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"DEAREST LITTLE WIFE"

The Gender Work of Polish Transnational Families in Past and Present

Abstract

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork among circular migrants from present-day Poland to Denmark and by revisiting the classic *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (1918-1920), the article brings together two examples of migration flows: the late 19th century outmigration from the then divided Poland to the U.S. and the present-day intra-EU circular migration between Poland and Denmark. The focus is on the gender work performed in transnational families as presented in the context of the mobility regimes in which the two different, yet related, transnational migration flows occur. By highlighting the historicity of migration flows through the lens of transmigrants' gender work, the article argues that the transnational migration approach remains a key tool for investigating similarities and differences in migration between changing global historical conjunctures.

Keywords

The Polish Peasant • circular migration • mobility regime • gender work • transnational social field • historicity of transmigration

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Introduction

The transnational migration approach, as developed in *Nations Unbound* by Basch, Glick Schiller & Blanc-Szanton (1994), evokes a relational mode of thinking focusing on the globe-spanning connections between the sending as well as the receiving ends of the migratory movements. These connections were termed as *transnational social fields* in which social networks spanned localities, nation-states, and regions. This framework challenged the more unidirectional depictions of migration (Glick Schiller 2015, see also Glick Schiller, Basch & Blanc-Szanton 1992). Hence, the transnational approach multiplied the locations of interest for migration research and offered a transnational relational paradigm that remains a vigorous analytical research framework. However, as several migration scholars (e.g Glick Schiller 1999; Wimmer & Glick Schiller 2002; see also Glick Schiller in this issue) have argued, transnational migration studies has too rarely come with a temporal analytical research framework that introduces and theorises historical comparisons. For example, as Favell (2008) observed, the fact that Europe underwent several periods of intensive migration in previous centuries often seems to be bypassed and neglected in migration research, not to mention in present-day media coverage of current migratory flows to Europe.

This article therefore seeks to accentuate not only the spatiality but also the historicity of transmigration. Two transnational migration flows from different periods of time are considered. First, the emigration from the then divided Poland to the U.S. from the mid-19th to the beginning of the 20th century as portrayed in personal letters published by Thomas and Znaniecki in the often acknowledged but not widely read classic volumes of *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (1918–1920) (cf. Sinatti 2008; Skrbis 2008). Although at the turn of the 20th century Poland was still annexed by Prussia, the Austrian-Hungarian Empire, and the Russian Empire, a strong connection between the population in terms of the Polish language and culture remained (Stauted-Halsted 2001, see also Weeks 1996). Hence, I refer to the emigrations from the Polish lands (in this case from the then Russian-governed Congress Poland) in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as *Polish* immigrants to the U.S.

My second case is drawn from fieldwork conducted among present-day Polish circular migrants working in the construction industry in Denmark (Sandberg 2012, Nielsen & Sandberg 2014). These Polish workers can be designated circular as they are moving back and forth across the borders between Denmark and Poland while still having their base in Poland, including family and residence (cf. Burrell 2009; Triandafyllidou 2013).

The two migration flows, the one preceding the First World War and the other following the implementation of the EU Schengen Agreement 1995 and the EU enlargement of 2004, are linked by occurrences of free mobility regimes in the slipstream of an intensified global economy, including visa-free travel and an abolishment of systematic border control checks. The First World War, however,

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put an end to visa-free regimes and the free movement of labour at the beginning of the 20th century. Similar ruptures in nation-state building processes and the global economy, especially in Europe (i.e. the EU) and the U.S., can be observed in present times such as the introduction of temporary border control at the EU's internal borders due to the increased refugee arrivals to Europe 2015. What defines mobility as an option therefore relates closely to the specific regimes in which mobility occurs. Following Glick Schiller & Salazar (2013: 189), the notion of the *regimes of mobility* is a conceptual framework for presenting the two migration flows, which "calls attention to the role both of individual states and of changing international regulatory and surveillance administrations that affect individual mobility" and tells us about the *modus operandi* of the individual states: what is protected inside the state and what kind of regulatory apparatus is framing the population, the territorial borders, and the state's security. Each mobility regime encompasses specific regulations of openness and closure as well as perform specific notions of belonging and of difference, and the concept of the mobility regime is therefore well suited to explore both the visa-free regime before the First World War and the intersecting logics that we can observe in the current EU mobility regime privileging movements of some while restricting and criminalising the movements of others.

