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CHAPTER XIII

A TRAP OF SYSTEMIC CHANGES – POLA’S BIOGRAPHICAL DRIFT

Introduction – a few words on transformation, poverty and sociology

While poverty is not only characteristic of the capitalist system and this phenomenon was also present in the socialist countries, raising the issue of changing the opportunity structures in the period of systemic transformation, it shouldn't be overlooked that one of the most visible consequences of the great change was the growing economic inequality in the 1990s including the divergence of material living conditions. The processes of the systemic and market transformations had a rapid and dramatic course, changing the structure of the Polish society, framing the experiences of social categories and groups, as well as the course of individual and family life histories. In the first years of the transformation, which we write about in other parts of this book, a dichotomous typology according to which Polish society was divided into two opposing collectivities was present in the public and scientific discourse. *The winners of transformation* were defined as those individuals and groups who were successful in the market economy conditions (among others: Palska 2000, 2002); *the losers* were those who quickly slipped into the areas of poverty and social exclusion. *The winners* seemed to adapt efficiently to the principles of neoliberalism (Palska 2002, Jasiński 2002). *The losers*, according to the principle of blaming the victim, were usually assigned the attributes which prevented them from using the opportunity structures opening in the process of change and inevitably condemning them to failure (see Chapter II by Kaja Kaźmierska and the introduction to Part III *Transforming opportunity structures*).

The processes of change quickly became the subject of research and analysis. Surprisingly, however, despite many years of sociological research tradition into marginalized environments, only a few sociologists undertook projects on the negative consequences of the systemic transformation. The peculiar resistance of the academic community to these issues is evidenced

by the fact that poverty researchers (especially those representing the engaged sociology) were then informally referred to as “lamenting sociologists” and their achievements as “lamenting sociology.” Due to the obstacles to studying social problems in socialist countries (cf., Chapter V), to some extent isolated from the Western Bloc, Polish sociology lacked theoretical background and language to describe the studied phenomena. Therefore, it would apply the concepts and lexicon functioning in those years in Europe and the USA importing, *inter alia*, the concept of underclass along with its connotations imposed on the poor, or the concept of the culture of poverty by Oscar Lewis, which is still controversial today (among others: Lewis 1967, Harvey, Reed 1996, Warzywoda-Kruszyńska 1998, Grotowska-Leder 2002: 33, 38, Tarkowska 2001: 104–109, Tarkowska 2013, Golczyńska-Grondas 2004). In the book *Życie i pracować w enklawach biedy* (“Living and working in the poverty enclaves”) published in 1998, Wielisława Warzywoda-Kruszyńska, as one of the first Polish scholars, described the models for explaining poverty and conceptualizing the collectivity of the poor, indicating that they are differentiated by the subject which is considered responsible for poverty and the status attributed to the causes of poverty. Therefore, she listed the models in which: 1) the causes of poverty are “located in the individual” – they result from the personality or character defects usually associated with ethnicity, race, or location in the social structure (deficiency model, genetic/racial inferiority model), 2) “causes of poverty are in the community” socializing and equipping the individual with features, values, and norms preventing functioning in mainstream society (culture of poverty model), 3) poverty is the result of an unfavorable social or life situation in which an individual finds oneself (accidental model, situational model), 4) poverty is the result of social changes, primarily changes in the labor market, and may even be an “inherent feature of a market-based society” and perform specific functions to its advantage (ravages of social change model, cyclical model) and 5) poverty is an immanent feature of the class systems based on social exploitation (class exploitation model) (Warzywoda-Kruszyńska 1998, Wright 1994, Vranken 1995 in Warzywoda-Kruszyńska 1998: 26–28). In Polish sociological “poorology,” as the years went by, other theoretical positions, paradigms, and discourses of social exclusion appeared (Silver 1994, Levitas 2005), various concepts of impoverished neighborhoods (Wilson 1987; Sampson 2009, Wacquant 2007, 2008, 2009), or theoretical and methodological positions such as those represented by Ruth Lister postulating participatory action research with partner participation of the interested groups themselves (Lister 2004, Tarkowska 2013a). Original Polish conceptualizations and models were also developed (e.g., Grotowska-Leder 2002, Warzywoda-Kruszyńska, Golczyńska-Grondas 2010, Warzywoda-Kruszyńska, Jankowski 2013). Despite an in-depth reflection on the problems

of poverty and social exclusion. The issue of social exclusion drivers – the situations and factors excluding individual and collective social actors from participation in the life of wider society – still has not been clearly resolved (among others: Spicker 2007: 66–67).

In this chapter, we assume the position that poverty is the result of macro-structural changes affecting intermediate structures and microstructures. In addition, the results of research on poverty, social exclusion, and helping institutions conducted for over 20 years in Łódź and the Łódź Province entitle us to put forward the assumption that the phenomenon of permanent poverty is sustained by the phenomenon of intergenerational transmission of poverty, which is accompanied by a complex set of conditions (i.a., Warzywoda-Kruszyńska, Golczyńska-Grondas 2010, Warzywoda-Kruszyńska, Jankowski 2013). The main aim of the article is therefore to analyze systemic changes’ impact on the life course of an individual endangered by poverty and social exclusion together with the set of opportunity structures and constraints, which within the boundary conditions are available to such individuals, affect their life possibilities, facilitate or hinder their participation in the social order.¹ The impact of these conditions will be illustrated by the case study of a biography of a 40-year-old inhabitant of Łódź. The story of the narrator’s family embodies, with a certain time delay, the stories of typical migrations for Łódź “for bread and a better life.” A poor rural family comes to a big city in the first half of the 1980s. Pola becomes a representative of the middle generation of Łódź workers, in which slipping into poverty is largely the result of the peculiarity of the changes associated with the process of the systemic transformation initiated in 1989. The narrator’s biographical trajectory is exacerbated by the lack of economic, social, and cultural capital which the previous generations did not accumulate (cf., Potoczna, Warzywoda-Kruszyńska 2009, Bunio Mroczek, Potoczna, Warzywoda-Kruszyńska 2016). We precede the case analysis with a synthetic description of pauperization processes from the first years of the systemic transformation to the middle of the first decade of the 21st century, that is, the time when the interview with Pola was conducted.² In the chapter, we use various materials. We reach for literature, as well as the results of empirical research (here, first of all, the team of Wielisława Warzywoda-Kruszyńska, in which we worked for over 20 years). We also use empirical materials collected

¹ We assume that each biography is clearly marked by its own specific configuration of opportunity structures and limitations rooted in historical processes and structural factors dynamically changing along the course of one’s life (Roberts 2009, Staunton 2015, Thompson 2017, cited in: Golczyńska-Grondas 2019).

² The interview with Pola was conducted in 2004 as part of the project *INVITE. New Ways of Biographical Counselling in Rehabilitative Vocational Training*, 2003–2006, Leonardo da Vinci program (project no 2003-D/03/B/F/PP 146 087).

for the needs of the project *INVITE. New Ways of Biographical Counselling in Rehabilitative Vocational Training* (2003–2006), including an unpublished working report assessing the support system for the unemployed in the early years of the systemic transformation. The scope of the statistical data referred to in the text covers the period of the transformation up to the middle of the first decade of the 21st century – due to the date of the interview with the narrator.

Poverty as a result of the systemic transformation³

In 2000 Elżbieta Tarkowska – an outstanding Polish sociologist, poverty researcher, and an ally of the poor – wrote: it is hard to “remain silent or not to notice the existence of poverty in Poland. Today’s poverty in Poland is visible to the naked eye. In a literal sense, poverty came out on the streets” (Tarkowska 2000: 11). This “massive” character of the new poverty, seen both in big cities as in smaller towns, is already reflected in the first years of transformation by the statistics collected at that time. The first year of the new order brought a twofold increase in the scope of poverty, a clear upward trend continued in subsequent years, which was confirmed by the results of research carried out using various poverty measures.⁴ In the years 1989–2004 the percentage of people living below the social minimum increased more than three and a half times from 15.8% in 1989 to 59% in 2004. The level of extreme poverty has grown from 6.4% in 1994 to 11.8% in 2014 and the extent of relative poverty from 12% in 1989 to 20.3% in 2004. The share of people benefiting from social security support has increased from 13.3% in 1997 to 19.2% in 2004 (Beskid, cited in: Tarkowska 2000: 12, Daszyńska 2002, 2004, Balcerzak, Paradowska

³ Poverty and social exclusion are relatively rarely reported in “mainstream” biographical sociology in terms of outcomes of statistical, quantitative research. Similarly the descriptions of social policy tools are. Therefore this chapter contains two separate descriptive parts with data and information helpful in analyzing and understanding Pola’s case.

