

Research Article

# “In the Footsteps of Our Ancestors” Polish Traditions of Westward Migration Meets Modern Epigenetics of Trauma

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## Abstract

For several years, there have been ongoing considerations regarding the interdisciplinary connections between the natural sciences and the humanities. The same holds true for the question as to whether trauma can be inherited biologically as well as culturally. Today, this topic is increasingly steering the scientific debate in the direction of epigenetic research, which currently combines molecular biology and social psychology with their respective hallmarks. Can culture-related traumas be inherited and, if this was possible, can transgenerational consequences of trauma be passed on to subsequent generations? The focus remains on educational and socialization-related conduct as well on biologically inherited processes of how individual deals with their own trauma. Can migration be inherited by subsequent generations via transgenerational transmission of trauma? In order to answer this question, both consequences and causes of the long-running migration from Poland to Western European countries need to be considered. This article thus seeks to establish a connection between now and then, while also focusing on tragic passages in Poland's history that were characterized by suffering, statelessness, and occupation (until 1989). Consequently, multi-layered and repeated habitus breakages as well as specific Polish “worldviews” may have emerged, which tend to favour migration. The causal links between the transgenerational transmission of such traumas and their causal connections to ongoing migration from Poland to countries such as Germany are addressed by using modern epigenetics.

## Keywords

Polish History, Transmigration and Shuttle Migration, Trauma, Collective Memory, Epigenetics

## 1. Introduction

Diachrony is the principle of cultural memory, the primal scene of cultural memory, the invisible bond that connects both the living and the dead, the “Remember me”. Every present consciously or unconsciously inherits the legacy of a previous generation [5].

This paper should be understood as a scientific essay <sup>1</sup>that

represents my personal point of view regarding the subject of Polish migration to Western countries in connection with the epigenetics of trauma; layed out within the framework of a thought experiment.

The term “lack of freedom” should be given a special connotation at this point, since we will encounter it frequently over the course of this paper.

In addition, this essay is informed by transcultural migration theories and socio-psychological expertise (chapters 1.3,

<sup>1</sup> This essay is inspired by my book [35]. Some passages such as in chapter 1.1, 1.2 and 3 have been partially adopted.

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1.4), while also including low-threshold considerations of current developments when it comes to the epigenetics of trauma.

Poland will be at the centre of the conceptual steps that will be detailed in the following chapters. Other nations have been divided and occupied by various foreign powers, but none more so than Poland. This tragedy, which lasted almost 200 years, gave rise to a form of regular migration from Poland to Western European countries and the United States.

Even today, the “engines” of migration have not come to a standstill, even though Poland regained its status as a sovereign state in 1989. However, people of all ages continue to migrate to Germany, the Benelux countries, France, Ireland and sometimes to the United States.

The first hypothesis as to why the Poles keep migrating westwards could substantiate an assumption as to whether, in the light of modern epigenetics of trauma, a genetic change via a “gene of unforgetting” has occurred, which is repeatedly reactivated and thus keeps Polish labour migration alive right up to the present day. In this context, one question could therefore be summarized as follows:

Is migration “in the blood of Poles” and could the Polish tradition of migration, which has caused immense suffering in the wake of partitions, shifting borders, bloody uprisings and wars, be hereditary?

The attribute “lack of freedom”, which has been a constant throughout the history of Poland from the first partition in 1772 (except for a few years of statehood in the 19th century and between 1919 and 1939) until 1989, serves as the starting point for my essay “In the footsteps of the ancestors”.

Certainly, lack of freedom can be interpreted in different contexts.

At this point, we are looking at living situations in which people have become strangers or even enslaved in their own homeland. They see no other option for themselves and their families since they have to fight for their very survival. Therefore, they migrate to foreign countries.

In this context, it is not surprising that Bronisław Malinowski from Krakow, who left Poland to become a migrant himself, moved to the vastness of the South Pacific. As cultural anthropologist, he laid the groundwork for field research with his “Argonauts of the Western Pacific” and he was the first to initiate participant observation as a qualitative research method.

Between 1918 and 1920, “The Polish Peasant in Europe and America” was again authored by a Pole who lacked freedom in his own homeland, namely Florian Znaniecki. Together with William I. Thomas, Znaniecki sought to analyse his compatriots, the community of emigrated Polish peasants.

In collaboration with his colleague Thomas, the researcher explores the question as to how Eastern European immigrants and their communities experienced the industrial transformation in Chicago and what psychosocial consequences this transformation might had on both the individual and the

group.

Last but not least, the grand dame of science, Maria Skłodowska-Curie, the only woman to win two Nobel Prizes for discovering radium and polonium, is another woman who lacked freedom in occupied Warsaw. As an exiled Polish citizen in France, she managed to “spread her wings”, was able to soar and realize her full potential.

These prominent Poles and millions of other Poles before and after them, even in today’s globalised times, are trans-cultural “wanderers” between different worlds who are unable or unwilling to “lock in”.

Therefore, the “Um-zu” “to-to” - and “Weil-” “because” motifs, as described by Schütz [93], can be understood as Polish collective practices, which reproduce certain conjunctive spaces of experience over and over again, since these are created by “the unconscious, spiritual forces of communal life, spiritual realities...”, from which, with the concept of the *polis*, collective practices emerge [67]. These examples suggest an ‘inheritance’ from the ancestors when it comes to their historical experiences since “Poland as native country” is equated with suggestive terms such as “danger” and “existential hardship”. The consequences of such a perception, e.g. for current generations of Poles, could mean the following: Despite economic and political stability, the current climate in Poland is not to be trusted since another fundamental crisis may occur at any time. The experiences of ancestors abroad could be used to create a pattern of migration in connection with history (as a reflection of the past in memory) and be linked to questions as to how a nation, especially its representatives, interprets its own history as well as the tradition of migration to the West in the course of collective transmission of trauma. In our case, the existent (man) and the non-existent (things) could create tensions which will then express themselves in the way a people perceives and practices the “broken habitats” (worldview interpretations).

Could the epigenetics of trauma therefore shed the light of modernity on the world of the past?

“*Deep is the well of the past*”, as Thomas Mann noted in his longest novel “Joseph and His Brothers”, which was completed between 1933 and 1943 [64].