Revisiting *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America,* I should like to do what few commentators have done so far and turn to the actual content of the letters presented there. Reading *The Polish Peasant* letters in tandem with my ethnological fieldwork insights spurs a focus on the gendered relations in transnational communication and family strategies. As shown by Levitt (2001: 89–91, see also Kofman 2004), when both parents or one of the spouses go abroad in order to support the family and household, different yet still connected lives are lived across national borders. Family dynamics are transformed; grandparents or siblings might take over the raising of the children, the gendered division of work alters, and overall the political economy of the household are subject to change. Pessar & Mahler (2003) argue for a gendered approach to the transnational family in order to scrutinise how gender roles are challenged and also reinforced by immigration. Suggesting a theoretical framework of "gendered geographies of power", they stress not only how structural factors condition the articulation of gender in migration but also how the *gender work* performed by transmigrants in turn reproduces and contests these power hierarchies and institutionalised gender relations (Pessar & Mahler 2003: 813).

In my analysis, I therefore explore the gender work performed through emerging transnational social fields between the Polish transmigrants and their spouses staying behind. As I will argue, gender work is enacted, for instance, in the communication (letters and Skype calls respectively) made across borders, and the concept becomes particularly relevant when analysing recurring themes in the negotiations between spouses on decision-making and work organisation in the absence of one of the spouses.

The aim of the analysis was to present and contextualise the communication and family strategies used by the transmigrants and their family members staying behind. Using the historical letters in tandem with ethnological fieldwork conducted among present-day Polish circular migrants as a lens for comparing past and present transmigrant practices, I intend to highlight the historicity of the transnational migration paradigm as an important tool for interrogating the changing global historical conjunctures in which transnational family practices are enacted over time. The historical comparison between the changing dynamics of migration regimes and gender roles can further serve as a strategy of destabilising the present (Foucault 1977) in order to challenge politicised depictions of migration as an exception rather than the norm.

European and transatlantic migration flows in the 19th century

Nineteenth century Europe is often characterised as the "century of migrations", since this period witnessed some of the largest migration flows in Europe's recent history. Between 1814 and 1914, more than 50 million Europeans emigrated from Europe, predominantly to the U.S. As Schlesinger (1964: 75) notes, in the early 20th century, around one million Europeans would arrive in the U.S. each year. Paired with the overall lack of employment and downscaling of living standards in Europe, the revolutionisation of transatlantic transportation – shifting from sails to steam power – was a considerable constituent of the large emigration to America. Agents employed by transatlantic shipping companies and US railway companies were sent out to European cities in order to enlist passengers. The agents formed a European-wide network of recruitment and were a substantial dimension of the acceleration of international migration.

According to Hvidt (1971), the European migration flows in focus here can be observed in two waves: a Western European wave from the years of 1845–1884, which culminated in the decades after the end of the American Civil War, and an Eastern and Southern European wave between the years of 1890 and 1914. These migration waves were closely related to industrial developments and the intensification of the global economy in Europe and the U.S., making labour migration (including rural–urban migration plus seasonal migration within Europe, see Andersen, Kramsch & Sandberg 2015: 470-472) more the rule than the exception (Wimmer & Glick Schiller 2004). The Western Europeans derived mainly from Ireland, the UK, Germany, and Scandinavia and were recruited to industry and farming, whereas immigrants from Eastern Europe settled in urban centres on the East Coast and Midwest and were hired in industry. Between 1880 and 1910, the Polish immigration to the U.S. was approximately two million Poles (Sinatti 2008: 11). At the turn of the century, around 360,000 Poles were living in Chicago, which meant that this city was the third largest Polish urban centre at the time, exceeded only by Warsaw and Łodz (Thomas & Znaniecki 1918, vol. II: 1510).

Nation building and the political economies of transnational migration

Late 19th century transnational migration practices took place in a political–economic environment in which monopoly capitalism and a general growth of finance capital reigned along with nation-state building projects in Europe and the U.S. (Glick Schiller 1999). Many emigrants participated in the nation-building processes in both their home country and their arrival country. In the case of the U.S. especially, they were expected to assimilate and become "good Americans" (Levitt 2001: 26); yet, the sending countries considered them as remaining connected to the home country.