⁴ Researching poverty we use objective and subjective measures. Objective measures, used in statistical and economic research, are used to estimate the scale and depth of poverty using financial indicators, such as income, expenses including the share of food expenses, the level of schooling, health status. These include: 1) subsistence minimum; 2) the social minimum; 3) the relative poverty threshold, which is determined by income below 50% of the average equivalent monthly income or expenditures of an average household; 4) the statutory threshold, which determines the scope of administrative poverty meaning the level of income that entitles a person to receive social security benefits. Subjective measures or indicators of subjective deprivation, are based on the declarations of people who perceive themselves as poor when assessing their income and access to various types of goods and services.

2004, *Sytuacja gospodarstw domowych w świetle wyników badań budżetów gospodarstw domowych/Situation of households according to the results of household budget surveys 2003, 2004*). A sudden impoverishment of a significant part of the society during the transformation period was, on the one hand, a consequence of unemployment and the resulting decrease in the level of real wages, including wages in the budgetary sphere, a decrease in agricultural income and a low level of social benefits. On the other hand, the pauperization processes were driven by an increase in consumer prices, living costs, including the expenses related to housing, and an increase in the costs of using social services resulting from their commercialization (e.g., the costs of health treatment, childcare, and care for dependent people).

The appearance of poverty was then perceived as the result of economic changes, primarily transformations in the labor market and changes in the sphere of social policy of the state (Golinowska 1996, 1997). However, it was also pointed out that the new poverty was rooted in the country’s past and strengthened by factors such as the specific heritage of real socialism, including the social structure “inherited” from that system. People who became poor “in the first place” were the ones who in the Polish People’s Republic had been excluded from participation in the so-called second economic cycle and based their existence on income from work in state-owned enterprises. Such people were entering the period of systemic changes deprived of economic and social capital and cultural skills to adapt to the new conditions of functioning in a market economy. Their limited adaptability and helplessness in the face of new rules governing paid work, the changing criteria and measures of a successful life were being depicted (Czapiński 1995). The specificity of such people’s behavior strengthened by attitudes attributed to *homo sovieticus* (among others, no predisposition to independence and activity) were to reduce their chances of overcoming problems completely new for them (Tischner 1992, Szalai 1996, cited in: Warzywoda-Kruszyńska, Grotowska-Leder 1996). As a consequence: “various forms of poverty, hidden, invisible during the Polish People’s Republic [...] [revealed themselves] in the form of permanent marginalization” of entire professional categories (Tarkowska 1998, 2000).

Poverty particularly affected certain social categories. The risk of slipping into poverty was more common for women than for men, people forming large families, single (especially) young parents, people with low levels of education, employed in physical work positions,⁵ the chronically ill and disabled living

⁵ For example, in 2004 the extreme poverty rate in families in which the main income came from being employed as a physical worker was 15%, compared to 2% among the households living out of employment, but in non-worker positions (GUS 2004).

from social benefits (Golinowska 1997, Topińska 1996). The inhabitants of rural areas were also becoming poorer, especially the families of employees of liquidated state farms, even though farms and backyard gardens constituted a certain resource providing a nutrition base (Topińska 1996, Golinowska 1997, Psyk-Piotrowska 1998, Tarkowska 1998, Szafraniec 1999, Perepeczko 2002). In the 1990s three-quarters of farm families were unable to earn enough income to sustain themselves; their earnings dropped from 110% to 40%, and 15% – 20% people from farms related to agriculture lived below the subsistence minimum (Perepeczko 2002: 33, GUS 2004). Pauperization of the villages was the result of a drastic deterioration of the economic situation in agriculture, endured especially in traditional, small-scale farms and – in some families – the loss of jobs in the industry by impoverished workers, which deprived their families of additional income (Beskid 1999). The researchers' attention was drawn to the progressive process of rural marginalization in the subjective aspect: "today at the advanced stage of the systemic transformation, the belief that the village is a place forgotten by people, God and history is especially common among its inhabitants" (Szafraniec 1999: 41).

Obviously, families affected by unemployment were subject to rapid pauperization. The scale and dynamics of this phenomenon was a shock to the decision-makers and the entire society. Already in 1990 the number of unemployed started increasing very rapidly (the unemployment rate was then 6%) (Auleytner, Głębicka 2000: 272) three years later in 1993 – 16,4% (Kryńska 2000: 129). The year 1998 saw the second wave of unemployment, and at the turn of the century, it was around 18–19%. In the early 2000s, despite economic growth, employment was falling. Entrepreneurs not only withheld recruiting new workers, research carried out in 2001 shows that 40% of them reduced employment or intended to do it. Other forms of cost-cutting were also introduced, such as months of unpaid leave or the use of flexible forms of employment. The scale of unemployment was so large that it reduced the feeling of social security not only of the unemployed, but also of the employed (Szyłko-Skoczny 2002a: 1, 3).

The relationship between poverty and unemployment is illustrated by data from statistics and social surveys. The Statistical Office survey for 2004 showed that among the households which included at least one unemployed person, the extreme poverty rate was about 26%.⁶ Also in opinion polls, unemployment was indicated as the primary cause of falling into poverty. The main weaknesses of the Polish labor market at that time were: a large share of women and youth among the unemployed, a relatively low level of education, a high share of

⁶ Among the households where there were no unemployed people, the extreme poverty rate was then 8% (GUS 2004).

permanent unemployment, a consistently high unemployment rate in former State Agricultural Farm areas. In addition to explicit unemployment, there was hidden unemployment in the form of low labor productivity in state-owned enterprises, in overcrowded agriculture, and work below one’s qualifications and not in the learned profession (Gabrysiak 2003: 5, Polak 2003: 11). The situation of the Polish unemployed was also conditioned by an increase in employers’ requirements as to formal qualifications, real skills and availability.⁷ Among the factors for unemployment (including living off low, unstable income gained from occasional work), the low level of education played the most important role. Age was also a significant variable – the market was looking for well-educated young people with professional experience. Thus, on the one hand, big industry workers with long work experience were becoming unemployed, while on the other, this phenomenon affected young people with low levels of education, for whom the first experience of early adulthood was (temporal) unemployment (among others compare Rek-Woźniak 2016: 89–91, 162–165, 246–249).

Since the first years of transformation, the phenomenon of new poverty has been territorially diverse. Statistics collected at the voivodeship level reflected the pre-war division between Poland A and B. Sociological research conducted since the beginning of the 1990s revealed the existence of concentrated poverty areas. Within voivodeships (even those relatively “more prosperous”) one could indicate particularly deprived districts and in the districts of the poorest communes. Poverty affected entire cities in which researchers identified and described impoverished neighborhoods, the Wacquantian neighborhoods of relegations, which were becoming populated by individuals and families who had lost homes in better parts of urban space, and people after evictions (Warzywoda-Kruszyńska ed. 1998, 1999, Grotowska-Leder 2003, Wacquant 2008). One of the cities particularly affected by social problems was Łódź (the place of residence of the narrator of the interview analyzed here), with its particular historical conditions (constant migration of the rural poor to the emerging and solidifying industrial city, over-representation of women among the city’s inhabitants, hidden poverty, housing problems). After the Second World War “[during] industrial modernization, thousands of people moved from the countryside to the city in search of work. This was also the case in Łódź, which again became the promised land for rural emigrants who had nothing but readiness to work. These rural migrants were [...] caught in the trap of

⁷ In turn, entrepreneurs complained about the far-reaching regulation of the labour market and demanded an increase in employment flexibility, which in their opinion was to increase the number of jobs. They also criticised the extensive provisions of the Labour Code, especially regarding the protection of employees’ rights and the amount of non-wage labour costs resulting in the growth of the grey economy (Golinowska 2003: 6, Szyłko Skoczny: 2002a: 3, 2002: 223).

socialist paternalism [...], poverty was hidden under the umbrella of socialism and revealed itself after its fall” wrote Warzywoda-Kruszyńska citing the work of the Hungarian sociologist Julia Szalai (Warzywoda-Kruszyńska 2003a: 130). The collapse of the textile industry led to structural unemployment – the share of the unemployed in the city population was disproportionately high compared to other large Polish cities.⁸ Also, unlike these cities, the poverty rate in Łódź exceeded the average for the whole country. These phenomena were accompanied by unfavorable demographic processes such as ageing of the inhabitants⁹ and an increase in the share of single-person households (Warzywoda-Kruszyńska 2003a: 127), as well as the phenomenon of juvenilization of poverty.¹⁰

The state’s response to social problems – new social policy institutions

Since the functioning of helping institutions is important for the problems and crucial for the case study discussed in this chapter, we will briefly characterize the basic changes in the field of social policy at the beginning of the

⁸ In 1975 there were 548 employees per 1000 people, in 1995 only 301. Employment in the industry in this period was respectively 276 and 106 people (Warzywoda-Kruszyńska 2003: 127). Unemployment affected the entire voivodeship. In May 2004, when the interview with Pola was conducted, according to the statistics of the Voivodeship Labor Office in the Łódź Voivodeship there were 224,045 unemployed, including 109,972 women. 36,412 people were entitled to unemployment benefits, and 56,726 people to the pre-retirement benefits (Invite Report 2004).

