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# **Transnational Labour Migration between Poland and Germany: The Case of Upper Silesia**

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## **Ewa Palenga-Möllenbeck**

### **Transnational Labour Migration between Poland and Germany: The Case of Upper Silesia**

#### **1. Introduction**

The relation of nation state and transnationalism can be considered as part of a broader discussion on the sovereignty of the nation state, which is faced with phenomena labelled “postnational”, “supernational”, “global”, “glocal” “local” and, finally, “transnational”.

“Transnationalism”, conceived of as trans-border relations and involvements of nation-state citizens, is happening across, transversing the borders of “container-type” nation states and thus challenging their claims to sovereignty and loyalty. That said, transnational practices are not “fluid”, but, as Ewa Morawska (2001:196) never tires to emphasise, “place and time bounded”. The great majority of empirical studies on transnationalism (cf. Levitt et al. 2003: 568) show that nation-states and their policies do matter for forms and contents of transnationalism. National policies can even actively encourage the development of transnational practices.

The case I would like to describe in this paper is an interesting example of this interaction between nation-state policy (specifically, dual citizenship), and transnational tendencies. The case involves about 100,000, more probably 200,000, persons from Upper Silesia in Poland, whose life-conduct and identity justify the label “transnational”. This group has certain characteristics which set it apart within the overall group of Poles practising “shuttle” migration, the dominant form of labour migration between Poland and Germany since the early 1990s.

Thanks to the ethnically defined concept citizenship in German law, Upper Silesians enjoy the privilege of dual citizenship, can draw on an old-established form of hybrid identity – they are used to defying the identity politics of nation-states – and a tradition of temporary labour migration.

#### **2. History and Policy**

First of all, let me summarize how the region of Upper Silesia came to occupy the key role in Polish-German cultural and economic contacts that it has until this day. Historically, Upper Silesia may be interpreted as an early example of a transnational space on a microcosmic scale. For centuries, the region had been on the border between the German and Polish areas of settlement. During the industrial revolution, it became the site of an industrial agglomeration, attracting German and Polish-speaking workers. In the course of time, an “autochthonous” population formed in the area: There were no clear-cut ethnic identities; the everyday language was a “Creole” dialect.

Initially, the whole of Upper Silesia was a part of Prussia and then Germany; a Polish state did not exist.

After World War I, a referendum on the affiliation of Upper Silesia did not produce a clear result. Finally, the League of Nations drew a Polish-German border through the region, which left large Polish and German minorities on either side.

During WW II, Eastern Upper Silesia was re-incorporated into Germany. Finally, in 1945 Poland as a whole was shifted westward and Upper Silesia was completely incorporated into Poland. Most ethnically ambivalent Upper Silesians were allowed to stay and undergo “re-polonization”. All these border shifts were accompanied by national conflicts, reinforced by antagonistic German and Polish nationalisms. Many Upper Silesian families became forcefully “transnational” overnight: Their concrete life-world was artificially divided into two national spaces by an abstract border. However, many of these people were bilingual and continued to define themselves as Silesian rather than Polish or German. What set Upper Silesians apart from “proper” Germans and “proper” Poles ever after is a widespread skepticism about national “great narratives” – as they have often enough been on the receiving end of nationalistic discrimination. In particular, they are aware of the artificiality of national borders and used to defy their existence.

A separate identity continued to exist in Upper Silesia after 1945, affected among others by ethnic discrimination on the part of Polish state. As the Polish sociologist Stanisław Ossowski observed in 1945, the Upper Silesians were persecuted by Germany because of their Polish origin, and persecuted by Poland because of their “contamination with German culture” (Berlińska 1999: 50). The cultural persecution in communist Poland, combined with economic problems, reinforced the Upper Silesians’ identification with the German aspect of their culture. Many of them emigrated to West Germany, which considered them a “German minority” and granted them the right to German citizenship. Due to the political situation before 1989, the decision to leave Poland was necessarily irreversible and final in the 1980s and earlier. In spite of this, many emigrants continued to cultivate their specific identity also in a German context.

1989 brought a fundamental change. After the borders had been opened, a new kind of migration – “shuttle migration” – became suddenly possible. Thus, even more Poles, including many who had been unwilling to make the decision to emigrate irreversibly so far, obtained a German passport. The most important incentive was the chance to work legally in Germany, while being able to return to one’s native region at any time, as it was possible remain a Polish citizen.

The German government, although usually very restrictive about granting German citizenship and particularly about dual citizenship, generously grants dual citizenship to Polish emigrants if their ancestors had lived on German territory before 1939, or if they had been re-naturalized as

Germans between 1939 and 1945. Additionally, in 1993 the German immigration law towards ethnic Germans from Poland changed. As a result, this group lost the right to special social benefits to assist their integration into German society. This made permanent settling down in Germany less and shuttle migration more attractive.