The late 20th century transnational migration, on the contrary, took place within a neoliberal economy intersected with the popularisation of a narrative of globalisation and open borders. At that particular moment, emigrants' contributions to their homelands were viewed through a positive lens by world financial institutions such as the World Bank. The emigrant-sending countries themselves would also concur to the extent that emigrants were seen as permanent

providers of remittances and reinvestment in the home country. At the same time, there was growing concerns about a "brain-drain" (from the skilled industries) together with a general depopulation in especially rural areas of the sending countries (Basch, Glick Schiller & Blanc-Szanton 1994; also see Levitt 2001).

Outside the heavily urbanised centres of Warsaw and Łodz, the livelihood of more than 80 per cent of the population came from agriculture. Overall, Congress (Russian governed) Poland, the source of most of the letters appearing in *The Polish Peasant,* was dominated by rural unemployment, which increased due to a growing parcelling of agricultural land on the basis of revised inheritance laws. The late imperial policies of the Russian tsarist regime accepted Russian as the only legal language (Weeks 1996: 82). Like the Lithuanian, Belorussian, and Jewish populations of Congress Poland, the Polish residents had to fight for their language and religion (Stauter-Halsted 2001).

During the end of the 19th century, the maintenance of transnational ties among Polish immigrants to the U.S. was first and foremost initiated by the links to family and kin, even though Polish leaders and intelligentsia worked to build a Polish national identity (Zaretsky 1988: 12). Actions were taken to support a family farm left behind rather than because of political loyalty to the homeland or visions of building of a "new nation" (Glick Schiller 1999: 100-101). In other cases, migrant transnational organisations were built on regional identities, such as Galician (Stauter-Halsted 2001). In order to purchase land and ensure social security with the aim of advancing future possibilities, remittances were sent on a regular basis. Most immigrant jobs in the U.S. at the end of 19th century were (and still are) low paid and without provisions for health or disability insurance. Continuing close connections to home could also be the last way out (or back) if the U.S. venture should fail.

"The Polish Peasant in Europe and America"

Before addressing the contents of the letters of *The Polish Peasant* immigrants, some words on the trajectory and legacy of the volumes are appropriate. The work was published between 1918 and 1920 by William Isaac Thomas (1863–1947), later professor in sociology at the University of Chicago, and the Polish philosopher Florian Witold Znaniecki (1882–1958). Encompassing more than 2200 pages in total, the five volumes form an impressive compilation of the so-called "human documents" that include personal letters and correspondences, as well as documents from associations, such as church parishes, and court records. The mail correspondences were primarily sent between Chicago-based Polish immigrants and their spouses, relatives, and friends staying behind.

At the time of its publication, the work was considered to be a scientific contribution to a sociological theory of social change in a society shifting from rural, agricultural life to urban, industrial life (Fairchild 1918; Blumer 1979: vi; Zaretsky 1988). In addition to its status at the time of publication as a groundbreaking work that addressed the assimilation of newcomers to the U.S., *The Polish Peasant* was praised for its innovative use of data collection.[1] However, it underwent what Blumer calls a "peculiar process of oblivion in the scholarly sociological society" (1979: iv), probably due to the shift from assimilationist to more cultural pluralist research approaches from the 1960s and onwards (Conzen 1996: 1).[2]

More recently, Burawoy *et al.* (2001) celebrated the collection as the very first global ethnography, albeit without a theory of globalisation attached to it, and Hannerz (1998: 21) described *The Polish Peasant* as a landmark in American sociology. However, whereas *The Polish Peasant* has received attention in the contemporary social sciences in general, "there is a near-universal absence of citations of their work in studies of transnational families" (Skrbis (2008: 233). Moreover, although *The Polish Peasant* is an extraordinarily illustrative example of migration as a transnational field of networks, family members, and correspondences (Sinatti 2008: 13), few have analysed the actual letters presented, which I will do in the following, focusing on the gender work performed in transnational communication between spouses.

The letters

The Polish Peasant presents private letters from approximately 50 Polish families, organised in series based on family names. Besides a 200-page introduction, the first volume contains 764 letter excerpts in total, all translated by Znaniecki from the original Polish and published in English. The Kukielka Series, the Pawlak Series and the Strucinski Series of the first volume are of special interest here, since they contain letters between family members: spouses, siblings, and also friends. My focus is on the letters between spouses in order to exemplify gender work performed in transnational family communication and decision-making. Thomas and Znaniecki were however not able to collect complete correspondences containing letters from both spouses, which is a general challenge when analysing personal migrant letters (Elliott, Gerber & Sinke 2006: 5). The reader therefore needs to pay special attention to the answers to previous letters in order to gather an idea of the negotiations and discussions taking place.

