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## CHAPTER XII

### **“TWIST OF FATE”: DECLINING AND RISING LINES OF OCCUPATIONAL CAREER IN THE BIOGRAPHICAL EXPERIENCES OF TWO ENGINEERS**

Hubert:

The company [a large state-owned construction company] said it was cutting our wages [...] So keeping in mind that my wife was jobless, our baby was already born and I myself had hardly any time for my private life, I worked non-stop and with my 8-year experience, all possible certificates et cetera. I earned 1200 zlotys a month... /I decided to look for some other job. At that time I sent out 200 applications, I was invited for 2 interviews and received no answer from the remaining 200, since it was generally a hard time, and there was no work, 2 interviews and I found out that they had been looking for someone with lower qualifications [...] So – hmm – I decided that something should be done about it, \and there was no other alternative, because there were simply no jobs, no other solution /and so I decided to go abroad. [...] At the time when a man just works all day long, he does not see his child, so you just had to play somehow... *vabanque* and there was no way out. So I took this parental leave, bought a plane ticket and went to Ireland/

Robert:

[...] I started earning good money, and she [the narrator's wife] was also doing well, so we could afford to change the flat and pay off the mortgage quickly, because nowadays it is nice to show off that you have a flat, a car, and some other things, it doesn't mean that you have [...] that your status is ok, because you just have to look at the loans you have taken out and for how many years you will be paying them off.

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My parents had a lot of these holidays, in fact, I did as well, but we went away for two weeks, maximum three, and I always remember that these were very economical trips, because it was difficult to collect so much money during these

10 months of work so as to splash out during the holidays. Now, with my children, it has actually become a standard that we go away twice in the summer, plus some long weekends, and twice in the wintertime skiing somewhere.

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The year 1989, all these ownership changes in the country. And here I think that I did all right in these transformations, even very well – I owe myself a little, a bit of luck, that I was somewhere at the right moment and time and took advantage of this opportunity. But, the way I see it, it is the generation of my parents that has been terribly mistreated by these changes, even I, working in this bank, Universal Economic Bank, as part of some, err, nationalization of this bank, as an employee I got, err, stocks and maybe that money was not great, but somehow it was enough for my first second-hand car, right? And my folks, who had worked for quite a few decades, err, in the previous epoch, got absolutely nothing, except that now they get some pensions, from which they try to live, err, a better or worse life. So, the perspectives of those changes that have happened, well, I can also see myself as a beneficiary.

In this chapter two life histories of Polish engineers (Hubert<sup>1</sup> and Robert) born in 1972 will be put together and compared.<sup>2</sup> In doing so, we apply open logic of the theory building strategy in which either old and new data or materials coming from different collections (projects) may be confronted. Consequently, the emergent theory may be supplemented, backed up, and respecified (Corbin, Strauss 1991: 451–452, Riemann, Schütze 1987: 11–12). The two life histories are very similar in terms of their family background, social origin, cultural capital, (foreign language) competences, course of education, occupation, and current civil status (both are happily married and have children). They both entered the labor market in swirled conditions of the transformation process in the late 90s marked with modernization and globalization. But – and this is what makes their experiences significantly different – Hubert's line of occupational development gets involved in a systematic decline of large state-owned enterprises in Poland

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<sup>1</sup> The interview was conducted by Katarzyna Waniek in May 2009. It belongs to the collection of “EuroIdentities – the evolution of European identity: using biographical methods to study the development of European identity” project implemented as part of the 7th Research Framework Program of the European Commission. Originally the case was discussed in: K. Kaźmierska, A. Piotrowski, K. Waniek (2012), “Transnational Work in the Biographical Experiences of Traditional Professions and Corporate Executives: An analysis of Two Cases,” in: G. Gray, R. Miller (eds), *The Evolution of European Identities. Biographical Approaches*, Palgrave Macmillan UK.

<sup>2</sup> The power of contrastive comparison was discussed by Kaja Kaźmierska in the *Methodological note*.

and, therefore, leads to a sort of a dead-end, while Robert's career is rather embedded in global changes and emergence of new market opportunities for certain products and services. Although we may say that for both storytellers the basic frame of their biographical experiences were very rapid changes resulting from the introduction of the capitalist economy, still it will be argued here that it is nothing more than a quirk of fate (being in the right place, at the right time and knowing the "right" people) which favors and lifts some people and marginalizes and humiliates others. Consequently, the social action paradigm, as well as some symbolic interaction approaches (Riemann, Schütze 1991) will be questioned here. Hence, our aim is to show that a course of events in one's life is not always intentionally and rationally planned, but in many cases it is a result of a weave of (outer) frame conditions and coincidences that may either destroy or seriously limit one's development line. Or, contrarily, it may suddenly open new opportunity structures and give one the chance to "spread his or her wings." We draw on some deliberations of Piotr Filipkowski who, in his quasi-philosophical essay, concludes that "they appear as if out of nowhere and hit on the spot, though not always individually. Seen in the perspective of an autobiographical narrative, they show life as a response to, ipso facto, random events" (Filipkowski 2018: 48). To put it simply, there are a great number of (outer) contingent events in everyday life which are beyond the control of an individual, which operate for good or bad in one's biography. In our understanding, they are hidden or unnoticed mechanisms of social and biographical processes. In this light, an attempt will be made – as in many previous chapters in this book – to strongly oppose stigmatizing classifications present in the dominating public discourse in which "it is your own fault" if you are unable to cope with the new capitalist or (post)modern or global reality. Moreover, a certain tendency in the liberal and left-wing media described by Jerzy Stachowiak according to which the determinants of one's success (career development) are exclusively located "inside" the subject, and not in "external" factors (2013) will be criticized. We will thus invalidate the assumption that if only an individual is equipped with a certain set of features, his or her way to prosperity and well-being is open.

After 1989, as Andrzej Piotrowski shows, a specific "hope-based pattern of thinking" prevailed, carrying the message that systemic transformation as "the abolition of anti-order brings order in itself, because it simply restores it" (Piotrowski 1997: 329). The image of the order was imported from the West often uncritically and unreflectively, that is, with no regard to the political, historical, and cultural differences, or the symbolic constructs of collective identity (Piotrowski 1997: 328).<sup>3</sup> It was based on the often illusory conviction

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<sup>3</sup> For instance, Marek Ziółkowski claims that: "After 1989 Polish society became definitely more an »imitative« or »mimetic« society than before in relation to the

promoted in all the countries of the Soviet bloc after its collapse, that the free-market economy guarantees success to all undertakings based on its principles. In the public discourse, the systemic transformation was presented primarily as a collective process of change associated with the emergence of new creative possibilities, and with the unveiling of previously stifled potentials of own initiative and entrepreneurship. Certainly, for many people the sequences of events in life was of such kind, but for dozens of them that period was associated with the experience of disorder and suffering. As shown by a large body of empirical data in the form of autobiographical narrative interviews,<sup>4</sup> individual biographical processes interwoven in different configurations, and with different strength of experiences of political, social, and cultural reality at that time, often led to a sense of disorder – chaos of values, interpretation schemes, or orientation systems. For dozens of people it was – if we recall Émile Durkheim's reflections on anomic suicides – the crisis situation understood as a disturbance of balance which always appears when there are major changes in society – regardless of whether they are caused by a sudden increase or an unexpected cataclysm (cf., Durkheim 1952). Unexpectedly, the orientation structures changed, the values which had been underestimated or suppressed, such as: own initiative, competitiveness, economic success, or continuous development, became the normative rules and constraints organizing social life. As Marek Czyżewski showed, “economizing” rhetoric and “economizing” legitimation were triumphing (cf., Czyżewski 2009a: 91). They spread to all fields of social activity (including family and school) and almost “sanctified” being entrepreneurial, creative, and resilient. The routine methods of conduct known up to that time proved to be unreliable, the horizons of expectations vague, the mechanisms governing the world of everyday life unobvious (they ceased to fulfil their nominal, regulating function). This led to growing and encompassing new areas of social life anomie, which meant chaotic social processes associated with deep cracks in the world of values and expectations, disorientation in everyday life and weakening of social ties. In sum, this was the period in which a sudden social change shook or seriously destroyed the existing

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societies of the Western civilization circle” (Ziółkowski 2015: 250). However, it remains debatable whether the idea was right.

<sup>4</sup> This thesis is also confirmed in the collection of the autobiographical narrative interviews gathered as part of the project *The People's Republic of Poland and the German Democratic Republic in Memory and Biographical Experiences of People Born between 1945–1955. Sociological Comparison Based on the Biographical Comparison* by the Polish-German Scientific Foundation (PNFN 2012-03) implemented in 2012–2015 by the Department of Sociology of Culture of the University of Łódź and the Otto-von-Guericke University in Magdeburg, funded by the Polish-German Foundation for Science (cf., Kaźmierska, Schütze 2013).

symbolic universe making it possible to give sense to the everyday reality and thus outlined the framework conditions for the emergence of collective and individual trajectory processes.

But still, those who – as Magdalena Nowicka emphasizes<sup>5</sup> – have not accepted a vision of emancipation embracing being an efficient, creative, reflective, creatively developing individual “are brutally excluded by theorists” (2014: 239). At the same time, she refers to the words of Manuel Castells, who states in an impertinent tone:

Changes are not automatic. They result from the will of social actors, as guided by their emotional and cognitive capacities in their interaction with each other and with their environment. Not all individuals involve in the process of social change, but throughout history there are people who do, thus becoming social actors. The others are free-riders as the theory would put it. Or, in my own terminology, selfish parasites of history-making (Castells 2013: 300).

Further, Nowicka writes that Polish reflection (including the sociological one) “reveals the elitism of post-colonial emancipation” contrasting it with the post-Soviet mentality of the “non-subject” mass and thus “divides society into winners and losers, and ultimately into rational, adaptable ones and inept, unable to adapt numpties” (Buchowski 2008: 101 as cited in Nowicka 2014: 243).

The minimally contrasting comparison of the two cases selected in the process of the adductive inquiry (Schütze nd: 4–5):<sup>6</sup> Hubert and Robert (both born in 1972 and both engineers by occupation) will verify and criticize these simplified and discrediting assumptions. It is worth noticing that they belong to the “in-between” cohort distinguished in the research assumptions of the *Experience of the Process of the Transformation in Poland* project. This means that particularly at the level of secondary and higher education they rather benefited from the transition in terms of unideologized curricula, but at the same time they were still brought up in the expectation of stability on the labor market, which appeared to be more and more difficult. Although they entered their adulthood after the symbolic moment of transition, their memory and understanding of reality before this passage are still biographically grounded by individual experiences.