⁹ The incomes of seniors receiving pensions (the traditional poor of the People’s Republic of Poland) became significant support for families affected by poverty.

¹⁰ Research conducted in the Łódź enclaves of poverty made the infamous phenomenon of poverty juvenilization known to Poland – the overrepresentation of children and young people up to 18 years of age in the poor population. Over 53% of children below 14 (constituting 20% of the enclaves’ inhabitants) lived in households supported by social security benefits. The processes of poverty ghettoization and the level of child poverty were so advanced that it was possible to designate entire zones of child poverty (Warzywoda-Kruszyńska 2000, 2002: 140). Although the topic of juvenile poverty is not further developed in this book, it should be emphasized here that before accession to the European Union, Polish poverty was the poverty of children. In 2005, 48% of children (0–17 years) were at risk of poverty and social exclusion, in 2012 this percentage was less than 30%. Children who were most at risk of poverty were those from multiple children families (i.e., 1/3 of Polish children) – over 20% experienced extreme poverty and 50% relative poverty. The risk of poverty for multiple-children families increased where the parents had a lower level of education, low professional qualifications. Single-parent families were also at risk of poverty (Topińska 1996; Balcerzak-Paradowska 1997, 2000, Kołaczek 1997, Warzywoda-Kruszyńska 2000, Tarkowska 2000a–c, Golinowska 1997).

transformation. The Polish People's Republic, like other countries of the Eastern Bloc, implemented the model known as the "socialist welfare state." A long list of social services provided to citizens (free health care, education, co-financing for housing, leisure, etc.) was accompanied by a policy of full employment. Poles, deprived of political freedom had a rather stable sense of social security (Golinowska 2002: 6). The systemic transformation resulted in the need to rebuild all the basic spheres of the state, including its social functions. The first decade of change was accompanied by discussions on the social policy model. As Stanisława Golinowska claimed then (2003: 30), these discussions were "rather weak," and among the representatives of the elite, there were supporters of all possible solutions in the social sphere.¹¹ The new Poland, in an attempt to create the basis for achieving the goals of modern social policy, limited the role of the state – a producer of social services – typical for the socialist system, while expanding the scope of social money transfers (Golinowska 2002: 6). Workplaces still offered a certain range of social benefits to their employees – for example, co-financing holidays or interest-free small loans, but the scope was significantly reduced. In these first years of the transformation, tendencies to use public-private mixed solutions and to expand the commercialization of social services were clearly visible in Poland (Golinowska 2002: 4, 30).

In 1990, in place of the former social security system, operating since 1945 still under the Act of 1923 (Broda-Wysocki n.d.: 2), a social assistance institution was established by creating municipal and communal social assistance centers, and in subsequent years further institutions (district family assistance centers, local activity centers, and social economy institutions). In 1989, the reform of state employment services was started by establishing regional employment offices, which were later transformed into employment offices. Administrative reform was carried out (1999) reducing the role of the political center and transferring full responsibility for social assistance to the local authorities. Districts and communes became responsible, among others, for education, labor market policy, supporting and activating unemployed people, and solving poverty issues (Bromber 2003: 15, Gabrysiak 2003: 6, Golinowska 2003: 32). Non-governmental organizations seeking contracts for the implementation of social services were to cooperate with the local government authorities in problem areas from which the state withdrew its activities.¹² By undertaking actions for

¹¹ The opponents of full-time employment proposing the introduction of a flat tax, the abolition of most social transfers and the introduction of private pension funds, spokespersons of the traditional welfare state and representatives of the so-called third way, opting for maintaining all the social achievements of the welfare state while strengthening the market mechanisms (Gabrysiak 2003:5).

¹² Already in 1989, non-governmental organizations began to flourish. According to estimated data, in 2001 there were 45,000 active NGOs in Poland. At that time, 40%

accession to the European Union, and then becoming its full member in 2004, the Polish state committed itself to achieving the basic objectives, values, and principles of the EU social policy (social cohesion and solidarity, subsidiarity, self-governance, increasing the role of civil society). However, already in those years barriers to the implementation of this policy were pointed out (Gabrysiak 2003: 6–7, Golinowska 2003: 32, Warzywoda-Kruszyńska: 2003: 189), such as the lack of a strategic state concept of social policy, a defensive rescue policy of overcoming social problems at the local level, the slow emergence of new social policy structures not yet able to build new mechanisms and tools, the weakness and changeability of the law, the underdevelopment of civil society, the established attitudes of learned helplessness and expectations from the state (guarantee of work, housing, free health care, and education), the institutional barriers at the local government level, including the lack of financial instruments, diagnostic tools, organizational and management skills, and the lack of procedures at various levels. Decisions in the area of social policy were made in Poland in the 1990s (similarly to today) under the influence of the current needs and pressures. Neither the government nor the regional level fully defined the principles of social policy, its concepts and directions, and the resulting documents did not act as a guide in this field (Golinowska 2003).

In the social policy strategies created at that time, the authorities declared radical goals – their implementation should form the basis of institutional opportunity structures supporting the functioning of people such as the unemployed Poles on the labor market. The priorities of the Regional Employment Strategy for 2003–2006 prepared by the local government of the Łódź Voivodeship included, for example, the introduction of policies to support the mobility of the unemployed, increasing the efficiency of the labor market, and preventive measures. This was to be achieved by developing a network of information and career counselling centers, supporting work clubs, developing training and practical forms of preparation for a profession and adapting these to the requirements of the labor market, strengthening the role of career counselling and support, increasing the availability of services for groups and people most in need of support in looking for a job, and groups at particular risk, as well as improving the professional qualifications of the staff of employment offices. It was declared that the philosophy of work applied in the social policy institutions is based on the principles of reciprocity in the assistance system, customer activation, partnership, and building local communities. The laws and

of these organizations declared activity in the field of social assistance and self-help (Marciniak 2002: 54). Churches also participated in the activities for the benefit of the unemployed and the poor.

professional literature emphasized the importance of activating techniques of working with the unemployed, the speed of intervention, and personalization of services (Gabrysiak 2003: 6, Świątkowski 2002: 16, Wiśniewski 2002: 26).

The local (later district) employment offices and their structures, such as, for example, information and career planning centers, have become the main institution handling the unemployed. It was the employment offices that were to seek vacancies, conduct and finance intervention work, public work, and conduct career counselling. Job Clubs (also created by other institutions and organizations) operated at most District Offices. At that time, they were considered one of the most important forms of work with the unemployed, among others, due to the fact that the participants were offered blocks of classes of a psychological and practical nature dedicated to issues such as positive self-esteem and self-acceptance, positive thinking, interpersonal relations, defining goals and professional preferences, job search methods, learning to write a CV and a motivation letter, and learning to talk to potential employers. The assumption was to adapt the blocks to the specificity and interests of the unemployed, but it seems that this assumption often remained “theoretical”. However, at that time the most widespread type of office services was the organization and supervision of conducting training implemented primarily by educational companies with a very diverse history and legal situation¹³ using their own training programs or programs created by the offices themselves.¹⁴ Despite the multitude of implementers, the training offer which existed at the turn of the century was considered scarce. There was a lack of funds for specialist training courses for specific professional groups, more expensive and better training courses, training courses for people massively dismissed from work and for personalized training courses for the needs of a specific employer (Bednarski 2002: 10, 12). The weak point of the employment office training system was the method of recruiting participants, in which the official selection criteria were: the probability of getting a job after the course, general education, previous qualifications, health, social criteria. However, the participants were usually the people who were most active in the search and determined to obtain a place on a specific

¹³ These were state-owned companies, some operating since the socialist times, private companies and various types of schools. The best rating was given to schools, private companies operating for at least 10 years, and public companies from former Vocational Training Centers with appropriate permanent staff and their own premises. Small private companies, in turn, enjoyed recognition due to the flexibility of the training offer and greater customer care (Bednarski 2002: 11).

¹⁴ For example, standard training courses organized by one of the district employment offices in Łódź were about setting up one’s own company, working with a computer, and operating cash registers (Invite Report 2004).

course, although the district employment offices were reluctant to finance subsequent training courses of the same people. To a limited extent, the training program was offered to people who barely coped with this difficult situation. From the point of view of biographical analyses, the key activity directed towards the unemployed should be career counselling.¹⁵ The work of a career counsellor is based on individual assessment and advice regarding the choice of an educational path or profession. Based on tests and questionnaires, the counsellor assesses interests and talents, and can also conduct workshops on the skills of navigating on the labor market (Skłodowski 2004, Borucka, Golczyńska-Grondas 2008/9). It seems, however, that the counsellors employed in district employment offices rarely provided real, individualized advisory assistance to the unemployed,¹⁶ limiting themselves to providing information and assistance in choosing the most adequate training course. At this point, it should be emphasized that the free services of employment offices did not enjoy a good reputation among their unemployed. The course and quality of professional helpers' interactions with clients could have been influenced by their common opinion about the reluctance of a significant number of clients to change their life situation. Thus, public employment services were rather rarely treated as the main source of information. The district employment offices became the places of "the last chance." Jobseekers would rather turn to family and friends for help (Kryńska 2003: 83).

