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## Post-2004 Migration from Polish Small Towns to Western Europe

BASEES CONFERENCE, Cambridge, 30 March 2009 (updated October 2009)

### Abstract:

My paper is based mostly on British Academy-sponsored research conducted in 2008-9: interviews in Grajewo and Sanok, and an opinion poll which I commissioned in Podkarpacie. I examine attitudes towards migration in small towns with very high levels of emigration and to some extent also explore the effects of migration on such communities. Although my paper examines all types of migration, there is a particular focus on migration by parents, and on reasons why the common pre-2004 pattern of temporary/circular migration by one parent, leaving the rest of the family in Poland, is to some extent being replaced by emigration of entire families.

### Introduction

My research project draws on a variety of sources, including the Polish media; Polish statistical data; interviews with key informants; participant observation as a volunteer English teacher in Bath; and other ethnographic data gathered during fieldwork visits to Poland and in the west of England. The main sources for the project are an opinion poll conducted in Poland in March 2008 and my 115 interviews with Polish mothers in both Poland and England.<sup>1</sup> This paper will draw mainly on the opinion poll; 54 interviews with mothers in Grajewo and Sanok in 2008; and repeat interviews with 10 of the Grajewo respondents in March 2009.

My research project is grounded in my wider interest in social change across postcommunist Eastern and Central Europe, and particularly in the livelihood strategies of 'transition losers' in small towns and rural areas. However, the particular focus of this study is a new migration trend which is also significant for British society. The project explores the phenomenon of migration by whole families from Poland to the West, with a particular focus on migration to Britain since Poland's accession to the European Union.

Mass migration by Polish families to the UK, and to EU countries in general, is a new phenomenon. Between 2005 and 2007, for example, the number of Polish children for whom child benefit was paid in other EU countries rose from 12,000 to nearly 55,000; half of these 55,000 were living in the United Kingdom (Kowalski 2008, cited in Iglicka 2008, p. 111). In fact, however, it seems that the total number of Polish children in the UK is much higher. In the second quarter of 2007 UK Labour Force Survey data suggested an estimated 170,000 Polish-born children (under 19 years old) resident in the United Kingdom (IPPR 2008). Polish-speaking children now forming the largest group of 'non-English speaking newly-arrived migrant schoolchildren' in England (Pollard, Latorre and Sriskandarajah 2008, 27).

My interviews in the UK suggest that many of these newly arrived parents are not professional people – English speakers whose experiences might be expected to in some

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<sup>1</sup> I conducted 18 pilot interviews in Poland in 2007. 9 were in 'Poland A', small towns and villages in Wielkopolska, on average a rich region with low levels of international migration. 9 were in 'Poland B', the small towns of Elk and Suwałki in the poor, north-eastern corner of Poland, which has above average levels of international migration. I then decided to concentrate the main part of the research in Poland B and to that end made research visits in March-April 2008 (Grajewo, 33 interviews); September 2008 (Sanok, 21 interviews); and March 2009 (Grajewo, 10 repeat interviews with women first interviewed in 2008). From November 2006 to June 2009 I also interviewed mothers in the west of England: Bristol, a large city; Bath, a medium sized town (pop. 80,000); and the smaller towns of Trowbridge and Frome (33 interviews, including three repeats). All the translations are my own. Where I use the words 'migrate' and 'migration' in quotations from the interviews, the Polish words used by my interviewees were usually the more colloquial *wyjeżdżać/wyjechać*, or the plural noun *wyjazdy*.

respects mirror those of migrant professionals from other cultures – but manual workers, often from small towns and villages. Usually the only foreign language they ever learned was Russian. It is a difficult decision for such families to uproot themselves and come to England, and they can find life in Britain hard.

My project asks why Polish families from such backgrounds migrate abroad, and how they make decisions about how long to stay there. This particular conference paper examines the sub-topic of how and why attitudes towards migration are changing within Poland, comparing the small towns of Grajewo in Podlasie Region and Sanok in Podkarpacie.

To some extent the reasons why people migrate (and adopt particular migration strategies) are related to factors in the receiving country, so-called pull factors, such as the availability of employment or rates of pay in Britain compared with those in Poland. The reasons why people stay abroad, or alternatively, decide to return to Poland, are obviously also linked to their experiences in Britain, within the context of economic developments in the UK. Unemployment in the UK, for example, can be a ‘push’ factor resulting in return to Poland.

However, my research questions (why people migrate, and how they decide how long to stay) can only be answered properly by also looking at *Poland*. Clearly, developments in Poland, such as changing levels of unemployment, are an important part of the equation. Of course, unemployment statistics on their own are an inadequate source. It is important also to explore how migrants and potential migrants interpret information about such economic developments. Pessimism often characterises residents of small towns and underdeveloped regions. Moreover, as migration theorists have frequently observed, migration decisions are not just made on economic grounds, even by labour migrants. An exploration of Polish attitudes towards migration must examine (changing) norms and expectations within Polish communities, within the context of the family and friendship networks linking those communities to almost every country in Western Europe, from Iceland to Greece.

Not every local community in Poland is equally touched by migration. Migration traditions and current trends differ greatly both between and within regions, both with regard to the scale and the direction of international migration. Podkarpacie is the Polish region with the highest rate of post-2004 migration; Podlasie is in 3<sup>rd</sup> place (Kaczmarczyk 2008a: 37). Within both regions there are localities where every resident has friends and relatives who have migrated and many residents are themselves former migrants. One third of respondents in my poll of people living in small towns and villages in Podkarpacie in spring 2008 had had members of their immediate family in the United Kingdom alone during the past year.<sup>2</sup> Interviewees always commented on the huge scale of migration locally; indeed, Magda, from a large village near Sanok, commented ‘I suspect that there isn’t a single household without someone abroad’.