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<sup>5</sup> Her considerations are placed within the frame of the Eastern European variant of postcolonialism.

<sup>6</sup> In the method of autobiographical narrative interview, individual cases are analyzed not only through the prism of referring their fragments to the whole, but also to other materials – often derived from other sources or thematically similar research projects.

Hubert and Robert obtained a master's degree in engineering (civil engineering and computer sciences, respectively). They have acquired complex knowledge allowing them to apply mathematics and science to solve technical problems and meet practical needs of society. Their educational background is, therefore, connected with institutionalized patterns of activities implying orientations towards possible and comparable paths of their career in terms of clear, internationally ratifiable expectations and standards as to its development (rules for upgrading, standards of achievements, and criteria of failure). Moreover, regularity and predictability of work tasks, as well as a self-confidence grounded in a sense of validity of the acquired knowledge and competences, seem to form here a syndrome of values and expectations typical for the modern industrial society in its classical sense (see: Kaźmierska et al. 2012).

Both were raised in families in which "being an engineer" was associated with a higher social status and open opportunity structures (regardless of the political or economic system) (see: Part 3). It is common knowledge – not only in Poland – that not everyone can cope with engineering studies based on the need to acquire scientific knowledge, that they require special skills and effort. They started working in engineering positions just after graduation and began to develop technical skills, accumulate experience, and acquire professional competences. In this respect the initial phase of their career is very similar and seems to be typical for young engineers (see: Hermanns 1984). But, due to a specific constellation of social and economic conditions (resulting from transformation, modernization, and globalization processes) their occupational career took a different turn in the early 2000s. Abstaining from any form of assessment, it can be said that Hubert has become somewhat "stuck" between the past and the present, while Robert has become the "emissary" of the future. Hubert had to constantly look back: at senior engineer colleagues, at established hierarchical relationships at work, old forms of management, which do not fit into the new market economy, and struggle with low earnings. This last factor – in the understanding of Harry Hermanns, which, based on 25 interviews with German engineers switching from full-time work to contracts<sup>7</sup> (see Hermanns 1984, also Prawda 1987) – could have constituted the external factors blocking the development of his career. While Robert's biographical line was accelerated by success – the (unexpected) possibility to create, design, and develop something new (op. cit.).

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<sup>7</sup> In essence, this is a transition not only between types of employment, but also ways of organizing your own biography: between the logic of regular and permanent employment which offers long-term holding of posts and guaranteeing a sense of financial security and the logic of temporality, instability, uncertainty, and precariousness.

Both life histories illustrate the change which Richard Sennett observed in the field of the courses of professional life. He argues: "In work, a traditional career progressing step-by-step through the corridors of one or two institutions is withering; so is the deployment of a single-case set of skills through the course of a working life" (Sennett 1998: 22). Zygmunt Bauman's message is similar, emphasizing that: "other features than in the past are conducive to life success: not consistency in proceedings, stubborn adherence to a predetermined goal, persistent specialization, gathering qualifications with a strong profile – but flexibility of interests and speed of changing them, adaptive flexibility, readiness to learn and the ability to forget what has already gone out of use." He also adds that the post-modern context favors "no specific identity" (Bauman 1993: 14).

### Hubert's case

Hubert was born in B. (middle-size city in Upper Silesia) in 1972 and raised in a Polish town close to the Polish-Czechoslovakian border as the only child of his parents. He was mainly brought up by his grandparents,<sup>8</sup> since his father – a civil engineer – was constantly busy with his work and often away on business trips and it was difficult for his mother to work<sup>9</sup> and run the household alone. The narrator briefly comments on his grandfather who, coming from a typical Silesian family, "being a Pole refused to sign *Volkslist*, he chose to become a compulsory worker in Germany instead of a soldier of Wehrmacht." He was liberated by the American troops and could go to America, but he came back to Poland and never used the opportunity to migrate though he had such an option. "He followed his own rules and always wanted to come back to his homeland." Although Hubert does not allude to his grandfather in any other part of his story, he may be considered a symbolic figure shaping the narrator's attitude towards his own biography, as well as implicitly influencing his decision to continue his life in Poland and to effectively pursue his goals – not always easy but defined as worth the effort. Hubert gives two arguments supporting his choice. Firstly, when working abroad he was considering the alternative of permanent migration with the whole family. Both he and his wife came to the conclusion that they probably would have better chances for professional development in Poland and that for sure they would never get rid of the status of immigrants which would also stigmatize their daughter. Secondly, at the end

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<sup>8</sup> The role of grandparents in raising children – when both parents are involved in paid employment – is the motif of many of our life histories.

<sup>9</sup> His mother graduated from secondary school of economics and worked in the economic department of plant management. Every day she had dozens of kilometers to commute to work.

of the interview Hubert declares that he has never considered leaving Poland, he is proud of his country – especially the people's ability to sustain national identity in times of oppression and abolition of communism.

Hubert's parents divorced when he was 16. As a teenager he attended Vocational Technical High School for Construction (entered into technical college in a field of building construction). Though high school was more prestigious, considering his difficult family situation, he decided to learn a trade. His mother, being alone, could hardly fulfil the children's needs. That is why as a teenager Hubert started working during holidays, which those days was not that common in Poland. He tried to earn money for new clothes for each school year and paid for private English lessons (which appeared to be a very good investment in his future professional career), since at vocational school he was learning Russian and English, but at a very low level. At the same time, he received good training concerning other subjects especially mathematics, physics, and Polish. He recalls this period of education as very fruitful – all his classmates completed higher education. Although it was still the time of state socialism, the teachers knew how to distance themselves from the official ideology and implement true values – a quest for perfection and having idealistic goals in life.

Hubert decided to continue his education in the construction sector and chose a technical university in G., which was “of a good standard and was recognized as such across Poland as far as this profession was concerned.” From 400 accepted students only 40 remained in the second year. “I struggled to stay there\.. But, on the other hand, this was a challenge and you could feel like a man of worth because you were getting there somehow, you know.” For the second time the narrator stresses the value of education and satisfaction of acquiring exclusive knowledge. Its quality is measured by high standards – the effort that must be put into the process of learning and the applicability of knowledge in the future profession. Such a mode of education is based, to use Bernstein's terms (Bernstein 1975), on a *strong classification* of contents and a *strong framing* of both the sequencing and pace of the contents' acquisition. As the following narration demonstrates, knowledge in these fields of sciences, valid and applicable universally, is transmitted as basically de-contextualized and isolated from culture-specific patterns of communication.<sup>10</sup>

Throughout his studies, he continued the habit of working during holidays. After the first year, having student status, he worked for 2 months on a farm in a small village in England. It was his first contact with foreigners from all over Europe. He recalls it as a very interesting and pleasant time. However, due

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<sup>10</sup> This means that potentially an engineer will find a job abroad faster than a humanist.

to a lower than expected salary and poor living conditions he decided to give up this work earlier and come back to Poland via London where he did some sightseeing.

I came back to Poland with the attitude of never going abroad again, you know... because it was a waste of time, and my goal was to be serious, I should not go against the tide, expect others to always help me and prove, that some people owe me something or that I am just like other people who keep saying: "Because you are from the East," you know.

This is the first time in his account that Hubert introduces the topic of East Europeans' inferiority. It must have been a difficult experience if he decided not to go abroad again. This first work was defined as an unskilled student temporary job, yet he could not accept breaking the rules and being treated without respect. The motive of inferiority is further elaborated on in relation to his profession.

Although he planned not to work abroad for the following few years, the very next year, encouraged by a friend, he went to Germany. He had a housekeeping job in a vocational school for one month.

I myself was assigned to floor cleaning a second-year student –((smiling)), umm- because there was a shop floor which nobody was able to clean properly ((smiling)), uhm- it was all smudged in all possible directions, and while living in B. ((N's place of birth)) I worked at F. for a short period of time ((big automotive factory)), and I needed to know how to use certain cleaning agents and how to apply them to get rid of the problem, you know? [...] it turned out that I cleaned the floor in two hours and there were people who spent the whole week doing it, so the Germans were very pleased, especially that the headmaster would use the main corridor when entering the school, so \... I would start at 7 a.m., cleaned the floor for two hours, then the headmaster came and was delighted with what he saw, you know and then there were some other minor jobs... I picked up some new German vocabulary, because this language is very similar to English so I somehow managed to communicate after one month of cooperation with the Germans. But the work itself was over and I came back to Poland... I came to the conclusion that it makes no sense taking other jobs than the one you learned aaaaaand doing things that have nothing to do with your education is simply a waste of time. \... Those were different times in Poland, at that time people would leave for other countries due to big poverty in the country \ when you look back and think of it /people had nothing, they drove Fiat 126p [small and cheap, but hard-to-get, car manufactured under the license of Italian Fiat between 1970–2000], to have one was an achievement, right?... Therefore, therefore you would go there just to earn some money and you would take whatever popped up in the EU that did not want us within its borders at that time, you know. On the other hand – hmm- I –hmm- came to the conclusion that it was better to earn less and

learn something more field-oriented and connected with my learned profession, but in Poland//I don't know maybe I surpassed the time I was living in because all young people nowadays do like this. You know, they accept some internship or start working in the role they have been educated to take up.

In this passage, there is a very dense and multilevel argumentation concerning the narrator's project of developing his skills and defining his future profession. Although Hubert is a young man just after his second year of engineering, he starts reflecting on the problem that will accompany his future professional life – it is a tension between gained knowledge and high competence level and poor financial gratification. In Germany, he could earn good money for floor cleaning. While discussing the phase of his life he illustrates the economic disproportions (concerning everyday standards of life and wages) between Western and Eastern Europe in the 1990s (very similar even today). The argumentative commentary is very much similar to that of Julia (see Chapter X) who compares the money earned as a physical laborer in Germany with the “scraped up,” very low income of a white-collar worker in Poland. For both, it is connected with a sense of resentment and injustice.

He did this work as a student thus he could think in terms of a temporary suspension of his future professional status. Moreover, his previous experience helped him to do the job exceptionally well. Accumulating experience, developing skills in order to enrich the professional *know-how* has been one of the main features of his professional biography. “I – hmm – came to the conclusion that it was better to earn less and learn something more field-oriented and connected with my learned profession” (see Hermanns 1984). The description of the living conditions in Poland, expressed before this statement, reflects the whole complexity and maturity of Hubert's decisions in face of his future work experiences, as well as contemporary Polish transnational workers' attitudes towards working abroad.<sup>11</sup> He concentrates on broadening his education, professional experiences, and competences, on building new personal and professional networks with the intention of self-development. What is especially interesting in his case is the fact that he defines the situation of working abroad as not always guaranteeing opportunities for developing professional skills; therefore, following student holidays, he decided to work in Poland in order to learn something related with his future profession.

