illustrates, as I have already pointed out earlier, the unexpected necessity of undergoing the dynamics of diabetes. It seems it took control of her life, especially when she ceased to look after herself when she had too much work and too many duties. Such a situation happened shortly after Julia had received a job as a trainer at P-Poland:

<sup>35</sup> To some extent they represent anti-consumption attitude and the minimalist lifestyle (Dopierała 2017).

<sup>36</sup> The Polish Social Insurance Institution.

*When I started working for P-Poland, at the end of May I felt terribly bad. We had a lot of work. Actually, I worked 12-16 hours a day. And at that time I was finishing writing my PhD thesis, doing three projects, you know, I needed to earn money to pay for the refurbishing of the flat. We had already bought the flat in April. And I had a health breakdown. I had food poisoning. It destabilized the sugar level and, as a result of this, my kidneys stopped functioning. I realized that after five days. It was a free day so we went to a GP. She said: Don’t worry, it’s only food poisoning. Take this and that and it will be better. It wasn’t, I went to hospital to emergency, they kept me for 6 hours. I had my tests done, et cetera. And the doctor said: Your kidneys aren’t working, you have to go to a nephrologist. The next day he let me go home with some medicine. I went home. My mother-in-law is a nurse and when she saw me, she said: Julia, you look bad. It turned out I was all swollen and I weighed eight kilos more. Eight kilos of water. My kidneys stopped working and I was taken to hospital to Lublin. I didn’t work. When I didn’t work, there was no money. And they didn’t pay me for the whole month. I mean, they paid me only for two days. And I didn’t get a bonus. Because it is granted on the basis of questionnaires results. And I didn’t have any questionnaires because I didn’t do any trainings. So, I didn’t get a bonus as well. I really have nothing against paying ZUS premiums. If somebody would like to employ me on a permanent contract, I would start up a business, because, as I say, if we want to have a baby, we have no other option taking into account the character of my work, the way I function, my diabetes.*

This passage shows clearly that—in addition to employment instability and, consequently, income—in her plans to have children, Julia had to take into account many interrelated

factors,<sup>37</sup> in particular, the disease that could unexpectedly disorganize her routines of everyday life. It can be assumed that given the current situation, the narrator very cautiously tried to keep a minimum of social and financial security. She took into account all “for” and “against” in a manner typical for implementation of the biographical scheme of action, considered alternative paths and possible biographical consequences. To sum up, the narrator’s life is a continuous, often parallel interaction of two process structures: an intentional biographical action scheme and a paralyzing (double) trajectory. Admittedly, the dynamics of suffering had a recessive, receding character, but its destabilizing potential constantly influenced the organization of everyday reality.

Let me repeat once again that the period of Julia’s studies and subsequent entry into the labor market fell in the period of a dynamic transition from the socialist social formation to the capitalist free market economy, which is based on principles other than those internalized in the family ordering the world of everyday experience, other life orientation models or other personal patterns (Schütze 2012:440-441, see footnote 22). Although the narrator was familiar with neoliberal values in her thinking, the conviction persisted that, even in work based on communicative skills and interactive work, knowledge is most important, and techniques of presenting yourself and manipulating impressions remain in the background (Goffman 1990). Her conviction

tion—repeated consistently (rooted in her parents) at many points of the rendering—expressed by the formula: *if I learn well, I’ll gain knowledge, then I’ll get a good job*, has been severely verified by the mechanisms of the capitalist economy. At first, Julia did not understand the rule according to which “knowledge,” in her opinion, still insufficient, can be sold. An idea suggested by a friend to earn on trainings is commented as follows: *I always thought I didn’t know enough. I still had to learn, I had to (...). And he showed me I didn’t. People take money even if they can’t do something, they just devote their time, so they work*. This excerpt shows not only other “recognition” rules that exist in the field of trainings and projects, but, once again, Julia’s enormous competence uncertainty. The narrator talks about this issue again in the coda ending her biographical recapitulation (I will return to it in a while), which shows the importance of this problem in her life and her personal identity. Analyzing the principles of the contemporary Polish labor market in the theoretical commentary, she reveals that: *it favors not so much those who have knowledge (but who are also aware of its shortage) as those of great confidence*. As she says: *unaware incompetence is worth much more than aware incompetence* (see also the excerpt of the coda cited below). On the other hand, the promotion of attitudes and skills required by the capitalist free market economy gave Julia great satisfaction, especially when—as in the passage quoted below regarding the trainings for P-Poland—she felt that as an “engineer of souls” she put someone’s life on the right track:

*But, the work is amazing. I work with people from the tool-room, people from the roundhouse. With people who have never had any trainings, never. At my last training a man*

*with 35 years of working experience in telecommunications came and he said with tears in his eyes: Julka, I’ve been working here for 35 years now, and it’s the first time in my life somebody’s taught me something. I realized a few things which have always influenced my work. And I’ve learnt it here with you. Thank you very much for this. I’m sure I’ll call you and I’ll want to meet you again. Thank you very much you’ve let me develop.*

This excerpt seems to confirm Julia’s thoughtless, even missionary faith in the content and sense of coaching and training in the field of communication. However, we already know that she assessed very critically the behavior of many people working in this industry. This leads us to the conclusion that she saw fiction and deception in the way of “selling” knowledge of specific competences necessary in a free market economy, but its essence, functions, or usefulness have never been questioned by her—quite the contrary, she treated them as an inalienable element of contemporary people. In this part of Julia’s story, we find many symptomatic terms typical of the institutional pattern of action, which, on the one hand, seduces thanks to the opportunities offered, and, on the other hand, imposes the obligation to give it energy, mind, and soul (Schütze 2008a). In other words, her criticism and resentment never concerned “what” she sells, but only “how” it is sold; for example, not that the content of “knowledge” about stress management is a banal commercial “releasing” of common sense knowledge, but that it is conveyed by people with poor knowledge, but full of faith in themselves and their presentation (Goffman 1990). It is not possible to decide whether it is due to their carelessness or cynicism, but we should ask whether the contemporary (postmod-

ern) world does not just sell one illusion by another illusion, appearance by appearance, or fraud by frauds (cf. Baudrillard 2005).

Again, what Julia sees and evaluates, and what she does not see and what she regards as obvious, makes us perceive her biography as an intense process of clashing values and attitudes socialized in childhood (and in the system of real socialism) with neoliberal virtues (Czyżewski 2009a; Waniek 2016a; 2016b). Looking at it in this way, one may risk the statement that what was defined in the public discourse—recalling the words of Andrzej Piotrowski—as the abolition of anti-order and restoration of order, in individual life history (or certain areas of experience) could be perceived conversely: as a transition from values to anti-values. In the case discussed here, and in the narrator’s opinion, it would be a transition from solid, deepened knowledge to theatrical ignorance cover, or, in other words, from a game that goes according to certain rules known to all participants, in which every player can use the instructions he needs. To sum up, in the course of biographical work during the interview, the narrator discovers that the knowledge and acquired life orientations in fact became counterproductive to the requirements of the contemporary complex world of work, which largely limited the possibility of giving personal meaning to her professional experience and became a life trap.

This issue is particularly visible in the coda, which is one of the key cognitive figures of autobiographical narrative interview, where the informant usually summarizes and evaluates the course of his/her own life history and tries to determine whether the

<sup>37</sup> Let us also pay attention to the fact that in the past grandmothers who were retired or not working professionally could look after their grandchildren, and today contemporary grandmothers still work, often—to support their children financially. This is the case of Hanna, Inga, and Julia.

decisions made by him/her and which follows the chosen development path were correct. Most often, it closes the biographical work, the key element of which is not only to think about the past, but also a prudent look into the future (cf. Schütze 1984; 2008a; 2008b). In Julia’s case—what should be noted—this closure does not take place, and the coda looks like this:

*The joy of having an own flat is incredible. You sit on the floor. When we moved in there was nothing there, only the bathroom, nothing else. You sit on the floor and you think: God, at last I’ve got the place I may come back to, where I can come and sit down. And I don’t have to move every year. Change places, apply for students’ hostel, wait to get the room, move from one room to another, you know. The good thing was we didn’t have many belongings. We were moving constantly, so there were not many things left. We haven’t bought a lot. We’ve got eight plates, we’ve got all the mugs as gifts. We use the cutlery used by the people who used to live here before us. (...). My parents say that for them my life seems to be very difficult. They can’t understand it. They want to make our life easier, so my mum brings all the lamps and sheets, and she always brings some food. She says for her everything was easy. She graduated from school, went to work, in the meantime she got married, she got pregnant, started her studies, had a baby, then she had the second baby, she completed her studies, they started building the house. And, you know, everything was easy then. They had work and the feeling of safety. And when she hears what I tell her, that I don’t have a job, that nobody will sign a permanent work contract with me, that everything I do is on the basis of a deal, I mean, now you do this and that and we’ll pay you this much. Such a system promotes people who are self-confident about their skills and knowledge. In fact, not necessarily they really can do something,*

*but they think they can, and that’s enough. And they will earn more than those who are aware of their incompetence. If you know you’re not an expert yet, you are in a worse position than a person who is unaware of his incompetence. Unaware incompetence is worth much more than aware incompetence. You know, I mean, this conviction: I can do it, I am able to do everything, why not? OK. That’s it. Enough. Isn’t it too much. I’ve talked too long.*

Bringing her story to an end, the narrator talks about stabilizing and emotionally positive experiences connected with having her own “place on earth” (the flat) being, in fact, the only factor stabilizing her unstable life situation. But, having in the head a “fresh” overall picture of her biographical experience, not so optimistic in all dimensions, the narrator must place an additional comment that breaks the coda.<sup>38</sup> Interestingly, she evaluates her life looking at it from the outside—from the point of view of her parents, who (especially mother) compare their own biography (linear predictable career based on well-defined achieved identities) with their daughter’s life history (“ragged” professional career simultaneously interweaving many

<sup>38</sup> An autobiographical recapitulation should end with a sequence that puts off the narrator’s memories and leads him/her to the “here and now” of the interview and then a closing statement, “and that would be all,” usually occurs. However, if his/her experiences were extremely difficult or painful, then before the final expression, a theoretical and argumentative commentary (in which the biographical manager attempts to close his biographical work) appears (it is often extensive). In such a case, we talk about a split coda, which is an important interpretation indicator. It provides the empirical evidence that, firstly, one of the process structures in the narrator’s whole life was the trajectory of suffering and, secondly, that he/she either got over it and tries to present his/her own attempts to go through its dynamics theoretically and practically, or—if the explanations, assessments, or justifications appearing in it have a chaotic, foggy, ambiguous character—revels inability to close the biographical work, and thus is still strong in his/her current life situation suffering experience.

paths of various temporary jobs, filled with uncertainty and anxiety caused by a vague identity). Let me note that this “mediated” reference to her whole life means that the narrator is not able to directly summarize and assess the course of her own biography—and thus carry out a (looking into the future) full biographical work. She would have to refer to problematic areas of her life and admit to the interviewer and, above all, to herself that she is unable to cope with difficulties in establishing and implementing future life plans in a cognitive and emotional sense and, therefore, she has been placed in a destabilizing situation of suspension (limbo). To say it in other words: Julia makes an effort to push back from herself the need to work on the destructive potential of unstable career, which determines and limits her decisions in the private sphere, since making the forced abandonment of motherhood plans the object of reflection could be too painful, and considering existing opportunities, would expose the overwhelming situation of the trap.

Finally, once again the concept of social worlds should be considered as an alternative to multi-jobbing and precarious work approach or to the discourse of late modernity prevailing in social sciences (e.g., Giddens 1991; Castells 1996, 1997; Beck 2005). It is worth looking at Julia’s biography and trying to consider her life situation from the perspective of belonging to different social worlds, which are competing, conflicted (but demanding loyalty of those involved), have different sources of meaning, use different logics and the criteria of authenticity. In the contemporary complex world, as Schütze (2002) writes, the biographical horizon of the sense takes the form of bricolage, which can lead to many

important problems resulting from discrepancies, contradictions, or mutual devaluation of meanings related thematically to fragmentary biographical orientations and lack of credibility of the general structure consisting of these fragmentary thematic orientations: which means it can lead to chaos in biographical work. He also adds that disputes about the authenticity of actions or moral standards, collisions of interests, constant processes of segmentation and budding, struggle for symbolic and material resources within the social world itself, as well as external disputes make them lose their approximate power and the function of making sense of an individual’s biography.

## Conclusions

Julia—a political scientist and sociologist has (unconsciously) become an expert orientated to producing disciplined—and even self-disciplining—subordinates (Scott 2001). Her work was about “producing” creative individuals capable of managing themselves and their time, controlling stress, working in a team, writing and evaluating projects. To put it briefly, being herself a product of the discourses of governmentality, she reproduced them and—thanks to her missionary activity (as a trainer running trainings and courses, but also as a university lecturer)—she contributed to their strengthening and development. However, she herself fell victim to this form of exercising power, whose external conditions, interweaved with the internal dynamics of her life, significantly began to limit further positive development of her life history. Many of Julia’s experiences—as shown by the analysis of her autobiographical statement—bear

the trajectory traits: being overwhelmed by many diverse professional duties, chronic instability and uncertainty of the current life situation, feeling of pressure from employers and dependence on their “goodwill,” or finally the necessity of suspending her life plans (motherhood). Her education acquired at the expense of hard work, for which she paid with lack of acceptance (at least at the elementary school level) and many sacrifices, does not translate into the expected social status, prestige, or—last but not least—financial profit. The promise of stabilization becomes an illusion. The biographical scheme of the narrator’s work is constantly being suspended, which leads her to abandoning biographical work—if she consciously takes it up it would be a threat the ominous truth could confirm, and that every year it becomes more and more complicated or even unrealistic. Biographical structures in the current life situation do not guarantee a fully positive development of the biography and are in fact a trap threatening the autonomous development of identity.

Let me return for a moment to the above-mentioned cases of Hanna and Inga, which allowed me to state that in the life of all three narrators, “there’s the visible tension arising from the fact that they try to meet the partially mutually exclusive outside imperative requirements: on the one hand (often expressed explicitly) parents’ expectations and, on the other hand, the pressures of capitalist rationality. Both of these sources of external pressure seem to block the biographical search lines and limit the autonomy of action” (Waniek 2016a:121-122). Paradoxically, however, the family is not only a force that determines a specific line of biographical development, but also

a kind of “safety valve” that allows the easing of the tensions resulting from the oppressive conditions of functioning on the free market thanks to emotional and financial support. The minimal difference in Julia’s experience is that while the institutional pattern of expectations directed Hanna and Inga’s actions to the continuation of the economic and social position of the parents, in her case, it was about her improvement.

Finally, it is worth emphasizing that this one life history (of Julia) analyzed in reference to other minimally (mentioned here cases of Hanna and Inga) and maximally contrasting materials collected using the autobiographical narrative interview method as part of the “Transformation...” project showed multidimensionality and multilevelness of systemic transformations in an experience of an individual. They deny the common schematic and stereotyping distinction between “losers” and “winners” of the transformation, which entails discrediting of those who—in the conditions of “governing through freedom”—have not become enterprising enough to face the necessity of “taking life into their own hands.” And as Ulrich Bröckling (2016:5) says: “Forcing people to develop their own individuality also means that ultimately they are to blame for their failures.” The life history of Julia, however, shows a certain, not included in this dominant typology—and yet not that rare—modality of the dynamics of experience basing on the maximum use of biographical potential of an individual by the neoliberal labor market in its Polish version. This becomes possible due to the strong alluring embedded mechanisms that obscure (or expose it only to economic logic) other areas of the

individual’s life, as well as thanks to the commonly promoted and accepted, by virtue of taken for granted, necessity for empowerment.

Transferring our analysis to a higher degree of generality, it is worth referring to the considerations of Magdalena Nowicka (2014:239) on the Eastern European variant of postcolonialism, in which she emphasizes that those who do not accept a vision of emancipation embracing being an efficient, creative, reflective, creatively developing individual “are brutally excluded by theorists.” At the same time, she refers to the words of Manuel Castells (2013:300), who states in an impertinent tone:

Changes are not automatic. They result from the will of social actors, as guided by their emotional and cognitive capacities in their interaction with each other and with their environment. Not all individuals are involved in the process of social change, but throughout history there are people who do, thus becoming social actors. The others are free-riders as the theory would put it. Or, in my own terminology, selfish parasites of history-making.

Further, Nowicka writes that Polish reflection (including the sociological one) “reveals the elitism of post-colonial emancipation” contrasting it with the post-Soviet mentality of the “non-subject” mass and thus “divides society into winners and losers, and ultimately into rational, adaptable ones and inept, unable to adapt numpties” (Buchowski 2008:101 as cited in Nowicka 2014:243). At this point, we can ask a question, how to qualify properly the case of Julia and what the elite did for these masses and could they do anything differently?

One solution would be a look at their actions through the prism of Fritz Schütze’s idea of a liaison work concept inspired by the legacy of Everett Hughes (1972:303 and on)—one of the classics of the Chicago School. It involves the transition of differences in language-conditioned cultural codas (understood as the resources of interpretation that enable defining and giving meaning to the world of life) with simultaneous explanation of various points of view of interaction partners or different realities (cf. Czyżewski 2005:348). Marek Czyżewski distinguished three types of intermediary work in public discourse (2005:356-385; 2006:130-132): hegemonic, symmetrical, and asymmetrical. As it seems in the transition between the socialist social formation and the neo-liberal model of capitalism, the symbolic elites took up its hegemonic variant, that is, one that did not take into account other points of view (“of non-subjective” mass) and either simply ignored them or—defining them as unwise, wrong, distorted, or immersed in the mental legacy of communism—granted themselves the right to lecture and rebuke a “rebellious ward,” reluctant to “do up modernizing backwardness” in reference to Europe (cf. Piotrowski 2005:338).

As a result, as Sergiusz Kowalski (1997:295) wrote, the process of decomposition of the former communist order was spreading: “it was the work of the elite, in which the masses had little to say, and even less to do.” And yet it would be possible to introduce a modality that would take into consideration the other party’s perspective on equal terms and take into account its hierarchy of validity (symmetrical variant) and even one that (in a special situation of suffering) would be based on pa-

tient listening to the voice of an “ordinary citizen” (asymmetrical variant). At this point, once again, it is worth asking a question about the alleged guilt:

are really “ordinary citizens” or intellectual and political elites to blame or whether the guilt lies somewhere else.

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## The Coping Strategies in Biographies of Polish Middle-Class Representatives of (Post)Transformation Period

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**Abstract** The article focuses on the problem of life strategies adapted by the representatives of young Polish middle-class in the (post)transformation period in Poland towards different aspects of social change. On the basis of two research projects focused on the consequences of the Polish systemic transformation, I discuss issues related to biographical experiences of this process. The main theoretical and methodological background is concentrated on using the autobiographical narrative interview to analyze coping strategies in relation to the class position of examined cases. The interviews taken under consideration have been conducted with young men who could be described as middle-class members.

**Keywords** Life Strategies; Middle-Class; Sociology of Biography; Autobiographical Narrative Interview; Sociology of Work; Precariousness

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In the paper, I would like to present the analysis of individuals' life strategies (Mrozowicki and Karolak 2017; Mrozowicki, Karolak, and Krasowska 2018) towards current social, economic, and political conditions of living in Poland. These conditions could be understood as the consequences of systemic change that had occurred in the country in the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. To obtain this goal, I will use biographical material and methodology based on the works of Fritz Schütze. The time-related scope of the analysis is focused on the period after 1989, which could be called a (post)transformation moment in the modern history of Poland. As a team member of two

simultaneous projects working on biographical consequences of different mechanisms of the Polish transformation,<sup>1</sup> I am in a convenient position to use both projects' materials and results to present the development of life strategies towards the post-transformation reality. As the direct empirical support and the asset in proceeding with the analysis, I will use cases of two young Poles who could be counted as members of the middle-class.<sup>2</sup> The class perspective will be treated here as one of the reference frames that let me explain motivations, actions, and attitudes I find important in the collected interviews.

I am interested in following the logic of actions that had been reconstructed by interviewees in their life stories. Keeping that in mind, I would like to go over the crucial points of analyzed narratives and examine whether it is possible to establish more general categories regarding their biographical experience of collective processes. One of the issues I would like to confront is the apparent division of conformist and non-conformist attitudes presented by the interviewees towards the rules, norms, and values of the worlds they live in. The hypothesis I would like to raise is that

<sup>1</sup> This article was prepared within the project PREWORK ("Young Precarious Workers in Poland and Germany: A Comparative Sociological Study on Working and Living Conditions, Social Consciousness, and Civic Engagement") funded by the National Science Center in Poland and the German Research Foundation (DFG), the NCN project number UMO-2014/15/G/HS4/04476, the DFG project number TR1378/1-1, and within the project "Experience of the Process of the Transformation in Poland. A Sociological Comparative Analysis Based on Biographical Perspective" funded by the National Science Center in Poland, the NCN project number UMO-2013/09/B/HS6/03100.

<sup>2</sup> One will find a more detailed description of ranking both interviewees as members of middle-class in the following parts of the article.

analyzed biographies will show complex and differential dimensions of using available capitals, following social rules, recognizing norms and values. Additionally, I will try to show how life strategies are established in collision with different class backgrounds in changing social, economic, and political conditions.

Both research projects have explored the consequences of the social changes of contemporary Polish society. The project "Experience of the Process of the Transformation in Poland. Sociological Comparative Analysis Based on Biographical Perspective" (2013-2018) inquired into issues of social transition occurring in Poland at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. The center of its interest was the consequences of socio-economic transformation and its biographical experience regarding the division of the collected interviews in three cohorts: individuals born in 60', 70', and 80'. The collection of 90 autobiographical narrative interviews was gathered and analyzed.

Within the second research project (PREWORK [2015-2019]) 64 interviews (conducted with the support of methodology of the autobiographical narrative interview) were collected in central and south-western Poland. The PREWORK project analyzed transformation processes in different aspects of the everyday life of young Poles than it was in the first-mentioned case. It focused, particularly, on the work-related sphere. The main topic was how the precarization of work affects the lives of young people in Poland and Germany. Inspiration to follow how life strategies work comes from the results of the project which are centered around

the concept of coping strategies of young precarious workers.<sup>3</sup>

In the paper, I choose to analyze two cases—one from each project. Sharing some similarities (which will be explained and described more specifically later on), the two young men's narratives are examples of understanding the rules of their social milieus and adapting (not without struggling) their biographical approaches to social, economic, and (to some extent) political circumstances.

The first case, of Remek,<sup>4</sup> shows a married individual who lives in a middle-size city, works as a local official, has one child, and rents a middle-sized flat. From the distance, it could appear as an easy life of the local middle-class or the intelligentsia<sup>5</sup> member. However, Remek's narrative exposed a deeper reflection on the precarious conditions of his and his family's living. His main concern is to gain a decent and stable work position, but to do that he needs to know how the local public institutions (the field of his professional interests) work. He has been learning the rules of the local labor market and has been following them since he started working in the late years of his university studies. For now, I classify

him as a conformist type regarding his structural position.

In comparison to Remek, the second informant, Radek, represents on the surface the non-conformist attitude. He is a young homosexual who had migrated from a very small village to Warsaw. His narrative is constructed around his relations with the closest family (especially parents), his sexuality, and interrelations between the local and traditional milieus of his origin and the seemingly open and tolerant capital city. His class background could be described as middle-class as well. However, in his case, economic capital is clearly higher than in Remek's case. Furthermore, Radek's occupational position could be understood as higher as well—he works as a copywriter in a media agency in Warsaw, when Remek is admittedly manager, but only in a middle-size city library. His non-conformism would refer here to his potential to break social barriers as a homosexual man from a small traditional village who does not fear to talk about his sexual orientation.

Both cases constitute a contrast set (Glaser and Strauss 1973:55-58; Schütze 2014:268-269) that allows us to generate more theoretical categories in an analytical process. I set out to present how individuals from different family and class backgrounds rework their economic, cultural, and social capital (in accordance with Bourdieu's definition) to establish appropriate life strategies that help them organize their biographies. Before more specific analytical conclusions will be presented, I would like to draw more attention to the conditions of living in (post) transformation Poland.

## Living in Contemporary Poland

Living in a present-day society brings paradoxical stability of instability. Individuals are subject to multiple tensions and forces which come from outside of their local milieus, but are also generated inside their communities. It could be assumed that the modern outside has been constructed around the rules of global capitalism and the norms of consumption which (especially in the Western world) dominate behavioral patterns. Globalization affects all countries and societies, but this process occurs with a different intensity and scale around the globe (Robertson 1992). For example, if we analyze the impact of the 2008 global crisis on the Polish economy, the effect would be surprisingly mild in comparison to economies of the center (North America and Western Europe). There were obviously some signs of an economic slowdown, however, due to weaker interconnectedness with the global economy and financial sector, Polish companies and banks were much less troubled (Nazarczuk 2013).

Nevertheless, in other aspects peripheral (or semi-peripheral) economies are more vulnerable—particularly under enormous pressure coming from the centers of the global economy. The process of the systemic transformation from the centrally planned to the neo-liberal economic system, which occurred in Poland after 1989, has been interpreted as a success story. The economic literature summarizes the Polish transformation around the successful establishment of the new—mostly economic and political—order (Gomułka 2014). Macroeconomic goals (like regaining economic balance, decreasing rate of indebtedness, market liberalization, and resto-

ration of economic growth capability) have been (at least to some extent) accomplished. Other research shows, however, that a more complicated picture is hidden under the surface. Pobłocki (2017:18-23) remarkably deconstructs the neo-liberal discourse of success and dominant narration. His argumentation is a critique of an economic mirage of the one-way development which still dominates the Polish public discourse in recent decades. Furthermore, there are more studies that used more sophisticated approaches to examine the present course of transformation. Sociological (but, not only) initiatives particularly show different consequences of the process (Sztompka 1999; Gardawski 2001; 2009; Dunn 2008; Mrozowicki 2011).

Another important perspective is to differentiate the local context of transformation (mechanisms which could be understood as uniquely Polish) from changes that could be named global ones. For example, shifts in the global labor market and economy in general cause the domination of uncertainty above stable professional life which was common in the early decades after World War II. The post-Fordist and postmodern perspectives set new rules of organizing biographies which can be described as “the shift of emphasis from the professional to the private and free time” (Andrejczuk and Burski 2017:52). It impacts the class structure where decomposition of traditional divisions of means of production would transform into a capability of consuming at a certain level. It can be assumed that today the class position is less defined by a type of work, but more by a lifestyle in the public and digital spheres (Gdula and Sadura 2012). However, being successful in fulfilling the

<sup>3</sup> There is not enough space for sharing all results from the project, but I do recommend works of Adam Mrozowicki and other members of the project team (Mrozowicki 2016; Mrozowicki and Karolak 2017; Mrozowicki, Karolak, and Krasowska 2018). For more details about the project, one can visit the PREWORK's website: [prework.eu](http://prework.eu).

<sup>4</sup> The first interviewee was anonymized as Remek, the second as Radek. Other names, cities, institutions (like the place of study) were anonymized in both interviews.