The sheer scale and diversity of migration can make it seem impossible to discern common motivations and outcomes.

There are lots of different cases. Each family has a different migration experience. It’s hard to generalise. Each family and each person functions in their own individual way with their own priorities. (Janina, Sanok)

There are as many different migration stories as there are migrants. (Elwira, Sanok)

Each individual person has his or her own ‘migration potential’ based on his or her personality, personal migration history and social capital. Some people are more likely than others to form active livelihood strategies and to be able to visualise themselves as migrants.

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<sup>2</sup> The sample was 1101 residents of Podkarpackie Region, not including the city of Rzeszów. The poll was a telephone survey conducted by BD Center Consulting, Rzeszów; I wrote the questions.

Some are less prepared than others to take on any available work: several interviewees, for example, expressed horror at the idea of becoming a cleaner, yet for women without language skills this is often the only option. People who have migrated previously have had either bad or good experiences which form their overall opinions about migration and deter or encourage new migration attempts. Finally, each person is located differently in the web of emotional ties which link them to friends and family both in Poland and abroad. Where most of the strong ties are still in Poland, migration potential is reduced, but where many of the immediate family and/or the best friends are already abroad, emigration is both more feasible and more appealing.

The local media could, in theory, help shape perceptions about migration trends within communities but my research (both the pilot project in different localities in 2007 and the main research in 2008-9) revealed an almost complete silence on the topic of migration in those communities where migration was a way of life. The national media more frequently address the issue, but my interviewees often did not agree that trends in their local communities mirrored those described in the national media. For example, no interviewees knew many people locally who had returned permanently from Western Europe.

On the television you hear that lots of people are coming back to Poland. On a mass scale. (...) But I don't think there are! You can't see it. And there are still people who are going off for the first time. In our region it is not the case that masses of people are coming back. Of course there are situations like everywhere where things didn't work out for someone and they came home. But not on such a mass scale. I don't think so. And here in Sanok, even if people decided to come back, and they do come back, they spend a month or two at home and then go back abroad. Despite coming home with the firm intention of not going away again. That's the way it is, I know that that's how it is. (Magda, Sanok)

On the other hand, there was considerable correlation between the views of respondents and concerns expressed in newspaper articles about 'euroorphans' – children who live in Poland but one or both of whose parents work in Western Europe, and who suffer emotionally as a result of migration.<sup>3</sup> The respondents had plenty of contact with local children and were able to back up their comments with personal observations (see below).

Most interviewees knew dozens of local migration stories simply from their personal contacts: they often had extensive kin networks and, more importantly, 'everyone knows everyone' in a small town. My respondents were typically hairdressers, nurses, kindergarten teacher helpers, factory workers and shop assistants and as such they had plenty of opportunities to chat to a range of local people.

### **The livelihood strategy approach**

To understand why migrants migrate, it makes sense to explore the range of livelihood strategies available to them in their local area, including those located within the shadow economy. For poor people in all societies livelihoods typically include a range of activities in addition to a basic job, activities such as taking on overtime or a second job or producing one's own food. The common Polish word 'kombinować', meaning to find a clever way of getting something done, often using social capital, exemplifies the idea of *combining* various assets. For example, driving a municipal bus may not be a highly paid job, but when it is combined with collecting returning migrants from the airport by minibus (functioning as a private taxi service) the household finances improve. Borrowing, subsisting on state benefits and doing without are more 'passive' strategies which also enable households to get by.

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<sup>3</sup> For articles from a variety of newspapers, see e.g. Markowski 2008, Przybyła 2007, Wasek 2007.

Households are tempted to adopt migration as their livelihood strategy when they cannot they put together a sufficient portfolio of different local income sources.

However, not all households have the opportunity to migrate. As used in anthropological and development studies literature, 'livelihoods' are not just about money and other material resources, but also other types of asset. A livelihood has been defined by Ellis as 'the activities, the assets, and the access that together determine the living gained by the individual or household' (Ellis 2000, 231). 'Assets' and 'access' in the form of personal and social capital are crucial variables in explaining why some people migrate and others do not. Beata explained why some neighbours had restricted livelihood options:

I have some neighbours with six children. And the little girls used to come and play with my younger daughter. My friend in America sometimes sent me clothes which her daughter had outgrown and when mine had grown out of them too I used to give them to my neighbour. Unfortunately they had no chance of migrating. The husband had worked at the chipboard factory but lost his job and they were very hard up. In the end he found some occasional jobs, the odd job here and there. The children grew up a bit and last year, when the youngest girl was already eight, the wife could allow herself to go to Germany for the summer to pick strawberries. (Beata, Grajewo 2008)

By contrast, Beata's husband kept his job at the factory, she had only three children, her parents-in-law lived downstairs and could help with childcare, and Beata herself had considerable migration and linguistic confidence as a result of working in America. Hence she had exactly the right sorts of asset to allow her to take on further short-term jobs in different European countries while her neighbour stayed at home with the six children.

An important aspect of the livelihood strategy approach is its understanding that constructing a livelihood entails behaving in ways which are considered appropriate in the context of the local culture. Pine and Bridger argue that 'survival strategies are not necessarily "economically rational" according to models of supply, demand and efficient self-interest. However, in terms of cultural meaning, local knowledge and understanding, and within the context of social relationships and networks, they are often the best and most sensible responses people can make' (Pine and Bridger 1998, 11). For example, a common feature of the migration culture in Sanok and Grajewo is the attitude that London is a preferable destination to Warsaw. It would be hard to prove the economic rationality of this assumption, but it is one which is widely acted upon. As international migration seems more feasible, it moves up the list of potential livelihood strategies and in some localities may come to seem like a strategy almost of first resort. A 'migration culture' develops in the local area.