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<sup>11</sup> In many migrants' life histories the motif of better income has prevailed over status and prestige and resulted in consent to downward mobility compared to one's social status in one's country of origin. Such motifs and mechanisms are strongly related to a so-called materialistic value orientation, whereas Hubert consciously distanced himself from such attitudes and represents a post-materialistic value orientation in the sense of Inglehart (1977) (Każmierska, Piotrowski, Waniek 2011).

After graduating from Technical University with high grades he came back to his hometown B. in order to look for a job. Thanks to his friend's help and the good reputation of the technical university he graduated from, Hubert got a job in the power industry, in a big city in southern Poland.

I went for an interview and there was a big man sitting in a nice office and a nice suit... and the interview itself was quite short and he said: Who was your supervising professor?... And at that time there weren't that many courses of study that specialized in building and construction engineering. I said "It was Mr. – M., PhD," "Ahhh – he said – and what was your MA thesis about," I replied "This and that," "Ok., so come to work tomorrow.." and that would be it as for my job interview ((smiling)), because as a matter of fact only three or four students supervised by the mentioned scholar would pass the tests annually and became graduates of this technical university (that Hubert graduated from)) and they already knew the kind of people this scholar liked to work with and the kind of skills that those people mastered.

And another job interview proceeded as follows:

Conversation with the CEO there at BB. [new workplace] also looked like that, there was simply a question – err – like: [CEO's question:] "Polytechnic?," [narrator's answer:] "Yes," [CEO's question about the previous workplace:], "M.?", [Narrator's reply:] "Yes," "And where did you finish school?" he asks, I say "Vocational Technical High School for Construction in B." "Oh, did you have any internships with us?," "Yes," "Then come to work with us" ((CEO)).

Both job interviews show the specificity of the transition period – suspension between old forms of recruitment typical for state socialism with the criteria for assessing a potential employee, and the recruitment model "taken over" from the West.

A very detailed reconstruction of this interaction suggests that it must have been an important experience in Hubert's professional biography. It confirmed his project of professional development: when you follow goals which are not easy but defined as worth making an effort, this results in the appreciation of your professionalism. Moreover, Hubert contrasts this pattern of applying for a job with the Irish one that will be shown below.

Hubert was delegated for a year to a small town near the border of Germany. He worked there in a multinational environment, mainly with Germans and Americans, so he could learn professional English. He also met more experienced older Polish engineers there and, as Hubert says, he could "suck knowledge" from them. Then, he worked again as an engineer for the power industry company and had to commute by train at least 2,5 hours one way. Due to the economic crisis and salary cuts he had to quit

the job. He was hired by another construction company in his hometown, again learning new skills.

So I ended up in a team of construction workers... aaand when I think about it now I have to admit that I couldn't have chosen better, because you could learn a very good building trade... I mean you could join the two skills together – design and practice... umm, there were several older employees, I mean the managers were all 50 and older, and when a freshman of 28 like me came (I could learn a lot)...

After 2 years he was relocated on assignment to the Czech Republic to be a head of a workers' team at construction sites. Due to the lack of proper management and obstacles to visiting home he decided to come back to Poland and work in the company's headquarters. In the meantime, he got married. Then, he was offered a new job by one of his former bosses. Hubert worked as a head of construction workers' team at sport building sites and motorway infrastructure in southern Poland. He worked overtime, yet, some problems with salary payment appeared. Also, his wife was pregnant at that time.

The company [a large state-owned construction company] said it was cutting our wages [...] So keeping in mind that my wife was jobless, our baby was already born and I myself had hardly any time for my private life, I worked non-stop and with my 8-year experience, all possible certificates et cetera. I earned 1200 zlotys a month... /I decided to look for some other job. At that time I sent out 200 applications, I was invited for 2 interviews and received no answer from the remaining 200, since it was generally a hard time, and there was no work, 2 interviews and I found out that they had been looking for someone with lower qualifications [...] I do not know what was the point of that interview, probably only so that someone could tick off that someone came for the interview [...], because the job had already been taken... [...] So – hmm – I decided that something should be done about it, \and there was no other alternative, because there were simply no jobs, no other solution /and so I decided to go abroad. [...] / And err, and there was a problem because a 3-month notice in the company, right?... you could expect that this 3-month notice will be a disaster [...] I was the youngest manager, right? 32 years old, everyone else was under sixty, right? [...] There was such a generation gap, besides, young people were simply not allowed to do so, you had to be good to get this manager [...] And now, suddenly, this youngest one is leaving them, right? [...] So I said that in that case I would go on parental leave ((smiling)) aaand \... Because it is a painless way of leaving the company within two weeks. There is such a possibility// At the time when a man just works all day long, he does not see his child, so you just had to play somehow ... *vabanguje* and there was no way out. So I took this parental leave, bought a plane ticket and went to Ireland/

The quoted passage illustrates clearly that because of the deteriorating and unsteady economic conditions (poorly paid, though highly qualified, job)

Hubert was no longer able to provide for his family and gradually lost control over the course of his daily life.<sup>12</sup> In another part of the interview he adds: "Well, we were in despair, because our bills were not paid." His autobiographical rendering reveals the piling up of difficulties resulting from a series of unfortunate outer events. Consequently, there is a systematically growing and irritating sense of powerlessness and disorientation (Riemann, Schütze 1991, Schütze 2012 [1995]) in his everyday experiences. In an act of desperation, Hubert leaves his wife and a newborn child at home and goes abroad. Due to his proficiency in English and following the already beaten tracks,<sup>13</sup> he intentionally chose Ireland, and excluded the UK keeping in mind the bad experiences of his first student job.

It must be noted here that for Hubert emigration was not an easy solution, but the ultimate way out of overwhelming external circumstances – a specific biographical trap: while working in his (requiring higher education) engineering profession, he could not support his family. If we look carefully at his hierarchy of values, it becomes clear that from the very beginning education is very important for him, since it gives high quality knowledge and competencies which enable him to improve his expertise in the field of engineering. Interestingly enough, Hubert decides to change jobs only when he can no longer stand poor living conditions or develop skills. He appreciates very much generational transmission of experiences which is rooted in the modern pattern of labor relations. In Margaret Mead's understanding (1975) these are defined as postfigurative, that is, authority is supported by wisdom and experience accumulated with age. He eagerly and quickly learns from others and in a relatively short period of time becomes a very good (but very low paid) engineer responsible for complex constructions.

At this point Hubert comments on the social history of the Polish transformation of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s – the costs of economic changes experienced in different social strata. In his case, the devaluation of educational capital appeared to be the most harmful consequence. Although well-educated and devoted to his profession, he becomes one of the "victims" of the economic changes and pays the costs of transformation. Nevertheless, his background and former experiences have enabled him to cope with systematic difficulties, disorientation and feelings of total senselessness and to orient himself again. Both his previous "initiations"

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<sup>12</sup> It is worth comparing his experiences with those described by Aleksandra Leyk and Joanna Wawrzyniak in their book *Cuts. An Oral History of Post-Socialism* (2020) in which people deal with transition from socialist factories to international corporations.

<sup>13</sup> After joining the EU and open borders after 2004, new opportunity structures have emerged. Since emigration has become a very common topic in the public and private discourse, they seemed to be easily available to everyone. The UK and Ireland have been the most popular destinations among Poles.

into transnational work (work on the Polish/German borderland, in the Czech Republic), as well as his unwavering conviction about his professional value, together with a very good command of English helped him establish and implement an effective biographical action scheme. Hubert planned to work legally abroad and to only take jobs in his profession (he planned to come back within 2 weeks if legal status could not be attained). Therefore, before he left, he had contacted a job recruitment agency and had been offered a job in one of the major cities in Ireland. With just 200 euros borrowed from his friends in his pocket he left Poland, but it appeared that the job had already been taken. Fortunately, his friend offered him a place to sleep. Two weeks later the narrator found a job as a senior structural technician (not engineer) in a construction company. He worked there for almost 4 years since 2005. He recalls:

It was a totally different search than in Poland, you know. Because – hmm what was important? When you went for an interview in Poland, you would tell them where you worked, what you did, whereas the Irish would be interested in everything/ he was even interested in... Say a young man comes in, a graduate, and it is very good if he worked somewhere else, was a helper, cleaner, because then you would know that the candidate was ambitious and eager to learn, you know, and he wants to earn money, does his best, does not roam and earn his livelihood god knows how/... So I needed to make some changes to my CV, starting from bottle washing in a bottling plant up to the job connected with my education... and it was very interesting, because they could follow a candidate's career path and his approach to life and what is expected of him/ I needed to make a compilation of various technical drawings and get them from Poland, all of them were in a very big paper format to show that I have learned something [...] I spent there around 2 weeks and the time flew really quickly, you know. Sending out applications takes time, all those Irish companies need two weeks up to one month to collect the whole set of applications, and have interviews with all the candidates... so it is a totally different story than in Poland, not that you send an application and you get the answer within two or three days, there you could wait two months and say then they would call you and tell you that your resume was stored in the database and they became interested in your application, in Poland your CV would be thrown away into the waste bin long ago, wouldn't it? And one company in U. [a small town in the middle of Ireland], a very small company, dealing with construction works made of steel... so I bought a ticket and went to U. ... Very nice people, they wanted to book me a flat and so on, just the salary was poor, right?... It was my goal to earn some amount there, otherwise it made no sense, you know. Anyway, working in Poland on a managerial position, you could earn some money, you know. So I went back to Dublin and made an arrangement that I would be back the following week, because I had to settle all the matters in Dublin... I came back to Dublin, and there was a job advertisement that an engineer was being looked for... so I went for an interview/ I mean, I drew up my CV, and they phoned me the following day and I went for an interview... a design

company, and talked with the bosses about what I had done and –hmm- they said they needed to think it over and I replied that they had no time in fact, because if it took them two days then, I was going to move to U., you know ((laughing)) / and so they were very shocked to hear that a Pole would tell them either this or that, because this is their way of thinking about us, you know. So I got on the bus, and went to U., I got off on the station in U. and I got a phone call from Dublin, they decided to give me a try ((smiling)) And so I ended up in a company, where I worked for over three and a half years... the moment I was employed, there were many job offers and few Poles working there, a position of a designer was proposed to me. I said "Unfortunately, I do not know all the Irish technical standards, and I would prefer to work as assistant for six months and then to become a designer" And maybe this was a mistake, because it turned out after some time that Ireland produced so many young designers so that they decided it was better for an Irishman to become a designer and the Polish people remained on their lower positions as technicians, assistants et cetera. ... hmm – and it wasn't so that the Irish were exceptionally good, since the level of education was far lower in Ireland as far as primary school and university education was concerned/ [...] And the job of a designer requires lots of construction work supervision, business travels, and meetings with other companies' representatives, and so they preferred an Irishman to negotiate with an Irishman, the perspective changes when it comes to a foreigner, so generally it came down to the situation that they were travelling and we were doing all the work, you know,... project, non-project work, design, absolutely everything \... and... and the company itself was quite ok...