However, the Upper Silesians are not merely a technically privileged group among Polish labour migrants to the EU, their specific cultural background almost predestinates them to become pioneers of transnationalism. Today, Upper Silesians can draw on transnational practices and patterns of identity handed down to them by family tradition. This additionally fuelled the emergence of a migratory system and a social space across the Polish-German border which is shaped both by “traditional” and “modern” transnational characteristics. This is why the Silesian migrants are not aware of being part of anything “new” or even “post-modern”. Much more, the apparently “new” transnational reality is in fact a replication of an all-too familiar, traditional reality, only on a larger scale and bridging longer distances.

### **3. Transnational labour migration – empirical findings**

In the new situation after 1989, a growing number of Upper Silesians commute between the two countries in regular intervals. These intervals can be years, but they can also be very short: A large number of persons work in Germany during the week, but return to Silesia every weekend. The “mental map” of this new “social texture” has no resemblance of the traditional, geographical-political map; instead, it resembles a tube or corridor connecting Upper Silesia with Germany.

#### **3.1. Statistical data on labour migration performance**

The exact number of persons with double citizenship involved in the practice of transnational migration is difficult to estimate. The vast majority is from the Polish provinces *Opolskie* (Opole Silesia) and *Śląsk* (Upper Silesia proper). The 2003 Polish census produced some information which helps understand the quantitative aspect of the phenomenon. Let us take a look at the Opole Province. According to the census, 55 per cent of all who hold Polish and German citizenship live in the Opole Province, that is about 158,000 people. Out of these, about 105,000 – or two thirds – are labour migrants who spend more than two months per year abroad. According to another study (Musiał 2002: 17), 60 per cent of all labour migrants spend more than 6 months a year working abroad, another 10 per cent between 3 and 6 months. These figures show that full-time work abroad dominates.

## **2. The ‘Silesian’ transnational labour market**

### **2.1. Shuttle strategy and the competitive advantage of Silesians on Western labour markets**

An important factor that contributes to the stabilisation of transnational labour migration is the fact that for Silesians, it is easier to find jobs on the German labour market while being based in Poland. On the domestic Polish labour market, they would have to face competition with sedentary Poles and have no competitive advantage; likewise, on the domestic German labour market, they would have to compete with sedentary Germans and again have no advantage. From Poland, however, they have no competitors on the German labour market: They are Germans “on paper”, and can be employed without any risk to the employer. On the other hand, they have only “East European” expectations concerning the wages and circumstances of employment. As some scholars (Mirjana Morokvasic, Frauke Miera) put it already ten years ago, the attractiveness of this model consists in consuming a Western income in an Eastern country (income relation 1-4).

### **2.2. The institutionalization of ‘Silesian’ transnational labour market: ‘patterned’ labour performance and formal material infrastructure**

#### **2.2.1 ‘Patterned’ labour performance**

The emergence of this new opportunity structure leads to the paradoxical situation that many Silesians do not even try to gain access to the Polish labour market, or they voluntarily quit relatively safe and well-paid jobs in Poland. Graduates from secondary schools refuse to attend universities or vocational training in Poland. Instead, they prefer to take up unskilled work in Germany. The high unemployment in Poland certainly is an influence on this choice. On the other hand, the lack of any post-secondary education can produce a life-long dependency on foreign labour markets. Also, the surplus income that labour migrants earn is usually not used for investment in local businesses that would provide an impulse to the local communities of origin, as some politicians had hoped. Instead, much of the income advantage that migrants enjoy gets absorbed by “conspicuous consumption” (Thorstein Veblen).

Even those who do try to begin a traditional career in Poland, habitually apply for German citizenship in order to have a “backdoor” or to be “on the safe side”. One labour migrant I interviewed compared the additional German passport to a driving-license: When you are 18 or 20, you simply *have* to get a driving-license, even if you don’t need it right away because you have no car – you might need it later.

## **2.2.2 Economic infrastructure**

The institutionalization of labour performance succeeds by dense informal trans-border networks (which I will come to later on) and by a formal material infrastructure. (Potential) migrants are provided with a rich offer of commercial services supporting shuttle migration: temporary employment agencies, transport companies, legal advisors. The most noticeable manifestation of this dynamic infrastructure is the growing amount of billboards and commercials in the local media of the sending region, advertising work in Germany and the Netherlands.

## **3. Socio-cultural aspects**

So far, I have described some political and economic aspects of ‘Silesian’ transnationalism. In the next step I would like to present some social and cultural consequences. The analytical field of “social facts” is indeed very broad, reaching from structures like stratification and mobility, institutions, organizations, over systems of values and norms, networks, down to cognitive images, beliefs, meanings and identities. Due to the lack of time, let me focus on only some of these aspects.

### **3.1 Transborder informal networks – core family, relatives, neighbours, colleagues**

The cross-border everyday life of Silesian migrants is based on informal networks. Firstly, an important part of social capital are relatives who permanently reside in Germany: According to an estimate, for every single person in an autochthonous family in the Opole Province, there are 1.2 (one point two) family members living permanently in Germany (Rauziński 2000: 63).