The reader is invited to take a deep dive into the well of Polish migration tradition, starting with hypothetical assumptions about possible causal connections between transgenerational, inherited traumas that may in turn produce genetic dispositions in the form of long-lasting migration events. This line of argument is laid out in the following chapters:

Chapter 1 offers an introduction to the subject of this essay.

Chapter 1.1, “Transgenerational Narratives of Trauma and Their Possible Consequences”, begins with a hypothetical question and offers a short timeline of Poland’s history, while also exploring what homelessness could mean in the long run.

In chapter 1.2, “Home Sweet Home”, the author will refer to some autobiographical encounters (memo) between then and now with several Polish citizens in Southwestern Poland.

At the time (October 2016), these men were 100 and even over 100 years old and had spent their entire lives in the geographic triangle of Poland-Ukraine-Slovakia. In addition, they had all lived through both Austrian and Soviet occupation.

Chapter 1.3 will deal with shuttle migration to Western countries, especially to Germany and the Benelux countries. Meanwhile, subchapter 1.4 will focus on international migration theories regarding transnational migration.

Chapter 2 will offer “Epigenetic Reflections on the Role of Non-Forgetting Etched Into the Genes”, that is reflections on the connection between the tradition of migration from Poland to the West and its presumed epigenetic “origin”, with section 2.1 focusing on Polish history.

The second memo will deal with Poland's current economic and political situation, and chapter 3 concludes with a summary of the considerations as to whether migration traditions can be hereditary and if so, how.

### 1.1. Transgenerational Narratives of Trauma and Their Possible Consequences

We open subchapter 1.1 with three questions:

Can migration traditions be hereditary and if yes, how?

“Trauma - Generations - Narrative. Transgenerational Narratives in Contemporary Literature on Eastern, East-Central and Southeastern Europe”. This is the title of a book by Yvonne Drosihn et al., which seeks to explore the narratives surrounding trauma experienced by multiple generations via a comparative literature perspective, while also using a post-memorial orientation. In this context, traumatic experiences as well as the consequences of wars and other man-made disasters are central to family memory [27].

My thoughts on trauma transmission will be focused on Poland, which was under foreign rule for the longest time of all Eastern European countries. Starting in the 16th century, foreign elective kings ruled over Poland, among them Hungarian, Swedish and French monarchs. In 1772-1793-1795, respectively, kings from Austria, Russia, and Prussia took power in Poland. Following their invasion in 1939, the Germans occupied the country and after 1945, Poland was essentially occupied by the Soviets. To this day, these historical facts cause a stigma of deep suffering. And since this suffering has repeated itself several times throughout Polish history, it still casts a shadow over Poland. The author Maria Dąbrowska (1889-1965) expressed this notion in a quote:

“...If lessons were learned from suffering, Poland would be one of the smartest countries in the world...”

“...Jakby cierpienie uczyło, to Polska byłaby jednym z najmądrzejszych krajów świata...” [25].

The image of a journey with a never-ending cycle of departures and arrivals is an apt metaphor for human life. However, this image is also true for Polish history and the consequences resulting from it, as this may perpetuate statelessness, the onset of migration patterns and diaspora life. For

individuals caught up in such a lifestyle, arrival often seems only temporary, according to the motto:

“... Those who do not have a house now will not build one for themselves. He who is alone now will remain so for a long time...”.

This is how Rainer Maria Rilke (1902) described potential problems of such a “journey” in his poem *Herbsttag* [8].

How have generations of Poles dealt with the traumatic experience of being a stranger in their own native country? How did they cope with the increasingly dramatic loss of their home, uncertainty and upheaval?

Different individuals certainly deal in very different ways with similar traumas: While some families may have suppressed these experiences, others have tried to keep the memory alive. In some families, traumatic experiences were often brought up, while the subject of being homeless in one's own native country remained a taboo in others. However, it remains a fact to this day that during times of unfreedom, new waves of migration to the United States and Western Europe started.

Life under foreign rule often triggers traumatic experiences that tend to burden those affected for a lifetime. Affected individuals also often pass their respective traumas on to their descendants, even though the descendants themselves were not exposed to traumatic experiences. Traumas can be passed on over generations, which is called “transgenerational transmission” [29, 103]. In *Vererbte Wunden*, Rauwald focuses on the transmission of traumatization, while also detailing therapeutic challenges, among them mechanisms of transgenerational transmission of parental traumatization, the consequences of the Shoah in the second generation, or raising awareness of transgenerational transmission in therapy. Rauwald also addresses topics such as refugees and their children, ego splitting during transgenerational trauma transmission, traditional escape from guilt, and the reactivation of transgenerational trauma in old age [89].

Based on decades of work with indigenous families and communities in Canada, O'Neill et al. have compiled a literature review regarding cross-generational, historical trauma and its impact on descendants. Exploring brain-based effects of trauma and new research in epigenetics can thus help to better understand complex, cross-generational effects of multiple trauma contexts [79].

This article is intended as a thought experiment within the gravitational field of Polish history and its tragic consequences, which may have triggered migration movements from Poland towards Western Europe that continue to this day (However, this article shouldn't be understood as the author's nostalgic effort to cope with the past, even though I have lived in Germany as a migrant from Poland).

In addition, my text is an attempt to establish a broader, multidisciplinary perspective, which includes historical science, psychology, as well as modern genetics research that explores the biological mechanisms of transmission in relation to genetic dispositions for hereditary vulnerability [48].

However, the science-based argumentation when it comes to genetics is kept at a low-threshold level since I am primarily concerned with cultural reflections. As it is the case in cultural anthropology, it deals not primarily with the individual and its “essence” constituted independently of historical and cultural imprints, but (also) with the different conceptions of man. In our case, these are Polish migrants and conceptions of them that have emerged as part of the discursive history on migration [2].

Since 2007, I have regularly travelled to my native country Poland and I continue to do so. My journeys are not for private purposes, but rather serve as guidance for my literary notes about my native country, its people and culture [34-36]. For instance, I have published cultural guides for tourists about these trips, which at times turned out to be adventurous.

I left Poland for Germany as a teenager. Currently, Poland serves as a transit country for migrants from neighbouring Eastern countries. During my travels “back to the roots” over the last 16 years, I met ordinary individuals of all stripes and from most regions of the country, including representatives from various sectors including politics, business, education, church, trade, environmental protection, art and even individuals who are committed to their centuries-old beekeeping tradition. For me, the border areas of the so-called “Eastern Wall”, which is located in the North and the Southeast of the country, were particularly exciting. These regions include the border areas to Russia, Belarus and Ukraine and harbour innumerable historical testimonies about Poland’s intercultural traditions. For instance, during the Middle Ages, around 1525, Poland was located in the immediate vicinity of the Ottoman Empire’s core areas) [84].