The letters are categorised into different types (such as "ceremonial letters" occasioned by Christmas or birthdays and "business letters"). However the authors suggest "the bowing letter" as an overall literary genre known from the specific time period and common to most of the letters. The bowing letter tends to follow a set structure, with an introductory religious appraisal such as "Praised be Jesus Christ", to which the reader is supposed to answer: "In centuries of centuries, amen" (Thomas & Znaniecki 1918, vol I: 304). This would be followed by an outro, in which extensive bows for/from each family member would be listed. The letters appear therefore rather schematic and include several repetitive elements, such as generalised statements and phrases such as "dearest little wife" and the aforementioned praising of God. This could be due to the fact that many of the letter writers were illiterate and had someone else doing the writing (Sinke 2015: 11). However, whereas Thomas and Znaniecki suggest the original function of the bowing letter as merely being "to keep members of a family in touch with one another" and the religious praises and repetitive phrasings as a way of invoking good health and fortune (Thomas & Znaniecki 1918, vol. I: 306), I argue that the letters, and in particular the general phrasings and repetitions, can also be analysed as a manner of performing gender work in which decisions are negotiated across geographical distances, in turn contributing to the making of a transnational social space.

Making decisions across the Atlantic

The Kukielka Series letters are organised as part of the theme called "Correspondence between husbands and wives" in which it is described how the reciprocal relations between the family members,

spouses, and children undergo changes due to the dissociation of the larger family from the family members (Thomas & Znaniecki 1918, vol. I: 822). Thomas and Znaniecki use the category of 'family' although one should not think of nuclear families only but rather households including extended family members and farmhands. The following excerpt illustrates how the male spouse makes decisions abroad on behalf of family members who stayed behind:

> Now I inform you, dearest little wife, about what you ask, whether Mańka shall go to Warsaw [to serve as a housemaid, which was apparently suggested by his wife in a previous letter], although she is a daughter of a farmer. Well, I answer you that she is not to go, because I do not allow this. [...] I inform you also, dearest little wife, that I will send you 100 roubles after some days [...] Now I want to say this also, my dear little wife, that I am very much pleased with your doing good farming for me, and keeping the boars, sows and pigs, and with your having harvested the crops. I am very much pleased with this letter, dearest little wife. [...] (Letters no. 506-9 from Jan Kukielka, August 9, 1911, vol. I: 830).[3]

The husband continues telling about his work in a brick factory for which he gets $2.70 per 13 hours and how he is worried when the factory work might stop during winter time. The reason why the husband thinks the daughter Mańka should not become a housemaid is that this was rather a strategy for the landless peasantry, not for farmers with more than 10 morgs (equals 14 acres) of land (vol. I: 830, footnote 1; see also Stauter-Halsted 2001: 23). In a subsequent letter, dated 6 January 1912, the husband discusses the wife's proposition that Mańka could then follow him to America, an idea to which the husband also has some hesitations. As he argues, the daughter will not be able to understand the language and since she cannot "remain with me, she has to go into service, and in the service it is necessary to learn the English language, and even to learn washing and cooking" (Letter no. 507, vol I: 832). The excerpt is interesting not only because it shows which moves are considered suitable for the daughter in order to enhance the family's conditions of living but also due to the kind of gender work at stake. As shown by Stauter-Halsted (2001), farm labour and gender roles were well defined in 19th century Polish household and farm life. Farm animals and the kitchen gardens were the female domain, whereas work in the field was considered the male domain, except during harvest when all household members would contribute. The division of areas of influence entailed that women tended to have key influence over the children's education, which in Congress Poland would be attendance to the Russified school system (Stauter-Halsted 2001: 43).[4] In this instance however, the migrated father seems to have a say, since he would be the gatekeeper for the daughter's prospective immigration to the U.S. The letter exchange, therefore, in turn shows how the absent father attempts to make decisions regarding the daughter's future despite him being overseas, a position which is accompanied by a significant amount of repetitions of the diminutive form of "dearest little wife" in the letter excerpt. These gendered positionings are made all the while it is clear that the wife in now in charge of the overall management of farm affairs. In this way, the husband's directions can be read as a reassertion of his overall authority of the household by making unnegotiable decisions ("I do not allow this") about the future of the children all the while appreciating the "dearest little wife" taking over the farm work.

