

A black and white portrait of a young woman with a serious expression, wearing a headscarf and a simple, textured garment. She is looking directly at the camera. The background is dark and out of focus, with some light coming from a window on the left. The overall mood is somber and contemplative.

MACIEJ LASKOWSKI

**SILENT STRENGTH
FROM THE MARGINS**

Silent strength from the margins

Maciej Laskowski

Silent strength from the margins

**Polish female memoirists and the immigrant
experience in turn-of-the-century America**



Poznań 2026

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*Nie ma, naprawdę nie ma takiego rozdziału naszej
wspólnej przeszłości, w którym kobiety nie zapisałyby swojej karty.*

*There is truly no chapter of our shared past in which
women have not left their mark.*

Anna Kowalczyk

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Abstract

This monograph examines five memoirs written by Polish women who emigrated to the United States at the turn of the twentieth century. These life stories were submitted to the Institute of Social Economy in 1936 for a memoir-writing competition. Set against the wider backdrop of mass Polish emigration (1870-1914), the study re-centres women's experience within a corpus dominated by male testimony. The study traces the women's accounts from departure to settlement, labour, and everyday survival, using close reading informed by life-writing studies, feminist autobiography theory, and the *zwrot ludowy* ('ludic' or 'people's turn'). Attention is dedicated to the intricacy of paid work and domestic work, to language as an element of identity and adaptation, and to silence as a practice of emotional endurance rather than an absence of feeling. The monograph also analyses gendered power within the family and community, and it considers relations with women of other nationalities in shared migrant environments. Together, these accounts illuminate resilience, constraint, and agency as they emerge "from the margins".

Introduction

At the turn of the twentieth century, millions of Polish emigrants crossed the Atlantic in an attempt to flee poverty, political and religious repression, Germanisation, Russification, and, in the case of men, mandatory military service in the partitioning armies. All hoped for a better life for themselves and for the generations to come. Regardless of the reasons for emigration, they found themselves thrust into the complexities of American socio-economic life. Among them were thousands of women – wives, daughters, labourers, and caretakers – whose historical narratives have often remained neglected or even silenced.

However, thanks to memoir-writing competitions held, among others, by the Institute of Social Economy¹ (Pol. *Instytut Gospodarstwa Społecznego*), their recollections were not lost entirely. For example, in 1936, the Institute organised a competition in Warsaw that invited Polish emigrants to share their life stories. Many of these accounts were later compiled in *Pamiętniki Emigrantów: Stany Zjednoczone*², with the English title *Memoirs of Polish Emigrants: USA*, under the editorship of Adam Andrzejewski (1977). *Pamiętniki* was the final volume in a series chronicling the lives of Polish emigrants in France, Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay, Canada, and the USA, and has been praised as “a remarkable work and, at the same time, a document of great importance for our national culture”³ (Andrzejewski 1977a: 5).

The texts of *Pamiętniki* document not only personal journeys from Poland to America but also cultural dislocation, family rupture, survival in harsh labour markets, and the emotional toll of immigrant life. The testimonies form a remarkable archive of firsthand experience, with forty-six written by men and five by women.

This study examines the five memoirs written by Polish women, all of whom lived in the United States at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Modest though it may seem, the choice of primary sources is not coincidental. Firstly, they provide invaluable insight into the gendered immigrant experience from the margins. The female-au-

¹ Henceforth ISE.

² Henceforth *Pamiętniki*.

³ All translations from Polish are mine, ML, unless indicated otherwise.

thored works offer the reader a more private perspective on domestic labour, maternal sacrifice, cultural negotiation, and silent endurance. Secondly, they reveal how immigrant women helped to sustain and shape both Polish and American cultural identities. Through their handwritten accounts, they bore witness to the psychological, cultural, and economic challenges of emigration, while articulating a sense of dignity and perseverance. Finally, there is every sign to surmise that the sample, to a large extent, represents the masses of marginalised emigrant⁴ women, whose voices will never be heard.

Yet this very research material remains understudied. While several works have addressed the collection, they have not exhausted its interpretive potential. For example, “Elementy polskiego charakteru narodowego w warunkach diaspory” (Elements of Polish National Character in Diaspora Conditions) (1984) by Andrzej Brożek makes use of *Pamiętniki* alongside many other sources. Then, the master’s thesis *Profilowanie wartości w pamiętnikach polskich emigrantów do Stanów Zjednoczonych* (Values Profiling in the Diaries of Polish Emigrants to the United States) (2020) centres on the axiological profiling of Polish emigrants in general.

This study differs significantly in both focus and methodology, however. It adopts an interdisciplinary approach and focuses on female-authored memoirs and the immigrant experience from gendered, narrative, and cultural perspectives, aiming to portray women in a holistic and multidimensional way. It is also crucial to note, as Tosiek (2024: 112) does, that women’s migration experiences have often been filtered through male-centred paradigms.

⁴ Throughout the book, the words ‘emigrant’, ‘immigrant’, and ‘migrant’, together with their derivatives, are used. The word ‘emigrant’, which is consistent with the title of the source material, is appropriate, for instance, when discussing the process of leaving the homeland, the conditions in Poland, or the motives for departure. This term aligns with the Polish historiographical and demographic tradition, in which references are made to economic, political, or family emigration. ‘Immigrant’ suggests that the focus of the work is on the experience in the destination country, that is, the United States. It is a more recognisable and established term in American (and English-language) studies in phrases like ‘immigrant experience’. The more neutral term ‘migrant’ is occasionally employed to refer to the movement itself, without focusing on the country of origin or destination, and thus helps to describe migration in a broader or more general sense.

Therefore, the following monograph aims to re-centre female experience in the story of Polish-American migration and shed light on the silent strength these women embodied. By analysing their testimonies, this study also seeks to contribute to the growing field of immigrant women's life writing. More specifically, the research addresses the following questions:

- How do Polish immigrant women describe their journey, settlement, everyday routines, and cultural adaptation?
- How do the narratives articulate personal agency and identity under conditions of social, economic, and linguistic constraint?
- How do ordinary women narrate pain, resilience, and silence, and what narrative functions do these modes serve?
- How are men portrayed, and what roles do they play in shaping women's experiences and room for action?
- How do the memoirists portray women of other nationalities within shared migrant environments?

The study focuses on the first and largest wave of Polish migration to the United States (1870-914), composed mainly of peasants and workers, including the five women whose memoirs constitute its core. Although most of the material falls within this period, some sections – especially in Chapter 1 – go beyond these limits.

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology grounded in literary analysis, cultural studies, and feminist theory. It focuses on close reading and contextual interpretation of selected memoirs written by Polish female immigrants to the United States at the turn of the twentieth century. The approach is interdisciplinary, drawing on scholarship in life writing, migration writing, and feminist approaches, as well as the *zwrot ludowy* – a turn toward the experiences and voices of ordinary people.

At this point, several notions call for clarification, beginning with 'memoir' – the primary genre under investigation – and 'life writing', the broader category to which memoir belongs.

As Couser (2011: 15) puts it, the 'memoir' is a nonfiction genre that "depicts the lives of real, not imagined, individuals". As a mimetic form of writing, it imitates life similarly to the way art imitates nature. A memoir presents itself, and is therefore read as a nonfictional record or re-presentation of actual human experience. Equally important is

the fact that this genre can serve as a platform for unheard voices to be heard. “Contemporary memoir has been a threshold genre in which some previously silent populations have been given voice for the first time” (Couser 2011: 12).

Smith and Watson (2010: 4) concur with Couser’s reflections. In *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, they observe that the memoir frequently addresses neglected aspects of marginalized lives, adding that it is often characterized by the author’s “self-reflexivity about the writing process”. In the same publication, the authors define ‘life writing’ as “a general term for writing that takes a life, one’s own or another’s, as its subject. Such writing can be biographical, novelistic, historical, or explicitly self-referential and therefore autobiographical” (Smith and Watson 2010: 4; cf. Browarczyk et al. 2023).

Also, the growing significance of gender studies – including queer studies – ought to be underscored, as demonstrated, for example, by Erica Rand’s *The Ellis Island Snow Globe* (2005). In her work on migration, Rand shows how iconic images such as the Statue of Liberty obscure histories of forced migration, while situating questions of security, identity, and the commodification of immigration history within fields such as sociology, cultural studies, and literary studies.

The analysis is further grounded in feminist theories of autobiography, particularly those developed by Leigh Gilmore, who challenges the notion of a coherent, unified identity in women’s life writing. Gilmore’s concept of ‘autobiographics’ – a feminist-oriented, critical approach to self-narratives – captures ways in which female autobiographical writing negotiates subjectivity and self-representation under conditions of social disempowerment and male-dominated cultural norms (Gilmore 1994). This framework is especially relevant when interpreting the memoirs of Polish immigrant women, whose narratives often focus on the domestic sphere rather than explicit political commentary, and are often understated, fragmented, and veiled.

Finally, this dissertation is informed by the already mentioned multi-layered and multidimensional phenomenon known as the *zwrot ludowy*.⁵ Beyond literary studies and the history of literature, this perspective

⁵ Ryś (2015) uses the Polish term *zwrot plebejski*. Stobiecki (2022) renders the concept in English as the ‘ludic turn’, while Tosiek (2023) refers to it as the ‘plebeian’, ‘folk’, or ‘people’s turn’.

can also be observed in other disciplines, such as archaeology, art, and history (Stobiecki 2022: 299-300). As Katarzyna Chmielewska (2021: 295-296) puts it, it aims to attract attention to “popular resistance to the power and violence of the upper classes” and give voice to “a completely different world of protagonists – those who have until now remained voiceless and in the background”.⁶ In this sense, the *zwrot ludowy* can be seen as an attempt to recover subaltern perspectives, without claiming to resolve the question famously posed by Spivak (1988) of “Can the Subaltern Speak?”

Analytically, the study is based on a close reading of selected memoirs from *Pamiętniki*, combined with contextual interpretation assisted by historical and sociological scholarship. Attention is paid to narrative structure, voice, and rhetorical and affective modes – for instance, nostalgia or shame – as well as to recurring motifs such as silence, endurance, labour, motherhood, and loss. These textual readings are situated within broader contexts of migration patterns, gender roles in immigrant communities, and limited access to literacy.

The monograph is divided into five chapters.

Chapter 1 provides the historical and social context of Polish migration to the United States, including the reasons for dislocation, patterns and destinations of migration, and the role women played in settling in the New World.

Chapter 2 introduces the memoirists and their texts, outlining the institutional context of the 1936 memoir competition, its guidelines, key remarks on the memoirs’ language, and concise biographical notes on the authors.

Chapter 3, the analytical centre of the monograph, examines the concept of ‘silent strength’ through thematic close readings focused on labour, motherhood, identity, and emotional resilience and resistance. It displays how the female writers realise their agency in confrontation with social structures within and beyond the home, and how gender affects the focus, perspective, and thematic expression.

Chapter 4 investigates the women’s portrayals of men and male authority, concentrating on how relationships with husbands, kin,

⁶ As examples of scholars dealing with the *zwrot ludowy*, Chmielewska mentions the works of Adam Leszczyński (2020), Michał Rauszer (2020), and Kacper Półlocki (2021).

priests, and employers shape female experiences, constraints, and forms of agency.

Chapter 5 compares the experiences of the five Polish female memoirists with those of women from other national and ethnic backgrounds encountered in the migration context.

Chapter 1

Historical and social context

1.1. Setting the stage: Historical roots of Polish-American presence

In order to contextualise the more systemic migration period of 1870-1914 which is the focus of this study, it is useful to begin with a brief overview of selected earlier Polish arrivals. The first Poles recorded to have appeared in the present-day United States arrived as skilled craftsmen and soldiers “desperately needed (...), at the insistence of Captain John Smith” (Polish American Congress, 1958: 5). He brought them to the Jamestown Colony in Virginia in 1608 and included a glass blower, a tar maker, a soap maker, and a timberman (Richmond 1995: 126, 72).

In the mid-seventeenth century, due to the Counter-Reformation in Poland, some Protestants – predominantly Arians – left the country in search of religious freedom, first in the Netherlands and then in America (Dyboski 1950: 53-54). Eighteenth-century America, in turn, saw the arrival of hundreds of Polish figures with military backgrounds, who, standing no chance of saving their homeland from Prussia, Russia, and Austria – the partitioning powers – joined the struggle in the American War of Independence.⁷

The two most prominent figures who joined the Revolutionary Army were Kazimierz Pułaski (1745-1779), often referred to as the “Father of American Cavalry”, and Tadeusz Kościuszko (1746-1817), a national hero of Poland, the United States, Lithuania, and Belarus (Grzełoński 1979: 70-71).

In 1854, Polish Silesians from the Prussian partition founded the rural community of Panna Maria (‘Virgin Mary’), Texas – the oldest permanent Polish settlement in North America. Soon afterwards, in the region there appeared other Poles – this time from Greater Poland. Though the town remained culturally distinct, many of its descendants later moved to nearby urban centres, leaving Panna Maria as a symbolic heart of Polish heritage in Texas (Meier 2023).

⁷ For a cartographic representation of the successive partitions of Poland (1772-1795), see Wells (1921: 800).

The period immediately preceding the mass migration that forms the core of this study coincided with two major military engagements on both sides of the Atlantic. In Poland, the anti-Russian January Uprising collapsed in 1864, while in the United States, the Civil War broke out the following year. Thousands of Poles fled their homeland to join the conflict. The following words highlight how the Polish diplomat and historian Bogdan Grzełoński (1979: 75) interprets Polish attitude and involvement:

The vast majority fought on the side of the Union and supported the abolition of slavery. Poles participated in all major battles of the war, earning high ranks – such as generals Józef Karge and Włodzimierz Krzyżanowski – for their skill. Their courage, bravery, and military expertise were noted in the reports of the most distinguished commanders.

While limited in scale, these early arrivals formed the basis for the broader Polish presence in America that emerged from the 1870s onward. As opposed to the earlier migration, the new one brought increasing numbers of women, whose experiences would later offer unique insight into the personal and domestic dimensions of immigrant life (see e.g., Parafianowicz and Niewiński 2021; Lamphere 1987).

1.2. Push and pull factors behind Polish migration (1870-1914)

The period in question was the peak time of Polish migration to the United States. According to Murzynowska (1972: 732), over two million Poles migrated to the United States during this time, accounting for approximately 85% of all Polish overseas emigration before World War I. Drozdowski (1979: 6) estimates that at the time around three million Poles left the Polish lands, along with an additional half a million Jews, Ukrainians, Belarusians, Lithuanians, and Germans.⁸

⁸ Due to the partitions of Poland and the region's ethnic complexity, precise figures are difficult to determine. As a result, Poles were often recorded under different national identities, such as Austrians, Russians, Germans, or Galicians, or as Polish Austrians. The low level of awareness among emigrants, together with the fact that US immigration statistics did not begin recording the nationality of newcomers until 1899, further complicates the estimates (Janowska and Spustek 1977: 21).

This movement was driven by a combination of push factors – forces that made people leave their homeland – and pull factors – factors that attracted them to start a new life abroad, as conceptualised by Lee (1966). In the discussion that follows, attention will be given only to some of the most crucial ones.

One of the main push factors was political repression following the failed uprisings in the Russian and Austrian partitions. Many Poles sought to avoid forced assimilation policies like Germanisation or Russification, or being drafted into foreign armies. Others lost their land or faced restrictions on education and cultural activities. These problems were particularly difficult in the Russian-controlled area, where the Tsarist government took strong actions to weaken Polish national identity (Drozdowski 1977: 70-71).

Economic difficulties played a major role, too. Poland, divided and controlled by foreign powers, faced challenges such as overpopulation in rural areas, small and fragmented land plots, and slow agricultural development, particularly in Galicia and the Congress Kingdom. Furthermore, agricultural innovations in the Prussian partition – such as iron ploughs and harrows – made it more difficult for the Polish peasant to find employment or compete economically (Janowska and Spustek 1977: 20; Brożek 1977: 17-18). At the same time, the United States saw “a period of intense economic expansion” driven by railway construction and fast-growing agricultural, livestock, and industrial production, which attracted further immigration (Brożek 1977: 20). For many Polish villagers, especially landless peasants and tenant farmers, emigrating was not merely an option but a necessity.

The pull factors associated with the United States can be divided into two categories, following Janowska and Spustek (1977: 38-39). The first, objective category indicates that – aside from exceptions typical of such assessments – the economic standards of the emigrant collective were generally better than those they had experienced in Poland. The second, subjective category concerns the emigrants’ own perceptions, which usually accord with this view. Even though most of these emigrants remained on the lowest rungs of the social ladder in their new country, they deemed their new life better. Nevertheless, this sense of betterment could be exaggerated, as Janowska and Spustek (1977: 39) note:

This widespread belief, conveyed in letters sent home to family and neighbours and reinforced, more or less regularly, by sent dollars, created the basis for the myth of America as a land of hard work but also of significantly higher standards of everyday life. For many decades, this myth, together with other factors, primarily economic, effectively stimulated migratory movements from Poland to the States. It seems that only the Great Depression of 1929–1933 weakened its influence.

Furthermore, because American industries such as the railways were in great need of workers, numerous recruitment companies and immigration agencies cooperated with steamship lines to secure cheap labour from Western, and later Central and Eastern Europe. As some Polish emigrants later noted in their memoirs, these recruiters were not always honest or reliable, at times concealing the dangers of emigration. Poverty, limited education, and lack of English made many emigrants easy targets for exploitation (Zaremba 1957: 18-19).