Other institutions which were to support the "losers" in the transformation processes were social assistance centers, which were aimed at helping the people whose financial resources did not exceed the income criterion set out in the Act on Social Assistance and at the same time were in a difficult life situation. Unemployment was mentioned in the "Act on Social Assistance" as one of the basic factors entitling people to apply for social assistance. The offer of the social assistance system also included a set of services for the unemployed in

¹⁵ The profession of career counsellor was included in the Classification of Occupations and Specialties in 1995.

¹⁶ Which was caused, among others, by the number of clients per employee. In the founding countries of the European Union, there was one counsellor or job broker per 300 unemployed in those years. In Poland, in 2000 one "statistical" counsellor had been "looking after" 5,665 unemployed, and in 2002 already 7,101 unemployed. In the district employment offices themselves, the number of employees in those years fell by 9% (interview with W. Drabek-Polak, 2004). According to research (Bednarski 2002) instead of getting employed, quite often people conducting psychological training, for example, psychologists running Job Clubs at employment offices were dismissed. Some of the staff of these offices were employed as part of public works and other forms financed from the Labor Fund. There were offices where over 80% of employees were employed in this way.

the form of material, financial, and non-material assistance (psychological and legal counselling, etc.). However, in the structures of assistance systems until 2003, there were no specialized centers or their departments dealing with this group of clients. Probably the only exception in the whole country was the Non-Material Assistance Center for the Unemployed located in the structure of the Municipal Social Assistance Center in Łódź. This Center provided psychological help and career counselling services to people from all over Łódź. Pola also used its services.

The tasks of social policy institutions were, among others, protecting employees against the loss of employment, limiting negative psycho-social effects of unemployment, ensuring social security for the unemployed and helping them to find the job by improving their chances on the labor market (Szyłko-Skoczny 2002a: 226). In reality, the existing legal order, institutional infrastructure and staff qualifications meant that labor offices provided services to the unemployed only at an elementary level. Many critical comments were also made about the social assistance institutions. The audit carried out in 2002 by the Supreme Audit Office revealed numerous irregularities, including weakness in internal control and corruption. It was also pointed out that the statutory objectives of social assistance were not achieved in the overwhelming majority of the surveyed centers (Auleytner, Głębińska 2000: 278–279, Bednarski 2002: 10, Szyłko-Skoczny 2002: 2, Bromber: 2003: 16). Therefore, it can be stated that in the first several transformational years, the assistance provided by public institutions (subordinate to the same ministry, but weakly interrelated both formally and through less formal cooperation networks) was of a non-specific nature, not adapted to the life situations of the clients and their problems. There were significant discrepancies between legal regulations and practice. Despite the declarations contained in the documents, what dominated, in reality, were passive forms of curbing unemployment (material transfers) supported by a training offer (not always adequate to the current situation on the labor market and even less often adapted to the specific needs of the participants). Public employment services and social assistance were characterized by a shortage of qualified staff – social workers prepared to deal with a multitude of individual and family problems, as well as career counsellors and people competent in managing assistance systems. Experts assessed the institutions whose task was to solve social problems and support people struggling with the processes of disorder and suffering as ineffective. As Małgorzata Szyłko-Skoczny wrote: “[...] at the beginning of the new century, the inefficiency of social policy in combating the phenomenon of mass and permanent unemployment was fully revealed” (Szyłko-Skoczny 2002: 226, cf., Golinowska 2002, 2003, Gabrysiak 2003).

Poverty as a biographical trajectory of suffering

Poverty is not a homogeneous social phenomenon. It certainly has a cultural dimension – to put it very simply, poverty is different in the countries of Europe, North America, Africa, or Asia. It also has, as Jolanta Grotowska-Leder (2002) wrote, a temporal dimension. The specificity of poverty in fluid modernity is also determined by its biographical character. Entering poverty becomes an individual biographical experience which can occur at any time during the life of an individual, regardless of age, gender, or place of residence. These days, poverty does not affect social groups, strata, or classes, but rather an individual with its characteristic market conditions. Poverty or unemployment are therefore becoming the personal fate of a man (Bauman 2002, Beck 2002: 137). The first pieces of research on the new Polish poverty were statistical (Golinowska 1996, Warzywoda-Kruszyńska, Grotowska-Leder 1996). Nevertheless, since the mid-1990s Polish sociologists, or rather female sociologists – aware of the biographical aspects of poverty – began to collect the life histories of the “losers of transformation” and their families (Tarkowska, Warzywoda-Kruszyńska, Wódz eds. 2003; for more on the history of Polish biographical research into poverty and social exclusion, see: Golczyńska-Grondas, Potoczna 2013, Golczyńska-Grondas 2019a). These analyses made it possible to indicate common features of the studied biographies, their conditioning, including unopened opportunity structures, or rather limitations and unused opportunities placing people in the situation of the Schützeian trajectory of suffering. In these life histories the material, family, emotional, educational, and professional dimensions intertwine, creating individual constellations of the lives of the poor.

Obviously, the most striking attribute of the trajectory experience of poverty, noticeable to researchers, as well as the external environment are the material conditions in which a poor person lives – the lack of income to allow the individual to participate in mainstream society, but sometimes to satisfy even the basic life needs (cf., footnote 2 of this chapter). The experience of poverty at various stages of life is associated with poor housing conditions – the overcrowding of flats, their low technical standard, for example, the lack of (hot) water in the flat, no toilet, leaky windows, insufficient heating, and fungus. The result of the deprivation of housing conditions, poor diet, as well as limited access to specialist healthcare is worse health (in both its somatic and mental aspect) (see e.g.: Potoczna 1998, Warzywoda-Kruszyńska, Jankowski 2013, Golczyńska-Grondas 2014, 2014a, 2018, Petelewicz 2016). Apathy, depression, sometimes other mental disorders and illnesses, and addictions of adults trigger family trajectories. Poverty

is not conducive to a sense of security, it can contribute to conflicts, verbal and physical violence, and family breakdowns. It can push children out of the home – then they function in peer environments, more “on the streets” in the devastated space of impoverished neighborhoods (Petelewicz 2016). Poverty combined with dysfunctions can also deprive children of home in a literal sense – it poses the threat of being taken into care by other people, for example, relatives, but also by limiting or withdrawing the rights of parents and placing the child in a childcare institution. Family problems encourage some teenagers to look for intimacy in early sexual relationships. Confirming the principle of homogamy, girls and women usually pair up with boys and men of low economic status, coming from the same or similar environment, which in the 1980s J.W. Wilson characterized it as a shrinking pool of marriageable [partners]. It happens that from these “street cohabitations” (the young have nowhere to meet, they live in their family homes), children of teenage mothers are born. These girls, abandoned by the partners or with them, remain in their current neighborhood, struggling with life problems accumulating in subsequent years (Wilson 1987: 68–76, 82, 95, 104, Golczyńska-Grondas 2004: 61,70, Rossa 1999, cited in: Golczyńska-Grondas 2004: 71, Potoczna, Warzywoda-Kruszyńska 2009, Bunio-Mroczek 2016). The thus-far description already indicates the potential of a vicious circle of poverty activating the mechanism of its intergenerational transmission. This mechanism determines the course of educational careers, during which the opportunity structures of biographical success are gradually closing. The lack of educational aspirations, interest, and support from parents who themselves finished their school careers early, are accompanied by a lack of wise, effective support from educational institutions and teachers, isolation and stigmatization of the poor children by their peers. “Poor” grades, constant failures, problems in relationships with adults and schoolmates lead to early school leaving. The reason for early school dropout is also the conviction that one has to take up a paid job to help their family or to have one’s own money (among others: Sennett, Cobb 1972, Fatyga et al. 2001, Zahorska 2012, 2014). A feature of biographies of permanently pauperized people is, therefore, the experience of early employment or early unemployment. In the professional dimension in such biographies, we also find the instability of employment, frequent changes of workplaces, periodic unemployment combined with work in the informal sector. The material and emotional situation is aggravated by inevitable random events – as there is a lack of resources necessary to deal with illness or death of close ones. A deep deprivation of the living conditions can also cause a (significant) shortening of one’s life (Tobiasz-Adamczyk 2000, Satterley 2012).