In the following excerpt, from the Pawlak family, the wife Józefa has likewise provisionally taken over the role of running the farm in the absence of the emigrated husband. Her letters primarily account for expenses together with bringing news about the children and family members (Pawlak Series, Vol. 1). For example, the wife repeatedly refers to a sum of the received money for "mother" (presumably her mother-in-law), a regular rate that the emigrated husband likely pays to his elderly mother. However, although the wife's role as a farm manager is thought to be temporary, it does not hold her back from buying a house, apparently in her own name:

> Dear Husband: I received your letter and 175 renski.[5] I gave mother 5 crowns and 22 1/2 renski (45 crowns) were left for me. I have spent it all, for I bought dung [manure] at 60 cents; I could get it cheaper nowhere. [...] Now, dear husband, I wrote you for advice, what to do with this house which is for sale, and you answered me neither so nor otherwise. Now people give (offer) for it 530 renski. It seems to me too expensive, but if you order, dear husband, I shall buy it for this money, because it would be good for us. But if you don't order, I won't buy. But there are people who will buy it, for there are buyers enough. Now, dear husband, upon my land I planted potatoes and I left one for cabbage. I gave one bed to mother, and I rented two from Lasota and Pasek [...] (Józefa Pawlak, May 18 1913, vol. I, Pawlak Series, nr. 502).

Half a year later, dated on 23 November 1913, Józefa writes again:

> Dear Husband, I have already bought that house. I agreed at 530 and I gave them 400 (renski). The contract is settled. I paid 13 renski, and 30 cents for the stamps, and I must still give 130 renski. So send them to me. You ordered me to borrow 200 renski from mother, but she did not give them to me, for she had none. [...] Pasek [a neighbour and land-owner] will sell two morgs (of land) quite near this house, which we bought. If we could buy at least half a morg, then even if a hen ran about there she would be upon our own land. Pitera [one of the other potential buyers] is very angry with me for having bought this house and threatens me very much. (Józefa Pawlak, Nov 23 1913, vol. I, Pawlak Series, nr. 503).

Since this series contains letters from the wife only, it cannot be reconstructed how the husband reacted to this acquisition of the house, but apparently he asked the wife to borrow a sum of money from his mother, presumably for this purpose of buying the house. In a following letter from the wife, it is clear, however, that the husband has asked in whose name she made the contract for the house out to, to which she replies: "Well, I have written you so many letters asking you whether I should buy it or not, why did you not write me in whose name to do it?" (Thomas & Znaniecki 1918, vol I: 504). We do not get any clear answer but can guess that the wife probably did not write the name of her husband into the contract.

The excerpt illustrates transnational family decision-making as continuously shifting between the husband giving orders and the wife making (huge) deliberations on her own, buying the house (presumably) in her own name, and planning for the leasing of more land. As Zaretsky (1988: 15) notes, in Congress Poland around the turn of 20th century, property "may 'belong' to a given individual, but only in so far as the individual occupies a definite position in the group, for example as manager of the farm", which in this case would be the wife. Nevertheless, the house ownership is stated as a "we" throughout the letter. Perhaps, this is done in order to convince the husband to send even more remittances, but the "we" also potentially maintains the husband's engagement in the expanding farm.

Negotiating long-distance decisions and the different positioning of being the "head of the household" is also seen in the Strucinski Series. Here, a husband tries to convince his wife not to travel overseas:

> [...] And now, beloved wife, you were writing that you want to come to America so now I do not advise you to come. It is better if I send you a few roubles for your use and if you stay, for the election of president will be soon, and it may even be that I will come back to the old country. And if, after the elections, in America times are good, then I can send you a steamship ticket, and if they are bad, then it may be that next fall I will come back to the old country myself [...] (no. 534, July 13 1910, vol. I: 859).

This letter is a good example of an open strategy pursued by many emigrants, in which both possibilities remain: continuing the venture in the new country or returning if times turn out to be too hard. However, according to Thomas and Znaniecki, there were no elections at the particular time the letter was written, so the sender might have been misinformed or else he wanted to find an excuse for not bringing the wife to America. The living conditions he had to offer were perhaps not attractive or affordable enough after all; he had a new wife or he simply needed someone to hedge his bets by staying on the land.