<sup>5</sup> From the economic point of view, Remek could be assigned to the middle-class. However, his social position is based on his working with and producing cultural capital—the most important attribute of intelligentsia (see the works of Tomasz Zarycki on the Polish intelligentsia [i.e., Zarycki 2009; 2014]).

new patterns is a luxury available for few. The rest of us face reality and class-founded ambitions, as well as consumption patterns. All of these mechanisms have had an impact on the life of Polish society. Young Poles are cases in point of these processes where they are more and more clearly exposed to class-based struggles. The transformation brought not only access to the free market of goods, political freedom, mobility, but established new constraints and tensions as well.

One of the negative social and economic consequences of establishing a neoliberal system in Poland was the drastic growth of unemployment. At the beginning of the 21st century, the country had the highest rate of unemployment in Europe—according to Eurostat, at the peak it hit 20% in 2002.<sup>6</sup> To reduce it different tools were implemented by the authorities. One of them was loosening the labor code and legislation to allow employers to hire people and terminate their contracts more easily. The effect was unsurprising—a number of people (especially the young—those who entered the labor market after graduation) were hired on temporary contracts, therefore mandatory contracts or other types of unstable employment reached incredibly high levels. For comparison purposes, in 2000, the percentage of young Poles (aged 15 to 24) employed on a temporary basis was at 14,2%, while in 2015, it hit 73,1% (Mrozowicki 2016:95). What deserves attention is not the fact that unstable employment conditions are frequent in this cohort, but the dynamic and scale of growth rate

are shocking. This kind of drastic change in living conditions had to have ripple effects on the biographical experiences of individuals.

Mechanisms of increasing instability and its impact on individuals' biographies put the problem of accessibility to people's experience in front of social researchers. One of the possible answers would be through biographical material and appropriate methodology. Using this type of approach, the researcher can find a way to explore what is important for informants, how the appropriate life strategy is constructed, and how it works in the biographies. Based on the works of Fritz Schütze and other academics specializing in this method (Schütze 2012a; 2012b; Kaźmierska 2016a; Waniek 2016), I would like to look at varied aspects and advantages of the biographical approach in regard to exploring coping strategies in contemporary Poland.

Fritz Schütze developed the concept of process structures, which can be understood as the main rules of the biographical order of one's life story.<sup>7</sup> One of them, the biographical action scheme, covers the efforts of the individual to shape and plan their biography actively. We can suppose that in the new—more precarized—world it would be harder to establish an efficient biographical plan of action or just imagine the future for yourself. It can be assumed that in the autobiographical narrative interview the

<sup>7</sup> There are four process structures: biographical action schemes, trajectories of suffering that cover the experience of losing control over one's own life, institutional expectation patterns that cover those parts of life when individuals are fulfilling institutionalized and normalized life trajectories, creative metamorphoses of biographical identity that cover the onset of new biographical development pathways (Riemann and Schütze 1991; Schütze 2008).

informants—regarding the work sphere—will have to concentrate on the problem of lack of stabilization and insecurity in their professional career and its impact on other life aspects.

The autobiographical narrative interview was used in both projects in order to capture the biographical experience of the collective phenomena. As stressed by Kaźmierska (2016b:61), this type of interview is not only a data collection technique, but also a coherent approach to the research design. This means that the researcher does not only collect data in a methodologically-determined way, but also can benefit from a well-developed analytical theory that stands behind this approach. In principle, it should allow him to reach the biographical experience of collective social processes.

Life history is a narrative "gestalt" that must be envisioned as an ordered sequence of personal experiences, and that orderliness implies the inner identity development of the biography incumbent. The most important ordering principles of life history are biographical process structures. [Schütze 2008:168]

Biographical process structures organized not only the life story of the informant, but could also be helpful in establishing order in the researcher's process of reflection. They could be used as an interpretative frame for analytical actions taken after collecting the interviews as well, especially when the collection consists of dozens of them. Each interview is a complex system of meanings, symbols, and events which eventually make up a narrative interview. Competent handling of this type of material requires skills in analysis and synthesis, work-

shop preparation, and sociological intuition. The challenge is harder when the researcher wishes to explore relations between macro sociological phenomena (like processes of transformation) and the biographical experience of ordinary people.

The paper focuses on the problem of establishing and shaping coping strategies in narratives. My aim is to show how those mechanisms can be traced in the material. Special attention is paid to the turning points as crucial moments of the individual's biography. It is assumed that as regards breakthroughs there are moments of verification of the biographical approach towards social reality in which individuals act. These parts of the interviews are taken under scrutiny and can be described as narrative communication schemes, and are contrasted with argumentation or theoretical remarks done by the informants. Thanks to the autobiographical narrative interview we are able to see how individuals reconstruct their life stories, what references they use, how they integrate the story, and what is the meaning of emerging events.

## Remek

Remek was born in 1984 in a middle-sized city in central Poland. He has a younger brother. The family moved to the country in the narrator's childhood (however, they lived near Remek's city of birth). Remek's education proceeded without any problems. He followed his peers in their choices of schools and studies, which could be interpreted as following institutional expectations patterns. He refers to school as "work" and "effort" rather than "fun" or "friendship."

<sup>6</sup> See: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&language=en&pcode=tipsun20&plugin=1>. Retrieved October 11, 2019.

His first choice of study was Administration, but while at the university, Remek started attending lectures on journalism. It was the reason behind changing his educational path. Finally, he majored in both subjects at the local university at the baccalaureate and master levels (Remek earned his MA degree in extramural studies after starting his professional career).

He started working in a local newspaper during his university studies, but he was disappointed by the relations with his supervisor. Eventually, he quit the job and moved on to another one—in the lawyer's office—which was run by his friend. His main task was to manage the office. Remek worked there till he got an internship funded by the EU grant in one of the local public institutions. He was assigned to the PR and marketing department there. That decision was crucial for Remek's further career—he decided to dedicate himself to that professional area. In the meantime, after completing the internship, Remek was unemployed for almost a year. It was a tough time, for economic reasons in particular. He was actively looking for a job and—as some escape plan—he contemplated leaving the city and moving to Warsaw. Luckily, he managed to get another internship in the institution where he still works today.

The central theme of Remek's biography is a consistent career path in the public sector:

Working in cultural institutions/ the culture was always hermetic/ regardless of the city, bigger, smaller. I know most people working in cultural institutions in the city. I am more familiar with some of them,

with some we are just acquaintances, I know who is who. Eee so I am becoming a middle-sized fish in a middle-sized pond. Maybe someday I will be a bigger fish in the middle-seized pond, maybe not. Eee I go to events of different institutions, some people come to my events. We see each other around. Sometimes we go for a beer. Eee so it is nice. I know that if I were in a bigger city, for example, Warsaw, I would be anonymous. I would be just one of the millions of people who live there, and I would mean nothing. And I am a man who likes to be popular. Here I have this chance. [Remek, p. 13-14]

Remek knows the local labor market, especially in public institutions. He is familiar with the situation in the private sector too. He does not want to leave the city and he tries to find a way to reconcile his career ambitions with his limited resources. The most important asset in fighting for his occupational position is to be recognized by and network with the right people. He does not put emphasis on the type of work or relations with his colleagues too much. He is rather keen on self-development and regarding that we can, to some extent, categorize him as a representative of the middle-class. He rather follows his individual goals by being a respected person by important people than tries to establish familiar relations with his team colleagues.

I have chosen this interview as an example of reflexive work within a set of norms and values of everyday life. They allow him to find a way to lead a decent career in harmony with his own beliefs. He is in constant "biographical work" on precautions strategies in case of losing his job:

Working in the culture, I go to these events of other institutions. I'm trying to get to know everybody from the media, from the culture, so my name would be known in the city. So, eee, if I lose my job for some reason or I decided to change it, I would not need to introduce myself to another institution. [Remek, p. 15]

In the interview, one can find a repeated phrase: "I still did not know what to do with my life," especially at the points of passage in the educational system (from primary school to high school, from high school to university). It can be assumed that this phrase is important as it underlines the liminal status of the informant at the turning points of his biography. Secondly, it is a description at present—Remek finishes the interview with the following words: "I still do not know who I want to be when I grow up." It was supposed to be a humorous concluding phrase, but it carries a more serious meaning—despite being married, having a son, and being employed in the public sector, Remek still feels insecure and vulnerable. Particularly, the economic status of his family is at risk:

Eee, we still rent a flat which costs us almost my whole salary. Almost? The whole! There is only some small change left. We live on the money my wife brings home. Eee/ so/ it's tough at the moment. There is no chance we can get a loan. [Remek, p. 19]

Asked directed about his affiliation to precariat,<sup>8</sup> he replies:

<sup>8</sup> The precariat is understood here as a group of people with unstable employment or low salaries.

If we understand this term as a group of people who don't have a stable position and this instability affects their life decisions, choices eee their mentality, so, yes. Because, I say, lately, I got a permanent contract, but with every previous contract, I didn't know if I will get one. I was forced to save money for a black hour. I couldn't buy any treat. I kept in my mind that one day I can lose my job, and I have been in that situation and I know it is not easy. And it has an impact. Actually, now I have a permanent contract, I got a promotion to a manager's position, but I am still not sure. I don't know if our director would not be replaced at some point. You never know, especially in cultural institutions. So, yes, if the term is understood thusly, then I am, I fit in. [Remek, p. 23]

In this citation, we can observe how Remek moved from being precarious in the aftermath of systemic changes in the Polish labor market (he was employed based on temporary contracts and as an intern) to being "awarded" with a permanent contract and managerial appointment. However, his understanding of his social and economic position did not change. He still feels insecure and unstable. This part of the interview can be understood as an open declaration and, at the same time, Remek's own interpretation of his socio-economic status. It is this exposure that reveals the true and harsh nature of the social reality in which he and his family live. He could be included in the local elite, however, his precarious position (in terms of job stability and economic safety) defines his actions and, in the broader perspective, determines his life strategy. Remek decided to establish his occupational status based on the social network—to know the right people is a key factor to stay afloat.

## Radek

Radek was born in 1985 in a small village in central Poland. He was the fourth child in the family. His father is still the richest man in the settlement. He made his fortune on the land trade (it is not said exactly when it happened, but it can be supposed it might have taken place shortly after 1989). A high economic status combines with traditional division of gender roles here—on the one hand, we have a conservative and a rather withdrawn father, while, on the other hand, Radek had a strong relationship with his sensitive and close mother. Remaining between his parents had a strong impact on Radek's well-being and produced a lot of tension in the family.

Radek has always been aware of his homosexuality. It is not directly stated, however, one can assume that coming out with his sexual identity in his adolescence resulted in having several mental problems. From one point of view, the source of tensions was rooted in the contradiction between his sexuality and the local intolerant community. But, Radek struggled not only with a potential rejection in the community—the main threat came from his father, who reconciled with his son only after Radek's mother's death. He managed to take control of the problem in his late twenties (at least to some extent) thanks to his biographical caretaker—his mother. Following his short-term migrations, he was trying to become a writer, but, in the end, Radek landed a job as a copywriter in one of the marketing agencies in Warsaw. The crucial moment of the interview—and of Radek's life story—was his mother's death. It ties different lines of

narration which could be interpreted as a story of growing up and searching for one's own place to live.

In this lightly spoken story, one can trace psychological and social tensions and contradictions that produce continuous worries for the informant. In the foreground, it can be observed how Radek constantly reworks his identity, especially in terms of his sexuality. Traditional religious culture in the story is contrasted with his seeking authenticity and his own identity. One of the crucial points is an experience of his physical attraction to another man:

so, this cousin, Slawek, came to us. He was twenty-something then, I was ten, eleven/ I don't know, he is such a distant family that even my sister had something to do with him, so even though he was family, there was some affair. But, I found him so attractive and I was so mad that he was interested in her and not in me, and then I knew. I've known since childhood. Completely [he hit his thighs to these words]. It has always been this homosexuality, mmm, because I, psychologically, totally/ or maybe not, maybe not, but I have some of the worst men's qualities, but, psychologically, I am a woman. [Radek, p. 9]

Dealing with his sexuality is placed in the center of the narration, but other issues follow as the sources of potential trajectory:

So, studies... a lot of turbulence in my life. Some anorectic episodes, psychiatrists, psychiatric medications, Xanax, hypnotic [soporific] drugs, the first, so-called, homosexual consumption. So, it was a very

tough time for me, very tough. I had to support myself with these drugs to get through, and I remember that I endured a lot of pain when I fell in love for the first time. So, yes, I visited a psychiatrist because I was 30 kg lighter than now. Now I am almost 90 and then I was only 60. I'll show you photos [laughing]. [Radek, p. 2]

Balancing on the edge of biography disorganization, Radek could always count on his mother's support. The role of the significant other in his case relates to establishing safety space as some kind of shelter, especially from other members of the local community and family:

Eee, so I'll tell you about this relation. I think that she intuitively knew how it was. But, she didn't have any problem with that. Because, you know, some mothers would say: "Jesus, what are you wearing?" But, she always praised me, she was always keen on my creative fashion ideas and supported my cosmetic interests. She didn't think about it as some kind of social faux pas when Radek chose her lipstick, or Radek chose this or that for her, or Radek helped her in fashion. You know, like those simple women: "Jesus, boy, those things? Don't confess to that! Tell nobody!" Eee she took it very mildly that I am gay. It was always obvious. Even when I was meeting with that boy, she was able to pick him up from the bus stop and bring him to me. She said: "But, don't tell father." She believed that was totally unnecessary, that they could not understand, and this knowledge would not help them. [Radek, p. 8]

Relations with other family members are in the center of his biographical concern, but being gay and

participation in the social world of homosexuals are other important issues. With reference to the article, it can be assumed that this could be a competitive source of values, attitudes, and norms, but a supposition that Radek would be flattered by the outside world is far from the truth. He established an outsider's perspective and became critical towards the social milieu of homosexuals, especially in the capital city:

It is only here if I have ever come across any homophobia in my life, it has never been in my village, rather in Z [a bigger town]. And till today, if I go home with my friend and somebody rides a bike, for example, some block with a girl, he says: "Look, faggots." And that's normal. That geographical location, it is rather mental belonging, which is not related to geography and I can tell you that my colleague was beaten in the city center for being a faggot. It was near Rotunda. So, if Z is attractive, it is rather naive, you know, those gays from little towns who think that they can be themselves. Yes, they can, but they can hear bad things too. The thing is that there are a lot of homosexuals, it's a majority in Z. Every other boy is homo here, so they think that they are going to find somebody, and so on, but this is a lie too, and that's untrue because the market here is saturated. The competition here is really fierce. All attractive persons are: a) taken, b) busy whoring, so I don't know why people think that Z is eee/ I understand that people come here for a career and their sexual life is on the side, like in my case, but there are people who come here only to pursue their sexuality. That's a fact that at the beginning, you know, when you finish high school and come here, and every other person is gay, and there are

lots of clubs, and you can date three times a day by Internet, but it passes after a few months, and, you know, that is only a mirage and this community is finished. [Radek, p. 10]

Radek experiences liminality, which is understood as being between different positions in a society or community. It is the foundation of his biography—firstly, he was a marginal man in his family: the youngest child, always more sensitive and (apparently) vulnerable, who had a strong relationship with his mother and was in conflict with the father figure; secondly, as a young gay in a traditional village community, he was forced to hide or at least limit his performative desires. Even after migrating to a big open and (apparently again) tolerant city, he felt like someone who is rather outside than inside groups or social bonds. At the end of the day he remains lonely, especially after his mother's death:

So, now I have this mission—I hate life, really. If I had to choose to be born or not to be born, I would never want to come to this world, because this world is bad. In general, this symbolic order which the man established doesn't fit this world, and that's why there is always a conflict between the man and the world. Eee and all these ideas: justice and so on, it is really not in the nature of this world. Those are fabrications, you know, and that's why the man struggles to fit in all this. So, I don't want to be part of it. I would like to be a tree, lizard, and just to sink all this from the world the way it should be. We should enjoy the sun, air, not, you know, rubbish like, you know, coffee machines or perfumes. [Radek p. 8]

This credo is his final exposition of the “true” problem of Radek's biography—he does not fit into the world the way he perceives it. He chooses to discursively sign out of it. It is important that he applies a rather argumentative communication scheme of presentation. Radek presents himself as an outsider, however, his emigration is of an internal character. On the outside, he has eventually and apparently become an autonomous and adult individual.

### Conclusions

Using Remek and Radek's cases I would like to present how the researcher can trace and reconstruct life strategies of coping with social change (understood here as a consequence of Polish transformation and—in a broader perspective—as an effect of global modernization mechanisms) in particular biographies. To achieve this goal, I decided to get a closer look at two cases of young Poles from different family, economic, and social backgrounds. However, both of them could be categorized as representatives of middle-class (but different segments of it).

In previous parts of the article, I have concentrated on presenting the advantages of using biographical material and methodology in analyzing the consequences of collective processes. To support this action, I would like to refer to the important mechanisms present in analyzed interviews—the self-presentations of Remek and Radek through engagement in different social worlds (Schütz 1960; Strauss 1978; 1982; 1984; Clarke and Star 2008; Schütze 2012c; Kacperczyk 2016). In some cases, the

reference to a particular social world is clearly visible in the interview, as in Radek's interview, where descriptions of different aspects of the social world of the homosexual man appear. His knowledge about the life of a gay who migrates from a traditional village to a big modern city gives us an opportunity to understand how the rules, norms, and attitudes in the social world of homosexuals are constructed. In the meantime, the emergence of individual identity can be observed when the biographical experience of a member of the sexual minority has been reworked regarding his family and social backgrounds. Radek faces moral dilemmas emerging from the clash of traditional culture of his origin (or rather the origin of his family) and his sexuality. One of the possible ways is to use his parents' high economic position to move away from the village. It enables him to literally escape by moving to the capital city, and morally by breaking the cultural codes of the traditional family. Thanks to his mother's care (she is his significant other and Radek's biographical caretaker) our protagonist transfigures into an autonomous adult independent (to some extent) of his family home.

In the second case, we can observe how Remek, a local official in the public library, skillfully manages his narration structure. He divides it into a few main segments which correspond with his education and career, private and family lives, hobby and passion. Using the terminology of social worlds, he refers to three subworlds for each segment. The mainline of narration refers to Remek's reconstruction of his way to a decent position in the local labor market. Nevertheless, the other

two narration parts support the main argumentation that his efforts are mostly focused on struggles with establishing stabilization and security to himself and his family.

Referring to factors of stabilization in both cases, we could look at those parts of Remek's biography where he refers to the social roles of the husband and father. In Radek's case, one can observe how the economic capital (in Bourdieu's meaning) is transformed by the informant into the social and cultural capital that allows him to establish an autonomous life in the capital city after leaving his native village.

A reconstruction of the main events of Remek's career tells a story of becoming a member of the local intellectual elite. To accomplish this goal, the interviewee needs to know how the social world of public institutions works. However, with regard to the economic status of his family, it is not only a fight for social recognition. The goal is stabilization and safety not only of Remek himself. He and his family live on the edge of falling into financial troubles.

Under economic pressure, Remek found a way to escape. He decided to engage in an amateur theater. He underlines a few times in the interview how important it was to his biography:

In the meantime, I started to play in an amateur theater and it was a landmark in my life...Hmmm, one of the reasons I didn't move [to another city] was the theater I mentioned. I became intimate with the group and it has worked somehow. Because I knew

that I liked it very much and if I went to another city, I would lose it for sure. And you didn't know if I could find something like this. [Remek, p.11]

The role of the social world of amateur theater is crucial to understand how his narration is shaped in the context of relations between different process structures. On the one hand, Remek is under constant pressure from institutional perspectives. He is forced to follow the rules of the local milieu at work—he must know the right people to get promoted and to defend his position if he were forced to leave. In family life, he and his wife are made to keep their budget under strict control. The social roles of a husband, father, and employee constitute responsibility for Remek, which—to be fair—he accepts. However, the risk of failure to meet institutional expectation's patterns brings potential jeopardy of another process structure—a trajectory of suffering. Class ambitions and consumption patterns work in the same way. Remek finally found a place only for himself in this complicated network of different tensions—an amateur theater. In this social world, he does not compromise—even eventually, he can be free.

There is no easy way out in Radek's case. His narration is constructed around experiencing a trajectory of suffering where his mother's death plays a crucial role. Even though he seems tough outside, Radek represents the fragile identity of a young homosexual man. The only person who knows him well is his mother:

You know, mother, by some intuition maybe, she knew that eee that I am, I don't have any protective

coloration, so to say. Because, you know, the country environment, a rural family is not the best place for, you know, an effeminate boy with interests in fashion, and, you know, beauty. It's not the best place, a village. So, mum had some intuition that life could hurt me if I had a weaker character and, because I am genetically intelligent, so, I say it immodestly, I never let others push me around. Despite the fact I was a fat fag, nobody messed with me, because it was known that I would say three words and they would run away and cry. But, mum knew that/ this instinct, bond/ that she had to take care of me/ maybe it was stupid, but which mother would say no to her child? [Radek, p. 7]

As long as his mother lived, Radek was able to live the life of a spoilt and rich kid—as beneficent of the class position of his parents. He had freedom in his choices of study and work. When he decided to become a writer, parents paid his school fee and covered the costs of living in a different city; when he decided to move to London, all expenses were borne by his parents. In contrast to Remek, Radek was not forced to make a living.

He clearly exposes in the interview how apparent the rules of social reality could be. For example, the local traditional community is a far more tolerant place in his case than the worldly capital city. Radek's security was insured by the high economic status of his family where the mother was his biographical caretaker. Complicated relations with father were a source of potential neglect. However, the trauma of his mother's death—surprisingly—bonded Radek and his father, but, ultimately, his mother's death led Radek to loneliness. He partic-

ularly struggled to establish social bonds with others (like his siblings or friends).

He reconstructs spheres of his life (family, local community, homosexuals, work) with ambiguous characteristics. I would suggest that one of the possible reasons for adapting this attitude is a rejection of the value systems that work in each of them. After his mother's death, the family is ruled by a despotic father with whom Radek does not have good relations. The power is in the hands of a priest in the local community. Radek is in a personal conflict with him because after his mother's death, the family was informed impolitely that they had been charged for the grave. Moreover, Radek openly declares his atheism and presents a very critical opinion about the Roman Catholic Church and religion in general. The social world of homosexuals is probably the closest milieu to Radek at the moment. However, he is aware of the social rules which govern this community and he does not accept them as well. On the other hand, his job (copywriting and advertising) is a source of financial stability, but Radek feels pressed to win awards, prizes, and honors. All of these failures in constructing social bonds with different communities can be interpreted as the evidence of struggling with establishing an effective life strategy. In theory, Radek has all attributes to find his place in terms of social belonging. However, he constantly experiences the rejection in real life (which—the rejection—is affirmed by him to some extent).

Radek and Remek make up a specific set of contrasting cases. Their interviews differ in many aspects—from the structure of communication schemes (in

Radek's interview one can find more of a narration communication scheme than in Remek's) to a biographical composition of events. However, in both cases, we can trace two young men who try to adapt to social expectations. Both of them need to learn the rules of social worlds in which they function. With every change from one job position to another Remek gets a better understanding of the local career market. He slowly develops the biographical plan that leads him through the public institutions' maze. It is interesting that he resigns from the private labor market after unsuccessful attempts to find a job there. He justifies that decision pointing out that he is unfit for a salesman job (the most popular one in his family town, in his opinion), but has not any particular skills. He chooses a more conformist path of a local official in the end. Radek is the example of an individual who develops the position of the marginal man—somebody who does not fit any collective identity. In psychological terms, Radek accepted his sexual orientation and mostly family-related consequences of this fact. However, regarding social references, the process of establishing social identity is not completed. He neglects all available collective frames. Possibly, this could be a base for his coping strategy with the social reality he lives in.

In the introduction, I have pointed out that my main goal was to reconstruct the coping strategies of the selected interviewees. However, Remek and Radek's life stories do not undergo an explicit interpretation in this regard. It is impossible to describe those narratives with simple dichotomies or typologies. The division into conformist (Remek) and non-conformist (Radek) case, mentioned in



previous parts of the text, does not explicitly stem from the material. An in-depth analysis of their interviews shows the unique complexity of possible interpretations. In many parts of his interview, Radek refers to traditional family and local communities not only as a source of restriction, but as an economic, cultural, and supportive resource. Since he acknowledges the rules of his family and community, Radek's attitude could be interpreted as a conformist type. In Remek's case, the non-conformist approach could be found in the distance and, to some extent, cynicism showed towards the rules of the local public institutions' world. Remek follows them and, in a very reflexive manner, adapts his actions accordingly. Simultaneously, he establishes his biographical agenda—to be recognized and important. What is common in both cases is related to the condition of looking for a safe and

stable mental space. That, in my opinion, would be the most important stake presented in their biographies.

Remek and Radek are in different geographical locations and at different social status positions. They differ as regards their sexual orientation and family background. Yet, both face social reality which is constantly changing in a consequence of macrostructural processes transforming sphere of work (precarization) and private life (transition or moral rules regarding sexual identity). The importance and meaning of their social worlds equally affect their socio-biographical situations. Understanding the rules that govern their respective milieus is crucial in their professional and biographical careers; as such is important to successfully elaborate their life strategies as well.

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## Who Is a Right-Wing Supporter? On the Biographical Experiences of Young Right-Wing Voters in Poland and Germany<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract** This article explores the selected cases of the biographies of right-wing supporters from a larger sample of narrative interviews with young (18-35 years old) people in Poland and Germany. In the existing literature, we can find the socio-economic explanations of the sources of the right-wing turn (related to economic deprivation, precarisation, social exclusion, labor market competition with immigrants and others), as well as cultural explanations connected with new identity politics, symbolic exclusion and divide between society and political elites, the disembedding from previously solid communities, and the fear of new risks related to the inflow of cultural Others. Despite notable exceptions, it is rather uncommon to discuss in this context the actual biographical experiences of right-wing and far-right supporters. In the article, we take a closer look at four biographical cases of people declaring their political support for far right parties. The analysis of the cases leads to the distinction of socio-economic and socio-political pathways to right-wing populist support.

**Keywords** Right-Wing Populism; Biographical Research; Precarious Work; Poland; Germany

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The results of opinion polls and exit polls following the 2015 parliamentary elections in Poland and the 2017 federal elections in Germany demonstrate a significant share of young people supporting right-wing populist parties. Recognizing the varieties of right-wing populisms (cf. Przyłęcki 2012:17), we follow Jan-Werner Müller (2016:4) and define populism in terms of anti-elitist and anti-pluralist type of governance which exhibits three features: “attempts to hijack state apparatus, corruption and mass clientelism (trading material benefits or bureaucratic favors for political support by citizens who become the populist ‘clients’), and efforts

systematically to suppress civil society.” Populist parties in power, such as the Law and Justice in Poland, tend to “uphold their self-image of a political embodiment of the *volonté générale*” (Pytlas 2017), and thus presenting themselves as a radicalization of mainstream (democratic) views (Mudde 2010), while at the same time pursuing policies which aim at supporting a part of civil society which backs them and undermining the mobilization capacities of their opponents. In 2015 parliamentary elections in Poland, the right-wing populist party, Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS) acquired 37.58% of votes and, according to exit polls, 25.8%

among people aged 18-30. Kukiz'15, which represents newcomers to the parliament unified under "anti-systemic," anti-elite, and nationalistic slogans, was supported by 19.9% of those aged 18-30 (as compared 8.81% votes acquired in the final results) and KORWIN, a Eurosceptic party led by Janusz Korwin-Mikke known, among others, for his radical anti-feminism, was backed by 16.8% of youth (4.76% in final results) (IPSOS 2015). In Germany, a historical turning point was the entry of the Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland, AfD), a far-right, anti-immigration, and Eurosceptic populist party to Bundestag in 2017, when it won 12.6% of votes. According to exit polls (Der Bundeswahlleiter 2017), 8% of people aged 18-24 supported the party. According to the studies, the share of young people in Germany expressing rightist attitudes and hatred towards groups such as asylum-seekers, long-term unemployed, or homeless is rising and could be as large as 39% of those aged 16-30 (Zick, Küpper, and Krause 2016:57).