For women, emigration was often related to family reunification and economic survival. While women's autobiographical materials frequently highlight community, work, and motherhood, they, too, indicate more individualistic motives like the pursuit of dignity or the hope for a fresh start. Scholarly texts on women's migration, as well as female life writing, imply that women were more than passive participants: they took initiative and negotiated their roles in the migrant life (see e.g. Lamphere 1987; Walaszek 2000: 27; Gabaccia 1994).

By 1914, more than two million Poles had arrived in the United States, making them one of the largest immigrant groups at that time. While many hoped for temporary economic improvement and intended to return home, a considerable number stayed permanently, forming strong ethnic communities where the Polish language, Catholic religion, and folk traditions continued (cf. Janowska and Spustek 1977: 41ff.). It is in this historical context – characterised by displacement, difficulties, and cautious hope – that the memoirs analysed in this work were created.

1.3. Migration dynamics and destinations

Between 1870 and 1914, Polish migration to the United States was not a uniform movement but a process shaped by rapid economic and social transitions, as well as changing settlement patterns. In the initial stages, many emigrants were young or middle-aged men who ran households. They left primarily to earn enough to purchase ship tickets for their wives and children. Unmarried young men also made up a significant share of this movement, often marrying Polish women who had already settled in the United States. Chain migration played a pivotal role, as relatives and neighbours followed earlier pioneers, creating networks that linked specific Polish villages with particular towns and cities in America. Travelling as entire families was rare, and emigration seldom resulted in the break-up of families (Drozdowski 1977: 95). Yet, there were also female pioneers, who “blazed a new trail, creating their own type of ‘chain migration’ which, through the dissemination of migration networks, facilitated subsequent journeys (Dmuchała 2014: 68).

Geographically, most emigrants came from the rural regions of Galicia and Congress Poland, the Austrian and Russian partitions, respectively, where low levels of agriculture and population pressure were felt most severely. A smaller, yet notable, group came from the Prussian-controlled area of Poland (Janowska and Spustek 1977: 20-21). Overall, during the period under review and the surrounding years, the three partitions accounted for more than two million Polish emigrants to the United States (Murzynowska 1972: 732), with the following distribution by period:

1851-1870	44,000
1871-1880	120,700
1881-1890	342,100
1891-1900	270,900
1901-1910	873,600
1911-1913	453,600
1914-1919	17,900

The majority of these emigrants were rural proletarians, smallholders, and village craftsmen. Depending on the period, they comprised 85 to 90 per cent of the emigrant population. Once in the United

States, nonetheless, these predominantly agrarian groups entered the industrial workforce, settling mainly in the manufacturing and mining centres of the Midwest and Northeast, where demand for labour was greatest. They worked as industrial workers – for instance, as miners and steelworkers – textile workers, and domestic servants. Many were employed in agriculture, too (Janowska and Spustek 1977: 28-30, 33)

Around half of all Polish immigrants concentrated in the three most industrialised states: New York, Illinois, and Pennsylvania. Others settled in Michigan, New Jersey, Massachusetts, and Ohio. Between 80 and 85 per cent of Poles lived in urban areas (Murzynowska 1972: 735), primarily in cities such as Chicago, New York, Buffalo, Detroit, Cleveland, Milwaukee, and Pittsburgh, where – similarly to other immigrant groups – they formed “closed” communities and organisations (Janowska and Spustek 1977: 29-30; Drozdowski 1977: 91; Brożek 1977: 66-67).

Although rural and agricultural communities did emerge – for instance, in Texas (see Chapter 1.1), Wisconsin, Michigan, and Minnesota – these remained smaller in scale. Still smaller and more scattered groups settled in Illinois, Missouri, and North Dakota (Janowska and Spustek 1977: 28).

This pattern of migration and settlement meant that many Polish newcomers occupied the lower rungs of American society, working in physically demanding and poorly paid jobs. To preserve language, faith, and cultural identity, *Polonia* – the collective term for the Polish immigrant enclaves of this era (Drozdowski 1979: 5) – relied heavily on Polish Catholic parishes, fraternal organisations, and a vibrant Polish-language press (cf. Janowska and Spustek 1977: 41ff.). Importantly, as Kimak and Świetlicki (2023: 1) observe, from the outset of mass migration at the turn of the twentieth century, Eastern and Central European newcomers were confronted with “exclusionary nativist rhetoric” that framed them as “the Other and a threat to the established communities”.

These migration dynamics and destinations set the stage for the female-authored memoirs examined in this study. They reflect not only individual experiences of dislocation but also the broader contexts of movement, settlement, adaptation, and community life in which those experiences were situated.

1.4. Women as agents of migration and community formation

If we understand ‘agency’ as “the capacity, condition, or state of acting or of exerting power, (...) activity, operation”,⁹ or more simply the ability to shape one’s life, then Polish women, including the five that form the core of this work, were agents of migration even before leaving their homes. Whether waiting for their husbands to return or preparing to join them in the New Land, they gradually strengthened their role by cultivating land, and handling household affairs, including finances (Walaszek 2000: 27). Notably – and in ways that challenge conventional assumptions about gender roles of the period – Gabaccia (1994: 40) observes that women exercised decision-making power equal to that of men, when determining whether to remain in the homeland or join their husbands abroad.

Crossing the Atlantic, often alone, heralded no easier life. As Dmuchala (2014: 73) notices: “They often arrived without knowledge of the language, without any profession, and many of them could not read or write. Their first encounter with America often turned out to be a painful confrontation of myths and misconceptions about the country of immigration”.

Yet, in such dire straits, Polish female immigrants often took matters into their own hands. Next to performing domestic chores associated with traditional gender roles, living in the new country could profoundly reshape the conventional understanding of femininity and the social roles long assigned to women, loosening some constraints that tied them to the domestic sphere, as Krystyna Slany (2008: 9) maintains. Many worked in factories, shops, laundries, or as domestic servants. They performed low-paid but essential jobs that allowed them to contribute to household income and sometimes support relatives back home (Anker 1988: 30-31). Significantly, paid work could make Polish women more independent of their husbands, a situation less common in Poland (Frysztacki 1986: 213).

Beyond the economic sphere, women played a significant role in preserving and transmitting Polish culture. They raised children in the Polish language, upheld religious customs, and participated in parish life, often forming prayer circles and women’s societies that became

⁹ Webster’s Third New International Dictionary of the English Language 1993: 40.

spaces of mutual support and cultural continuity. These activities were not marginal; they helped to maintain a sense of identity and belonging in unfamiliar surroundings (Dmuchała 2019: 395-396, 401).

Moreover, women's involvement in community organisations, such as the Polish Women's Alliance of America (founded in 1898), reveals their growing civic awareness and organisational skills. They participated in charity and educational events, and initiatives cultivating Polish tradition and patriotism, demonstrating that their agency went far beyond the domestic sphere. Importantly, the Alliance welcomed women from countries other than Poland, for example, Lithuania and Ukraine (Brożek 1977: 213).

Chapter 2

The memoirists and their memoirs

2.1. The role of the Institute of Social Economy in preserving emigrant testimonies

Although it was only at the turn of the twenty-first century that writers began to narrate their own lives more extensively, resulting in an unprecedented emergence of auto/biographical forms, such as memoirs, diaries, letters, and biographies (Kusek 2021: 2-3), Poland had already developed a distinctive tradition of life writing earlier. With around 1,500 memoir-writing competitions organized in the twentieth century, it constitutes a phenomenon of international significance (Rodak 2022: 10-11).¹⁰

The Institute of Social Economy, founded in 1920, became, in inter-war Poland, a kind of laboratory for studying society through first-person writing. From the beginning, it was shaped by the personality and programme of the Polish anthropologist, economist, and sociologist Ludwik Krzywicki (1859-1941). Under his guidance, the Institute drew inspiration from Znaniecki's biographical method, which treated life writing as evidence of the relationship between individual and collective identity and social organisation (Kaźmierska 2013: 18-19).¹¹ For Krzywicki, autobiographical texts were not a curiosity but a form of evidence: they showed work, poverty, mobility, and family life from the inside (Andrzejewski 1977a: 5-6).

Organising memoir-writing competitions was a typical *modus operandi* for the ISE. The competitions, largely advertised in the press (Andrzejewski 1977a: 10), targeted poor (often unemployed) workers and peasants, emigrants, and generally the underprivileged. In 1932, for example, a competition for the memoirs of the unemployed was

¹⁰ Comparable memoir competitions were also organised within the Jewish community; for an analysis of Jewish youth memoirs submitted to competitions in the 1930s, see Sroka (2024).

¹¹ The use of personal documents as sociological material and the biographical method are central to Thomas and Znaniecki's *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (1918-1920).

organised, thanks to which 774 memoirs, diaries, and recollections were obtained; 57 of them were published (Krzywicki 1933). A year later, a memoir competition for peasants yielded 498 manuscripts, 61 of which appeared in print (Krzywicki 1935). The third major ISE competition concerned emigrants and was organised in 1936. It received 212 memoirs, of which more than half were later published in four volumes: France and South America in 1939, Canada in 1971, and the United States in 1977 (Krzywicki 1939a; 1939b; Ratyńska 1971; Andrzejewski 1977a; 1977b).¹² The long interval between the first two and the final two publications was caused by the outbreak of World War II. Still, the manuscripts, together with materials connected with the competitions, survived in the ISE archive (Andrzejewski 1977a: 11).

Methodologically, the Institute treated memoirs as “one of the methods of getting to know reality”. These personal narratives were positioned side by side with surveys, questionnaires, and statistical analyses conducted on unemployment, rural life, industrial safety, and related issues (Andrzejewski 1977a: 8). Such a design gave memoirists the freedom to write from the heart, something they were actively encouraged to do. At the same time, they were instructed to deliver concrete stories: departure from the homeland, the voyage, first jobs, wages and housing, unions and parishes, marriages, disappointments, hopes for children. The organisers insisted on authenticity rather than polish; the memoirs were to be printed as documents of experience, not as literature corrected into elegance. As Szturm de Sztrem (1959: 190) argues, the ISE handed over the memoirs to the reader in their “raw state”, without selecting them according to sociological criteria and without compiling a synthesis of the collected material. The texts were to be a faithful reflection of the thoughts, feelings, and moods of the masses of workers and peasants, and thus helped to shape social awareness.

The guidelines for the last of the above-mentioned competitions – addressed to emigrants in the United States, and forming the focus of

¹² The tradition of the Polish memoir competitions, including those dedicated to women, is presented, e.g., by Paweł Rodak in the article “Fenomen Pisania o Własnym Życiu: Konkursy Pamiętnikarskie w Polsce w XX Wieku” (The Phenomenon of Writing About One’s Own Life. Diary Competitions in Poland in the 20th Century) (2022).

this study – were no exception. The ISE prompted participants to write about every stage of their migration experience. These encompassed, among others: how the money for the journey was earned; the decision-making process leading to departure; the means and conditions of transport; the legality or illegality of entry into the destination country; the process of settling down; moments of good fortune and adversity; the nature of work and level of earnings; relations with employers; access to medical care; the standard of housing; patterns of expenditure; leisure activities; and educational opportunities. In total, the list comprised dozens of carefully formulated and often nuanced directives (see Appendix 2; Andrzejewski 1977a: 109-112).

Although men outnumbered women in the submissions – for instance, 46 to 5 in the collection discussed in this monograph – women’s memoirs form a distinct and indispensable part of the set. They make visible domains that are often absent from male-centred accounts, as illustrated in Chapter 1.4. Moreover, even though gender does not appear to be an explicit organising principle, the ISE, perhaps involuntarily, created a sort of gendered archive. The Institute’s successful efforts to disseminate their life stories allowed women’s experience to enter the national record not as an appendix but as part of the core narrative of migration.

Altogether, the Institute safeguarded hundreds of emigrant manuscripts through war and political change and turned a large portion into accessible books. Without the Institute’s competitions, archives, and editions, much of the Polish immigrant experience – especially women’s everyday labour and quiet endurance – would be scattered or lost. With them, we can follow the silent strength that ran through homes, factories, parishes, and neighbourhoods at the turn of the century, and we can read it in the writers’ own words.

2.2. Short biographies of the memoirists

In *Pamiętniki*, individual authors are not identified by name but by a number. This practice, adopted by the Institute of Social Economy, ensured impartiality in judging and protected the privacy of the participants. As a result, the five women whose life stories form the subject

of this section appear in the original volume simply as Memoirist 6, Memoirist 15, Memoirist 26, Memoirist 44, and Memoirist 48, an approach also adopted in this book.

The following brief biographies introduce these five women. Each account outlines their family backgrounds, childhood experiences, and early struggles in Galicia and Congress Poland, before they embarked on journeys to the United States.

Memoirist 6 was born before 1900 in the small town of Korczyzna, near Krosno, in Galicia, the daughter of a poor smallholder. Her schooling was brief and interrupted by respiratory illnesses, which left her bedridden for long periods, after which, as she informs the reader, she was miraculously healed through prayer. Although she longed for education, family poverty and the need for her labour in the household and fields forced her to abandon school after just a few years. She and her sisters worked at weaving workshops, though the labour was exhausting and poorly paid. Raised in a large family of nine children, she grew up in modest circumstances that were constantly overshadowed by debt. Despite these hardships, she nurtured a deep attachment to her homeland, remaining close to her parents until her departure for America. She later settled down in New Bedford, Massachusetts.

Memoirist 15 was born in 1887 in Galicia, the daughter of a sailor. Her childhood was filled with stories of the sea and travel, which stirred her imagination and left her with a longing for broader horizons. Although she received only basic schooling, she soon learnt the trade of a seamstress and, with a partner, opened a small workshop in Kraków. The business soon failed, however, and her health began to deteriorate. She married, but her husband's ventures were equally unstable, leaving the family in debt. When her husband died after a long illness, she was left with children to feed and creditors pressing for payment. In such circumstances, she was forced to take on heavy work, often sewing late into the night. These years of precarious livelihood, poverty, and repeated setbacks shaped her resilience, but also persuaded her that only emigration could offer a way out. She chose New York.

Memoirist 26 was born in 1886 in Stary Czortków, Galicia, the daughter of a farm labourer. Her parents lost their property through misfortune, leaving the children scattered among relatives. She grew up under the care of a strict but poor aunt, where she was expected to contribute to farm work from an early age. The uncle, an alcoholic and a thief, drank away much of what little they had. Because of poverty, her schooling was limited to only five years, and the dream to become a teacher was never fulfilled. Her frail health often set her at odds with the hard demands of rural life. She longed for stability and companionship but had to face a joyless life instead. Her teenage years were marked by pain and insecurity: separated from her parents, she lived in dependence, and the pull of emigration became stronger as the prospect of marriage and work abroad opened new possibilities. She ended up in New Castle, Pennsylvania.

Memoirist 44, born around 1900 in a small town in Galicia, was the daughter of a poor smallholder. She grew up in a family of ten children, where daily survival demanded constant labour. Her father often left for seasonal work as a mason, while her mother – ambitious but limited by circumstance – pushed her children towards education whenever possible. The girl herself developed an early love for reading, borrowing books whenever she could, though formal schooling remained brief. Poetry and stories fired her imagination, and she sometimes tried to write verses herself, to the pride of her father. She dreamed of further study and longed to see life beyond her village, imagining horizons far wider than those offered by fieldwork or household chores. These aspirations clashed with her mother's desire to keep her close, but eventually the lure of opportunity abroad and her father's support enabled her to depart at the age of only fourteen. Her new home was Detroit, Michigan.

Memoirist 48 was born around 1892 in Łomża, Congress Poland, the daughter of a shoemaker. She was one of nine children in a family marked by hardship and instability, worsened by her father's absence, infidelity, and physical and emotional violence. Much of her childhood was spent between poverty-stricken towns and temporary lodgings, often under the shadow of family conflict. Her mother, left without support, struggled to raise the children, while the young girl experienced neglect

and social humiliation. Small joys – such as time spent in the forests gathering berries – stood in contrast to the constant uncertainty and pain at home. By adolescence, she was already burdened with responsibility, caring for siblings and contributing to the household. Her longing for a more stable life, coupled with the promise of relatives abroad, eventually pushed her toward emigration, specifically to St Louis, Missouri.

As can be seen, each writer's life story followed its own path, and their writing represents, in Rodak's terms (2011: 11), "reality always seen from the perspective of an individual subject". Yet read together, the memoirs show that the authors also shared socio-demographic, cultural, and experiential features, and their striking similarities place them within the category of 'silent strength from the margins'.

For instance, all five memoirists:

- were born before 1900 and made their way to the United States before 1914, belonging to the so-called "new, economic emigration" as opposed to the earlier "old, political emigration" (Janowska and Spustek 1977: 19);
- represented the first immigrant generation and maintained a strong emotional and cultural attachment to their homeland and families (Drozdowski 1977: 68);
- originated from poorly educated, economically disadvantaged rural areas or small towns in the underdeveloped southern and southeastern parts of Poland;
- were raised in households with many siblings;
- arrived in the United States without any knowledge of English;
- displayed diligence and a marked dedication to improve their lives;
- wrote with honesty and emotional directness;
- with the exception of Memoirist 44, wrote in a plain, vernacular Polish – often judged as grammatically incorrect by contemporary standards – showing clear traces of English in vocabulary, syntax, and word formation (Szymczak 1977: 103–108);
- established themselves in the Northeastern or Midwestern regions of the United States.

