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Past Migrations and Their Consequences from a Lifelong Perspective: Reflections of Polish 1980s Migrants

Dawne migracje i ich konsekwencje w perspektywie całego życia. Refleksje polskich migrantów z lat osiemdziesiątych XX wieku

Abstract

In today's dynamic world, migration is gaining more scope; it is more complex and analysed from many perspectives. One of those is provided by past migrations. In 2020, a study concerning Polish residents who migrated internationally in the 1980s was performed. Its results not only offer another perspective on the past migration experience but, above all, on its lifelong consequences. The financial needs satisfied at that time resulted in considerable improvement of migrants' family's living conditions and, in many cases, also contributed to better family's financial standing later in life. However, in the whole life view, regardless of the financial assets gained, the migration, which was a threat to the family's stability in many respects, was assessed as a mistake of the lifetime.

Keywords: family, migration in the 1980s, lifelong perspective, Polish migration

Abstrakt

W dzisiejszym dynamicznym świecie zjawisko migracji ma coraz większy zasięg, jest bardziej złożone i analizowane z wielu perspektyw. Jedną z nich są migracje dawne. W 2020 roku zostało przeprowadzone badanie wśród Polaków, którzy migrowali za granicę w latach osiemdziesiątych XX wieku. Jego wyniki określają nie tylko kolejne punkty widzenia na przeszłe doświadczenia migracyjne, ale przede wszystkim ich konsekwencje w perspektywie całego życia. Zaspokojone wówczas potrzeby finansowe spowodowały znaczną poprawę warunków życia rodzin migrantów, a w wielu przypadkach przyczyniły się również do poprawy ich sytuacji materialnej w późniejszym życiu. Jednak w perspek-

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tywie całego życia, niezależnie od korzyści finansowych, migracje te, okazując się zagrożeniem dla szeroko rozumianej stabilności rodziny, zostały ocenione jako życiowy błąd.

Słowa kluczowe: rodzina, migracje w latach osiemdziesiątych XX wieku, perspektywa całego życia, polskie migracje

Introduction

People have always moved about from place to place in search of a better life. So far, we have known a lot about the short-term effects of migration, how migrants make their decisions and evaluate them still outside their home country or soon after returning home.¹ Still, little do we know about their perception and assessment of the past migration in the long-term perspective and with regard to other life events. Also, little research touches upon such a perspective in migration studies.² Nevertheless, it is only in the lifelong view that migrants can tell whether their decisions to leave were right, what the costs of those decisions were, and whether the benefits outweighed them. This is especially noteworthy since migration rarely concerns one person, i.e. the migrant alone.³ Although they physically stay home, their relatives also participate in the migration process. Today, the new media open up the possibilities of being together across borders, maintaining family ties over borders, and creating transnational families.⁴ In the 1980s, in the conditions of limited communication opportunities, practically reduced to exchanging letters and occasional telephone calls, separation put marital bonds and parental relationships to the test. Nevertheless, both parties agreed to take it, motivated by the family's well-being, which at that time was tantamount to improvement in the living conditions in the first place, but also to creating development opportunities for themselves and their children.⁵ In this

¹ M. Dziągiewski, *Powroty do (nie)znanego kraju. Strategie migrantów powrotnych*, Zakład Wydawniczy Nomos, Kraków 2019; M. Dziekońska, 'This Is a Country To Earn and Return': Polish Migrants' Circular Migration to Iceland, "Nordic Journal of Migration Research" 2021, vol. 11, iss. 2, pp. 142–155. DOI: 10.33134/njmr.414.

² E. Zontini, *Growing Old in a Transnational Social Field: Belonging, Mobility and Identity among Italian Migrants*, "Ethnic and Racial Studies" 2015, vol. 38, iss. 2, pp. 326–341. DOI: 10.1080/01419870.2014.885543.

³ O. Stark, D.E. Bloom, *The New Economics of Labor Migration*, "The American Economic Review" 1985, vol. 75, no. 2, pp. 173–178.

⁴ D. Bryceson, *Europe's Transnational Families and Migration: Past and Present*, in: *The Transnational Family: New European Frontiers and Global Networks*, eds. D. Bryceson, U. Vuorela, Berg Publishers, New York 2002, pp. 31–62; R. Dekker, G. Engbersen, M. Faber, *The Use of Online Media in Migration Networks*, "Population, Space Place" 2015, vol. 22, pp. 539–551. DOI: 10.1002/psp.1938.