In the above fragment Hubert describes differences in cultural patterns and schemes of action in the labor markets in Poland and Ireland starting from submitting a CV, the evaluating process, to the very work on a construction site. He compares the local and common stock of knowledge to his own knowledge at hand (Schütz 1990a). He was also confronted with certain stereotypes and learned very quickly that foreign workers are expected to follow orders and not to manage others even if their expertise and experience is better. The narrator tried to act against it by putting himself in an equal position as the locals on the one hand, and not losing the status of a stranger on the other. The feeling of inferiority, strengthened by his conviction about proficiency and universality of his knowledge; sensitivity to others combined with reciprocity of perspectives and responsibility in terms of civil society practices intensifies his biographical work (Strauss 1993, Schütze 2008a, b) and widens his European mental space (see: footnote 12 in Chapter X). The general frame for those experiences is Hubert's loneliness in terms of his family relationships, which appeared to be the most important biographical cost. He comments on this not only in relation to his individual experiences, but also other Polish goal-oriented migrants who went abroad to solve financial problems or accumulate money and then came back home. Their main characteristic is a sense of temporality, usually severely

limiting or even blocking any kind of social engagement. “Living out of the suitcase” determined people’s biographical orientation and helped to suspend social roles and affiliations. Hubert alluded to the examples of men running “double lives” – having full families in Poland and love affairs abroad.

Well, let’s be honest and say if a married person goes abroad and finishes work at 17.30, and what to do after work? You may bear it and watch TV for one year, you know? You may spend one year travelling around, you know... and what can you do next, either you become an alcohol addict or look for a new partner.

Although Hubert’s case is a remarkable example of extensive biographical work on maintaining family relationships, this passage is a sarcastic commentary on life situations influenced by socio-biographical constraints of goal-oriented mobility (see Kaźmierska, Piotrowski, Waniek 2011). He points to the difficulty of keeping balance between the feeling of being lonely and uprooted abroad and being a homecomer (Schütz 1990a) who endeavors to sustain intimate relationships with home. Hubert claims that one has to be very self-determined to maintain close ties with the family who stayed back home, since it requires a lot of attention, determination, phone calls, and visits.

There is also another socio-cultural aspect of this situation. The social status of a guest-worker is related to the role of a stranger “who comes and goes” in Simmel’s sense (Simmel 2001). Therefore, he does not require much social attention and respect, because the host society does not presume that he would stay for long. When observing the Irish society, Hubert realized that his experience was limited to professional contacts not necessarily broadened by social and informal relationships. But, he was also aware that one had to take into account a broader social context of one’s current position in the host society. Thus, he reflects on the arguments of both the Polish and Irish workers.

so you need to be cautious here, it often happens that the Polish (there) who increase efficiency and do 200% more and there are arguments between the Irish and the Polish... because the Irish (have been working there) for 10 years whereas Poles one year, you know... so a man in his twenties will work differently than the one that is 40 years old, you know... so it is a question of matching, you know.

The comparison of the life situation of a guest worker and the local community members is a recurring topic in his rendering. It is accompanied by a sense of responsibility in terms of civil society.

When I left for Ireland, I assumed that I would look for a legal job only in my field of study, you know. You get the number, basic insurance, and the employer needs to show consideration for you, because the tax is paid, anyway, I was always

of the opinion that creating such a situation, when the country, hmm, does not open the job market, then this causes a gray area gap automatically, you know. Those people are in the gray area and in fact the supervision over the market by the local authorities does not work, and this all causes unfair competition on the market, right? Because it is no surprise that every capitalist wants to know, have the biggest income aaaaaaaand earn as much as possible, you know if the opportunity arises for the company to hire somebody illegally without tax being paid and upon the agreement with the employee himself, they will do it because they don't care about the employee and the latter has no alternative so he will do it, because he knows what he's doing, right? And this will be unfair towards other employees who work in this country and who have to pay contributions to the National Health Service, pension contribution and so on, you know? So I liked it in Ireland, I liked that we paid taxes as the others did, you know taxes, social security, and so on. They would never say "because you are a cheaper employee," because I wasn't, I sometimes got more money, you know.

Working in Europe is associated here with being a citizen of a welfare state which guarantees employment, true recognition of professionalism (also in terms of income), regard and responsibility on the one hand, and expectation to respect rules on the other. The concept of Europe is not represented here by symbolic ideas introduced in order to construct European identity, but from the perspective of the socio-economic aspect of work. When expressing such an attitude Hubert alludes both to transnational workers' (also Polish) practices abroad and the Polish labor market when exploring the gray area. The narrator seems to suggest that such a defined Europe should be implemented in Poland. He also clearly distinguishes European values from a national attitude:

[...] we have to have the roots down. I really can't imagine that//I think that the Union is a, hmm, union of nations just that... you cannot deprive people of their roots, because then they would be from nowhere and having no goals, they lose, they lose things they became attached to, that motivated them and so on. I think that we hmm should live in some, some zone where we are able to be mobile, I can't imagine it otherwise, you know, so... I cannot see the reason why I shouldn't be proud of being Polish. Communism was abolished ((laughing)) and we are currently one of the most entrepreneurial nations in Europe aaaaaand we have achieved so much, so if we only wanted to get along with one another, this would be great.

Being proud of his country, having strong conviction that one gets a good education in Poland, Hubert does not insist on taking an occidental perspective as such, rather implementing civil society values and rules of "well-defined capitalism" (i.e., free from neoliberal tensions). From the whole narrative we may conclude that Hubert would like to see Poland as an equal partner in the

EU though he realizes that the country has to deserve such status in the same way as he, a well-qualified engineer, deserves respect and recognition in his work. That is why the narrator is very sensible to the stereotype of inferiority of “the East” which is often taken for granted (Davies 2006).

And it came to a point, a job was to be done, a power plant of which no one had the faintest idea... ahhh ((sighing)) and so when the gentlemen engineers came up with their ideas, I was called by the boss and asked about what should be done with it, you know?... and I said “You need to do this and that, these and those pillars” And no one believed me, you know? ((smiling)), because a Pole would not be believed to know right, you know... So the English were asked for support, and there was a meeting with them ((smiling)), then they came once again, and then the third time, then went to Belgium to see a similar site, and then travelled there once again and again... and after three weeks they developed a solution similar to mine ((smiling))... And in the end it was me, a technician, who was supposed to do all the work, I did it.

This is not the only example where Hubert points out that deep-seated assumptions held by Western Europe societies about the inferior nature and civilizational backwardness of Central and Eastern Europe being the aftermath of a retrospective and an archaic image of the “wild” East, is projected onto contemporary immigrants. The narrator recalls many instances which illustrate his own experiences of being a victim of certain stereotypical assumptions about Polish engineers (or workers in general). It is often believed that they are not educated enough or less experienced than West European professionals, but this usually proves to be false. What is of significance in Hubert’s case is his creative attitude towards these challenging situations. He always attempts to take the perspective of the other and (re)work the stereotypes not by means of ideological dispute, but continuous efforts to create a field of effective communication. This means that Hubert uses commonsense strategies in order to foster symmetrical mutual give-and-take (professional) interactions (cf., Strauss et al. 1985).

Since 2009 Hubert has lived in Poland and runs his own business together with his wife based on their professional education. In his narrative, he mainly concentrates on the sphere of work, which is embedded in a larger context of his biography – mainly family life. His biographical orientation is characterized by continuity, entirety, stability, regularity, and repeatability. He presents his story in a very mature way – it is well-ordered and rich with self-reflective commentaries and evidence of reciprocity of perspectives in interactions with others. The main storyline is dominated by the narrative scheme of communication, whereas argumentation is scarcely developed. He seems to control his narration reducing a “confessing-like” style of self-presentation, which we find characteristic of professionals’ narrations.

### Robert's case

We have emphasized several times in the text that Robert's case was juxtaposed with Hubert's interview due to the similarity of significant socio-demographic characteristics and at the same time a difference in the context of achieving professional success, which in the case of our second interlocutor is undoubted, and its achievement (and in a sense proving in the narration) is one of the key frameworks of the interview.

In the main part of the narration, Robert focuses primarily on the reconstruction of his educational and professional career. The latter is as follows: after completing higher education he managed to get a job at a bank where he was employed in the department introducing new technologies.

After initial successes, his company was taken over by the competition, and the narrator decided, together with his colleagues, to resign and move to a well-known nationwide clothing company. After two years, he gave up (due to the poor financial condition of the company) and decided to return to the financial sector. In one of the currently largest Polish banks, and at the time when the interlocutor started working there – newly established, he co-created one of the important segments of this corporation.

He still works at this company today. His professional position allows him to be classified as a high-level manager, although it should be emphasized that this is not the organization's top management. During his career he was never dismissed or experienced a clear demotion (admittedly, as a result of organizational transformations in the current workplace, it can be concluded that sometimes his position in the structure weakened, but these were not unequivocal situations and were not associated with, for example, lowering salary). Even if he was struggling with career problems (such as solvency problems in one of the jobs), the interlocutor swiftly managed to change the employer. So, we can conclude that the characteristics of his professional biography is a success story. As emphasized above, the first part of Robert's narrative develops primarily around an educational career and then a professional one. In the final part, the interlocutor describes his family (he has a wife and two children, a 13-year-old son and a 10-year-old daughter).

Robert was born in 1972 in a small city in central Poland where his family had lived for several generations. Both of Robert's parents were teachers and until the time of his studies the narrator was in the schools where at least one of them was working. The grandfather (on his father's side) was a small entrepreneur right after the war. His role in the context of family history was important because he left capital in the form of real estate, which was an additional financial resource for Robert's family in later times:

He was, hmm, he had no education, he finished several primary school years, as it was practiced before the war, but after the war he started working somewhere in textiles, and had a few looms there. And despite this unfavorable system, somewhere on the edge of the law he was functioning somewhere, he employed a few people at his place, and there they lived too easily, unfortunately, until my time a significant part of the property that they worked out did not survive, so I could not take advantage, but some real estate is still there, so is some souvenir from grandparents.