All these features point to the shared social position from which the life writers spoke: a world of hardship and modest beginnings, but also endurance and quiet strength, which will be looked at more closely in Chapter 3.

2.3. The language of the memoirs

The women's texts are not only life stories; they are also linguistic documents of first-generation migration. As Szymczak (1977: 103) notes, the corpus allows observation of (1) interference between Polish and English, (2) shifts in language awareness tied to assimilation, and (3) material for studying the development of Polish outside the country.¹³ As illustrated in Chapter 2.2, most of the female authors were adults on arrival; all spoke Polish as their mother tongue and all had little formal schooling. Furthermore, they came from peasant or worker families in Galicia and Congress Poland. That social profile resonates in the narratives themselves.

Apart from Memoirist 44, the language is simple and colloquial, often judged "incorrect" by contemporary norms. We see non-standard syntax and phraseology, e.g., *zna szacunek oddać każdemu* (M6: 223) instead of *wie, jak okazać szacunek każdemu* ('knows how to show respect to everybody'). There are also semantic calques from English, such as *chorą mnie robiło* (M15: 425) ('it made me sick') or inflectional imperfections like *4 roki* ('4 years') (M6: 221) in place of *4 lata*.

English influence is strongest in lexis and word formation. Borrowings appear raw or lightly Polonised: the Polish *plótno* ('linen') becomes *lina* (M6: 222), *biuro* ('office') is used as *offis* (M15: 429), and *szkoła średnia* ('high school') as *chajskół*.

Arguably, the most telling example of such linguistic tendencies comes from Memoirist 44, who states that to understand some Poles, one has to first learn English. In her aunt's house in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, she heard the following fragment (M44: 441):

Bawili się bojsy (boys – chłopcy) na strasie (street – ulicy) przyszedł wacman [watchman] (stróż) bojsy pouciekali a jeden dziompnął (jump – skoczył) przez fensę (fence – płot) i uciekł do nejborki (neighbor – sąsiadki).

Difficult as it is to render the example's linguistic specificity for readers unfamiliar with Polish, one possible explanation runs as follows:

¹³ These and other observations in Szymczak (1977: 103-108) concern all the 51 memoirs from *Pamiętniki* and apply to the five written by the women, too.

“There were playing – *bojsy* (boys) – on the *strasie* (street). A *wacman* (watchman) came; the *bojsy* scattered and one *dziompnął* (jumped) over the *fensa* (fence) and ran to the *nejborka* (neighbour).

To give readers who know the Polish language a sense of the original texts, quotations from the memoirists are provided in both Polish and English throughout the dissertation. In translation, I retain the plain, occasionally improper-looking phrasing and grammatical irregularities where these reflect the writers’ early-twentieth-century, non-standard register.

Such items do not simply signal error; they record a bilingual environment and the practical vocabulary of immigrant life. As early as 1874, Polish migrants could turn to Władysław Dyniewicz’s *Pośrednik Polsko-Angielski*¹⁴ for practical instruction on English (see Brożek 1977: unnumbered pages between 191-192).

Importantly, the editors used a light hand. They modernised punctuation for clarity, preserved paragraphing, and did not normalise syntax; lexical items such as borrowings and regionalisms were retained, typically glossed in notes, and so were English place names. Inflectional imperfections were kept in the original, too, unless they were clearly typographical. Orthography was regularised to contemporary rules (*rz/ż*, *ó/u*, *ch/h*, etc.), but dialectal and living speech forms were kept where they conveyed authentic usage. The result is a readable text that still carries the essence of the original voice (Szymczak 1977: 105-108).

Viewed this way, the “imperfect” Polish of the memoirs is part of their value: it preserves oral rhythm, emotional directness, and the bilingual pressure under which these first-generation women wrote. More broadly, the linguistic features of the memoirs shed light on broader processes of adaptation and identity. They document how the female life writers, with Polish as their mother tongue, navigated a new linguistic environment while trying to preserve a sense of cultural distinctiveness. Their writing stands at the intersection of personal memory and the larger history of Polish-American bilingualism, offering an invaluable record of both.

¹⁴ The full titles in Polish and English are: *Pośrednik Polsko-Angielski: Książka dla Polaków w Ameryce dla Łatwego Nauczenia Się Języka Angielskiego* (Polish–English Phrasebook: A Book for Poles in America for Easy and Quick Learning of the English Language).

2.4. Thematic guidelines for memoir writing

The Institute's public call from May 1936 asked prospective authors to write openly, simply, and without fear, stressing that the questions were only hints and did not exhaust what they might wish to say. The goal was to obtain a full and honest picture of emigrant life, from childhood to settlement abroad.¹⁵ In consequence, the authors were asked to address well over a hundred points:

- Origins and childhood: family background, number of siblings, relations at home; early schooling and literacy; place of birth (village/town) and local conditions.
- Decision to emigrate and preparations: reasons for leaving (poverty, debts, conflict, curiosity, letters from abroad); who encouraged the move; how money for the journey was raised; passports and papers; legal vs. illegal departure.
- The journey: route and means of transport; difficulties on the road and at the border/port; first days after arrival.
- Settlement pattern: whether one settled immediately or moved from place to place in search of work; rural vs. urban locations.
- Work, wages, and employer relations: kind of job and pay; relations with employers; unemployment spells; accidents and hazards; aid received when out of work.
- Health and social protection: illness and treatment; costs of hospital or sanatorium care; access to insurance and relief from social or charitable organisations.
- Housing and household economy: lodging conditions; rent; standard of the household; whether one kept a garden or smallholding and with what results.
- Finances, thrift, and property: ability to save; remittances sent to family in Poland; where money was kept (bank, cash), including losses through bankruptcy or devaluation; plans to buy land or a shop in Poland or in America.
- Community, language, and everyday life: relations with local people and authorities; participation in unions, parishes, associations; leisure

¹⁵ The information in this subchapter is based on the original Polish text of the ISE's *odezwa* (public call), reproduced in Andrzejewski (1977a: 109-112) and in Appendix 2 of this book.

(music, cinema, theatre, dances, reading); use of Polish and English at home and in public; children's schooling and language use.

- Mobility, legal status, and future plans: forced removals from particular districts; naturalisation vs. keeping Polish citizenship and why; (dis)satisfaction or with life abroad; whether one intended to stay permanently or return, and on what terms.

The circular ends by urging writers once more to speak “sincerely, openly, in simple words”, assuring them that their testimonies would be printed so that society could understand the real situation of those who had left the country and to guide those who intended to do so.

Chapter 3

Silent strength in the immigrant experience

3.1. Crossing thresholds: The journey from homeland to hope

In the writings of all the female authors, migration appears as a series of practical stages rather than a single dramatic event: arriving at the decision itself, preparation, travel, and provisional settlement. Each stage required careful planning, boldness, and, finally, money. Read together, the memoirs reveal a consistent pattern of quiet discipline: saving on a small scale, discreet requests for help, and maintaining household order amid constant activity.

What triggered these writers' decisions to emigrate? For example, for Memoirist 6, it was a terrible disease with raging pain and poverty (M6: 222):

W piątym roku doktor mnie uwolnił ze szkoły gdyż dostałam niebezpieczną chorobę ze zaziębienia (...) a że miałam podłe buty więc każdy dzień przeziębiam nogi. (...) Dostawałam zatrucie krwi i noga cała czerwona była i twarda, że do dziś pamiętam ten straszny ból.

[In my fifth year, the doctor excused me from school because I caught a dangerous illness from a chill (...) and since my shoes were so poor, my legs got chilled every day. (...) I developed blood poisoning, and my whole leg was red and hard – I remember that terrible pain to this day].

The pain accompanied the author long after the episode itself. She then describes the drudgery of working at the looms, the fact that nine children had to survive on only a few *morgens* of land, and the burden of growing debts (M6: 221):

Nieraz mnie się sprzykrzyła ta praca przy warsztatach tkackich. Ale że nas była wielka rodzina, siedem dziewcząt i dwóch chłopców, a majątku było 4 morgi pola, więc nigdy nie wystarczyło nas wyżywić i przydziać, więc zmuszeni byli zaciągnąć pożyczkę.

[Often I got tired of that work at the weaving workshops. But because we were a big family – seven girls and two boys – and we had only four *morgens* of land, it was never enough to feed and clothe us, and we were forced to borrow money].

Memoirist 15 recounts an unsteady life in Kraków: a failed shop, illness and poor eyesight, yet she sews into the night to feed her children and placate creditors; she also suffers the deaths of both children and husband (M15: 426-427).

Memoirist 26 describes family decline and children dispersed among relatives, service work beginning in childhood, and life with an uncle who is both an alcoholic and a thief. Deprived of schooling, she toils in the fields to avoid starvation and – after the deaths of parents, then aunt and uncle – becomes homeless (M26: 571-572).

Memoirist 44, one of ten siblings, is too poor for school while the father leaves in search of bread, and the mother keeps the household running as the children work the fields (M44: 439).

Of all the pre-emigration testimonies, M48's account is the most harrowing. She grows up amidst sustained domestic violence and deprivation. She witnesses her father betray and abandon her mother while keeping most children, watches older siblings being beaten, and sees one brother flee into the piercing cold before later emigrating to the USA with another brother (M48: 501):

Zaczęło się dla nas dzieci istne piekło. (...) Najwięcej znęcał się nad starszym bratem, od którego wymagał, żeby ten wyręczał go od wszystkich jego robót. A kiedy mu w czym nie dogodził, wtedy bił go prawidłem do butów, co szewcy używają. (...) Pewnego poranka Florian (...) poszedł on piechotą do Łomży w największy mróz, ale do ojca już nie wrócił tylko zarobiwszy trochę pieniędzy, obaj z Władkiem zabrali się do Ameryki.
[It turned into pure hell for us children. (...) He beat my eldest brother the most, making him do all his work for him. And when he failed him in anything, he would hit him with a shoe tree, which shoemakers use. (...) One morning Florian (...) set out on foot for Łomża in the bitterest frost, and he never returned to his father; after earning a little money, he and Władek left for America].

Denied a proper dress for the Holy Communion ceremony and money for schoolbooks, she endures severe beatings from her father for minor faults and hunger (M48: 501-502):

Za małą bagatelę bił mnie niemiłosiernie, a i głód często mi dokuczał.

[He beat me mercilessly for the smallest trifle, and hunger often tormented me].

Next, her father forces her into service with a harsh aunt. When she complains to her mother about the aunt's treatment, her mother beats her and sends her back to her father. He then expels her from the house, and they never see each other again (M48: 502-503):

Próbowałam być ojcu posłuszną na wszelkie jego chimery. Ale to nie pomogło, bo ojciec się domyślał, że ja jestem za roztropna dziewczyna i za wiele bym się przyglądała na jego niecne postęпки. Postanowił za wszelką cenę pozbyć się mnie w czym mu dopomogła jego kochanka. Więc bez dania racji wypędził mnie z domu, dając mi pieniądze tylko na przejazd. Tą razą już się z nim nie żegnałam, tylko trzasnęłam drzwiami i poszłam, od tej pory już więcej ojca nie oglądałam.

[I tried to be obedient to my father in all his whims. But it did no good, for he suspected I was too sensible a girl and would watch too closely his wicked deeds. He decided at any cost to get rid of me, and his mistress helped him. So, without giving a reason, he drove me out of the house, giving me money only for the fare. That time I did not say goodbye; I slammed the door and left, and from that moment I never saw my father again].

After hours of wandering – exhausted, hungry, and terrified – she loses consciousness and is taken to hospital (M48: 503-504).

Having outlined some of the factors that pushed them from home, the memoirs now describe the hardships encountered en route and the women's resourcefulness in overcoming them. The memoirs describe the journey in concrete, unromantic terms: queues, inspections, cold nights, seasickness, and the worry of losing money and belongings that could ruin the trip.

Memoirist 15, having left her two children behind, sets out from the port of Hamburg. Here is how she illustrates the journey (M15: 428):

Byłam na morzu śmiertelnie chora. Ponieważ w tym czasie w Rosji panowała cholera, to kto jechał na Hamburg, musiał przechodzić kwarantannę, to znaczy, że nas wywieźli na rzekę Elbe i trzymali sześć dni. Jakikolwiek prowianty miał kto ze sobą to je wypotrzebował, a potem na dużym okręcie na morzu nie było co jeść. Jechałam trzecią klasą bo na drugą nie mogłam sobie pozwolić. Życie było wstrętne, tak że sześć dni nic nie miałam w ustach i chorowałam, opadłam zupełnie ze sił.

[I was deathly ill at sea. Because at that time cholera was raging in Russia, anyone bound for Hamburg had to go into quarantine; they took us out onto the Elbe and held us there for six days. Any food people had with them was used up, and once we were on the big ship, there was nothing to eat. I traveled third class because I couldn't afford second. Life was awful – for six days I had nothing in my mouth and fell completely weak].

On the day of the journey, Memoirist 44 loses confidence; her thoughts are filled with the fear of the unknown. Yet, she is determined to start a new life in “the promised land, rich in milk and honey, a land of opportunity” (M44: 440):

Więc patrząc na te wielkie bałwanami spiętrzone morze byłam jak zbłąkane dziecko i posyłając mój wzrok w dal myślałam... co mnie tam czeka, na tym nowym świecie, gdzie mnie nikt nie wysyłał, ale sama się rwałam w świat mi nie znany. Nadrabiałam więc miną by się nie zdradzić, że tam gdzieś w głębi duszy był strach przed nieznanem.

[So looking at those great, piled-up waves I felt like a lost child, and staring out into the distance I kept wondering... what will wait for me there, in that new world, where nobody was sending me, yet I had myself rushed into a place I did not know. I forced my face to look calm so I wouldn't give away that deep down in my heart I was afraid of the unknown].

Memoirist 48 evokes the experience in Prostki, a village on the Prussian border, in the following way (M48: 504-505):

Ja nie mając nic z ubrania przygotowanego w tak daleką podróż wyruszyłam biorąc ze sobą jedno ubranie i 3 ruble. (...) Tak jak było gnane byliśmy do jednej zagrody z wyjątkiem tym, że kobiety osobno. A tam przez mus kazano nam rozbierać się do naga i ubranie nasze zabierali i parzyli, a nas wysyłali do kąpieli i potem gdyśmy były jeszcze nagie doktor nas egzaminował. Ja będąc wtedy 14 lat od wstydu mało się nie spaliłam.

[Having no clothes prepared for such a long journey, I set out with only one outfit and three rubles. (...) We were driven like cattle into a single yard, except that the women were kept separate. There, by force, we were ordered to undress completely. They took our clothes and boiled them, and sent us to bathe, and then, while we were still naked, the doctor examined us. I was then fourteen years old and almost burned up with shame].¹⁶

Finally, with no wage yet, the first shelters abroad are makeshift and precarious. The newcomers stay in crowded boarding houses or with relatives, usually paying for board with work and temporary house service. The memoirs show that reaching American soil is only the beginning; surviving the first nights away from home requires the same thrift, vigilance, and capacity for work that got the women onto the ship in the first place (M6; M15; M26; M44; M48).

3.2. Work, material survival, and the domestic sphere

The memoirs show that for these five Polish authors, paid work and domestic work are the same fabric. The difference between factory and workshop life – with double shifts and changing lodgings – and domestic life – with the kitchen, laundry, cleaning, child-watching, and boarding room – is small. The hectic pace of living is a struggle for money, most often against time, and care for the family.

If we were to compile a list that fits the “work, survival, and the domestic sphere” category, it could be as follows: low pay and unequal

¹⁶ Photographs from the period also show similar realities: crowding on board, inspection routines, and the exposure of women and children at transit points. These images are not reproduced here; they were consulted, for example, in: Leszczyński (2018), Brożek (1977: unnumbered pages between 80-81), *Popular Science Monthly* (1913).

pay; instability of employment; language barrier at work; hostile or un-supportive relations with managers and in-group compatriots; overwork and physical strain; work-related illness straining the budget; starting at the bottom; crowded and uncertain housing; food scarcity; going into debt; (self-)pressure to send remittances home; childcare conflict with work; lazy, un-supportive, and unfaithful husbands; domestic violence.

The following passages, which constitute merely a handful of examples, reveal how these pressures took shape in practice.

This is how Memoirist 15 laconically describes her first job as a seamstress, soon after arriving in America: “They turned me out because I did not understand what they were saying to me” (M15: 428). She then moves from job to job but finds it hard to survive everywhere (M15: 429):

Inne robotnice dostały osiem dolarów na tydzień to ja cztery dolary choć tę samą robotę wykonywałam. Nie mogłam z tego żyć i coś posłać choćby jeden dolar na tydzień dla dzieci to zrobiłam dług. Zdecydowałam się iść do służby, aby tylko więcej zarobić, poszłam do piekarni Żydówki, ale siły mi nie dopisały. Dostałam reumatyzm rąk, nie byłam przyzwyczajona tak ciężko pracować. Po siedmiu tygodniach odeszłam. (...) robić musiałam jak koń.