⁵ L. Lui, K.C.Y. Sun, Y. Hsiao, *How Families Affect Aspirational Migration amidst Political Insecurity: The Case of Hong Kong*, "Population, Space and Place" 2022, vol. 28, iss. 4, e2528. DOI: 10.1002/psp.2528.

article, based on the qualitative study,⁶ I present the migration decisions of the people who migrated internationally from 1980s Poland and their assessment of the past migration and its consequences taking a lifelong perspective.

International Migration from Poland in the 1980s

In the 1980s Poland, Polish citizens did not move freely outside their country in any chosen direction; the nature and duration of their stay abroad were also limited. The most popular and “available” migration destinations at that time were those within the Eastern Bloc countries, which took place under bilateral agreements.⁷ Still, the most attractive was the westward direction. As reported by Statistics Poland, between 1980 and 1989, Poles left for the Federal Republic of Germany, which accounted for more than half of all exits from Poland, followed by the USA, Italy, Austria, France, Greece, Canada, Sweden, Great Britain, Australia, and other countries, including non-capitalist ones.⁸

From a legal point of view, there were only two categories of international mobility: temporary – not shorter than two months and permanent;⁹ departing persons were asked to fill in a form to declare the purpose of their trip and file it in the Passport Office before leaving. According to those declarations, there were three main reasons to leave Poland: permanent residence, business or tourist trips.¹⁰ The category of economic migration as we know it today was not an option in that form. These short “tourist” trips made it possible to cross the border and see new places, but above all, engage in trade and make a profit. The long-term migrations were often associated with several years of absence from home, employment abroad and notable financial success.

⁶ The research received funding from the National Science Centre, No. DEC-2019/03/X/HS6/01872.

⁷ D. Stola, *Kraj bez wyjścia? Migracje z Polski 1949-1989*, Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, Warszawa 2010.

⁸ M. Okólski, *Migracje zagraniczne w Polsce w latach 1980-1989. Zarys problematyki badawczej*, “Studia Demograficzne” 1994, no. 3, pp. 30–37.

⁹ Also, at that time UN defined short-term migration as no longer than a year and long-term migration as no shorter than a year. See B. Sakson, *Wpływ “niewidzialnych” migracji zagranicznych lat osiemdziesiątych na struktury demograficzne Polski*, Oficyna Wydawnicza Szkoły Głównej Handlowej, Warszawa 2002, pp. 26–28.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 75.

Migration Decisions and Goals

Whether openly stated or kept secret, migration aspirations, plans and hopes refer to the present but also the future imagining of one's future condition.¹¹ Migration decisions have always resulted from individual needs and from the context of the external circumstances, i.e. the economic and political conditions of the sending country, which some people considered imperative to search for means to a safer and more dignified life elsewhere.

All times have unique circumstances that determine the decision behind migration to another country. For example, in the 1980s, Poland was affected by a precarious political situation, which translated directly into its economic condition and declining living standards,¹² thus also shaping people's needs and wants. Limited social and economic opportunities, combined with limited prospects for personal development and career growth on the one hand, and aspirations and dreams on the other, inspired Poles to improve their lives and welfare through international migration. Moreover, family context influences individual migration decisions and how families make them is also intrinsic to gender roles and the beliefs that underlie those roles.¹³ In the family production stage, when they are highly geographically mobile, young adults shoulder more caregiving responsibilities than other age groups.¹⁴ Thus, parental and young spouses' concerns about the well-being and future of their families may also push them to arrange international migration in the hope of better prospects in the years to come, not only for themselves but also for their partners and children.¹⁵

In the turbulent times of the 1980s, stability and thus family became important again in Poland, both in private lives and public awareness.¹⁶ Its power was also in that it meant to safeguard higher values.¹⁷ The family has undergone many

¹¹ H.B. Marrow, A. Klekowski von Koppenfels, *Modeling American Migration Aspirations: How Capital, Race, and National Identity Shape Americans' Ideas about Living Abroad*, "International Migration Review" 2020, vol. 54, iss. 1, pp. 83–119. DOI: 10.1177/0197918318806852.