The most of existing analyses of the support to the new right-wing populism are based on large quantitative survey research and, often qualitative, discourse analysis of media presence of populists parties. This article acknowledges the relevance of discourses understood as "the social activity of making meanings with language and other symbolic systems in some particular kind of situation or setting" (Wodak and Krzyżanowski 2008:6). However, it also addresses an appeal for more internalist perspective in qualitative research on the phenomenon of right-wing populism focusing on the subjective (and reflexive) perspective of participants and supporters of right-wing parties and movements (Goodwin

2006; Blee 2007; Kajta 2017). Therefore, it follows the tradition of biographical research on right-wing radicalization (Inowlocki 2000) in order to understand the role of socio-structural conditions, as well as culturally mediated subjective interpretive practices for the growing support for right-wing parties in Poland and Germany. It is assumed that biographies are not merely reflections of structures provided by the society, but they are also the expressions of narrators' individual agency and reflexivity (Mrozowicki, Turk, and Domecka 2013:30-31). As such, they can help to understand the emergence of right-wing views in the context of biographical experiences and identities.

In the article, we discuss four selected cases of biographies of right-wing supporters from a larger sample of young (18-35 years old) precarious workers in Poland and Germany collected in 2016-2017 within the DFG-NCN supported PREWORK project. We understand precarity, following Kalleberg (2009:2), as a relational concept pointing to "employment that is uncertain, unpredictable, and risky from the point of view of the worker." Thus, precarity cuts across class structure (Dörre 2003) rather than constitutes a single, "new social class," the precariat (Standing 2011). The young precarious workers studied represent a variety of social classes as indicated by their economic and educational resources. What they share are employment conditions marked by insecurity in contractual terms (non-standard or informal employment or unemployment) and economic terms (low or irregular source of income). In the body of the article, following a discussion of the existing explanations of the support for the far right in both countries, we analyze four biographical cas-

es selected in more detail. Our goal is to answer the central research question, namely, what is the relationship between narrators' biographical experiences in the sphere of work and beyond it and their support for the agenda of right-wing parties and social movements.

### Explaining Support for Right-Wing Populism in Poland and Germany

There are multiple ways to explain the right-wing sympathies among young people. They include the references to the need of social protection by the losers of globalization and modernization (Dörre 2003; Kalb 2011) in the context of the crisis of social-democracy (Nachtwey and Jörke 2017) and the expansion of precarious (unstable, short-term, low paid) employment (Standing 2011), the rise of cultural anti-liberalism and the rejection of cosmopolitan and post-materialistic values (Inglehart and Norris 2016; Fraser 2017; Kajta 2017), latent racism, xenophobia and authoritarianism (Heitmeyer 2018), and "new racism" which replaces "racist categories by cultural ones" (Lentin and Titley 2011). Other approaches point to the disappointment with democracy and its liberal elites which are criticized by both the eroding middle and impoverished popular classes (e.g., Zick et al. 2016; Gdula 2018). Simplifying the existing approaches, they can be divided into (1) socio-economic explanations focusing on the mechanisms related to broadly understood precarisation, (2) socio-political explanations referring to the perceived alienation of political elites, and (3) socio-cultural explanations pointing to cultural changes in late modern societies, in particular the conflict between fundamentalist and postmodern values, which in

turn is clearly visible in the contradiction between populism and cosmopolitan liberalism (Inglehart and Norris 2016:22).

The existing research makes use of the aforementioned explanations to discuss the successes of right-wing populist parties in Poland and Germany. In the case of Germany, in the early days, the political program of AfD was mainly EU-skeptic. However, in the last parliamentary elections, it focused its claim on anti-refugee policy. More than 60% of AfD voters claimed that their decision was based on disappointment with other parties and only 32% claimed that they supported the political program of AfD (Infratest Dimap 2017). AfD was able to mobilize a large number of non-voters or first-time voters. AfD voters show a number of characteristics. They perceive themselves as socio-economically deprived (Tutic and von Hermann 2018), show a low trust in democracy and the current government (Ripple and Seipel 2018), and/or have illiberal, right-wing ideas (Lengfeld 2018). They are above-the-average male, living in the new federal states, and often older people living in the countryside (Franz, Fratzscher, and Kritikos 2018). The most recent debate mainly focuses on socio-economic explanations for the right-wing support of which level is claimed to be different among the members of various social classes (Nachtwey and Jörke 2017; Lengfeld 2018). Especially blue collar workers in West Germany would long for the re-establishment of the social market economy of the 1970s and those in East Germany would regret the loss of the community of workers in the former DDR (Sauer 2018). Politically, the rise of the far right is seen as a new emergent divide between cosmopolitanism and communitarianism

which goes beyond that of the (traditional) left and right (Merkel 2017). Socio-cultural explanations focus on the loss of the “pride” and recognition of the “little man on the street” who mourns the loss of traditional cultural norms, especially gender ones (Sauer 2018), as well as a continuity of authoritarian character in German society (Heitmeyer 2018) and, in particular, a fear of immigration (Lengfeld 2018). The socio-political explanations are less prominent at the moment in the German debate (Ripple and Seipel 2018).

In Poland, the electoral success of right-wing populist parties is explained by their neo-authoritarian appeal offering various sections of the Polish society and opportunity to join a national community in opposition to cultural Others, liberal and EU elites, feel national pride and symbolic cultural significance (Gdula 2018), the political organization of anger of those excluded in the course of transformation (Ost 2005; Kalb 2011; Pierzchalski and Rydliński 2017), the weakness of left-wing alternatives, limited legitimacy of liberal elites, and the relevance of social program of PiS appealing to the disadvantaged sections of the society (Śpiewak 2010). One of the popular explanations of the sustained support for Law and Justice, in particular among its liberal critics, is related to political clientelism in which the party, in power since 2015, offered the underprivileged strata and classes in Poland tangible economic advantages which helped to secure their backing despite anti-liberal reforms pursued in the country (e.g., income support for families with two and more children “500 Plus” or policies aimed at limitation of civil law contracts [cf. Kajta and Mrozowicki 2018]). Yet, regardless of workers’ friendly policies,

the results of existing studies are rather ambiguous as far as the social profile of the PiS supporter is concerned. According to the analysis by Gdula (2018) and his research team, the PiS discourse, based on the strong criticism of the liberal elites and anti-establishment attitudes, in combination with its socio-economic reforms, has found favorable context across various segments of the Polish society.

The support for right-wing populist ideas in the youngest cohorts of voters varies in Poland and Germany. While the electoral support among those aged 18-30 was high in Poland, the majority of the AfD voters in Germany were above 35 years old. However, as we have shown in an earlier study (Lorenzen et al. 2018), even though the perception of one’s own precarity as a transitional phase of youth might have made the youngest people less supportive of right-wing parties, once they realize that precarity is an internal aspect of their working lives and their hopes for upward mobility cannot be met, their turn to the right becomes more probable.

Both in Poland and in Germany, there are various approaches to explain the spread of rightist opinions among young people. First, it is suggested that young people are generally less interested in politics than other age cohorts and in case they turn into the public sphere, they tend to search for parties and social movements with a more radical outlook (Messyasz 2015). As many of them have still no established political viewpoints, they are particularly susceptible to populist publicity campaigns offering simple, dichotomized vision of the world (e.g., the “people” vs. the “establishment”). Presenting themselves as “apolitical” (Szafraniec et al. 2018:285)

often means being against the mainstream politics dominated by centrist and liberal parties in the not-so-distant past. Secondly, the spread of far-right opinions among young people is interpreted as a strategy for dealing with “fears and crises of orientation,” typical of their age (Hanesch 1994:39; Szafraniec 2012; Jurczyszyn 2014) and searching for stronger points of reference and identity. For Heitmeyer (2018), the increase in extreme rightist views among young people can be explained by, among other things, the disturbed transitions to adulthood in which achieving economic independence is increasingly difficult. For Szafraniec and colleagues (2017:285), the popularity of right-wing movements and parties among young people in European countries needs to be explained both by their political disorientation and the loss of trust in political elites.

Regardless of the types of explanations, they share some flaws, including, most importantly, the difficulty to explain why it is only in some cases that the conditions of economic uncertainty or, more broadly speaking, existential insecurity among young adults contribute to the emergence of right-wing rather than left-wing views. In this context, it is clear that accounting for the support of right-wing populist parties among young people requires adapting “theoretical sensitivity” (Glaser 1978) which combines various approaches. Certainly, the turn to right-wing ideologies depends on their availability in local contexts as a part of the “repertoires of contention” which draw on “the identities, social ties, and organizational forms that constitute everyday social life” (Tilly and Tarrow 2015:20). Since liberalism and left-wing views are often identified by right-wing parties as dominant ideologies in Eu-

rope, the right-wing starts to be seen as the main alternative to what is seen as the existing, hegemonic order. This effect is magnified if socialist discourses are considered as a part of corrupted *ancien régime*, as in the case of many Eastern European countries (Ost 2005). However, as argued by Dörre (2006) and Sommer (2010), as well as the advocates of internalist perspective in the analysis of far-right activism (Goodwin 2006; Blee 2007), in order to understand the increase in right-wing attitudes it is not enough to describe the macro-social and cultural opportunity structure. It is necessary to take into account the subjective perception of their situation by young people themselves. This is where our analysis of young workers’ biographical experiences in Poland and Germany has its roots. Their life stories, the way of telling and justifying life decisions let us better understand the narrators’ worldviews and reasons for supporting right-wing politics.

## Methodological Background

The empirical research used for the purpose of this paper is based on the data acquired in the Polish-German study on young people aged 18-35 in non-standard employment, unemployed or precarious forms of traineeship and vocational education trainings. In total, we collected 123 biographical narrative interviews with young people in Poland (63) and Germany (60). The data were collected in the locations differentiated by their economic dynamic and situation: four middle-size cities in the “new” and “old” German Federal States, as well as three large cities, two mid-sized cities, two small towns, and one village in Lower Silesia, Mazovia, and Lodz regions in Poland. Interviews were designed in line

with Fritz Schütze's (1983) method and comprised of three parts: the first part following the request to tell us the entire life history of interviewees, the second part including additional biographical questions about the issues not covered in the first part, and the third part including topics such as transition from school to work, the meanings of work and activities in the life beyond work, social activism, political views, and the images of social order.

Out of the larger sample of interviews with young workers, for the purpose of this paper, we decided to focus on those who express support for right-wing populist parties and social movements. For this purpose, we operationalized the support of right-wing populist parties and social movements by adhering to at least two out of three criteria: (1) voting or declared intention to vote for right-wing populist parties (AfD in Germany, KORWIN, Kukiz'15, or PiS in Poland); (2) expressing racist, homophobic, or anti-refugee views; (3) participating in demonstrations and marches organized by right-wing populist milieu (in particular, the National Rebirth of Poland and the National Movement in Poland, AfD or PEGIDA in Germany). The criteria (1) and (3) are straightforward since they directly point to the political participation (voting behaviors/intentions or mobilization); the criterion (2), in turn, refers to the agenda of the (far) right-wing parties and, thus, can point to the potential support of them. Adherence and support could be formulated in different parts of the interview to be considered by us. Two parts of the interview were in the traditional sense biographical, containing a narration and clarifying still stimulation elements of a narration. In the third part of the inter-

view, we added semi-structured questions around society, social structure, and political views.

During the fieldwork, we tried to access these categories of young people in various ways: through personal contacts (the acquaintances of acquaintances), attempts to contact nationalist organizations via emails and social media, and, in Germany, visiting AfD stands during electoral campaigns and contacts made with football supporters. However, there was rather limited success in reaching the supporters of populist far right. In Poland, we collected three cases of activists who declared participation in demonstrations and marches organized by far right groups and met one of the additional criteria. In addition, there were 13 cases in which at least one of the aforementioned conditions was met. In Germany, three cases of AfD supporters were collected. The German sample also includes four more cases which do not meet at least two criteria of right-wing populism as operationalized in this article, but they show signs that suggest at least a latent racist attitude or strong authoritarian ideas.

For the purpose of this article, we have chosen four cases of right-wing supporters which were diversified in terms of their social background and their current economic situation (relatively stable in the case of Marian and Sven vs. relatively unstable in the case of Johanna and Marianna). Even though we focused in our research on precarity, the analysis of full biographical interviews made it possible what economic reasonings implied by the socio-economic explanation for right-wing populism precisely leads to the support of right-wing parties and social movements. The analysis of interviews combined

some elements of narrative analysis as developed by Schütze (2008) and the grounded theory methodology (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Glaser 1978), including open coding, selective coding, and memo writing. For each interview, we reconstructed biographical portraits and developed extensive analytical memos which are summarized in the next part.

### The Analysis of Four Cases of Right-Wing Supporters

The analysis carried out for the purpose of the entire project revealed that regardless of political orientations, narrators' statements about "politics" did not appear in the center of their extempore narrations (the 1<sup>st</sup> part of the interview) except for a limited number of cases in which they were directly involved in social movements or trade union activism (Mrozowicki forthcoming). It was not surprising in so far as we knew from the existing research (e.g., Szafraniec et al. 2017) that in all advanced countries "[v]oter turnout among young people tends to be low, relatively few belong to political parties and, in surveys, they tend to express a low level of interest in national politics" (Furlong 2013:214). Therefore, analyzing extempore narratives and accounts in the third part of interviews, we paid attention to indirect ways in which the political issues *implicitly* emerged in the modes of constructing their accounts by our young narrators. In doing so, we assumed that declared anti-political stance and biographical irrelevance of politics might in some cases lead to critique of specific aspects of the political system (Messyasz 2015:75).

Similarly to our larger sample, extempore narratives of right-wing supporters did not include direct ref-

erence to conventional politics. However, once directly asked about their political views, it appeared that those who reveal right-wing attitudes share some common traits in their biographies, including the feeling of injustice combined with resentment towards cultural Others. Exploring the cases of Johanna, Marianna, Marian, and Sven, we were wondering if and which experiences in individual lives lead to such political dispositions.

#### The Case of Johanna

At the time of the interview Johanna was 23 years old. She was born in a mid-sized city in southwest Germany (W-city) into a low, middle-class family. Her early childhood was spent in a small village. After her parents got divorced when she was 5 years old, Johanna first lived together with her mum in a nearby city and later they followed her mum's new partner to a bigger city. Johanna reconstructs her parents' divorce during her early youth as a changing point after which living conditions for the whole family deteriorated. The beginning of the interview documents a potential of biographical trajectory of suffering "in which persons are not capable of actively shaping their own life anymore, since they can only react to overwhelming outer events" (Schütze 2008:14). An idealized picture of an intact middle-class family living in a quiet village is contrasted with privation, relational conflict, and the urge for mobility. Johanna finds it painful to recall these events, which is indicated by the hesitant style of her narrative:

**Johanna:** Ok. Well, I was born here in W.-city and (.) then I lived in G.-town, that's a small town close

to here, for about half a year with my mom and my dad, because my mom grew up there and the house of my grandma is there and my dad bought a house there in S. in G.-village, which is a very small village with about 500 inhabitants. So we moved there and- (2) Yes, so the first four, five years I can't say much. I know that I, em-, (.) was on the road a lot with my dad, he bikes a lot. (.) Em- ((drawn out)) (.) We were also travelling around a lot with the motor home on the weekends. And I know that I, already as a small child, had a very strong relationship with my dad. (.) Otherwise I think I screamed a lot as a child, I was no planned child, I think my mom had some issues with me in the beginning.

At the age of 13 the relation with her mother worsens and Johanna wants to move out from home, but eventually she stays with her mum. At 15 she gets a job in promotion by chance, handing out flyers during the weekend and earning up to 10 Euros per hour, thus having good pocket money. Shortly before her *Abitur* she suffers from appendicitis which causes recurring health issues and further operations. When her appendix ruptured, her mother misjudged and ignored her pain, interpreting the daughter's complaints as an attempt to skip school which further magnified distrust between them. Being bound to bed, Johanna manages to pass all exams, but does not quite achieve results as good as she wished for.

After graduating she immediately moves out and back to W.-city and starts working in a large department store for a while until she starts a voluntary year at a hospital. At the same time she meets her first boyfriend. Having finished her voluntary year,

Johanna starts one year of dual vocational training in wholesale and foreign trade with the option to another year to graduate as a commercial specialist (*Handelsfachwirt*). During her training Johanna surprisingly becomes pregnant. As her partner disagrees with keeping the baby, he leaves her shortly after the baby is born and Johanna invests all her energy in finishing her training and starting the second year as a commercial specialist. At the present day, when she is 23 and a single mother, she receives Hartz IV (financial assistance for unemployment combined with his/her commitment to labor market activation) which sums up to 1100€ and has exams for her training as *Handelsfachwirt* coming up. To make some extra money on the side she sells her old clothes online on e-bay. Despite her wish to improve her financial situation and even with her son at the nursery, finding a "proper" part-time job has proven difficult, and the search for a bigger flat for herself and the child, unsuccessful. Being betrayed and left by her partner and first long-term boyfriend has not fully biographically worked either and reappears in the coda of the interview: "Now (.) well now with his dad everything is going through child services. (.) Em-, (4) and-, ((drawn out)) (.) yeah he is just very, very manipulative. (...) that is \*quite (.) difficult\* ((hesitant)) because you can't stop contact completely."

Johanna finds herself in a situation in which she can neither hold up the old image of herself as strong and independent nor is she able to build a new identity in line with her ideal of a middle-class family. Being dependent on social benefits and unable to find employment is in her view clearly linked to the single parenthood. Asked in how far her current liv-

ing conditions are limiting or empowering for the life she would like to have, she answers:

**Johanna:** Well, occupationally, and I'd say for my living standard too it limits me a lot because you're really not respected as a single parent, but as I said, I've already sent so many applications. I didn't even get one answer. Earlier I always sent the same one and always got the job. Uh, and then I, I really looked during the pregnancy for a flat. I looked for one after I had him [the child], and you're not accepted, now I find that really bad. Above all when you go to the city [local council] and they say well, municipal flats are out, because they're all reserved for refugees. Uh, well, and then you do get a bit, well, hateful too, that nothing's happening.

Johanna is a good example of how feelings of helplessness, abandonment, and betrayal lead to bitterness towards the welfare state and prepare a fertile terrain for populist notions. Aside from her material worries, Johanna also suffers from a deterioration of her social world, as she feels that her friends are turning away. The absence of her usual personal and occupational interactions causes an increasing feeling of isolation. Besides expressing frustration about labor market discrimination of single mothers, she also feels politically mobilized to criticize and express her disappointment with the welfare state, which seems to be giving priority to a competing group. In another part of the interview she points to refugees as a "big topic" and one of the central lines of conflict in the country which indirectly indicates the role of media in representing immigrants as the source of problems ("the refugee issue is of course still, for about one or two years it's

been a big topic"). However, she does not reveal her political views until directly asked for whom is she going to vote:

**Interviewer:** Hm, (3) mh ((drawn out)) do you go vote?

**Johanna:** I've never gone to vote before, but now I will go. (.) ((laughter))

**Interviewer:** Why will you go vote now? (.)

**Johanna:** Em-, (2) yes, (.) because fucks me off a bit. Well, I have, (.) in the last \*two years\* ((laughing)) (.) gotten to be a bit more right, I would say. Em-, (.) and I really just partially find it really unfair, (.) like that I-, I am of course not speaking for everyone, (.) but (.) I, for example, have my vocational training next to an asylum seekers hostel. And (2) eh-, I think that there is really-, a lot of money being put into that. And (.) partially they get so many chances and all of that gets ruined. And gets broken again and they get so much support, really, where I partly get less and they get an apartment and everything and that (.) yeah, that's just too much for me. (5)

**Interviewer:** And for or against what would you vote?

**Johanna:** I would vote AFD.

The organization of Johanna's justification of her plan to vote indicates an attempt to mitigate and temper her prejudices. She uses an agency-denying strategy ("things" happen to her and she is unsuccessful in counteracting them) and presents herself as a realist observer of society. Her case shows how rightwing populist attitudes develop not only out of fear of being culturally dominated, but as an answer to the issue of distributional justice and out of social envy. Instead of facing the structural causes of her dependency Johanna focuses in a moralizing way mainly on the competition for welfare state benefits

on which she currently needs to rely. She brings refugees into causal connection with her own situation and holds them responsible: her denigration of refugees serves to legitimate her own claim to more benefits and assistance. The critique of the injustice of her own situation results from direct observation of her immediate environment, and from there is abstracted into realms beyond her personal experience. She decides to vote for the rightwing populist party because it promised to undertake something against this competing group for public benefits and assistance, by reducing the number of refugees in the country, or by restricting their access to social security system benefits. Yet, her statements are full of doubts and hesitation.

### The Case of Marianna

Marianna was at the time of the interview 25 years old. She was born in a rather small town (B.-town) in a former mining district in Lower Silesia, close to a larger town WZ. She has an older brother (33 years old). She comes from a working class family: her mum was a shop attendant and her father a welder. She describes her family as a “loving family,” relatively “well-off” due to the fact of having a small grocery shop by parents. Marianna attends primary school and so-called “musical” lower secondary school. Similarly to the case of Johanna, her story starts with the depiction of growing a “cumulative mess” (Schütze 2008:2) resulting from the separation of her parents, drug addiction of her brother, economic and family problems. A macro-social context is the collapse of the family-run shop and her father’s migration abroad; a frequent fate of small businesses established in the 1990s (Domecka 2010):

**Marianna:** So, it started a veery long time ago (.) As a little girl, I was a very happy little girl, in a loving family, loving mother, loving father, great supportive nine year- older-brother (.), who, according to stories, changed my diapers because he loved me so much. Until... (3) my parents had a shop, everything was going great, they were well-off financially (2)... Until the shop started slowly failing, mother got ill, dad decided that he would go abroad to work, ‘cause it was supposed to be even better. They were planning to build a house, new cars... A fairytale (\*smacking\*). And finally dad came back home for Christmas, I was eleven at the time, twelve... I was finishing primary school, I was to start the junior secondary school (2). And he said he was leaving. Because he found a new love abroad. Mum knew about it earlier, but she was hiding it because she did not know how it would really end and finally he left. And then everything started. My brother went into drugs (...) I was in a quite demanding school, a musical junior secondary school. This cost as well, you had to pay for the instrument, there were problems with my brother, who was on detox later... but was still aggressive. We had to escape the house with my mother, go to my aunt, live there for some time until my brother calmed down (2). This is how it all went down and down (5).

The idyllic picture of family life marked by the family plans of social advancement through entrepreneurship gets broken due to a range of uncontrollable events. As the result of some kind of “failed project” of her parents (investing in her education and cultural capital, running own business) and family problems (separation, brother’s drug addiction, mother’s illness) Marianna is left without the support and, as documented in subsequent parts of

the interview, attempts several times to develop life projects on her own, quite often painfully learning by mistakes, but also acting against social expectations (“I just do things to spite everybody”).

As the teenager Marianna starts taking light drugs and “legal highs” (*dopalacze*), explaining it by family situation; she also drinks quite a lot of alcohol, steals some jewelry from her mother which ultimately leads to her leaving her mum’s flat and moving to her father’s (and grandmother’s) flat. At the age of 18, she leaves upper secondary school (lyceum) without finishing it due to growing problems with her education and various kinds of addictions. One year later she meets her boyfriend, Kryspin, who is eight years older and married. Marianna decides to live with him, which means for her another phase of going “her own way.” At that time she gets her first work experiences in electronic industry factories near to Wroclaw and distributing leaflets of mini-loan company in WB. Meanwhile, however, her relationship gets disturbed as her boyfriend is alcoholic and behaves aggressively, eventually he disappears without any notice. Soon after, Marianna starts to live with Zenon, her co-worker, but their relationship does not last long because of his alcohol problems which makes her feel like she is reaching a “real bottom.” After moving out, she meets her current partner, Kostek. It is another turning point in her life and starts a biographical metamorphosis of Marianna who gets new energy to cope with biographical problems.

The birth of their daughter in 2015 improves relations with both of her parents and makes Marianna completely stop with alcohol and change her prior-

ities (“But, since I am with Kostek, we have Aleksandra, I became mature somehow, strong and everything is for them, for my family, so everything is ok”). As her daughter experiences some serious health problems (with symptoms of epilepsy and explained by Marianna as a side effect of vaccination) she becomes also a supporter of the anti-vaccination movement and gets increasingly fascinated by legal issues connected with the health care system. She is even asked to be a local leader of the anti-vaccination movement, but she refuses (“But, I did not agree because it is a bit too big, too big an obligation for me”). Similarly to Johanna, Marianna’s concentration on her child’s good is a permanent line in her narrative. Both Marianna and Kostek do not have a permanent job. They live for six months in the United Kingdom, but Marianna does not like their new surroundings, mostly because of her neighborhood being populated by Muslims.

Upon their return to Poland, Marianna decides to finish secondary school and starts to work in the post office. She is very pleased with her work despite that she experiences quite a lot of internal competition, mostly due to the fact that having a little child, she could only work one shift (“I will be a lady from the post office. Post lady. Elegant clothes. I have to be nice at the counter, clean smelling, eloquent, computer, office work”). After some time, she was offered a part-time probation period contract; however, despite the contract being part-time, she could not choose the shifts she worked on which made it impossible to combine taking care of her daughter with her work. It is also the time when Kostek works abroad (Germany, Sweden) from time to time. At the time of the interview, both of them are searching for



new job opportunities attending the driving license courses. Marianna's biggest dream is to have a happy family and find a "clean" job in administration. She finishes her interview with a coda in which she emphasizes the symbolic "break with the painful past": "For so many years, it was going so bad for me. I wrote diaries which when we came back from Great Britain I burnt all in the heating unit. I said I did not want this past and it gave me a lot, because since I burnt them, I do not go back in my thoughts to the past. I live with what is today."

In the interview with Marianna, the dominant biographical process structure is the biographical trajectory of suffering marked by the feeling overwhelmed by powerful outer forces (Schütze 2008), which is only partially overcome by (rather fragile) maternity. A strong emphasis is placed on the desire of being a "normal girl" and having "a normal life," as well as on rather intriguing figures of "cleanness" (connected with her dream job in administration). She seems to have achieved some kind of fragile stability, but there are several potential biographical traps she might fall into, including potential alcohol problems of her fiancé, as well as lack of stable jobs.