Forever etched in my memory are encounters of mutual “*Beschnuppern*”, during which I felt very much like a “testee” as my compatriots were trying to “read me” as they sought to figure out whether I returned as a “hybrid” or “non-hybrid” compatriot from Germany and, whether I was hiding arrogant, cheeky traits. Very much to my delight, the perceptions of my fellow Poles, which inevitably resulted in evaluations, turned out to be positive. They felt that “I was one of them and the West did not transform me into a hybrid migrant”, as some of them put it.<sup>2</sup> Probably, such observations were not just the result of subjective impressions by my interlocutors. Certainly, notions of intersubjectivity and indexicality were very much part of these “Who is who” parlor games, “a world shared in

commonality with others” [92]. Apart from the fact that my mother tongue has not changed, Polish life words are still “glued” to me, so even after a long time living in Germany, I was able to share “our” collective views with my interlocutors. During such encounters, I felt as if I had never emigrated from Poland...

This sense of unity (which I rarely encounter in everyday life at home in Germany), tends towards human ecology, from which the metaphor of a culture of emotion may have emerged (ibid.). In fact, this sense of unity turned into something I associate with the term “*das Elementare*” or with culture along the lines of “You really belong here” [41]. Can home therefore be seen as a primordial scenario that might point to collective explanatory patterns? Mannheim refers to this as origin-related, conjunctive spaces of experience that, very much like “maps,” set human logics into motion”. This understanding seeks to penetrate through the entities into the existential background of a space of experience...” [71].

The establishment of such a conjunctive space of experience is linked to commonalities regarding the existential background, to common “routes of experience” – be it an identical (group-like) or (merely) a structurally identical experience: “We are communalized only insofar as we travel such common routes of experience with each other” [72]. These essential social connections are formed by individuals in childhood.

The “maps” guiding me included, among other things, my questions about the possible causes of Poland’s long-established emigration patterns, which continue to this day. One of these causes I believe to be inherited, unwitting migration practices, which may consist of prereflective behavioural patterns, which then reproduce migration motives and migratory movements. However, not every permanent or temporary shift of one’s main place of residence into a foreign cultural environment turns out to be beneficial, as it can also lead to a “impasse” in life.

When discussing the question why people from Poland constantly emigrate, most of my fellow Poles told me that it was a bandwagon effect caused by our ancestors, since they have demonstrated we can escape from internal political and economic crises by emigrating to Western Europe. Apparently, a subsystem has emerged in the system of Poland and migration that reproduces autopoietic patterns, which in turn have oscillated for centuries between concepts such as “crises” and their “management”. In Luhmann’s basic concepts of social systems, autopoietic systems are described as self-generating and self-sustaining units that are themselves self-determined by structure and state [57].

## 1.2. Memo “Home Sweet Home”

At this point, I would like to insert a memo dedicated to my “Methuselah”, that is, my fellow Poles of advanced age.

These men were, at the time of our conversations in 2015,

<sup>2</sup>For me, it felt like a test of my attitude towards the rigid integration practices in Germany, which I still encounter and which resemble assimilation. Assimilation means the disappearance of systematic differences between various groups (for instance, due to education, income, sectoral distribution or marriage behaviour) while retaining all individual inequalities, also based on education and income, but also on political orientation, religious conviction or cultural lifestyle). “Assimilation” therefore does not mean the total disappearance of all differences between people, but merely the reduction of systematic differences between groups and the equalisation in the distribution of the characteristics concerned. My emancipated understanding of integration possibilities presupposes the right for immutability and captivity. Consequently, the term “integration” could be understood as a general connection of parts in a “systemic” whole. The opposite concept is the segmentation of the parts into autonomous, unrelated units. The basis of any integration is the interdependence of the parts, their mutual dependence [31].



100 and 93 years old. They had all survived<sup>3</sup> different occupation regimes in the border areas between Poland, Ukraine and Slovakia. While telling me their stories, they explained to me that amid the chaos of the wars, they were no longer sure of their own identity: at some point, they were Austrians, at some point Ukrainians, at some point Russians and currently, they are Poles.

Therefore, when I asked them how they felt today, they responded with "We are locals...". At that time, I called them my dear and mentally alert "*Dziadkowie-granddads*". For me, they were real "jewels" of the region's ethnology, since they had a rich collective and historical memory at the ready, allowing me to learn exciting narratives and important facts regarding Polish "*Um-zu*", to-to motives. Each of these centenarians also had first-degree family members who have been emigrating to the West for 180 years and continue to do so. By then, it seemed reasonably clear to me that I was in good company. We are migratory people.

In his book "Memory and its Social Conditions" [38], Maurice Halbwachs explains memory as a collective social phenomenon, which feeds less from the depth of the layers of an individual's consciousness. Rather, direct access to the collective consciousness is established. Where collective memory frees itself from its "autistic" features, it acquires a new dimension. Thus, memories are created, which in turn can create a community, according to the Polish psychoanalyst Kobylińska-Dehe [58].

Memory images may be specific. In relation to the presumed Polish "heritage" of migration traditions, frames of reference might have been formed via narratives of "remembering and forgetting" national tragedies, how these were present within the family tradition and what and how alternatives to these circumstances came about. In this case, families would have become second-degree observers, namely as to

how populations might have seen migration and how this cultural continuation of narratives might have reproduced established migration traditions. Second-degree observation is an operation consisting of two moments, those of distinction and designation [62]. Admittedly, the memory figures that thus come about are linked to concrete societal frameworks, while also providing information as to what and how the society and the respective epoch are reconstructed within the present frame of reference [38].

Similarly, emerging narrative aspects when it comes to imparting collective practices may influence the formation of identity as one of their models of belonging [3].

From the perspective of symbolic interactionism, there is no world per se, but only worlds that individuals construct for themselves and for each other. Only with the meaning that individuals attach to objects do they become part of their environment. Thus, an abstract world becomes a concrete world from which alone an individual's actions can be understood. [1].