[Other women were paid eight dollars a week – I got four, though I did the same work. I couldn’t live on that or even send one dollar a week to my children, so I went into debt. I decided to go into service to earn more; I took a job at a Jewish baker’s, but I didn’t have the strength. I got rheumatism in my hands – I wasn’t used to such hard work. After seven weeks I left. (...) I had to work like a horse].

When she finds another job – again as a seamstress and again underpaid – her children come down with measles. When she tells her employer, she is dismissed on the spot, in no uncertain terms (M15: 434):

Dzieci moje zachorowały na odrę, to ta pani powiedziała, nie przychodź tu, ja też mam dzieci i przyniesłabyś zarazę.

[My children caught measles, and this lady said don’t come here; I have children too, and you’d bring the sickness].

The experience of Memoirist 26, who at one point makes a living waiting on people, is also marked by poor health and suffering, and appears equally harsh (M26: 579-580):

Idę służyć do chłopów a było ich 15, mój szesnasty i troje małych dzieci (ta trzecia jeszcze nie chodziła). Ja słaba 98 funtów ważę, pracuję, mam dolara na miesiąc od chłopu. Ręce mi odpadają, nocami spać nie mogę, mąż pracować nie chce.

[I go to serve for peasants – there are fifteen of them, mine the sixteenth, and three little children (the third not yet walking). I’m weak, weigh ninety-eight pounds, I work, I get one dollar a month per peasant. My hands are falling off, at night I can’t sleep, my husband won’t work].

To demonstrate the “work and survival” challenges of Memoirist 44, it suffices to remember that she is only fourteen when looking for her first job in the new country (M44: 441):

Po przyjeździe chciałam jak najprędzej iść do pracy, ale do jakiej? W tym wieku gdzie posyłano mnie raczej do szkoły, ponieważ w stanie Wisconsin było prawo by nie zatrudniać dzieci poniżej lat szesnastu. Ja jednak chociaż chętnie poszłabym była do szkoły nie mogłam sobie na ten luksus pozwolić, gdyż trzeba było iść pracować na chleb.

[When I came, I wanted right away to go to work, but to what? At that age they would more likely send me to school, because in the state of Wisconsin there was a law not to hire children under sixteen. But me, though I would have gladly gone to school, I could not afford such a luxury, for I had to go work for bread].

After some time of intense daytime work and evening English study, as well as other misfortunes, her physical and mental health started to deteriorate (M44: 442-443):

Przy takiej aktywności i w tym wieku, oprócz innych kłopotów i złych wieści z kraju w którym wojna robiła spustoszenie, zdrowie moje zaczęło szwankować. Objawiało się to na razie w zmożonej nerwowości, w zniechęcaniu do walki z życiem i o życie.

[With such activity and at that age, besides other troubles and bad news from home where the war was laying waste, my health began to fail. At first it showed itself in stronger nervousness, in losing heart to fight with life and for life].

After years of acute poverty, once she finally attains some security, she judges housing conditions to be better in the United States than in Poland. Lodgings, she notes, come with “electricity, illuminating gas, a sewage system, and other comforts”. She also remarks that “a labourer’s life is better off in every respect” (M44: 452). Yet, when speaking of small businesses, she is quick to qualify this (M44: 452):

Nie ma żadnego zabezpieczenia, żadnej kasy chorych, człowieka niezdolnego do pracy usuwa się jak zużyte narzędzie. Zwolnić od pracy można robotnika w każdej chwili kiedy jest niepotrzebny, lub nie odpowiada wymaganiom.

[There is no protection, no sick fund; a person not fit for work is thrown away like a worn tool. They can dismiss a labourer at any moment when he is not needed, or when he does not meet their demands].

Memoirist 48 is also only a fourteen-year-old child when she must face the brutal fate of a teenage immigrant. She adds her own dramatic testimony from St Louis, Missouri, and the surrounding area, when she already has a baby, but no work, no money, no food, no help, and she is about to lose her accommodation (M48: 511):

Wiadomem jest, że kobietę z dzieckiem na ręku do pracy nigdzie nie przyjmą, przeto starałam się na siłę dziecko umieścić w jakim sierocińcu, a sama pójść do pracy. Ale czem więcej starania kładłam na to tem mniej było korzystne. Wszędzie gdzie tylko się zwracałam spotykałam się z odporą [odmową]. I czas upływał – za mieszkanie już byłam winna i w dodatku jeść nie miałam co. Dziecię piersią karmiłam. Wysłałam z dzieckiem na ulicę nie wiedząc gdzie się udać.

[Everybody knows they won’t hire a woman with a child in her arms, so I tried by force to put the child into an orphanage and go to work myself. But the more I tried the worse it turned out. Wherever I turned I met only refusals. Time passed – I was

already behind on the rent and, on top of that, I had nothing to eat. I was nursing the baby. I went out into the street with the child, not knowing where to go].

Sometimes survival depends on assistance from US social institutions. Because many newcomers had little or no English, guidance from – and at times chance encounters with – strangers were the necessary push to reach out for help. This is how she continues her story, this time with a gleam of hope and practical help (M48: 511):

Szłam powoli, przede mną szły dwie kobiety, które ze sobą rozmawiały, że idą w pewne miejsce gdzie zamierzają podać swoje nazwisko i adres, że tam mają dostać jakąś zapomogę na Gwiazdkę. A więc ja pospieszyłam w ślad za nimi i gdy weszłam do jakiegoś urzędu, po wysłuchaniu co one tam mówiły i ja tak samo postąpiłam. Powiedziałam, że nie mam utrzymania dla dziecka i dla siebie. Tam mi powiedziano, że niech oczekuję wizytorów we Wilię Bożego Narodzenia, że mi przyniosą pomoc i tak było.

[I walked slowly. In front of me two women were walking, saying that they were going to a place to give their name and address, and there they would get some help for Christmas. So I hurried after them, and when we went into the office, after hearing what they said there, I did the same. I said I had no support for the child or for myself. They told me to wait for visitors on Christmas Eve, that they would bring me help, and so it was].

After a series of serious setbacks in the first year in the United States, including maltreatment by her brothers, the author plainly writes (M48: 507):

W kraju ludzie nie wierzyli, że tu przybysz tak ciężkie miał początki.
[Folks back home didn't believe a newcomer here had it so hard at the start].

Memoirist 6, in turn, highlights the decline in her own financial situation. After achieving economic stability in New Bedford, MA, the Great Depression struck 25 years after her arrival. A house bought “on payments” becomes a burden as prices collapse (M6: 223):

Mąż mój chciał sobie kupić swój własny dom na spłatę, co zapłaciliśmy za niego 9 tysięcy dolarów, gdyż wtenczas była szalona drożyzna. A że Amerykę (...) nawiedziła straszna Depresja (...) i wszystko szalenie spadło w cenie tak, że ten dom można było kupić za trzy tysiące.

[My husband wanted to buy a house to pay off, so we got one for \$9,000, because prices were crazy high back then. But, because America (...) was hit with a terrible Depression (...), everything lost its value enormously to the point that this house could be bought for \$3,000].

She then goes on to illustrate the dire straits of others during the financial crisis (M6: 223-224):

Prawie wszyscy domy pogubili (...) i prawie każdy swoje oszczędności stracił z młodych lat zapracowane. (...) Ludzie stali pod bankami z płaczem bez centa i pracy. Gdyż bezrobocie było wszędzie, fabryki były powystawiane na licytację i zdawało się, że już naród nie wytrzyma.

[Nearly everyone lost their homes (...) and all the savings they had worked for since they were young were just gone. (...) People stood outside the banks crying, broke, and jobless. There was no work anywhere, factories were getting auctioned off, and it felt like the whole country was falling apart].

As presented, survival means hard work, disciplined economy, careful housing choices, favours asked and repaid, and help extended to kin and newcomers. English is a necessity when dreaming of a better job – and sometimes, indeed, any job – and life in general. Relations with bosses and foremen are reported without ornament: rules to learn and fines to avoid.

In such a reality, sickness and injury come sooner or later, often due to overwhelming labour, constant care, and sickening distress. What keeps the women and their hope alive is small saving, mutual aid, parish funds, and the idea of return home. Yet, at times, the memoirists are left with no help at all.

How these material pressures register in endurance, reticence, and brief flashes of feeling is examined in section 3.4.

3.3. Identity, language, and cultural adaptation

Language and identity are co-constitutive and together underpin cultural adaptation. Language forms part of identity, yet identity also emerges from linguistic and other semiotic practices (Bucholtz and Hall 2005: 588). This section, therefore, traces cultural adaptation as the interplay between language practices and identity work.

Importantly, across the five accounts, identity is practical before it becomes declarative. Polishness is carried predominantly in the domestic sphere, school, Polish cultural institutions, parish life, and correspondence sent to and received from the ‘old home’. Language is first a tool for getting by and only later a medium for self-expression. Along with acquiring English, the memoirists show a steady movement from fear and incomprehension to small routines of competence: understanding orders, managing errands, defending one’s country in conversation, and speaking a mixed Polish-English that marks both belonging and change. Attachment to the homeland and family back in Poland remains strong, even after decades of living in America.

Predictably, the first months in the new land are marked by little to no English and a strong urge to preserve Polish identity, with Polish at the forefront.

The first encounters with English often came as a shock, and the language resembles an acoustic barrier rather than a language. For example, right upon disembarking from the ship, Memoirist 15 hears only a cacophony of noise: “the sounds of English are just awful” (M15: 428).

The Polish language and identity are safeguarded in multiple ways. As observed above, the home is the primary site where Polishness is cultivated. As Memoirist 44 puts it, “At home we speak Polish” (M44: 453). Even if a child is signed up to an English school, as in Memoirist 26, the domestic space remains pivotal (M26: 581):

Ja ich uczę wierszyków polskich co pamiętam ze szkoły; (...) im mówię o Polsce, o szkole, o dzieciach sto razy biedniejszych niż my jesteśmy a te bajki w łóżku mówione jak one to lubiały. [I teach them little Polish verses I remember from school; (...) I tell them about Poland, about school there, about children a hundred times poorer than we are, and those bedtime tales – I told them in bed – how they liked it].

The mother's care seems to bear fruit, as her son, now living in a distant US city, one day demands: "Mom, write me long letters in Polish, because I don't want to forget" (M26: 587).

The authors also attach great importance to their children's attending Polish school, especially in the early years in the United States; Memoirist 15 is prepared to move to another borough to secure this (M15: 435):

W tym miejscu nie było szkoły polskiej (...); musieliśmy przeprowadzić się w inną dzielnicę N. Y. (...) Wprost chorą mnie robiło, żeby moje dzieci nie mówiły po polsku i czytały, pisały. [There wasn't a Polish school there (...) we had to move to another part of N.Y. (...) It made me plain sick to think my children wouldn't speak Polish and read and write].

Polish belonging is also organised through the Polish press, radio, parish, mutual-aid societies, and cultural associations, all of which keep a channel open to the old country. Memoirist 44 mentions the assets of the National Church – "independent from Rome" (M44: 443) – where:

msza odprawiała się po polsku, gdzie jakoś było bardziej swojsko i nie wołano w prostych słowach: „Daj pieniędzy na kościół, bo jak nie to pójdiesz do piekła i będziesz się smażył w smole”. [mass was in Polish, so it felt more our own, and they didn't shout in plain words: "Give money for the church, or else you'll go to hell and fry in tar"].

The same writer describes how, on modest means, she and her family sustained Polish communal life (M44: 453):

Czas wolny spędzamy na czytaniu (...). Radia nie mamy, bo chcielibyśmy kupić takie by można dostać też programy z Polski, a te są drogie. Kupujemy jedną polską gazetę, to jest „Dziennik Polski” w Detroit. [We spend free time reading (...). We don't have a radio; we'd like one that could get programs from Poland, but those are dear. We buy one Polish paper, the "Dziennik Polski" in Detroit].

Lastly, a sense of being Polish is nurtured through cultural organisations; Memoirist 44 is notably active in this domain (M44: 442):

Zapisałam się do towarzystwa, Związku Młodzieży Polskiej, gdzie odbywały się lekcje śpiewu, próby na przedstawienia amatorskie, a także mieliśmy własną bibliotekę, w której ja miałam dyżur raz w tygodniu. Czas mój był bardzo zajęty, tak że na czytanie niewiele było czasu. Czytałam więc w tramwaju a nawet idąc ulicą, naturalnie z wielką szkodą dla mych oczu. Szczególnie kółko dramatyczne zajmowało dużo czasu gdyż poza naszym towarzystwem zapraszano nas do brania udziału w przedstawieniach innych towarzystw, tak że próby przeciągały się nieraz długo w noc. [I joined a society, the Polish Youth Union, where took place singing lessons, rehearsals for amateur plays, and we had our own library, where I had duty once a week. My time was very busy, so there was little time left for reading. I read on the streetcar, even walking, which surely harmed my eyes. The drama circle took much time, because other societies asked us to perform, and rehearsals often ran late into the night].

While preserving Polishness, the Polish women quickly realise that English is key to a better life. They struggle to master the language; however, numerous obstacles stand in the way. The paid work overload in combination with domestic duties seem to be the main inhibition. Memoirist 44, for instance, comments (M44: 442):

Naturalnie koniecznym było uczyć się języka angielskiego. Zapisałam się więc do szkoły wieczorowej. Z początku chodziłam dwa razy tygodniowo od 7 do 9, potem cztery wieczory w tygodniu, było to jednak za ciężko. (...) Zaniedbywać zaczęłam moją naukę angielskiego. [Of course I had to learn English. So I signed up for evening school. At first I went two evenings a week, 7 to 9; then four evenings a week, but it was too hard. (...) I began to neglect my English].

The following account of the same writer is perhaps an even more acute reason for not progressing (M44: 442):

Byłoby naturalnie inaczej gdybym była tu z rodzicami którzy by mnie może posłali do szkoły, ale dziecku w 15 roku życia walczyć o byt, w obcym kraju, bez znajomości języka, bez żadnego doświadczenia, bez środków na odpowiednie ubranie, a człowiek źle ubrany zawsze ma poczucie niższości, co w walce o byt nie

jest stroną dodatnią. Nie było to wielką przyjemnością prać sukienkę wieczorem a prasować raniutko by było się w co ubrać. [It would be different if I'd been here with my parents; maybe they'd have sent me to school. But a child of fifteen fighting for a living in a strange country, without the language, without any experience, without money for proper clothes? And a poorly dressed person always feels low, and that's no help in the struggle. It wasn't much joy to wash a dress at night and iron at dawn so there'd be something to wear].

Sometimes learning English – or learning at all – is hindered by those who ought to be most supportive: husbands. As Memoirist 26 notes (M26: 582):

Mój kłótni zawsze znalazł, tylko myślał, waryatka, dzieci uczyć chce niech idzie psia krew do fabryki pracować tak jak on pracuje.

[My man was always looking for a quarrel. He thought, crazy woman, wants to teach the kids – let her, damn it, go to the factory and work like he does].

In fact, the man terrorises the son, too, who is ambitious to study in English. When the former is about to burn the latter's school books, the boy decides to run away from his tyrannical father. Memoirist 26 presents her son's dramatic words (M26: 585):

Mama ja uciekł od ojca on straszny chciał moje książki spalić to nie moje to szkolne, (...) ja muszę skończyć ten rok ja uciekł w nocy ja książki poskładałem na ganku u jednych ludzi a sam chodziłem aż do rana po ulicy.

[Mom, I ran away from father, he was terrible, he wanted to burn my books. They're not mine, they're school books (...). I must finish this year. I slipped out at night; I piled the books on some folks' porch, and I myself walked the streets till morning].

These scenes make it plain that language learning is not only a matter of schools but of power at home. Clearly, maternal determination protects literacy, but it comes at a price. They show how language, identity, and adaptation are negotiated most intensely within the household.

With time, before the Polish diaspora can speak English fluently, a hybrid of Polish and English can be heard both in the homes and the streets of American cities and towns. The most striking example of such a mix comes from the already quoted fragment provided by Memoirist 44 shortly after arrival in the USA, where she records a man saying (M44: 441):

Bawili się bojsy na strasie przyszedł wacman bojsy pouciekali a jeden dziompnął przez fensę i uciekł do nejborki.

[The boys were playing on the street. A watchman came; the boys scattered and one jumped over the fence and ran to the neighbor].

Startled, the newcomer adds that she must learn English to understand Polish (M44: 441):

Trzeba więc było najpierw nauczyć się języka angielskiego, aby można było rozmówić się po polsku.

[So first you had to learn English, so you could manage to talk in Polish].

The memoirs also suggest that intermarriage was the exception rather than the norm, which did little to accelerate language or cultural uptake. For example, it can be inferred that Memoirist 44's mother prefers a Pole over a foreigner as a husband (M44: 443):

Nie wychodź w Ameryce za mąż za kogoś nieznajomego, chyba ktoś z naszych. Jakoś dziwnie mi było słuchać o mężu w tym wieku, jednak zachowałam to w pamięci.

[Don't you marry in America some stranger – only one of our own. It felt strange to me to hear of a husband at my age, but I remembered it].

Not only was it customary to obey the parents' will, but sticking with one's own people abroad was natural as well, even if the potential partner was far from perfect, as Memoirist 44 resumes (M44: 443):

Na obczyźnie zaś swój swego szuka, bez względu na różnice wieku, charakteru i wiele innych różnic.

[When you're abroad, like attracts like, no matter the age, the temper, or all the other differences].

