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BIOGRAPHICAL CONSEQUENCES OF WORKING ABROAD IN THE CONTEXT OF EUROPEAN MENTAL SPACE CONSTRUCTION

Abstract

Bringing to the fore the “bottom-up” perspective, i.e., the view of experiencing individuals, this article differentiates between types of work-related migration and mobility and discusses their biographical consequences in the context of the creation of European mental space. The findings based on a detailed analysis of autobiographical narrative interviews with transnational workers prove that a considerable number of people leave their country of origin for other than economic reasons. Among issues covered particular attention is given to two motives behind migration: “escape from” overwhelmingly unbearable life circumstances and “escape to” Europe in search for space of individual expression and development. Moreover, the paper considers the phenomenon of reconciliation with one’s country of origin as an aftermath of experiencing cultural otherness. It is, however, pointed out that migration or mobility reduced to work practices only is not a sufficient condition for the development of “European” identifications.

Key words: transnational work, migration, mobility, biography, European mental space, reconciliation.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper is concerned with questions of how, and to what extent, working abroad (or transnational work) and being this way exposed to non-native (in the sense of national, or – generally – culturally specific) forms of life is likely to
be a vehicle of Europeanization understood in terms of a process through which a European mental space and European identifications may emerge.

In the 90’s decade of the last century, as well as in the first decade of the new millennium, various concepts and theories of transnationalism have emerged in the field of migration studies as one of the most influential perspectives on cross-border networks and connections that link migrants with the countries of their origin [cf., e.g. Portes, Guarnizo, Landolt, 1999, Faist, 2000; Vertovec, 2009]. On the one hand, the phenomena of transnational ties relate to labour migration and mobility and, on the other hand, to identity work (identity formation and change). The perspective of transnationalism has proven useful for the purpose of our study, the more so as the gathered data allow, at least in part, for a reconstruction of such networks.

Yet, although we use the term “transnational workers” to refer to one of the basic aggregate categories delineated for the project, it does not necessarily mean that the term “transnational” is applied here with an intention of looking for an affinity of our approach to particular theories developed within that perspective. Thus, in the most general and theoretically non-specific sense, we define “transnational workers” as people whose work activities abroad are, have been or were considerably long lasting to result in biographically relevant experiences. In our analysis we also refer to the cases in which transnational work is interrelated with other categories – “Educationally Mobile”, “Cultural Contacts” and “Civil Society Workers”. We have found these cases particularly analytically and theoretically rich what enables us to formulate the conviction that social and cultural meaning of work may successfully develop when the world of work interacts with other dimensions of individuals’ social activity.

In this paper we intend to present general overlook based on the analysis of all the interviews which is undertaken in frames of work as the narrator’s biographical experience. We especially focus our attention on motives of mobility and consequences of these biographical situations in which work is not a primary reason for going abroad. Furthermore, we examine the phenomenon of reconciliation with one’s country of origin appearing in life histories in the context of educational and work experiences.

1 The data base consists of 67 autobiographical narrative interviews carried out mostly with educated persons of the European stem, which may rightly be seen as a shortage of the sample. Among the interviews there are 27 cases, in which category of transnational workers has been found interrelated with other categories, i.e., Educationally Mobile, Cultural Contacts and Civil Society Organizations in a significant way.

2 Among the interviews there are 27 cases, in which category of transnational workers has been found interrelated with other categories.
2. MOTIVES OF MOBILITY

Seen from the biographical perspective, mobility should be analysed in terms of specific biographical choices (and thus meanings given by individuals to their actions and experiences), as well as cultural, economic and political circumstances that constitute frames for the individuals’ activities.

Since the core category of our analysis is ‘work abroad’, it has been important to find out in what contexts the theme of transnational work occurs and what meaning the experience of working abroad gains in an individual biography. Our collection of data allows for distinguishing two types of motives. One of them relates to the situation in which work as such is a primary reason for mobility. Another type is connected with the situation in which narrators look for a job abroad as a result of biographical plans other than those orientated to work. In such cases we treat work as a secondary motive. It should be stressed that these reasons are distinguished as the result of analytical procedure. This means that the narrators often do not literally name these experiences as motives for mobility, but the structural text analysis enables identifying specific meanings given by the narrators to their experiences, plans and expectations. Accordingly, each decision of going abroad made in a specific moment in one’s life constitutes a turning point [Strauss, 1959] implying various biographical consequences. In both cases European mental space plays an important role for designing biography and interpretation of personal experiences. According to Fritz Schütze, European mental space is conceived of as: “an overarching stock of knowledge and shared mindset that enables European citizens to transgress all types of borders between the national realms. A European mental space provides horizons of competitive or emulative comparison between achievements in terms of the standard of living in different European nations and in terms of chances for biographical plans and undertakings [...]” [Schütze, Schröder, Nagel, no publishing date].