In his book "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity", Jan Assmann deals with the specific imprints on human beings, which are acquired via affiliation with a certain society, thus enabling an individual to learn about his or her specific culture. This irreversible form of learning through the generations is not matter of phylogenetic evolution, but rather of socialization and transmission. Such "species preservation" in terms of cultural pseudo-speciation is a function of memory [4].

This is also the starting point for my questions as to why Polish people emigrate to the West, which correspond primarily to the collective memory of a nation, a people. As mentioned earlier, I am seeking to answer the question of whether a country, which was under prolonged occupation, might be prone to the transgenerational transmission of social practices based on the traumas it has suffered. In turn, this might have also fostered traditional migration and ongoing movements towards Western Europe, even though Poland (re)gained its status as a sovereign republic in 1989. This also goes to the core of my article, which seeks to explore the question as to whether such connections can be transformed into "conserved" determinants or collective patterns, which can be traced back to the "book of life", specifically in epigenetics.

Can collective suffering be inherited? And what does modern genetic research say about this? My hypothetical presumptions will deal with the unconscious "migration paths" of Polish ancestors, who thereby may have created some sort of "emergency quest for meaning" for themselves as well as for the generations coming after them, when their native country could not offer other chances for survival.

So have most people from Poland have probably inherited this specific "quest for meaning", since their ancestors already emigrated to Germany, Belgium, France or to the United States? And why is it that the teleological imperative to emigrate cannot or won't come to a stop even after these centu-

<sup>3</sup>Today, I would like to pay tribute to "my" grandpas and introduce the reader to their unusual, sometimes deeply moving biographical passages. I consider myself lucky to have met these people. RIP.Mr. Józef, who has died in the meantime (He lived in the region of the so-called "Eastern Wall"), conversed with me in a very self-sufficient and relaxed way. He laughed away the years of war and the post-war years until 1949 with a hearty laugh. He nevertheless began to smile when he said "... I am a Hiersiger." "Who?", I asked. "... I was once a slave of Austrians, then I was put on a Ukrainian register, then I was German-administered. I was also "Russian" and currently I'm Polish...". At the end of our conversation, my interlocutor gave me some advice: "Oh girl, don't think so deeply about these phenomena, those who came to us in Poland were all uncivilised...". The second protagonist of my story is unfortunately no longer alive either. RIP.Mr. Michał had - unusually for Polish culture in the countryside - a head of long, curly hair. He was taken to Hamburg as a youth during the Second World War. In the perversion of the Nazi era, he "served" as a test subject for Nazi doctors. He compensated for his painful experiences with a deep religiousness.

The mysterious Hasidic Rabbi from Long Island, whom I met in Leżajsk (Carpathian foothills) in 2014, conversed with me in Polish not only about what drives us when we migrate, but also about how he had been the last experimental child in Josef Mengele's medical killing machine.

Mr. Stanisław is still with us and is likely roughly 95 years old. His narratives are also very special. As a "Sybirak child" he was baptised twice. The second time Russian Orthodox, when he had to be rebaptised in order to be accepted by an Russian orphanage. When he was taken away from his mother by Russian soldiers during the Second World War as a small child, she scratched a deep wound into his forehead with her fingernails. When he returned to Poland from Siberia in 1952, his mother recognised him due to this scar.

ries-long journeys?

I will first assess these questions with theories that address trans- and shuttle migration from Poland to Germany and Belgium.

## 2. Transnational Migration from Poland to the West

Whether people live sedentary or highly mobile lives is often determined by the social, political, and religious contexts of the environment in which everyday life takes place. In addition, historical research has shown repeatedly that migration movements are the rule rather than the exception when it comes to the history of the *homo sapiens* [9].

The world owes the development of classical migration theories to the disciplines of cartography and demography. To illustrate this, it is worth mentioning that in 1885, the British-German cartographer Ravenstein, [91] with his work “Laws of Migration”, created a concept to classify migrants. For this purpose, he developed a classification that includes two levels of migration: On the one hand, there are migrants who come from participating, so-called preparatory countries (“countries of dispersion”) and on the other hand, there are societies that can be called “countries of absorption”. Ravenstein recognized that migration movements are usually dependent on economic dominance [26]. Meanwhile, in the early 20th century, the first empirical sociological studies by Thomas and Znaniecki dealt with the emigration waves of Polish peasants to the Prussian part of Poland and to the United States of America [95].

The 20th century, which is known as the “age of migration”, also heralded a boom for a new spectrum of labour migration. This was not due to an increase or decrease in migration processes, but rather due to their connections to intercultural paradigms. In this context, a qualitative differentiation of population strata participating in migration emerged [18]. Against this background, modern migration theories were developed, which are increasingly dedicated to group processes. These theories also seek to explore political and economic patterns, while also expanding them by determinants such as age, gender, education, profession or marital status of “potential participants” in migration.

At the micro level, which deals with the actions of individual actors, Hartmut Esser [30] developed an approach which is focused on the individual experiences of migrants and explores both their potential and willingness to integrate. The author also discusses phase models dealing with integration or assimilation processes (which, in the 1980ies, were still regarded as an important prerequisite to find one’s way in a foreign country). For instance, such models address causalities between the individual potentials of the respective migrant (integration performance) and the relevant requirements of the country of arrival. The liberalization of markets and the second “media revolution” (Internet) after Gutenberg’s in-

vention of the printing press in 1440 led to another wave of globalization, with migrants crossing the borders of nation states. In addition, researchers also developed concepts regarding the transcultural aspects of migratory movements. The “new” immigration from Eastern Europe, which is associated with the EU’s freedom of establishment, is not an exception in European migration traditions, e.g. from Poland to Germany or Belgium, but rather the rule.

In the passages below, I am seeking to explore the shuttle migration from Poland to Germany and to Belgium, which will be discussed in short historical remarks. The number of “Polish speakers” in Germany is estimated at over two million today. Accordingly, this group makes up roughly 2.5 percent of the total German population. Due to the heterogeneity of this group, they do not show up in any official immigration statistics. If their number were documented, the “Polish speakers” would probably be the second largest immigrant group in Germany after the Turks. However, they appear neither as a statistical quantity nor as a “Polish minority”, not even in the cultural sense, in the consciousness of German society, including politics and media [54]. Over three hundred years of foreign rule (except from 1772 to 1795 and 1918 to 1939), various occupying powers (including France, Hungary, Sweden, Prussia, Austria, Russia and Germany) have left their “mark” on Poland [20]. After 1989, Poland was once again thrust into a new system and into a profound process of change (similar to Bourdieu’s study of Algeria in 1979 [17]). History also seems to repeat itself as the country has so far been unable to effectively reinvent itself. Thus, staying in the diaspora is nothing new for Poles employed in the West.