¹² D. Stola, *Kraj bez wyjścia...*

¹³ T.J. Cooke, *Gender Role Beliefs and Family Migration*, "Population, Space, Place" 2008, vol. 14, iss. 3, pp. 163–175. DOI: 10.1002/psp.485.

¹⁴ R. King, M. Thomson, T. Fielding, T. Warnes, *Time, Generations and Gender in Migration and Settlement*, in: *The Dynamics of International Migration and Settlement in Europe: A State of the Art*, eds. R. Penninx, M. Berger, K. Kraal, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam 2006, pp. 233–267; L. Lui, K.C.Y. Sun, Y. Hsiao, *How Families Affect...*

¹⁵ R. King, M. Thomson, T. Fielding, T. Warnes, *Time, Generations...*

¹⁶ E. Tarkowska, J. Tarkowski, "Amoralny familizm", czyli o dezintegracji społecznej w Polsce lat osiemdziesiątych, "Kultura i Społeczeństwo" 2016, vol. 60, no. 4, pp. 7–28. DOI: 10.35757/KiS.2016.60.4.1.

¹⁷ A. Giza-Poleszczuk, *Rodzina i system społeczny*, "Studia Socjologiczne" 1993, no. 2 (129), p. 44.

changes,¹⁸ and so has the Polish family.¹⁹ Nevertheless, throughout this time, it has invariably occupied a high position in the hierarchy of values of successive generations of Poles. The World Values Survey results covering waves between 1989–2017 show that Polish respondents rated family as the most important aspect of life.²⁰ The Polish scholarship confirms this, and other research also indicates that family well-being is valued over personal well-being irrespective of cultural context.²¹

Past Migration from a Lifelong Perspective

Not all families move as a unit; indeed, facing mobility restrictions such as those in Polish communist reality, not all families were able to move abroad together.²² Therefore, a split family migration, when only one member leaves and others stay at home,²³ seemed a rational decision back then. It was also a proven strategy of economic and social advancement of migrants' families,

¹⁸ A.J. Cherlin, *A Happy Ending to a Half-Century of Family Change?*, "Population and Development Review" 2016, vol. 42, iss. 1, pp. 121–129. DOI: 10.1111/j.1728-4457.2016.00111.x. The changes are, among others, partnership regimes, gender relations, household composition, reproduction, legally recognized, alternative ways of family formation: A.F. Castro Torres, L.M. Pesando, H.P. Kohler, F. Furstenberg, *Family Change and Variation through the Lens of Family Configurations in Low- and Middle-Income Countries*, "Population, Space and Place" 2022, vol. 28, iss. 4, e2531. DOI: 10.1002/psp.2531. Also, in the sociology of the family, a shift has been noticed from "being a family" to "doing family": M. Buler, P. Pustułka, *Dwa pokolenia Polek o praktykach rodzinnych. Między ciągłością a zmianą*, "Przegląd Socjologiczny" 2020, vol. 69, no. 2, pp. 33–53.

¹⁹ These refer to the decline of the multi-generation family and the loosening of relations with the extended family: H. Bojar, *Family Values from the Parental Perspective*, "Polish Sociological Review" 2005, no. 3 (151), p. 286. It should also be noted that not all individuals and groups are equally affected by change: A. Kotlarska-Michalska, *Dylematy towarzyszące realizacji zasad solidarności rodzinnej. Na podstawie relacji między pokoleniami w rodzinie*, "Studia Socjologiczne" 2017, no. 2 (225), pp. 167–188.

²⁰ In wave 1 (1989–1993), 90% of Polish respondents claimed the family was very important to them; in wave 7 (2017–2020), 93% said the same. *EVS Trend File 1981-2017*, GESIS Data Archive, ZA7503 Data file Version 2.0.0, Cologne 2021. DOI: 10.4232/1.13736.

²¹ H. Bojar, *Family Values...*, pp. 281–290; K. Slany, P. Pustułka, M. Ślusarczyk, *Polskie rodziny transnarodowe: dzieci, rodzice, instytucje i więzi z krajem*, Komitetu Badań nad Migracjami Polskiej Akademii Nauk, Kraków – Warszawa 2017; K. Kryś, C.A. Capaldi, J.M. Zelenski et al., *Family Well-Being is Valued More than Personal Well-Being: A Four-Country Study*, "Current Psychology" 2021, vol. 40, iss. 7, pp. 3332–3343. DOI: 10.1007/s12144-019-00249-2.