2.1 Work as a primary motive

2.1.1 Traditional for bread

Working abroad in order to make living has been one of the most common reasons for emigration related to differences between countries defined in terms of economic prosperity. Thus, this kind of motive has usually involved a sort of a push mechanism [Ravenstein, 1889; Lee, 1966] connected with collective macro-structural conditions which are experienced by individuals as unbearable. In such cases people try to move beyond desperate circumstances in which they
feel to be forced into a tight corner (being in urgent needs, lacking financial or other means of subsistence). We call this motive traditional because it describes a classic model of economic migration. Although differences between economic potential of Western and Eastern Europe, though gradually decreasing, remain significant, people rarely go abroad being forced by extreme poverty. A classical example of “traditional for bread” migration may be found in the life history of Monika – a young Polish woman and a mother of three little children. She experienced a critical situation of poverty and hopelessness receiving no help and support from her family. Because of pathological and emotionally draining relationship with her mother she was left alone with her problems. Therefore, going abroad seemed to be the only solution:

And again I would have to stay alone and again to start everything from the beginning. And just the best thing would be to slash my wrists, or to murder the children and work then myself. Or to get asphyxiated or to. I don’t know, or to leave them at an orphanage and then to cut my throat. Different thoughts were coming because when you have no possibilities then, then it’s horrible. And my mummy called then. But when she heard that... I didn’t really want to talk to her but when she heard that Jacek had gone to... here exactly, to Ireland, she decided that we must have had so much. so much money that we didn’t need anything. And I’m explaining her – “Listen, maybe you could send me some money, I’ve got nothing to eat”.

The quotation shows a tragic plight of Monika’s biography. Her autobiographical rendering proves, however, that she fortunately managed to overcome her predicament. Monika’s case seems to confirm that leaving one’s country of origin in order to flee or overcome personal problems and experienced defeats may result in a positive and active biographical orientation. For her life in Europe has become a mental space broadening biographical opportunities. However, in other similar biographical experiences this may lead to a situation which we call “limbo”, i.e., a process in which settling in another country does not alleviate one’s difficulties and, quite the opposite, results in loosing social standing, shrinking professional opportunities and a consequent accumulation of constraints. For these

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3 It should be mentioned that in the European context this motive is still common in relation to migrants recruiting from really poor, mostly overseas environments. Here we concentrate mostly on East-West context where in our opinion most people go abroad because of ‘bread with butter’ motive.

4 These cases are crucial for our analysis because at the same time they show biographical meaning of trajectory caused by dramatic economic conditions and specific biographical circumstances which got the narrators into a tangle.

5 Jacek is Monika’s husband who went to Ireland to support his family, but disappeared for a couple of months. He left Monika without substance.
individuals Europe rather blocks their biographical careers by means of illusory possibilities. What follows, is a systematic atrophy of interaction networks and spiritual sensitiveness as well as a systematic loss of life orientation.

2.1.2 Contemporary *for bread with butter*

Contrary to the traditional model which describes migration as movement from poverty-stricken areas to more affluent countries in order to fulfil basic human needs, recently transnational labour market is rather developed by individuals’ need to become well off. In other words, contemporary mobility in Europe is not linked with the necessity to look for survival, but with the choice anchored in economic and social expectations towards the affluent societies. The deterministic push mechanism has been replaced by the voluntary pull mechanism. Therefore, the analysis of material enabled us to distinguish another group of motives that after Ewa Morawska [1985] we call *for bread with butter*. As Grzegorz Babiński points out “During the last five years, this type of migration is becoming a global phenomenon and is extended not only to high gratification specialists, but also to less qualified workers” [Babiński, 2008: 25]. This social phenomenon can be analyzed from two perspectives: first, as a collective cultural trend based on a materialistic value orientation, and second, in terms of individualistic plans based on a post-materialistic value orientation.

2.1.2.1 Collective cultural trend based on a materialistic value orientation

It is widely claimed that economic conditions generate essential motives of leaving one’s country of origin and it is taken for granted that people are rational when it comes to decision to go abroad in order to work. Moreover, it is believed that they carefully consider multiple and complex economic factors like: market opportunities, wage differentials across markets or possibilities of development before going to a foreign country. However, according to our findings economic motivations for transnational work are also rooted in haphazard, not always systematically calculated, decisions supported by collective images of successful work and life abroad.