It is worth noting here that while in the case of Hubert we emphasized his post-materialistic attitude to the world (especially in the context of work as an activity creating opportunity structures, for example, through the development of skills or acquiring knowledge), Robert presents the opposite attitude – focused on raising capital. Of course, in many places he highlights or contemplates various biographical experiences using intangible criteria. However, among others, in the quote quoted above, when he talks about his grandfather's heritage, he refers to material issues as a determinant of assessment – in this case it is about resourcefulness and efficiency in accumulating assets. He uses similar criteria when reconstructing his childhood image:

Well, but going back to school, I somehow went through it without major problems. As for the material situation, contrary to appearances, it was not good. It was as average as it was in those days, everyone had more or less equal, it was difficult to buy anything, even with money, so that the lack of money was not felt so much. Most things were done, I remember when my father got a fridge somewhere, a TV, we stood in queues for a week to buy Rubin 714P, err, but it was a standard that in no way made me feel worse or better err than this material side err, I mean probably the fact that my parents/ dad later became the headmaster, so that materially they should be somewhere above average, but the times were that, err, that any major shopping or holiday trips, somewhere there you had to scrape and organize that money.

It is worth comparing this description of the childhood period with a quote regarding the standard of living Robert and his family have:

Comparing err my material status and material err mainly, yes, with what my parents had there, although probably err... Their work seems to be as much, if not more responsible and demanding, err so as I say, I remember that every larger purchase of a washing machine, fridge, even when you could buy it, when they were in stores, well, it was a huge financial effort for them, looking for that money somewhere, collecting, borrowing from grandparents. Well, for me at the moment the purchase of such equipment, on the one hand, it has become relatively cheaper, on the other hand, that if I earn above this national average, there is no bending over backwards, I have such savings that easily allow me to

plan such purchases, without any dramatic advance. Err such a change, which is very important to me, it is a matter of such trips, rest, yes. My parents had a lot of these holidays, in fact, I did as well, but we went away for two weeks, maximum three, and I always remember that these were very economical trips, because it was difficult to collect so much money during these 10 months of work so as to splash out during the holidays. Now, with my children, it has actually become a standard that we go away twice in the summer, plus some long weekends, and twice in the wintertime skiing somewhere. Err, so this somewhere over the decades has changed so much that it was not a standard once. And in winter the children's entertainment was then a sled and err a hill on the neighboring street. Well, now everyone is skiing and actually it is only a matter of whether it is done in the country or if you go somewhere abroad to make it even better, yes. Oh ... that's probably the number of such changes that are the most, the most visible to me, right?

The role of intergenerational comparisons – which are crucial in many life histories collected in this project – will be described further. Here, we would only like to emphasize that one of the dimensions of social change and assessment of individual success is the level of consumption, which in the case of the interlocutor is not only significantly higher than in the case of his parents, but also places him above the average for the whole society.

In elementary school and secondary school, he is a distinguished student. Initially after school, he wants to study medicine, but he changes his mind and decides to study at polytechnic:

But/ I mean in secondary school I ended up in biological-chemical class, err, but unfortunately, it turned out that, err, despite the fact that my mother taught there, the set of teachers that I got, especially in chemistry, was so dramatically weak that with this chemistry I couldn't go on because there was no chance. During secondary school, err, my interests changed a little, because I started perceiving medicine as a more, err, feminine, female specialization. I mean there were twenty-one girls among thirty classmates, and they all wanted to study medicine. So, just out of perversity and desire to do something different there, I think somewhere in the fourth grade of secondary school, I decided to go to the polytechnic. Ugh, and because I was good at maths, for the last year, err, I took some extra courses, myself, to get there, in maths, physics, and language because there were five exams then. And for this polytechnic, to applied mathematics and technical physics – that's what it was called then, I got admitted.

One can hypothesize that the period spent on his studies is formative for the further course of the biography for at least two reasons. First of all, what the interlocutor clearly emphasized is the fact that it was the first moment in his life when he became more independent, which for Robert meant, *inter alia*,

learning in a place where one of his parents does not work. However, the most important issue is the fact that the university gives him an education, which is a pass to the first job after graduation:

In the fourth/ fourth year I chose some specialization – IT, but it turned out that there were not enough places in IT, so they placed me in statistics with IT. But, it turned out to be a very interesting choice, because I liked statistics and I also found such a professor, a supervisor from P, who later just helped me with, err, preparing for my diploma exam. Err, and so we also established quite a close relationship, we even met at his home so as not to go to L unnecessarily. And this fourth and fifth year, where there was more computer science, it was also fun with these statistics, I even began to enjoy it, I even wanted to be an actuary for a while. Err, but, err, later it turned out that you need to have loads of money to pass some exams there, to prepare for them, and you have to devote a lot of time to become an actuary. So I gave it up and I didn't know what I was going to do there, but I wanted to be close to IT and close to statistics.

In the quote above, we can see how little is needed to direct the path of the entire biographical career in a completely different direction. Financial restrictions blocked one of the possible opportunity structures for Robert (see introduction to this part of the book and Chapter X) and biographical paths of development. At the same time, however, the closing of one of the possible paths directed him (which of course we are not able to state at the moment of the interview) towards the main direction of his future professional activity, that is, information technology in banking.

However, entering the labor market itself after graduation was at the cost of several months of stress and, as we will see in the quote below, related to one of the key turning points of Robert's biography:

I finally found this job, and I think I had sent four or five CVs and found a job at a bank, BPG, two skyscrapers away that way, it was the year 1996/97. And there, as a young, talented but unskilled person, I was thrown into implementing a cash machine network. It was 40 cash machines in the country, the first, one of the first networks of such [blurred] cash machines, and the fact that I landed there – because my parents, as they saw that looking for work somehow was not going well, then of course my dad suggested that there in P he has such acquaintances in education that he can easily get me a job as an IT teacher at school, well, maybe every father would want his son to follow in his footsteps, because it is not the best, it is bad, but tested and it will not cause harm. Well, somehow, I managed to avoid becoming a teacher. So in retrospect, it was a very good decision, I do not know if it was completely conscious, or simply because of the desire to oppose my father there, but even if, the fact that from September 1<sup>st</sup> I could have started this job at school, because then IT professionals were also sought, I did not start it.

And after sending this CV to several places, people usually there, err, either they did not respond or they replied that they were not looking for anyone. And in UEB, err, they called back, and they said so, that in two days I was supposed to be at work, from the first of October, and in a week, I was going to go to some foreign training, three weeks. Because they wanted to quickly organize this project and wanted to send someone. Also, here, my story progressed very quickly, it was a very intense period, because I actually worked there for two years, but we were three people who implemented this network of cash machines, which was such a guerrilla, pioneering approach in banking at that time.

In the quote above various issues which require a comment intertwine. First of all, Robert is looking for a job for a relatively short time – he manages to get it without much effort and although he does not directly address the reasons behind this success, we can assume that it was at least partly related to his education profile. Secondly, we can trace the background constructions that are key to his history, in which the interlocutor emphasizes the potential alternative, which in his case turns out to be work at school. This is a striking contrast especially from the perspective of his later professional career and the position he manages to achieve, resulting from the juxtaposition of the potential of becoming an IT teacher with a high position in one of the largest Polish banks. This is also an important thread because of Robert's relationship with his parents, especially with his father, who, having a network of contacts and the position of school director, tries to use them to provide his son with a good (at least from his perspective) start. Here, we would like to emphasize the way the narrator assesses the work at school, and actually the work and achievements of his father: "well, maybe every father would want his son to follow in his footsteps, because it is not the best, it is bad, but tested and it will not cause harm."

The thread of juxtaposing one's situation, choices, outlook on life with what was and is the share of Robert's parents will appear many times in the interview. At this point, we just want to emphasize this, and the reader will find a more detailed analysis in the further part of the chapter.

The narrator decides to reject the path proposed by his father and decides to "take matters into his own hands." Although he clearly deviates from the institutional pattern of expectations, he also does not undertake a clearly outlined biographical action plan assuming a specific career path. It seems that even if Robert had wanted to work in a bank, he was not necessarily determined to follow the narrow specialization associated with cash machines. We can say, referring to the theme of this part of the book, that he took advantage of the opportunity structure, which was associated with the opening of new sectors of financial institutions, their technological leap, and the new career opportunities which followed. Motivated by, among others, the wish to become independent, he started his first job at the bank and, what is also important from the

perspective of his further fate, it was associated with the creation of a virtually new organization department and the introduction of new technologies on the Polish market (networks of cash machines). Despite the positive evaluation of this period, Robert decided to leave work after two years. Interestingly, it seems that the motif for such decision was related to his nonacceptance of the organizational changes, which, after many years, he assesses as natural processes inscribed in the logic of the market economy:

But, it was great until somewhere in the Ministry of Finance the decision was made to merge those banks that were previously separated there after 1989, to make it look more market-like. And four/ three banks, those smallest ones, including The Universal Bank of Commerce in L, another one from Lublin, from Szczecin, were to be taken over by BANK X. And the first decision of BANK X was, of course, that all the cash machine networks that were in these three banks were to be incorporated. And looking back, it was nothing unnatural, because you never respect your first job, as I watch other people too, huh. So, with our team, a three-person cash machine unit, as we learned that they were to migrate us, one day the three of us said that we don't give a shit about this job, and if so then we are quitting, having nothing else prepared yet.

We can see here that in retrospect, Robert assesses his decision as reckless. However, it seems that this was also an example of individual resistance to processes which also in his later career stages caused his dissatisfaction.

His bank (and consequently also his department and what he managed to achieve) underwent changes in line with the market logic (the decision was taken by state structures, but the motivation behind it was characteristic of the market logic). Robert does not present here the broader context of this decision, but the action he takes can be considered as a strategy of individual resistance (although he quits his job in consultation with two colleagues who together form the department responsible for the development of the cash machine network project). Therefore, he chooses independence and puts emotional issues over any profits associated with remaining in the corporate structure. Referring to the concept of a biographical scheme of action, one of the process structures characteristic of the autobiographical narrative interview (see Chapter X), it can be seen that Robert "is trying to actively shape the course of his life" (Schütze 2012 [1995]: 157) and to some extent he does it again, if we consider the decision to reject the job offer at the school put forward by his father. On the other hand, it seems important that also in the situational context of the current workplace, Robert is not satisfied with the direction of changes in the organization and again the issue of his negative assessment of following the market plays an important role (in this case it is about the increasing corporatization of the bank's organizational culture):

Err, later it started to get better again, but I think, I have been observing this for 3–4 years, that our company has already become a huge corporation and such a corporate culture here, unfortunately, is starting to dominate. Err, a lot of outsiders are employed, a lot of consultants, err, who are supposed to throw some/ I mean to give us a fresh look and let us change, for the better, err. In my opinion, they don't always change what needs to be changed, they only change what they just have an idea to change. And, err, the victims of these changes, among others, are us. Well, because the card branch was fucked up two and a half years ago, and we still see the negative consequences till this day, and think that we will still be observing them for many years.