²² P. Kaczmarczyk, *Uwarunkowania procesów migracyjnych z perspektywy społeczności "wysyłającej"*, in: *Ludzie na huśtawce. Migracje między peryferiami Polski i Zachodu*, eds. E. Jaźwińska, M. Okólski, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, Warszawa 2001, pp. 303–330; B.S.A. Yeoh, Ch. Yi'En, *Family Migration*, in: *The Encyclopedia of Global Human Migration*, ed. I. Ness, Wiley-Blackwell, Hoboken, NJ 2013. DOI: 10.1002/9781444351071.wbeghm217.

²³ E. Kofman, *Family-Related Migration: A Critical Review of European Studies*, "Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies" 2004, vol. 30, iss. 2, pp. 243–262. DOI: 10.1080/1369183042000200687.

well noticed, especially in little towns, and well approved by their inhabitants.²⁴ It was a compelling example of a good life earned through international migration, especially to western countries. Therefore, naturally, families decided to migrate when opportunities opened up.

Migration results often evince material goods, but they are not the only predictor of migration success because income-based metrics may not be satisfactory in explaining every aspect of the human condition. There are “relational goods that bring true human happiness beyond material welfare”.²⁵ A multi-dimensional self-evaluation of one’s situation, related to many contexts and outcomes – well-being and happiness, defined as an achievement on one’s part,²⁶ may also shed some light on past migration choices, their interpretation, and their further consequences. Since some things are better seen from a distance, the lifelong perspective seems crucial to understanding the family migration experience as a whole. It shows how past migration events may contribute to or threaten the family’s well-being and happiness later in life. Thus, the time perspective in migrations is critical,²⁷ but few studies apply it. Therefore, in an attempt to contribute to the accumulated knowledge, this article presents migration decisions taken early in life and their consequences evaluated in an almost four-decade-long view. The article is based on empirical research; therefore, in the subsequent sections, I present the research methodology and results, which are discussed later.

²⁴ B. Cieślińska, *Przyczyny i skutki wyjazdów zagranicznych Polaków w świetle badania ankietowego mieszkańców północno-wschodniej Polski*, “Pogranicze. Studia społeczne” 1992, vol. 2, pp. 153–170; eadem, *Składniki prestiżu społecznego w małym mieście*, in: *Miasta na uboczu. Przyczynek do socjologii peryferii*, ed. T. Popławski, Dział Wydawnictw Filii Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, Białystok 1994, pp. 117–129.

²⁵ J. Stiglitz, A. Sen, J.P. Fitoussi, *The Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress Revisited. Reflections and Overview*, Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress, Paris 2009; P. Donati, *What Does a “Good Life” Mean in a Morphogenic Society? The Viewpoint of Relational Sociology*, in: *Morphogenesis and Human Flourishing. Social Morphogenesis*, ed. M. Archer, Springer International Publishing, Cham 2017, pp. 137–162. DOI: 10.1007/978-3-319-49469-2_7.

²⁶ I. Lietaert, *Migrants’ Post-Return Wellbeing: A View From the Caucasus*, “International Migration” 2021, vol. 59, iss. 2, pp. 239–254. DOI: 10.1111/imig.12777; J.E. Annas, *Happiness as Achievement*, “Daedalus” Spring 2004, pp. 44–51.

²⁷ Blossfeld H.P., Rohwer G., *Techniques of Event History Modeling: New Approaches to Causal Analysis*, Lawrence Erlbaum, Mahwah, NJ 2002.

Methods

This article highlights the experiences of 19 people who migrated internationally in the 1980s.²⁸ The recruitment technique was snowball sampling; the semi-structured life story interviews were conducted based on the list of dispositions addressing mainly the migration motivations, the course of migration and evaluation of the migration decision, including its immediate and long-term consequences. In addition, the respondents told their oral histories focusing on specific aspects of their lives.²⁹ The scope was international migration, located in the political, social and economic contexts of past events. The interviewees were informed about the scientific purposes of the research and assured of complete anonymity; they all agreed to participate. The interviews were carried out in 2020 and held at a location chosen by the respondents: either in a public place or at their home. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, and the data were anonymized.