The authors mention other obstacles preventing them from integrating into American society. They say that to adapt culturally – to feel ‘one of them’, a local, an American – learning the language is necessary but not sufficient:

Żeby mieć przyjaciół wśród ludności miejscowej, trzeba najpierw dobrze władać ich językiem, żyć na ich poziomie, kochać ich kraj, a nade wszystko nie zabierać im pracy. Teraz szczególnie gdy o pracę trudno są różnego rodzaju nagonki na cudzoziemców. Nieobywatelom trudniej dostać pracę, zapomogę itd (M44: 452).

[To have friends among the local people you must first know their language well, live on their level, love their country, and above all not take their jobs. Now, when work is scarce, there are all kinds of drives against foreigners. Non-citizens find it harder to get work, relief, and so on].

Sooner or later they reach a sobering judgement about language, identity, and especially cultural adaptation. And it seems to hold across host countries, the migrants’ origin, and the era people live in, namely that full integration into the new society remains elusive. Memoirist 44 compares the above to family relations (M44: 452):

Pewnie jednak żaden kraj nie traktowałby cudzoziemców lepiej, bo wszędzie zresztą traktuje się lepiej swoje dzieci niż pasierby. [Surely, no country would treat foreigners better, because everywhere they treat their own children better than stepchildren].

The authors’ words show adaptation not as a move from Polish to English but as patterned change. English enables entry into work and civic life while Polish secures intimacy, literacy, and memory. The street-level blend of codes is the practical bridge between them. The outcome is negotiated, and it takes the form of Polish-American belonging rather than a fully assimilated identity.

3.4. Emotional endurance, silence, and voicing pain

Endurance and silent restraint are not treated as an absence of feeling but as ways of managing it. As Joanna Puppel and Stanisław Puppel (2025: 125; 126) observe, “silence remains one of the most powerful tools of nonverbal communication (and) the absence of language simply makes the presence of silence more apparent”.¹⁷ This observation applies to the women’s accounts, where silence concurrently operates as a mode of communication rather than just withdrawal. The memoirists show stamina in the routines needed for economic and emotional survival. This resilience is neither buoyant nor flamboyant; on the contrary, it is quiet, secluded, and often practised by holding one’s tongue. The women hold their tongue because they are steadfast and humble in the first place, but also because they are ashamed of their poverty and hurt, or they are scared. If silence breaks, it is in extreme situations: severe illness, pain, work beyond human strength, glaring injustice, negligence and indifference, even from family, insults, violence, homesickness, extreme misery, the death of a beloved person. In all, it occurs when suffering becomes unbearable. In such cases, emotion finds outlets through familiar acts: prayer, a word with a neighbour, reflecting on an (often idealised) past, dreams of return to the relatives left behind, letters written in Polish, or simply hope for a better life. All the female writers narrate their experiences – inclusive of the most extreme ones – in flat, matter-of-fact language. Rather than seeking self-pity, this restraint forms part of their style of endurance.

This section examines how practices of persevering, remaining silent, and speaking obliquely shape belonging and guide adaptation, binding language, identity, and feeling into a unified lived experience.

The memoirs record a considerable number of hardships that the authors must endure. A single passage often contains several, tightly interwoven difficulties, as one difficulty entails the next. For example, as noted in section 3.2, illness and pain commonly follow from overwork and, in turn, deepen financial strain, and they seem to be constant com-

¹⁷ For a more thorough outline of the topic of silence, used, among others, in politics, psychology, philosophy, anthropology, cultural studies, and linguistics, these authors refer the reader, for instance, to Jain and Matukumalli (2013), Jaworski (1993), and Valle (2019).

panions in Polish women's lives in America. For that matter, Memoirist 26 describes her condition after the birth of her third child (M26: 577):

Już z łóżka nie mogę wstać, kamienie ciężkie w brzuchu czuję, dzieci płaczą, już nie mogę opisać co się działo u mnie. (...) Doktor mówi – iść na operację, ja się boję, już wolę tak umierać. [I can't get out of bed anymore, I feel heavy stones in my belly, the children are crying, I can't even say what was happening to me. (...) The doctor says – go for an operation; I'm afraid, I'd rather die like this].

Memoirist 15 specifically points out the financial dimension of repeated illness and treatment (M15: 439):

Chorowałam bardzo na różne choroby jak rozstrojenie nerwów i reumatyzm, sklerozę. Chodziłam po szpitalach i prywatnie się u lekarzy kurowałam ale mi nic nie pomogli do zdrowia, tylko do lżejszej kieszeni.

[I was very sick with all sorts of diseases, like nervousness and rheumatism, sclerosis. I went through hospitals and saw doctors privately, but they didn't help me to health – only to a lighter purse].

Death is constantly present in these memoirs, as well. Parents, husbands, siblings, and babies are lost, oftentimes in rapid sequence, and the women, again, register these blows in a direct and economical way, which shows pain absorbed into daily endurance. The same author reflects on extreme deprivation, which ultimately contributes to the death of one of her children (M15: 431):

Nie było kawałka chleba, nie mówiąc o reszcie. Nieraz czytając powieści o nędzy wielkich miast sądziłam że to fantazja pisarza. My przeszliśmy nędzę co przeszła wszelkie wyobrażenie, nikomu się nie pożałowałam, bo mnie wstyd było. W takich warunkach dziecko mi umarło mając cztery i pół miesiąca. Drobnych epizodów można by dużo dodać, ale to za bolesne dla mnie.

[There wasn't a scrap of bread, not to speak of anything else. Many a time, reading stories about the misery of big cities, I thought it was the writer's imagination. We went through

a misery beyond all imagination; I told no one, because I felt shame. In such conditions my baby died, four and a half months old. I could add many small episodes, but it's too painful for me].

Elsewhere, she speaks of another tragedy, this time the death of her mother (M15: 428):

Dowiedziałam się, że moja matka umarła. Byłam zrozpaczona, kochałam mamę bardzo i nie wiedziałam, co się stało z moimi dziećmi.
[I heard that my mother had died. I was distraught. I loved my mother so much, and I didn't know what had become of my children].

To make matters worse, she is bereft of more family members (M15: 430):

Mój brat najukochańszy, który mi chował dzieci, napisał mi, że jest chory na żołądek, musi się poddać operacji. I po operacji umarł. I tak miałam w rodzinie do roku cztery śmierci. W marcu bratowa, w sierpniu mój mąż, w grudniu mama, a brat w maju.
[My dearest brother, who took care of my children, wrote me he was sick in the stomach and had to have an operation. And after the operation he died. So in one year I had four deaths in the family. In March my sister-in-law, in August my husband, in December my mom, and my brother in May].

Memoirist 6 expresses her grief after both her parents have passed away within a short period, without a chance for a proper goodbye (M6: 222):

Otrzymaliśmy pierwszy list żałobny żeśmy już Matkę utracili podczas wojny; którą my nad życie kochały i były przywiązane do niej; później i Ojca i zostałyśmy już sierotami tutaj na obczyźnie. Smutne to i przykre pisać, że gdy opuszczałam rodzinę nigdy sobie nie pomyślała, że to już było ostatnie pożegnanie z rodziną.
[We got the first letter of condolences that we'd lost mother during the war, whom we loved more than life and were so

bound to. Later father too, and we were left as orphans here in a foreign land. It is sad and bitter to write that when I left home I never thought it was my last goodbye to my family].

Memoirist 44's story follows the same pattern of loss. She faces an impossible decision to make: either treat herself or treat her children. Her maternal instinct and love make her choose the latter, but the sacrifice does not save them (M44: 446):

Wezwany lekarz powiedział, że nie da się dwie sroki za ogon łąpać, trzeba leczyć żonę albo dzieci. (...) W 6 tygodni później dziecko umarło na zapalenie mózgu w nocy obok mnie chorej, bo oprócz gruźlicy dostałam panującej wtenczas grypy czy też zapalenia płuc. W parę godzin później dano nam znać ze szpitala, że drugie dziecko umarło. Straciliśmy więc oboje naszych dzieci w jedną noc.

[The doctor called and said you can't catch two hares at once – you must treat the wife or the children. (...) Six weeks later the child died of brain fever at night beside me, sick as I was, for besides tuberculosis, I caught the influenza they had then, or maybe pneumonia. A few hours later the hospital sent word that the other child had died. So we lost both our children in one night].

At that moment, “put off by all the failures, broken with pain”, she does not want to live any more (M44: 447).

The narrators also illustrate exploitative and discriminatory treatment at work, in their neighbourhoods, and within their families, which they are compelled to endure in order to survive. After a time of grief-stricken exhaustion and withdrawal, Memoirist 44 tries to rebuild her life and finds employment. Nevertheless, even though she does a man's work, the pay is lower, and the working conditions are hazardous (M44: 447):

Łatwiej jednak było kobiecie dostać nieraz męskiej siły wymagającą pracę, gdyż kobieta będzie pracowała za wiele niższą cenę. Dostałam więc pracę w fabryce automobilowej, gdzie pracować musiałam nocą, stojąc na nogach 9 godzin, w powietrzu zatrutem olejami i różnymi wyciekami, trzeba było robić z siebie maszynę i dźwigać ponad siły nieraz.

[It was easier for a woman to get work that needed a man's strength, because a woman will work for much lower pay. So I got a job in an automobile factory, where I had to work nights, nine hours on my feet, in air poisoned with oils and all sorts of fumes; you had to make yourself a machine and lift past your strength oftentimes].

She then explains that there was no real alternative (M44: 450):

Dwa jednak było tylko wyjścia z tego położenia, zabić się pracą, albo umrzeć z głodu.
[There were only two ways out: kill yourself with work, or die of hunger].

The next story, told by Memoirist 44, is revealing for two reasons. Firstly, it indicates her tact and consideration for others, and secondly, it exposes her neighbour's misconduct (M44: 450):

Pamiętam, że spotkałam raz znajomego odrabiającego swą zapomogę zamiatając ulice; udałam, że go nie widzę bo wiem że mu na tem zależało by go nie widzieć. Ten wysoko rozwinięty punkt honoru z czasem się zmienia w pretensje do społeczeństwa, bo ten sam człowiek winien nam pieniądze i teraz w lepszych czasach nigdy nie pomyślał, by oddać choć po dolarze.
[I remember once I met a fellow I knew working off his relief, sweeping the streets; I pretended not to see him, because I knew he wanted not to be seen. That highly developed notion of honour turns, with time, into a grudge against society, for the same man owed us money and now, in better times, never thought to pay back even a dollar].

Neighbours and strangers alike also play a hostile part in Memoirist 48's life. After she is abandoned by her husband (see below), she becomes the target of finger-pointing, even though he is the one who has left (M48: 518):

Mieszkałam sama ze synem w oddali od znajomych. I choć lubię towarzystwo, to jednak zmuszona byłam omijać bliższe znajomości z każdym, gdyż najmniejsze zetknięcie się z kim sprowadzało

mi udręczenie z powodu donoszonych mi plotek. Powodem było to wszystko, że nie żyłam z mężem. I kobieta, choćby była aniołem jak raz dostanie się na język już nic nie pomoże.

[I lived alone with my son, far from people I knew. And though I like company, I had to keep away from closer acquaintance with anyone, for any meeting brought me torment from the gossip carried to me. All because I didn't live with my husband. And a woman, even if she were an angel, once she's on people's tongues, nothing will help].

The husband's decision to forsake his wife comes before their child's first birthday. He goes to work as normal, collects his wage, and disappears without a word (M48: 511):

Gdy dziecko było 8 miesięcy stare wyszedł niby do roboty z rana i już więcej nie wrócił. (...) Na próżno oczekiwałam na jego powrót dzień i noc wyglądałam, że może się wróci, że pożałuje choć nie mnie to dziecko. Wszak mu było wiadomo, że zostawił nas na lodzie bez centa.

[When the child was eight months old, he went out in the morning supposedly to work and never came back. (...) I waited for him in vain, day and night looking out – maybe he'd return, maybe he'd feel sorry, if not for me then for the child. He knew well enough he'd left us in the lurch without a cent].

Reading the memoirs, it becomes clear that the life writers' close family members often turned their backs on the women. With nowhere to stay and a baby in her arms, Memoirist 48 is initially invited by her sister, who offers both lodging and childcare. The arrangements are settled by letter, but she is already disappointed at the station, where no one comes to meet her (M48: 513):

Przyjechałam w niedzielę rano, że gdy będą wszyscy domu wyjdzie ktoś mi na spotkanie. I wielce zdumiałam gdy po oczekiwaniu na stacji, nikt się nie zjawił – wszak im pisałam kiedy przyjdę [I came on Sunday morning, thinking that with all at home, someone would come meet me. And I was mighty surprised when, after waiting at the station, no one showed, though I'd written when I'd arrive].

Matters then grow worse, as the sister quickly becomes impatient with the new lodgers. Alongside a series of various critical remarks, she hints at jealousy towards her sister over her husband; nonetheless, the real bone of contention is the baby. Fed up with his crying, the sister voices her irritation (M48: 513):

Czy on tak zawsze płacze? – to my tu nie będziemy mogli wytrzymać.

[Does he always cry like that? – we won't be able to stand it here].

And so the memoirist tries “beyond strength to please her, so she'd have no excuse”, but it has hardly any effect. Supposedly, the sister spends a lot of money on the memoirist and her child. The following are the sister's words, as recorded by the memoirist. (M48: 514):

Wanda może tylko zabrudzić z jej dzieciakiem, i że od czasu jak ona tu przebywa dwadzieścia dolarów wydała na same jedzenie, i że nakupiła mi już dużo rzeczy, że dała za trzewiki i 3 i pół dol., za bluzkę dolara itd. i jak tak dalej będzie, to ona nie nastarczy na to wszystko!

[Wanda can only dirty things with her kid, and since she's been here she's spent twenty dollars on food alone, and she's bought me many things already, and paid three and a half dollars for shoes, a dollar for a blouse, and so on. And if it goes on like this she won't manage it all!].

Taken by deep grief and unable to bear “such lies”, the writer “grabs the child in her arms, runs out into the street, and creeps into a corner to cry” (M48: 514). Unfortunately, the author must also endure daily hostility from her brothers, who “would hold council and pass judgment” on her, ultimately deciding that the child should be given away so that she might be allowed to stay and work (M48: 515):

Umyślili, żeby dziecko oddać komu, kto by zechciał go wziąć. A wtedy ja mogę z nimi mieszkać i pójść do roboty. W przeciwnym razie niech się nie ważą tu pozostać, gdyż jak ja pozostanę z tym dzieckiem, oni pójdą z domu bo go się brzydzą itd.

[They decided to hand the baby to whoever would take him. Then I could live with them and go to work. Else I wasn't to dare stay here, for if I stayed with the child, they'd leave the house, because they were sickened by him, and so on].

As the pressure rises, even her mother begins to side with the brothers, in fear of losing their support. Feeling left on her own, the memoirist decides there is one thing she will not give up, namely, her child (M48: 515):

Matka obawiając się o to mimowolnie zaczęła im pomagać. Wołała się pozbyć mnie niż mych braci, z których miała utrzymanie. Ja teraz zrozumiałam, iż nie zdołam oprzeć się im, poczęłam za wszelką cenę starać się o inne wyjście, gdyż dziecka na zawsze oddać wcale nie myślałam, jedna śmierć mogła nas rozłączyć, bo czem trudniej mi było o jego wychowanie, tym bardziej rozstać się z nim nie chciałam.

[Mother, fearing this, began, willy-nilly, to side with them. She'd rather be rid of me than of my brothers, who kept her. Then I saw I couldn't stand against them; I set myself, at any cost, to find another way, for I never thought to give up the child for good – only death could part us. Because the harder it was to raise him, the less I wanted to let him go].

Years later, even her beloved son, now a grown man, turns his back on her. Furthermore, he leaves his wife just as his father left his mother (M48: 520):

Zaniedbał swój interes reperowania zegarków i przez to zadłużył się po same uszy. A gdy dalej nie mógł wystoić wysłał swoją żonę z dziećmi do jej rodziców a sam przyszedł do mnie. I kiedy go napierałam, że niech i sam tam idzie gdzie jego familia ten zabrał się i wyjechał i już blisko dwa lata jak o nim słuch zaginął. [He neglected his watch-repair business and ran into debt up to his ears. When he couldn't hold out any longer, he sent his wife with the children to her parents and came to me. And when I pressed him to go there himself, to his own family, he upped and left, and it's near two years now since there's been any word of him].

For once, the author, baffled and distressed, allows herself to break the usual silence and complain a little about her fate (M48: 520):

I zniknięcie mego syna przyprowadza mię wprost do rozpacz. Nie umiem sobie tego wytłumaczyć dlaczego musiało się tak samo stać z synem jak stało się z jego ojcem. I czyż nie miałam dość udręczenia z wychowaniem jego? A teraz gdy urósł zamiast pociechy, jeszcze większe utrapienie pozostawił po sobie. I tak jak ojca tak syna już odnaleźć nie będzie można, lecz po synie większą czuję utratę niż po jego ojcu.

[My son's vanishing simply drives me to despair. I cannot make out why it had to be the same with the son as with his father. Didn't I have enough trouble raising him? And now, when he's grown, instead of comfort he's left me a greater sorrow. And as with the father, the son won't be found; only after the son I feel the loss more than after his father].