During the period of the Polish partitions (1872-1913), 3.5 million people left Poland, and another 7 million lost or left their homes between 1914 and 1918. In the 44 years from 1870 to 1914, a total of more than two million migrated from the East to the West. Soon after the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871), the first emigration wave of so-called “Ruhr Poles”, namely miners from Upper Silesia or Poland and other agricultural workers of Slavic-origin occurred from East to Western Prussia and Posen” [13].

### 2.1. Shuttle Migrations to Western Countries

By the mid-19th century, Polish miners increasingly immigrated to areas along the Ruhr rivers [13]. In the 1890s, immigrants of Slavic origin constituted the majority of the workforce in many coal mines located in the Northern Ruhr area [13]. This is how the term “Ruhrpole” became part of the migration jargon.

This well-established knowledge, as well as the continuation of migration practices, allow for the assumption that the past may be an expression of history, and plurilocal migration from Poland to Western countries, such as Germany, Belgium, or the Netherlands, may have a permanent character. Such migration can lead to bizarre bilocal lifestyles, which in turn may give rise to a veritable “migration culture.” Meanwhile,

many migrants initially deal with their “transnationality” in an unbiased manner, which is then problematized by their environment, as Palenga-Möllenbeck has aptly described it [81]. However, mobility can also have socially and politically divisive effects.

In this respect, the example of Polish workers is very interesting: Even though Poland is a member of the EU and thus part of its internal market, the migration of workers is considered as migration (needing control) and (undesired) mobility [77]. The consequences of the EU’s Eastern enlargement are also not distributed equally. For the “old” as well as for the “new” member states, enlargement has certainly brought advantages, but there are also groups that perceive it as disadvantageous. So far, national logics have proved detrimental to the notion of a broad and inclusive European space in which individuals are actually free to choose where they work and live. The fact that the discussion has shifted towards debating bilateral relations between Poland and Germany also reveals a lack of patterns and descriptions which would allow the public to better reflect on their common life in Europe [77]. To imagine Europe as a common home for several nations and ethnic groups means to rethink social relations on a different spatial scale, without forgetting the temporary aspects (collective memories and identities). These imaginative capacities, both of societies and of science will also have a decisive impact on the future of Europe [77]. Given the breadth of the respective research, it cannot be reproduced here in any detail. However, what all disciplines probably have in common is the fact that transnational migration is seen as regular migration between two or more places.

Theories of transnational migration are thus related to earlier approaches seeking to construe global capitalism as a highly interdependent, dynamic system of central and peripheral regions, as argued authoritatively by Wallerstein [101]. This theoretical background also distinguishes them from classical migration theories, whose implicit economic frame of reference was mostly a singular economy fixed to a given space, while also making rather simplified distinctions between an internal and an external space (as the place of origin of economic migrants) [80] for instance, Cyrus (2000) associates the “ideal-typical Poland” with the concept of migration as a “space” in which both integration or assimilation can occur [23].

## 2.2. Transnational Migration

However, there is a marked difference: Many studies on transnational migration describe how migrants maintain ties to their respective contexts of origin while their main place of residence is located in the context of arrival: This fact can be attributed, among other things, to long distances and or to an illegal status [80]. In his analytical model, Pries [87] has developed a multi-level “system” in order to describe transmigration. It distinguishes different types of social spaces which illustrate transnational spaces. For instance, the micro

level includes everyday events, the meso level organizations, while the macro level involves political systems and institutions. These different divisions (micro and macro), provide for various regional, global and transnational social spaces [88]. Consequently, a transmigrant lives on his life simultaneously in two or more places, as he or she commutes in between them and maintains diverse social relationships. According to Pries [88], this also involves “plurilocal lifestyles.” Therefore, there is every indication that this labour migration is a very complex process involving the creation of transnational social spaces and not just simply the process of leaving or arriving (...) [88].

Cross-border connections between places of origin, destinations, and onward migration, as well as places of return, are an integral part of migration. A transnational perspective assumes that migration is not an irrevocable process or one-way street, but may involve mobility in different directions, as well as, most importantly, continuous transactions between migrants, their relatives, and non-migrants across the borders of nation states [34]. At this point, one question that comes to mind pertains to the “*Um-zu*”, “to-to” motives behind the wish or the need to migrate. According to Castels [19], most labour migrants who leave their home countries temporarily are driven by economic motives.

Such motivations are often determined by symbols of the migrant’s country of origin, for instance, the purchase of a home or a car, etc. (ibid.). Drawing on Bourdieu, labour migration helps to attain a certain social status [15]. Furthermore, there is now widespread agreement within social sciences that globalization is not a monocultural and uniformly homogenizing process, but rather leads to highly diverse effects on different national and cultural contexts [82].

Currently, the term globalization fulfils the function of initially designating this epochal change. It is well known that globalization refers to an increase in economic, political, social and cultural interconnections between regions and, above all, between societies that were formerly organized as nation states [88].

The basic idea of dynamics, which might also encompass terms of plurilocality, is associated with the extended scope of action available to individuals: Instead of transferring from one place to another, they cross different “places of distinction” and their national borders [51].

The “transmigrant” is organizing his or her life simultaneously in several places, between which he or she commutes at regular intervals and in which he or she has forged various social relationships. While traditional theories start out from fixed nation-state “containers” for a single “social space,” the theory of transnational migration assumes that social and geographical space do not have to coincide at all [80].

