

**Wioleta Danilewicz**

University of Białystok, Faculty of Pedagogy and Psychology

**BETWEEN AMERICA AND EUROPE –  
COMMUNICATING IN THE LIGHT  
OF THE SPATIAL MOBILITY OF POLES.  
PART 1**

**Abstract.** Emigration from Poland has a rich and complicated history. Also nowadays, international mobility is still a constant element present in the life of Polish society and in worldwide trends. Migrating beyond the borders of a given country has become a feature of contemporary citizens of the world. The new global mobility trends are: globalization, acceleration, diversity and transnationality, feminization (Castles, Miller, 2011). In reference to the issue of the volume, major emphasis was placed on the first of these trends, i.e. globalization. The purpose of this paper is to show how migrants have communicated with members of their families during cumulative dislocations from the late 19th century to modern times. Particular attention was paid to the ways of maintaining contact with family and the country of origin.

*Keywords:* emigration, migrants, communication, history, family.

### **Introduction**

Migration always involves leaving the place of residence, the environment, and loved ones. Some migrants leave permanently, breaking off their contacts; others try to keep them afloat regardless of distance.

The purpose of this paper is to show how migrants have communicated with members of their families during cumulative dislocations from the late 19th century to modern times. In the first part, attention is drawn to the first migration wave, i.e. at the beginning of the 20th century.

The choice of issue is due to several reasons. One of them is the rich emigration history of Poland, which people have been leaving for hundreds of years. Also nowadays, despite a diversity of causes, phases, and directions, international mobility is still a constant element present in the life of Polish society and in worldwide trends. Migrating beyond the borders of a given

country has become a feature of the contemporary citizens of the world. The new global mobility trends are: globalization, acceleration, diversity, and feminization (Castles, Miller, 2011). In reference to the issue of the volume, major emphasis is placed on the first of these trends, i.e. globalization. Particular attention is paid to the ways of maintaining contact with family and the country of origin.

### **International migration from Poland – the historical perspective**

Although the history of displacements of Poles is considerably rich, the paper highlights only the basic stages of the mobility, accepting its large scale as a criterion.

The first wave of emigration was directed to North America and consisted of participants in the Kosciuszko Uprising who sought refuge from persecution. The next wave was a consequence of the subsequent national uprisings. The outflows were politically motivated and were directed mainly to Western European countries and resulted from Poland's political situation (representatives of the creative, intellectual, and political elites were leaving). Political refuge was often temporary, with the hope of returning to the homeland. These expectations did not materialize, especially after the November Uprising, which triggered further migrations, including economic ones (of escaping masses of soldiers).

At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, *za chlebem* ("for-bread") migration of the poorer parts of society began. It was, *inter alia*, the result of overcrowding of the countryside and the slow development of the Polish industry in the interwar years. Researchers (e.g. Wrzesiński, p. 162) estimate that 10% of Polish society emigrated before the outbreak of World War I. In the early stages of that period, they mainly migrated to the United States (though they were also heavily driven to Prussia). Changes occurred during World War I. Other groups of Polish citizens were leaving, although forced migration was predominant (as a result of the mobilization of the partitioners' armies and heading to work in industrial plants). After the war, the emigration continued; new destinations emerged: France, Belgium, Argentina, and Palestine.

Another mass displacement occurred in the period 1939–1944. Intense migrations continued throughout the Nazi occupation, and displacements were forced as they were closely linked to war events. The period from 1944 to 1950 was also marked by this intensity, as then outflows also resulted

from border changes, repatriation and return migration, and migrations involving repopulating in the so-called Recovered or Regained Territories (*Ziemie Odzyskane*, literally “Regained Lands”).

After the period of the “Great Closure” (*Wielkie Zamknięcie*, 1951–1954), the outflow again took on a stronger character to which the destalinization process, improvement of relations between the blocks of socialist and capitalist countries, personal changes in the Polish United Workers Party (*Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza, PZPR*) and improvement of the international situation in Poland contributed. In addition, Germans and people of Jewish origin changed the place of residence in the action of family reunification (Stola, 2001).

The 1960s were a time of departure for socialist countries (e.g. Czechoslovakia, the GDR) for gainful employment and, consequently, a period of controlled growth of international migration in the opposite direction. It was a period of legal migration with the gradual emergence of illegal migration. It was also a time when, under the pressure of the anti-Semitic campaign, another wave of Polish citizens left (Paczkowski, 1996, p. 371).