The case of Pola¹⁷ – opportunity structures and “limitations,” resources, and unused biographical opportunities

A “private” history – a resource or a biographical burden?

Pola was born in 1964 in a traditional rural family. She was the so-called “middle child,” the only girl among five siblings. Her two older brothers were born in 1961 and 1963, and two younger ones in 1968 and 1973. The description of the material conditions of her childhood indicates a low standard of living of the family, “maybe not the poorest out there in this village”:

In total, there were **thirteen of us at home, we only had one large kitchen**.¹⁸ My mother with father and five of us children and my mum’s sister with her husband and her daughter and two sons and also the grandmother. [...] When it comes to food, **one would happily eat anything, I even liked very much bread with water and sugar. The water from the well was fresh** [...], or even such bread fried only on fat and I liked it a lot too, it was just, then it was a paradise yes, I liked it so much like today, I don’t know, ham, or anything even better.¹⁹

Both the house where Pola’s family lived, and the land constituting the basis for supporting the family, belonged to the maternal grandmother: “the land was all the time my grandmother’s, **so we simply helped on the land and lived off this land**”. The maternal grandfather was killed during the Second World War, the paternal grandparents, also farmers, lived in the nearby area. Pola’s father – a socialist impoverished-worker has employed in a construction plant, the mother, after the birth of one of the next children gave up her job in gastronomy. The father’s work made it possible to buy the first bicycle in the village (which does not sound credible), as well as the first television set – the programs were watched together with the neighbors. The parents did not want to stay in the countryside – the father “paid an instalment for a flat in the city” and the family was waiting for the allocation of the premises.

¹⁷ The interview with Pola is analyzed due to the assumptions of structural analysis based on methodology elaborated by Fritz Schütze and his co-workers. The text was thoroughly discussed among a multidisciplinary team during international and Polish workshops led by Fritz Schütze within the framework of the INVITE project in early 2000 and reanalyzed for the purpose of the chapter.

¹⁸ All bolded phrases in quotations are emphasised by the authors.

¹⁹ In our other interviews with people affected by poverty, the consumption of bread with water and sugar, or bread fried on fat in childhood, is cited as evidence of the experience of poverty (e.g., Potoczna, Kruszyńska 2009).

In the narrator’s memories, the childhood time in many respects appears to be a good, somewhat idealized, stage of life. Despite the cramped living space:

all in all, we lived very happily. There were no bigger conflicts, as you could see or hear about other people. Some of them had posh houses, but domestic wars were fought quite often. Now I think so, that my family is unique compared to the others who lived there.

The image of Pola’s happy childhood is also constructed by referring to games and time spent with her peers:

Life was carefree. We went to bathe in the river, and also to the so-called meadows. [...] We often went out, we had such a big yard and often in the evening we stood with the guys by the fence just like the young, we talked, we laughed, we were fooling around.

Pola did not feel material deficiencies: "from my mother’s story it can be said that yes, we did not have much, so to speak, but as a child, I did not feel it at all, I never lacked anything".

In the narrative phase of the interview, the description of family relationships is overshadowed by the optimistic tale of the collective upbringing of eight children staying under one roof: "everyone raised us. The aunt was interested, the uncle was interested, the grandma was interested, well everyone was interested in us, in all the children." However, already in this part of the narration, there are statements which may indicate the tension in family relationships felt by the narrator, which may have been resulting from the crowding of 13 people in a small living space:

Such a situation once, it got stuck in my memory, because I came from school once and I say to my grandmother: "Grandma, what’s for dinner?" and she says: "Leave me alone, you have your ma," so she got upset because my mother worked, so many children here and each, well, mum at work, well, so all the children go to grandma, grandma this, grandma that, and grandma was also fed up sometimes.

"To this day" Pola remembers both this incident and her strong emotional response to her grandmother’s words which "somehow" hurt her. Grandmother, a "very good person, really" has been the most important person in the family and support, and perhaps even the narrator’s actual biographical carer. The narrator’s parents differed in how they treated children. The narrator says of her father that he loved and spoiled her very much, but he did not have any significant impact on her history. In the role of the "event creator," she casts her mother, whose character became the inspiration for creating the category of a destructive significant other (Golczyńska-Grondas 2008/9a). The rejection

which Pola felt from her mother's side triggered a child's trajectory of suffering (Golczyńska-Grondas 2016), which marked her further years of life:

Well, I was such an obedient daughter, I did what she wanted and I think that if she had not influenced my decisions so much, my life would have been a little different. [...] Mum is more/ she always said (xx) that she didn't like girls, but guys. It hurt me a lot because she said it so often, I thought that, and that's why I tried to do everything as she wanted... that she would be happy, that she would praise me, but I haven't lived to see it and I won't see it happening. [...] Otherwise, no one else has influenced my life too much... As I say, I wanted to, I probably wanted to please my mother in everything ((a very long pause)) and that's the reason for so many life mistakes.

Perhaps the idealization of childhood in the first part of the interview is associated with historical events and a critical turning point resulting from the dominance of the mother which Pola experienced at the threshold of adulthood:

As I mentioned, my childhood was happy, let's say, up to the age of eighteen, life at home was happy. [...] And later, just after graduating from trade school, in a way my happiness seemed to have ended.

A biographical breakthrough in the life of Pola happened during the Martial Law, and in parallel, when the family move from the village to the city was approaching. During this period, the 18-year-old Pola, a graduate of a trade school, was persuaded by her mother and concluded an early marriage characteristic of traditional rural culture with a man who was four years older, which triggered one of the main currents of her biographical trajectory.

One had entered such a maybe not very adult life, but as soon as things got rough, because it was somehow Martial Law soon... And people... in the countryside were really terrified ... so my mother too, she told me to marry so early, because "What will you do, you don't have work, how will you make a living?"... And so I married... a boy from our village... **Persuaded by my mother, I didn't love him, but I married him... I was young and stupid... At that time I didn't think about it yet, that it's for the whole life, a marriage...** Maybe he was not a bad man, but... I dreamed of something else. And so I got married shortly after graduating from this trade school...

The very negative attitude of Pola towards her husband is evidenced by the fact that this character disappears from the following parts of the narration, only at the end of the interview the narrator briefly talks about her marriage in response to the researcher's question:²⁰

²⁰ "I want to ask about your marriage, right? You said it was a boy from the same village, did you know him from your childhood, in such a way?"

I mean, I don’t remember, because as a girl I wasn’t really interested in him at all. I don’t remember him as a child. [...] When I remember him, he is already a guy, I don’t know, a fifteen-year-old... [...] I thought maybe that when there will be a child, it will somehow bond me with him, but actually, it was getting worse. Anyway, it was him I didn’t like. He was a man who you couldn’t count on. He was not a drunkard, he wasn’t violent, none of that stuff, but just, well... Well, even when it comes to such matters, err, I’ll call them bed issues... I did not enjoy it, even this was hard work for me and I just couldn’t and it seems that I was with him a long time, ten years...

The marriage ended with a final break-up – her husband’s moving out after 15 years of “shared” life and a formal divorce two years later. When asked about the profession and education of her husband, Pola answers: “...I don’t even know who he was... I was never interested in him (laughs) so that I don’t know.”

The analysis of the interview prompts the question – to what extent does Pola’s family of origin constitute her biographical resource, and to what extent limits her life opportunities. Certainly, the mother appears in the context of the narrator’s account as a biographical “gate-keeper” – closing access to the opportunity structure at a private life level.

Educational career – Pola’s unused potential

The elementary school reality quickly disappointed the seven-year-old Pola. The narrator’s dreams of starting a school, which she had imagined as a sign of independence, are replaced by trajectory experiences:

[...] I envied my two brothers that they were already going to school. **I wanted terribly to go to school**, by myself of course, because on the first day my mother walked me, and later, I walked alone, because if my brothers walked alone, I also wanted to be so adult ((laughs)) alone, independent, I remember this very well. Well, later, maybe **I didn’t love school that much** (laughs) ... **learning wasn’t going so well**.

The educational methods used in this village school were rigorous, there was physical punishment and labelling. Pola “was a bad student,” received unsatisfactory marks, repeated the fifth grade. It seems that the teachers have tried to help the failing student to catch up during extracurricular classes, but were unsuccessful in this field; probably at least some teachers were not motivated enough to run these classes.²¹ They also failed to recognize the girl’s

²¹ “To me, the maths teacher also seemed to be the worst she could be. Today, in retrospect, I can say that she was probably not the worst, but even when she made you stay after lessons when you did not get it, and she would say earlier, first she would say that you had to stay for an hour, then she would let you go after half an hour.”

abilities and guide the development of her interests. Undoubtedly, Pola was artistically gifted, she also showed some ability to learn foreign languages, but the disclosure of the latter met with a stereotyping and humiliating reaction of the subject teacher:

[...] to be honest, I was doing better in Russian than in Polish... I even remember, in primary school once, there was such a situation that I got a B on a test and the teacher told me that I had cheated. Well, it hurt me so much that she just told me that I had cheated as if it was impossible for me to get a B...