Research Field

All respondents migrated from the Podlaskie region. In the 1980s, this north-eastern Polish region bordering the USSR saw some of the largest departures from the country. Short- and long-term migrations represented the region's main international mobility patterns. The former was observed within "the countries of the people's democracy" and concentrated chiefly on trade activity. The trips lasted from several days to a few weeks, and although many were officially tourist trips, "the tourists" mainly engaged in trade. Some migrants repeated their trips several times a year; some continued this form of international mobility even for a few years. The latter ones lasted even a few years; they were mainly for work and served to achieve greater financial goals than those secured by the "trade migrations".³⁰ Sometimes "trade migrations" preceded long-term migration and were undertaken in order to raise funds that would enable long-term migration to Western Europe or other Western countries.

²⁸ The presented study is a part of the research devoted to international migration from the Podlaskie region in the 1980s. The main research was in two parts: a quantitative study ($N = 601$) and a qualitative study ($N = 30$). In the qualitative part, 19 people experienced international migration themselves, and 11 people experienced their family member migration. The quantitative study results are presented in: M. Dziekońska, *Zagraniczne migracje mieszkańców województwa podlaskiego w latach 1980-1989 w świetle wyników badania retrospektywnego*, "Studia Migracyjne – Przegląd Polonijny" 2022, no. 1 (183), pp. 57–83. DOI: 10.4467/25444972SMPP.21.027.14424.

²⁹ R. Atkinson, *The Life Story Interview*, in: *Handbook of Interview Research: Context and Method*, eds. J.F. Gubrium, J.A. Holstein, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA 2002, p. 125.

³⁰ M. Dziekońska, *Zagraniczne migracje mieszkańców...*

Participants

There were 13 female and six male study participants, ranging in age from 62 to 84 (the median age was 69.5). Most of them migrated in their twenties and thirties, and two people were in their forties. A majority were retired, and only two were still working; 11 people had secondary education, six held a university degree, and one had vocational and one primary education. Most respondents (11) were married, two were divorced, and four were widowed; one had never married, and one refused to provide this information. When the interviews were conducted, only one person lived in a village; others lived in towns and cities of the region. There were four “trade migrants”, and their destinations included the USSR, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, East Germany and Czechoslovakia. And 15 long-term migrants to Belgium, East Germany, West Germany, Libya, Australia, USA; six preceded their long-term migration with “trade migrations”. The long-term migration lasted from about a year to six years.

Results

The analysis of the migration motivations must not neglect the external circumstances of historical time, the place of departure or the stage of life of the migrants while leaving the country. These are not only important components of their past decisions but also of their contemporary assessment of those decisions.

Migration Decisions, Motivations and Goals

The respondents’ migration decisions were influenced by the moment in time – the country’s economic and political situation, the timing of their lives,³¹ and their individual needs, which all together set their migration goals.

In the 1980s in Poland, economic factors were the strongest motivators of the respondents’ international migration. Despite having a job in Poland, they still viewed their financial situation as serious, difficult or hopeless, mainly because some of their needs were still difficult to satisfy based on their work at home. A 62-year-old woman recalls: “To buy a car, you know, people were saving all their lives [...] and their parents and children, whole families, just to buy it”. Moreover, in times of permanent lack of even essential goods, anything not available in Poland, i.e. food products, clothes, household equipment, obtainable

³¹ G.H. Elder Jr., *The Life Course As Development Theory*, “Child Development” 1998, vol. 69, no. 1, pp. 1–12.

abroad, was desired and appreciated. The shortages at home also set material standards of “the good life”. Money from “trade migration” enabled achieving some of those standards. Long-term migration and employment abroad best fulfilled the need to own a car, house, or flat. Returning, some of the respondents attained these goals; some were also able to make investments such as buying land, farm machines, and other assets, e.g. a 72-year-old woman who built her hairdressing salon and ran it for years.

Cultural factors and migrants’ individual position were no less important to the decision of international migration: the stage of life, the responsibilities attributed to traditional family roles, and well-known patterns of a good life. Leaving Poland, the vast majority of the study participants were at the stage of starting a family,³² assuming the roles of husband/wife, father/mother, and trying to shoulder responsibility for completing the tasks of an assigned role. Migration aimed to secure not only temporary improvement in the family’s living conditions but, most of all, secure its future existence. The father of two children admitted: “I wanted my children not to go through what I was going through when I was a child” (male, aged 66).