In the 1970s, another wave of departures took place (P. Kaczmarczyk estimates it to be more than 4.2 million people). This was a consequence of accepted “tourist trips” intended to be *de facto* migration, which ended in long-term residence abroad. Contracts, i.e. departing of company employees to work abroad under state contracts were also popular.

The next period began in the 1980s and lasted until the end of the 20th century. It was diverse in terms of number of outflows and their causes. The migration stream closed in December 1981 to be open again quite quickly. Initially, political emigration, called Solidarity migration, was a popular type of emigration in the 1980s. It concerned people who did not accept the political system in Poland, left or stayed abroad after the introduction of martial law in the country, and those in the opposition who had been offered by the authorities to leave as an alternative to pending repression. The displacement of academic staff resulting from the lack of development opportunities (the creative migration) became an important feature of the outflows during that period.

In the 1990s, as a result of the liberalization of the passport policy, there were qualitatively different features of migration processes in comparison to the history of Polish migration thus far. Following the political changes in 1989, Poland introduced a policy of full freedom of movement in the outflow and inflow. Still the predominant causes of migration were economic, although the groups of migrants and the time of staying abroad were becoming more and more different. M. Okólski described the migration

behaviour of Polish citizens after the transformation of 1989 as the “swing strategy”. He wrote: “while ‘people in motion’ (*the author’s reference to migration as a global tendency – author’s note*) sought to find a new, better place ‘in this world’, migrating Polish citizens – ‘people on the swing’ generally remained attached to abandoned native habitats, keeping in constant touch with them, treating their stay in new places as temporary, and deliberately not attempting to establish lasting social contacts” (Okólski, 2001, p. 11 – translation mine).

### The Epistolary Beginnings

Changing or abandoning the current place of residence has many causes. It results from the same conditions that have accompanied migrants since prehistory and from those that are specific to the place and time. The fact that migrations are a permanent part of human existence remains, however, invariable.

Douglas Massey and William Kandel (2002), exploring the impact of migration on Mexican society, stated that “absent migrants are always present”. This conclusion can also be applied to Polish society, especially in the face of a centuries-old migration history. Searching for opportunities to keep in touch with loved ones during separation was an important part of the lives of separated families. And these, in turn, were closely related to historical time and its specificity.

Going back to the wave of migration at the end of the 19th century and the early 20th century, although the descendants of the “insurgent” emigrants were already in the USA, as Halina Janowska and Irena Spustek write in their introduction to *Pamiętniki emigrantów. Stany Zjednoczone* (The Diary of Emigrants. The United States), that emigration was completely different. “Small in number, increasing only after each national defeat (...) this emigration consisted of people of a relatively high intellectual level, often of a high social status and generally of a political formation” (1977, p. 19 – translation mine). The authors indicate: “(...) at the same time in California the Shakespearean actress Helena Modrzejewska performed, Henryk Sienkiewicz wrote *Listy z podróży do Ameryki* (letters from his travels to America), and Ignacy Paderewski performed in concerts in Carnegie Hall in New York” (ibid – translation mine). These people definitely were a minority. Only the wave of emigration from the beginning of the 20th century was so numerous that it became the beginning of the later American Polonia. Particular attention will be paid to this particular group. Their repre-

sentatives are those whose lives were researched by, *inter alia*, Krystyna Duda-Dziewierz in the village of Babica near Rzeszow (1938), by Kazimiera Zawistowicz-Adamska (1948) learning about the migratory meanderings of the life of the inhabitants of Zaborow located in the Malopolska countryside, and by Ryszard Kantor describing the history of the same village (1990).