Repeating the class mobilized Pola to study more so that it was “hard as it was,” but “somehow [she] finished” this stage of education and being “talked into by a friend” began studying at an agricultural trade school. The choice of this institution was accidental and unsuccessful for many reasons²²:

I knew that sooner or later we would move out of the village, because my father paid an installment for a flat... in the city and, and we were just waiting for these flats. In fact, I was interested in something else, as I thought about sewing.

The education program duplicated the curriculum of the last grades of elementary school, the problems with maintaining discipline by the teachers came as a shock for the narrator. Finishing her education at the trade school – without any problems, this time, with “fairly good grades” and a driving licence for a tractor – Pola obtained the profession of a “vocational” farmer.

In the education process, Pola could not count on the support of her parents, who “in fact, did not put much pressure on learning, as they had only done six grades of elementary school in total, both the father and mother.” The acceptance of her choice of agricultural school on the part of her parents was dictated by material conditions:

In the countryside there were no such opportunities, of course, you had to commute somewhere, and parents told us all the time that they couldn’t afford it... here, this trade school was convenient for my parents because there was a bus, it was for free, and for a school elsewhere I would have to pay.

The narrator’s brothers also had learning problems. The youngest of them graduated from primary school, the remaining three failed to graduate from trade schools.²³ In the summary of the interview, Pola says:

²² Pola’s parents did not have their own farm, and the prospects of inheriting a larger area of land from grandparents seemed very doubtful in the narrator’s case.

²³ Which in the case of her siblings resulted in starting work quickly.

Now I would not go to this agricultural school, but to some kind of profession that... would interest me. Well, but as I say, in the countryside there were no such opportunities, of course, you had to commute somewhere, and parents told us all the time that they couldn’t afford it... **They did not try to educate us at all... They probably thought that if they could live without it, then we can. Well, they probably, this was their assumption...**

Pola’s education history clearly shows the mechanism of inheriting low status associated with the lack of education. This mechanism has been consolidated through the processes of social valuation and by the educational system which gives students from the upper classes badges of ability, and the students from the lower classes signs of inability. At school, students from the lower strata of the social structure such as Pola, ignored, disciplined, and labelled by teachers are primarily focused on survival, a quick end to the school career, and the start of “real life.” Therefore, the symbolic valuing practices of the self-fulfilling prophecy nature block the life chances of some, enabling the success of others and thus consolidate or even petrify the social structure (Sennett, Cobb 1972: 82–87, Zahorska 2014, cf., Golczyńska-Grondas 2014a: 152–155). The low level of the obtained education, the lack of support in educational choices, the abilities undiscovered by teachers create real limitations which a few years later condition the functioning of the individual on the labor market. It is the poor education that Pola considers as one of her life failures:

Today, for sure, I would like to educate myself in some specific direction, so that I would not have such difficulty with work, this is one thing, and so that I would do what I like. It’s definitely what I would like to change. Now I would not go to this agricultural school, but to some kind of profession that... would interest me.

As illustrated by Pola’s example, the institutional and educational opportunity structures – seemingly available to everyone – remain out of their reach for many children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Bourdieu, cited in: Jacyno 1997).

From the PPR to the new Poland – adrift on the labor market

For the first three years after arriving in Łódź, which probably happened in 1984 or 1985, Pola did not work professionally. The young couple lived in a three-room flat in a block of flats with the narrator’s parents and brothers. It seems that in those years the trajectory evoked by an ill-considered marriage decision was developing, and the narrator could not find a solution to this situation:

For these three years, I worked at home, not that I was just lying around there. I cooked, I washed my husband's stuff, I took care of the house. I don't know, I wasn't thinking about a job. I don't know, I rebelled a little because, because maybe I was dissatisfied with this marriage, somehow. I don't know, and on the other hand, perhaps I was hoping that I would get pregnant. In fact, after three years, I became interested in just having this child. Even three years of marriage passed and we didn't have children, I even thought that maybe something was wrong with me or my husband.

Pola decided to get a job around 1988, in the last period of the socialist policy of full employment. Initially, she wanted to work in a hospital, but eventually, she got a job in a textile factory, learning about this possibility from a neighbor. In the first year of work, she performed simple auxiliary activities, then, without proper preparation, she began to operate textile machinery. When she soon became pregnant and gave birth to a daughter, she decided to go on a two-year maternity leave. The moment of Pola's return to work in 1989 coincided with the beginning of the changes in the employment structure. The narrator was moved to another department because "in her department" the redundancies had begun. In this department, she also started at the lowest level, "and later with time [switched] to [...] more complicated machines [...], in total, [it] was not difficult work." In this plant, Pola worked 14 years. She was made redundant when Łódź was hit by the second wave of unemployment, rising since 1998 and triggered by a progressive restructuring process of the economy. In practice, this process meant an almost complete liquidation of the textile industry in Łódź. Like other Łódź textile workers, the narrator at first was unaware of the seriousness of her situation:

And then larger group redundancies began and finally they fired me, I always laughed and said to my friends **"Well, come on, they won't fire me, I'm the best employee" and suddenly the manager came and handed me the dismissal.** They fired me. In fact, it was sometimes better sometimes worse in this job at the time. **I even said it was good for me, that maybe I would get out of here and have a chance to find something better, something that would suit me better, but maybe I was unaware of the unemployment and that it would be hard.**

Thus, around 1999, Pola's professional career as an unskilled worker, stable for several years, collapsed and the narrator's biographical drift began which has lasted until the time of the interview. The next four years in Pola's "professional" life were: 1) a three-month unemployment benefit period; 2) a year of working in a worker's position based on sequentially concluded contracts of mandate in a newly created company interspersed with periods of registration and deregistration at the employment office; 3) a year of working for a foundation established for disabled children; 4) four months of working in a newly created

small factory in a worker’s position steaming jeans, and subsequent months in the same place as an ironer; 5) a year of unemployment during which the narrator participates in training courses and is intensively looking for a job.

During this period of the narrator’s life, the biographical trajectory reveals with all sharpness. It is associated with a social process structured “through a chain of related events which cannot be avoided without incurring high costs, continuous breakdowns, expectations, and a growing sense of loss of control over one’s life position.” In this process, the individual – going from the intentional phase to the passive phase – can only face the “external forces” whose actions he/she does not understand. (Riemann, Schütze 2012: 393 et seq).

Pola’s trajectory of suffering, based on the inability to maintain work continuity and the traumatizing experiences accompanying her subsequent activities are determined by the closing institutional opportunity structures, the illusory nature of some of the opening structures and the individuals’ actions implemented within them, including the ostensible activities of the employees of public employment services. Using the metaphor of the door as a symbol of access to the labor market, and thus to mainstream society, you can draw here the picture of the narrator who slips through successive pairs of doors avoiding with difficulty their wings slamming shut. The emergence of new companies announcing recruitment initially brings hope for stabilization in the labor market, but soon it turned out that these hopes were illusory and the narrator began to “pulsate” between successively undertaken work and the periods of unemployment:

Er, and they fired me, for some time, I don’t know, I think for three months I was on the dole then [...]. I found out that some work was supposed to be there, that some new company was going to do the same, but they were taking on people. So I went there [...], the manager [...] called [me] and there was a job, but then I already got a, err, a contract of, a contract of mandate, so, it varied at the beginning because I would get a contract even for two days..., or for a month, or for two weeks, and for two days, and I was just going back and forth, registering at the employment office and deregistering, and registering and deregistering, I kept going back and forth like that [...].

The reality of the next work done for a foundation with an unclear status did not match Pola’s expectations regarding the care for disabled children. Her job was actually the work of a face-to-face fundraiser asking for donations for the foundation, also outside Łódź:

I thought it would be looking after handicapped children... but there I found out later, it was about fundraising for these children. Well, but there was no other job, so I took this one [...] in the end, I gave it up myself, because... it was not a job for

me, and there was a big risk, I didn't like it. I thought that at least these funds would simply be collected, for example, in some, err, in prosperous companies, and this was just everywhere, you had to go everywhere, to people, to private homes.