They do try to find a job here but they get discouraged very easily, especially young people. (Aldona, Sanok)

Finally: 'livelihood' is a better adjective than 'survival', the label commonly used to describe such strategies. The term 'livelihood' also encompasses accumulation strategies (Pickup and White 2003), sometimes given other labels, e.g. 'development' strategies (Kaczmarczyk 2008b). Everyone has a livelihood strategy: strategies are not restricted to people who merely wish to 'survive'. Moreover, 'survival' is a problematic and disputed concept (see e.g. Wallace 2002). Definitions of 'survival' - as of 'accumulation' - are highly subjective, depending on what standard of living is considered an acceptable minimum for 'survival'. My respondents often asserted that they or the people they were talking about were migrating 'for bread', not because they were 'seeking coconuts'. However, one might argue about whether a car, for example, is a 'coconut' or 'bread'. For a nineteen year old man in Sanok, going to England for the summer to earn money for a car may be 'seeking coconuts', but for a family living in a village with no employment and few buses into Sanok a car seems more like 'bread'.

### Livelihoods in Sanok and Grajewo

The two towns are not identical. Sanok is larger, with a population of 39,224 (December 2007) compared with Grajewo's 22,347 (Rocznik, p. 96). Sanok is in a tourist region, the Bieszczady mountains, while Grajewo is just outside the tourist region of the Mazurian lakes. Sanok has received more investment; for example, the town park, rising above the centre of town, has recently been renovated with EU money. Sanok also has landmark buildings, including a castle and a classic Polish market square. Sanok has more leisure activities, whereas almost all the Grajewan respondents complained that the town was boring for young people; the lack of even a swimming pool was a constant theme and 'three churches and a cinema' (Edyta, Grajewo 2009) were not a substitute. Unemployment rates in the two counties shortly before the interviews were 20.1% and 17.7% in Grajewo Powiat (December 2007, January 2009) and 11.4% in Sanok Powiat (July 2008).<sup>4</sup> The Sanok rate was only 2% more than the national average, whereas Grajewo suffered from significantly worse levels of unemployment.<sup>5</sup> Overall, in 2008, the Sanok respondents tended to be slightly more optimistic than their Grajewan equivalents that the local economy and job market was showing small signs of improvement.

However, the two towns were also perceived to share common attributes. Many interviewees referred to the poverty of Eastern Poland, sometimes using the phrase 'Poland B', but more often mentioning their particular regions of Podlasie and Podkarpacie. They often distinguished between their small towns and the prosperity of the main Polish cities, where they had relatives, or children at university. One woman who had worked as a nanny both in Poznań and in Belgium made the following comments:

I didn't notice that big a difference between working in Belgium and working in Poznań. (...) I liked Poznań. Life is a bit different from here. It's a strange thing, isn't it, one country, and divided into such different regions. That part of Poland is very rich and people earn really good money and there are lots of jobs. (Alicja, Grajewo 2008)

By comparison, respondents emphasised that Grajewo and Sanok were characterised by wages below the national average, insecurity of employment and limited job opportunities, especially for people over 40. The objective reality of these features – which are of course widespread across Poland – was confirmed in my interviews at the local job centres.

1000 zł (£200 at current exchange rates) was a good wage for a woman and many were taking home 800 zł a month or even less. Most respondents could never save, but lived from month to month, barely making ends meet.

You can't just work [in Grajewo] and buy something for the flat. Furniture, or some equipment. For example, a television costs two month's wages. (...) People I know [who work abroad] just use the money to ensure themselves a normal existence. (Anita, Grajewo 2008)

In general, a big difference between cities and small towns is that small towns offer fewer opportunities than cities to earn additional money (*dorabiać*) through overtime or an extra

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.stat.gov.pl/cps/rde/xbcr/gus/PUBL\\_bezrobocie\\_rejestrowane\\_I-IV\\_2007.pdf](http://www.stat.gov.pl/cps/rde/xbcr/gus/PUBL_bezrobocie_rejestrowane_I-IV_2007.pdf), accessed 15 April 2008; <http://www.up.podlasie.pl/default.aspx?docId=15947>, accessed 4 March 2009; <http://www.ezeto.pl/pupsanok/?c=mdTresc-cmPokaz-148>, accessed 11 September 2008.

<sup>5</sup> Some parts of Poland have even worse unemployment. This does not necessarily mean that it is easier to get jobs in Grajewo and Sanok; rather, the figures simply indicate that a lot of people have migrated from Grajewo and Sanok and their absence deflates the unemployment figures.

job.<sup>6</sup> Interviewees complained that the only options for women were very lowly paid cleaning and caring jobs. In Grajewo, for example, Jolanta was paying her *full-time* childminder only 400 zł. a month (Jolanta, aged 27, Grajewo 2009). Even for building work, it was sometimes seen as necessary to work in the city in order to ensure sufficient overtime to earn a reasonable wage:

At the moment my husband is working in Poland, but not here in Sanok, he works in Kraków (..) because it is easier to get work and you can earn more money (...) Although the way it is they have to work 14 hours a day, not 8 hours like people work in Sanok. (...) He works from 8 am until 8 pm for the minimum rate, which is 8 zł., and later in the evening he gets 10 zł. That's the overtime he does. 14 hours is a bit much! (Magda, Sanok)