Similarly to the interview with Johanna, there are not many references to explicitly political issues in the interview with Marianna. Implicitly, however, political statements are present in her views on the social world she lives in: she is afraid of the medical system which is accused of imposing harmful vaccination on her daughter, she is distrustful of her colleagues at work, as well as friends and family members (at whom she discerns a risk of drinking alcohol in the presence of her daughter), and she is

physically afraid of Muslims and refugees mentioning "ban on refugees" as the first thing she would do if she had power to change things in Poland. In the part in which she is asked about her political views, she says:

**Marianna:** Mhh... I am not interested in politics (4). More... I mean (\*louder until\*), maybe I am interested a bit, more about the refugees (\*). This stay in Great Britain, when we were for half a year in Great Britain. I got to hate Islam very much. Very much! We lived for three months in C. where there were thirty mosques and no white person in the street, and I had too much of them. They were rude, unpleasant, almost run over us on the pavement. They almost killed our daughter in the pram, because they run the car right into the pram, and they wanted to fight us afterwards. This was all in Great Britain. So I really took a dislike to them. So in terms of politics, this is the only thing that interests me, so they do not accept them among us.

The main fears expressed by Marianna are connected with her daughter's safety. She frames a short story from the UK in a similar manner like a story about health problems which she links with the vaccination of her daughter: there is Marianna and her family opposed to the threatening external world from which she needs to protect them. She thinks about politics as a way of defending her and her family against religious strangers she encountered in the UK and recalls as dangerous for children and aggressive, rude, and unpleasant. It fits into the central oppositions organizing the life story of Marianna which is based on the logic of "getting by," in a threatening external world. In such a context, Muslims seem to perform the same role as doctors

demanding children's vaccination: they are a part of externally imposed rules, legitimated by the dominant culture and state, and contested as they are seen as threatening fragile stability of a life world achieved by Marianna and her family.

### The Case of Marian

The third case analyzed is 22-year-old Marian, born into a working-class / low, middle-class family in a Z.-city (in Opolskie Voivodeship in south-west Poland), with his father being an electrician and mum educated as an accountant (but working as a cleaner). He has a younger brother with whom he gets along well (having at the moment a shared business, selling online games). His interview begins with a biographical process structure of institutional expectation pattern in which he presents his life as institutionally shaped and normatively defined (Schütze 2008:11) by the model of working-class educational career as an electrician, similarly to his father:

**Marian:** Eee... I finished electrical vocational secondary school. I started the school in Z.-city, in Opolskie Voivodeship. Yyy, due to some private matters, I finished it in D.-city [in Mazowieckie Voivodeship], my father is also an electrician, maybe that is where it came from, since I was young I used to go to construction sites, or other places, it helped a bit, didn't it?

When he is in technical secondary school, aged 18, his parents get divorced, after which he and his brother move with his mum to a mid-sized city in central Poland. As their financial situation at home is rather poor, he goes abroad to earn some mon-

ey and got some job in a construction site, working with much older workers. He works as an electrician, without contract, making installations. In a specific way, he frames the moment of getting employed, connecting it with the day of Warsaw uprising against the German occupation in 1944:

**Marian:** Later, when the German called me, only "Ja, Ja" [interviewee imitates German talking on the phone]. It was a bit funny, funny situation like this. Because he called when it was 1st, 1st August [Warsaw Uprising anniversary], at W hour [hour the Warsaw Uprising started] when all the sirens were on, and the German called [laughter]. And I am talking to him, I say, he hit it on the spot [laughter]. You know, I went there by bus, and what. There was no contract.

The figure of a "German employer" calling on the anniversary of the Warsaw Uprising to offer Marian a job can be interpreted in terms of ironic reference to historical experiences of conflicts, now translated into domain of work in precarious conditions, without a contract. Nevertheless, migratory experience is interpreted by Marian as a biographical turning point, in which his own decision-making power and independence were proved, as well as technical skills acquired strictly to the direction of his vocational training. From this moment on, Marian's story is focused almost exclusively on professional transformation resulting—in his own interpretation—from his courage, self-determination, and resourcefulness. Biographical problems are generally pushed into the background and not discussed: he explicitly refuses to talk about some of them which he sees as painful (e.g., divorce of parents). Upon returning to Poland from Germany, after 2,5 months,

Marian finishes his secondary vocational education and receives technical qualifications as an electrician. As his plan to become a firefighter fails during the admission process, he searches for another job in a large city (a WW.-city). Firstly, he works in a construction site, then he gets a job on an island in the Mediterranean Sea. Once he returns to Poland, he works shortly as a waiter, registers as unemployed, and finally finds a job as an electrician in a factory. The occupational accident in a plant (a machine hit into his face) is seen by him as another turning point in his life:

**Marian:** They wanted me to stay at work. I had sick leave and so on, but for me it was a definite end, “Man, you have to change something.” I went for the [IT] course. It was two months long. It was in Katowice. Yyy. With the course, let us say, I incurred some debt. I knew that if the programming would not work, would not work, this vision would not come true, then I would have had to go back abroad [laughter] and work it back. Yyy, but it worked, I finished the course, for two months I looked for work. I found work, in fact one in D. [city in the Mazowieckie Voivodeship], but yy, I was thinking about the WW.-city because here you have better perspectives in terms of this sector and yy, I got a job in the WW.-city.

Working in the IT sector is a true metamorphosis for Marian. Encouraged by the vision of good work, he takes some loans to finance the course in programming and finds a job in the WW.-city, in which he claims to earn around 5000 PLN for the last couple of months (1200 EUR), working with specific task contract (*umowa o dzieło*) first and then with contract of mandate (*umowa zlecenie*). Taking loans to do IT

training, he is motivated by media discourse on excellent working conditions and wages in the sector (“I read a lot of articles in which they wrote that programmers earn so much”). He does not see his situation as precarious and unstable even though he does not get any extra benefits. He expects to earn at least 10 thousand zlotys in a couple of years and concludes his extempore narration by saying: “The work is really good. The salary is ok, the atmosphere at work is very good, the company is great. My project is a bit poor, but this changes, it will change into something better, so, so, in professional terms, this is my best. In general [5.0].”

Despite follow up questions, Marian does not talk too much about his life beyond work: he has good relations with his mother and his brother, but no contacts with his father. He can afford living in a monitored neighborhood, renting a shared flat in a new block of flats. In his leisure time, he does street workouts, sometimes also giving some shows for children. As for the future, besides professional plans (which “will change many times”), he dreams of having a full family; indicating, likewise in earlier stories, a dream of “normality”: “to have a son, plant a tree, and build a house [laughter].” Considering himself as a socially advancing self-made man, he successfully capitalizes various occupational experiences and turns them into assets to be used for the sake of economic upgrading of his situation. Marian also considers himself a practical man who “likes to do their job well,” not even being passionate about it, but striving for good earning and respect at work. This resembles some features of traditional workers’ habitus (Bourdieu 1984) which stayed as important refer-

ence point for Marian due to his origins, despite the experience of economic advancement.

The combination of working-class dispositions to work hard and do one’s job well with the idea that “nobody ever gave me anything for free” defines not only Marian’s life strategy, but also his political views. He mentions them directly only after an explicit question, but goes on to talk about them for more than fifteen minutes in a tone marked by passion. He speaks about his support for right-wing parties (he voted for Kukiz’15 in previous election and expresses his support for extreme right, marginal politician, Marian Kowalski). Encouraged by his friend, he also joined Independence Marches organized in Warsaw by the National Movement and other far right groups on 11 November each year (“The atmosphere is incredible, because when you walk in a crowd of tens of thousands with Polish flags, singing the anthem together, this is an incredible experience”). While he strongly emphasizes his disinterest in politics (seen as a domain of incompetence and manipulation), he also describes the Independence March as an event “in which there is relatively little politics.”

Yet, despite his explicit refusal of politics, the interview with Marian includes a relatively consistent set of far-right set of statements. He combines anti-refugee views with the critique of political establishment, the promotion of LGTB marriages and child adoption (as going against “nature”), and women’s rights to abortion (seen as concerning the minority of society). He expresses his opposition both to the Civic Platform and Law and Justice. The opposition to PiS stems both from the criticism of autocracy in

the party (“they vote as they are told by their master”) and its welfare program, so-called 500 Plus, offering unconditional benefits of 500 zlotys to families with two and more children. He is against accepting refugees to Poland seeing them, in principle, as becoming the new “majority” (“I suddenly become a minority”) and welfare claimants. The anti-welfarist attitude, a part of existing political tradition represented in Poland, among others, by the KORWIN party, is linked to his idea of a “self-made man,” as well as his feeling of distributional injustice in which privileges are offered to people who do not work, including both some Poles and refugees acquiring welfare support, and hard-working majority, such as entrepreneurs who are pushed to the margins:

**Marian:** In terms of refugees, this is also much pumped up balloon. My opinion on this topic is that in general our current government behaves in such a way that here they do not want them yyy, but this is due to what terms they would come here on...They have to work...They have a different culture, but I do not know, because of that they can come maybe not in such a big group as they would like to, we know that in Germany this is at the moment a big disaster what is happening. Because now it is difficult to find a true German there. There are many Poles, many Turks, many... And because of that, that even these people later come, become a minor... became a majority in the country and yyy. I will be the host of the country, living as a true citizen, yyy, later I have no rights, because I suddenly become a minority. So I am this way. But, I have nothing against refugees as such, a family may come, but work here, not get everything for free, because we the nationals in Poland get nothing for

free. In any case, I do not respect Poles, yy who live somewhere on benefits, you know...And it is good taking benefits. I hate, hate parasites.

In the arguments of Marian, we can find a lot of statements which are pretty typical of far-right discourse. By defining himself as “not a strong racist,” he represents a pattern of “the denial of racism” (van Dijk 1992; Kajta 2017). He gives an example of his good relations with a dentist, who is Arab (who “speaks Polish” and “does his job very well”). More generally speaking, he does not see himself as a radical right supporter. He says that he did not go to the last Independence March as he got embarrassed by its Facebook profile (“Comparing it with crusades, refugees. I caught my head and said, no, leave it, you don’t talk with idiots”). Here again, similarly to Marianna and Johanna, we can see that right-wing views represent a mixture of some first-hand and media-based knowledge (in this case, Facebook or Youtube, mentioned in other parts of the interview) and involve rhetorical mitigation of their own prejudices. Differently from Johanna and Marianna, who were generally supportive of welfare system as long as it supports the “right people” (i.e., local people like them who are in need), Marian opposes the very idea of redistribution of wealth. His anti-welfarist views seem to be based on a radically individualistic anti-solidaristic vision of society divided into “brave,” self-determined men (with “a bit of luck”) and the rest of its members, including “parasites” (regardless of their nationality), taking advantage of others’ hard work. As he is an example of a person who did it on his own, he does not take into consideration other scenarios, excluding the story of his mum, who works, but still needs his financial support.

### The Case of Sven

The last case analyzed, Sven, is a 32-year-old man from an affluent middle-class family in B.-city (a large city in Germany): “a good German family” as he calls it. He is single, has no children, but would like to have a family. He describes his relation to his parents as good, particularly as they supported and invested in his education; however, the way he speaks about them sounds he felt and still feels lonely. His educational life is characterized by various changes due to matching problems. The feeling of misfitting into the system is recalled at the very beginning of the interview:

**Sven:** So... well, in grade school, I’d say, I was, uh, the outsider. Had friends in the circle of friends, but I still rubbed people the wrong way every- everywhere. I had a pretty tough time with the teachers. Uh, most of all with adults, I had some difficulties. Um, yeah, I spent a lot of time out in nature and stuff like that. Or also privately, because the school always, if I can, let’s say, I didn’t always feel like I was in good hands there. So that made me feel out of place.

Recalling school time, Sven feels his needs and interests were not addressed. After being diagnosed highly skilled “in artistic sense,” he changes to a special school—later re-changing to the old one, as the situation did not improve. Eventually, he drags himself through school, he never has good grades, and feels continuously socially isolated. Compensation for this situation is brought by his father’s garage, where he finds room to play, tinker, and try out constructions of weapons—not with straightforward lethal interest, but for engineering, technical

reasons. He (“just barely”) manages to receive a lower secondary school degree, but feels disoriented after school. His parents then pay for vocational training as a gunsmith. Having completed education, he first starts working as a salesman for interiors and some other, mostly unregistered jobs. His motivation to start working points to his critical attitude towards the idea of being welfare-dependent (similarly to Marian). After some time in several jobs, he manages to get a job as a gunsmith, but loses it due to problems with police (indicated through friends who pulled him into their trouble). Being banned to work as a gunsmith until his record is cleaned, he starts a job via temporary agency in the electronics industry, which he very much criticizes. He perceives it not only as a form of “modern slavery,” but also a government strategy to get “nice numbers,” to “push our problems away” in order to pretend progress. However, disliked temporary work functions as a stepping stone to hired employment. He is able to negotiate a real work contract and in addition to his job in the semi-conductors’ plant, he starts working as a consultant for airsoft guns in a friend’s company. He finishes his extempore narration by emphasizing his professional advancement and available opportunities.

Similarly to Marian, but differently from Marianna and Johanna, Sven’s story is predominantly work-centered. Asked about his life beyond work, Sven mentions good contact with his parents, but almost no relations with his brother who stole some money from his father. He does not have too many good contacts with friends either. For a hobby, beyond airsoft, he also did combat sports, football, lifting, and engages as a scout enjoying the work

with the children. His dream is to “start a family sometime,” which he wants to be able to provide for and have “basically a little bit of square life,” again pointing to common for all four cases aspiration to “normality.” Sven does not mention any relationships, but says of himself that he is rather shy towards women and has difficulties to express his feelings.

Sven frames his story in terms of the contradiction between his own biographical projects and the constraints imposed by the institutional world. The tension is firstly mentioned at the beginning of the interview and continues throughout the entire story. The extempore narration is centered on the history of becoming a gunsmith and being temporarily excluded from performing the learnt occupation due to conflict with law. This, in turn, forces Sven to work via temporary work agencies for some time—which he truly “hates.” He recognizes phases of precarity in his life, mainly through terminated contracts of work, that make life precarious because of the inability to plan ahead, get decent housing, and deal with banking issues (“If you want to plan, you need an open-ended employment contract in the end in this world”). In order to overcome precarity and to improve the current situation, Sven has a range of resources together with a strong sense of self-efficacy and a belief in his competences that provide him with the right level of agency to put things into action.

The sense of agency in the sphere of work and personal life is in contrast with his feeling of lack of adequate control over the public sphere defined through the dominance of those with economic power. He

criticizes politics as done mostly by companies and lobbies, something that “stinks from beginning to end.” He is also skeptical about democracy as the system in which neither those in power are people with merits nor voters have real competences to take part in the political life. He favors a more elitist system in which “if people vote, then one should take people who have something in their heads. Those, I would say, are at the very top of the social, economic, or scientific rankings, and they should decide how things are going.” Even though he is very critical of the political system, there are no traces of clear biographical experiences which brought him to vote for far-right AfD in the past elections in 2013 and “Die Partei” (a satirical and anti-systemic Party for Labor, Rule of Law, Animal Protection, Promotion of Elites and Grassroots Democratic Initiative) in 2017. The only exception might be his unfair (in his own view) treatment by the police during the case against him—illegally dealing with guns. However, his own explanation focuses on “zero trust to the political system,” including in fact AfD itself which he considers “dumb as a party”:

**Sven:** I would have voted for the AfD now, as I said, but I was afraid that they would become too strong. Because as an opposition, I like them. I think they're dumb as a party. Well, they're partially just airheads. Now here, what's the name of the one who left? Ms. Petry [the previous chair of AfD]? ((I: Yes exactly)) She seemed to have something going on in her head. She was a bit of a hardliner, though. But, now, what's that? It is really just such a Nazi thing. Although, I mean, okay, why not. Why not bring a little bit of stink to the Bundestag? Like everything always runs in one direction. But, I, as I said, I wouldn't have voted for

them now because I simply predicted the trend that they would probably (.) I was afraid they would be too strong.

Having an ironic attitude to AfD and defining himself as “definitely” not “racist” (“because I've been dealing with foreigners all my life...So racist is just plain stupid”), even though with a “slight right tendency,” he still thinks that political correctness in Germany is something covering some real problems, including the problems with multiculturalism. Asked about refugees, he answers that the problem was created by the “stupidity” of German elites who let them in, media which are “causing excitement,” and reluctance of international political community to intervene in Syria. From this perspective, the refugee crisis is interpreted in anti-systemic language as another way of “keeping nations divided” to help rule them by policy-makers. Sven is, in principle, not against helping refugees, but rather “in their home country”:

**Sven:** Quite logically, if there are refugees, then you have to help them. Well, we have to answer for that, in my opinion. You shouldn't let yourself be ripped off by bums from abroad like a complete idiot, as they are doing now, on a grand scale. Well, I'd be, the first thing would be to have families enter, for example... So I'll say we have to answer for it, we should definitely help where we can and if they really have to flee from the war, you have to help them, no question...In principle, it would have been more appropriate to create retreat areas in their home country, in my opinion.

Based on his own school experiences and reference to one of the German politics, he also points out that

the potential of conflict is an unavoidable part of multicultural society and refers to a concrete situation in his former school:

**Sven:** Helmut Schmidt once said that, uh, integration is really important, but you have to be careful out of, uh, that the cultures don't differ too much, because it offers too much potential for conflict and can destroy a lot. And that's just in many areas, right now I'm saying my former school was closed because the teachers couldn't deal with the students anymore. There was the case, for example, where a teacher had made an announcement to a Turkish pupil, something because he had beaten a girl. Then the Turkish pupil spat on the teacher and then she just rebuked him, gave him a bad mark and the like. That evening the father of the guy came along, he gives the teacher a slap in the face, for her talking to his son the way she did as a woman. And she was hot no, got no support from the school.

Similarly to Marianna, Sven builds his picture of refugees / other cultures on single experiences and makes that image more general. Not seeing himself as racist or xenophobic, he spends quite some time on criticizing religious fundamentalism and sees himself “as not a fan of religion, no matter which one,” since religion is seen by him as another (and the oldest) form of mass control. In fact, the main driver of his turn to the right-wing populist party voting seems to be related much less to some authoritarian traits (though, his criticism of democracy can indicate them) as to his individualistic critique of the dominance of any kind of system on individuals framed in a similar fashion like in the case of Marian. For instance, based on his own experiences,

he is very critical of the education system in Germany and would like his future children to get access to education promoting “their own interests,” much more individually oriented. The public sphere, in such a view, is itself a part of the system and is not treated as a serious arena of decision-making, since the real decisions are made in the backstage, by corrupt elites and hyper-influential media.

## Conclusions

In this article, we posed a question about the biographical sources of the support for right-wing populist parties granted by some young people in Poland and Germany. From a sample of biographical narrative interviews with young people in both countries who experienced various short-term and temporary forms of employment, we draw four cases of right-wing supporters. Our goal was to explore the relationship between their biographical experiences and their political views. Interestingly enough, despite the objective differences in narrators' economic and cultural resources, their biographical accounts shared some common characteristics. Firstly, the political views did not *explicitly* emerge in the course of extempore narratives, but they were discussed in the third part of interviews: sometimes just briefly (as in the case of Marianna) and sometimes with passion and at length (as in the case of Marian and Sven). It confirms that political identities, even those related to rather extreme views, do not need to be at the center of broader biographical identity of young people pointing to their general distance and distrust of politics (Szafraniec et al. 2017). Secondly, similarly to earlier studies (e.g., van Dijk 1992; Kajta 2017), in the case of interviews with right-wing

supporters we observed various strategies of rhetorical mitigation of own prejudices towards cultural Others, such as Muslims, refugees, or homosexuals. For instance, anti-refugee statements were accompanied by irony or hesitation, which can point both to their relatively weak anchoring in the narrators' personal identities and communicative situation of interviews in which extreme views were seen as better to be avoided, in line with the interpretations suggested by the "denial of racism" hypothesis.

Even though it would be misleading to define any direct, causal relationship between biographical experiences and the emergence of right-wing views, our analysis allows us to reconstruct some case-specific explanations and, perhaps, some more abstract and general observations. All four narrators presented themselves as certain kinds of "outsiders" who throughout their lives were confronted with various structural and institutional constraints. Right-wing ideas, encountered mostly through media and, sometimes, through peers and significant others (such as Marian's friend), offer some ready-made patterns of interpreting biographical predicaments and find a favorable ground in a broader context of various biographical problems, of which only some can be attributed to labor market precarity. In the case of Marianna and Johanna, the turn to the right can be linked to their insecure life situations involving both socio-economic problems and the precarious state of their family relations. In this context, cultural Others are seen as potential competitors for rare resources or an additional threat to a fragile stability of a life world of informants (cf. Dörre 2006; Sommer 2010). In the narratives of Marian and Sven who enjoyed stable employment and a family

support net (as in the case of Sven) or well-paid jobs (the case of Marian), the basis for a right-wing turn seems to be different. It is connected with a greater sense of individual agency and overcoming precarity by "own means," often in spite or against structural and systemic constraints. In this context, the distrust of political establishment (seen as corrupt and granting unjust privileges to elites) and the critique of "undeserved" social support offered to some disadvantaged segments of the society, such as refugees or welfare claimants, seem to be linked with hyper-individualistic orientations opposing an individual and the system. Needless to say that such orientations are at the core of long lasting, publicly available socio-political tradition which combines economic ultra-liberalism and cultural conservatism, probably the most visible in Marian's case. They can also be understood as a consequence of the spread of market-individualistic ideologies stressing the role of individual responsibility, discipline, and competition, which can be attributed to the disciplinary mechanisms of market-centered forms of work (Dörre 2006:28).

Given the early stage of our analysis, our study also left some issues to be addressed in further research. Firstly, it is an open question about a social distribution of the two patterns, their relationship to social background and to the social mobility of informants. Secondly, a comparative analysis of precarious and non-precarious right-wing supporters, as well as between precarious supporters of other political forces would be helpful to understand better why certain individuals experience a turn to the right while the majority still abstains from far right support.

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*Part III*

*Discourses on Transformation and  
Biographical Experience*

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## Winners and Losers of the Process of Transformation as an Etic Category versus Emic Biographical Perspective

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**Abstract** One of the common and schematic descriptions in the perspective of the 1989 breakthrough are two ways of dealing with it by people who are respectively called winners or losers of transformation. These stereotypical characteristics are not only the tool to draw the general image of effects of the transition, but are also based on the specific way of interpretation deeply rooted, for example, in neo-liberal thinking. Yet, from the perspective of an individual—so-called Schütz's *man on the street*—the categorization of winners and losers not only simplifies the description of social reality, but also it cannot be easily biographically justified because the *etic* categorization is not always relevant to the *emic* perspective. In other words, the life history of an individual, showing the main phases and events of biography, and life story—the way that one interprets his/her biographical experiences—may not correspond to each other. The analysis of these two aspects of biography (what is lived through and how it is interpreted) shows how people have dealt with the process of transformation. In the paper, it is presented on the basis of one case study.

**Keywords** Biographical Analysis; Emic; Etic; Process of Transformation

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Issues related to the great transformation change of the social system in relation to all aspects of social life (economic, political, cultural) over the last three decades have become the subject of interest of sociologists, economists, historians, lawyers, and other representatives of social sciences. No wonder, since Polish society as one of many and, at the same time, the largest in Central and Eastern Europe has undergone a radical change in the political and economic system. The dynamics of research on this process have been subordinated to the specific time frame and attempts to define when the transformation processes came to an end. As far as the first point of time reference is concerned, it was determined by anniversaries celebrated from 1989, which (also to some extent conventionally, because changes in the economic system started earlier) is symbolically described as a turning point and the beginning of a great change. Thus, we had to deal with publications analyzing the effects of transformation, for example, after 10 or 20 years (just to name a few examples: Giza-Poleszczuk, Marody, and Rychard 2000; Marody 2000a; Kochanowicz and Marody 2010; Kozłowski and Domański 2010).

It turned out to be much more difficult to define the end of the transition process. It is difficult to set a specific date here, although some scholars believe that Poland's accession to the European Union may be considered as another great opening for social processes related more to modernization than already achieved transition from the old to the new political system. For example, Mirosława Marody suggested (2004:9), "We assumed that 14 years after the introduction of fundamental political reforms,

the work of systemic transformation could be considered completed, while the foreground is the question of the direction and pace of civilization changes."

On the other hand, four years earlier, Andrzej Rychard (2000:11) wrote, "when one sometimes hears voices that the transformation has in fact ended, one can only agree with them in the sense that a certain stage of political and institutional transformations has ended. Whereas social transformation—in fact, social change—continues because it is a continuous process and runs according to a different chronology than a political one." Such perspective is much closer to the biographical approach presented here, where macro social processes are reflected in the life experiences of individuals, who, on the one hand, become their subjects and, on the other hand, by giving meaning to their actions, are interpreters and creators of social reality. In this respect, we can still analyze, even after 30 years, social results of transformation.

The starting point for the analyses presented below is my understanding of a more complex meaning of transformation as a process that cannot be definitively closed within a defined time frame. In other words, if other criteria, such as the transition to the capitalist and democratic systems, are taken into account, these changes can be placed in the period 1989-2004, whereas the transformation "continues" through the biographical consequences for the actors who have experienced it in the perspective of the individual life cycle. These were the assumptions of the research project "Experience of the Process of the Transformation in Poland. A Sociological



Comparative Analysis Based on Biographical Perspective,” in which we conducted autobiographical narrative interviews with people born in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s.<sup>1</sup> One may say that those born in the 1980s have nothing in common with the process, yet, in the research project, we try to show the sequential processual transition of social reality which consequences on different levels can be identified in individual biographies.<sup>2</sup>

In this paper, I would like to discuss just one issue related to the question how we may describe the process of dealing with the transformation changes by individuals. The query how people cope with this big social change involves the desire to estimate whether they managed the new social, political, and economic conditions successfully or they experienced failures. As a result of such thinking two terms—*winner*s and *loser*s—of transformation appeared both in the scientific and public discourse. We cannot forget that the process of systemic transformation from the very beginning has become the topic of not only scientific research, but also public, media, and political discourses. Due to the limited space of this text, I do not analyze how, when, and by whom winner/loser categories have been used in the public and, especially, political discourse. Thus, I do not intend to analyze the complicated field where great and rapid economy

and social changes have been discussed, evaluated, and still remain a token in political discourses concentrated on the effects of once chosen economy solutions, what we could observe in contemporary political discussions.

My point in this paper is that these are *etic* categories used to describe and interpret individual and group ways of dealing with systemic transformation. Analysis of biographical narrative interviews with people who experienced the time of the big change at different phases of life and coming from various social environments and milieus shows that the winner/loser categorization is not necessarily the *emic* perspective when understanding strategies of individuals coping with the new reality. I use Kenneth Pike’s (1967:37) terms well established in contemporary anthropological, as well as sociological reflection: “etic viewpoint studies behavior as from outside of a particular system,” while the “emic viewpoint results from studying behavior as from inside the system.”

I begin the text from referring to the sense and meaning of terms winners and losers which appear in some Polish research. Then, I am going to present a case study—a biographical narrative interview with a woman anonymized as Róża. This analysis is divided into two sections. In the first section, her life history will be described; in the second one, Róża’s life story. I use here “an analysis concept where the distinction between life story and life history (i.e., between the narrated personal life as related in conversation or written in the present time and the lived-through life) plays a central role” (Rosenthal 2004:49). The life history based on lived-through life

enables reconstructing the past—the dynamic of events experienced by an individual, while the life story allows us to show the past and present interpretations of these experiences. I will try to show that concentrating only on the life history aspect of the analyzed narrative can be misleading in the process of interpretation and can easily legitimate using *etic* thus imposed categories like, for instance, winners or losers. In conclusions, I show both methodological and analytical aspects of the presented study.