Additionally, Parnreiter defines them as transnational “movements”, while discussing the characteristics of multiple, cross-border location changes using the example of female commuting migrants from Mexico. In other research, transnational family life as seen from a female, Filipino perspec-



tive, appears in the context of motherhood at a distance [86]. What seems of particular interest here is the fact that mothers who work abroad for longer periods without their children and who cannot commute to see them, can still have a close relationship with them [74]. Unmistakably, “transnational linkages have increased in intensity and simultaneity following the development of new transportation and communication technologies and the increase in mobility” [24]. For economic reasons, the “homo economicus” decides to move to a foreign country offering attractive wages. A migrant with such an attitude solely relies on economic calculations [12]. Labor migration can now be seen as a result of supply and demand in all countries. Polish labour migrants commute to work in Germany and Belgium, which is described as commuter migration, “*Schaukelmigration*” or “two-ways migration” [42]. “Space” can thus become “time” and “time” can become “space” [87]. Starting with the long tradition of migration from Poland to the West, which offers insights into sociological concepts such as shuttle migration and global transnational migration events, we then proceed to a discussion that is both informed by cultural anthropology and social psychology. This will allow for some assumptions, for instance that migration may also be a transgenerational “inheritance” from times of hardship and crisis – an assumption which could add an impulse to the epistemology of current biomolecular research methods.

### 3. Epigenetic Reflections on the Role of Non-Forgetting Etched Into the Genes

In the following paragraphs, I would like to take the opportunity to discuss some scientific aspects accompanying the current debates on epigenetics and trauma. My question is whether the repeated trauma in Poland’s history could have had an impact on those “Poles” who are still migrating today.

For this, I will briefly discuss research by Vamik Volkan, Nathan Kellermann, Angela Moré, Pierre Bourdieu and Peter Spork, Vanessa Lux and Rachel Yehuda.

Vamik Volkan, a peace and conflict researcher and U.S. psychiatry professor with Cypriot-Turkish roots, has devoted his research predominantly to the historical roots and psychological mechanisms of ethnic conflict.

In the essay “Large-Group-Psychology in Its Own. Rights”, Volkan examines the psychology of “large group identity” and a creation of “psychological boundaries,” of relationships that have been subjected to massive trauma at the hands of the “Other.” This trauma has an international character and is about peaceful coexistence after wars and violence [99].

In “Transgenerational Transmission and Deposited Representations: Psychological Burdens Visited by One Generation upon Another”, Volkan and Greer examine adults, a reservoir for the intergenerational transmission of certain self and object characteristics that a mother can transfer into the child’s ego identity. We refer to this type of intergenerational

transmission as “deposition.” [99].

Nathan Kellermann is an Israeli philosopher who conducts research on the history of the Holocaust and its traumatic transmission to subsequent generations [54].

“... Yesterday is now...” – one of many mottos of Angela Moré, professor of social psychology at Leibniz Universität Hannover as well as co-founder of the group analytic institute GIGOS. Moré’s research focuses on traumatic experiences and their transmission to subsequent generations, referring to circumstances such as persecution, violence, the death of relatives, war, displacement – and the culpability in families of persecuted individuals and those of the perpetrators [71].

Bourdieu describes the solidified personal history of an individual as habitus. The habitus is itself the product of history, creating individual and collective practices, that is, history, according to schemata generated by history; thus ensuring the active presence of past experiences, which are present in every organism in the form of perceptual, thought, and action schemata, thus ensuring conformity and consistency of practices over time, much more so than any formal rules and explicit norms [16].

Epigenetics is a relatively new discipline. Epigenetics stands for “above” or “beside” genetics and is concerned with the epigenes that are located above – some also say behind, next to or on – the genomes of our cells.

Very much like letters of a genetic text, epigenes form a code that cells can read like a blueprint and then translate it into the numerous proteins making up a living organism [94]. Epigenetics is considered as the link between environmental influences and genes. In connection with trauma, it means that psychological wounds are inherited. Even though epigenetic responses to different environmental influences in individuals are now considered to be proven, the inheritance of epigenetic imprints is still the subject of much controversy. In particular, the specificity of inherited traits, in terms of actually passing on complex acquired traits, has been discussed critically [10].

Therefore, practice-related actions that may be the result of such a mechanism and which are linked to experiences, might have a direct influence on the management of life challenges. Mannheim compares the workings of this regulatory mechanism as “historical recognition”, which is “a classification of mental realities” as “shared worlds of experience”, which are linked to specific behaviours when it comes to needs and which can be called collective notions...” [22].

Meanwhile, social psychologist Angela Moré has referred to part of her research findings as a “time-specific notion of inheritance”, linking her findings to experiences with (civil) wars, persecution, displacement and genocide. Such experiences do not pass without (also) leaving psychological marks on the descendants, which are then implanted into the psyche of subsequent generations. When the process of coming to terms with the past does not succeed, or succeeds only partially, the emotional legacy becomes a “burden even for the grandchildren and great-grandchildren” [74]. In addition, C. C. Sangalang and C. Vang [95], drawing on the common phrase



“the apple does not fall far from the tree”, examine transmissions that may offer some clues regarding familial traits in traumatized behaviours which might have a connection to transgenerational conflict. This shifts the focus from the individual to his or her development, while being embedded in existentially significant transgenerational relationships.

In November 2015, the journal “Nature Reviews Genetics” published an overview regarding the molecular basis of the inheritance of acquired behavior through non-genetic means. The authors, Johannes Bohacek and Isabelle M. Mansuy, discussed concepts as well as experimental findings for non-genetic transgenerational inheritance via the germline. As transmission routes, they assume transmission via epigenetic mechanisms, in particular DNA methylation and non-coding RNA in sperm. For several years, the interaction of various epigenetic mechanisms, such as DNA methylation, histone modifications and RNA interference, has been discussed as central to the regulation of gene expression in cell differentiation. As has been shown, some of the epigenetic mechanisms are sensitive to environmental influences, especially nutrition and stress [63, 102, 69].

In her research, Rachel Yehuda, Professor of Psychiatry and Neuroscience and Director of the Center for Psychedelic Psychotherapy and Trauma Research at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai and at the James J. Peters Veterans Affairs Medical Center in New York City, has examined both the sensitivity to threats and their inheritance to subsequent generations. War, genocide and terror lead to changes in the DNA that can facilitate psychological disorders. Parents pass this on to their offspring. As a result, it explains why children of trauma victims are often more anxious. Increased awareness of danger could represent an adaptation that is evolutionary beneficial. In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, a medical team from the Icahn School of Medicine in Manhattan examined scores of people who had been near the collapsed twin towers of the World Trade Center. These included 187 pregnant women. Many of them were in shock and Yehuda was asked if she and her team could provide them with psychological support. Finally, there was a risk of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) including flashbacks, nightmares, emotional emptiness or other psychiatric symptoms that can occur years after a traumatic experience [49].