During this work, the narrator experienced distrust and humiliation on the part of people who she asked for donations. She visited the same places several times, at the behest of her superior, which exposed her to accusations of extorting money, and additionally, the lack of trust was caused by the fact that the collection of money was carried out by a paid employee. She got bitten by a dog, people who performed the same task told the narrator that they had been thrown stones at by the inhabitants of one of the visited towns. Pola quit and took up work again in a small private company:

[...] I managed to get [a job], err, also, err, in the same buildings as I used to work in my first one. There, actually, a new company was established [...] they're doing [AGG/MP operating], to this day, err ... This is a laundry service with ironing, additionally dying jeans. [...] I even wanted to work in this ironing room, [...] but I landed in another department, because there was a need there, although later I was satisfied, all the more so [that] when there we had no work, they would take us to ironing. [...] And I worked there... I guess until April, from January to April, and then it started to be difficult with work, fewer and fewer orders were coming, and they started letting people off. **And at the beginning they said that it is a newly opened company, it would prosper so well, at the beginning it was really a lot of work, a lot,** that they even pressured us to do as much as possible, and then it got worse and worse, fewer orders, you would come to work and they told you to go home because there was nothing. [...] Of course, if I had paid for the [bus] ticket, I came, but nobody would pay me back, I didn't do any work, nobody wanted to pay for it. [...] Well, it also got worse and worse with work [...] later when they had a little more work, they either called us or if someone was at hand, they took her, and so on and so forth. Later [...] they didn't extend my contract, it was also a contract of mandate [...] and I would sit at home, I went there from time to time, they said that something would move, even the director promised us that it would move, that he would call. [...] A month had passed, silence. In the second month, it was not far away, I [...] dropped in on this plant and asked around, but I went a few times and left with nothing. Later they also took me on a contract of mandate ... for a month. But, err, to the ironing room, and there in the other department, when they needed, err [...] and there just when they needed, then they would take me [...] and that's how it went on. Well, but there wasn't so much work like at the beginning. [...] Some people were from the beginning and as soon as I went there, err, then later the same people were left to the end, err, and others were dismissed.

The narrator also resigned from this job. These years were still a time of "ruthless capitalism," the emergence of small companies, some of which failed,

and on the other hand – the market of the employer and the instrumentally treated employees:

And one, err, was like on-demand, it wasn’t that I just worked even those six hours, [...] six days a week, the Sunday off, but no, because there were four shifts, kind of... and it was going on and on, work went on and when there weren’t enough people, then just, one was supposed to have four shifts a week and should have two days off, as it used to be when I worked before, it was two days off a week, after night shifts, [...] one day was free, and after night shifts two days. [...] Now, I was working all the time, for example, I was finishing the night shift, and in the afternoon they would call me to come to work. It was just paranoia, I did nothing but work and I was tired and sleepy, and this went on for quite a while.

Pola also became a victim of abuse. In the steaming plant, workers used harmful toxic chemicals, therefore, masks with replaceable filters were necessary for such work, even if they probably did not fully secure them, anyway. This equipment after a long time and only as a result of the intervention of workers: well, “it was possible to deal with that somehow.” The wage level did not match the agreed remuneration:

I got my salary in this ironing room, there was a huge difference compared to what I had earned there. I got over a thousand zlotys there, and here I didn’t even get eight hundred. And the work I would say, it was not lighter at all. I think they wanted to, I don’t know, that one person did as much as two... at the beginning, and they paid less for it... So, when I saw my salary, I wasn’t too happy.

This was the last paid activity which Pola had undertaken by the time of the interview. The narrator became unemployed, just like other members of her family of origin. In 2004, only Pola’s youngest brother was in permanent employment, working in conditions which today we call precarious. The other brothers, having been dismissed from a liquidated enterprise, were unemployed. Two of them were on the dole and undertook occasional work, one was addicted to alcohol. Also, the cousins with whom Pola grew up in her grandmother’s house did not find a job in the countryside.

In the drift of an unemployed person described here, Pola used the assistance of public employment services. She made several attempts to obtain unemployment benefits, she also used training and career counselling services. The actions of the services’ employees partly deepened the narrator’s feeling of being objectified. Pola mentions here the unclear rules for calculating benefits, a certain discretion in considering contracts of mandate and contracts of employment, the negligence of employers who should provide the former employees with properly prepared documents certifying their earnings, the indifference and the lack of support from clerks. The experience of suffering is

illustrated in particular by one of the longer fragments of the interview regarding the application for unemployment benefits, colloquially called “kuroniołka,”²⁴ which we will allow ourselves to cite with some abbreviations:

I counted it up, [...] I was eligible for this kuroniołka, although I also had quite a hassle with this kuroniołka, because at the beginning, just when I left the foundation... I know for sure that I had submitted all the papers, and later they said that I was not given it because one document was missing, [...] I remembered very well that I went to the foundation especially for this document. And I was telling, in this foundation, Ms. Manager that, that I needed it, what I earned each month separately, [...] because I said earlier I worked on a contract of mandate and I know it is required. She said that no, that it's no longer so, that it had changed, that she wouldn't, and she didn't give it to me. Well, but later when I went to the employment office, they said that it was required and I remember it very precisely because I went for these ((speaking ironically)) earnings, once again to this foundation, and later it turned out that it was missing... And I did not qualify for it. I thought that I would normally get the money, so I came and they said no. I went straight to the manager, err, I presented her the case. [...] She tells me “Submit an application,” and I say well, but what application, for what? When I know for sure, as I say, I have worked for over a year and I should be eligible, so I don't understand why. “Maybe you should check it.” And she went, looked at those papers, and said that one document was missing. She tells me, “Bring this document and then we will consider the case” So, happy or not, I say I have to go, but nevertheless, I started to argue with her a bit, because I told her that I had specifically come to get this paper and that's why I remember that it should be there. Well, “but it's not” and that was the whole answer of the manager, so I went to this foundation, of course, earlier there she wrote it on the spot, and now she said that no, she doesn't have to. Because in general this whole office [was] (((a town in the south of Poland))), [...] and here it was only a branch, and she had to register me there and they will send it to me. [...] And that was just before Christmas, and I was penniless. And... I waited a week for these papers... the papers came, I took them to the employment office, the ladies at the employment office accepted the papers, she told me to write an application despite all that, that I was not granted ((the benefits)) because of such and such papers missing and wait a month for an answer... I said great, it's Christmas, and I'm without money... Well, I don't know ((sighs)) probably a week had passed again or two, I was summoned to the employment office, and I thought to myself, what's going

²⁴ The name of the benefit comes from the name of Jacek Kuroń, who was the Minister of Labor and Social Policy at that time. In the years 2002–2004, the amount of this benefit was around 500 PLN. 80% of the amount was paid to those whose work experience was below 5 years, those with up to 20 years' experience were paid 100%, over 20 years – 120% (<https://www.infor.pl/wskazniki/prawo-pracy-i-ubezpieczen-spolczych/zasilki-i-slaty/79,1134,Zasilek-dla-bezrobotnych.html>).

on? I was supposed to wait a month for the answer, probably something is missing again. I got nervous again, I went to this employment office again, err, but there I went to another room, upstairs, and there a lady explained to me what and how, that actually, to make things go faster, I don’t have to submit this application at all, all I have to do is deregister, today, for example, tomorrow I will register and they will give me the money. So I say, couldn’t the manager tell me that right away? Well, she could have just explained it. And she was only like “submit your application” and goodbye... Well, and so I deregistered one day, the next day I went to register again, and then they granted me the money, but of course I had to wait for almost one month to get this money, so I got it in January... And so. Well, and the thing that I took care of it all, I was granted that money one day in December already, so in January when I got it, I only got it for those days from the twenty-something to the thirtieth, only for those days I got something like two hundred zlotys ((crying)). This was also... I broke down... [AGG: It’s OK] ... It’s already gone, but when I talk about it... [a break in the interview during which the researcher provides emotional support to the crying narrator].

Narrations about similar humiliating situations experienced by informants when dealing with employment offices are also found in other interviews of the poor and the unemployed found in collections compiled during the research on poverty and social exclusion in Łódź. Pola experienced more “humane” contact with assistance institutions when participating in meetings for the unemployed organized by the Non-Material Assistance Center – a kind of prototype of the local activity center organized at one of the branches of the Municipal Social Assistance Center. However, here too, she did not see any chance that the classes and individual conversations conducted by psychologists [would] “actually bring any results.”

The poor and the unemployed use various strategies during the periods of poverty and unemployment. Małgorzata Potoczna points out that generally these strategies can be divided into two contrasting categories of at-benefit orientation²⁵ and at-employment orientation. Pola undoubtedly presents the latter option, actively seeking work. The analysis of her life history and similar biographies, however, indicates that the employment services of that time were not very effective (Kabaj 1998, 1999). One of the strategies for seeking work used by the unemployed was visiting the employment office. Pola had never received any job offers from this institution. Despite this, she “quite often” went there alone and read job offers posted to clients, partially copying the ads in the press. Some of these ads would turn out to be outdated, which in the case of people slipping into poverty meant not only further stressful experiences and unnecessary travel expenses, but also probably had a demotivating effect on their subsequent efforts:

²⁵ Also requiring significant activity on the part of people pursuing this life orientation.