Another recurrent burden the Polish authors speak about in unison is homesickness. Longing for parents, kin, and the sound of Polish echoes on the pages of their works. One more time, the way they pass it on to the reader is lapidary and informative rather than dramatic. Memoirist 6 writes (M6: 222):

Dla mnie był wielki smutek opuszczać rodzinę i krewnych, a tem bardziej swój kraj ojczysty.

[For me it was a great sorrow to leave my family, and all the more to leave my native country].

Memoirist 44 relays this longing when World War I ravages Poland (M44: 443):

Był to rok 1915, wojna – niewiele wiedziałam co słycać w domu, czułam się bardziej osamotniona niż dotąd, tęskniłam za rodziną, za domem.

[It was 1915, the war – I knew little of what was going on at home, I felt more lonesome than before, I longed for my family, for home].

For Memoirist 48 another reason to yearn for Poland is the desire to be recognised as Polish but without being made to feel inferior (M48: 520-521):

I największą moją chęcią jest powrócić do Polski choćby na jakiś czas przed śmiercią. Raz jeszcze ujrzeć strony rodzinne, gdzie choć mimo, że w niedostatku wyrosłam miłsze spędziłam chwile jak tu na obczyźnie. Nikt mi tam nie powiedział, że jestem cudzoziemką, że nie władam dobrze językiem.

[And my greatest wish is to go back to Poland, if only for a little while before I die. To see once more my home, where, though I grew up in hardship, I spent kinder times than here in a foreign land. No one there ever told me I was a foreigner or that I didn't speak the language right].

Against this backdrop, the life writers show how they try to make their emotional life bearable. These are modest, rather than grand solutions, but they are how endurance is practised day-to-day. One strategy is to plan, or just dream, of returning to Poland, even if only for a while. This prospect appears to give the immigrants an emotional anchor, something steady to cling to. In this context, Memoirist 6 conveys the point succinctly (M6: 224):

Jedyna moja pociecha w życiu i marzenie odwiedzić Polskę na wiosnę i rodzinne strony a także i mogiły rodziców i mogiłę Józefa Piłsudskiego.

[My only comfort in life and my dream is to visit Poland in the spring and my home places, and also the graves of my parents and the grave of Józef Piłsudski].

Memoirist 15 puts this in a similar way, though she is more apprehensive (M15: 439):

Jeszcze mam jedno marzenie, żebym mogła Polskę odwiedzić dopóki żyję, ale coraz więcej tracę nadzieje, ponieważ jestem już stara to nie wiem czy dożyję.

[I've still got one more wish – that I could visit Poland while I'm alive – but I'm losing hope more and more, because I'm already old and don't know if I'll live to it].

Memoirist 26 stresses that the thought of homecoming has stayed with her throughout (M26: 586):

Zawsze się nosiłam z myślą że muszę jeszcze raz Polskę odwiedzić.
[I always carried the thought that I must visit Poland once more].

Memoirist 48 expresses the same inclination, only with greater resolve (M48: 521):

I pomimo, że tu przebywam już zgoła 29 lat jednak do dziś jeszcze nie wzięłam obywatelskich papierów, bo czy prędzej czy później zamierzam powrócić do Polski.
[And though I've been here 29 years, to this day I haven't taken out citizenship papers, for sooner or later I mean to go back to Poland].

Memoirist 44 not only dreams of going back to Poland; she carries it out. Yet, years in America have left her shattered (M44: 447):

Po tej męczącej podróży przyjechałam do mego rodzinnego miasta, z którego blisko 7 lat temu wyjechałam kwitnąca zdrowiem i z nadzieją w sercu. Wróciłam złamana, chora, staruszka 21-letnia.
[After that weary journey I came to my home town, the one I left nearly seven years before, blooming with health and hope in my heart. I came back a broken, sick old lady aged twenty-one].

Dreaming of a return to Poland is a pattern shared by each of the writers. Other ways of handling emotional pain take various forms, depending on circumstances and temperament. For example, Memoirist 44 gets married at a very young age, hoping for a better life (M44: 443):

Wierzyłam, że mąż zastąpi mi rodziców, rodzinę, no i wszystkie inne braki. Wyszłam więc za mąż mając lat 17.
[I believed a husband would take the place of my parents, my family, and all the other lacks. So I married at seventeen].

Asking for help, such as public relief, is too high an emotional cost for this author, even when the family goes through a financial crisis, and even though she is eligible (M44: 450):

Pytam się męża co będziemy robić? a on mówi pójdziemy po zapomogę jak inni. Nie! nigdy! nie ja. Nikt z mojej rodziny nie korzystał z zapomóg nawet w czasie wojny.

[I ask my husband, what do we do? and he says, we'll go for relief like the others. No! never! not me. No one in my family ever took relief, even during the war].

At her lowest – mourning her child, sick, exhausted, broken, and poor – she expects the worst, but in the end she simply goes on (M44: 446):

Zdawało się śmierć po mnie przyjdzie lada chwila (...). Śmierć jednak przyjść nie chciała na zawołanie, trzeba było żyć i przeżyć to wszystko.

[It seemed death would come for me any moment (...). But death wouldn't come when called – I had to live and live through it all].

In the case of Memoirist 48, chronology matters. The description opens at rock bottom. The husband has left, the child is hungry, and she has nowhere to go. Yet, just like the previous author, she decides to fight (M48: 511):

Całą siłą zaczęłam się starać pomóc sobie ażeby nie dopuścić do głodowej śmierci, która już oczekiwała za drzwiami.

[With all my strength I tried to help myself, so as not to let death by hunger in, already waiting on the doorstep].

Later, however, she is overpowered by strains and setbacks and wants to finish her own life and the child's, too (M48: 516):

Postanowiłam zakończyć raz na zawsze i zabrawszy dziecko ze sobą udałam się wprost do rzeki i tam chciałam rzucić się wraz z dzieckiem w przepaść i nie być nikomu w drodze.

[I made up my mind to finish it once and for all, and taking the child with me I went straight to the river, to throw myself in with the child, so as not to be in anyone's way].

Yet again, she gathers quiet strength and resolves to continue, alternating between any paid work she can obtain and the search for more (M48: 517):

Sąsiedzi moi widywali mnie jak co dzień wychodziłam w poszukiwaniu za pracą i gdy oznajmiłam im, że muszę choćby co bądź robić byle zarobić na zapłacenie za dziecko, ci przynosili mi bieliznę do prania i prasowania. A więc w dzień poszukiwałam pracy, wieczorami prałam bieliznę.

[My neighbors saw me going out every day looking for work, and when I told them I had to do whatever came to hand just to earn the money to pay for the child, they brought me linen to wash and iron. So by day I looked for work; in the evenings I did the washing].

The account culminates when, looking at her brother's body, she forgives her family for forsaking her in need. For emotional survival, the act of forgiving appears redeeming or at least soothing. The fragment also reveals that it is a life of reversals and that even unyielding people sometimes fall down, but then the same unyielding people get back on their feet (M48: 519):

Ja choć dotąd jeszcze czułam urazę do swej familii, po tej strasznej tragedii, gdy patrzyłam na trupa swojego brata, darowałam im wszystkim, że nie chcieli mi nic pomóc w mojej biedzie, że i ja zamierzałam popełnić samobójstwo w niedawnym czasie. [Though I still felt a grievance against my family, after that dreadful tragedy, when I looked at my brother's corpse, I forgave them all that they wouldn't help me in my misery, and that I myself was about, not long ago, to take my own life].

As noted, the women seek modest rather than grand measures to steady their feelings and to keep life going. For instance, Memoirist 15 learns to swim late in life and then teaches other women the skill. Such acts may look trivial and unimportant at first sight, but they are meaningful, in fact, as they restore agency and a tangible sense of being (M15: 439):

Czuję się dosyć dobrze, nauczyłam się pływać już w 50 roku com jeszcze dzieckiem marzyłam (...). I chcąc co dobrego zrobić, uczę kobiety polskie pływać, już nauczyłam około 40 kobiet. [I feel pretty well; I learned to swim when I was fifty – something I dreamed of when I was still a child (...). And wanting

to do some good, I teach Polish women to swim; I've already taught about forty women].

Memoirist 6 also notices positive aspects in life. After the Great Depression, which devastated the country economically and socially, this person finds cautious optimism and belief in America's capacity to recover, while wishing the same could be true among her own people (M6: 224):

No ale tutaj choć się straci to jeszcze można mieć nadzieję że się kiedyś zwwyższy i można prędzej życie zrobić, jak w kraju na wsi, lecz smutne że to jest na obczyźnie i pomiędzy obc narodowościami.

[But, well, even when you lose everything here, you can still hope that one day you'll get back on your feet and make a better life than back in the country in the countryside. The sad part is, it's all happening in a foreign land, surrounded by strangers].

It is also characteristic of these women that, while going through enormous hardships and acting with quiet heroism, they are full not only of humility but also of guilt and shame for deeds that are not their fault. For example, they write:

Nikomu się nie pożaliłam, bo mnie wstyd było (M15: 431).
[I told no one, because I felt shame].

Mię dusi w gardle gniew okropny na moją naturę, na opinię ludzi (...) ja się mocno wstydzę (M26: 574; 576).
[In my throat a terrible anger chokes me at my own nature, at people's opinion (...) I'm sorely ashamed].

Nie chciałam być mężowi ciężarem (M44: 451).
[I didn't want to be a burden to my husband].

Chciałam (...) nie być nikomu w drodze (M48: 516).
[I didn't want to be in anyone's way].

This self-effacement and mute complaint come across as part of their endurance. Here, restraint is less a virtue than a survival rule: to carry on, you must stay small and keep quiet.

Although much of Memoirist 26's story is taken up in section 3.5, the final words of her memoir are apt to end this section. They come from perhaps the most battered voice in the corpus, and they offer an attitude for enduring feeling: an outward, inclusive belonging that rejects bitterness and seeks good in others (M26: 589):

Według świata poglądów nie należę do nikogo ale według moich pojęć należę do wszystkich lubię wszystkich religię i każdą narodowość bo wszystko i wszyscy mają w sobie coś dobrego. [By the world's notions I belong to no one, but by my own notions I belong to all. I like everyone's religion and every nation, for everything and everyone has in them something good].

As can be seen in these texts, feeling is present but rarely explicitly or insistently manifested. Pain, fear, shame, and hope are recorded in a plain register, with few exclamations, little ornament, little or no complaint, and concrete detail. Quiet endurance often appears in place of speaking. When the women do voice intensely emotional, dramatic experiences, they do so without drama, in an unemotional, simple, and sometimes chaotic manner. However, this restraint, simplicity, and erroneous style do not weaken emotion; actually, they sharpen and define it. At the same time, it can be inferred from the memoirs that silence can be ambivalent practice, as is not always protective: it can isolate, delay the decision to reach for help, or accept injustice. In fact, it can be read as a sign of vulnerability, passiveness, or even helplessness. Ultimately, then, the quiet that runs through the memoirs does represent strength from the margins, even though at times it takes fragile forms.

Chapter 4

Gendered dynamics: Men as portrayed in women's memoirs

Because this monograph foregrounds Polish female memoirists and their immigrant experience, it does not juxtapose the women's writings with male-authored memoirs. Instead, it concentrates on the female memoirists' portrayal of men – be they husbands, brothers, cousins, sons, neighbours, or priests. In general, these men tend to claim decision-making and public speech within the family, while the women – as discussed in section 3.4 – narrate moderation, self-blame, and negotiated endurance. In addition, the former set the terms of consent and respectability, and exert authority, whereas the latter are often confined to pleas, compliance, or silence. While this chapter does not undertake a systematic comparison with male-authored memoirs, some differences can nonetheless be noted at the level of narrative voice, tone, and the representation of experience: women's accounts tend to foreground affect, relationality, and everyday endurance, whereas male-authored narratives more often emphasise labour, mobility, and public life. A fuller comparative analysis, however, would require a separate, more extensive study.

One can easily surmise that negative portrayals of male family members and close circles outweigh positive ones. They even extend to the treatment by their fathers long before the memoirists-to-be began dreaming of or planning emigration. For example, Memoirist 48 states (M48: 502):

Nieraz za małą bagatelę bił mnie niemiłosiernie, a i głód często mi dokuczał.

[Often he beat me mercilessly over the smallest trifle, and hunger tormented me often as well].

The authors face ill-treatment from their husbands, too. When Memoirist 44 visits Poland, her husband accuses her of “desertion” and divorces her, exposing the woman to nasty gossip and scandal (M44: 448):

Nie będę opisywać tego, bo trudno opisać co trzeba było przejść kobiecie, w małym miasteczku – rozwódka: sensacja, piekło! Bo trzeba taką rzecz przeżyć by zrozumieć.

[I won't be writing about that, because it's hard to tell what a woman had to go through in a small town – a divorced woman: a sensation, sheer hell! You have to live through such a thing to understand it].

The husband of Memoirist 48 also decides to leave. The woman reflects on what led to her misfortune (M48: 510):

Nie zastanawiając się nad tem co później będzie wyszłam za człowiek, którego znałam tylko z widzenia, że był przystojny, młody i wesoły (...). Ale o dziwo jak się na tem przeliczyłam, gdyż nie wszystko złoto co się świeci. (...) wszystkie roboty okazały się dla niego za ciężkie, gdyż on nie przyzwyczajony do stałej pracy.

[Not thinking about what might come later, I married a man I only knew from seeing him around, just because he was handsome, young and cheerful. (...) But, oh, how I was mistaken, for not everything that shines is gold. (...) any work turned out too hard for him, as he wasn't used to steady labour].

One of the few positive comments about a husband comes from Memoirist 15, who simply states (M15: 432):

Mąż był doskonały stolarz, spokojny trzeźwy.

[My husband was an excellent carpenter – calm and sober].

The line also implies – confirmed by other remarks in the corpus – that heavy drinking is a recurring issue among Polish men in the communities.

When it comes to brothers, the picture differs even within the same author's family. Memoirist 15 has contrasting relationships with her two brothers: as noted, one is her "dearest brother", who takes care of her children (M15: 430), but the other brother (M15: 432):

(...) mi nagadał w liście, że jestem wyrodna matka odjechałam dzieci i nie dbam o nich.

[...] wrote to me saying I was a bad mother, that I'd gone off and left the children and didn't care for them].

Memoirist 48's brothers threaten to vacate the house and leave their sister and mother to cope on their own if her child stays with them in the house (M48: 515):

Jak ja pozostanę z tym dzieckiem, oni pójdą z domu bo go się brzydzą.

[If I stayed with the child, they'd leave the house, because they were sickened by him].

Cousins, generally speaking, do not have a good reputation, either. Memoirist 44 remarks on her husband's cousins' behaviour after the funeral of her two children, which they do not attend. She says of her husband that (M44: 447):

(...) po pogrzebie wstąpił do kuzynów i zastał ich grających w karty.

[...] after the funeral he stopped by the cousins' place and found them playing cards].

Memoirist 15's cousin, aware of her difficult economic situation, offers to help her through marriage. She is apprehensive but agrees (M15: 431):

Nie miałam wyboru, (ale) wiedziałam że będę miała z tego powodu dużo nieprzyjemności.

[I had no choice, (but) I knew I would have a lot of trouble because of it].

One issue concerns the payment for the marriage ceremony. The priest's fee equals several months' wages, an amount beyond the couple's financial means:

Jak się krewni żenią, ksiądz żąda 100 dolarów, a my ich nie mieli (M15: 431).

[When relatives get married, the priest asks for a hundred dollars, and we didn't have that money].

The only mention of a grown-up son comes from Memoirist 48, as illustrated in section 3.4. Referring to her husband, who mistreats her, this author concludes (M48: 520):

Syn poszedł w ślady ojca.
[The son followed in his father's footsteps].