Here we would like to draw attention to the process of transformation of a given organization into a corporation and its consequences for the individual's biographical experience. At the beginning of his professional career, Robert joins a company which has only started introducing changes (technological and organizational) which were pioneers on a national scale. His dissatisfaction is caused by the fact that after a few years it becomes part of a broader structure, and the "work" being the result of his effort is taken over by the competition. In retrospect, he understands this logic of change, but then makes a radical decision and, in an act of protest, quits his job. In the context of the company with where he is currently working (and this relationship has lasted for 13 years), he makes critical comments referring to one of many elements of the corporate life – the introduction of consultants in an advisory capacity, but his strategy of individual resistance is not as radical. Moreover, it seems that Robert, although he considers himself (unreasonably) an expert in the field for which he is responsible and assesses the changes negatively, he still tries to rationalize them:

Well, err, everyone recalls, those who stayed, that then, when we were on the fourth floor, we would meet once a week, we discussed all the topics for 2–3 hours, we planned, err, what now requires 5 meetings and some teleconferences, it once required a half-hour meeting at the desk and there then a division of tasks. Well, this has changed and this – from my perspective – is a change for the worse, but it is possible that somewhere it was a necessary change and from a higher perspective – the bank managers', err, that such a large institution that we have become, to maintain and control, then it was necessary.

Returning to the course of Robert's professional career, after handing in his notice at the bank, the narrator, thanks to networks of connections, moves to a new place. This time, he starts working in a clothing company, in which he joins the IT department:

And Company Y, just like in UEB it was a period of my really hard work, where I learned a lot and it had the greatest impact on, err, future, in retrospect. Company

Y was two and a half years of total fun. Nothing was happening there, it was, err, a typical communist company, even before the changes, it was probably the last chance, err, to see something like this up close. There were crowds of people who I did not know, after three years of working there, what they were doing. Finally, I got to, err, the position of IT boss in the whole Company Y, but after two years I would suddenly discover that somewhere in the other part of the building there was a guy who did not know what he was supposed to be doing, obviously he did not have a computer, but he needed something from me.

When we look at Robert's career in a new place, we will see the success story again. Robert reaches the position of the head of IT in the company. However, in his opinion, it would be difficult to assess the organization itself. Especially when compared to his previous work, where he was responsible for an interesting, "pioneering" project. Here, if he landed well in the team, he did not find too many interesting challenges. It is interesting that ultimately his leave did not involve the search for a new career path, but was a consequence of the problems the company encountered: "Well, but this adventure ended because of, err, Company Y – probably because of what it looked like, found itself in such para- / financial problems that it didn't pay us salaries for two months [laughs], not to mention any bonuses."

One can risk the hypothesis that Robert found himself in a similar situation as Hubert, who was looking for a way out of the difficult financial situation in which he found himself in a company where he worked just before emigrating to Ireland. However, the atmosphere created by the narrator is completely different. Robert – in contrast to Hubert's rather depressing story – presents his vicissitudes lightly, emphasizing their anecdotal value. Of course, what allows him to give such tone to his leaving the company of where no salary was paid is related to what happened next:

But here, somewhere, with a stroke of luck, it turned out that, err, the CEO of L is thinking of opening a bank. At that time, it wasn't called MegaBank yet, but it was called the Mega7 project. And I got to a very important person in my professional life, Piotr, a director who employed me there at UEB and who was also supposed to organize the cards here. At the time, he was employed in the cards, and I remember when I came to this skyscraper and talked to him there, but he knew as little as I did, so no one could tell me. Well, my decision, what made it a little easier for me was that there was no such future, err, of work anyway. We weren't getting the money there anymore, then we got it from some Guaranteed Benefits Fund, because there is such a thing. But, few things kept me there. Err, even considering some uncertainty there, I decided to come here.

Again, it is worth comparing Robert's history with Hubert's experience. Thanks to acquaintances made during the career, the first interlocutor does not

face a difficult unemployment situation at all. To be precise – he immediately goes to a new company, a bank just being created, which as a young organization needs experienced professionals. While meeting a specific person earlier seems crucial here, the issue of skills, knowledge, and education, which from the bank's perspective guaranteed that Robert would cope with his tasks, was also significant. This is what happens anyway, and after many years the interlocutor becomes a high-class specialist in the field of payment transactions, which directly translates into his social status in the organization, his and his family's material position, but on the other hand, also gives him the opportunity to watch how the organizational culture changes. In a broader perspective of the whole biographical interview, the success achieved by Robert also has its darker side, which we will try to show using the example of a detailed analysis, typical for the narrative autobiographical interview structure – coda (see, among others, (Schütze 2008a: 175–176). Its sequence begins when the narrator speaks about starting work at MegaBank:

Well, err, here, err, maybe some three or four months there was some kind of preparation, but then the hard work started and, if you think about it, for over the past 13 years, I still work my ass off here so much that there is not much time to get bored, thinking about other things. Errr, financiallyyyy, err, as I said – better than I had thought, so from my perspective I don't think I could, err, in banking and even outside banking in L find a better paid job. Err, I do what I like, I do what I know best. Err, so if the company does not give up on me and somehow what I value does not change, I do not expect myself to change this job, right.

Referring to the definition, the coda essentially consists of two parts. The first, which has the task of closing the contents of the autobiographical story, that is, bringing the stream of life memories and experiences to an end (Schütze 2008a: 179) and the second, whose task is to re-introduce the perspective of what is here and now, in other words, return to the situation of the interview. However, in the case of Robert, after the first – summarizing coda fragment quoted above, the narrator is still trying to "deal with" his history. Initially, it seems that reaching the end of his history, he realizes that he had focused too much on the professional perspective and devoted little space to his family and private life, and that he is trying to fill these gaps: "So perhaps now a bit, because I left out, err, I followed the educational-professional path, and err now more about the family."

However, the essential part of completing his life history begins with the return to the time of working at Company Y, during which he managed to finish postgraduate studies in management of capital and state-owned companies. This passage is indeed a supplement to the previous information provided by the narrator about education and professional work. Another thread is the

relationship with the history of the relationship with his wife, which began while working at Company Y. Its important element is the moment when Robert sums up what has been achieved by referring to buying a flat and quickly paying off the mortgage:

But later, err, she came back and I started earning good money, and she was also doing well, so we could afford to change the flat and pay off the mortgage quickly, because nowadays it is nice to show off that you have a flat, a car, and some other things, it doesn't mean that you have, err, that you have, that your status is OK, because you just have to look at the loans you have taken out and for how many years you will be paying them off. That this also, also changed.

Then Robert talks about the birth of his children and subsequent moving houses, next he tries to close the structure of the coda again. However, the researcher conducting the interview does not move on to additional questions, but still leaves the narrator with a free space of expression, suggesting only that there are issues which he would like to know more about. Robert continues his account "carried" by the need to say what he calls "a curiosity," and which for our analysis is one of the keys to the interpretation of the whole of his biographical experience:

Well, so much for the family, professional, I don't know, err, I wouldn't want it to come out here, that I am bragging here, I don't know, any other material issues, what other topics to raise?

I: If you want to add something, go ahead and add, and I already have my list of questions.

N: A list of questions, OK. I mean, from such curiosities, I will say that I never had my private mobile phone [laughs]. I've always had a company one, when it became popular then I got the first one in my current job, at MegaBank, and since then. I had two private cars, but I haven't had my own private one for quite a few years, I only have, err, a company one. These are also some nice bonuses that were unattainable for my parents and for me and my children are already obvious that you get it at work, if you have a good job. Comparing err my material status and material err mainly, yes, with what my parents had there, although probably err... Their work seems to be as much, if not more responsible and demanding, err so as I say, I remember that every larger purchase of a washing machine, fridge, even when you could buy it, when they were in stores, well, it was a huge financial effort for them, looking for that money somewhere, collecting, borrowing from grandparents. Well for me at the moment the purchase of such equipment, on the one hand, it has become relatively cheaper, on the other hand, that if I earn above this national average, there is no bending over backwards, I have such savings that easily allow me to plan such purchases, without any dramatic advance. Err, such a change, which is very important to me, it is a matter of such trips, rest, yes. My

parents had a lot of these holidays, in fact, I did as well, but we went away for two weeks, maximum three, and I always remember that these were very economical trips, because it was difficult to collect so much money during these 10 months of work so as to splash out during the holidays. Now, with my children, it has actually become a standard that we go away twice in the summer, plus some long weekends, and twice in the wintertime skiing somewhere, err, so this somewhere over the decades has changed so much that it was not a standard once. And in winter the children's entertainment was then a sled and, err, a hill on the neighboring street. Well, now everyone is skiing and actually it is only a matter of whether it is done in the country or if you go somewhere abroad to make it even better, yes.

Robert, starting with a funny anecdote about phones (after all, we live in a world where everyone has a mobile phone, and the narrator does not have to buy one), he describes the scale of his success. Just as with the quick mortgage repayment, a telephone or a car which others have to buy to show off, Robert just gets it from the company. Therefore, he does not have to confirm his position through conspicuous consumption. The measure of his success is that it is the company that values him high enough to provide him with a high salary "protecting" him from borrowing money (or allowing him to pay off debts quickly), equipping him with the tools necessary for work, but also for daily functioning. Therefore, the relationship with the bank seems to be the essential framework structuring the interlocutor's narrative. The key sentence of this part of the interview is said a moment later, however: "These are also some nice bonuses that were unattainable for my parents and for me and my children are already obvious that you get it at work, if you have a good job."