With these few but illuminating excerpts from the rich material of personal letters presented in *The Polish Peasant*, I have highlighted gender work at play in the communications across the Atlantic, which in turn form a transnational social space: the continuous interrogations about family members and their well-being, the sending of remittances, and the systematic accounting for expenses from the receivers of letters. The repetitive phrasings, such as "dear little wife" and "dearest husband", confirm the spousal relation but are also part of an ongoing positioning that can shift the gender relations and balance of power between the spouses (Pessar & Mahler 2003). Clearly, the decision-making processes were subject to negotiations and could be distributed to the family members or spouses staying in the homeland.

Present-day polish labour migration to Denmark

The 2004 EU enlargement gave way for a diversity of mobilities across the EU's inner borders, such as shuttle or circular migration. Among EU policy makers, circular migration has been promoted as a triple-win situation: the countries of destination would benefit from a flexible (and easily dismissible) workforce, the sending countries would gain from remittances and the reinvestment of savings into the circular migrant's home country, and the migrant him/herself was expected enrichment too (Triandafyllidou 2013). The negative aspects of circulatory migration, such as risk of underpaid and unsafe working conditions, brain drain, and xenophobia, are largely downplayed by the free mobility regime.

As a response to the nationalist fears of mass migration from Eastern Europe to the "old" EU member states, several EU member states, including Denmark, introduced transitional regulations that required working permits from the so-called "East-workers" immediately after the 2004 enlargement. In Denmark, Polish labour migrants form the largest group from Central and Eastern Europe, followed by Lithuanians and Romanians. The official total reached 37,414 Polish labour migrants in 2016 (Danmarks Statistik 2016) to which the unrecorded numbers covering an unknown amount of irregular workers should be added. The demand for a Polish workforce in Denmark seems to be constant, if not increasing, especially in the building and construction, manufacturing, and agricultural industries and in the (low-skilled) service sector (Arnholz & Hansen 2011). In the construction business, many temporary migrants arrive in Denmark as skilled workers but work in positions seen as unskilled.

Like the recruitment methods of 19th century European migration flows, we today see a range of institutional and private actors involved in hiring temporary labour migrants across internal EU borders. Similar to the situation 120 years ago, the recruiters of present-day intra-European labour migrants act as providers of transport as well as of accommodation and settlement (Sandberg & Pijpers 2015).

Checking in with each other

As Thomas and Znaniecki documented for the past experience of Polish emigrants, currently spouses, children, and relatives staying behind continuously communicate with the present-day Polish labour migrants entering the Danish employment market. During fieldwork, my colleague Niels J. Nielsen and I visited Karol,[6] a member of a small crew of Polish workers on a Danish construction site. We visited him first while he was working as a foreman of the crew and later while he was a part of another crew, also at a construction site in Denmark (Nielsen & Sandberg 2014; Sandberg & Pijpers 2015). Karol had an education as tiler; however, like his Polish crew colleagues, he would do almost any kind of work except electrical work and painting. While in Denmark, Karol lived in a rented room, which he would share with colleagues. Except from a huge television screen and the computer, the room would be sparingly equipped. This stood in sharp contrast to his small row house in a larger city in the northern part of Poland, where he lives with his wife Joanna and their two sons. He was therefore content to having made an agreement with a Danish employer and the trade union that he could work 46 hours per week for three weeks, leaving room for one week off every month, hence enabling his circular migratory practice. Included in the flexible agreement was an obligatory, paid membership in the trade union, a practice that is not generally adopted among work migrants in Denmark from Eastern European countries. Membership provided the workers with a wage in accordance with the collective agreement, although not as high as the norm for Danish workers.

As discussed by Bell & Pustułka (2017: 128), there is a strong tradition of a patriarchial gender order in a Polish context both in past and present, confirming the traditional roles of male breadwinners and female caretakers. The authors point to the necessity of broadening the analysis of "the male Polish migrant" as only being a provider. As we shall see, the gender work of Karol does not only leave room for a one-dimensional breadwinner, he has multiple roles as father and caregiver too.[7]

Compared to evidence in *The Polish Peasant* letters, communication with the family was obviously more frequent; in fact, Karol called his wife on Skype every day at a certain time. "We have our cup of tea together", as Karol explained, referring to the English habit of ritualising the "five o'clock tea" (Sandberg 2012). Establishing the Skype connection in itself requires a certain amount of technical adjustment, including confirming and reassuring questions such as:

> Karol: Is everything all right?
> Joanna: You know what, I can barely hear you.
> Karol: It's because I am sitting far away from the mike. Is everything ok, everything fine?
> Joanna: Yes, yes, everything's fine.