The insecurity of work in the small town was often mentioned by interviewees as a negative aspect of the local labour market. Many employers preferred to keep their employees on short-term contracts, to reduce their national insurance liability, and many jobs were 'illegal', without a contract or national insurance contributions. (This creates a paradoxical situation where people in Sanok or Grajewo feel they need to get a job in Britain or another EU country in order to pay contributions towards their pensions.) It is true that each town has two large and well-known factories. In Sanok these are the Autosan bus factory and Stomil, which produces rubber items such as washing machine parts. In Grajewo the major employers are the Pfeleiderer chipboard factory and the Mlekpól Dairy. Respondents and their husbands who had managed to secure a job at one of the big factories tended to be inclined to hang on to them and these were the people least likely to migrate. However, even the big factories have a history of laying off workers when orders are in short supply and during my visit to Grajewo in March 2009 I was repeatedly told that 'crisis' on the local labour market was nothing new.

Given the scarcity of employment, having connections was an important asset mentioned by a number of interviewees. So was youth. Women in their 30s in both towns complained of how difficult it was to return to work after having children and respondents and their husbands over the age of 40 had been told directly by the Job Centre that they were 'too old'. Danuta, aged 45, had been looking for a job for a whole year in Grajewo when I re-interviewed her in March 2009. All she had found was a summer job in a local shop. After returning from a summer job abroad, Beata was also unemployed and had looked for work in autumn 2008:

There was absolutely no question about it: no work at all. I did the rounds, searching for something. But there was nothing. (Beata, aged 49, Grajewo 2009)

In this situation, it can be tempting to set up one's own business, and this is a common livelihood strategy, especially since it is possible to take out an EU-subsidised loan from the Job Centre. Occasionally (but according to most respondents, not very often) foreign earned money is invested in small businesses. In Sanok, for example, one interviewee's husband imported putty from the UK, while in Grajewo another interviewee ran a shop selling bathroom fittings. In this case, however, the husband was still working from time to time in London. Small building firms, second-hand clothes shops and hairdressing salons abound in both towns. According to one hairdresser, there are 50-60 hairdressers' salons in Sanok alone. Hairdressers and beauticians seemed to be among the most prosperous of all my respondents: for example, they often took foreign holidays.

However, the sample also included several failed hairdressers and beauticians who had not been able to break through into the formal market by setting up a salon or even getting a job as an employee. (Hairdressing for friends and acquaintances at home is a useful additional

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<sup>6</sup> For discussion of the same phenomenon in postcommunist Russia, see White 2004.

money earner.) A number of respondents, including some interviewed in the UK, mentioned that they and their husbands had failed in their attempts to set up small businesses and gone into debt as a result. This often resulted in migration being adopted as an alternative strategy.

When our daughter was four I opened a little cake shop, but you know that, with that kind of product [i.e. not an everyday purchase], there are ups and downs, there were times when we did make some money, but one thing led to another and it made no sense any more and my husband and I decided to shut it down. And then I had a really long break before I could find another job, because here in this region of Poland it's really hard to get a job, and that's why so many people go abroad. (Eliza, Grajewo; she continued by relating stories of her husband's trips to work abroad).

## Migration and life in the small town

Sanok is a half-town (Iwona, aged 34)

The interviews showed that even families where both parents had regular work and there were only two children were often unable to cover more than day-to-day living expenses and household bills. In many households only one spouse had regular work and/or there were more than two children, so these families were in an even more precarious position. Although some respondents or their husbands could take on extra work, and there were occasional mentions of other strategies such as borrowing money from the bank or from neighbours, dependence on remittances to a greater or less extent was a way of life for many people.

Parting is not at all pleasant, no, leaving your family, but when you absolutely have to, when there is no money for everyday life and all the bills, and bills are so huge. Then there is only one decision. To go abroad. (Marta, Grajewo 2008)

Interviewees were frequently punctuated by references to 'separation...' (ta rozłąka...), usually followed by a sigh or a significant pause, almost as if 'separation' were some kind of evil spirit presiding over the town. The younger the interviewee, the more likely they were to have lost most of their friends. Jolanta (aged 27) for example, said sadly 'I really don't have many friends any more. Because so many have gone abroad.' (Grajewo 2009). Celina, aged 33 said 'I think 80% are abroad. Our class has a page on Nasza Klasa [the social networking site] and almost everyone is abroad. Very few have stayed in Poland' (Grajewo 2008). The impact of migration on families is discussed in more detail below. Everyone had stories of children, parents, wives, husbands and grandparents who were unhappy because they were missing their family members.

A particular problem is that almost everyone in Grajewo and many people in Sanok have relatives in the USA, many stuck there because they are working illegally, and visa applications on the part of their family left in Poland are often refused. For example, Alina, aged 49, in Grajewo, had not seen her father for nineteen years and had been refused a US visa. Eliza had been married about 15 years and knew her mother-in-law only from telephone conversations.

I've never set eyes on my mother-in-law. She went to the States before I met my husband. It was only just recently that she met my daughter, her grand-daughter, when my daughter was there on holiday. That's the charm of the situation. She married off her two sons, but she wasn't at either wedding. It's so sad. But that's life. Thanks to her being in the States her children had their weddings. Otherwise they couldn't have afforded them. (Eliza, aged 36, Grajewo)



Separations are shorter in the case of migration within Europe and respondents mentioned how in the summer holidays and at Christmas and Easter you suddenly became aware of just how many people were actually absent for most of the year. One woman said that a friend, on his summer holiday in Sanok, commented that over the last two weeks he had actually met more people who lived abroad than those who still mostly resided in Sanok itself. Hairdressers, dentists and doctors are suddenly overwhelmed with custom and cars parked in front of the churches have foreign licence plates. In summer, the migrants tell their stories to families, friends and neighbours who have stayed behind:

Young people tell each other stories, persuading their friends to join them, saying ‘Come and earn some money, you can buy a car’, that’s what they say, sitting outside the block of flats. They sit on the benches and have these conversations. One persuades the other. And lots of young people go off abroad, right after leaving secondary school or university. (Felicja, Sanok)

Of course, not everybody lets themselves be persuaded. Another feature of life in Sanok and Grajewo is that so many residents have memories of *missed* migration opportunities: suggestions and invitations turned down, plans abandoned after household discussions, visas not obtained. Such experiences lead the interviewees to ponder how their lives might have turned out had they made different decisions.