Culturally determined roles of father-breadwinner and mother-caregiver motivated international migration, but, at the same time, they were also strong deterrents.³³ Despite their intention and capability to migrate, two women abandoned their plans because their commitment to their children kept them home in Poland. In addition, their relatives were opposed to their departure. Other female respondents, faced with similar problems, decided to migrate only as soon as their children were almost adults. The mothers forced to leave their little children by the pressing economic need soon redefined their role so that they could better fulfil it through migration, however, on the condition that this solution received full acceptance and support of the family. “We had little money, and there were five children, and the little one was one-year-old. He stayed with my mother-in-law; I promised I would help her [...] It was her who agreed that I should leave. Who would like to take care of so many children?” (female, aged 76). The woman’s migration made sense because it was for the children and the family, enabling her to care for her loved ones in this way.

New consumption patterns introduced by returning migrants, the way of life of migrants’ families in Poland and their economic advancement, more and more noticeable in the local environment,³⁴ were other motivators for migration. Seeing migrants’ new homes and farm machines around, a woman who had

³² R. King, M. Thomson, T. Fielding, T. Warnes, *Time, Generations...*

³³ Also, migration strategies of persons of one sex should be analysed in relation to the strategies of those of the other one: G. Bjerén, *Gender and Reproduction*, in: *International Migration, Immobility and Development*, eds. T. Hammar, G. Brochmann, K. Tamas, Th. Faist, Berg Publishers, Oxford 1997, p. 226.

³⁴ B. Cieślińska, *Składniki prestiżu społecznego...*

lived with her family in one room of an old wooden house before migrating remembers it this way: “Our children were born, and we wanted to measure up to others. Well, we had a tractor, then we got more cows, we were just getting at it” (female, aged 78).

Other motives of international migration depended on the migrants’ individual needs and intentions, usually unrelated to the already discussed ones. At that stage of their lives, migration was a test, a challenge and a chance to experience a different world. It was also a way to achieve their aspirations and goals, a way to know themselves better and find their own place. A man who was 27 when he left the country reminisced: “I felt that somehow it was not my place here [in Poland – note M.D.]” (male, aged 66).

Migration from a Lifelong Perspective

Today, the respondents agree that the past migration profoundly impacted their lives’ trajectory. Many see it as positive, but there are also some negative evaluations. They are all related to the timing of migrants’ lives when undertaking international migration and achieving intended goals. Perhaps most importantly, in the whole life view, at the core of these assessments are the long-term consequences of the past event, not so much for the migrants but their families in the first place.

The majority of the respondents believe that their decision to migrate was the right one. They achieved their goals because they improved their financial position and standard of living, and those few in challenging circumstances took the opportunity to rebound. However, from today’s perspective, they can see the greater sense that their financial success has continued to serve the whole family till today. “I improved my financial situation and the financial situation of my family. [...] because my mother did not have a retirement pension, she had nothing. As long as I was there [abroad – note M.D.], I was able to provide education for my children, including their higher education” (female, aged 80). Thanks to considerable investments, such as a house or land purchase, and seeing to the retirement benefits, migrants maintained a financially satisfactory level of living: “It seems to me that it is better here, now I have a better life here than I would in America” (female, aged 75). Another reason to be proud is that the migrants also fulfilled their obligation as parents. Many of their adult children started their own families and maintain a good standard of living today because their parents – the migrants – could support their education and first steps into adulthood with the money earned abroad. For some respondents, an important component of this assessment is that they remained faithful to their values. As integral elements of their culture, these values served as determinants of