### Winners and Losers as Etic Categories

One of the common and schematic descriptions in the perspective of the 1989 breakthrough are two ways of dealing with it by people who are respectively called winners or losers of transformation. Differentiation between beneficiaries and victims is another way of describing the social and biographical situation of individuals representing certain social groups. It is not easy to discuss these characteristics in neutral language since both dyads are evaluative as such and, additionally, they are usually used in relation to specific frames of interpretation deeply rooted in different discourses.

The first dyad—*beneficiaries* and *victims*—highlights more the role of external social frames. According to Zdzisław Pisz (2000:112-113), “Beneficiaries are individuals who have been enabled to advance, sometimes rapidly, socially, and economically, by the transformation program and its implementation. The victims, on the other hand, are individuals and social groups whose professional and social careers were interrupted or clearly delayed by the transfor-

mation process in relation to potential opportunities stemming from the adjustment capital.” According to the author, politically and economically designed circumstances have made some individuals and/or social groups put in privileged positions—they could take advantage of the transformation. At the same time, other people, due to the same processes, have been excluded from the access to differently defined goods and paid huge biographical and social costs. Moreover, they have been subjected to processes they could hardly control or influence. This way of describing social phenomena and processes may be considered as a normative one. Its supporters usually focus on social injustice and such design of macro structural frames that neglected people’s abilities and possibilities to cope with the new economic deal. Those who are beneficiaries have taken advantages thanks to positions as members of politically, socially, or economically privileged groups. Those who are victims have paid the costs of transformation like losing social position, means for leaving, what has resulted in an increased feeling of insecurity and awareness of new divisions and inequalities in society.<sup>3</sup>

When examining different Polish sociological publications devoted to the process of transformation, especially from the time of the first two decades, we may observe that many authors focused on broadly understood social costs of transformation, social exclusion, developing inequalities and dangers generated by social and economic change (e.g.,

<sup>1</sup> This article was prepared within the project “Experience of the Process of the Transformation in Poland. A Sociological Comparative Analysis Based on Biographical Perspective,” funded by the National Science Center in Poland, the NCN project number UMO-2013/09/B/HS6/03100. A short description of the project can be found in the editorial *Thirty Years after the Great Change. The Process of Social Transformation in Poland in Biographical Research Perspective(s)* (Kazmierska in this volume).

<sup>2</sup> See articles by Katarzyna Waniek, Joanna Wygnańska, Jacek Burski in this volume.

<sup>3</sup> This kind of rhetoric is used by socially left oriented perspectives, especially in political discourse. Paradoxically enough, it is also used by contemporary right wing parties, as well as PIS (Law and Justice).

Tarkowska 2000; Bugaj 2010; Pańków 2010; Sadowski 2010). What is interesting, in my opinion, is that these critical voices were rather hardly heard in public and media discourses. One example is the research on urban poverty carried out by sociologists in Lodz since 1992. They undertook research on communities threatened with social exclusion as a result of pauperization processes. Lodz has become a natural area of research. Over twenty years of research practice has led to the establishment of the Lodz School for Research on Poverty and Social Welfare (Golczyńska-Grondas and Potoczna 2016:384).<sup>4</sup>

Social change has more frequently been introduced as a challenging, difficult, yet commonly profitable process. A lot of prominent social researchers promoted this approach consequently supporting the dynamic of social change and more or less consciously adapting the neoliberal perspective of social reality interpretation. We can see it in published studies and, moreover, learn from contemporary voices of researchers and intellectualists who took an active part in creating, maintaining, and legitimating a certain type of this discourse which we can generally characterize as neoliberal (e.g., Król 2015; Giza-Poleszczuk 2018).

According to Giza-Poleszczuk (2018), “We [sociologists] believed that it was our obvious duty not only to describe modernization, but also to actively support it, as Solidarity was previously advocated.

<sup>4</sup> Although this research gained recognition in the sociological community, it was difficult for it to reach the local authorities, which even blamed the researchers for “promoting” Lodz as a city of poverty.

Therefore, as sociologists, we were one of the most committed promoters of the new Central European order. All these Western ideas—such as meritocracy, post-industrialism, and development theories—were then uncritically accepted by us, because they came to us from a different, better world. They were an obvious counterbalance to socialism, so they had to be good.” The consequence of such thinking could be the application of winners/losers categorization in order to describe the dynamics of social change and people’s activities: “There was a venturesome middle class and “marauders,” that is, farmers from state-owned farms (so-called PGRs) or large industrial plants. The latter were treated in a careless way, in terms of clumsy people who, having supplied the rod, could not use it rationally. Instead of being blamed for the aggressive transformation, all the blame was placed on those who simply exceeded the limits of the transformation” (Giza-Poleszczuk 2018). This diagnosis of (self)sociologist way of thinking expressed in the interview from 2018 can be easily recognized in researcher’s works.

Winner/loser category was very supportive in this context. First of all, if we compare winners/losers categorization with beneficiaries/victims, the first one is focused more on an individual agency—those who win or lose are defined as actors of the *game* let it be labor market, the project of one’s professional career, or generally—biography. So, implicitly, when this categorization is used, some dose of responsibility is being taken into account. In other words, both winners and losers are considered as individuals who *did* something or *re-signed* to do anything in order to find themselves in a new social and economic system.

We may recognize this categorization in many works as a straightforwardly or implicitly used tool to describe social reality. At this point, it is not my aim to provide the reader with a full review of literature and authors. I have chosen these few examples because, in my opinion, these authors can be identified as important and opinion-forming voices in the discussion about transformation. Their work was a synthesis of empirical research and theory building on transformation as a social change. An additional argument in favor of referring to the research is the confrontation with the current critical voice of the already quoted Giza-Poleszczuk (2018). So, just to give the example—winner/loser categorization can be found in the study from 2000 where the authors (Giza-Poleszczuk, Marody, and Rychard 2000) try to nuance the typology<sup>5</sup> by showing that there is a wide gap between winners and losers, which is filled by those who, due to certain circumstances, may in the future find themselves in one or the other group. Their distinction is possible due to the introduction of two criteria: possessing (or lacking) resources, as well as knowledge and/or ignorance of the rules, that is, the degree of rationality. In this way, apart from clearly defined categories of winners and losers, the authors introduce additional ones: those who do not have resources and know that they cannot win and those who do have them, but do not know that they can use them, that is, win. The latter group is interesting in particular, because they are people who are not aware of the capitalization of their resources. In other words, as the authors point out,

<sup>5</sup> I consciously use the term typology because the authors smoothly change the winners/losers categorization into typology by developing its subtypes.

such groups of people may feel discomfort because it is difficult for them to determine whether they have benefited or lost from the system change (Giza-Poleszczuk, Marody, and Rychard 2000:37-38). This interesting and sophisticated analysis is anyway based on the assumption that the category of winners and losers can objectively describe individual attitudes and ways of dealing with the new system, and although the authors suggest that they do not intend to use normative terms, in fact they do.<sup>6</sup>

Five years later, the categorization of winners or losers was even more legitimated by using it in a book title. In 2005, Maria Jarosz edited the book entitled *Winners and Losers of Polish Transformation*. The very book cover deserves commentary. It is a piece of Canaletto painting presenting an aristocracy woman in a carriage and people belonging to other, certainly lower, classes in the background. I do not know what was the key for the cover, but if understood straightforwardly—the synonym of winner is the person who is well-off and keeps a privileged position in society.

Even more intriguing are comments in the introduction where Jarosz used the terms winner, losers, and beneficiaries. She rather avoided the word

<sup>6</sup> It is interesting that also in 2000 in another publication Mirosława Marody (2000b:77) wrote, “in the case of categories defining basic social groups, the dimension that synthesizes the most fundamental transformations within the meanings associated with them, and at the same time pointing to the most strongly experienced element of ongoing social change, seems to be the division into winners and losers.” But, just on the next page she decides to abandon these categories as not describing social mechanisms because they cannot be understood by individual actions, rather by people’s motivations, what moves scientific reasoning towards psychological and not sociological analysis.

victims. Let me quote some small excerpts, for example, “Cost of reforms for different groups is unbearable. It involved different reactions: not only passiveness and despondence, but also a desperate attempt to defend one’s affairs” (Jarosz 2005:12); “Passiveness, a sense of injustice, and the lack of fulfillment of claims [not needs] are not simply functions of poverty, but rather the result of systemic transformation that destroys the previous order which was considered as known, normal, and long-lasting” (Jarosz 2005:2-13); “We should remember that the stereotype, so widely spread in common language, of the **poor and passive, because disadvantaged**<sup>7</sup> by unfair market economy, is not only a handy tool for political proponents of the losers, but it also is *dangerous for the social order* and losers themselves. Silent approval for such explanation of the reasons for passiveness, as well as forbearance for poorly justified claims and social promises *and attempts to extend welfare activities*, more or less straining on public finances—all this may lead to the *petrification of passivity and escalation of claims*” (Jarosz 2005:15).

The language of scientific description is accompanied here by normative statements with a very clearly expressed neoliberal perspective. As I said in the beginning, it is not easy to describe big social change in neutral language, yet I was quite astonished to read this introduction describing social reality in such an evaluative manner. But, if we could find it in scientific language let alone it has been widely used in political, as well as

<sup>7</sup> Expressions originally bolded in the book. In italics I marked phrases that I intend to expose.

media and everyday discourses. Thus, stereotypical characteristics have not only become the tool to draw the general image of effects of the transition, but have been also absorbed by engaged political discourses such as, for instance, neoliberal thinking. As we know, it promotes individual independence “measured” by such items as creativity, self-development, effectiveness, innovation, self/permanent education, flexibility, agency, self-control, and responsibility, et cetera, and it also evaluates those who are considered as not successful, non-creative at all, or enough, having no abilities to deal with challenging situations, being too passive, et cetera. All these items are framed by one more aspect of neoliberal discourse, that is, the perspective of modernization and patterns of contemporary postmodern reality built in the contrast to traditional/modern society and its values. Although “neoliberal language meets the criteria of quasi-religious rhetoric, it is staged as a result of scientific analyses of organization and management, PR, and marketing” (Czyżewski 2009:93). I will come back to this topic in the conclusions.

When presenting in critical mode the above chosen examples of using winners/losers categories, I do not mean that the intuition of researchers is totally incorrect. Social imagination and sensibility, as well as observation prompt that there are people who have taken advantage and others who, to the contrary, have had big difficulties in dealing with the new reality. We could also show the dynamic of this process, especially considering the exclusion of thousands of people from the labor market in the 90s and the contemporary common phenom-

enon of precarity, especially in the case of young people.

My critical point is that such discourses not only are evaluative, may be excluding, and they simplify the interpretation of the transformation processes, but they also may invalidate other, more complex ways of understanding how individuals managed to deal with the new reality and if, how, in what way they had to reorient themselves in order to adjust to the new economy. Such a point of view justifies my presentation of the above perspective of description of the transformational reality. I have used the texts of the *in statu nascendi*, that is, the apogee of the transformational processes of the 1990s, to show not only, in my opinion, one of the dominant options of diagnosing social reality, but also to indicate in what circumstances categorization of winners and losers has been shaped. Moreover, I believe that these categories have become so catchy that if they have not dominated, they have certainly framed one of the mainstream ways of thinking about transformation.

Thus, I would like to discuss how, from the perspective of an individual, so-called Alfred Schütz’s (1990) *man on the street*, the categorization of winners and losers not only simplifies the description of social reality, but also it is difficult to be easily biographically justified because the *etic* perspective is not relevant to the *emic* one.

I would like to present a biographical narrative interview with a 44-year-old woman living in a small rural commune in Eastern Poland where the un-

employment rate in the first decade of 2000 fluctuated between 14 and 20%<sup>8</sup>; thus, was much higher and chances for professional development were far more limited than in other parts of the country.

The autobiographical narrative interview was conducted in 2016 within the framework of the aforementioned project in the interviewee’s house, and lasted about 2 hours. It is part of a collection of 90 interviews, 30 of which were conducted with people born in the 1970s. I chose this case not to make it “representative”<sup>9</sup> of a particular social group or strata, or to show a biography of a woman from a local community that could be considered a kind of periphery. The choice of this case is dictated by the following issues. First of all, on the example of the analysis of this interview, I intend to show how it could be treated as an illustration for the category of winners and losers by referring to literature and adapting a specific analytical perspective, even though these categories do not fit here. Secondly, at first glance, the inclusion of Róża’s biography in the transformation process may seem to be an over-interpretation, since her professional career begins to crystallize after 2005. I will try to show, in accordance with the logic of biographical experiences, “a narrative ‘gestalt’ that must be envisioned as an ordered sequence of personal experiences, and that orderliness implies the inner identity development of the biography incumbent” (Schütze 2008:168),

<sup>8</sup> Data according to Statistics Poland. See: <https://stat.gov.pl/en/>. Retrieved October 18, 2019.

<sup>9</sup> I am not referring, of course, to statistical representativeness, but to a situation where a case exemplifies certain patterns of experience and biographical strategies in a specific social group.

showing the continuity between the earlier and the present phases of biography. Thirdly, in the analyzed case, we will probably find unexpected solutions in terms of sources to build social capital by the interviewee.

In the case of Róża, her entry into the labor market in 1995 and a kind of moratorium, that is, safe, although by nature precarious work in an environment of high unemployment risk, allowed her to prepare for later experiences, although this preparation was not fully planned.

The interview is analyzed according to autobiographical narrative interview procedures developed by Fritz Schütze (2008). First, I will reconstruct Róża's life history—chronologically ordered biographical facts and experiences that appear in the narrative. All the data come straightforwardly from the transcription of the interview. In the part of life history, my intention is not to interpret them, but rather to focus on the presented facts and experiences. Then, I present Róża's life story, that is, the way she talks about her life experiences and how she interprets them. This part of work is based on the interview interpretation. As I am going to explain in the next section, this is the analytical division and both aspects are equally important to build the gestalt. Nevertheless, for the purpose of this article, they are characterized separately. It is possible that the reader may get a feeling that some content is repeated in the following two sections, yet, I could not find a better way of clear presentation of both aspects. If done together, it may appear quite complicated to read.

### Róża's Life History Reconstructed from Her Narrative

Róża was born in 1975 in a small rural commune (about 6 thousand inhabitants) in Eastern Poland. She was an only child, partly brought up by her grandmother when both of her parents worked. Her father was a farmer and her mother worked in the post office. Róża's grandmother was a very important significant other for her. After her death in 1991, Róża was 16 years old, her family ties were limited to mother and father relationships. This was the reason she had always dreamed about a big family and, in the future, she wanted to have many children. Róża tried to compensate for the lack of siblings by having a big group of peers, so she could never feel alone. She was a very active member of school and church youth organizations. Thus, she was quickly recognized as a very dynamic person. She was also a good student.

In the third form of secondary school, Róża got to know her future husband. In 1994, in the twelfth grade, she got pregnant, got married, and managed to pass her matriculation exam just before the delivery of her daughter. Considering her new family life situation and the lack of help from her mother who was still working, Róża was not able to continue her education. She decided to postpone her studies to the next year and took care of her baby. She planned to study Polish philology and become a teacher. However, in 1995, she got the offer of her first work and she gave up the idea of studying.

Róża became a dentist assistant and started working in the dentist's office placed in her secondary

school. The dentist woman who hired Róża is in the narrative consequently called as "my Mrs. Doctor" and "a model of a boss." Róża had worked there for ten years up to 2005.

After a half of a year since Róża had started this job, her first son was born, so she had the second child in 1996. She came back to work and, in the meantime, started training related to her work in the field of stomatology and healthcare, as well as she started evening education in postsecondary librarian college. The librarianship study lasted for two and a half years. She undertook the librarian education because of her friend who planned to become a librarian, so Róża simply joined her.

In 2000, her third child (the second son) was born. After a while Róża came back to work in the dentist's office and at the same time started looking for finance resources for individual projects because, in the future, she planned to have an agritourism business. She realized that one could apply for such funding and searched for the opportunities to take part in training on the Internet. She had some capital: a piece of land, ponds, and she wanted to build a house. For four years she had attended various training sessions according to the rule: taking part in training enables writing a project, a business plan, and applying for irreclaimable funding. According to her observation, about 50% of participants won the project. She was never successful, yet she was determined to be persistent.

At the beginning of 2000, when Róża did not work due to the delivery of her son, she had no mon-

ey.<sup>10</sup> As she said, "I didn't have enough money to buy milk for my child," she started making floral decorations and sold them with her husband in front of the church. She also said that in 2000 her husband was buying milk for the dairy company. So she as well had three cows and, "I had to milk those cows in the morning, help my husband pour the milk, prepare children for kindergarten, and drive them to the kindergarten, and arrive to work at eight."

In 2004, her third son, as the fourth of her children, was born. She planned to act according to the well-known pattern—come back to work after some time would pass from the delivery. Yet, her plans had to be changed. In 2005, her employer "Mrs. Doctor" decided to leave for Great Britain on the wave of post-accession migration. She represented the educated group of Polish migrants (mainly medical professions or engineers) who had a chance to get well paid jobs and immediately improve their economic status. Róża presented her perspective: the dentists' couple rented a small apartment in a block of flats, could raise just one child, had poor perspectives to improve their status. This event may direct our attention to the processes of change initiated by Poland's accession to the European Union. The professional career of Róża is significantly accelerating, although, as we will see, it is difficult to talk about

<sup>10</sup> It is not clear in her story, but we may conclude that her job as a dentist assistant was not based on a permanent contract and it was poorly paid. From the field notes we know that each year her contract was renewed when the doctor got new funding to run the school dentist office. By the way, we may assume that it was still exceptional that the dentist could have an office in the school building as the majority of school offices were closed in Poland at the beginning of 2000. The new regulations since September 2019 obligate school masters to establish a dentist's office.

the planned, controlled development at the beginning. It should be emphasized that the departure of dentists' couple is, of course, possible thanks to the use of new opportunity structures by opening the British labor market, but, at the same time, as Róża's narrative shows, the departure is forced by the post-transformation situation of this occupational group, when professional activity was not combined with ensuring an appropriate economic status and, to put it bluntly, it did not give the possibility to satisfy economic needs defined as basic ones.<sup>11</sup>

Having four children, Róża was unemployed and her husband had only odd jobs working as a builder, a carpenter, or a postman. However, she quickly managed to find a job in a mushroom farm. It was the only company offering any jobs in the region. Her baby boy was just one month old. She says: "It was some employment without agreement, although perhaps I was hired part-time or something like that," what suggests that she worked without any contract and insurance or she was hired for a fixed-term contract just part-time and worked more than full time, so the biggest part of her work was done as illegal employment, thus not reported, enabling to avoid security costs. It was exhaustive work, sometimes lasting 12 hours, requiring flexibility when growing mushrooms had

<sup>11</sup> The common-sense thinking about educated people and especially from the field of medical work presents this group as economically privileged. Yet, as materials collected in the mentioned project (see: Waniek 2016), as well as in other research contexts show (Kazmierska, Piotrowski, and Waniek 2012), the transformation, especially at the turn of the 1990s and the first half of the 2000s (i.e., when Róża works in a dentist's office), was for many professional groups an experience related to the loss of economic status or job at all.

to be picked up on time. However, this time she could leave her baby because her mother had been already retired and could take care of her grandson, what was a real relief for Róża. She worked there for one year, and being falsely accused of saying bad words about the boss, she got irritated and dropped the job immediately.

At the same time she got the internship at school as a cleaner. After a month, when a new opportunity appeared, Róża took a one month leave and she went to Norway for a month, where she earned some money to invest in agritourism—she could buy a piece of land nearby her house. This part of her story is not clear enough. It is difficult to understand if she got an internship still working in a mushroom company. When she quit the mushroom farm, she was unemployed for just a week.

After a week Róża got a call from the library master. One of the librarians went on maternity leave and Róża was asked to replace her, starting the next day. She was expected to work only for the time of maternity leave, but because the librarian extended the leave, she had worked in the library for more than 2 years from 2007 up to the beginning of 2010. Róża developed different social activities in the library treating it also as the culture and leisure center for the local community. During this time she got a bachelor degree (two years of postsecondary librarian education were accepted as part of bachelor studies) and she wrote a Master thesis, getting her M.A. This extramural studies at the University of Warsaw gave her the opportunity to meet people from different parts of Poland working in institutions of culture. The network of

colleagues she had built appeared to be very fruitful in the coming future.

In 2010, just after finishing working in the community library, she was employed in the school library for a year as the substitute because a woman who worked in the library took a one year leave. Róża got this work being recognized as an active person when she successfully tried to introduce scouting in the school. It was her own initiative. Being fascinated with the idea of European scouting (thanks to a girl scout met on a train during her travel to Warsaw University), she proposed the school master organizing scouting. The scenario from the past two years was repeated: library became a lively cultural center for the whole school. Róża was very respected and appreciated by the school master, yet she had to leave after a year in January 2011, as the person she was substituting came back to work.

On the last day of her work in the school library, she got an email that she won the project for establishing agritourism. She registered her business, built the house, and had her first tourists. According to the rules, for the first year, she had health and pension insurance paid by the state. After a year she deregistered the company. It was September 2011, and she was jobless again. She got just two paid hours a week at school to work with scouts.

As we could see up to this time Róża had completed her education, got experience in running her own business, learned how to apply for a job; thus, she sent lots of applications with her professional curriculum vitae to different places. In the meantime,

she got an offer to substitute a librarian in the neighboring town. The offer was for a year, and she obviously accepted it. But, on the same day, Róża got a phone call from the mayor (who read her CV) with an offer of a permanent job as a director of the newly built Culture Center. At the beginning she was hesitant as she had no experience in managing human resources, but after having discussed the issue with her family, she accepted the job and was appointed to the position of the director on the 1st of January 2012. Since then Róża has been working successfully in the Culture Center. She had to organize work, got all administration documents for the new institution, and develop its activity. This was the time when she used the network of relations built during her studies in Warsaw.

Róża has been recognized as a very good animator and manager. She is respected in her community, awarded for her work. The Center is a very lively place focused on social and cultural needs of the local community members, promoting folk and higher culture. Róża is also personally involved in many social activities; she often acts in the field of social care and charity as she finds her local social welfare center as not effective enough. Up to now she also makes floral decorations and sells them. She is no longer desperate for money, but she simply likes it.

Of course, Róża's life history can be filled with many other details connected with her family relationships, her husband's professional career, short description of her children's biographies, but I do not have the space to develop these topics. To sum up the presented characteristic, we can say that so far Róża, being 44, has been active on the labor

market for 25 years, she developed her education by achieving an MA degree, and she is permanently taking part in courses, training, and workshops, some of them she organizes herself in the Culture Center. Her professional CV is very rich: she worked in the healthcare system (dentist assistant), as an unskilled worker (cleaner, mushroom picker, florist in Norway), as a librarian and culture animator (in a public library and at school also in school day rooms), she runs her own private business and developed the idea of agritourism, she is the director of the Culture Center.

If we analyze these facts of her biography in the context of social circumstances and milieu, we should consider that she is the inhabitant of a respectively small rural community where agriculture is the main source of living. The majority of inhabitants have their own small farms and they mainly grow fruits or vegetables. Thus, although in, for example, 2004, according to the statistics, the unemployment rate of 13% was lower in comparison with the whole region (about 18%), at the same time the figures do not reflect the real social problem of unemployment when the majority of households having the status of farms were not able to maintain just from farming. Róža's story about searching for work and the status of jobs she got shows that it was very difficult to get a stable position and most of her jobs had the status of fixed-term contracts of employment, renewed many times instead of being replaced by a permanent contract.<sup>12</sup> It is enough to say that Róža

<sup>12</sup> In Polish language, they started to be called *junk contracts* as it gave the illusion of real work agreement; up to January 2016 the employer was not obliged to pay pension funds for fixed-term contracts. Reducing costs of work had been treated as one of the strategies to lower unemployment, but from the

has worked for 10 years without a permanent contract of employment in the dentist office, and she probably did not have any contract in the mushroom farm. Also, her husband was in the same situation. From this perspective, we can say that, for the main part of her work time, she was in a precarious situation, also including the jobs she did substituting librarians.

At the same time, when we look at Róža's professional curriculum vitae and the strategies she undertook to get out of trouble, we can describe her career using the rich vocabulary of contemporary neoliberal language. We can characterize Róža as: a person who actively searches for a job, who is flexible and ready to face difficulties even if she must work in underqualified positions, she permanently develops her skills, knowledge, and competences, is a very good example of life-long education, she is very creative and has the ability to animate the environment, she finds solutions and never gives up, she has a master plan for her life, she is open and not only easily develops relationships and networks, but she also knows how to use them in the future, she is very efficient in using opportunity structures like different state and European funding, workshops, projects, she is very flexible and has the ability to adjust to certain circumstances, she is a real leader in her community, deeply engaged in its life, she develops civil society organizations.

To conclude, she can be a very good example of a person who successfully dealt with the changes,

perspective of the employee, it was a precarious situation generating neither stable prospects for the future nor pension or even health insurance.

a beneficiary who can be put as a positive example, or even a perfect model to follow. Here, we could finish our description with the conclusion that, even in difficult life circumstances (early pregnancy), fix-term/no contracts, precarious situations, and difficult labor markets, Róža could manage thanks to all the enumerated virtues of her character and she could be qualified as not only the winner of transformation time, but also a beneficiary of EU opportunity structures. I do not claim that it would be a false image of her biography. Yet, we should also look at her life story—the way she tells her life, the language she uses to describe and interpret her life experiences.

### Róža's Life Story

Having in mind the described chronology of Róža's biographical experiences, I will show now how the narrator presents them in her story. Again, I will focus mainly on her professional career. Thus, I will present these excerpts of her main narrative part related to turning points in her activity on the labor market.<sup>13</sup> As I mentioned, I must, to some extent, come back to some already presented episodes, which can arouse a feeling of repetition, but I would like to show how the same episode is interpreted by the narrator. In such a way, we may say that in the life history section, I presented the etic perspective—reconstructed Róža's life, whereas now, by explaining the contexts of her experiences and the meaning she gives them, I will try to present the emic perspective.

<sup>13</sup> All the fragments come from the first main part of the narrative interview when Róža spontaneously talks about her life without any interviewer's questions.

Her first job in the dentist office lasted for 10 years. Róža started it being 20 years old, yet with the experience of motherhood. The language she uses to describe her boss resembles a mother-daughter relationship.

I had a wonderful woman doctor, who claimed I didn't need any experience, she would explain everything to me. I needed to take a few courses and they wanted to hire a dentist assistant...My doctor was wonderful, she was only six years older than me. Incredible, she has just left for England, we're still in touch. We write letters, she always visits me when she comes here, she simply showed me a model of a boss. She has this personality, I never felt stressed when going to work. She was always clear, direct. When I came to work the first day, she explained everything to me. And later she never double checked me, never. Be it sanitary inspection, control, or something else, I took everything on my shoulders. And she knew she could simply trust me. That's why it was so encouraging, I simply knew that I do well and the control of sanitary inspection was OK.