The narratives show that such orientations are built on the very desire to improve one’s living conditions, very often regardless of the type of work being done. We consciously use the term “desire”, since while in some cases a well developed biographical action scheme may occur and be grounded in rational

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*Still, in the European context the flow of migration wave continues to take East-West (e.g. the huge Polish immigration to the UK and Ireland) or North-South direction.*
expectations, in many other cases that desire is based on a sort of the myth of wealthy and rich West (a “Promised Land”), created through the means of public and private discourses. Stories about successful and easy life abroad make future transnational workers think about the possibility of leaving their country. Therefore we call this phenomenon “cultural trend” based on, quite often illusory, collective images of the West. Consequently, people are not prepared for many contingencies which they might be confronted with when reality of living abroad does not correspond to their optimistic or even idyllic images. Under specific circumstances biographical plan of having better life may be gradually replaced by the experience of trajectory [Cf. Riemann, Schütze, 1991].

Nevertheless, this motive and mechanism is strongly related with a so-called materialistic value orientation in the sense of Inglehart [1977]. A better standard of living is measured with the ability of consuming everyday goods. In narratives this experience has been presented as one of crucial advantages. Thus in many cases the motive of better income prevails over status and prestige and results in consent to downward social mobility while compared to one’s social status in one’s country of origin. The example of Maciej illustrates this situation very well. After a few years stay in the UK together with his wife, they decided to return to Poland. The experience of different life standards contributed to their decision to come back to London, though, having university degree, they still continue to work beneath their qualifications.

*We knew that if we come back we can sustain our financial status and that it may be only better. Whereas in Poland everything appeared in an unfavourable light and an- and first of all that, as I’ve mentioned living on a shoestring doesn’t suite us ehm and-and then we could see no possibility to be kicked upstairs and to have decent incomes, to maintain our standard of living here and 1000 zlotys wasn’t really much enough ehm.*

### 2.1.2.2 Individualistic trends based on a post-materialistic value orientation

This concerns people who go abroad to broaden their education, professional experiences and competences, to build new personal and professional networks, with the intention of self-development [Cf. Inglehart, 1977]. Their choice of destination country is usually based on careful and realistic calculation of chances and long-term biographical planning. Going abroad is associated with biographical strategy of accumulating social capital. This motive is particularly visible in those

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7 It could be well observed in Poland, especially between 2004–2008 when whole social milieus e.g. friends, family members, members of small villages or towns, were going abroad to taste better life.
narratives in which transnational work is intertwined with educational activities abroad. The narrative of Maja is a good example of it.

So I had waited until we jointed the EU. And it was like that ehm... I went there with a plan of improving my English [...] of finding a job in any office and when I come here (to Poland) I could apply for a better position, and that I would not have to start with this secretary position. Ehm... So it was the plan.

In many cases this strategy of biographical self-development appears successful, especially when narrators have the ability of comparing different perspectives and implementing their knowledge in varied social contexts. Very often, when returning home, they become mediators or animators of contacts within the cultural space of European societies. At the same time this strategy may turn out to be misleading when one’s orientation to Europe as a mental space, acquired and appropriated during one’s living abroad, can not be successfully used after coming back to one’s country of origin, at least in accord with the homecomer’s expectations, like it was in the case of Maja, who expected that as a very resourceful and active person in the UK she would be able to use her cultural capital accumulated there, after returning to Poland, to find better chances in the Polish labour market. She did not take into account that her absence at home country would hold up the development of her Polish line of professional career and that she would have to invest much time and energy to take care of her professional position in Poland. This led her to a feeling of deep biographical disappointment.

Another aspect of misfortune in this respect is related to the situation in which individuals want to implement cultural patterns acquired abroad as much more effective than their original ones. They usually present themselves as emissaries of other, e.g. Western European cultural patterns, with no respect for home culture. Reni, a young Bulgarian woman studying in England, is a very good example here. After completing her education abroad she came back to the home university and had great difficulties in establishing her position as a knowledgeable and well educated person. To the contrary, she was treated as a homecomer who lost her loyalty to local environment.

2.2 Work as a secondary motive

People, who move across Europe looking for opportunities to develop their future career or to experience something new in the first place, represent those motives when working abroad is not defined as a dominant biographical goal.