However, the most detailed and emotionally charged account of male authority and the suppression of female voices is that of M26's coerced marriage. In the following example, male kin make decisions, invoke community shame, and abuse the woman both physically and psychologically. The narrator cycles through fear, prayer, and muted protest. Even at the marriage ceremony, the one moment when consent is asked, fear and shame stifle speech. There is neither dialogue nor equality – these are replaced with male dominance, terror, and control. The fragments' length and density are integral to preserving the rhythm of tension, silencing, and abuse, which unfold step by step. They cannot be reduced without flattening her experience, and so let Memoirist 26 speak for herself (M26: 574-575):

Przyszło do mowy, mnie piersi gniew rozsadza i żal a słowami nie umiem wypowiedzieć. Brak mi odwagi, boję się kuzyna, kuzynka także się boi męża tylko mi cicho mówi, prosz o którego innego chłopca choćby ruskiego. Kuzyn zaczyna prosto, Minka jutro jedziemy dać na zapowiedzi i za sprawunkami do miasta. Ja zebrała odwagę i mówię, szwagier ja bym prosiła żebyście mnie dali do służby, ja za mąż nie chcę iść na co szwagier woła, tak będzie jak ja mówię. Ja już nic nie mówię ale się duszę a płakać nie umiem czy nie mogę. Mój odchodzi zły pije z chłopami ja znów proszę kuzyna do służby, ale tak mocno a się boję. Kuzynka także i mówi trudno musisz wyjść za mąż. Jeszcze raz proszę, kuzyn krzyczy, do Żydów cię nie sprowadzę, do Amerykanów nie możesz iść bo nie umiesz mówić a po drugie musiałabyś z niemi spać i nie próbuj uciekać bo za pół godziny policjanci cię przyprowadzą a za chłopca prostego cię nie dam. Boże mój! Boże! tylko tyle umiem mówić. Dziewiątego lutego pojechaliśmy brać ślub do drugiego miasta bo tu nie było polskiego kościoła. Śnieg deszczy błoto od rana aż do wieczora ja mam w myśli księdzu powiedzieć wszystko

niech mię ratuje ale się boję kuzyna i opinii ludzi z mojej wsi co oni pomyślą o mnie na plebanii. Kuzynka mię ubrała (ale czemu nie do trumny) nic nie słyszę, nic nie widzę. Kuzynka mówi, Minka to chodź do lustra popatrz jak wyglądasz ale ja wybiegła do spowiedzi bo ksiądz już wyszedł ale ja mu nic nie mogła powiedzieć, on mię się pytał kilka razy czy z chęci z dobrej woli się żenię? Ja mówiła jest ale mię dusi w gardle gniew okropny na moją naturę, na opinię ludzi. Bodaj bym była tej chwili nie doczekała. Msza się odprawia, czas przychodzi iść do ołtarza. Boże mój ratuj, ziemio roztań się pod nogami, ksiądz przemawia pierścionek wkłada on bierze mię za rękę zdawało mi się że zimny wąż mnie ścisnął. W płacz mię rzuciło, nie mogę przemówić słowa trzęsę się ucieknę. Uciekać z kościoła, het, het – ta bojaźń przed kuzynem trzyma mię, stało się. Odjechałyśmy, jakaś muzyka gra ale ja nie słyszę. Byłam milcząca, nałożyłam fartuszek obsługuję tych chłopów pijaków, mój ledwie łazi z gębą otwartą i język (ma) na brodzie okropnie wygląda. Ja nie tańczę, chłopci rzucili mi sto dolarów, oddają kuzynowi (a mnie straszyl że to mój mi „szifkartę” posłał że on mię sobie kupił i ja jestem jego niewolnicą i muszę się z nim żenić). Wynajął trzy pokoje w mieście długu zrobił sto pięćdziesiąt [dolarów] bo nic nie miał zaoszczędzone, choć trzy lata z górą już tu był. Modlę się. Boże dopomóż aby w domu mojem był spokój. Strasznie nie lubiałam kłótni, jeszcze na wsi będąc zawsze przyrzekałam sobie w domu mojem tego nie będzie a stało się przeciwnie.

[When it came to talk, my breast near bursts with anger and grief, and I can't put it in words. I've no courage; I'm afraid of my cousin; the female cousin's afraid of her husband too, she only whispers to me quietly, ask for some other fellow, even a Russian. The cousin starts straight off: Minka, tomorrow we go to give notice of banns and for the shopping to town. I gathered courage and said, Brother-in-law, I beg you to send me to service; I don't want to marry, and he shouts, it will be as I say. I say nothing more, but I choke, and I cannot cry. My man walks off angry, drinks with the fellows; again I beg my cousin to let me go into service, but I'm so scared. My female cousin too, she says, well, you must marry. Once more I beg; the cousin yells, I won't give you to the Jews; to the Americans you can't go, you don't know the language, and besides you'd have to sleep with them; and don't try to run, for in half an

hour the police will bring you back, and to a common peasant I won't give you. My God! My God! that's all I can say. On the ninth of February we went to take the marriage vows in another town, for here there was no Polish church. Snow, rain, mud from morning to night. In my head I think to tell the priest all, let him save me, but I fear my cousin and the people's talk from my village – what they'll think of me at the rectory. My female cousin dressed me (but why not for the coffin), I hear nothing, I see nothing. She says, Minka, come to the mirror, see how you look, but I ran out to confession, for the priest had come out already, yet I couldn't tell him anything. He asked me a few times, am I marrying of my will, of good will? I said I am, but in my throat a terrible anger chokes me at my own nature, at people's opinion. I wish I hadn't lived to see that hour. Mass begins, the time comes to go to the altar. My God, help me, earth open under my feet. The priest speaks, puts on the ring, my man takes me by the hand; it seemed to me a cold snake squeezed me. I burst into tears, I cannot say a word, I shake, I'll run. Run out of the church, far, far, but fear of the cousin holds me; it's done. We drive off, some music plays, but I don't hear. I was silent; I put on an apron and serve those drunkards; my man can hardly walk, mouth open and his tongue on his chin; he looks awful. I don't dance; the fellows threw me a hundred dollars; I hand it to the cousin (and he had scared me that it was my man that sent me a 'ship card', that he bought me for himself, and I am his slave and must wed him). He rented three rooms in the city, made a debt of a hundred and fifty dollars, for he had nothing saved, though he'd been here over three years. I pray: God help that there be peace in my house. I hated quarrels terribly; even back in the countryside I always promised myself there won't be quarrels in my house, and it turned out the other way].

After the wedding, the woman's life is characterised by sheer fear. She anticipates cruelty, as any situation can be a pretext for the husband to attack her (M26: 575):

Ja się go strasznie bałam słuchałam ale nic nie umię zadać jakie pytanie aby go nie obrazić. Po dwóch tygodniach jak podałam mu śniadanie jak machnął ręką przez stół i wszystko się roz-

leciało i zbito. Ja ścierpłam, on poszedł do pracy. Cały dzień jestem w strachu co będzie jak przyjdzie z roboty.

[I was terribly afraid of him; I obeyed, but I don't know how to ask any question lest I offend him. After two weeks, when I set his breakfast, he swept his hand across the table and all smashed. I trembled; he went to work. All day I'm in fear what will be when he comes from work].

Soon, the violence only escalates and takes increasingly drastic forms. In a pattern typical of abusive partners, the husband not only terrorises his victim but also forces apologies to shift blame away from himself and demands gestures of glorification (M26: 575):

Za trzy tygodnie zbił mnie, skopał za włosy po podłodze wytargał. Ja nie mogłam się podnieść, błędna jestem co się stało i za co on był straszny. Szatan prawdziwy biega klnie, ja wstała, siadłam, strasznie płacząc on siada i mówi, przeproś, ja mocno zdziwiona ale dodaję sobie odwagi i pytam za co mam przeproszać, za to, że go rozgniewała, ja się pytam czem, ale on mówi nie pytaj tylko przeproś, ja mówię nie mogę, on mówi całuj mię. [In three weeks he beat me, kicked me, dragged me by the hair over the floor. I couldn't get up, I'm dazed by what happened and why, he was awful. A true devil – runs, curses. I got up, sat down, cry terribly. He sits and says, apologize. I'm much amazed, but I add myself courage and ask, For what shall I apologize? For making him angry. I ask, with what? but he says, don't ask, just ask for forgiveness. I say, I cannot. He says, kiss me].

Now the feeling of shame is hardly bearable for the woman. Other people's opinions are even more painful than the emotional and physical abuse inflicted by her husband. She prefers being beaten, even brutally, and tortured emotionally to being thrown outside and exposed to public opinion. The fragment below also discloses that silence prevails and functions as a way to get by:

Ze wstydu że ludzie patrzą na dworze upadam na kolana łapię go za nogi wołam, Miecio najdroższy bij, tylko na dwór nie wyrzucaj, bił wiele chciał kopać ja się podnieść już nie mogłam, płakałam ale nie krzyczałam (M26: 576).

[From shame that people look outside, I fall on my knees, grab him by the legs, cry, Miecio, dearest, beat me, only don't throw me outside. He beat a lot, wanted to kick; I couldn't get up any more; I cried but did not scream].

In this reality, silence may well be the woman's strategy to survive, to avoid a "quarrel"; nevertheless, it is also a tool for enforcing and maintaining male authority and the patriarchal *status quo*. The priest calls for obedience and quiet; women's suffering is less important than keeping the male-controlled structure. The elderly – probably referred to as the wise, an authority that ought not to be questioned – also promote this docile and degrading attitude. It can be inferred that the "old people" mentioned in the text represent both genders, but then it can be further concluded without too much risk that the female segment is already imbued with a societal hierarchy. In this hierarchy, authoritarian or not, the master of the house is the man:

Modłę się, wołam ja nie chcę kłótni na myśl mi przychodzą słowa księdza – bądź posłuszną mężowi, słowa zasłyszane u starych ludzi dziewczęta nigdy nie zaczynajcie kłótni w domu a będzie wam dobrze nie rozpowiadajcie co się w waszem domu dzieje, ja staram się tego trzymać.

[I pray, I call, I don't want quarrel; I remember the priest's words: be obedient to your husband; words heard from old folk: girls, never start a quarrel at home and you'll have it good; don't tell others what goes on in your house. I try to hold to that].

If women are born into a religious (or religious-claiming) society that uses the biblical-sounding promise "it will be given to you" on condition that you keep quiet, it is hardly surprising that many will be silenced out of fear. What follows is seclusion, loneliness, and emptiness, as exemplified below (M26: 575):

Czym dalej tem gorzej było do nikogo nie chodziłam ani do kuzynki ani do kościoła.

[The more time passed, the worse it was. I went to no one, not to my female cousin, nor to church].

Studying the memoirists' texts, it is devastatingly easy to see that men are the decision-makers in the family and community. The authority of husbands, brothers, cousins, or priests is rarely challenged. They decide, admonish, coerce, and exert power, and their sons are very likely to follow this role model. The role of women is confined to restraining themselves, managing shame, absorbing blame, and remain silent.

As presented above, the most striking testimony is that of Memoirist 26. This life story writer is literally forced into marriage and becomes a victim of domestic violence, community pressure, and fear of public exposure. Her narrative makes evident the structures that shape the other memoirs as well: silence is not only the consequence or product of male authority but also a means of endurance and mental survival. Yet, the narratives also show that silence is costly. Much as it enables the authors to persist, it limits objection to exploitation and marks endurance not only as victory but fragile survival as well.

Chapter 5

Among neighbours: The memoirists alongside women of other nationalities

The memoirs quite frequently mention neighbours of other nationalities, and these are usually women. Although names or detailed portraits are rare, the texts capture general attitudes towards other women, and this constitutes an essential part of the memoirists' everyday landscape. Here, kindness, helpfulness, and solidarity mix with cultural ridicule, animosity, and exclusion. Additionally, confronting 'the foreign' prompted comparisons to Poland, so the reader is almost accidentally provided with a glimpse of the memoirists' view of that country.

It is worth noting that the memoirists-to-be's first experiences with other nationalities occurred right after crossing the partition border. Then, especially before World War I, they had to use the ports of neighbouring countries, where they faced border and sanitary officials. Once they reached American soil, with New York taking pride of place, they travelled on to various locations. Memoirist 26, for example, continues to Pennsylvania. She has a high opinion of the American conductors on the train and is struck by how members of different social classes commune with each other (M26: 573):

Ta grzeczność konduktorów, to ciche i spokojne gadanie ta swoboda pomiędzy panami i robotnikami. Nigdzie wyższości jeden nad drugim nie widziałam. (...) Najwięcej że nie zauważałam tej unізoności robotników do panów co w Polsce było a co ja bardzo nie lubiała.

[That politeness of the conductors, that quiet and calm talking, that freedom between gentlemen and workmen. Nowhere did I see one acting above another. (...) Most of all, I didn't see that humbling of workers before the gentlemen, the way it was in Poland, and which I never liked].

Years later, her comparison between social behaviour in the USA and Poland is even more striking. As a migrant, her sensitivity to hierarchy and everyday dignity increases (M26: 586):

Widziałam w Polsce pokorę tych biedaków co się chcieli dostać do jakiej głowy miasta i to przez Żyda dopiero, z jaką dumą jasny pan przyjmował takiego robotnika. Tutaj tego nie ma.

[In Poland I saw the humbleness of those poor folk who wanted to get to see the head of the town, and could only do so through a Jew at that, and how proudly the fine gentleman received such a workman. Here there is none of that].

What impresses – and perhaps surprises – her as well is the independence of young Americans and the respect shown to wives. Her words imply that respect for women is something ingrained in American males, which contrasts with the gendered dynamics she remembers from Poland (M26: 586):

Są samodzielne dziewczęta i chłopcy co mi się bardzo podoba ich odwaga. (...) Żony swoje szanują bo to już jest w nich mieć szacunek dla kobiet.

[There are independent girls and boys, and I like their boldness very much. (...) They respect their wives, for it is in them to have respect for women].

Finally, based on the achievement of her son, who made it to the United States Military West Point Academy, she praises the American educational system (M26: 586):

Tu muszę Amerykanów chwalić że ułatwiają obcokrajowym jak tylko kto chce się uczyć.

[I must praise the Americans, for they make things easier for foreigners whenever someone wants to learn].

Another positive account of local Americans comes from Memoirist 15. When she needs to be heard and to obtain practical help, she reluctantly strikes up a conversation with the pharmacist. The passage also shows that a word-of-mouth system of help is at work (M15: 435):

Mimo woli musiałam opowiedzieć o mojej doli, on mi powiedział, że ma znajomego doktora, to ja mogę u p. doktorowej dostać robotę (...). Dał mi lekarstwo na wzmocnienie, parę dolarów mi pożyczył. (...) Ta p. doktorowa dała mi swoich

znajomych, jak się u niej skończyła robota. Niech im Bóg zapłaci za ich dobroć.

[Without meaning to, I had to tell him about my hard lot, and he told me he knew a doctor and that I could get work at the doctor's wife's place (...). He gave me some medicine to strengthen me and lent me a few dollars. (...) That doctor's wife gave me her own acquaintances when the work at her place was finished. May God repay them for their goodness].

Next, Memoirist 15 highlights positive feelings towards Jewish women. One of them fetches help when the author falls sick (M15: 428):

Pożaliłam się jednej Żydówce polskiej i ona mi doktora sprosiła wadziła

[I confessed my sorrows to a Polish Jewish woman, and she brought a doctor for me].

She is also fond of the way Jewish and Italian women organise themselves at work. As opposed to Poles, who “think to earn a little and go back home” (M15: 437), they invest in long-term prospects. The following lines also show this author's awareness of practical ethnic networks among immigrants (M15: 437):

Żydzi od pierwszego dnia myślą jak założyć interes, jedni drugim pomagają, pouczają i wszystko jest w żydowskich rękach. Włoszka jak tu przyjedzie i Żydówka nie pójdzie do służby jak to Polki robią, tylko idzie do szycia, dlatego jest ich większość w pracowniach i w Unii, mają nawet swoje oddziały włoskie, to ich ma kto bronić.

[The Jews, from the very first day, think how to set up a business; they help each other, teach each other, and everything is in Jewish hands. When an Italian woman comes here, and a Jewish woman too, she doesn't go into service like the Polish women do, but goes into sewing, and that's why there are so many of them in the shops and in the Union; they even have their own Italian branches, so they have someone to stand up for them].

She also mentions that she is aided by Russians when in need (M15: 436):

Miałam dobrych znajomych, narodowości ruskiej, którzy mi nieraz pomogli w potrzebie, dali robotę i pożyczili pieniądze. [I had good acquaintances of the Russian nationality, who more than once helped me when I was in need, gave me work and lent me money].

Slovak women are presented positively by Memoirist 26. When maltreated and left by her husband, she finds relief and practical help among them (M26: 581):

Mówię im wszystko co się u mnie stało oni się śmieją i mówią ta lim ty nie płacz my ci pomóżem. Zabrali do miasta do jakiegoś biura tam opowiedzieli całą rzecz miasto daje mi na utrzymanie. [I told them everything that had happened to me, and they laugh and say: now then, don't you cry, we'll help you. They took me to town, to an office there, told the whole thing, and the city gave me support to live on].

This support stands in contrast to what follows. The next fragment concerns men and serves as a transition from praise to criticism. She appreciates the treatment of women by men in certain national groups, yet is critical of male behaviour among Poles and Slovaks (M26: 586):

Także Italianie szanują swoje kobiety Greci Syrianie Rumuni a nawet Rosyanie lepiej się obchodzą z żonami. U polskich tego nie widziałam i Słowaków kłótnia krzyki nieustanne. [Italians also respect their women, and Greeks, Syrians, Romanians, and even Russians treat their wives better. Among the Poles I didn't see this, nor among the Slovaks – quarrelling and shouting all the time].

Earlier in the memoir, however, the reader can find a different image of Russian men. Waiting on some of them in her household, she is met with crude, abusive language. When she refuses to be treated in a sexist manner, she hears the following comment (M26: 580):

My takiej służalki nie chcemy (...) my chcemy babę do łóżka. [We don't want a servant girl like that (...) we want a woman for the bed].

The only remark about a German woman comes from Memoirist 48. At one point, she stays with her brother and his German wife, and she notes that (M48: 507):

Bratowa, rodem Niemka, niewiele przyjacielsko odnosiła się do nas a tak i do męża.

[My sister-in-law, a German by birth, wasn't very friendly to us, nor to her own husband either].

A similarly lapidary mention – and again negative – appears regarding Black Americans. While Memoirist 44 commends social assistance for the needy, she condemns those whom she believes abuse the system (M44: 450):

Jest wiele takich których ta pomoc zdemoralizowała, którzy wymagają od tych płacących podatki by ich utrzymować, szczególnie Murzyni.

[There are many whom this help has spoiled, who expect those paying taxes to keep them, especially the Negroes].