Karol: Ok, cool
Joanna: So, how are things?
Karol: It won't get any larger.
Joanna: Doesn't matter, don't enlarge it!
Karol: *Ok.*
(Interview 2012).

The fixing of technicalities and asking back and forth if the connection works is part of a ritualised exchange in which it seems nothing is really said. However, the seemingly insignificant exchange contains an important mode of confirming each other's presence and position, checking up with each other's well-being and comfort. Karol's wife knew that my colleague and I would be visiting, and in the following excerpt, she starts out by asking if his "guests from the university" did not show up after all, since "his lamp was green":

Karol: Whassup honey?
Joanna: Hey there, whassup, no guests after all?
Karol: No, they're here, still sitting here.
Joanna: Oh yeah, they are there?
Karol: Yes, I can show them to you, here you go [turns his computer screen towards us].
Joanna: Ok, no, it's just that I thought, cause I had a look [on my computer screen] and you were green, so I thought maybe they didn't come.
[The conversation continues in which we greet with the wife]

So the green light indicates accessibility, and together with the fixing of cameras and communication props, this casual checking in with each other contributes to the manner in which Joanna gets involved in Karol's daily activities abroad, including when he has visitors. The exchanges on "how things are going" is obviously under the influence of our presence in the room and therefore perhaps not so detailed or private as on other occasions. However, these small routines and repeated questions are important everyday exchanges in order to keep contact and make do with Karol's absence, which in turn contributes to shaping a shared transnational space (Olwig & Sørensen 2001).

Planning futures

Karol's wife Joanna and the two sons also inhabit the transnational social field, living their lives in a context influenced by Karol's regular work abroad. Joanna works as a municipal employee in Poland. Salaries are low, however, and Karol's income in Denmark makes it possible for the younger son Jacek to attend an advanced dancing class and for the elder son Jakub to attend private language classes, to help him obtain a driver's licence, and to buy a car. Jakub has saved up money by accompanying Karol to construction sites in Copenhagen during summer breaks:

> I want to manage for him [Jakub] a better start than I had. For example: I had to learn the German language, the English language myself. He [Jakub] has a better start. I paid for his school [i.e. private English classes]. (...) It was a very good situation because when he was working over there [in Copenhagen], our manager, he had much better contact with my son, than [some of the other guys in the Polish crew] (Interview 2011).

Like the Kukielka Series letters showed, deciding and planning for the future of the children is centre stage for the transmigrant parents. In order to understand Karol's rationale about accepting his regular periods of absence in the everyday life of his wife and children, it is necessary to consider the political economy of this transnational family in which the careful planning of the future becomes central (Levitt 2001: 9). To have the son educated at an advanced level is highly prioritised. To realise this plan, the gender work in this household includes that Joanna, in Karol's absence, takes many decisions that occur in day-to-day life in which "she is the boss", as Karol expresses it, while Joanna adds that this would be all the daily matters regarding the children's school and education. The circular migratory practice of Karol is hence not an individual act but forms part of a family decision-making process (Sandberg 2012).

The historicity of transnational migration: concluding remarks

Highlighting the historicity of transmigration, my aim has been to accentuate the transnational migration approach as not only a spatial but also a temporal analytical research framework. Reading *The Polish Peasant* letters in tandem with the online communications of present-day Polish circular migrants in the EU sheds light on the making of transnational social fields not only in multiple locations across borders but also in different time periods.

The 'Polish peasants' were not uprooted but lived in and formed transnational social spaces in which the household dynamics would challenge and contest more formalised gender relations, such as when the wife from the Kukielka Series buys a house in her own name. Moreover, many men contemplated return; they did not assume that their migration was permanent. The majority did settle, but 25 per cent returned to Poland permanently (Stauter-Halsted 2001: 22). The livelihood strategy of working in one country and investing in another of the past migration was not that different from the transnational family practices of contemporary Polish male migrants to Denmark. Karol's circular migratory practice includes several roles (other than breadwinner) and preparing for a better future for the children involves all members of his transnational family such as when the son participates in seasonal contract labour in Denmark. Even though contract labour was not a desired strategy at the outset, Karol's case shows that it is a joint spousal decision to live a separated life, with Karol commuting across borders. In both cases, my research shows male transmigrants' continuing relations with spouses and family members. So this study cannot speak to transnational family negotiations outside of heterosexual family dynamics, nor does it reflect the many Polish female breadwinners working abroad (see for instance Körber & Merkel 2012).