8 The same phenomenon is described in a written autobiographical story of Ukrainian scholar Natalia Pohorila “Touched by Transformation. My Life and Sociology” (Kenn, Mucha 2006).
In this respect, our findings extend the social and biographical profile of transnational workers to educationally mobile and in some respect to interviews of cultural contacts persons and CSO activists. Thus, among motives where work plays the secondary role in terms of biographical plans we enumerate: embarking on a journey, intimate relationships, escape from and escape to.

2.2.1 Embarking on a journey

Embarking on a journey means one’s willingness to undertake adventure and refers to “I always wanted to travel” motive and the feeling that “my home is not enough”. Driving force behind one’s mobility is here eagerness to travel and the need to learn, discover and explore new realms. This involves risk-taking, a readiness to test one’s abilities and being open to and curious of other cultures. It is well illustrated in the interview of Filip – a young Polish man:

I didn’t stick to anything for a longer period of time. I remember I earned money, I don’t know. I put aside somewhere around one thousand dollar and I decided to travel the world.

I: Uh-huh.

N: Err... «sighing» Well my father since he had been travelling a lot too he also helped me somehow. And my first travel destination was Morocco, I was hitchhiking. Err and I decided that during this journey wherever I was I would just visit all the places. I mean to visit, well not exactly like a tourist does but to see what I’m interested in.

Although the above quotation refers to just a small biographical episode, Filip’s whole narrative is presented in the mode of adventure. Interestingly enough, the same narrative communicative scheme is used when he introduces the topic of work in his biography. In the story about establishing his own business on Cyprus he presents himself as a wager, a humorous man – using the notion put forward by Florian Znaniecki [2001] – who treats work as fun. For him it is the challenge to face obstacles what constitutes the sense of work not the economic profits.

Embarking on a journey may be related either to a liminal period [van Gennep 2004, Turner 1995], or with a Bohemian personality type as described by Thomas and Znaniecki [1976]. In either case narrators are looking for jobs abroad in order to gain financial means for their travels in the first place.

In the case of liminality we deal with the suspension of the routine of everyday life, detaching from normal course of things. This usually entails putting oneself

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9 The very notion of “embarking on a journey” as well as a sharp distinction between this cause of mobility and the “escape to” motive we owe to Ulrike Nagel.
to the test in order to prove to oneself and significant others one’s independence, ability to organize one’s life and ability to face challenges. This also involves the need to abandon home to see and learn other ways of experiencing the world in order to reach a new position in social structure [Turner, 1995, Cohen, 1979]. This motive had been well known in the history of European culture since the Middle Ages when students travelled to university towns in the frame of so-called Ausbildungsräume. In the XIXth century it was replaced by the Grand Tour undertaken by nobleman’s sons as an obligatory element of good education (Bildungsreise) [Miączak, 2003]. In most cases it is still related to a specific stage of life course: being young, having no family, looking for education and/or some possibilities to work in the cultural convention of adventure which constitutes different biographical meanings to this kind of experiences.

The case of Bohemian personality type concerns all these individuals whose openness for new experiences is permanent and may be seen as enduring feature of one’s personality in the sense of Thomas and Znaniecki [1976]. They are usually ready to experiment with different ways of life and do not fear otherness. Let us refer to the life story of Kostek – a young well-educated Polish man with a very good command of English who quits his lucrative bank marketing position and goes to Scotland in order to try his hand at working there and to take advantage of new opportunities. His case proves that random frame of biographical plans goes together with the willingness to “taste” different types of experiences also related to work:

_They transferred me to London. I lived there for 6 months at a hotel, which to a large extent influenced my decision to give up this job. Mmm ... In the meantime I met a girl, I fell in love and I knew that I’d like to escape from the place slowly because a) working in this environment doesn’t suit me, I’m stuck in London, I am living at a hotel, I am eating out all the time// This is London: cool parties, alcohol everyday, or every weekend ehm so I didn’t find it amusing anymore, anyway you know how it is if you do the same all the time# _I: #Well, yes# _N: #at some point you’re sick of it._

This passage shows the complexity of the biographical situation in which easygoing and Bohemian attitude towards life is gradually transforming into more reflective biographical project. From the context of Kostek’s whole narrative we learn that initially he was charmed by the metropolitan atmosphere of London.

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It is worth mentioning that the contemporary idea of students’ Erasmus exchange supported by the European Commission is based on the Middle Ages phenomenon of open Europe universities education.
This feeling can be explained by the demonstrated in his life story openness for new cultural “tastes”. Later, however, he finds out that this adventurous style of life may limit the possibility of building stable relationships.

Paradoxically, embarking on a journey motive though apparently not connected with work may appear significant for interpretation of biographical experiences of transnational work.