behaviour and regulators of their needs and desires.³⁵ Despite challenges and various temptations away from home, the migrants kept their marriage vows intact: “I had a clear conscience; some people did not return home, and some people reported on others. I had no reasons to do so” (female, aged 78). Foreign influences affect societies’ value systems,³⁶ and the destination country’s new culture may be attractive to newcomers in many respects. However, guided by their values, beliefs and principles, they rejected those customs and elements of the culture which they identified as threatening their marriage and family cohesion. International migration at the beginning of their adult life also brought additional advantages, which were not the respondents’ goals when leaving. From the perspective of almost four decades, they notice how much they have shaped their lives after their return and can appreciate it. Perhaps, with time, these benefits have even become the respondents’ main gain. Foremost, it concerns the character traits they strengthened or developed living in another country and culture: independence, determination, self-reliance or faith in their abilities – not taught in communist Poland, and openness to other cultures and “the other”. Moreover, staying abroad for some time, they learned about other ways of life: new patterns of consumption, different political systems, and new possibilities: “I was aware that there may be a different world out there”, assured a 66-year-old man. Those experiences shaped migrants’ further goals and ideas about their future; some respondents admitted that they verified their goals and personal situation and understood that they already had all they needed in Poland. For example, a female trade migrant recalled: “When I went to Belarus, I was shocked [...] I came to the conclusion that we had strong democracy in Poland” (female, aged 69).

The financial situation resulting from migration makes some of the respondents positively assess the past migration decision. They explained that they would always view it positively because, back then, migration was the only way available for them to take care of their family and their own needs. In their opinion, they fulfilled their obligations very well. However, there was a price they had to pay for that decision, which turned out to be very high. Back in the 1980s, the trade migrants felt stress, humiliation, and shame about their migration-and-trading activity: “Well, because we were called *torbacze* [kitbaggers – trans. M.D.] [...] The people who travelled with bags were called *torbacze* [...] They laughed at us” (female, aged 68). The long-term migrants also had the price to pay for several years of absence from home. Two people lost eligibility for retirement benefits in Poland and had to work longer to re-

³⁵ M. Filipiak, *Socjologia kultury*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, Lublin 2003, pp. 85–130.

³⁶ M. Lipnicka, *Wspólne wartości społeczeństwa holenderskiego*, “Zeszyty Naukowe Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego Jana Pawła II” 2020, vol. 63, no. 3 (251), p. 56. DOI: 10.31743/znkul.12232.

gain those rights. They, as well as other long-term migrants, had to put a lot of effort into recovering their position in the labour market and rebuilding their professional careers. Another migrant, a young girl at that time, stopped her education to go abroad, but she never took up full-time study again. Although she still believes that the decision was right, demanded by an absolute necessity, and she would do it again. She has experienced its adverse effects throughout her life: “Because from the perspective of my whole life it was, you know, well, I should have finished my studies, well, what to say about it [...] I returned home and brought the money, and it went to my head a bit. I felt so free, but studying is a duty, right?” (female, aged 68).

Longing and missing also impacted the respondents’ assessments. Through these states, they understood better what was dearest to them and that fulfilling only the financial aspects of parent and spouse roles would never make up for fragile personal relationships and lack of physical presence, which are inextricably linked to long-time separation. Over and above, the migrants moved to different social environments from those that they left, and the moral sphere of the world outside home was hard to accept for some: “In Germany, I saw what was going on there [...] I have this faith, I believe a little, and I could not accept that someone connected with another one” (female, aged 73) remembered a woman who, despite the substantial financial benefits resulting from her stay in East Germany, did not decide to migrate again, purely for these reasons.

From a lifelong perspective, the migration event was evaluated as entirely negative by the people whose financial gains were small compared to the losses incurred. The family suffered the greatest losses. Time spent apart was never made up for, and loosened parental ties were the most difficult to rebuild. In some cases, they were rebuilt from scratch for many years: “I was trying to make up for this time with some amusement parks, swimming pools, crap like that, but I knew that it would not do”, remembered a father of two (male, aged 66). Only after almost four decades can they see that their international migration undermined the family’s emotional and relational stability more seriously and for far longer than they had thought.

The negative assessment of the past migration should also be examined with regard to the special circumstances of time and place and the chain of related events. This is well illustrated by the stories of migrants returning from the USA at the end of the 1980s. The myth of America was slowly shattered by then, and new opportunities were opening in Poland, but some migrants returned too late to grab them. Choosing migration, a 33-year-old man naturally lost his job in Poland, never returned to his previous employment, and lost the opportunity to develop his career at home. Moreover, because of the change in the US currency rate, the savings from work abroad were worth much less in Poland than he had assumed when leaving. All these combined jeopardized the financial

and social security of the migrant and his family: “So, after all, I did not move forward, I rather moved backwards instead. I haven’t been able to explain it to myself so far [...] America; it’s a bit of no use going back there now, but I guess it was a terrible mistake. Because if I had stayed in the army, I would have been promoted there and be somebody” (male, aged 64). Naturally, the position the migrant found himself in after his return also influenced his emotional re-adaptation to the home country.