There was a time when lots of young people were going abroad, to Greece, for example, to harvest something or other, and to be honest I sometimes even feel sorry that I didn’t go too. I regret it. Perhaps life would be better as a result (...) I have women friends who migrated and they have simply stayed there, they are there legally and have permanent residence, and they say how happy they are to have made that decision. And here you are stuck in your small town. It’s a hard life. (Eliza, Grajewo 2008)

My requests for stories of whole families who had migrated or reunited abroad produced strings of stories about *unsuccessful* attempts at family reunification. Alongside the visible phenomenon of actual families reuniting there is a kind of ‘black matter’ consisting of memories of reunification attempts which failed. In the case of the USA, this was often because of visa problems, but in the case of Europe it is because one of the parties – usually a parent, but sometimes a child – refused to live in the foreign country.

In the case of families, usually just one of the parents goes abroad. And they see that life is better there. And often it turns out that the person, well, the husband, or the wife, comes back for a visit and it isn’t such a wonderful marriage any more. And then, if the person who stayed at home wants the family to keep together, they have to make concessions (...) I know from my own experience, since my ex-husband used to work abroad a lot. He went on his own, when the children were small. Well, you know how it is. I didn’t like it very much. But he made several attempts to persuade me to join him (...) because he liked it there. And I think that in situations like that if the second party decides to go, lets themselves be persuaded, then the whole family will go. And if not, it can turn out badly, because from what I see people often set up new families. (Anna, Grajewo 2008)

## **Migration patterns in Sanok and Grajewo: changing attitudes and trends**

### Migration destinations

Both Grajewo and Sanok have long traditions of migration to the USA and migration to the USA had continued even in the 1970s and 80s, particularly from Grajewo. A teacher who came to live in Grajewo in 1980 reported her surprise that ‘half of Grajewo lived in the USA’<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Interview with deputy headteacher (not formal interviewee), Grajewo, 2008. Grajewo neighbours the town of Mońki, famous throughout Poland for its American connection (see e.g. Cieślińska 1997, Osipowicz 2002).

and Grajewo residents still reminisce fondly about what you could buy for dollars in Grajewo's hard currency shops during the 1980s food shortages. With increasing opportunities to work in Europe since 1989, and especially since 2004, labour migration has largely reoriented itself and residents of both towns migrate to a wide range of countries in Europe: Norway, Sweden, Iceland, Ireland, the UK, France, Spain, Portugal, Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, Italy and Greece were destinations mentioned by interviewees. In most cases networks linking local people to these countries were established after 1989; Italy and Germany seem to have been particularly popular destinations in the 1990s, as well as Belgium, in the case of Grajewo. In recent years the UK and Ireland have attracted many migrants from Sanok and Grajewo, as from all over Poland.

In addition to visa restrictions, the distance and cost of trips to the USA are factors which often make it more rational to work in Europe.

Nowadays people prefer to travel shorter distances. If you go to the States you need to stay at least six months to pay off the cost of the ticket, and it's a long way, but here in Europe the costs are low and it's near to home, you can always come home to visit, whereas if you go off to America, that's for a long time (Anna, Grajewo 2008)

However, migration decisions are also shaped by habit. In Grajewo the strong culture of migrating to the USA seems to form a handicap preventing some residents from attempting new destinations. It is a kind of essentialism: migrating to the USA is seen as part of the Grajewan identity. In the words of an unemployed man who had six times been refused an American visa but was not seeking work in Western Europe:

In the west of Poland they go to Germany, here in the east we go to the USA. (Maria's husband, aged about 45, Grajewo 2009)

By contrast, Sanok residents, with their weaker ties to the USA, started migrating to Britain, and very specifically to London, even in the 1990s. Some idea of the scale of the Sanok presence in London – although definitely only capturing a part of the total – is given by the number of users of the social networking site Nasza Klasa who name London/Londyn plus Sanok as their place of residence. There were 677 such users on 22 April 2008, far more than from any other town in Podkarpacie. Grajewo had only 77.

Official statistics about permanent resettlement abroad paint a similar picture of the similarities and differences between Podlasie (Grajewo) and Podkarpacie (Sanok). In both regions, in 2007 the USA remained the favourite destination country for permanent resettlement abroad, which is far from being true for Poland as a whole. However, in Podkarpacie, the UK was nearly as popular as the USA:

#### Permanent emigration, 2007

	UK	USA
Podkarpacie	547	583
Podlasie	194	293

Source: GUS, *Rocznik Demograficzny 2008*, pp. 466-7.

Although interviewees never mentioned factors such as architecture, landscape and climate as the main reasons drawing them to particular countries, it was nonetheless apparent that (especially in the case of southern Europe) these do play a role in encouraging repeated returns to the same destination.