2.2.2 “Escape from...” and “Escape to...” motives

The “escape” motive is one of the most interesting findings in our empirical data. Its analysis shows that the perspective of open Europe and the concept of European mental space also appear in biographical situations which initially are associated with the experience of trajectory or at least deep biographical dissatisfaction. Going abroad is expected to be the solution. In other words, for most of the narrators the idea to go to Europe is connected with negative rather than positive experiences as a starting point for leaving one’s country of origin. What is particularly intriguing is the inner dynamics of biographical experiences leading by means of biographical work from the situation defined as difficult or even unbearable to successful biographical solutions. In order to describe those processes we allude to Erich Fromm’s [1994] expressions “freedom from” and “freedom to”. Whereas the “escape from...” motive refers to oppression and trajectory the “escape to...” motive is related mainly to the opportunity to take distance to one’s original culture, family and to separate oneself at least temporarily from one’s old world and its suffocating living conditions. At the same time Europe seems to be a space that enables to cope with multiplying difficulties, suffering and disorientation in one’s life.

We cannot fail to note, however, that “escape from...” and “escape to...” are a sort of a model situation creating a very diverse spectrum of biographical arrangements and solutions of each narrator. It happens that in the same biography the need to “escape from” may be transferred into “escape to” motive. Constant changing of meanings being the result of biographical work gives the field for constructing European mental space of reference and may initiate the process of repatriotization which will be discussed later on.

Escape from

The “escape from...” motive refers to an oppression and trajectory which is not related to economic factors, but to an individual’s predicaments at home and local milieu (e.g. abuse and violence in family settings, experience of victimization). Here again we may refer to push mechanism which works as follows: an
individual being in serious trouble, distress and affliction (chaos and disorder) at home blindly flees unless he or she finds a shelter. Leaving unbearable conditions behind one simultaneously faces empty space. Although there are not many cases of this kind in our collection, they are analytically significant because they exemplify a multilevel and intensive process of biographical identity work. The case of Monika, mentioned above, is the striking example of this phenomenon. Economic conditions and other biographical circumstances meet in her life course in an unfavourable combination that creates a deep trajectory potential. Her migration career development seems to confirm Eric Cohen’s suggestion that individuals abandoning their homes in discontent, tension and often disagreement in search for “elective” centre may remain alienated from both (their home and “elective” centre) until they reconcile with their place of origin [Cf. Cohen, 1971:193]. At the time of the interview Monika is still overwhelmed by the experience of suffering and is unable to start the process of reconciliation. For her, going abroad is connected with biographical choice of permanent migration – it is the only example when the narrator calls her homeland (Poland) as a foreign country.

**Escape to**

The “escape to...” motive is related mainly with intentional plans of one’s biography (biographical action scheme in Schütze’s terms), which may differ, however, in their scope intensity and complexity. In this case, Europe as the pull mechanism providing a set of tempting opportunities, is most often conceived of as a space for individual expression and development, extricating oneself from subjectively defined emotional insufficiency and constraining suffocating conditions at home or local milieu.

A comparison of two contrastive life histories will illustrate this point: Matthias – the 27 year-old Swiss who leaves for Estonia, and Pauline – the 31 year-old woman who comes from a small village in Northern Ireland and goes on Erasmus exchange to France, later marries a Dutch man and works in Denmark. What differentiates these two cases is the narrators’ definition of situation at home which makes their life discontent.

Paradoxically enough, for Matthiasthe ordered, predictable, sterile and lacking in spontaneity Swiss environment is a stimulus to go abroad. In his view Switzerland is boring and people (including his family members and friends) are too concentrated on their identity and faked emotions. His diagnosis of the condition of Swiss society seems to be compliant with the concept of “too much reflexive-self” as described by Giddens and Beck [Giddens, 1991; Beck, 1992]. According to Matthias the modern European society is polished and cleaned up
and then put up on some kind of a shelf. The result is a loss of long-term emotional commitment, a receding sense of authenticity and disillusionment usually implying high biographical costs.

I still think that – it was mainly the interest for other staff that made me leave. I could go back there, I’d have a handful of very good friends. I’d have a caring and very, very good family of nowadays reasonable and nice people and I will have a regular, – average life in Switzerland. It would be more comfortable there, but I’m, I would just be bored to death. That’s rather the reason why I left, I think. I was bored, bored of the opinion of my friends, bored of with ... yeah, boredom ... Yeah, that’s that, about the problems I had...