Disapproval of Americans occupies as much space as approval. The Polish women meet them mainly at work. In the fragment below, Memoirist 15 describes American employers who, she suggests, reject her on the grounds of nationality (M15: 437):

Gdziekolwiek poszłam do innego miejsca, a dowiedzieli się że jestem Polką to mi nie dali roboty. W jednym miejscu już tydzień przerobiłam i forelady mi się pyta jakiej jestem narodowości, jak się dowiedziała że jestem Polka powiedziała mi, idź tu nie masz co robić.

[Wherever I went to another place, and they found out I was Polish, they wouldn't give me work. In one place I had already worked a week, and the forelady asked me what nationality I was. When she found out I was Polish, she told me: go, you've nothing to do here].

Difficulty in gaining employment is followed by being underpaid compared to women of other nationalities. Here the main obstacle is her lack of English (M15: 430):

Dostałam 8 dolarów na tydzień, a inne za tę samą pracę dostały 20 dolarów. Ale ja nie umiałam mówić.

[I got 8 dollars a week, and the others for the same work got 20 dollars. But I couldn't speak].

Ultimately, Memoirist 48 feels hurt by the ridicule she encounters from American women. The account also takes place in the workplace (M48: 507):

Naśmiewały się ze mnie. Najwięcej przykro mi było, gdy jedna z nich zapytała mnie jak mi na imię i ja jej powiedziałam, że imię moje jest Wanda, to ona śmiała się aż do uduszenia.

[They made fun of me. What hurt me most was when one of them asked me what my name was, and I told her my name is Wanda, she laughed as if she would choke].

These fragments show that contact with women of other nationalities is a regular part of the memoirists' everyday lives. Help, advice, and practical support often come from their Jewish, Russian, or Slovak neighbours, many of whom are women. Moreover, American politeness and social ease stand in contrast to the hierarchies remembered from Poland. At the same time, the memoirs testify to ridicule, exclusion, and unequal treatment, especially in workplaces. It is there that language, nationality, and competition for jobs form relations between women. The authors also provide reflections on ethnic groups, sometimes admiring their organisation or family life and at other times repeating the prejudices of their era. In general, the picture that emerges is neither uniformly hostile nor supportive, but one of shifting alliances in which Polish immigrant women negotiate their place among others.

Conclusion

The texts analysed in this work reveal that the Polish immigrant women's world was shaped by frequent movement, hard labour, silent endurance and courage, adaptation, and hopes for a better future. Although the accounts differ in detail, the testimonies reveal many similarities in the women's experience. Firstly, the authors had to cross various borders – both physical and mental – and display remarkable courage, resolve, and organisational skills in undertaking the journey from Poland to the United States. Secondly, they were poor, often ill, had little formal education, knew no foreign languages, had to face many – oftentimes extreme – trials and tribulations, and their families had a dozen or more mouths to feed. Against this backdrop, the scale of what they managed becomes even more impressive.

At the same time, even though the memoirs examined here were written during or shortly after migration, they often reflect a kind of double vision: of the remembered homeland and the interpreted new world, filtered through cultural dislocation and linguistic hybridity (see Ulanowicz 2013). It is pivotal here to argue, as Alessandro Portelli (1991) does, the subjectivity and imperfections of such testimonies make them by no means less meaningful.

The first two chapters place these narratives within the broader context of Polish emigration before World War I and the distinguishing role of the Institute of Social Economy in preserving the memoirs from oblivion. Thanks to the Institute's effort, the reader can see the five life writers as key agents of their survival, homemaking, and of immigrant community formation. Their narratives illustrate challenges such as negotiating the plan to emigrate with the family, collecting money in Poland, the journey to the United States, factory and domestic labour, the uncertainty of finance, the struggle to carry on, and gradual success that finally establish their sense of belonging to the new world. The memoir writers' emotional, uneven, and at times hybrid language constitutes part of their testimony and identity. This linguistic space, made of dialectal Polish and broken English, reflects efforts to maintain cultural distinctiveness and documents the beginnings of Polish-American bilingualism.

Chapter 3 foregrounds identity, survival, and silence, while Chapter 4 examines male authority as portrayed in women's memoirs. The pattern of emotional endurance is embodied by internalised quiet that helps to manage fear, pain, and shame rather than by dramatic expression. Consequently, silence does not represent merely obedience, shyness, or social withdrawal – all of which can be treated as weakness – but also a strategy of survival. In the memoirs, it often serves as an indirect form of communication, conveying attitudes and emotional undertones that are not explicitly stated. In this sense, “it also conveys inter- and transpersonal communication and helps us to express and communicate our ideas, attitudes, and emotional undertones” (Puppel and Puppel 2025: 124). Moreover, male authority makes for the sharpest inequalities in the domestic space. Husbands, brothers, cousins, and priests often act like authoritarian rulers, invoking shame and threat, but ultimately they foster the women's agency. This agency is further strengthened by life writing, and the stories can be read as “interventions [that] give voice to the cultural and social agents who are traditionally silenced” in dominant narratives (Nowak-McNeice 2017: 76). And even though, as Smith and Watson (2010: 28) note, “language fails to capture, or engage, or mediate the horrors of the past and the after effects of survival”, writing was nevertheless an act of recognition for these women. For the first time, perhaps, their story formed the centre of someone's interest. Memoirist 26 expresses this already in the second sentence of her memoir (M26: 571):

Mnie się o nagrodę nie rozchodzi tylko że mogę wypowiedzieć się przed inteligentnymi ludźmi co mi leży na sercu blisko 30 lat. [I am not after the prize; what matters is that I can speak out before intelligent people about what has been lying heavy on my heart for nearly thirty years].

Furthermore, articulating violence, poverty, or shame in their own words became a way of questioning the social and cultural norms. The act of writing is all the more vital as women's testimonies are usually underrepresented and thus silenced (see e.g., Reading 2002, Fricker 2012, Tosiek 2024). The research material used for this monograph is no exception: out of 51 works in the collection *Memoirs of Polish Emigrants: USA*, 46 were written by men. Within this frame of reference,

the words of Cavarero (2005) saying that every voice is inherently unique and reveals the speaker acquire even more significance. Here, the testimony of Memoirist 26, who is coerced into marriage, subjected to growing abuse, yet perseveres, becomes even more unique and worthwhile.

Chapter 5 sheds light on ambivalent relations beyond the Polish community, principally with women of other nationalities. American, Jewish, Slovak, Russian, and Italian women are seen to give support and empathy on the one hand, and ridicule and exclusion on the other. We can also see that judgment works both ways, as the memoirists offer both favourable and unfavourable opinions about others' habits and drawbacks. Such encounters were embedded with the broader context in which Eastern and Central European migrants were routinely positioned as "the Other"¹⁸ within American society (Kimak and Świetlicki 2023: 1). They illustrate how the memoirists navigated their space within a multinational society and how national identity becomes relational, defined through contact with others. As Boym (2001: 12) emphasises, "it is not surprising that national awareness comes from outside the community rather than from within".

These stories – however emotional, restrained, or fragmented – broaden migration narratives long dominated by male authors. At the same time, they demonstrate the importance of affective registers¹⁹ in life-writing, negotiating what can be said, what must remain unsaid, and what surfaces only indirectly. Also, there is cause to suggest that for the memoirists, writing served several co-existing functions. Most immediately, it operated as testimony, a way of sharing with the reading audience an individual, subjective reality. Writing also permitted the women to order and grasp their own lives retrospectively. Moreover, memoir-writing functioned as an act of identity formation, understood as the repeated "reinforcement and confirmation of the act of self-interpre-

¹⁸ Rutkowska (2021: 99-100) observes that, in contrast to nineteenth- and early twentieth-century antecedents, contemporary women's travel narratives "move away from the interest in exploration of the Other" toward accounts of identity work.

¹⁹ For scholarly discourse on affect, emotions, feelings, silence, and sound see e.g., Ferens (2020), Brinkema (2014), Gregg and Seigworth (2010), and Tomkins (2008).

tation” (Bielik-Robson 2001). Finally, it carried a therapeutic dimension, helping the writers endure and process hardship (see Demetrio 2001).

This study brings to light texts that are little known yet by no means marginal. They are not only historical but historic, as they render immigrant lives marked by movement, constraint, and endurance. In doing so, they challenge assumptions about women’s agency and show that resilience itself can function as a mode of expression, embodying the women’s silent strength that emerges from the margins.

Finally, this work draws on the limited selection of women’s memoirs from the Institute of Social Economy archive, the corpus of which remains largely underexplored. A systematic analysis of the full collection would further deepen the findings presented here. At the same time, this study may be seen as part of a broader project of feminist recovery, bringing to light voices that have long remained unnoticed in migration history and life-writing studies. In doing so, it points towards further research into migrant self-representation, memory, and narrative practice, particularly in contexts shaped by displacement and linguistic hybridity. Moreover, the memoirists’ encounters with women of other nationalities suggest the potential for comparative work on immigrant experiences and everyday forms of intercultural negotiation. In this sense, the narratives analysed here not only document women’s silent strength but also open new perspectives for interdisciplinary inquiry across gender, migration, and narrative studies.

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Streszczenie (Summary in Polish)

Monografia analizuje pięć pamiętników napisanych przez polskie emigrantki mieszkające w Stanach Zjednoczonych na przełomie XIX i XX wieku. Teksty te powstały w związku z konkursem pamiętnikarskim ogłoszonym w 1936 roku przez Instytut Gospodarstwa Społecznego w Warszawie i zostały opublikowane w dwóch tomach *Pamiętniki emigrantów: Stany Zjednoczone* pod redakcją Adama Andrzejewskiego (1977). W całym zbiorze, wyraźnie zdominowanym przez relacje męskie, świadectwa kobiet są nieliczne i tym bardziej cenne. Ukazują migrację w perspektywie codzienności, pracy domowej i opiekuńczej, relacji rodzinnych oraz emocjonalnych kosztów przetrwania. Celem pracy jest (ponowne) umieszczenie kobiecego doświadczenia w centrum opowieści o polskiej migracji do USA oraz ukazanie „cichej siły” jako kluczowego wymiaru tej egzystencji.

Punktem wyjścia są pytania o to, jak autorki opisują podróż z Polski do Ameryki, pierwsze miesiące w nowym kraju, codzienne praktyki adaptacji i walkę o byt; jak ujawnia się sprawczość oraz tożsamość w warunkach ograniczeń ekonomicznych, społecznych i językowych; w jaki sposób pamiętniki rejestrują ból, wstyd, lęk i nadzieję, a także jakie funkcje pełnią milczenie i powściągliwość w relacjonowaniu przemocy, strat i upokorzeń. Osobny obszar analizy dotyczy obrazów mężczyzn (mężów, braci, kuzynów, synów, księży) oraz relacji z kobietami innych narodowości w środowiskach migracyjnych.

Praca ma charakter jakościowy i interpretacyjny. Podstawę stanowi uważna lektura materiału źródłowego, jakim są *Pamiętniki*, wsparta kontekstualizacją historyczną i socjologiczną. Ramy teoretyczne łączą badania nad life writing, feministyczną refleksję nad autobiografią oraz perspektywę zwrotu ludowego, przesuującą uwagę z narracji elitarnych na doświadczenia „z dołu”: robotników, chłopów, migrantów, kobiet pozbawionych instytucjonalnego głosu. Błędy językowe, kolokwialność, skrótowość czy ślady polsko-angielskiej hybrydyczności są traktowane jako część świadectwa i znak usytuowania społecznego, a nie jako „niedoskonałość do wygładzenia”.

Rozdziały 1-2 sytuują materiał w kontekście wielkiej fali migracji polskiej do USA (1870-1914) oraz omawiają instytucjonalne tło kon-

kursu pamiętnikarskiego. Pokazano, że kobiety nie są w tych relacjach jedynie „tłem” migracji męskiej, lecz współtwórczyniami strategii przetrwania: organizują dom, opiekę i budżet, budują sieci wsparcia, często równolegle podejmując pracę zarobkową.

Trzon analityczny monografii stanowi rozdział 3, w którym „cicha siła” (*silent strength*) zostaje rozwinięta w trzech wątkach: pracy i przetrwania materialnego, języka i tożsamości oraz adaptacji kulturowej. Pamiętniki pokazują przenikanie się pracy płatnej i domowej: granica między fabryką a kuchnią, praniem, sprzątaniami i opieką jest cienka, a presje czasu, pieniędzy i troski stale się nakładają. Wątek językowy ujawnia angielszczyznę jako barierę społeczną i zawodową, która z czasem ustępuje rutynom kompetencji i mieszanii kodów. Dom pozostaje podstawowym miejscem podtrzymywania polskości (mowa polska, listy, opowieści, edukacja dzieci), a adaptacja ma charakter negocjowany, hybrydyczny.

Rozdział 4 koncentruje się na dynamikach płci i na sposobach przedstawiania męskiej władzy. Powracają wzory monopolu mężczyźni na decyzję i „publiczny głos” w rodzinie oraz ograniczania kobiet do próśb, posłuszeństwa lub milczenia. Szczególnie dobitne są świadectwa przymuszonego małżeństwa i przemocy domowej, w których wstyd wspólnotowy i sankcja instytucjonalna wzmacniają podporządkowanie.

Rozdział 5 ukazuje ambiwalencję kontaktów poza polską wspólnotą: solidarność i pomoc (często praktyczną), ale też wyśmiewanie, wykluczenie i nierówne traktowanie w pracy. Tożsamość narodowa jawi się jako relacyjna, kształtowana w codziennych spotkaniach z „innymi” (*the Other*); równocześnie autorki niekiedy powielają stereotypy epoki, co jest ważnym składnikiem historycznego świadectwa.

Wnioski podkreślają, że analizowane pamiętniki poszerzają narracje migracyjne zdominowane przez autorów męskich, ujawniając mechanizmy codziennego przetrwania oraz pokazując „cichą siłę” jako realny tryb ekspresji i budowania podmiotowości. Jednocześnie praca wskazuje na potrzebę dalszych badań nad całym zbiorem Instytutu, wciąż w dużej mierze niewykorzystanym interpretacyjnie.

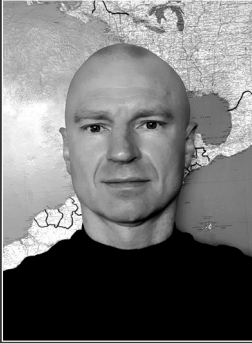
Appendix 1

Timeline of Polish emigration to the United States

- 1608 (c. 1 Oct.)– First recorded Polish settlers arrive at Jamestown (Virginia) aboard the *Mary and Margaret* (skilled craftsmen; glass, pitch/tar, etc.).
- 1619 – Polish craftsmen at Jamestown stage what is often described as the first recorded labour protest/strike in English North America (linked to demands for equal rights).
- 1776-1783 – Poles become visible in US public memory through figures tied to the American Revolution (e.g., Kościuszko, Pułaski).
- 1830s-1860s – “Political” emigration intensifies after failed uprisings (notably 1830-31 and 1863-64), alongside smaller skilled/individual migration streams.
- 1854 – Panna Maria (Texas) founded as the best-known early permanent Polish settlement in the US (Father Leopold Moczygemba and settlers).
- 1870-1914 – Peak era of mass migration (“Great/Old Immigration”): largely working-class/peasant, heavily tied to industrial labour and ethnic neighbourhood formation.
- 1914-1918 – World War I reshapes mobility; transatlantic movement becomes harder and more regulated.
- 1921 – Emergency Quota Act: first major US quota law limiting immigration by national origins.
- 1924 – Immigration Act (Johnson–Reed Act) tightens national-origins quotas further, sharply restricting immigration from much of Eastern/Southern Europe.
- 1936 – Institute of Social Economy (*Instytut Gospodarstwa Społecznego*) announces its memoir competition in Warsaw.
- 1948 – Displaced Persons Act: authorises admission of up to 202,000 displaced persons over a two-year period (post-WWII refugee governance).

- 1949-1952 – Post-war migration systems consolidate; Cold War politics increasingly shapes refugee/asylum pathways.
- 1980s – New wave often linked to late-communist crises and Solidarity-era mobility (plus broader family-reunification patterns).
- 2004 – Poland joins the EU, which changes Polish mobility patterns overall (much stronger intra-EU circulation; US routes become comparatively less central for many).
- 2019 (11 Nov.) – Poland enters the US Visa Waiver Program (ESTA travel for eligible visitors).²⁰

²⁰ The appendix is based on the following sources: Radzilowski (2022) and *Office of the Historian* (n.d.).



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Silent Strength from the Margins examines five memoirs written by Polish women who emigrated to the United States at the turn of the twentieth century. Submitted to the Institute of Social Economy's 1936 memoir-writing competition, these testimonies offer rare insight into female experiences of migration, labour, domestic life, language, adaptation, and emotional endurance.

Combining close reading with life-writing studies, feminist autobiography theory, migration studies, and the *zwrot ludowy*, the book re-centres voices often overshadowed in accounts of Polish-American history. It shows how ordinary immigrant women narrated hardship, silence, family obligation, cultural negotiation, and agency from within the margins of social and historical visibility.

“The text places into relief gendered experiences of migration that have all too often been marginalized in, if not entirely overlooked by, scholarly examinations of immigrant experiences. Throughout the manuscript, the author offers lucid and convincing close readings which underscore the importance of major shared themes. I learned an immense amount in my reading of this text, which succeeds in revealing an important, yet understudied, aspect of Polish-American history.”

— Anastasia Ulanowicz, PhD,
Associate Professor, University of Florida

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