The stories of these and other migrants are known based on the letters written by them and by their addressees. The volumes titled “The Polish Peasant in Europe and America” published by William I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki in 1918–1920, are a great source of knowledge on the issue, thematically developed and commented on, with a substantive and methodological introduction. This monumental work was published in Poland in 1976. It is not the only one of its kind. In 1941 a Polish historian Witold Kula found in the Archive of Ancient Acts several boxes filled with letters written in the late 19th century. These were letters of emigrants from the Kingdom of Poland to Brazil, USA, and also the United Kingdom. These letters (367), edited by Witold Kula, Nina Assorodobraj-Kula (a sociologist) and Marcin Kula (a historian), were first published in 1973. Their authors were uneducated peasants and they were written in Polish, German, Russian, German Lithuanian, and Yiddish. They were written by the authors themselves, but some were dictated to “*pisenniki*”, i.e. writers, those who possessed the skill of writing. Illiterate peasants – migrants and members of their families – paid for the possibility of maintaining written contact with their loved ones. Nevertheless, the letters never reached the addressees, as well as some written on Ellis Island – the first port in the US for millions of immigrants.

The content of this correspondence is extremely rich. It includes messages about the new country, work, experiences, feelings, events, and more. It also refers to the everyday life left in Poland. W. Thomas and F. Znaniecki in the preface to the part of the letters set out in the chapter “Correspondence between Husbands and Wives”, in the Pawlak Series, note that “There are only a few rather insignificant expressions of affection; business, news about children and relatives constitute the content of the letters. The detailed account which the wife gives of all expenses and other matters of business is significant” (Thomas, Znaniecki, p. 822).

In the Struciński series, the migrant Adam Struciński wrote to his wife: “DEAR WIFE! I greet you at least through this dead paper, and I kiss you, my love, and I inform you that I received a letter from you from which I learned about your dear health and also your success, and therefore I am very glad, my beloved Broncia.” (Thomas, Znaniecki, p. 860).

R. Kantor finds that “the most striking, also numerically, category of emigrants during World War II were young landlords, people aged 35–40, having already quite numerous families; in debt, forced to earn cash to buy land from siblings, unable to maintain the land from the small-holdings of the farm, with a low income, and of which modernization they could only dream” (Kantor, 1990, p. 56). Most of these migrants returned to their homeland after having reached their objective. Some decided to stay permanently. However, they all maintained diverse contacts with the country.

K. Duda-Dziewierz notes that in most cases emigrants acted as heads of families, as they continued to run their families and farms. This fact can be interpreted not only by the strong peasant tradition of family connections (Thomas, Znaniecki), but also by the specifics of the then-periodic migrations, quite often periodical or trying to connect in a new place.

Thus, in the letters, in addition to courtesy greetings for the closer and further family members, questions about their health and success, there are clear guidelines for household, children, education, health, etc., and “weddings, baptisms and deaths are among the most important issues shared by the members of the family, separated by the ocean” (Duda-Dziewierz, p. 66).

Aleksander Wolski wrote in 1913:

Now I inform you, dear mother, that I brought everything with me, I did not lose even the smallest thing. I got here with \$13.00 and I have bought me a suit and shoes. Of the \$44.00 that auntie sent for the ship-ticket, she intends to make me a present of one half and I have to work back the other half. I will work hard now in order that I may be able to send you some 10 or 20 dollars. Now I am very sorry, because it is harvest time there [with you], and [I don't know] how you can manage it, mother; and you have no money. Oh, dear mother, I grieve more than you. Often I weep secretly, and not an hour passes without my thinking about home. Nothing rejoices me in America. May our Lord God give me health that I may get our affairs in order and return to our country the soonest possible. I pay aunt only for board, for nothing more – \$3.00 a week, because living is very expensive. Aunt gave \$2,700 for this house. She borrowed \$700. And those boys whom auntie brought from our country, they did harm. Uncle bought them everything that they wanted, and they did not want to work, although they could already. And then they simply went away. Stasiak went away two years ago, and Józef went away after Stasiak, and since then uncle and aunt have not seen them. I did not see them either, but they are not far away; by street-car from Waterbury it costs only 10 cents. [...] I inform you, dear mother, how many hours a day I work and how much a week I earn. I work in an iron-foundry 10 hours a day. Now, in the beginning, I have light work. I choose different irons out [classify], which are good and which not, because now it is terribly hot. Later on I shall try other work.

Letter sent from Union City, Connecticut, by Aleksander Wolski to his mother living in Poland, July 14, 1913; the source: W. Thomas, F. Znanięcki, ....., pp. 757–758.