As we can see in the passage cited above the interpretation of one’s life situation as suffocating is always relative. For Matthias well-arranged welfare state is experienced as a sort of biographical trap. Thus, Matthias intends to get out of boredom and meaningless of routine and searches for new experiences, exciting places and interesting people. It happens quite by chance that he goes to Estonia where his penpal friend lives and is very much attracted by the country. He gets married there. His description of people in Estonia may be explained in relation to Ralph H. Turner’s concept of task-directed and identity-directed self [Turner, 1968: 100–102]. Matthias himself is an “amused spectator” who derives enjoyment and reassurance from the fact that others live authentically” [Cohen: 189]. Moreover, he endeavours to take the perspective of the Other (the Estonian society) and becomes more committed to his new community. His life takes on meaning in Estonia.

Now, it is interesting to see how Pauline defines her place of origin. She was born to a traditional, Catholic family living in a wee and boring village. She describes her mother as a servant with barely any thought for herself trapped within traditional gender roles and modes of authority. For Pauline her family is as an external force imposing symbolic violence and tight control on her. While going abroad she attempts to free herself from influence of “suffocating” traditional values and cultural patterns of her Catholic community. Encountering alternative cultural patterns of life there results in her case in the rejection of closed role family system and the traditional working-class culture. She starts re-examining, re-evaluating and questioning her old values, taken-for-granted background assumptions, commonly shared knowledge and patterns of conducts (including religion and her mother’s position within family). This is how her first encounter with Europe initiates critical and, according to her, more objective point of view. She is the first in her family to go to university, trying through education to get better or easier life. For Pauline education is a way of getting out of her modest family.
And it was also like a very /ehm/ small town... Catholic village ((laughing)) which was /ehm/ more and more /eh/ something that felt ... made me feel a bit suffocated./ /Eh/ Because, I don’t know if it was necessarily because it was Catholic (and because) Catholicism brought its own sort of strict rules about it and (everything?) but it was also maybe partly a small town or a small, it wasn’t even a small town, it was like ... I don’t know, 700 inhabitants, so a tiny village so it was this sort of small town mentality and ... And I always /ehm/ remember like /eh/ growing up with people ... people tended to be very similar or, or have certain ... /ehm/ social scripts.

After some years of living, studying and working in different countries (France, USA, Denmark, Sweden and Finland) Pauline has come to realize that what seemed to be emancipating, fascinating and alluring at her first encounters with Europe, should be (re)interpreted and revised. Accordingly, the nagging sense of strangeness and the feeling of being uprooted became dominant in her biography. This made her aware that she had “lost a sense of centre” and consequently stimulated her capacity for doing biographical identity work. It must be emphasized, however, that it is only after the experience of liberating European space when it becomes apparent for Pauline how much she owes to her home.

The cases examined above reveal that this is not only a traditional (usually religious) way of living of one’s family and local environment but also an ambivalent, person-oriented egalitarian family milieu, tidy and affluent surrounding what encourages individuals to escape (to Europe). To make this point clear: we state that “escape to...” may result both from the insufficiency of civilization and also from suffering from the surfeit of civilization. What appears to emerge from the analysis of such cases as an additional significant topic is a biographical process of reconciliation with most issues lying behind escapes.

3. RECONCILIATION

As it has been already said, the motive of escape from life circumstances that a person finds hardly bearable or annoying, as well as one’s wish to escape to a place that seems to promise new and more satisfying life chances (which we see in many cases as dialectically bounded to each other and which we tend to distinguish in the data by pointing to the narrators’ own perspectives, i.e., whether they put a dominant stress on the trajectory character of their experiences or on the orientation to the intentional action schemes), is quite frequent in our data collection.

Now, it is worth noting, from the point of view of the concept of European mental space that in most of analyzed cases the initial frames of mind which were
triggering the process of escaping (feelings of oppression caused by personal conflicts with one’s social milieu, but also a generalized feeling of dissatisfaction because of life conditions and culture of the country of origin), tend to undergo, in an intensive biographical identity work, a significant transformation which we propose to call, to put it generally, a reconciliation with one’s place of origin. On the microsocial level of one’s collective affiliations this usually means an improvement or reestablishing of family bounds which were spoiled or broken. On the level of one’s orientation towards larger social collectivities such a reconciliation may occur as a process of a (re)discovery of one’s own place of origin, its society and culture, as a valuable frame of reference and identification regardless many of the country’s limitations and shortcomings which were previously speaking to escape. In cases, when such coming to terms with one’s own heritage refers to the level of nation-state and national culture, we could call it (re)patriotization, having in mind its non-conflicting modality which does not imply differential we-feels based on ideologies and meaning contexts of nationalist character.