When describing the attitude towards her boss, Róža is focused on personal, almost family ties, she distances from the language of professional, institutional relationships typical for a work environment. It is not the language used by persons focused on their professional career and development. Róža tries to be a devoted worker and the relation is built on mutual trust and not on professional procedures. Referring to the classical typology by Ferdinand Tönnies (1988), we may say that Róža frames her work in *Gemeinschaft*, what can be observed based

on spontaneous arousal of emotions and expressions of sentiment.

We may assume that during the first ten years of her work in the dentist's office Róża gained experience and maturity. In the meantime, she had three more children, she completed post-secondary librarian college. At the same time, it should be noticed that librarianship was not her own biographical plan. It was undertaken due to two reasons: firstly, her mother insisted that Róża continue her education after breaking her plans due to the first early pregnancy; secondly, she followed her friend because she did not want to study alone. Again, her agency is framed not by neoliberal standards of individual, planned, independent biography, but by well-known and tested *Gemeinschaft* patterns—family ties and friendship.

We can also say that although Róża undertook different initiatives during her first ten years of work (besides those aforementioned she took part in training and applied for funding to start a private business), first of all, she appreciated the stable position of her work and particular family relationship with Mrs. Doctor. She never complains in the interview that for ten years she did not have a regular permanent contract, it was renewed each year as each year the dentist was receiving a new contract and funding to run the dentist office at school. So, although it was a precarious situation and probably not a well-paid job, its guarantee was defined not in frames of institutional management, but “face to face” trust relationship.

The next few years, which can be described as difficult yet a successful development of Róża's professional career, are presented by the narrator in a totally different mood. We can point here to at least three threads: the risk of trajectory of suffering; finding the solution in local community trust—relations, as well as family ties; looking for external help or intervention. All these three threads merge, but they should be analytically distinguished.

From the life history description we can imagine that, although Róża lost or ended her jobs a few times, she could immediately find a new one. This may create the illusion that it was not only her openness and flexibility, but also open possibilities on the local labor market that enabled her to find a new job. However, when we see how Róża describes these moments in her narrative, it appears that they were connected with the experience of trajectory of suffering.<sup>14</sup> Its strong potential could be stopped by getting new jobs, but its danger was experienced very deeply. Below I present a part of her narrative divided into three fragments in order to show how she develops her story and what kind of interpretation stands behind it.

When Róża learns that she could no longer work in the dentist's office, she says:

So, Janek was born and I intended to come back to work. I am about to go and tell the doctor I want to come back in a month, and my doctor let me know

<sup>14</sup> Trajectory of suffering is the process structure experienced when an individual is suppressed by circumstances that take control of one's life course (see: Riemann and Schütze 1991).

that, unfortunately, I can't return to work. I had simply **tears in my eyes, I don't know what's going on, how did I deserve it.**<sup>15</sup> Mrs. Doctor says nothing has really happened, she says they got a contract in England. Her husband was a dentist and says there are just way better prospects there, you know. They packed up and left for England, even more understandable that they had one child and better money there. **I was in despair.** I was left stranded with four children, without a job. My husband took odd jobs, he made coffins, he's a carpenter and a builder err he was working as a postman too. Simply all professions, he took all jobs, but every job was temporary. And, I say, what will I do, for me it was a **total disaster.**

Róża wanted to continue her biographical plan to work for “the good master,” but when she was informed that her contract could not be prolonged, the first interpretation that came to her mind was self-accusation about having done something wrong. It is a very interesting language construction—“how did I deserve [to be fired]”. It shows not only a very personal relationship with her boss, but also the interpretation of her situation in terms of liegemen-master relation. This language of dependence is built on the bases of trust and ego-centric relationship, and it cannot be recognized as modern work relations. From other parts of this quotation we can learn about the social frame of the situation. Róża appears to be privileged having a stable position (although, objectively, each time it was just a one year contract with the promise of renewal), whereas her husband's situation is very unstable. As I wrote earlier, this part of Poland was endangered by high

<sup>15</sup> In bold I mark expressions exposing trajectory experience.

unemployment and official figures did not illustrate the real phenomenon as those who had small properties, like 1 hectare, were qualified as farmers (and were not included in the statistics of the labor market), although they had no chance to make a living from farming on such a small piece of land. Róża was in a similar situation, although her work at the dentist office, framed by a good relationship with her master doctor, gave her the illusion of stability. In fact, it was also a precarious situation. On the other hand, in comparison with her husband, she described it as safe and stable. In Róża's story, the year 2005 was the first time she felt insecure and had to fight for the solutions to maintain the family. The words like “total despair,” “disaster,” “tears in my eyes” express the experience that the potential of trajectory of suffering had just been opened. As we could see when analyzing further parts of her story, she reports her experiences in the mode of building-up the trajectory potential (Riemann and Schütze 1991:349). This potential in Róża's story approaches and withdraws a few times. She continues her narration:

But, when Janek was one month old at the most and there's a mushroom farm nearby, so I went and asked if they would hire me. And they hired me for a trial week. As I was working fast, they hired me at once. It was some employment without agreement, although, perhaps, I was hired part-time or something like that. And I was working on that mushroom farm for a year. Sometimes my heart ached because we were supposed to work for eight hours, let's say, and there were lots of mushrooms and we could come back home after twelve hours. The child was small, my breasts hurt, this job was a painful experience. (.) 'Cause they

wouldn't let us go home for a while, but I had to express the milk, all I earned, my mum here was taking care of Janek 'cause she had retired already. So, thank God, I had a safe haven of sorts at home 'cause mum would look after the children. So, I, you know, needed to earn for milk for children, right.

This fragment goes just after the previous quotation. We may say that, actually, the trajectory did not develop or even start. But, if we analyze the language she uses and the situation she is put in, we can easily recognize the trajectory potential. We see that Róża reacted immediately, she revised her plans and found a new job. Probably, if she could have continued her work at the dentist office, she would not have come back to work just after a month from the delivery. The new unstable situation made her react as soon as possible, what can be interpreted as an attempt to overcome the trajectory. Again, this situation can be interpreted from two perspectives: it can be treated as Róża's ability to react and act in difficulties. She can be presented as a creative person with agency, having the ability to deal with difficult situations and adapting to the needs of the labor market. This interpretation stops at the level of facts and acts, but, if we consider how Róża presents her new work and what she exposes, the image is more complicated. First of all, as already noticed, we can assume that Róża had not planned such a quick return to work. Yet, when she lost her stable position, she was in despair about the possibility of staying jobless and compulsorily looked for a new job. Secondly, compared to a dental assistant, the new job was not a social advancement—on the contrary, it was a degradation. Róża started working as an unskilled laborer in, as we know from the con-

textual knowledge, the only workplace offering any kind of employment. Thus, both the decision to take up this job quickly and its nature show that Róża saw her situation as extremely difficult. Finding this job only to a certain extent made it possible to control the trajectory risk, because, as the description shows, the work itself was very hard, entailed the necessity of working overtime, and the lack of stability of employment. At this time, Róża was balancing between an "intentional and conditional state of mind" (Riemann and Schütze 1991:349).

Thus, taking into account the analysis of the narrative, it is difficult to expose the agency and subjectivity—Róża had to adapt to difficult external circumstances, which put her in the position of a victim in this respect. The only favorable context turns out to be her family capital—her mother/grandmother retired and could take care of Róża's children.<sup>16</sup>

She continues:

And I was working for a year. Then, I was accused of verbally abusing my boss. Somebody did it and they heard it and they said the voice was similar to mine. And they accused me that it was probably my voice, it was me. My workmates say that Róża doesn't swear, all right, but the voice sounded similar. So, it was probably the right stimulus at the right time. So, I took off the apron, took off those rubber boots which one wears while picking mushrooms and said: "If Ms. boss thinks that I did it, so I'd like

<sup>16</sup> It is worth noting here, by the way, that we are dealing with a reproduction of family relations models—Róża herself was raised, to a large extent, by her grandmother, because her mother worked.

to thank you for this job and quit." They apologized to me later, I say, pay me out my wage, please, and that's it. I came back home, **was in despair for a week and then suddenly the library boss rings** me and says that my workmate left for maternity leave and she needs someone. I say: "When? I graduated from librarianship study. When? From tomorrow." I remember I was vacuum cleaning then, I dropped it and couldn't wait for tomorrow. That the madam from the library rang me at home is quite amazing, told me to come to work. **I say, beloved God, it must be some, I don't know, God's intervention.** And I went to that work.

The above fragment confirms the earlier description—the work on the mushroom farm was very hard and, what is more important for Róża, not based on the relationship of trust. All this causes the impulse-driven quitting the job—in a literal and metaphorical sense—she took off the apron and left. Taking into account Róża's care for the protection of her family, at the same time we can imagine that working on the mushroom farm must have been beyond her physical and mental strength. She decided to take a desperate step, which, again, brought the potential of the trajectory closer and caused a feeling of despair. Fortunately, it only lasted for a week. A picturesque and detailed reconstruction of the scene of answering the phone with a job offer shows how important this event was. At this particular moment, in Róża's life, the trajectory potential was stopped once again. It appeared also to be a turning point in the perspective of the further biography, when Róża started to develop her professional activity, which will eventually lead her to the moment when she is telling her life story.

In this fragment, appear two more threads to be considered. First of all, we find here a reference to transcendence. Here, and in the following passages, Róża does not speak about the coincidence or agency in relation to her own competence, but of God's intervention. As it turns out from all the self-presentation in the interview, these are not only rhetorical phrases, but a sincere conviction resulting from the narrator's religiosity. Róża is a strong believer and she interprets her life within the frame of her faith and God's agency. I will return to this thread again. Secondly, an important element determining the chances of Róża on the labor market is the mutual relations between local milieu and the labor market. Róża replaces her colleague at work. From a further fragment of the narrative we learn that this position was originally intended for the cousin of the mayor. However, the cousin was not interested enough in it, nor did she have any qualifications. Demonstrating her high competence, Róża soon gained the recognition of the mayor and was employed legally.<sup>17</sup>

As we know from Róża's life history, she managed to work as a replacement for more than two years. Then she got the opportunity to work in the school library as a replacement. Here comes the next

<sup>17</sup> For a while the library master was informing the mayor that Róża worked as a volunteer, although she was somehow paid for her work. In this short description of relationships, we see that positions in the local milieu are delegated through the mixture of networks and competences. Between the lines, Róża sometimes suggests that in such a local community mutual relations and influences are important and tensions may arise. It should be stressed, however, that from the perspective of her biographical experience, these issues are invalidated by her. In other words, her narrative is not devoted to the character of social relationships typical for or specific to the local community. Róża's story is devoted to her biographical experiences inscribed in the reality of this community.



fragment when she describes her situation after a year of work as a school librarian:

Five years ago, in 2009, that's right, it was six years ago already. The headmaster came up himself and says: "Róża, you should stay here." **However, unfortunately, my agreement was only for a year, my colleague returned. And I simply, I was crying,** the deputy headmistress was crying, 'cause I just found myself there. But, unfortunately, **it's a normal course of events, I had to leave.** (.) So, what then, I say, I remember I finished on the tenth of my agreement came to an end on the tenth of January, the agreement was signed and it was **simply a great despair on the last day of work.** And I'm sitting in the library in front of a computer, it's over, I need to leave. And I open my email box and I read I won a project, forty thousand for an agritourism business. **And I simply really don't know if there you are God and protecting me.** So, there was just no break. My agreement came to an end, I set up my company right away, agritourism business, it was obligatory to lead this for a year. So, I got forty thousand, we built a house/it wasn't enough to build, but at least enough for the roof and furniture, so I was leading that activity for a year. I had to be self-employed, it's closed now, but I'd like to do it in the future. (.) So, social security premiums were paid for another year, I had no break from work, 'cause I finished work at school I started my business activity.

In this fragment, the trajectory potential is hidden—Róża does not have to wait for another chance as she smoothly moves from one job to another. However, there are a few issues worth considering. First of all, the trajectory threat, al-

though eliminated, does exist. The narrator again uses the same language: "It was **simply a great despair on the last day of work.**" Secondly, the human relationship is again in the foreground. Róża's story suggests that she was a more active worker, better at fulfilling her tasks than the person she replaced. The logic of the neoliberal labor market would suggest the dismissal of the previous librarian and the continuation of cooperation with Róża. However, this is not her post, it belongs to a person on a one-year leave. Relationships of work, trust, and responsibility are more important than the competence and creativity of an individual. Thirdly, once again, there is a reference to God's intervention. Several attempts to apply for a small business grant had failed—the fact that Róża received it at the moment she desperately needed support could not be described by her as just a fortunate coincidence.

Let me quote another fragment of the story in which Róża refers to the last turning point in her professional biography. After running her business for one year, when security premiums were paid by the state, she closed the company because she could not afford paying security premiums by herself.

And what, another year passed by. And again, they stopped paying social security premiums, closed my company, and what, nothing again, and what. (.) I was in church in September, yes. Children were going, my scouts, all were going to the opening of the school year, **the mass on the opening of the school year, all are going. I remember clearly I was standing with tears in my eyes near the organs, every-**

**body is going to work, and I put so much heart into this profession and I don't have a job again.** I remember I was the last one to go down the stairs in church and nothing. And again with those scouts, as I had, I was meeting them once a week, and, but the headmaster says go to the mayor, he should assign you some hours. And the mayor assigned me two hours at school, total madness, two hours a week isn't much. Anyway, I was happy even with it, 'cause I was doing whatever I could with scout. And my headmaster says: "Listen, in D. [small village in Southeast Poland] some librarian is going on maternity leave again."

Further on, Róża reconstructs in great detail the conversation with the library director and with the mayor, who offers her the job of a director of the culture center. Róża accepts it after two days of reflection—as she says, she had no experience in human resources management. The family convinced her that this was an opportunity for her and for the whole family—for the first time it was possible to stabilize the professional career and life situation of the whole family. From that time she has taken up the post until today—she has been working as the director of the cultural center. This fragment (if we take it as a whole, including also its not quoted part) is rich in detailed descriptions of conversations and interactive scenes, what indicates the significance of the sequence of events and their experience in the life of the narrator. But, let me go back to the quoted excerpt. Here, too, we are dealing with a meticulous reconstruction of the scene, the consequence of which is not a sudden turn of events (as it happened in the described "vacuuming" scene when Róża answered the

phone with a job offer), but its aim is to recreate the emotions accompanying the narrator. This is another moment of suffering connected with inability to take up the work that the narrator has all the competences to perform. Not without significance for the whole narrative is the fact that Róża invokes a scene in a church, during a mass—again, we have here a reference to transcendence and, although Róża does not say it directly at this point, the interpretative framework that she gives to her whole story requires us to interpret this fragment as another call for God's intervention.

### What Can We Learn from This Single Case Study?

In Róża's life story, it is difficult to look for a planned, rational project of her life. The main theme of her narrative, expressed literally in the coda, is the conviction, "so I think it should work out somehow." It is based on a deep religiousness and a sincere trust in people. Using William James' (2017) statement, she has *the will to believe* both in terms of religious convictions and one's ability to accomplish tasks that require confidence. The key to understanding her biographical experiences is trust at different levels: in God, people, the local community.

The conviction of the presence of God in the form of his intervention in difficult situations is the consequence of Róża's deep and sincere religiousness. It is related to belonging to a local community (this part of Poland is characterized by a high degree of religiousness) and is, at the same time, a living religion, practiced from

childhood through various activities such as participation in the school choirs, leading prayer groups, youth camps organized by the priest, pilgrimages to Czestochowa. Róża does not emanate her religiousness in an interview, but includes it naturally in the course of events and experiences, considering it as something normal and obvious. She also blurs the boundaries between the sacred and the profane, which overlaps with the division into the private and public spheres. Her description of relations at work is very significant.

I mean, I'm extremely pleased with my work. I manage a nice crew, I hired my employees myself. It wasn't like I came here and started managing a group, which was created. But, I just selected my team members, some of them had an internship here before, some sent applications directly to me. And I make a very nice group at work. We also joined a foundation Orszak Trzech Króli.<sup>18</sup> I have organized a parade in Z. (small country town in Southeast Poland) twice and they also have such err sort of challenged everyone who belongs, that it was possible to join them and pray the Angelus at noon. So, we always set our alarm clocks in the office, everyone at work knows they go on the carpet in the director's office at noon and pray the Angelus. So, it's very inspiring for us/ and no one from outside knows about our secret. They don't even know about it, but it's just our, our professional secret. We meet there in my office for some five minutes, pray the Angelus and disperse. I guess that we'll handle it somehow.

As we can see, Róża smoothly moves from the context of a public institution to the sphere of religious activities and vice versa. In her story, they are inseparable, whereas the strict division of these two spheres is characteristic to modern society. Very interesting here are rhetorical phrases usually used in the context of institutional relations in the world of work, for example, "they go on the carpet in the director's office"—this term is used with a distance to the commonly understood "to be called on the carpet," which usually means difficult confrontation with the boss, where the relations of power are revealed. On the other hand, the term "our professional secret," which usually describes the accumulation of professional competences here, is transferred to the sphere of non-professional (but highly bond-forming) activities.

Trust in people is revealed in various dimensions of biographical experiences, from the described relationship between Róża and her grandmother, then with Mrs. Doctor, through building a network of relations in youth work or with employees of cultural institutions scattered all over Poland, with whom Róża studied in Warsaw and now uses these contacts in her work. In each of these dimensions, she is a meaning resource; how to deal with relationships and trust relation shapes her attitude to other people, thus her experience is both formed and based on the tradition of doing social relations. This trust in people is supported by and at the same time builds the trust of the local community. In this context, Róża turned out to be a master of social work in terms of symbolic

interactionism.<sup>19</sup> All that she does is not supported by some kind of her individual plan—the power of doing social innovation comes from culture and community. At the same time, she has the ability to construct new opportunity structures for the local community.

Although Róża has always been reconciled with her life, trusting that "somehow it should be worked out" has allowed her to take on new challenges that are not formulated in the biographical action scheme. They *just* happen, but, as a result, lead her to a metamorphosis<sup>20</sup>—a radical positive change in her life. She experiences a social upgrade in an objective and subjective sense: she has a prestigious position in her local community and she can fulfill her dream of working with people:

It was my dream to be a teacher, to start with, I was the youngest, I mean, in this part of R. (small village in Southeast Poland) to lead kids to May prayers, I was always gathering a group for church services and I was sort of a leader. (.) So, a spirit of leadership and guardianship was always running in my blood, therefore I wanted to be a teacher. And I was thinking a lot about Polish philology.

She has not become a teacher, but she achieved much more gaining the ability of being a "fulltime" leader. What is more interesting, the metamorpho-

<sup>19</sup> In the narrative, Róża gives many examples of her activity in the field of social work and charity. They are undertaken with family members and local inhabitants. She does it apart from her professional activity.

<sup>20</sup> Metamorphosis is the process structure of an unexpected, positive change in one's life which makes it possible to discover new possibilities that may lead to a radical change of one's life (Schütze 2008).

sis mode becomes in a way a constant pattern of her action. We can even describe it as a metamorphosis potential<sup>21</sup> which, in a way, eliminates the trajectory potential. It is undertaken in the fashion of happening events that she meets on her way, not in the mode of expectations and biographical plans. Such an attitude is possible because her main biographical resource is a trust relationship.

So, we are dealing with a life story rooted in milieu and community oriented, but, at the same time, strongly individualized, characterized by resourcefulness. I refer here to the analytical dimensions developed in the research *Biography and National Identity*, where rootedness in milieu is described as "placing one's own biographical and interbiographical processes (e.g., family processes) in the local microenvironmental plan" (Czyżewski 1997:46). In the case of Róża, although her story shows some, so to speak, universal features of a social activist and leader, it is also clear that they gain biographical significance in the local milieu. It is not a question of saying that Róża would not be able to develop elsewhere, but of exposing the symbiosis of her biographical experiences and the process of giving them meaning by including them in the local community.

In the mentioned research, resourcefulness was defined as "coping with the requirements of a micro-social situation characterized by dominant macro-historical conditions" (Czyżewski 1997:46) and diagnosed as one of the characteristics of

<sup>21</sup> I would like to thank the reviewer of my article, whose name I do not know, for suggesting the idea of a potential metamorphosis and cultural resilience.

the Polish society's cultural resources. This is very visible in Róża's narrative. The belief that "it should work out somehow" is connected with active searching for solutions and coping with crisis situations. Researchers in the commented project enumerated two dimensions of resourcefulness: as dealing with trajectories of suffering and as a feature of an autonomous action plan (Czyżewski 1997). Róża's narrative shows that resourcefulness can also be associated with a metamorphosis leading to a significant, positive change in life. Undoubtedly, the presented case is an example of launching the culturally rooted resources of the symbolic universe characteristic of Polish society. We can also notice that an individual usually tries to control trajectory potential by introducing a biographical action scheme. In Róża's case, it is rather metamorphosis due to her ability to attach readiness to accept appearing solutions.

One can also try to relate Róża's narrative to another notion of resilience, recently used in social sciences. It is a concept quite widely used in psychology, educational sciences (where it has been successfully applied to both children and adults capable of overcoming unfavorable life conditions), and in community/ecological systems studies, where it has been used in research on natural and man-made disasters. Such studies show that resilience is at the same time the process of, capacity for, and outcome of, successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances (Masten, Best, and Garmezy 1990; Williams 2008; Endress 2015). Many models and theories of resilience, which so far have been developed in the social sciences, tend to refer to resilience, to put it generally,

in terms of the capacity of an individual, a community, or an ecological system to return to its *original* shape *after* cessation of, or overcoming, stressful and disturbing circumstances. In such a context, resilience is defined as the ability of an individual, a family, a community, a region, or a country to withstand, adapt, and recover from stresses and shocks caused by crises and disasters. The role of the community and local community, in particular, could be vital for surviving a crisis (Chaskin 2008). The narratives of resilience appear as normative constructions of an understanding of "good coping," like particular expectations of community members to be able to adapt to the situation of crisis and, which in an opposite case of inability to adapt, might lead to stigmatization of individuals and whole communities (Harrison 2012).

This concept was somehow reintroduced into the scientific discourse during the last crisis in 2008. The crisis in the sphere of finance was quickly transferred into social problems, for example, increased unemployment, especially among young people, loss of trust in public institutions, et cetera. As I noticed, resilience aims at returning to the state before the crisis. It can be said that Róża's activity may be characterized by resilience, she has the ability to find solutions and act quickly in crisis situations in order to return to the previous state. Yet, it is a specific kind of resilience that may be called *cultural resilience*. Róża successfully uses "old" values in the "new" world. Whenever she finds herself in a new situation, she adapts to new opportunities, but in traditional frames. So we can notice a paradox here. The transformation process assumed a change without the intention of

returning to the previous state. Meanwhile, Róża implements transformational changes through resourcefulness, but also through resilience. In fact, the point is that nothing should change in the field of the construction of social life and the traditional hierarchy of values. In a sense, it is about the return/maintenance of the status quo.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, Róża's case exemplifies the main paradox—the merging of modernity and traditional society values. She uses both in order to give meaning to her biographical experiences, as well as be an active actor in the process of local community development. She is an example of a leader who moves effectively in the contemporary reality of a modernized society and metamorphosis potential in her biography can be well attached to the expectation of a neoliberal system where the individual is "an 'entrepreneur of himself,' who constitutes capital for him-/herself and who becomes a producer of him-/herself" (Czyżewski 2009:91). But, we can hardly find such auto presentation in Róża's narrative. To the contrary, what we find is that the interpretation of her life story requires references to a language that characterizes society with traditional values. Thus, in the presented case, the transformational changes do not follow the model of a complete modernization of social life if we understand them as a unidirectional process with clearly identifiable characteristics (Joas 2016). The example of such a perspective can be seen in Giza-Poleszczuk's critical statement. "Religiousness of Poles is presented [in media discourse] as the

<sup>22</sup> It is not, of course, about the issues of systemic change in the political dimension and the dream to come back to the political system before 1989. Such resentments are also part of some kind of nostalgic thinking, but it is a completely different problem that I do not discuss in this paper.

main barrier blocking us from modernity. Hence, the great enthusiasm for all the statistics showing the progress of our secularization. And yet religion is not a slavery that hinders progress, but an ethical attitude that is supposed to be a testimony to such values as love of neighbor, kindness, or compassion. Religion is therefore an essential 'social glue' that allows people to be generous to themselves. Without such generosity, all human relationships are reduced to a commercial system. Society then ceases to exist. That is why the theory of modernization applied here, in which the traditional society with its values is a barrier to modernity, was absurd" (Giza-Poleszczuk 2018).

The quote describes the mechanism of creating the mainstream vision of social change—we are able to build a common world with others, only then we exclude the Other—strangers to such an extent that we have the right to despise them. The case of Róża is problematic for such a perspective: her activity in the professional and social sphere is possible to be carried out successfully since it is based on traditional values, and the local community will develop on the basis of them and not in contrast to them, for example, in relation to a neoliberal social project. Thus, the conservative and traditional Róża, cultivating family, religious, and community values has at the same time become a carrier of the values of civil society and makes effective use of modern opportunity structures. What is more, these features become a social glue that integrates and does not exclude in the local community. This conclusion can be valid not only for those in favor of modernization who consider that secularization should be a condition of modernization, but also for the orthodox

rhetoric of the Church. Especially that the symbolism of oppression, sacrifice, and survival remains an important resource for building the sense of superiority and inferiority (Piotrowski 2006).

Thus, the analysis of this case shows the ineffectiveness of schematic rationalizations, questions the unidirectionality of the social change process (in the social and cultural dimension), shows to what extent the effects of transformation on the dimension of macro-social level can influence social change in the local and individual dimension.

## Conclusions

One may say that the main part of the article has nothing in common with the winner/loser categorization. It was exactly my argumentation in this text. The presented analysis can be concluded from different perspectives. I would like to pay attention to two of them: the methodological and interpretative ones. In the analytical context, they merge. I intended to show what kind of conclusions can be derived from the material when it is analyzed at the level of facts presented in the life history and at the level of the narrator's interpretations presented in the life story. We can apply here to the concept of the subject, distinguishing between "biography as a theme" and "biography as a means." In the first case, biography is treated as an issue in itself, the researcher's interest is directed at the structure (narrative/biography) and expressed in the question *how* is the narrative constructed, *how* do the interactive conditions of its production shape the story, *how* does the biographical reconstruction of the life course take place, et cetera. In the case of "biogra-

phy as a means," the question of *what* comes to the fore. *What* is told enables gathering biographical information to answer typical sociological questions (e.g., social structure, strategies on the labor market) (Helling 1990:16). The life story corresponds with "biography as a theme," whereas the life history with "biography as a means." Very often the second approach is supported by the etic perspective, whose aim is to describe an individual's experiences with the help of categories not grounded in the empirical material, but imposed by the researcher. As I intended to show by the analyzed case, Róża's life history could be a very good empirical material to illustrate a successful development of competences that lead her to the position of the winner. We could also say that Róża has become a beneficiary of social change when she effectively uses opportunity structures, for example, state and European funding to develop various social activities, on the one hand, and to continue self-education and developing of private business, on the other hand. Of course, we cannot say that it is a false interpretation—Róża can be considered as an example of a successful person and her achievements result from her hard work and determination to achieve goals (to describe her biography in neoliberal language). But, finishing the analysis at this level, we miss the most crucial items of her biographical experiences. They could be studied on the level of her life story that enables seeing the emic perspective and the way an individual gives meaning to his/her experiences.