Purely negative assessments of international migration are also closely related to migration goals. These should not be confused with individual migration intentions, as the factors shaping real migration intentions might diverge substantially from those shaping actual migration decisions.³⁷ In this case, the most important were personal migration intentions and goals, not common ones. The migrant declared the family’s well-being was their goal, but as they see it now, they pursued their individual goals, e.g. achieving their long-held dreams of visiting America or other Western countries, before the common family goals. However, after all those years, the family’s well-being, not their own, was dearest to them.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that regardless of the assessment of their past migrations, parents-migrants do not pass positive “family migration capital”³⁸ as most do not wish international migration for their children. All parents-migrants are proud that their children can provide for their needs without engaging in economic migration like they once did.

Discussion and Conclusions

This article presents a retrospective snapshot of a particular time in the migrants’ life combined with their present-day evaluation of their life situation, providing a long view of the migration results for the migrants and their families. The past migration decisions and goals need to be assessed in the context of time, place, and migrants’ individual situations. With its tense political situation, the time – the 1980s – and the place – Poland – necessitated international migration for young families. The ultimate goal of every single migration was to better the financial standing of one’s children and partners or other relatives, thus fostering their well-being. The decision that helped materialize such goals through migration was always assessed as the correct and the only right decision to take. However, to fully understand its consequences, other participants in

³⁷ J. Brzozowski, N. Coniglio, *International...*

³⁸ A. Ivlevs, R.M. King, *Family Migration Capital and Migration Intentions*, “Journal of Family and Economic Issues” 2012, vol. 33 (1), p. 119.

the migration project should not be neglected. This is best confirmed when the lifelong view is applied.³⁹ The lifelong perspective on life choices shows that one's well-being is connected with certain choices early in life, choosing some social relations instead of others and living in some way and not another.⁴⁰

The almost four-decade view on the past migration event affords two different assessments of its formative influences and outcomes, determined by the extent to which all participants of this project shared the migration goals and intentions. Despite the physical separation – a threat to the family's stability in itself – migration was still evaluated positively not only for its immediate financial aid but, above all, for the fact that it inspired other decisions and enabled various investments, which helped to secure the family's well-being in the following years. Moreover, it was the event that influenced their later life choices and achievement of new goals, thus enabling the migrants to fulfil their roles as parents and spouses better.

The negative assessments of the past migration stem from the fact that, in the whole-life view, it was the event that shook the family foundations. Migration motivated by individual aspirations rather than common goals brought only temporary improvement in the family's financial standing, resulting in broken family relationships. The costs of rebuilding them, returning to their former roles in the family, and connecting things torn apart by the separation appeared far greater than they might have thought leaving the country and far greater than they could pay upon their return. Setting things on the right track took a lot of time and effort for all involved.

The study is not without limitations which relate mainly to its retrospective character. These include the misrepresentation of the respondents – some representatives of the studied sample may not have been available for the study due to death or migration; the respondents' memory presents problems as well, especially concerning questions about not easily verifiable “non-factual data” such as changes in motivations and attitudes.⁴¹ However, the study participants were referring to the push factors – the facts behind their decisions to leave and not their attitudes. Furthermore, their evaluation of the past migration decisions was carried out in 2020 and reflected their present opinions, attitudes, and assessments.

In conclusion, regardless of the moment in time, both when decisions were made and years later when their results were evaluated in many aspects and perspectives, the family has been the migrants' frame of reference all the time.

³⁹ R. King, M. Thomson, T. Fielding, T. Warnes, *Time, Generations...*

⁴⁰ P. Donati, *What Does a “Good Life”...?*; J.E., Annas, *Happiness as achievement...*

⁴¹ H.P. Blossfeld, G. Rohwer, *Techniques of Event...*

Therefore, it is crucial not to examine migration only as an act of individual relocation at a given time but to interpret it and its consequences.⁴²

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⁴² R. King, M. Thomson, T. Fielding, T. Warnes, *Time, Generations...*; I. Lietaert, *Migrants' Post-Return Wellbeing...*

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