A good example of repatriotization in the sense sketched above is the case of Dorota, whose experiences in Germany, during her studies in a German Studies faculty, have eventually led her both to reconciliation with her family and to (re)patriotization of her overall orientation towards Poland and Polishness.

I: and then you need to go back and you have this dilemma#
N: oh right#
I: to come back or not...
N: Yes/ and because of the people, because I really met fantastic people and ... and really, I became mmm ... me ... torn, emotionally too, because er ... I started mmm ... to feel that ...
I// I belonged partially ... in Germany and in Poland// I mean, for sure, my stay in Germany made me realize that// that I belonged in Poland, that it’s my home ... hh ... While studying here [in X], I kept thinking that sometime ... after I graduate, I’d escape abroad ...
I: uh-huh
N: because there were no perspectives here, no future, somehow I had this feelings ((deep breath)) But while in Germany, I realized that Poland actually is my home that I can’t imagine ... me ... spending my life somewhere ... outside of Poland ... I ... yes ...
I can leave for a year; two or three, to see what life looks like elsewhere, but I will come back for sure, because, quite simply, it was such a joy, I remember; when I came back for Christmas, when I crossed the border and I saw those ugly, blister// blistered blocks of flats and basically ((laughing)) such a joy (+) to be home, well ... I was surprised myself err ... to feel this way ...
I: uh-huh
N: ((deep breath)) however, when it was time to return to Poland/ I realized that// that after all ... despite those neo-Nazis, despite all those stories ... errr (3) perhaps not so cool, despite the fact that I had to go those 5 stops to buy bread in Kaufland ((laughing)) and all those different things that were not perfect in my daily life ...
I: uh-huh
N: or even that mentality of the Germans sometimes, or ... mmm ... the things to arr// when you had to arrange something at an office some// sometimes it annoyed me ... I could come five till eleven, and the lady would point to her watch to// that she worked till eleven. 

Anyhow, who works till eleven? ((laughing)) so, those things annoyed me, but when it was time to leave ((quieter)) I felt that (+) Poland is my home, but Germany is my... summer house ((laughing)) ... This is this summer house I've got, somehow, my second home...

I: uh-huh
N: (deep breath)) and I felt torn inside err I had a huge dilemma, but ... mm ... as I said, I figured that, after all, I could learn more in Poland.

What should be stressed in Dorota’s narration is that her looking back on the country of origin from the perspective of her living and studying in Germany results not only in her reconciliation work on the level of her individual and collective identifications, but also in her discovery of a particular place in Germany (her interests in the German culture and literature have been established earlier) as a second home, much kept in heart summer home of a kind, regardless reservations concerning conditions of living there and some initially experienced fears embedded in the traces of Polish-German collective / historical memory, known to her only through the channels of cultural transmission, yet still recognizable and alive.

Second home in this sense does not need to be a place of permanent residence. It means rather, as we understand the context of use of this category in Dorota’s narration, a domesticated space in which, just through developing cognitively and emotionally relevant biographical knowledge of a range of contexts that once organized our daily practices, one may get a sense that a space, sometimes distant from the place one is permanently or most of the time living in, is basically within one’s reach and can be used in a competent way, without a feeling of being estranged or alienated, whenever is visited. In this sense a second home could be conceivable as something that can partially prevent from the effect of homecomer described by Alfred Schütz [1990b].

Another version of such a domestication, expressed in terms of feeling as if at home in another country can be find in the interview with Brigitta, an Estonian young woman who spent in Germany a considerable part of her educational career. She is a 32 year old woman who studied in Germany within the frame of the European Erasmus programme for a year. Then she was working on her PhD thesis there for another two years sharing her time between the university and her husband and small daughter.

But in the background of this, did you feel that you shared something more with Germans now than with any other European nationality?
N: yes, when there is a German movie on, then it is our, so to speak, home movie (laughing), for example, quite recently, just a couple of days ago, there was a German headline in one of our Estonian daily newspapers; wow, I spotted it immediately, and as the German language has not been integrated that well into our society as the English language, you will come across it more rarely. Well, of course, when in Germany I was a stranger; then in Estonia, Estonia, in a way, I am like a link to Germany for my colleague [...] So, a kind of invisible network does definitely, definitely exist. And, and well, let’s say it without any doubt that German society is the closest to me. I know all about it besides our own, well, our home, homelike society. So the countries which are located physically closer to us seem to be much more unfamiliar to me [...] Well but, in a sense of the environment... somehow; mmm, those differences, when I am still thinking about Germany; those differences in communication between people, well, they definitely are there, but they are very typical of, let’s say, their lifestyle is very typical of that in Estonia. So that I didn’t have the feeling that I was abroad at all. And I think, I was, I was really melting. Well, in the opinion of Germans, not at all, maybe they could understand it immediately in the street that oh yes, that’s a foreigner; but, but I felt as if at home there.