We would like to highlight two issues here. First, the criterion of good work, which is receiving a number of benefits. Receiving this scale of perks is rare even at the bank where the interlocutor works. Using this logic, it turns out that almost everyone around Robert has a job worse than him. This is important because the second thread, which in our opinion is crucial in the context of the whole biographical narrative, is to use the example of his parents. Robert talks about the importance of the work they did, but at the same time shows how little from his contemporary perspective they could afford. This is perhaps one of the most important dimensions of social change which occurs between the generation of Robert's parents and Robert himself. Assuming that both he and they were professionally accomplished, both performed important tasks, and the overall measure of one's success is material position, in Robert's narrative his achievements are the proof of his parents' "loss," which the narrator himself describes as follows:

Oh... that's probably all, regarding such changes that, that are the most, most visible to me, right. A lot of everyday problems, existential problems I would say, err, remained. And if you think about it, it's, it's the same as my parents/

what problems they had, they experienced, I have similar ones, and probably my children will also do, because you will not run away and no transformations will change this, no transformations. Err, I mean, this period somewhere of my entering the job market and maturing, well, everybody knows that a lot of important things happened. The year 1989, all these ownership changes in the country. And here I think that I did alright in these transformations, even very well – I owe myself a little, a bit of luck, that I was somewhere at the right moment and time and took advantage of this opportunity. But, the way I see it, it is the generation of my parents that has been terribly mistreated by these changes, even I, working in this bank, in UEB, as part of some, err, nationalization of this bank, as an employee I got, err, stocks and maybe that money was not great, but somehow it was enough for my first second-hand car, right? And my folks, who had worked for quite a few decades, err, in the previous epoch, got absolutely nothing, except that now they get some pensions, from which they try to live, err, a better or worse life. So, the perspectives of those changes that have happened, well, I can also see myself as a beneficiary.

I: Academically it is called the “winners and losers of the transformation”

N: [laughs] Well, then I am among the first ones.

I: In this perspective probably not much will change, so probably yes. OK, would you like to add anything else?

N: Nothing comes to my mind, it is logically ordered, also if I have omitted anything from your perspective, or told you too little, I will supplement it.

Therefore, in the broken coda structure presented by Robert, the key fragments appear not in the content itself, which closes the interview, but between them. In the extensive commentary, in which the interlocutor includes the history of his marriage, or obtaining additional education, the most important role is played, however, by the parts in which comparisons between the narrator and his parents appear. This allows him to summarize his life story through evaluative statements about him and his parents history. In this perspective, Robert is a beneficiary of the changes even when the company in which he worked practically went bankrupt. In turn, his parents had to deal with a difficult financial situation even when both of them were working professionally, although they worked hard and (as we know from other parts of the interview) supported the PPR state. Many years of work at school did not translate into high pensions either. Without recalling the parents' situation and working through the difference in the material status, Robert cannot “finish” the coda. He does this only after expressing his opinion and a short exchange of views with the researcher, which allows them to ease the atmosphere.

The narrator, using the example of his parents, points to the important role of transformational change as the main framework structuring the world he

was entering at the time of his studies and starting his professional career. He interprets his biography from the perspective of the opportunity, which he used primarily through economic promotion in comparison to his parents (which can also be seen in other parts of the interview). There may be something more in this statement, which relates to the assessment of his father and mother as the victims of the transformation. Robert, as the beneficiary, thanks to the comparison sees the complexity, complication, and injustice of the change taking place. This is important because this type of utterance can be treated as a counterpoint to those quotes and parts in which the respondent creates a picture of the success of his own biographical career. This, of course, on many levels is undeniable, but also has its flip side. It turns out that the success of the transformation must also have its victims, and its winners may be concealing a sense of guilt because of their own success.

Therefore, we can say that the pair Robert-his parents is a contrast set (Schütze 2008a: 189), which, used in various places in the interview allows the narrator to show the scale of the social change which took place during his life. On the other hand, the use of this comparison is a stimulus to the biographical work which Robert has to do, in order to work through the issue of injustice not only of the transformation itself, but of more general historical processes. This work does not end with the coda in the first part of the narrative. It is also associated with the political revelation the narrator has been experiencing in recent years:

Err, so, since/ I don't know if such political issues would also be interesting, yes? Well, because my parents were probably both members of the Polish United Workers' Party. Mum certainly was, and dad probably also had to be due to the fact that he was the headmaster, so then he had no way out and, so, err, in retrospect, because then I did not see it, they had a very big impact on how I perceived these changes how I position myself with my political sympathies. Well, at home the views were as they were, we read *Gazeta Wyborcza* and *Polityka* every week, and not the more alternative right-wing magazines. And, err, later, I mean, they were not some fierce communists like most people in Poland, err. My dad was one, because he had to, my mother, when I talked to her she was, because she became a complete orphan at the age of 7 or 8, and she decided, err, that if it weren't for the system that existed, err, then she wouldn't have achieved what she had, because she had free schools, free studies, scholarships that allowed her to support herself and practically without any care, she achieved what she had achieved, right? She believed that she had some debt of gratitude to that system and that she's repaying it as much as she can, with her work and commitment. Err, interestingly, my mother taught history, I didn't see it that way, but now we often talk about how much she deliberately or unconsciously falsified this history, or omitted some facts, because you couldn't say loads of things in schools at that time, many things could not be said, yes. Err, and

I think that somewhere there until, err, actually recently I began to perceive these politics differently. I don't know, maybe it's a perspective of 10–15 years. The whole studies and the first jobs, it was/ actually, it was not really that much to me: who's in charge there, from which party, err, which side. I thought it didn't affect my future, and what's going on in, err, the country. Err, it's true, that afterwards my dad even became a member of the Freedom Union, and then he was active in the Civic Platform. So somehow, after these changes, he found himself, he went in a slightly different direction, more so, err, future-oriented, reforming, yes. He did not stay somewhere in the Democratic Left Alliance, he was even a local politician in P. for a while, he also performed some local government functions, so he wanted to do something, change it. But, err, my, err, just such political err sympathies – from the perspective of these last 10–15 years – are moving towards the right.

Let us start with the fact that the issue of political worldview was not “raised” by the researcher, and the beginning of this thread was the spontaneous decision of the narrator. Thus, we can assume that after the parts devoted to education, work, and family, Robert felt a kind of compulsion to present the entirety of his biography, and in this context also an important identity element associated with his political views. Yet, he could not do this without first explaining why his political awakening in adulthood is so important in the context of his biography. This thread, however, is associated with another tension factor in the interview – his parents' involvement in the PPR system. The fact that this is an important problem for the narrator, faded out until now, would be indicated by the appearance of the so-called second-level background construction (Schütze 2012: 269–270), which not only allows Robert to explain his political choices, but also gives him the chance to try to work through the issue of responsibility for the previous political system. The importance of this problem is further raised due to the modern right-wing orientation of the narrator. Robert begins his account with a statement about the potential membership of both parents in PZPR. Then he assures himself of the mother, whose membership he knows about directly from her, and assumes that the father, as the headmaster, probably also joined the party. He says that this has had an impact on his political consciousness – he also includes the issue of reading *Gazeta Wyborcza* and *Polityka*<sup>14</sup>, juxtaposing them with the right-wing magazines. At this point, it seems that the narrator wants to smoothly proceed with further arguments about his right-wing orientation, but he returns again to the issue of his parents' involvement:

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<sup>14</sup> *Gazeta Wyborcza* is one of the most important Polish left-centered daily papers. *Polityka*, in turn, is a current affairs opinion weekly of a similar characteristic. Both titles are one of the most recognizable periodicals on the Polish market and have a big impact on shaping public opinion.

"Well, at home the views were as they were, we read *Gazeta Wyborcza* and *Polityka* every week, and not the more alternative right-wing magazines. And, err, later, I mean, they were not some fierce communists like most people in Poland, err."

Robert explains both his father (briefly emphasizing that he had no alternative) and his mother, who is especially important to him. The reason here seems to be the fact that she is a history teacher, which puts the narrator's mother before moral dilemmas related to what she could versus wanted to teach in class. In conversations with her son, in a sense, she repeats the teaching pattern, but this time she does so without having to fulfil the institutional pattern of expectations, which before 1989 imposed on her the obligation to remain silent or to convey a false picture of history. It seems that it is the motif of moral dilemmas and the associated responsibility that is the main stimulus for Robert's political search.

As we emphasized above, the narrator often uses economic themes to comment on his life and the world in which he operates – even when describing the changes which have taken place in Poland over the last few decades. Also, in the parts of the interview in which he relates to his worldview, the topic of finances returns:

Because, well, I earn quite well, it's such an economic dimension, so that they would take less of these taxes, yes, it's a shame to give away so much of this money, and I give away a lot, right? Especially that I still have the impression that I would be better off using my money than someone else using it for me. Err, the right is not for lowering taxes, err, although, as you said, it is very complicated here.

The argument about the advantage of the private over the public (in this case the narrator presents the postulate to reduce the taxation of his income) fits perfectly within the voice depreciating the role of the state as a social redistributor<sup>15</sup> present in the Polish public debate. When asked about specific political sympathies, he answers:

[...] I mean, here, this right-wing nature is, unfortunately, associated with Law and Justice err, who, because of, err, its leaders, the people who appear somewhere on television, cannot be evaluated positively. But, when it comes to at least the Real

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<sup>15</sup> The trend towards limiting the role of the state is one of the characteristics of the neoliberal discourse present in Polish politics. We can find it both in the political declarations of the groups formed by the right-wing politician Janusz Korwin-Mikke, referred to in a further section of this chapter, or in the left-centered titles mentioned above. This is where *Gazeta Wyborcza* stands out, whose main economic columnists display clear neoliberal views.

Politics Union<sup>16</sup>, yes, Korwin-Mikke<sup>17</sup> or other parties that have such a, err, right-wing approach, both to the economy and how you can shape your, err, internal policy, foreign policy in the country, I am definitely going in this direction.

The postulates of economic liberalization are supported by a strongly conservative voice referring to moral issues – especially in the context of different political options and sexual minorities:

Because for the left wing, I have the impression that the family is of little value, my perspective is due to the fact that I have two children, it has changed, I think about the future of my children, I see what is wrong in schools err, that these schools, they do not look like they should look, but err, the left is going in the direction that it is best if people were single, they do not need to have children, it is best if there was a family of two daddies or two err mommies, err, I'm, err, I mean, very negative about these, errrr, different genders (laughs).

Additionally, Robert clearly emphasizes his attachment to the national symbolic resource in this dimension, which is based on the ethnic and cultural separateness. Paradoxically, as the company where he works is not Polish, this is supported by elements of the Eurosceptic discourse:

Now, what worries me is also such, err, such total, err, submission to the European Union. Err, well, I'm afraid that it might harm our national separateness, right. We are in a great situation that we do not have any minorities in Poland, because if we were such as Ukraine or even Hungary, there are a lot: there are Romanians here, and Russians there. In Poland, after the war, they made sure that all strangers were to be displaced, and people from the other side of the Bug river were resettled here to the Regained Territories, so that we are culturally coherent and, err, I mean, I do not know in what direction this further, errr, this further unification of the Union will go, so to say, yes [...]