It should be stressed that life history and life story are not contradictory stories—to the contrary. "Being truthful to our experiences, we cannot invent the life-story as pure fiction, but depend on our

life history...What I have been through, my life as I lived it, the communication with my fellow humans and its relevance...all goes into my life story" (Fisher-Rosenthal 2000:116). So, we should be very careful when going from the level of life history to life story and vice versa. As I noticed in the analyzed case, we could see that, when at the level of life history, the categories of winners-losers would fit with Róża's image of life based on presented facts and she could be smoothly presented as the winner. Moreover, she could be a model example of a self-made woman, developing her skills and not surrendering to difficulties. Whereas if we consider her life story, it appears that her success is not the result of activities that could be analyzed by a winners-losers dichotomy and all the described normative categorizations, but rather by motives and relations belonging to completely different social resources.

It does not mean that winners-losers categorization is totally out of context. For sure, it describes, to some extent, opportunity structures that put some people in advantageous positions and some others not. Yet, it is symptomatic that in our collection of 90 interviews only one person used this category as the self-description.<sup>23</sup>

**Narrator:** And my old folks, who had been working for several decades err in the former epoch didn't get absolutely anything, apart from the fact that they get some pensions, which enable them to get by err better or worse. Therefore, from the perspective of those,

<sup>23</sup> In the third part of a biographical narrative interview, when the researcher is entitled to pose theoretical questions related to the studied problem, we never asked interviewees about winners/losers categories.

those changes which took place, well, I can be perceived as a beneficiary.

**Researcher:** In scientific jargon, it's called "winners and losers of the transformation."

**N:** [chuckling] So, I rather belong to the former.

The quotation comes from an interview with a three years older man working in banking in one of the big Polish cities. We can assume, and it can be seen in his life story, that a neoliberal way of thinking and acting is not just the adapted ideological language, but his perspective, especially in the frames of professional career. As I noticed, it is the only example of using this category. Perhaps if we asked our interviewees, "Do you feel a loser or a winner?" some of them would try to attach to one of these categories, what still would not prove that they truly identify with them. Giza-Poleszczuk described this type of reasoning in a very critical way: "We [sociologists] have not anticipated any of the important changes of the last 30 years, because we have lost the ability of a true sociological analysis. True, that is, holistic, with a broader context, and not just using Western cliché. The mechanism of 'public opinion washing' is also extremely harmful. It is that we ourselves create public discourse by imposing certain labels in order to convince people that this is what they think. We analyzed this with a group of colleagues in 2009, when we celebrated the 20th anniversary of the Round Table. In the media, one side was talking about a 'social contract,' the other about a 'collusion of elites.' In the midst of this media storm, the CBOS asked the citizens a question: 'In your opinion, was the Round Table (a) a social contract; (b) a collusion of elites?' This is what I call the 'opinion washing' mechanism. First, we create a narrative, then we

publicize it, and then we tell people that these are their own opinions” (Giza-Poleszczuk 2018). I think that the same mechanism has worked in the case of winners/losers categorization as a “created narrative” to be imposed on people’s ways of dealing with the social change.

Róża uses neither these categories nor this perspective. To describe her experience we need dif-

ferent language. Thus, these two different levels of analysis can bring various results and the etic level could perhaps illustrate some social process, but it would be very difficult to understand them from an individual perspective. This could be the reason for the misunderstanding of people’s motives and, for example, political choices, but also social phenomena and processes that stand behind them.

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## Narrative Agency and Structural Chaos. A Biographical-Narrative Case Study

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**Abstract** The article is an analysis of a single case—a biographical narrative of a Tri-City resident who enters adulthood at the beginning of political transformation in 1989, and whose life path turns out to be an unintentional, dynamic journey between various professions, social worlds and structural positions. This creates a complicated and ambiguous biographical pattern which does not fall into either the socio-economic promotion of the “winner” or into the degradation of the transformation “loser.” The reconstruction of this pattern reveals the hero’s great resourcefulness and entrepreneurship, but also the fragility of the structures stabilizing his life and the volatility of life orientation points. The binder of this biography turns out to be, above all, reflexivity and, what I suggest calling, the narrative agency of the narrator, who can transform his structurally dispersed and chaotic life experiences of the time of transformation into a very original story, making him a strong subject of his own fate. This, however, creates the inevitable tension between the experienced or lived life, life history and the narrated life, life story, prompting us to again pose the question about the commonly assumed, although differently defined, correspondence between the level of reality and the level of its linguistic (in this case—autobiographical) representation.

**Keywords** Systemic Transformation; Biographical Narrative; Subjectivity; Agency; Reflexivity; Chaos; Complexity

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The heroes of the well-known documentary film “Talking Heads” of Krzysztof Kiesłowski from 1980 answer several seemingly simple questions: Who are you? What would you like? What is most important for you? The interlocutors are forty-four people born between 1880 and 1979. They are of different age, gender, occupation, social background, and “class” affiliation, attitude towards the world in general and the political system then in particular. Regardless of these differences, almost all the heroes seem to take the task extremely seriously. Although each of the talking heads appears on the screen only for a short time, we can see how the participants of this short movie survey ponder the answers, looking for the best justifications. Perhaps the film director, who did not have to worry about any sociological or psychological representativeness of his sample, wanted to include only such most reflective statements from among the many recorded during the realization of the film. The method of filming and editing further strengthens this individualizing interpretation. Thus, “Talking Heads” can be read—at the most basic, existential level—as a film about the orientations of the modern man in the world of values and ideas, but also in the context of social structure. However, when it was shown in 1980, it was read rather as a record of civil hopes for political and moral change (Hendrykowska 2015). The emergence of the trade union “Solidarity” may have seemed to be a spectacular fulfillment of some of these hopes, though very short-lived, as it turned out.

One of the protagonists, a man born in 1934 (45-year-old at the time of filming), begins his answer with such a declaration: “Since I changed my

profession from a humanist to a taxi driver, I have been feeling a much freer man.” After which he immediately adds: “But, at the same time, I have understood that a sense of personal freedom is not enough. For a man to truly feel free and at ease, he must live in conditions of democracy and a sense of security. This personal freedom, a sense of personal freedom, however, is not enough.”

This explanation may suggest that it is about systemic, political restrictions on the freedom of the “humanist” working in Poland under real socialism. The officially valid ideology, propaganda, censorship, falsification of history—we know all these labels, although we rarely see them in the perspective of an individual biography. We can assume that the taxi driver has it easier in this respect, because his problems seem much more down-to-earth, which does not mean that they are less severe, such as imposed limitation on fuel, not to mention the difficulties associated with buying a car. Yet another association, probably unintended neither by the hero nor the director of the film, is the increase in economic freedom associated with abandoning the intellectual profession in favor of a “private initiative.” A symbolic degradation in exchange for a better income and a more prosperous life (most likely, and, if you take into account the rides paid in foreign currencies, almost certainly).

What is more important than these casual socio-biographical speculations is the observation that despite the internal anxiety and even tension manifested by many protagonists, their structural embedding, to put it technically, is very stable. It raises no doubt either. In other words—professionally

and socially, everyone is as if in their own place: children have dreams, youth have (un)real plans, adults have stable family and professional roles, the oldest reflectively look back on their lives. Even the current biographical experiences cited by several interviewees to a minor degree make this static image more dynamic. What is really important, for the characters, but maybe even more so for the director, takes place in the existential and axiological aspect, and allusively, the political one. The sociological dimension, understood as looking at a man through the social roles he plays, though so clear, sometimes almost exemplary (the cook is filmed in the kitchen, a worker in a factory, a sculptor in his studio, a mountaineer in a “highlander” sweater, a professor in a smoky study full of books...) is of least importance here. In this “spiritually” disconcerting, but sociologically very stable, almost static company, the intellectual taxi driver seems to be a rather special, structurally least obvious figure.

I present this cinematic and historical example as a sample of reflective inspiration for the interpretation of the biographical narrative of a completely different intellectual taxi driver. My protagonist<sup>1</sup> was born thirty years later than the hero of Kieślowski’s film, so he entered adulthood in the declining phase of the existing political order,

<sup>1</sup> The interview was recorded over several meetings in autumn 2016 and spring 2017 during the implementation of another research project. Then, by a joint decision of the research group, we included it in the pool of interviews analyzed in the project *Experience of the Process of the Transformation in Poland. A Sociological Comparative Analysis Based on Biographical Perspective*, carried out at the Department of Sociology of Culture of the University of Lodz (funded by the National Science Center in Poland, the NCN project number UMO-2013/09/B/HS6/03100). This text was written as part of this project.

whose value crisis the documentary was diagnosing. The systemic or structural background of his story is, above all, the Polish reality of economic, social, and cultural transformation which began after 1989. A great, traumatizing change, as one of its prominent and influential sociologist-researchers already stated in the title of his book (Sztompka 2000).

I would like to take a closer look at this biographical “case,” because more than many other ones I know from my research experience, it encourages one to pose interesting questions about individual, subjective agency and freedom (to use this sociologically suspicious word not only in a movie quote), happening in the context of radical structural transformations. Understood here, which is worth emphasizing right away, not as “macro-social” transformations, but as the experienced at an individual level dynamic process of the disappearance of some and the emergence of new patterns of action, lifestyles, social roles, and what follows, the framework, or even attachment points, biographical orientation. And it is not just about the diachronic, temporal dimension of this process, about replacing some patterns with others. It is also about their synchronous dimension: the multiplication and overlapping of these patterns, and the related biographical (in)balance.

In the narrative retrospective, it is clearly seen: some matters, commitments, roles proved to be stable and long-lasting—others only fleeting; some important and with significant biographical consequences—others rather insignificant; some reinforced one another—others conflicting. Yet, these

processes appear only in the autobiographical retrospection and reflection—in the life story. A lived biography which is happening as life goes on, is first and foremost specific, pinpoints life events—life history. And among them those that complicate and sometimes ruin biographical scenarios (Strauss 2012:529-531). The subjective answer may then be a crisis and entry into the experience of trajectory, frequently described by sociologists—biography researchers. But, it can also be the perception and opening of opportunities for efficient action and implementation of new scenarios. It is quite obvious that not everyone and everywhere had a chance for the second type of answer, as the conditions for the possibility of one’s agency were very unevenly dispersed. However, this does not weaken the argument that the systemic transformation in Poland (although not only, of course) can be viewed through the prism of de- and re-composition of life orientation frameworks and biographical scenarios.

Interpreting the chosen “case,” I will look at its narrative structure, *what* and *how* is told, in order to recognize the interviewee’s biographical experience behind it. This analytical “inward” orientation is typical of sociological biographical research, in which case analysis usually means showing how this case is constructed, what it consists of. What is more difficult to show here—for various theoretical and methodological reasons—is the “outward” analytical orientation (Filipkowski and Życzyńska-Ciołek 2019). Still, I would like to, at least, pose the question: what do the narrative and biography analyzed here refer to? In other words: what can it be a case-study of? But, first things first.

## Narrative Exposition—Episodic Family History

The request to tell one’s life (story), which is usually how the transcription of the biographical-narrative interview begins, fits into the broader communication situation between the researcher and the narrator. In the minimal version, it is a brief explanation of the research objectives and plan; in the maximum version, it is a long-term, private acquaintance. I met Leszek<sup>2</sup> while I was looking for (using the so-called snowball technique) contacts to former employees of the Gdynia shipyard, which I had been investigating as part of another research project using the oral history method. He was recommended to me less as a “shipyard worker,” that is, an interview candidate, but as a potential informant, having contacts to other interlocutors and a good orientation in the topic that was of my interest. It was already during the first conversation that we redefined this communication situation. Leszek began to tell his family story, and I—switching on the recorder—asked him to tell *his* biographical story. I did not think at the time what research project this interview could be included in, or even what specific topic (or topics) will be the leading ones, or which would be most interesting for me from the research perspective. The starting point here was simply an interesting, engaging biographical story. Both formally, linguistically, narratively, and in terms of content, to say so—meaning the constellation of life experiences, commitments, choices, embedded in a specific historical reality. History is, in fact, a strong background to Leszek’s biographical story from the first sentences.

<sup>2</sup> The name of the narrator has been changed.



However, not in the sense which sociologists from Lodz wrote about years ago—the embedding of biography in history, contrasting it with embedding biography in milieu (Piotrowski 2016). Here, history is not simply the course of events, which had been happening on a macro scale, above people's heads. Events, which people had an insignificant impact on while bearing the radical biographical consequences of these situations, experiencing trajectory (in the strict sociological sense—as this biographical “process structure” in which an individual under the pressure of external circumstances is thrust out of current practices, routines, structures, and loses control of their own life [Schütze 2012a, Riemann and Schütze 2012]). From the very beginning, in the story of Leszek, history is treated as a moving stage for a biographical drama. And this drama has its own dynamics—it can be a tragedy, a comedy, or even a farce—as if independent, or at any rate not dependent on the movement of the stage. And it takes place at the level of individual biographies of the family members who were included in the story. The story, over a dozen pages long in transcription, about his own family history is extremely convoluted. Despite repeated reading, I could not fully understand it. Perhaps because the narrator's purpose is not to narratively build the family tree, but to highlight the most grotesque characters and family situations embedded in the “big” history.

It [my life—PF] began in Wrzeszcz and, like almost all Gdansk residents, I was born on Kliniczna, which is on the border of the shipbuilding district. About three hundred meters from the shipyard's borders. I think North street is closest there. And I was born there, and at home, I had a grandfather who worked

in the foundry, right? It was not his only job, because it was another picturesque figure in this flat in which I spent my childhood, because in the year 1939 he was an uhlan of the Greater Poland Cavalry Brigade. And there, at Bzura river he did something, right? Well, it wasn't such an uhlan from the first line who would charge at tanks, he was a corporal in the communications platoon...And together with this Brigade there near Bzura he would be pulling a wire somewhere to the positions, right? And he would run away, trying not to let the Germans kill him. He tried sometimes/ I mean, it was not his duty to kill the Germans on the battlefield, but to ensure communication with the command post. And when it turned out that these command posts are not getting the hang of it, they gave the order that everyone should save oneself on their own, and so they dispersed. He ran away for two weeks, right, to Poznan, so as not to get caught and locked up in Oflag, right? He succeeded, along the way killed the only German in his life, which he would tell every time...It was one of his standard stories.

The most important message the narrator conveys here is not really about the grandfather's involvement (as it will turn out later, he was not his biological grandfather, but his mother's stepfather) in the defensive war of 1939, but his ability to *disentangle* himself from dangerous and too risky stories. History—this big one, written with a capital letter—gets people entangled in historical circumstances. The narrator will choose those characters from the family saga who were able to transform History into individual small stories—and to disentangle themselves efficiently, somehow take command of one's fate—even if the spectrum of agency was

very narrow in the given circumstances. Using one's own reason, cleverness, resourcefulness, craftiness, courage. But also, by a lucky accident. If there is any heroism here, it is very private. The almost caricatured image of uhlands charging at tanks emphasizes the narrator's distance to national historical myths. Myths, to clarify here, understood not necessarily as mere “untruths,” but as fixed images and narratives fulfilling the binding, community-forming function, as specific historical “super-truths” (Niznik 1978).

This applies not only to the heroic myths, but also to those demonized ones. The narrator's biological grandfather was in the Waffen-SS, which we will find out about in a few minutes.

I once talked to my aunt, who is an ethnic German, because I have such people in my family too, be prepared for the worst, right? [Laughs] My second grandfather was in the SS, the original one, right? And he was at Stalingrad...And this aunt, who also lived ninety years, wrote in her diary that he was in the SS, just like Grass, right? Only that as for the Grasses, they made a big thing about it, right? Almost, practically. That he volunteered, they dragged his name through the mire. And in my aunt's diary, there is such a feminine and purely pragmatic explanation, right? They/ She expressed it in one sentence. “Adolf,” because that was his name, “went to the SS like all the *Volksdeutsche*.” The Germans simply conscripted the *Volksdeutsch* automatically to the SS. And who was *Volksdeutsch*? It was a German from outside the Reich...And the free city of Gdansk was just such a state. So, the citizens of the free city were sent to the SS automatically.

The grandfather survived the battle of Stalingrad. Suffering from jaundice, he was evacuated for treatment near Hamburg, where he lived to see the end of the war. After the war, he did not return to Gdansk and to grandmother, but started a new family in Germany (and then another one). All this is told in an adventurous, almost absurd convention. History entangles the hero—and he, here with a happy coincidence of tragic circumstances, disentangles himself from it, telling his individual biographical story. No wonder that we often find here a reference (the above is only one of several) to the German writer Günter Grass. It is not only about the similarity of the fate of some members of the German-Polish narrator's family with the fate of this famous writer from Gdansk (and the fate of thousands of other Germans of his generation). It is more about the way of constructing the narrative—here biographical, there fictional, but in both cases, immersed in the colloquial and colloquial oral tale, in the element of orality, storytelling (Janion 2001). Behind this formal resemblance lies, I suppose, a similar philosophy of history and the philosophy of individual human life. And of survival in extremely hostile conditions. Ethical questions seem somewhat inadequate here. Not because of “fading out of awareness” or “repression,” but simply because we know nothing about the course of the (biological) grandfather's service in the Waffen-SS. And since we do not know, we do not judge him for this with a collective historical responsibility. An ordinary man is too weak to resist the power of historical events and overwhelming historical forces. What he can do, if he is lucky, is to try to disentangle himself from the historical matrix—before it is too late.

Another hero of this family saga, the foster grandfather of the narrator (with the biological one, despite efforts, he did not manage to meet), came from Podlasie, but before the war he lived in the western part of the country. In 1939, also his biographical events gained tremendous dynamics:

And when the Germans came, then snatch! Take them to Stutthof, right? And there, him alone, a sixteen-year-old, of course, those from Stutthof were sent to work somewhere in the fields near Krynica, Stegna, and they were working there, in the field. And one time he said that he would just run away. And so he did, ran away and made his way back to Lublin area. So this is the next story which/ And later, because it was somewhere at the beginning of the war when he was a sixteen-year-old and later when the war ended, he was twenty-something, the Russians came and took him to the ISC, the Internal Security Corps, and he went to Bieszczady [mountains], under [general] Świerczewski, he fought against Ukrainian bands. What he would tell about it...

The fate of this grandfather turns out to be no less complicated than the life events of the “German” one—although, from a historical perspective, there is nothing extraordinary about them. He manages to get himself out of one big History, but he becomes entangled—or perhaps entangles himself—in another. To what extent he exercises his agency in this, and to what he is tuning in to the new historical and biographical situation and thus to the new “system”—this we do not know. We only get a suggestion that with time, he was able to transform these experiences into a suggestive story. Perhaps, by imposing *narrative agency* where its real

impact on the course of events was very limited. The briefly outlined further professional path of the foster grandfather—working in the militia, and then many years of working in the shipyard—suggests adaptation to external institutional or “systemic” conditions rather than any biographical rebellion. Well, not every History can be efficiently disentangled from—but each one can be told (or at least attempted) as an interesting story of individual life events. If only there is sufficient self-critical reflexivity and narrative skill.

To break this male-centric perspective, let us stop for a moment at the female heroines of these family stories. The narrator’s grandmother clearly resembles the Kashubian grandmother of the hero of Grass’s novel, who—in every historical turmoil—“has her own mind.” She also has strength, which seems to be greater than men’s, to develop her own counter-history (Grass 1994).

Grandmother lived the entire war in Gdansk. I mean, she was Polish, but she was a maid at the home of such wealthy Gdansk residents, also of Polish origin, but in some past generation they got uprooted. They came from Swiecie area, but they switched to German and it was believed they had some incredible real-estates, tenement houses, plots of land, and securities.

Although during the war, the grandmother’s employers were successively losing this property at the Sopot casino, so that in 1945, “when the Russians came and began seizing it, they actually had nothing to take,” it was probably impossible to get a better job during the occupation.

In turn, the narrator’s mother ends up doing “forced labor” at that time. Very peculiar, indeed. Her grandfather, the grandmother’s father, is saved from Stutthof (“they locked him up because he openly confessed that he was Polish. And he spoke Polish, he taught Polish to children and did not want to be German”) thanks to the intervention of his front friend from the First World War world—currently an SS general—and relegated to the management of a several-hundred-hectare property. Working there, he brought his grandchildren, among them the mother of the narrator.

My mother did not have any siblings, all the cousins, everyone spent the occupation there, right?...And when it was over, they were like butterballs. Because there was everything—molasses, ducks, geese, dry sausage. My mother remembers the occupation as such a paradise land of happy childhood.

These are just short excerpts from the narrator’s family war story. There are many more references to Polish History, and many more surprising individual counter-stories. These random experiences of family members supported by their causative action (more often consisting of disentangling from History or rather avoiding being swept by the current than implementing some individual life plans) make up a gripping family tragicomedy, full of surprising, situational, and consequently biographical turns. However, it is the task of the listener/reader to build an understandable plot out of them—the narrator merely tells episodes from the lives of the characters, his own ancestors, which are diffused, though interrelated. To understand them, one needs to have a grasp of Polish 20<sup>th</sup>-century history, and

a minimum of openness to its possible biographical implications and complications.

### Feature Accumulation—Autobiography of the Time of “System Transformation”

The narrator does not become the hero of this story until “in due time.” Its shape is determined not by chronological, but by narrative order and binding events into a web understandable to the recipient (or at least by the narrator’s attempts of such binding). Somewhere at the very beginning, he emphasizes his attachment to Gdansk, Wrzeszcz, to be precise—not only declaratively, but also recalling a specific biographical episode (sightseeing his city by following the footsteps of the writer Günter Grass).

However, he appears in the main role as late as in the story of a trip to Germany in 1991, which unfolds the story of grandfather Adolf evacuated from Stalingrad, whose family the author meets there, and tries to meet with him, though unsuccessfully. However, this addition (in the terminology of the narrative analysis of Fritz Schütze, we would speak about narrative drive and constraint [Schütze 1983; 2012b:164-165]) turns out to be an independent narrative whole—yet another family story which, this time, takes us not to the times of war, but transformation.

We went to Germany together because [a friend—PF] had a prepayment for a large Fiat, then there was a prepayment system. Well, but because there were few of these cars still, the Rakowski government or someone invented that those who had a prepayment can bring a car from abroad and will not pay the duty,

right, duty exemption. And because my friend emigrated to Germany at that time, he noticed immediately, whether right after the first or the second trip, he said that he found in...near Frankfurt there is an American military base. And there's a Jew from Poland who sells to these Negroes, right, those who have to do military service for two years, the Polonez, Polish cars. He advertises them as large, heavy, typically American, right? He had such a special leaflet, I regret that it got lost somewhere, but there were slogans that really...depicted this Polonez so descriptively, as a car that has all the features that Americans care about when they decide on a car. And these American soldiers bought these Polonez cars, right? They were ridiculously cheap, right, they cost four thousand marks there, I think. It was then terribly cheap/ the conversion rate for a mark was six thousand probably, so this car cost twenty-four million. And almost everyone from this base bought these Polonez cars. And when they finished their service after two years, they sold them back to this trader. This trader repaired them there and sold to Poles. We bought one, only it was supposedly unused. Although I doubt it, it seems to me that/ [You bought a Polonez in Germany, second-hand, from US Army soldiers!?] I mean just, supposedly unused, because it was on white plates, we brought it on white plates.

Times have changed, but the way the main protagonist experiences the world—now being the same as the narrator (whether also in a stronger sense postulated by biographical analysis, which, after all, is looking for, in various ways, the correspondence between the narrative *here* and *now* and the experiential *there* and *then*—let us leave aside this question for the time being)—remained as if intact.

The History (with a capital “H”) is again changed into minor episodes of interpersonal comedy (although, perhaps, it would be more accurate to speak of a grotesque or farce here). Inter-human, but here built on vernacular, bottom-up anthropology of things. The most important, most efficient actor (or in a newer sociological terminology—*actant*) of this story is, after all, the Polonez car. The object which is really strongly and, at the same time, ambiguously and surprisingly symbolically cast, which cannot be reduced to the last oddity of the Polish automotive industry of the PRL<sup>3</sup> times, nor to the object of desire, and the ultra-detailed amateur historical and technical studies of retro-automotive fans. Polonez is here yet another comedian, who in the symbolic vortex of “breakthrough time” can change masks and roles, depending on the needs, and even more on the imagination of buyers, sellers, and various intermediaries. Everyone is rational here—and yet the whole scene is grotesque. It reveals the “absurdities” of the late PRL, but also the unobvious agency and resourcefulness of all the actors involved in it. It is even more credible because shown on the occasion of telling the story about the life events of the German part of the family and meeting them after many years.

However, let us finally recreate the chronology of the main life events of the narrator-hero. It takes on clear contours only during the second meeting, after several hours of conversation. Yet, it does not cover the “whole” life—the years of childhood and early youth are blurred in the literary pictures of Gdansk-Wrzeszcz (this is spoken literature, but, as

<sup>3</sup> Polish People's Republic.

we have already seen, strongly and explicitly inspired by canonical written works, at least for Gdansk). However, in place of these (un)told experiences of the family home, the narrator offers an interpretative frame for his entire autobiography. The more important because it appears as early as in the first sentences of the interview.

Unlike most of his peers, my father did not work “the Japanese way,” that is, in one place all the time, doing such an employee, ant career, but he changed jobs seven times. And this for me/ I mean, a man learns by imitating, just like animals. Well, because he was an alpha-male in my home, so I started doing the same, right? I mean, even not really planning this intentionally, it just happened to me that life turned out so that I had to change jobs every now and then. Whether I want it or not/ I mean, I usually want to, right, because it just stops engaging me, and then kind of accidentally it also stops bringing satisfactory income. And I have to look for something else. And so it goes on.

It is not a binding or sufficient interpretation for us, but it is worth—and in line with the spirit of humanistic sociology—taking seriously this initial self-reflection of the narrator. The forecast fluctuation and instability of the life course gain a simple psychological or psychoanalytical explanation. We do not have to question it (succumbing to the fears of many sociologists about “psychologization”) in order to search for, on a slightly shallower biographical level, other than deeply psychological determinants, or rather the conditions of the narrator's course of life. Anyway, his initial self-reflection also encourages it, revealing the hesitation be-

tween translating the biographical turns with his own “wanting”—and with situational extortion, between autonomous choice—and fate, explained by the metaphor of *the course of life*. When in a moment this autobiographical story will begin to manifest more content of event and experience nature, aligning itself with the historical context of transformation, it will turn out that this initial self-reflection of the narrator about the unintentional imitation of his father does not shed, but rather poses the question about his individual agency—about its scope, conditions, and restrictions.

The choice of secondary school in 1978 is the proper beginning of a relatively chronologically ordered autobiographical narrative.

And so I went to this high school according to his wishes, to this technical college. And there I started my adventure with shipyards.