For both narrators the initial motivational frame of these experiences is connected with educational mobility. Yet, exploring these two cases with relation to work seems to be justified here. In the case of Dorota, her educational career in Germany, and adopting one of the places there as a second home, in a conscious and much worked-through, biographically grounded and symbolically relevant way, is eventually leading her to a choice of mediation/liaison work as a long-term perspective for professionalized biographical action scheme. Starting, in the time of her studies, from a loose metaphor of “building bridges”, she is engaged now, as a translator and tourist guide, in developing a frame for such work not only in the context of Polish-German historical splits and cleavages, but also in a larger scale of the East-European relationships, looking for her own way to establish a frame for, so to say, mediation from within.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Our concluding remarks should begin with phenomenon of democratization which constitutes the frame of the described above processes. The narrators are aware that there are an increasing number of modes of life and experiences accessible previously to elites only which get more and more available and open to mass society of late modernity in Europe. The material shows that transnational work together with educational processes is becoming a main vehicle of this process.
The situation of transnational work shaped by economic and civilization inferiority often makes people from higher social strata (e.g. having higher education) take up simple jobs. Whereas in biographical perspective this situation may be experienced as a brain waste and regression, at the collective level it results in: lack of orientation towards group solidarity (vs. diasporas) and empathy, successful stories hiding biographical costs, weakening attachment and diminishing loyalty to “we”– community (entailing systematic atrophy of interaction networks, social bonds and spiritual sensitiveness) / disengagement.

Furthermore, the findings of the research seem to show that transnational work, if not associated with any other “sensitized area of contact”, implies also a weak involvement in public and civil society sphere. This usually involves the lack of interest in civil activities in one’s country of origin, host society as well as in European matters in general. The very situation of transnational work, though inherently implying a contact with otherness, may not be a sufficient condition for the initiation of identity and biographical work. Consequently, in terms of individual biographical perspective, such situation impedes any reflection on one’s collective belonging and Europe. To the contrary, when transnational work is accompanied by social involvement and participation usually entails very effective identity and biographical work very much focused on European issues. In the macro-social context we may assume that work, when reduced to the matters of labour influx, weakens the experience of integration and narrows the European mental space. The reduction of the idea of social integration to economic level appears to be a false image. Even if mobility always activates some identity work (by the very nature of experiences in new cultural and interactional frames), this work becomes much more intensive and productive in the biographical sense (also with reference to the European mental space) when it is related to participation in social milieus larger than the ‘place of job’ itself, thus, when it is not reduced to the sphere of labor market and consumption.

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**KONSEKWENCJE BIOGRAFICZNE PRACY ZA GRANICĄ W KONTEKŚCIE EUROPEJSKIEJ PRZESTRZENI MENTALNEJ**

(Streszczenie)

Wysuwając na pierwszy plan „oddolną” perspektywę, a zatem punkt widzenia doświadczających jednostek, artykuł ten rozróżnia typy migracji i mobilności związaną z pracą i omawia ich biograficzne konsekwencje w kontekście tworzenia europejskiej przestrzeni mentalnej. Wnioski wyprowadzone ze szczegółowej analizy autobiograficznych wywiadów narracyjnych z transnarodowymi pracownikami pokazują, że istnieje znacząca liczba osób, które opuszczają swój kraj pochodzenia z innych powodów niż ekonomiczne. Wśród omawianych kwestii szczególna uwaga poświęcona jest dwóm motywom migracji: „ucieczce od” przytłaczająco nieznośnych warunków życia i „ucieczki do” Europy w poszukiwaniu przestrzeni ekspresji siebie i możliwości osobistego rozwoju. Co więcej, omówione zostaje zjawisko rekonciliacji z krajem pochodzenia.
będące zazwyczaj następstwem spotkania z kulturową odmiennością. Podkreślony zostaje jednak fakt, że migracja czy mobilność zredukowana do samej pracy nie jest wystarczającym warunkiem dla rozwoju „europejskich” identyfikacji.

Słowa kluczowe: praca transnarodowa, migracja, mobilność, biografia, europejska przestrzeń mentalna, rekoncylacja