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<sup>16</sup> The Real Politics Union is a conservative-liberal party registered in 1990. Its best-known politician was Janusz Korwin-Mikke (see below) until the split in 2011.

<sup>17</sup> Janusz Korwin-Mikke is one of the leaders of the right-wing political scene in Poland. Known for free-market economic views and extreme statements about sexual minorities, women's rights, and racism. He was an MP in the Sejm in 1991–1993 and is an MP in the Sejm for the 2019–2023 term. He was a Member of the European Parliament in 2014–2019. Candidate for the office of the President of the Republic of Poland in the elections in 1995, 2000, 2005, 2010, and 2015. Founder and president of the Real Politics Union (1990–1997, 1999–2002), Liberty and Lawfulness (2009–2011), Congress of the New Right (2011–2015) and the KORWiN party (since 2015), as well as one of the leaders of the federal party Confederation of Freedom and Independence (since 2019).

This paradox, however, is not only specific to Robert's experience. Antonina Kłoskowska in her book *"Kultury narodowe u korzeni"* (Roots of National Cultures) published in 1996 already raised the problem of the particular tension resulting from the clash of globalization with the new wave of nationalisms. (see also: Piotrowski 2006: 244). In Polish (but not only) public discourse on national and cultural identity – intensifying recently due to the "growth" of multicultural life forms – it assumed the form of "fear of Europe" (Piotrowski 1997). We deliberately refer here to the works dating back to a relatively long time ago to show that in Polish sociology voices noticing this problem were not lacking, but they were marginalized. What is more, they do not lose their relevance – quite the opposite – many times these diagnoses apply today. Returning, however, to the narrator's theoretical-argumentative commentary, it should be noted that he refers to the "rhetoric of fear" usually used by "romantic-traditionalist" conservatives (for the record, the counterpoint for this voice is the civilizational optimism of the liberals) (Piotrowski 1997b: 327–328, Krakowiak 2014). It is, as Andrzej Piotrowski explains, "pointing out the negative consequences that the actions of certain people and groups as a whole [in Robert's case – the European Union] can have for the prosperity of the life of the collectivity in the categories of «we» [in Robert's case – the nation]. At stake here is the issue of physical security, material living conditions, and freedom of action according to one's own patterns, and thus the integrity of the cultural form of life." (1997a: 195). However, we must remember that the rhetoric of fear opposes "us" with some "others" – and the contemporary discourse (especially the political one) – somehow "conquers" their strangeness, hostility, and threats from their side, but also attributes specific motivations to them, based on their interest and uncontrolled enjoyment of benefits (cf., Czyżewski, Kowalski, Piotrowski 1997: 37, Czyżewski 2009: 12–13).

Trying to answer the question about the genesis of Robert's political views, we would propose a thesis about the complex impact of the environment in which the narrator moves in. Robert openly speaks of being inspired by colleagues, "who are on the other side" (which means right-wing), showing him websites or historical books which he should read. Nevertheless, it seems that in the course of the interview the issue of the influence of the parents' past, being entangled in the previous system comes to the fore, who in recent years have been either supporters of such parties as the Democratic Left Alliance, Civic Platform, or Freedom Union, or their members (in the case of the father).

From a structural perspective, Robert represents the case of an individual using the cultural capital of his parents, who, thanks to the right decisions, favorable coincidences, and above all the opening of institutional opportunity structures, achieves social promotion visible in his professional position and material status. In the narration, we see it especially when he uses comparisons as part of the contrast

set with the position of his parents. He directly and indirectly describes the history of the transformation of the cultural capital into the economic capital. His parents had the former one as belonging to, or at least aspiring to the intelligentsia of the socialist state. Their earnings, however, never constituted the basis for determining the social status of the family. If we can talk about such an additional (distinctive) function of financial resources in the case of Robert, it would be the legacy of his grandfather – a private entrepreneur of the post-war period. The period of the Polish People's Republic for the analyzed family is the period of building cultural capital, which in the narrator's biography will function through the education system. One can risk the assumption that the interlocutor's educational successes were possible, among others, thanks to the support and social resources of his parents. In the case of Robert, there is ultimately a shift to the position of the middle class in the neoliberal economy of a democratic state. Meanwhile, his parents in the course of the changes were (at least in the opinion of the interviewee) degraded in relation to the position they had before 1989. Along with the change in the basic criterion for determining position in the structure, it turned out that what once gave social prestige (education, profession – in the case of Robert's parents being a teacher), is now giving way to the economic factors.

## Conclusions

Deciding on a contrasting set of cases of Hubert and Robert, we were interested in investigating how it is possible for two individuals, similar in terms of socio-demographic characteristics, to experience extremely different paths of professional and biographical career development. Assuming a similar potential existing in the cultural, social, and economic capital of the narrators and a similar educational path, a logical observation would be to expect similar effects – at least in relation to professional development. “Engineering education” for the families of both interlocutors, as well as for themselves (but also in the then pedagogical and public discourses) was undoubtedly treated as a guarantee of employment and a better future – everlasting practicality, a kind of social usefulness.<sup>18</sup> They both also had features which in a free-market

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<sup>18</sup> A contrast here would be “people for shredding” “people-waste,” and thus, for example, “humanists.” “To be superfluous – as Zygmunt Baumann explains – means to be redundant, unnecessary, useless – regardless of what kind of needs and uses determine the standard of usefulness and indispensability [...]. Others do not need you, they will manage just as well – and even better – without you. [...] To think someone is better means to throw them out because they are intended to be thrown out. [...] Redundancy shares its meaning with words such as ‘discarded’, ‘outcasts’, ‘garbage’ – in short ‘waste’” (Bauman 2004, 25).

economy and the neoliberal model of "ruling through freedom" are promoted as indispensable for success.

As we know from the description of the biography of both interlocutors, their life histories are different. Robert uses opportunity structures resulting primarily from the special demand for specialists with specific education, skills, and competences. Already during his studies, he enters a field that has not yet been developed and established, and later, after entering the labor market, thanks to being in the avant-garde he achieves a high position in one of the largest Polish banks.<sup>19</sup> Hubert, despite the specialized education and vast expertise, precisely because of the closure or fossilization (the barrier of flexibility in adapting to changes resulting from the process of modernization or transformation)<sup>20</sup> of the opportunity structures finds himself on the verge of losing control over his life. However, it would be a simplification to assume the deterministic impact of social and political conditions (understood here by the rapid development of the Polish banking sector and its computerization or crises occurring in the building industry). The analysis of both cases also leads us to conclusions relating to the individual strategies and life orientations of both narrators, although, as we did in the introduction, it is not our intention to repeat the erroneous assumption about the full agency of individuals, and thus to blame one for their success or failure in the struggle with (in this case) the labor market.

One of the potential interpretations of the mechanism of the emergence and disappearance of the opportunity structures is the assumption about the imbalance in the distribution of funds, as well as attention to and control of various sectors of the economy by the ruling elites. One of the key indicators for a country entering the capitalist system was the financial condition of the economy. The market, which developed as a result, started in the early 1990s almost from scratch, and the pace of its development was very dynamic. This was associated, *inter alia*, with the immediate need for qualified employees who

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<sup>19</sup> A similar case belonging to the "EuroIdentities" collection is the case of Jakub (cohort 1980), who, as a technical university student, specializes in a completely new field of computer science in management. He goes to France within the Erasmus program, where he not only quickly learns the language, but also becomes one of the best students. Entering the local labor market, he turns out to be one of the few specialists in online business management and, as he says, his income places him in one percent of the best paid people in France.

<sup>20</sup> The word "fossilized" is neutral and non-judgemental to us. We treat the processes of modernization or transformation in a similar way – not as the absolute and the only possible direction of social or individual development, but as the dominant form of social perception in a given historical period about the direction in which the world should go.

were to be able to work according to foreign standards. On the other hand, it was also a unique opportunity for individual success. However, the transformation process did not have the same pace in all the sectors of the economy – some of them underwent a serious crisis. Hubert's biography represents here the crisis of professional strata dependent on those industrial branches which had to pay the biggest costs of transformation; for example, the textile industry which lost the Eastern (post-Soviet) market or building and construction companies which had to implement expensive modern technologies, which required time and financial resources.

In this perspective, Robert's case is an example of reverse logic – his individual success is directly related to the civilizational and technological leap of the Polish banking industry. This translates directly into institutional opportunity structures which Robert turns into a success story using the cultural capital gained from home, the education acquired at a public university, and the social networks built during the first years of his professional career. He does not do so without incurring biographical costs, which in the narrative take the form of reflections on the injustice of the social change taking place, which lifts up some (Robert) and affects others (Robert's parents). Intergenerational comparisons play a key role in Robert's narration. They allow him to perform biographical work, within which he juxtaposes his experience with two categories of significant Others: parents and children. Parents in Robert's narration are among those who fall victim to the transformation. As teachers, they have cultural and social capital, which gradually loses its value after 1989. They fail (despite attempts by Robert's father) to convert the resources acquired in the previous system into success. The children act as a contrast to the childhood of the narrator, and their conditions of growing up are used to show the scale of social change, but they also work as evidence of the material success of the interlocutor. In a broader sense, Robert's case may be considered as an exemplification of one of the possible paths of using the emerging opportunity structures: from cultural capital (Robert's parents), through material capital (Robert) to an attempt to combine both of them (Robert's children).

One of the most interesting differences between the analyzed cases are the ways in which the narrators render their collective identifications and their feeling of belonging to various social worlds. Hubert tends to use a repertoire allowing him to mark his identification in terms of national identity, to which a sense of attachment to a larger cultural entity like Europe or the European Union may be added. This is done in a non-conflicting way through consciously experienced biographical work in which the construction of enlarged identity is something to be achieved. Robert uses nominally the same references – Polishness has become an important frame of his social identity, especially in the last years when he has tended to be more political aware. However,

in opposition to Hubert, his understanding of being patriotic is far more conservative. For example, his biographical work concentrated on correlating the experience and political choices of his parents leads him to understanding the European Union as a threat to the Polish identity and culture. Furthermore, Hubert takes on an active and open orientation towards culturally different experiences. In his case, it evinces his willingness not only to develop professional skills, but is also the readiness to take the perspective of a culturally different *Other*, to reconstruct one's own cognitive patterns and to do biographical and identity work.

It should be remembered that the sensitizing concepts (Blumer 1954) presented in this article, which emerged during the analysis of the collected narrative interviews, are not binding. The interpretation threads proposed here are intended to open the arena of discussion and outline dimensions which will be the starting point for confrontation with other life histories.