Rome has its particular climate and there's some other quality that draws you to it. It's not necessarily about money, somehow you feel like that's where you want to be, walking through those little streets (Janina, Sanok)

I really liked it, I really really liked it, and I could live there. It's a lovely country, warm. So, well, I got used to it very quickly, to that climate, but here it's so cold! (Alexandra, Sanok: married daughter was living in Greece; Alexandra had gone for a holiday and was tempted by the prospect of summer holiday work in the future)

The gendered character of certain labour markets has a particular role in attracting certain individuals to particular destinations, for example men to work on building sites in Norway, or women to work as carers in Italian families. This is obviously a factor which applies equally to all of Poland.

However, the overwhelmingly important factor in determining specific migration destinations *from specific Polish localities* is the existence and cultivation of personal contacts, especially family and close friends. The actual process of persuading and requesting – the conversations on benches during the summer holidays, etc. – has already been touched upon, and the relevance of personal ties is a recurring theme in the remainder of this paper. It is important to note that networks to new destinations can be developed very quickly today, thanks to globalisation – the possibilities for instant and frequent communication and cheap travel. The wider issue of whether or not Poles are becoming less reliant on informal pre-migration networks is a complex one which is discussed in some detail in White and Ryan 2008. For the purposes of this paper, it is sufficient to note that almost all the interviewees remained wedded to the idea that one had to migrate to be with trusted individuals. Even distant friends might be unreliable, let alone recruitment agencies.

### Duration of stay

As the figures quoted above suggest, officially registered emigration for permanent residence abroad is not very common, and much migration from the two small towns falls under the heading of 'incomplete' migration (Okólski, e.g. 2007, p. 3) which has typified labour migration by less well educated Poles since the early 1990s. Money is earned abroad to be spent in Poland and the family home remains in Poland. To some extent the duration of stay abroad depends on how much time the migrant can afford to be away, for example whether they have taken a period of unpaid leave from their employers (seemingly a common practice in both towns) or are simply using their annual leave or a university vacation. Clearly, restrictions imposed by receiving countries – most importantly Germany and the USA – also play a role, although these can be circumvented by working illegally.

Of course, the duration of migration also depends on what the migrant hopes to buy with the money they earn, but this is only a very rough guide to how long they will stay abroad. It seems from my interviews as well as from other studies (see e.g. Eade, Drinkwater and Garapich 2006) that many migrants sensibly admit that they do not know how long it will take to achieve their aspirations and are prepared to extend their original stay if this seems necessary. At the same time, emotional factors also play a considerable role either in drawing them back home, or in keeping them abroad, as they are drawn into new friendships and networks (see White and Ryan 2008 as well as some of the stories discussed below). Many respondents in Sanok and Grajewo also commented that people who had been earning abroad could find it hard to adjust back to the standard of living in the Polish small town:

My brother hopes to return to Poland but his stay abroad is getting longer and longer. There is a kind of trap because if someone never works abroad and is always working in Poland he is used to Polish wages. But if he goes abroad and sees he can earn two or three times as much over there... (Anita, Grajewo 2008)

### Migration, by age and sex

This section discusses a few of the main motivating factors which inform livelihood strategies of people at different life stages, as well as attitudes towards their gendering and some of the consequences which ensue for family relations. For reasons of space I have not attempted to discuss all motives; in particular, I have omitted the large and complicated topic of earning money to buy a flat or house.

a) *Financing higher education.* It is a widespread assumption in both towns that parents of grown-up children may need to migrate in order to finance their children's higher education. This is a feature of contemporary Polish society: higher education is a very widespread aspiration in Poland today (more so than in the communist period) and so it was not surprising that although my respondents did not have higher education themselves they often desired it for their children. Those same children often work abroad to finance their studies in Poland, but nonetheless the parents felt compelled to help. Often these parents are women who cannot find a job in the small town. For example, since losing her job in Grajewo, Beata has dedicated her life to supporting her children through higher education. In 2008 Beata was 48 and her children were 26, 18 and 14.

This was why among other reasons it was a good idea for me to go and work abroad a bit, to help my children. We have a daughter (...) in her final year at Warsaw University, she's doing English and will be a translator. And the money I earned in America went to help her (...) I'm very glad I could help her and now I want to help our next child. (2008)

The daughter duly graduated and found a good job as a translator, so the strategy paid off.

It's good that she has established herself. I'm pleased at the moment. But now it's the turn of the other two children. Now it's my [19-year old] son's turn (...), let him study, and then we'll start thinking about the youngest one. (2009)

Beata emphasised the sacrifice this strategy involved.

I think to myself on occasion: my life is slipping away and here I am abroad all alone and they are in Poland alone without me (2008)

After three years in the USA she had in fact given up and come back, hoping to stay in Grajewo permanently, but since she could not find a job, she began to migrate again. Danuta, aged 44, had no previous experience of migration. She had been unemployed for more than a year and both her children were both at university. She loved her home, was very attached to her husband and mother and could not imagine herself as a migrant. However, she acknowledged that: 'if I'm really forced to go, then, well, I don't know, I'll just have to shut my eyes and jump'.

b) *Families with school-age or younger children.* A number of interviewees told stories of husbands or wives of school age or smaller children migrating in order to have the things they needed for their homes, or a car.

The situation was that my husband had to migrate. Because we were very hard up. I have a cousin in Germany and he went there during his leave to earn some extra money. Obviously there's that time [in a young family's life] when you want to buy something, change something in the house, and you can't afford it (...) It's lucky he

had someone to go to. But me, as a mother: I would never ever in my life leave my children. Never in my life. (Edyta, Grajewo, 2008)

Usually the migrating parent is the father, and, as Edyta's comment suggests, traditional views about gender roles help to shape strategies: the woman is not expected to leave her children. My opinion poll suggested that such views are entirely typical, at least for Podkarpacie.