The contacts of emigrants with their families were of varied character. First and foremost, they relied on the continuous flow of people who created migration networks (family-neighbours). “This constant flow of people between Babica in America and Babica in the country created close contact between emigrants and their native village. From America to Babica, collars, ties, textiles for clothes, ready to wear garments, etc. were sent via acquaintances or by mail. From the country honey, poppy seeds, mushrooms, medallions, sacred pictures, etc. were sent. American relatives were requested to send bedticking, and in return they were sent feathers and home medicines” (Duda-Dziewierz, p. 59 – translation mine).

Indirect contact was made through letters. In these letters (as mentioned above: written in person or by outsiders), information on everyday life in both hemispheres was provided; concerns, pain, happiness were shared, successes and failures were informed. Migrants already started building a migration chain that consisted of successive members of their families. As pioneers they described their journey by giving advice and guidance to future travellers. They tried to connect with the immediate family (those who had it set up), although they often also provide support to others in making the decision to migrate.

In light of the research of R. Kantor, “they maintained correspondence with their close and distant family, they began visiting their homeland in the 1930s, worked for their villages in the Chicago community, and according to their possibilities made it easier for newcomers to come from the country. Collective action in favour of family homes, for the whole parish, constituted to the growing community of Chicago both expression of a strong bond with the homeland and the result of an inner conviction of almost each of them that the stay in emigration did not have to be lifelong, that one could go back to the country, to the family village” (Kantor, 1990, p. 124).

This example shows the building of a space, which was defined at the end of the 20th century as transnational. It is recognized that a transnational social space (Faist 2006) was formed, consisting of sustained social and symbolic bonds. There are also relationships and familial ties of a transnational character – they go on not in a place, but in space.

The quoted excerpts from the letters indicate that the flow had occurred a hundred years earlier. Some of them did not reach the addressees, such as one written by Józef Jagielski:

Dear wife, praise Jesus Christ, I inform you, beloved wife, that I am healthy and I wish the same to you and the children, good health and success from Lord God and I inform you that I wrote a letter to you, it has been 11 weeks and I do not have an answer from you and I do not know whether the letter had not come or you have not replied, and let me know if you have received the money which I sent you 15 rubles, so reply as soon as possible if you have got it or not. And tell me if you picked it up, and you do not want to write me back, or are you angry or do you not care for me, because I can get angry and tell you good, because in America many wives can be bought for small money. I was going to send the ship ticket [*szyfkaartą*] to you, but I will not send it until you reply, then I will send the ship ticket to you and you will come to me with the children and I greet you, dear wife, and beloved children (...)  
(Szejnert, 2009, p. 14 – translation mine)

Letter by Józef Jagielski from Pittsburgh, PA, to Franciszka Jagielska from Dulsk, the Golub-Dobrzyn district.

M. Szejnert, the author of the publication on newcomers to Ellis Island in the USA, indicates that: “in this letter of the husband to the wife and on thousands of other envelopes from America the supervisor would write the handwritten word *zadierzat* (seize) next to the stamp of the Russian mail. The tsarist government did not want the families of individuals who had emigrated from the Polish territories of the empire to be given a ship ticket [*szyfkaartą*]” (Szejnert 2009, p. 15 – translation mine).

With the following decades successive letters appeared – from the pioneers of migration, members of their families and new migrants, traversing already recognized “migration paths” and seeking and building new ones. The socio-historical time still made them leave their homeland. The reasons for their departure, their circumstances, ways, strategies, and directions of migration changed, but the issues brought up in the quoted correspondence were repeated. The last one appeared several decades later. For example, in the monograph titled “*Mimo wszystko bliżej Paryża niż Moskwy*” (in English, “in spite of everything closer to Paris than Moscow”) by Marcin Kula (one of the co-authors of the discovered letters collection – *Listy emigrantów...*), the author wrote “about the role that Paris played for historians of Communist Poland (Kula, 2012, p. 9). He cited fragments of the letters sent by his parents (Prof. Witold Kula and Prof. Nina Assorodobraj-Kula), *inter alia*, from Moscow and Paris. The people are the senders and addressees of letters to the closest family, but also to their friends, relatives, and outstanding representatives of science in Poland and abroad.

In spite of the differences in all spheres of life of these authors and the other ones – the poorest leaving “for bread” at the beginning of the 20th century – their correspondence included certain similar themes.