Although the decisions are made by his father (whose professional career seems to be much more stable than we could gather from the introduction, and is firmly rooted in state institutions connected first with the sea and then with agriculture), the narrator agrees with his reasoning at that time. The prestigious Technical Secondary School of Shipbuilding in Gdansk, commonly known as Conradinum,<sup>4</sup> which he attends, is a place that allows one to reasonably count on sound education, good professional preparation, and the prospect of

<sup>4</sup> Conradinum is a colloquial term for the oldest, prestigious secondary school in Gdansk with over two hundred years of tradition, educating specialists in “ship” professions to this day. Its current name is Conradinum Ship and General Schools. Its graduate was, among others, Günter Grass.

stable work in the developing shipbuilding industry—then treated as the avant-garde of the modernizing country. The proof that it turned out to be quite accurate is the career of his close friend (and later my interviewee in the shipyard project), who, after this school, graduated from the Shipbuilding Department of the Gdansk University of Technology, after which he started working as an engineer in the Paris Commune Shipyard, later transformed into the Gdynia Shipyard. After its fall in 2009, he easily found a satisfactory employment in one of the private shipbuilding companies operating in the Tri-City. The example of the friend illustrates the *possible* direction in which, in a typical scenario, the narrator's professional life could have unfolded—regardless of transformational changes with the accompanying “collapse of Polish industry.” After graduating from secondary school in the late 1980s, the narrator studies philosophy at the Catholic University of Lublin. He justifies this firstly with the need to escape from his father's domination: “but, at some point, I thought that it was under his influence that I made this decision [about technical education—PF], so now it's time to make my own.” However, a moment later he shows the biographical basis of this decisions, emphasizing the attitude that has distinguished him since his youth, distancing him from reality, from commitment, also from the political one, demonstrated by his peers.

Eighteen years old, I was still wearing a Shetland polo-neck sweater, herringbone jacket, I would take an umbrella and a pipe with amphora and set off down the avenues. There, my friends were running, I mean, they were running away, because there

wasn't even a need to do anything. It was enough when there was a group of young people wearing jackets and chanting slogans, they would immediately start chasing them, or shooting, or something. And I was calmly walking through these avenues in this outfit with an umbrella and a pipe. Nobody just dared to approach me...And I liked that, right? The fact that thanks to this I am, in some sense, untouchable. I mean, I'm neutral and I'm not getting one look or another. The more so that my father would always convince me that you always have to look for the other party's arguments. And even though he would listen to Free Europe [radio] for days, he never let me uncritically repeat what was broadcast there, right? He always had an answer to the arguments that Free Europe provided. And it wasn't just a simple answer. So no, no, he didn't paste it with quotes from the People's Tribune. He just said it wasn't quite right or not quite so. Because they tell you something else and this is an obvious exaggeration, but the truth probably needs to be looked for somewhere in-between. And so he accidentally produced a philosopher.

Again, a long piece of argument to justify the distinction and singularity of the narrator, who persuades the listener to his individual “third way” between the extremes of “communism” and an active “fight against communism.” It is easy to interpret this fragment as a narrative dodge, setting aside the question of one's own commitment to Solidarity, and even justifying its lack. The birth of this mass, spectacular social movement and its “carnival,” radically ended by the imposition of martial law at the end of 1981, coincided with the last years of the narrator's education at the Gdansk technical school. So he was very close to the center of those important

events that made the big, national history. However, the context of this statement and the further biographical story suggest a different interpretative trail than a desire to justify. The narrator has no problems with his own “maladaptation” to historical patterns—on the contrary, he derives some sense of pride from this separateness. He also shows that when entering adulthood, he not only wanted to free himself from his father, but also to run away from History—into his own biographical stories. Although the narrator is well aware that none of these escapes can be fully successful (in short, the father is still acting “at the bottom” and the historical process is “at the top”), since that moment, he focuses his story on this intermediate level, where he can reveal his individual agency. Not some total or subversive anti-structural, but—to refer to the theory of Margaret Archer (2013a)—real and realizable in the subjective band of possibilities of a specific, reflective man (Domecka 2013).

Along with his wife, whom he met at the university, they return to the Tri-City. The first employment after obtaining a diploma is at the Student Work Cooperative “Technoserwis.” We have several snapshots from this short period of pre-official work. One is cleaning the dry dock after sandblasting the hull, the other, much more lively, is cleaning the workers' hotel belonging to the Gdynia shipyard, which includes, among others, clearing a clogged sewage system: “And also, women's panties, bras, and other things were taken out. Most often such items of clothing were the cause of these clogs.”

I am extracting this particular picture from many, not for the sake of the vivid anecdote itself, but to

show from what position the narrator is observing reality here—in this case, the turn of 1980/1990. Although he returned to the shipyard to work for which the technical school prepared him, he returned as a “philosopher” and not a shipyard worker. Structurally, he is there as a short-term laborer, well-paid for the exhausting and dirty tasks (“the salary that I got to my hand then was twice as high as the salary in the first official job I took after studies”). Mentally, he is outside this shipbuilding world—he is distant to his role, interpreting it “from the bottom” or “from the margins.” In almost literary stories, extracting the “structural” paradoxes of large-scale socialism in its declining phase along the way.

The first permanent job at the Marine Fisheries Institute as a senior editor does not change much in this respect, although the narrator's observations are now carried out from the center of the microcosm in which he is functioning. This institutional microcosm (represented rather than experienced) becomes an inter-world. “Structurally” belonging to the old institutional and bureaucratic order, “functionally” adapting efficiently to the new market rules of the game organizing the life activity of many people even before the symbolic breakthrough of 1989.

There were several such institutional periodicals. In addition, they, books of these researchers, all publications. So everything that was devoted to the industry in which they worked...So, you know, it was a bit absurd, because I, for example/ they had their duties, right, such a ritual. And such an article, such a professor dealt with “factors affecting the population of the

Baltic cod.” And she had to, it resulted from some regulations, she had to write such an article every year. Well, what to write here, we know what these factors are...Well, she just submitted year after year the same piece of text and added tables with some measurements...And we published it, and everyone had work.

This story about bureaucratic stability (much more extensive in the interview: unfilled vacancies, a kiosk next to the institute to which they “threw” attractive goods, view of the sea from the window...), is not an introduction to the story of stagnation or implementation of the institutional pattern of action, but about initiating individual agency.

Everyone was happy, and at the same time it was possible to do extra jobs on the side. Because thanks to the fact that this manager was influential, we had a photocomposition program...it was called digitset. And it was a program which allowed the typesetting of newspapers and big books, right?...The manager trained everyone, right? They were carefully trained. Young, twenty-something-yearolds. More or less my peers, I think. And after two months, two of them ran away to England. And this one [who stayed—PF] was obviously the least brainy. And he broke/ that is, accidentally formatted the hard disk in that computer on which there were most of these photographic programs...And, of course, there was a computer specialist employed full-time, and he started saving this data, and I was assisting him. And I learned so much from this assistance that after a month the manager decided that he would make me the manager of computer photocomposition...Theoretically, my job was to manage a team. There were two, three, or four people employed. Well, but after some time, we were about to

take over the administration of the tenement house. I mean, I took steps to take over this administration, so it was quite absorbing. You had to go here and there, write letters, deliver them. Well, I convinced my boss to create a second shift and I would start work at two [o’clock—PF]. And my subordinates finished at three. So I had an hour to settle their tasks, delegate work for the next day. And then, I had seven hours to myself. Nobody controlled me because no one was there anymore, only the security guards came from the company that was guarding the building, and we would gossip. And I also took the opportunity and was learning this photocomposition program. Or, I was doing some side job. Or, I was doing some work that really had to be done and no one but me could do it. And so I was bluffing there until at some point the manager said that the market for offset plates collapsed.

The scientific state institution resembles a revolving door mounted between completely different realities. Both are operated by the same machines (by the way, we get here a micro insight into the computer revolution of the early nineties) and, in part, by the same people for whom the full-time employment of the old-times turns out to be the “base” for implementing completely new ideas and biographical scenarios. These ideas are not invented here, planned, or dreamed, and the scripts are not waiting to be played by the actors.

The narrator’s presented world as a dynamic, shimmering world, is open to sudden and frequent change. At the same time, it is not about “accepting fate” or some adaptive adjustment to it. No, here the change coming from the outside—from the

world, from the “system transformation”—meets the active operation of the hero, who grabs it, integrates it in his actions, and thus changes the direction in which his (professional) biography unfolds. This evokes associations with the theory of chaos, which describes complex, intertwined systems, susceptible to unexpected, non-linear, holistic changes, caused by single micro-causes (Smith 2007:1-6; Byrne and Callaghan 2013). Random, from the point of view of the disturbed system, although having their own logic, their causes, and effects. With such an addition, however, that in this biography of the “breakthrough time,” it is difficult to catch longer periods of stabilization of the biographical “system.” From the narrative retrospective, rather emerges a picture of continuous biographical dribbling, constant reconfiguration of the points and the framework of life orientation. And almost every such change is constructed as a result of unexpected external circumstances and an active, efficient, and subjective response to them. Not passive adaptation, but the active use of emerging and perceived options—within the limits of individual biographical possibilities. In short, the world of the hero in the period of transformation (and, by the way, of youth) is a potential world, full of new opportunities, an open world *in favor of*. However, these possibilities are arranged horizontally rather than vertically—their implementation does not add up to the path of social promotion or the path of “career.”

Additionally, for a long time, as it is clearly seen in the passage cited above and as confirmed by numerous further fragments, the narrator implements several parallel biographical scenarios. Not only in

the sense obvious to a modern society that he plays many relatively independent social roles—a husband, a father, an employee, or an employer, et cetera—but also in the stronger sense that his professional, and thus social, identity is hardly perceptible. In the above quote, he is at the same time the editor of a scientific journal and a self-taught IT specialist. And also, as a consequence of marriage, the administrator of the tenement house recovered by the heirs of the former owners (including his wife). At the end of the interview—during the next meeting—we will learn that at the same time he undertook extramural doctoral studies at the Catholic University of Lublin (which he had not finished), and a little later he taught logic at the University of Gdansk. Such multitasking (sometimes leading to crises) would not be possible without the acceptance of the social environment of the narrator. The ease with which he negotiates the flexibility of his employment may testify to the universality of such multi-layered biographical occupational scenarios at that time. In fact, he will confirm it elsewhere.

A lot of people at the university were in a situation like mine. Anyway, working at the University of Gdansk at that time was something completely different from what I had expected when I went there. It was not an academic life. You just popped in to tick off the class. And then, everyone hopped in the car, or rushed for the train to get to the next job.

This can legitimately be seen as the degradation of the crumbling system (or its specific subsystems, for example, the academic one), but also as its openness to structural changes—and then a kind of contribution to the dynamically reconfiguring reality.

The collapse of the offset plate market, where the penultimate quote stopped, is my arbitrary cut—somewhere you have to finish the already long quotation. This destabilizing impulse, in line with the biographical reconfiguration pattern outlined above, initiates new action plans. The narrator sets up a private company with a friend (“It was an already registered business. Because then everyone, there was terrible pressure, such pressure, right? To open a business”) and imports offset plates from Germany. This business did not last long, but smoothly turned into the sale of reagents for their development and, in parallel, the distribution of floppy disks (at that time popular data carriers), and then various computer accessories. The next step—and the answer to the technological “transformation” (the whole interview clearly shows how much it overlapped with the “systemic” transformation)—was the provision of Internet access services.

At this point, it seems that the narrator’s professional biography has stabilized around “small entrepreneurship,” so characteristic of the transformation period, especially its early, transitional phase, from before the market dominance of large corporations and the forced popularity of running one’s own franchise business (although many small companies have survived and today operate on a completely different market). This stabilization turns out to be an illusion.

Talking about the subsequent reconfigurations of his small business, the narrator suddenly inserts a short sentence completely out of tune with his thus far narrative: “And then the Internet came

about and I started to deal with the Internet, but in the meantime, I had an accident in which my wife died.” Such short, as if involuntary, digression refers to the experience unlike any previously cited, to a tragic random event whose detailed circumstances we are to learn in a moment. Traffic accident statistics do not leave the impression that this was an absurd, “causeless” case. It was rather a nexus of incidents—not only the death of the wife, but the survival of other passengers, including the narrator and his daughter. This event opens nothing in the hero’s life and is not easily biographically integrated—like all earlier and further life “adventures.” It is not another obstacle in life the overcoming of which triggers new ideas and redirects life in a new direction. Rather, we get a signal of the experienced trauma, confirmed later at the end of the interview. The rapid current of adventure narrative which has thus far exposed the narrator’s agency stops for a moment.

However, this narrative suspension does not last long. The dynamic story of the next business adventures, the need to close down the Internet company which has no chance of surviving in a market dominated by big players, quickly returns. The narrator, although illustrating the growing difficulties and attempts to adapt to increasingly difficult conditions, does not dwell on his business failure at all. He suppresses this thread to develop the next story. It is a story about running a large seaside holiday resort on a lease basis.

He owes the entry into this transformational microcosm to his second wife, whose father-in-law used to be the manager of a neighboring resort, which

belonged to one of Warsaw’s factories during the period of socialist modernization and employee holidays. After its fall in the 1990s, he became an agent for the declining complex, and then bought it at a good price in order to renovate it.

The story’s intricacies do not allow for even a brief factual reconstruction. The more so because the already complicated vicissitudes of family business (previously family life remained on a distant narrative set) are again embedded in the set of colorful pictures of the Polish transformation. Not only are grassroots made credible through his own experience—as we already know well from the entire narrative so far—but, additionally, here narrated from the coastal periphery, from the perspective of the holiday outskirts of former factory holiday resorts.

In this quiet holiday area, the business struggle turns out to be fiercer than in the city, and the rules of the game are much less transparent. After these few years of adventure, we return to the Tri-City with the narrator, where—together with chefs employed at the seaside—he runs a school canteen for several years, and then engages with home baking of trendy healthy bread. After a few more years of this chaotic micro-entrepreneurship (chaotic understood as above—more philosophical than colloquial), he attempts to enter a strongly institutionalized and structured labor market, and work in a large banking and insurance corporation. This decision is presented as very rational and well thought over; however, it is taken, like many others in the life of the hero, under the influence of an accidental impulse:

I rather went there to return to the labor market. I cut myself off because of the fact that I kept the server here, well, it was a very cheap solution and very convenient, because I could be with children almost all day. And be useful at home. However, I lost contact with reality and was out of the loop. Well, so I went to this insurance company with the thought of renewing old contacts...It was an impulse because I was at a friend’s funeral in the winter, who was just “a gem,” or “a diamond.” It was the year ‘98, I met him in the street and he was cheering with delight, how well he is doing. He was just so optimistic that you can’t imagine. And then/ and this picture I kept...I was at the funeral and afterwards I was talking to the widow and said that I got this opportunity, because here, nearby is this branch and they were just looking for someone to work. So I said that if Wojtek praised it so much, maybe I will go there, something will pop up. And she directed me there, to some of his colleagues who were still working there and I talked to them.

Coming into contact with an international corporation done locally, with a large bureaucratic business employing (producing) a new middle class, with Polish capitalism, which achieved spectacular success, lasted only a few months (*ipso facto*, it was limited to the initial induction training). This short biographical episode turned out to be intense enough to be remembered by the hero as a series of expressive, ironic images of a hostile world of paid work tasks of a completely new Polish middle class: “it’s terrible trash.”

This distance is not surprising when we know the biography of the narrator, as well as his way of constructing the story. It can, however, be interpreted

more objectively as a measure of the biographical and social difference between his world and the world of his colleagues—perhaps also graduates of philosophy and earlier technical secondary school—who twenty or so years ago entered the stable, predictable path of newly opened corporate careers and have remained on it to this day (Domecka 2016). In a social and in their own sense, they achieved professional, maybe also “life” and transformational success (or vice versa)—from the narrator’s perspective: at the cost of abandoning the multitude of biographical plots, and of giving up “philosophizing.”

### “I Started Driving a Taxi”

Driving a taxi is a direct consequence of corporate disappointment of the narrator, and it is still his occupation at the time of the interview in 2017. Presented as a completely natural life choice, which, of course, does not necessarily mean that it has been the target choice. How to locate it “structurally” in the context of the entire biography? It could be perceived as a return to individual entrepreneurship in its next stage of development. It could be a “wait and see” strategy, entering a professional time in-between, allowing him to “return onto the market” at a more favorable moment and into a place where it is possible to use intellectual competences and previous experience. Though which ones? Since there were so many biographical action plans so far, and they were so different. And all of them—seen from a distance—turned out to be so fleeting, impermanent, and so poorly shaped.

It is not easy to classify the biography of our hero as one within the studies of “positional wander-

ings in the period of radical changes” (Mach 2003). There is even no certainty whether he is a “loser” or a “winner” of these processes, to recall the binary (and probably too banal) conceptual opposition popular (also) among sociologists (Palska 2002; Jarosz 2005). At the same time, we have no doubt that we are dealing here with the biography of the time of Polish transformation—that the narrator’s experiences reveal the characteristic socio-historical processes of that time. And he, thanks to his ethnographic imagination and narrative zest, is a good guide to various transformational micro-worlds. Their credibility is assured by the biographical experience of the narrator—these are always participatory observations. He even brings to life some of these narrated microcosms, and then abandons them, extinguishes, closes in order to engage in the next ones.

Unfortunately, these changing worlds of life are not hierarchical at all. I do not even mean in the sense of economic profitability of the activities or “professions” undertaken, because the differences are quite clear (although most often through guessing), but in their subjective valuation by the narrator. A state job is just as good (or bad) as importing offset plates in one’s first company run with a colleague, as later running a computer company, as providing Internet to nearby residents, as running a holiday resort and school canteen, baking healthy bread, or driving a taxi. This last occupation has the additional advantage of providing a constant source of amazing human stories that drive the hero’s imagination (although the freshness effect may also work here) and which he willingly shared with me—also after turning off the recorder. External

measures and possible “structural” consequences of performing these various, so scattered professional activities do not appear at all. The meaning of life seems to be located somewhere else.

It is only at the end of the interview when we learn that the first “permanent” job after studies, taken in the spring of 1989 (this date appears only in this context, seems difficult to calculate for him and is not automatically located in his memory, which tells a lot about the individual experience of the political breakthrough), the narrator treated as a waiting room before what he *had been planning* to do in his life: “Because I submitted my papers and I just wanted to become an assistant lecturer.” So, in the long run, *just* an academic philosopher. He was not employed at the first attempt, but in the following year, it was a success and this ready, ultimately very simple and predictable (though difficult to implement) professional scenario—in the terminology of biographical analysis of Fritz Schütze: the institutional model—seemed to be within the range of biographical possibilities.

It is impossible to judge today whether it was “transformation” that cancelled these life plans. Certainly, it brought about chaotic, de- and re-structural compositions in the midst of which our hero turned out to be an extremely effective and efficient actor, though playing in small-stage performances. This efficiency and agency are something more than “dealing with” social change as described in depth by Adam Mrozowicki (2011) using the examples of Silesian workers. He abandoned his doctorate in philosophy, because combining teaching and running a company quickly

proved impossible. Years later, he tried to return to university as a lecturer (not just of philosophy), but this also proved to be only a fleeting experience—incompatible with his main paid occupation and the associated way of life (“at the seaside”) at that time. However, this unrealized philosophical path is not considered in terms of a biographical loss, an unfulfilled career. The narrator does not cling to this biographical thread when he casually summarizes this story: “The scientific thread has been cut off. And that’s it.”

The binding factor of this autobiography is neither “career” nor other structural embedding, with its daily routines, professional practices, ethos, or, at least, auto-stereotypes (“IT specialists,” “entrepreneurs,” “taxi drivers,” etc.). Just as the hero’s ancestors, at least in his stories about them, tried to sneak out of History and resort to their own counter-stories, he, himself, escaped the sociological transformation schemes to... Well, exactly, to what?

I would say that into a particular kind of “philosophizing.” Individual, non-systemic, very literary. Constantly emphasizing the non-obviousness and multidimensionality of the world, as well as its flickering and grotesque quality. Of every world: the war, communist, transformation, German, Polish, Gdansk (the latter, perhaps the least sociologically important, seems to be the strongest *symbolic* anchor of this biography).

The narrator faces the chaotic reality of “meantime.” He changes it into small ones, looking for streaks of subjective agency somewhere between the disappearing, or perhaps—decaying, old order, and the

new one, emerging chaotically since the late 1980s. Even if each subsequent streak seems to be narrower than the previous one, as the new institutional and structural order crystallizes and becomes more and more closed, the *narrative agency* of the autobiographer remains unwavering.

Whatever happens in life—except maybe for this one life tragedy, when his wife dies in an accident and the daughter and other passengers, including himself, survive “by a miracle”—the narrator is always in control of the shape of his autobiographical story. Regardless of his current profession and life vicissitudes, he remains a reflective humanist—an independent hermeneut of his own fate (Filipkowski 2018), not by title, but through active practice. Driving a taxi—maybe even freer than before. At the same time, at the level of operation, as never before dependent on the courses ordered.

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A careful reader has probably noticed that the above analysis focuses much more on the hero's autobiographical narrative, on a *life story*, than on his biography, on *life history* (Rosenthal 1993). In places, it may even resemble a literary interpretation, and not a sociological and biographical analysis focused on the reconstruction of the real course of life or different phases of life experience. As in the classic proposal today of Fritz Schütze, which aims—on the level of individually analyzed cases—to reveal the sequence of “biographical process structures” (Schütze 1983). This is the most well-known and well-grounded proposition in Polish biographical sociology, but the problem of the transition from

the narrative, that is, the linguistic representation created during the interview, to the life behind it or experience (what it was like in the past, at the time of experiencing it) is a key problem. It is a constantly recurring subject of all the most important theoretical and methodological proposals in this research field, in particular, those which today are most popular and still creatively developed, that is, in Germany by Gabriela Rosenthal, and in England by Tom Wengraf (Każmierska 2013).

As the years go by, it is even clearer that the former accusation of excessive “narrativism” put forward by Daniel Bertaux against the “German school” in biographical research (Wengraf's proposal also deriving from there) was rather misguided (Rokuszewska-Pawelek 2006). Perhaps even—though this claim would require solid historical and sociological verification—postmodernism and linguistic turn did not weaken, but, paradoxically, strengthened the realistic orientation of sociological biographical methods, which sought to defend some “truth of experience” against the narrative, or rather narratological arbitrariness. Although, of course, it is still not the very general realism of social structures and facts which Bertaux had argued in favor of in that polemic, but the realism of the individual experiences of social actors. In other words, the narrative “how” is to be oriented towards the biographical, but also sociological, “what?” Today, such realism, or rather—realisms, though at different levels of analysis, as well as the subjective, humanistic perception of the actors present in biographical approaches, is easier to defend theoretically by referring to the works of Margaret Archer (2013b).

I recall these well-known matters to make it clear that my analysis of this case basically stops at the narrative “how?” What I propose here is, first of all, the extraction of the narrator's ways of *linguistic portrayal* of both his own biographical experience and the reality of the Polish transformation observed from the bottom, locally. So, it is a kind of second degree hermeneutics, or, after Giddens (1996), *double hermeneutics* (Hałas 2001), which explains and organizes the senses and meanings of the *presented world* by a narrator rather than gives an insight into the experiences (s)he once lived. I say “rather,” because, in this interview, there are long, strictly narrative passages, in the sense in which they are defined by Fritz Schütze, looking for access to the past reality experienced and lived—“there and then.” It is also possible to reconstruct the elementary process structures of this biography, oscillating constantly between biographical action plans and (weakly outlined, fragile, just emerging, or undergoing revision and decay) institutional patterns. Yet, both are embedded here in the context of dynamic structural and cultural changes of the time of transformation, creating in effect the impression of a mosaic-like and fortuitous course of life. If we were to examine it with a survey repeated every few years (e.g., carried out as part of the POLPAN Polish Panel Survey), aimed at locating this narrator—who would then be called the respondent—in the hierarchically understood socio-professional or class structure, we would probably get a picture of gradual transformational “social degradation”—from a scholar, philosophy lecturer at the university, through a petty businessman, to a taxi driver.

However, this mosaic, fortuitousness, or even more so the loss of position in the social structure diagnosed from the outside, seem to be secondary aspects of the narrator's biographical experience. When we treat his story as a whole (which does not exclude or invalidate detailed analyses), taking into account its various components, and thus also descriptive, argumentative, theoretical fragments, but also considering its self-presentation, relational and persuasive function (Schulz von Thun 1981), something else emerges in the foreground. This is not the biographical experience, but the autobiographical narrative. Or, more precisely, a consistent way of its construction, which puts the narrator in the center of events, gives insight into his various, mounting and surprising life adventures and events, as well as into the social micro worlds he co-created or just passed along the way. At the same time, it makes it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to move from the story level to the level of experience. The interview, which was successful in my opinion, and the resulting many hours of biographical narrative, which fully meets the structural formal requirements, should, at least potentially, constitute good research material for in-depth sociological analyses, even those based on the rigorous assumptions of the Fritz Schütze's method. However, I get the impression that these analyses do not really give good insight into the narrator's real, historical experience. As a subject and object of historical/social processes, it still remains poorly perceptible. And where it can be captured, it is difficult to see much more than the case of the biography of the transformation period, even if extremely interesting. However, what organizes and binds the whole story is the author's specific attitude, which I call *narrative agency*.



The autobiography does not try to be here, first and foremost, a representation of experience—even in its most narrative parts—but its creative organization and interpretation. Certainly spontaneous, that is, not fully controlled and consciously constructed by the narrator, and certainly not prepared in advance and played for the needs of the interview. And, at the same time, marked by clear literariness—natural, unpretentious, own, although revealing various cultural or literary influences. This literariness is obviously of a spoken and storytelling type.

At the same time, this spontaneous, original narrative organization and interpretation of biographical experiences is so strong that it imposes, in a way backwards, a specific form and meaning.

Here, the narrative order prevails over the biographical order and organizes it to such an extent that the resourcefulness of the hero, who is adventurous, mischievous, and exposes a peculiar eccentricity, can be accepted by the benefit of the doubt or rejected, as, for example, a literary creation or biographical illusion (to recall the known critique of biographical approaches by Pierre Bourdieu). However, it is very difficult to challenge it analytically—by juxtaposing the truth of the narrator's experiences with the lack of truth in his narrative. Or, to put it slightly differently: the depth of his experience with the superficiality or conventionality of his wording. Consciously or not (I suppose not), the narrator does not give us access to this first level. We have nothing to grasp—except maybe for one moment when the memory of his wife's fatal accident stutters his swift tale.

However, this difficult access to our truth and depth of the narrator's biography is not necessarily a problem here. After all, we get not only an engaging and suggestive, but also cognitively intriguing autobiographical tale, which—at least—is a valuable, even if mosaic and flickering, illustration of the social and cultural changes of the transformation period.

Yet, it is also a case of something theoretically and methodologically more important. I am convinced, drawing on many years of experience in conducting and interpreting biographical narrative interviews, that once again I came across a very individualized, authentic, creative way of linguistic organization and interpretation of one's own experiences and observations of the social world by an "ordinary person." I call this way *narrative agency*, which is a working and a bit technical term. Even if it restricts access to real socio-biographical processes—and perhaps even more so—it deserves attention. Both methodological—it is difficult to dogmatically defend the assumptions of the method, as "it does not work" or its application does not contribute much. As well as theoretical—the transition from experience to its narrative representation has not been in biographical sociology, in particular in the classical proposition of Fritz Schütze, worked out once and for all and ready to be used in every case.

For there are such stories about individuals' own lives—as the above one—which, although they seem to fulfill the recently recalled (Waniek 2019), strict criteria of the sociological biographical method at the empirical level, they encourage its theoretical reopening. It is difficult to find a better excuse than the serious problem disclosed here by moving from the narrative "how" to the biographical "what."

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