If one parent in the family works abroad temporarily, it's better for the children if the father migrates, not the mother, even when the children are teenagers.

Agree/strongly agree	63.9
No opinion	13.9
Disagree/strongly disagree	22.2

Mothers of small children should not leave their children and husbands to work abroad

Agree/strongly agree	85.3
No opinion	4.8
Disagree/strongly disagree	9.9

However, it has to be said that the in-depth interviews showed that attitudes overall were pragmatic. If the mother was unemployed or had a job offer she might well be the person who was expected to go.

I had a sister, and the sister migrated first. In fact she had been invited by a woman friend and this friend had found her a job. And she worked for a bit and then phoned me and asked if I would come. So I took up the offer.

On reflection, Janina could not decide whether the fact that she was the mother had made the situation worse.

If it's all the same, which parent should go, then it's probably better if the children are with their mother. Although it's not better, you can't just say that it's better. Because the children probably suffer just as much, whichever parent goes (..) I left my children too, although my husband was at home, and my mother-in-law, and my father-in-law, but all the same. It's a difficult thing, and when I think about that time when I had to go and work abroad and not be with my children I do have pangs of conscience. That I left my children. (Janina, Sanok)

Even more rarely, both parents are abroad, while the children are left temporarily in Poland. Usually they are looked after by grandparents, although the Polish media occasionally carries sensational articles about children being left with strangers or in children's homes.

For example I know some people who have been there three years and left their small children and I don't know when it is going to end. There's always some reason why it's too soon to return. First the flat, then the car, then something else (Magda, Sanok)

The tone here is judgmental, but apparently because the couple became greedy and forgot their children, rather than because of the practice itself. Other interviewees were ready to justify couples who left their children behind for very short periods.

c) *School-leavers with little prospect of employment in the small town.* Descriptions of the young adult Polish migrants – especially those to the UK - often emphasise their sense of

adventure, and their willingness to take advantage of opportunities for mobility offered by EU membership. My middle-aged interviewees made comments along the same lines.

Young people know the language, they can make themselves understood, they are readier to take risks. They don't have the same fear of change. They think that somehow things will work out. They go off abroad with a group of women friends, somebody will give them an address (Maria, Grajewo 2008)

However, it is important to remember that young people in a small town may have little choice of livelihood strategy. Their situation is different from that of many city school-leavers.

Huge numbers of them go abroad after leaving school. They leave secondary school and they don't have any prospect of getting any sort of job, so they go off abroad. (Jadwiga, Sanok)

I didn't really have any other choice. After secondary school I had a miserable chance of finding work here in Sanok. And I did have the opportunity to go to London because I had family there, otherwise I probably wouldn't have gone. (Rozalia, aged 30, Sanok)

### **Migration with children**

There are many financial, practical and emotional factors deterring parents from relocating abroad with their children, in any culture. Accession to the EU has obviously facilitated legal family migration from East-Central Europe, but there remains the problem that parents of all but the youngest children are likely to have learned Russian rather than English at school, so there is often a language barrier which can be particularly terrifying when migrants are faced with the prospect of having to take their children to the doctor, discuss their progress with teachers, etc.

Given the riskiness of family migration, it seems unsurprising that migration by just one spouse, without children, should until recently have been the norm in many places. Krystyna described the shock caused in a small village near Suwałki when her friend in London invited a local family to relocate to the UK:

So off he went, and after about four months, six at most, not longer than six months, his wife followed after. Everyone in the village thought they were mad, that they simply wouldn't be able to cope, after all, she wouldn't be working and they had two small children (...) Everyone thought they were mad, that they couldn't be serious. (...) They reproached them and said that he should have gone on his own, or perhaps she could have left the children with the grandmother. (Krystyna, Grajewo 2008)

The fact that family migration is becoming more common and that old norms are being abandoned testifies to the strength of networks, as in this case, where Krystyna's friends were already living in London with their children and were able to help the newcomers settle in. My research in the UK also shows the importance of networks, with sisters and best friends, already living in England with their families, inviting their sisters and best friends to join them with their own children. The fact that men had been migrating from Sanok to London even in the 1990s means that plenty of time has elapsed for family and friendship networks to develop and for families to have the confidence that they will be moving to be with other Polish families. This helps explain why there is more family migration to Britain from Sanok than from Grajewo.

Changing attitudes also play their role in facilitating migration with children: such attitudes include (a) the greater confidence of young people that they can cope with migration and (b)

enthusiasm (not just among the very young) for a model which avoids the emotional costs of single-parent migration.

We are in the EU, we are legal now. And younger people today are braver, I think. Everything happens more quickly today. The husband goes off first, soon afterwards the wife visits him to see if she likes the conditions there, then right after that the children starts school [in London] and Mum starts work. Young people perhaps – I'm not old myself, I'm 34 – but I think 20 somethings have a different way of looking at the world. Those young mothers, they have a different way of talking and a different outlook on life, not like mine, a bit different. It's simply a different generation. (Iwona, Sanok)

Participants in the opinion poll were invited to express their views about the assertion that it was 'frightening' to move abroad with children. The generational differences were clearly displayed, with younger respondents adopting a braver attitude. However, it should be noted that – contrary to Iwona's assertion – the very youngest group was less confident about family migration than those aged 24-34. Moreover, even the oldest group was evenly divided between those who agreed and those who disagreed with the assertion.