However, using gender work as an entrance into analysing past and present transmigrant practices accentuates the following similarities: Both examples derive from cultural contexts with rather strong formal patriarchal traditions. However, as shown in Bell & Pustułka (2017), complex and sometimes contradictory processes are going on in relation to Polish men's masculinities. In both *The Polish Peasant* letters and in my contemporary research, there is evidence of men and women negotiating the power dynamics of their relationship and we can trace shifting domains of authority in the absence of husbands and fathers.

These similarities make it possible to raise the question of why transnational family strategies of connection, including the renegotiation of gender relations, occurred in the 19th century migration from Poland to the U.S. and the Polish 21st century migration to Denmark. In both cases, we find households and families

facing situations in both the sending and destination countries, which encourage families to "hedge their bets" in organising their livelihoods.

It is only when we look further into the decision to maintain transnational families that the differences in historical circumstances become evident. That is to say, precarious working conditions that were faced by 19th century Polish peasant households and 21st century Polish male contract labourers in Denmark arise from different configurations of the global political economy. The precarious working conditions reflected two different mobility regimes. Polish immigrants of the 19th century were offered precarious jobs in a rapidly growing and industrialising U.S. economy, which was in need of all types of labour. Precarity reflected the boom-bust cycles of industrial capitalism in which the workers had neither labour union nor state protections against unemployment, accidents, or illness. However, despite considerable racialised discrimination, Polish immigrants were expected to settle and become citizens. The legal and political structure encouraged permanent settlement and often discouraged home ties.

The precariousness of Polish contract workers in Denmark is of a very different sort. Despite shared EU citizenship, the neoliberal labour arrangements of the 21st century EU member states increasing rely on contract workers to circumvent labour protections and liveable wages guaranteed to citizens. EU migrants' short-term labour contracts are not expected to integrate in their country of work destination. At the same time, the 21st century mobility regimes with their reimposition of national borders and renewed nationalist ideology coupled with reduced social benefits, even for citizens, makes circular labour more difficult. However, ironically, the result of a reimposition of borders and a more repressive division between citizens and non-citizens has led workers, including an increasing amount of Polish workers, to choose to stay in Denmark on a more permanent basis, bringing family members to join them (Arnholz & Andersen 2016).

The analysis shows then that very different regimes of mobility can in fact produce seemingly similar patterns in transnational family ties and patriarchal formal authority. Yet, by using gender work as an entrance into analysing the transnational family communication and negotiations, it becomes clear that gendered geographies of power are in one and at the same time reproduced and contested in the two time periods under consideration. An exploration of the varying political economies and mobility regimes underlying the precarious working and living conditions faced by migrant workers at two different historical conjunctures helps to explain why transnational family dynamics have arisen at very different historical moments. Furthermore, in a context of rebordering and restricted immigration laws of the EU and the U.S., in which migration increasingly is presented as a challenge in negative terms, historical evidence and experiences with transnational practices of the past can help destabilising the notion of migration as exception.

Notes

1. Blumer (1979: 36), however criticizes Thomas and Znaniecki because they did not account for how the collection and selection of the letters took place, which accordingly casts doubt on the representative status of the letters.
2 In addition, Thomas faced political repression and scandals in his personal life, which forced him to leave the University of Chicago (Hannerz 1998: 22; Sinatti 2008: 3).
3. Abbreviations in parentheses are inserted by Thomas and Znaniecki. My explanations are made in brackets.
4. Some women engaged in underground schooling of children as an alternative to Russian-organised schools (Stauter-Halsted 2001: 43 n29).
5. The letters mention several different currencies (crowns, renski, gulden, etc.) due to the shifting, ruling governments in Poland from 17th century to the First World War (Stauter-Halsted 2001: 825, n1).
6. All names have been changed due to anonymity.
7. The multiple roles of Polish female migrants and their changing roles as entrepreneurs, citizens, caregivers, mothers, daughters, wives, friends, colleagues etc. are for the sake of delimitation not considered here (Bell & Pustułka 2017).

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