We all are part of a chain, links in a chain of generations, connected and linked via multiple inherited biological, cultural, social as well as family-specific legacies. We are thus incorporated into an already existing world and are shaped by it well before we are aware of this influence and well before an active appropriation of this heritage becomes possible [89]. First and foremost, this concerns unprocessed psychological traumas that may have been acquired in various contexts. Their experiential qualities can then be passed on to descendants in different ways and to different degrees, directly or indirectly, and with different effects.

In addition to numerous adverse consequences, an individual’s psychological resilience can also be strengthened via

transgenerational transmission.

In his essay “The Problem of Generations”, Karl Mannheim<sup>4</sup> explores the fact that people connect their formative or decisive experiences in certain transgenerational frameworks and in certain ways. For instance, one can connect the traumatizing experiences of the Shoa and Jewish life in the diaspora, respectively.

The parental trauma is not only experienced differently by the descendants, but in part also in contradictory ways. Therefore, it can be perceived by a person as a curse and a legacy at the same time [59]. Again, the inherited Polish trauma of lengthy occupation might serve as a possible explanation for this mental orientation. According to Moré terrifying ancestral experiences in the form of long-lasting periods of violence, lack of freedom, and displacement can be described as telescoping [72] and these manifestations of inherited trauma are considered as transgenerational transmissions to the subsequent generation. Unconscious trauma thus reproduces parental actions and transmits them to their children [11].

The theoretical approach for a possible answer to these questions is supported by habitus theory, namely through the consequences of aftereffects as explained by Bourdieu [14], the notion of cultural memory by J. Assmann (as well as collective memory by Halbwachs) [39].

### 3.1. The Polish Dilemma in History and Its Possible Impact on the "Inheritance" of a Plurilocal Lifestyle

It is the Polish dilemma, which originated in 1569 (Poland’s transition to a Republican system) and lasted in part until the collapse of communist rule in 1989. In over three hundred years (except 1772 to 1795 and 1918 to 1939) of foreign rule, occupying powers (including France, Hungary, Sweden, Prussia, Austria, Russia, and Germany) left their “mark” on the country [20]. After 1989, Poland was again thrust into a new system, into a profound process of change. (similar to Bourdieu’s Algeria study from 1979 [17]). History seems to repeat itself since even today, the country seems unable to actively reinvent itself. Thus, staying in the diaspora is nothing new for Poles employed in the West. Drawing on Bourdieu, I would also like to address the “special case” regarding Poland’s collective habitus and then proceed to tie it to the side effects<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>4</sup>Karl Mannheim’s essay “The Problem of Generations” (1928) has strongly shaped research in social sciences. But other disciplines such as history and cultural studies have also referred to Mannheim’s concept of generations. In contrast to biologicistic social theories, Mannheim attempted to theoretically link generational and social change. For Mannheim, the difference between generational storage and generational context lies in the culturally constituted stratification of consciousness and experience (...). Generation-building is a communalisation process predominantly localized in public spaces and thus the object and result of collective understandings [50].

<sup>5</sup>Even though Mannheim does not exclude the universality of the truth claim, at the same time he does not negate the fact that cognition and objectivity are nevertheless possible because an object in space (for instance, as a narrative object) can

Of course, this assumption must remain hypothetical. What is certainly easier to prove based on historical considerations would be the fact that breaks within the habitual orientations of the Polish men have their own history. According to recent findings regarding the psychology of acculturation, acculturation can be seen as a phenomenon of both migration and immigration, which may cause conflict-laden personality changes in migrants. Their conflictual behaviour may relate not only to divergent groups, but also to changing cultural values and structures in countries of arrival [105]. When we connect these assumptions to consequences resulting from the migrants' problematic acculturation processes, not just a socialization rupture could occur, but also a habitus rupture. It must logically occur, since habitus is a system of boundaries [17], and not just for those who are acculturated in it. The habitus concept includes, among other things, compliance with rules [59] and is both an expression and result of constellations of groups in space that can produce social inequality. If a rupture in socialization occurs due to a migration event, it is even more likely that the migrant will also experience a rupture in his or her personal and collective habitus. "In the disposition of the habitus, (...) the entire structure of the system of existential conditions is laid out..." [17]. If these existential conditions are additionally problematized in terms of socio-cultural localization<sup>6</sup>, as it was done with regard to the participants of my case study between plurilocalities, it would be understandable that the Polish expats not just seem frail in their ambiguitous (ambiguous) life contexts, but then also are increasingly despairing about it.

### 3.2. Memo the Current Political and Economic and Situation in Poland

The Eastern enlargement of the European Union is not only aimed at stabilizing both democracy and market economy in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), but (also) to promote modernization in post-communist transition societies, according to general belief.

The question I would like to ask at this point relates to the time factor, which means how long the EU will actually continue to support the Central and Eastern European countries, given that more than 30 years have passed since the collapse of communism. It should be obvious that a country such as Poland, for instance, would be better off with emancipatory support on its way to independence and self-determination, thus promoting participation and not paternalism as path of socialization. Thirty-four years during which a state is under

the auspices of another state or a community of states could easily be associated with paternalism.<sup>7</sup>

An essential foundation of legal theory relates to the assumptions about human behaviour from which the legal system should proceed: Should it assume that citizens are fundamentally rational in pursuing their subjective goals and interests? Or should it assume that individuals systematically and repeatedly make mistakes, act irrationally, and therefore need the assistance of the law [28].