It is frightening to move with children to another country and I find it hard to understand parents who decide to do this

	Aged 60-91	Aged 50-59	Aged 35-49	Aged 25-34	Aged 18-24
Agree/strongly agree	43.0	37.4	25.8	15.8	20.2
No opinion	13.9	10.7	10.3	9.2	10.6
Disagree/strongly disagree	43.0	51.9	63.9	75.0	69.1

In the past, migration by just one parent was justified as 'simply an act of self-sacrifice' (Anita, Grajewo 2008), and it is still perceived that way by some middle-aged people, such as Beata, quoted above. However, younger people are often less willing to live abroad without their partners, and childless Poles who work abroad often invite their boy- or girlfriends to join them. Among my interviewees, mothers who had migrated to be with their husbands were ready to acknowledge the importance of emotions in contributing to their decision and did not feel compelled to adopt a discourse of self-sacrifice. Bożena (aged 32), for example, explaining why she and her children had joined her husband in Bath, stated that: 'The main reason was because he missed us so much. There he was on his own, and we have been married for 13, nearly 14 years, and had always been together.' Iwona, despite her comments on how people in their twenties were different, had in fact taken her own children to London before EU accession and, like Bożena, she stressed the emotional binds, in this case with her children:

My husband took me to central London, well, those shops, and all those sights, I was really impressed, I liked it, it was so nice. But then I began to feel that longing to be with children. I began to miss the children so much that I didn't want to have the money I was earning, nothing, I just wanted to go home. Well, later, there I was, coming and going [between Sanok and London] and we had to make up our minds. Either I would come back to Sanok or we would all go to London. So during the summer holidays I set off, we set off [to London], with the children, and we intended to stay. (Iwona, aged 34, Sanok)

The in-depth interviews also confirmed that respondents – particularly in Sanok – were genuinely worried by the extent of marriage break-up resulting from migration and distressed by the plight of children whose parents worked abroad. They recognised that children might have behavioural problems as a result of missing their parents. Of course, in many cases they and their children had experienced this at first hand.

My husband used to work abroad when our son was between the ages of ten and twelve (...) Then the children got a bit older and we began to have new problems. And we decided that the most important thing was the children and to bring them up properly. After all, a child needs both parents. As a mother I couldn't completely substitute for their father (...) It's true that while he was working abroad we were a bit better off. But we think that the most important thing in life is not money, it's the family. (Anita, aged 40, Grajewo 2008)

My son has a friend and the father has been migrating for about six years and says he is doing well. For example they bought a new car. I can see that the fifteen-year-old daughter is still on speaking terms with her mother but the son somehow isn't really. He's a year older than my own son and I try to keep them apart (...) It seems to me that he has too much freedom and he does whatever he likes. I don't know how he is getting on at school, but my son says things are not good. And the company he keeps! The last I heard was that the father had gone away and not returned. He found himself a woman over there (...) I think that's the main reason why marriages break up here in Grajewo. (Mariola, Grajewo 2008)

The opinion poll attested to the prevalence of such worries about the effects of family separation, at least in Podkarpacie.

a) In my locality you can notice certain problems connected with parental migration: there are more lone parent and broken families.

b) In my locality you can notice certain problems connected with parental migration: the children left in Poland have psychological and behavioural problems.

	Broken families	Children have problems
Agree/strongly agree	60.0	68.6
No opinion	12.6	13.9
Disagree/strongly disagree	27.4	17.5

## Conclusions

Anne: Do you think it is bad that so many people work abroad?

Anita: Is it bad that so many people work abroad? (Pause) We are used to the situation as it is today, here in this part of Poland. And for me it's not surprising that people go to work abroad. It's normal here. It's normal here. (Anita, Grajewo, 2008)

I think it's better if they are there as a whole family, husband, wife and child, not that one parent should be abroad and the other in Poland. Really. (Danuta, Grajewo 2008)

My paper has argued that migration is perceived as a 'normal' livelihood strategy in some towns in Poland, a strategy which is often viewed as essential in order to guarantee a 'normal' standard of living, so that families can afford to buy consumer goods and wage earners can pay their pension contributions. Although there was emigration from Sanok and Grajewo during the communist period, nonetheless the status of migration as a *normal* livelihood strategy is something new in the postcommunist period. This situation is not about to reverse, despite media reports about Poles returning to Poland. The economic situation in both towns, particularly Grajewo, cannot tempt many migrants to return home permanently.

The direction of migration has changed to a large extent. There remains a well-entrenched migration culture in Grajewo, which has a kind of 'American' identity common in this part of Podlasie. Nonetheless, migration has to a large extent become redirected towards Western Europe and interviewees in both towns mentioned almost every West European country as a destination.



The residual attachment to the USA attests to the importance of networks, particularly kin networks. However, given that migration networks can be established very quickly in the age of globalisation, the existence of old networks does not necessarily impede the forming of new networks, in new destinations. This is indicated, for example, by the emergence of the huge Sanok community in London, or the smaller Grajewan community in Iceland. One might expect to find that in contemporary Poland people have more trust in organisations and are readier to rely on 'weak' ties such as recruitment agencies, but my research suggests that in these two small towns at least the reliance on families is still very strong. Younger people are perhaps readier to trust in friends to find them work abroad.

The 1990s witnessed the emergence of widespread 'incomplete' labour migration from Polish small towns, with short visits or circular migration by just one parent, leaving the household in Poland. This is still seen as a normal state of affairs and parents continue to migrate on their own. However, the negative consequences are increasingly evident, in the form of emotional suffering and family break up. Hence the growing popularity of migration by parents *with* their children. The 'pull' factors here are the emergence of networks in Western Europe which make it seem safe and even 'normal' to migrate with children; the 'push' factors are worries about the effects of family separation, based on personal experience and knowledge of other families' problems within the wider community.

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