When a few times the situation occurred when the parents were at the same time in different cities in the West, and the letters were exchanged between them quickly, they recognized that finally they were in the civilized world. However, since most often one of the parties lived in a moderately civilized world, a great deal of correspondence, at least analyzed here, concerns the writing itself, the sending, the regrets on bad writing of the other family members, etc. With little exaggeration, half of our family correspondence consists of questions why there is no letter, the words of joy when it arrived, assuring that somebody frequently wrote, bragging and praising another person because of frequent writing, justification for not writing, calling to write to friends. Even words of sulking for the lack of letters can be found – just like in the peasants' letters from America of the late 19th century (...) (Kula, 2010, p. 380 – translation mine).

## Conclusion

Written communication left by migrants and their families on their fate is very rich. The issue presented in this paper concerning maintaining contact between migrants and their past environment, is one of many that are undertaken in the letters. It is an example of the attempts to cope with the decision to leave and be separated – according to possibilities and abilities.

At the grounds of emigration there was no lack of individualistic aspirations, especially in the later periods of emigration they began to increase. Nevertheless, family tendencies are clearly on the forefront. (Thomas, Znaniecki, Vol. 2, p. 86 – translation mine from the Polish edition).

So the letters were written on their own and by the “*pisenniki*” (writers). In them questions about all the spheres of family and social life, on their abandoned farms, were asked. Migrants asked, sent advice, money, material things, but also required specific actions and behaviour. Some people treated the departure as a stage after which they would return to their current place. Others began to build such a place outside of Poland, but most often based on the networks they created materially supporting newcomers or to which they belonged along with other migrants. Some lived “here and there”, i.e. abroad, but in constant contact with Poland (with a view to return); others only “there” (without any plan to return), though – most often – by building a migration chain consisting of their loved ones.

R E F E R E N C E S

- Castles S., Miller M.J. (1993). *The age of migration. International Population Movements in the Modern World*. MacMillan.
- Duda-Dziewierz K. (1938). *Wieś małopolska a emigracja amerykańska. Studium wsi Babica Powiatu Rzeszowskiego*, Warszawa – Poznań.
- Faist T. (2000). *The Volume and Dynamics of International Migration and Transnational Space*, Clarendon Press, Oxford.
- Faist T. (2006). The Transnational Social Spaces of Migration, Working Papers – Center on Migration.
- Janowska H., Spustek I. (1977). *Pamiętników emigrantów. Stany Zjednoczone*, IGS SGH, Kraków.
- Kantor R. (1990). Między Zaborowem a Chicago: kulturowe konsekwencje istnienia zbiorowości imigrantów z parafii zaborowskiej w Chicago i jej kontaktów z rodzinnymi wsiami, PAN, Warszawa.
- Kula W., Assorodobraj-Kula N., Kula M. (ed.), (2012) *Listy emigrantów z Brazylii i Stanów Zjednoczonych*, Warszawa, 2nd ed. revised.
- Massey D., Kandel W. (2002). The Culture of Mexican Migrants. A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis. <https://pubag.nal.usda.gov/pubag/downloadPDF.xhtml?id=38751&content=PDF> (15.10.2015).
- Okólski M. (2001). Mobilność międzynarodowa ludności Polski w okresie transformacji: przegląd problematyki, [in:] E. Jaźwińska, M. Okólski, *Ludzie na huśtawce, Migracje między peryferiami Polski i Zachodu*, Wyd. Naukowe “Scholar”, Warszawa.
- Paczkowski A. (1996). *Pół wieku dziejów Polski*, Wyd. Naukowe PWN, Warszawa.
- Stola D. (2001). Międzynarodowa mobilność zarobkowa w PRL, [in:] E. Jaźwińska, M. Okólski, *Ludzie na huśtawce. Migracje między peryferiami Polski i Zachodu*, Wyd. Naukowe “Scholar”, Warszawa.
- Szejnert M. (2009). *Wyspa klucz*, Wydawnictwo Znak, Kraków.
- Wrzesiński W. (2006). *Polskie migracje w XIX i XX wieku*, [in:] A. Furdala, W. Wysoczański, *Migracje: dzieje, typologia, definicje*, Wyd. Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, Wrocław 2006.
- Thomas W.I., Znaniecki F. (1918–1920). *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, Boston.
- Zawistowicz-Adamska K. (1948). *Społeczność wiejska. Doświadczenia i i rozważania z badań terenowych w Zaborowie*, Łódź.