The external discipline imposed on these countries by, among other things, the interaction of foreign capital and the EU's pre-accession strategy goes hand in hand with the so-called new social crisis. In this context, it is not surprising that the societies of Central and Eastern Europe are already "tired of endless demands for reform", or that they are now becoming easy prey for the promises of interventionism and populism. One can only speculate about the possible consequences of these changes for the future path of political transformation [44]. Meanwhile, the European continent "invented" an indicator of determinants that is based on European national identity: we are talking here about the so-called "net-payers" (Western Europe) and "net-recipients" (Eastern Europe)<sup>8</sup>

Politics influences migration, like many other social and economic phenomena on its margins. This does not mean, however, that politics (like culture) is a simple variable of little importance. As in any other social process, what often happens on the margins is of great importance but difficult to analyze. To use Weber's metaphor, if we compare international migrations to an accelerating train driven by economic and social forces, then the state is the switch that can change the course of the train or derail it" [61]. Migration from Poland to the West has always inspired a lively public debate on

<sup>7</sup>"The only circumstances in which market economy and democracy can be implemented equally well is when both are imposed by a society outside and guaranteed by international relations of dependence and surveillance over a long period of time" [77]

<sup>8</sup>In the years 2007-2013, Poland applied for a significant part of European regional aid, which is subject to strict EU control. The challenges related to the absorption of structural funds from the Cohesion Fund for the Polish administration are enormous. They go far beyond the technically efficient use of EU funds. If Poland were able to use only a small part of the available funds, this would result in political problems for the entire European structural policy, which could inevitably lead to a revision of this Community policy to the detriment of Poland. (cf. Guz 2004: 359). Poland not only belongs to the so-called "net recipients", but also actively participates in the translation of Polish acquisitions in Germany, as reported in 2019 by Konrad Poplawski et al in Prospects for the development of economic cooperation between Poland and Germany. 2016 The medical company Medort led to the second acquisition in Germany by acquiring shares of the wheelchair manufacturer Richter RMS. 2016: Izo-Blok, a manufacturer of plastic elements, acquired its competitor SSW PearlFoam for EUR 22 million. 2017: Intive, a supplier of advanced software solutions, acquired 65 % of shares in the German company iNTECE, a leader in software for cars (including autonomous vehicles). 2017: The logistics company Raben made its fifth acquisition in Germany by purchasing shares of Busse Logistik. 2017: Trailer manufacturer Wielton acquired the traditional Langendorf brand for EUR 5 million. 2018: ASM Group, dealing in sales support and outsourcing services for business clients, acquired its competitor in Germany, Vertikom, for EUR 21 million. 2018: The chemical company Grupa Azoty took over the specialist fertilizer producer Com po Expert for EUR 227 million. 2019: Furniture manufacturer Nowy Styl made its third acquisition in Germany by acquiring shares of the family company Kusch+Co [84].

only be seen from one point of view at a time, i.e. perspectivistically. It can only be recognized in its wholeness, not via the effort to "develop an imperspectivist picture", but only by "holding the various layers (in our case, this includes the historical perspective) against each other in order to see the perspectivist as such and thus achieve a new kind of objectivity" (Mannheim [75])

<sup>6</sup>The principle of cultural memory is diachrony, the primal scene of cultural memory, the invisible bond that connects the living and the dead, the "remember me". Every present consciously or unconsciously inherits from a previous generation [5].

the profits and losses generated in this process [91]. When presenting it, we can use the metaphor of "two containers". One may contain "monetary" resources guaranteeing survival, and the other "container" may contain "dissatisfaction/suffering", associated with, for example, obtaining positions below actual education, when a person is only a supplier of resources [21], "...then he goes to the very edge of the abyss, namely, where he himself must be recognized only as a resource..." [43]. Moreover, the second generation of emigrants, left with no choice, suffers not only from the feeling of rootlessness, but also from the stigma of "otherness". However, the most tragic effect of these states of "exile" is the loss of mutual communication between the generations of parents and children and the loss of their homeland [21]. At this point, the reader will certainly ask a justified question: do the quoted political paternalism and multidimensional processes of economic emigration from Poland to this day have any links with the transgenerational transmission of the trauma of the past?

In this case, the epigenetics of trauma may, as a "worst case", attempt to discuss the issue of transmitting information about it based on parental exposure to the motives for its creation, which may determine the sensitivity of subsequent generations in the context of making decisions about further "wandering". According to J. B. Lamarck, programming, which takes place during developmental age, always under the influence of the environment or inherited from parents, can be perceived as the "first event".

The influence of environmental factors on epigenetic processes has revolutionized our view of the intergenerational transmission of information, but we still lack answers to many fundamental questions: What is the true nature of the influence of environmental factors? What is the nature of the structures targeted by these factors (marks and/or conformations)? What is the nature of the objects to which information is transmitted? Are the mechanisms at work direct or indirect? How does stored information persist across generations? What are the "windows of sensitivity" or "insensitivity" to environmental factors? [55]. These reflections may manifest themselves in epigenetic trauma and its correlations to the hundred-year-old traditions of Polish emigration to the West, which are transgenerational in nature and do not focus mainly on reflections on biologically determined identity [6].

## 4. Conclusion

In relation to the initial question as to whether migration traditions can be hereditary and if so, how, we can so far only offer assumptions based on the multidisciplinary research discussed in this essay, since to date, there has never been a quest for a "migration gene". Based on my research, no relevant specialist literature or evidence for this connection could be found.

However, considering the perspective of migration theories

developed during the last century (Znaniński / Thomas 1920-1922), it is possible to conclude that Poles have regularly been a "migratory people", right up to the present day. Of course, one can speculate at this point as to whether a special genetic disposition could have emerged given the various tragedies that have occurred throughout Poland's history. This in turn would imply an emotional legacy of the ancestors that is still at work today, since Poles continue to migrate even though there are no more hardships and wars in their homeland: Therefore, one is drawn to the conclusion that maybe, Poles just cannot help it since they have migration "in their blood".

My essay primarily seeks to harness the epistemic potential for epigenetics while also implicating the limits of both metaphors and models used in the cultural anthropological and social-scientific aspects in current epigenetic debates. For instance, the painful history of some nations could provide a "treasure trove" for today's molecular biology, allowing researchers to find new clues in the epigenetic quest for genetic modifications or mutations that may reveal certain dispositions for migration which could also be inherited as genetic information via transgenerational pathways. Thus, by creating a bridge between then and now, we can connect different perspectives on a variety of phenomena, genetic research and its development as well as intellectual and cultural history, language and visual knowledge. Therein, interpretations of life processes are preserved, which are associated with the collective memory of nations and their history [63]. Not just is the "...well of the past deep...", but *"...our memories remain collective and are recalled to us by other people - even in case of events that we alone experienced and objects that only we have seen. This means that in reality, we are never alone..."* [4].

Halbwachs taught us to understand individual memory as a "representation collective" and to think in two dimensions, the neuro-psychological and the psycho-social dimension. For its part, the theory of cultural memory seeks to expand this two-dimensional concept of memory to include a third dimension of symbolic forms – texts, images, rites – the objectified long-term memory of society [4].

## Author Contributions

Kornelia Golombek is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

## Conflicts of Interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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