Secondly, since shuttle migration has become a “mass phenomenon”, a great part of relatives, neighbours and friends are labour migrants, too, and constitute another important resource in arranging jobs and exchange of information. And, finally, there are non-migrant actors in the sending country which are involved indirectly – e.g., family members who take over the parental and other tasks of the absent spouse, the regional Catholic Church which distributes a flyer on “moral issues” transnational migrants can be confronted with in their life (Czech 2005: 119), etc.

### **3.1 Transnational life as social norm**

Shuttle labour migration also emerges as a new social norm. It is passed on as a model of professional life in families, from parents to children, from sibling to sibling. It is also reinforced by the status expectations of peers – neighbours, friends, colleagues, class-mates etc. – and finally by the example of friends and relatives permanently settled in the receiving country. As one of my interviewees put it, in this case regarding his brother living in Germany permanently:

*“I am in the bad [sic!] situation that I see how they live there. If I didn’t see this, I would certainly be much calmer, and I wouldn’t feel the need to leave for work. This is how the human mind works, and maybe it’s good that way, because that’s how you get ahead, that one wants to have a better*

*life, to have more things. And when you see how some do live better, damn... you feel you have to work harder, too, so that we can live like that as well, maybe even better...”.*

### **3.2. The socio-cultural cognitive dimension: (collective) convictions and images**

Another aspect that helps understand Silesian Transnationalism is the subjective dimension of the phenomenon. A study conducted in 1996 with 25 interviewees demonstrated the impact that migration has on the everyday knowledge. It showed that many use a consolidated pattern of argumentation to justify the practice of labour migration. Migrants, their dependents at home, but also non-migrants, referred to the “economic necessity” for migration, which was nothing new but had existed for as long as they can remember (Grygierczyk 1997).

Now, there can be little doubt that labour migration makes it possible to enjoy a higher standard of living than the average non-migrant. On the other hand, it should not be forgotten that the majority of Poles are not labour migrants. Much of the so-called economic necessity for migration is the result of a process of social construction of reality within the transnational community itself. In this process of social construction, status expectations are increased, while at the same time Poland as a place to realise these expectations is discredited. This again contributes to the stabilisation of the transnational space in a circuit of positive feedback.

As already mentioned, even those who cling to their lives and jobs in Silesia often apply for German citizenship in order to be prepared for any necessity, or even to ensure a better future for their children. My interviewees often expressed their dissatisfaction about the hardships of living “transnationally” and said they would prefer to live and work in the same place. At the same time, they emphasised the necessity to plan for a life in more than one country. What definitely sets the group of Upper Silesians apart from sedentary Germans, Poles and other Polish shuttle migrants is the fact that they are *legally equipped* and traditionally *used to* plan for a life in more than one national container society – and to me, this seems to be a key element that makes the label “transnational” well-founded.

#### 4. Conclusions

What does the Silesian case of legal shuttle migration tell us about the main question of this conference, whether it is “a chance or a threat for the state”? First of all, it needs to be stated that the labels “national” and “transnational” are merely ideal-types, which are rarely found in their pure form.

First of all, it needs to be said that the most important basis for this migration – the possession of two passports – is due to more or less accidental legal circumstances. That said, it cannot be overlooked that the legal situation, unintended as it may be, is still part of the nation-state’s citizenship regime. The German government *could* stop granting its passports to Upper Silesians if they retain another passport; just as well, the Polish government *could* prevent its citizens from accepting the citizenship of another state. That neither government does so is due to a number of reasons, and most of them are not the result of transparent political decision-making. They could, however, *become* the subject of such decision-making. However, the precondition is for the state to depart from the notion that it must demand *exclusive* loyalty from its citizens, and must have power over how its citizens’ define their identity. Let me quote from the introduction of the conference, which warns that “people being torn between two countries can lose their identity and a sense of belonging to a given nation”. I do not want to downplay the social hardships that transnational migrants face as much as any long-distance migrant. However, I would challenge the notion that they are “losing” their identity. Rather, they are building another, hybrid identity. This becomes a problem for themselves only insofar as state politics and the sedentary majority discriminate against them because of their hybridity. Quite the same goes for the question of belonging: Transmigrants can indeed feel to belong to more than one nation; they are losing their sense of belonging anywhere only insofar as the nation-states jealously insist that one can belong to just one of them.

The way I see, nation-states will have to depart from the idea that they must – and can – manage a sedentary population inside a single “identity” within a tightly guarded container. Instead, they should realise that transnational migration and identity-formation can be an asset. First of all, they could possibly moderate national conflict. At the moment, we are observing tensions in Polish-German relations which are largely due to the two society’s isolation from and ignorance about each other. If there were a larger, more self-confident and politically vocal group with inside knowledge of both societies, it could possibly help to cushion this ignorance-driven conflict. On a more practical level, migrants could also be an asset in a globalising economy, if they are allowed to become or remain transnational. For example, ethnic entrepreneurship has recently been discovered as a creative impulse for stagnant national economies “at home”; at the same time, people who are culturally competent in more than one country can also help to further develop foreign markets. These are just some of the possible positive effects that transnational migration

can have in the long term. However, in order to use the potential, nation-states have to recognize it and to be prepared to regulate it accordingly – instead of denying it or denouncing it as a threat.

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