And there, they do not take these ads down. [...] A friend told me that she had read the advertisement, went to the room, they gave her a referral, she went and the lady shouted at her: "Leave me alone, will you? I have already hired a worker a long time ago, and you keep on coming and coming here." Yes. And she got a referral from the employment office that same day. And that's how they work there in the employment office. They are no longer valid [...] and in the employment office, they explain again that when employers take someone on, they do not report that they have taken someone on, so they don't know. Well, I don't know, maybe some do not report, but there are certainly those who do report, but in the employment office, either they do not immediately take it down, or they don't get it out of the computer there, later they forget and it will remain so. I suppose, if this is the way, err, it just happens, then it must be so.

Pola was also looking for a job by reading newspaper ads, among them she found "many such ads in newspapers, interesting [for her]," and went "to many places." Most of the time, however, it turned out that these endeavours were taken in vain – for example, someone else had already been accepted for work, the potential employer did not indicate in the ad that he will only employ men, he informed the narrator that she did not have the qualifications or experience he expected for the job:

They just don't, no, they don't give you a chance, that with time, because it's obvious that everything which is done for a long time, it is simply done faster, but they do not give you a chance to familiarize yourself with it, but expect you to come and work at once and that's it. This is a drawback in all this because usually, employers want qualified ((workers)), those who do it not even quickly, but very quickly.

The narrator also left recorded messages on answering machines at workplaces. Employers did not respond to these cues or called to promise to call again, but never did.

Pola undertook actions to increase her chances on the labor market by participating in two training courses aimed at requalifying the unemployed. The first of these experiences proved unsuccessful. The pastry and bakery course was organized during layoffs in the catering industry and the liquidation of state-owned bakeries and confectionery factories. On the other hand, small business private owners were looking for qualified employees and were not interested in recruiting people without professional experience. The narrator participated in this course "terrified" – her emotions resulted from the awareness of the futility of participating in the classes. Participation in the second training course is a sign of the narrator's feeble attempts to break the trajectory. They are based on a biographical action plan – an independent decision, grounded in self-image

as a manually gifted person, to cover the cost of an expensive hairdressing course (the narrator did not receive funding from the employment office):

I went to this hairdressing course, [...] because the ad was just there, [...] a lady opened a new private hairdressing parlor and I went there, and I said that I just simply have manual skills, that I like to comb and cut hair, men's and women's, do hairstyles. And I went to her there, I talked to her, [...] she was a very nice lady. Well, but unfortunately, she didn't even like the way I washed hair ((laughs)), yes, that I didn't have the slightest idea about washing hair, in fact, at the hairdresser's... because I had never washed one. And this lady just said that, because I said that I haven't done any course, I am just self-taught, and she kind of said that if I finished the course, then I should come back, that maybe something... So I said, I will finish this course, I will go there, see, and maybe she will give me a chance. It would be nearby, too, I would not have to travel... close, if it worked out, it would be great [...]. So, I'm still hoping that maybe after this hairdressing course **I will be able to do something there...** Because, if you come across a person who will just give you a chance, well, maybe there are not many people like that.

In order to increase her chances on the labor market, Pola started learning English on her own initiative, being helped by her daughter in this activity. However, she did not see the possibility of obtaining further levels of education – her school experience meant that the existing opportunity structures for adults, such as evening and extramural education, she perceived as permanently shut:

Today, to go to school, maybe, they say that it is never too late, but, but I guess I have just never had such abilities to learn. I'm just very stressed. For example, when I attended this baking course, you know, **everything was great during lectures, I also did well at home, but when it came to the exam, I was so shaky, although you can say this exam was like a dream.** But, because I was so shaky, I forgot half, they gave us some hints, and somehow I passed. So, in practice, a person can learn many things, especially if one has a talent for this something, but there is also theory.

At this moment, the history of Pola stops – we do not know if she managed to implement this fragile, biographical action plan. Nevertheless, taking into account the conditions of the labor market and the demand for cosmetic and hairdressing services in Łódź in the second decade of the 21st century, the decision to take up hairdressing training could prove to be successful.

The everyday life of Pola *in the year 2004* was as follows: the narrator lives with her fifteen-year-old daughter – a middle school student, her youngest brother and mother in a flat which the family moved into during the Martial Law. The family is supported by Pola's mother's pension, or rather a survivors'

pension after the narrator's father who died in 1999, Pola's unemployment benefit and irregular earnings received by her brother. Additionally, the narrator receives alimony from the husband – in a rather symbolic amount of 350 zlotys. Despite low income, Pola does not decide to apply for material benefits in a social assistance center. She pays rent with her own money. The mother is still trying to influence the narrator's life, discouraging her, among other things, from participating in training courses ("You've attended one, she says, and it came to nothing and nothing will come out of this one either, so I say: Then, I will sit at home and I will sit and wait for manna from Heaven.") In this relationship, the narrator, assessing that a significant part of her life mistakes resulted from attempts to "please [her mother] in everything" is struggling for autonomy:

At the moment, I am, err, more rebellious and now I do not let her. What I have to say to her, what hurts me, I simply tell her what hurts me. But, she then, she, she takes it as an insult. Yes, I feel that she takes it as an insult if I do otherwise than she wants me to...

Evicting her ex-husband from the flat required effort. At the time of the interview, he maintains regular but not very intense contacts with his daughter, "who he is a little bit interested in at the moment" – he bought her a computer, finances holiday trips. Pola did not enter into another lasting relationship, for some time she was seeing a married man, "broke up" with him when he became too possessive. The narrator maintains relationships with her close relatives –her grandmother, who is still significant to her, her brothers and their families. She has no close friends, but she meets her casual friends. She has closer contacts with those not working professionally, with one of them they participate in meetings for the unemployed. In the description of everyday life evoked by the researcher's question, we can notice that the specific structure of time grounded in the life situation of the narrator. For three days a week, Pola spends a few hours studying on a course. In the days of her afternoon classes, the mornings are filled with shopping, cooking dinner, reading job offers in the newspaper, and attempts to contact the ads' authors on the phone. On Wednesdays, the narrator attends classes at the Non-Material Assistance Center, pops into the employment office on the way to check the job offers there. She is also learning English.

Conclusions

From the perspective of biographical researchers of poverty and social exclusion, Pola represents the generation of women – big city immigrants, for whom the basic factor pushing into poverty is a loss of job in the first years

of the transformation and limited chances of permanent legal employment in the following years. In Pola’s biography, we see mechanisms that pose a risk of inheriting poverty and a series of circumstances arising from her biographical conditions, closing access to post-transformation opportunity structures. However, at the same time, we cannot unequivocally say that the narrator is a complete “loser” – a passive victim of coercion and constraints resulting from the socio-historical processes. In her biography, in addition to hindering constraints, we also find resources and attributes which can potentially help to overcome the trajectory of suffering. The course of Pola’s biography and her current life situation is primarily determined by her childhood and adolescence experiences, including educational experiences. Already in the analysis of the situation of her family of origin, we find the ambiguity of the narrator’s biographical conditions. We observe a lack of economic capital probably resulting from grounded rural poverty. On the other hand, Pola accumulates significant resources of emotional capital, created regardless of the destructive influence of her mother in relations with her grandmother, father, cousins, and peers. These resources may also be the result of the socialization of the child in a rural community still retaining elements of tradition. One can refer to the issue of her educational career more unequivocally, as a result of which Pola is unable to take advantage of the institutional opportunity structures, seemingly available in the education system in a democratic society. A low level of education, a profession inadequate in relation to family plans, as well as the situation on the labor market in Łódź after 1989, significantly block the narrator’s professional opportunities. The diploma of the agricultural trade school with which Pola entered adult life, sentenced her to take up employment as an unskilled worker in a textile plant and proved completely useless in the years of transformation. One can speculate, if the narrator had stayed in the countryside, would this diploma have given her a chance of a prosperous life? At the time of the interview, Pola is experiencing a trajectory of suffering with its overlapping and mutually reinforcing layers – professional (unemployment, the threat of social exclusion) and private (single parenthood, living in the household with her mother – a destructive significant other). However, living and running the household together prevents her from losing a flat of a decent standard (Pola has not yet faced the need to move to an impoverished neighborhood due to housing debts) and further slipping into poverty. Paradoxically, the income of the destructive mother is a safeguard for all the close relatives. Here we see a pattern characteristic of the families of Łódź social assistance beneficiaries, where the basis for the maintenance of three generations (children, parents, grandparents) in the 1990s were the material resources of the oldest generation (Potoczna, Warzywoda-Kruszyńska 2009). The balance of Pola’s marriage is definitely negative, but the narrator perceives

her motherhood, the resulting “fruit” of this relationship as a success. She tries to provide her daughter with good conditions, sees her abilities, helps in planning education. The daughter is also an important source of support for Pola. We see how much effort Pola makes herself to stay “afloat,” break the trajectory using all the possible institutional opportunity structures. The narrator seems aware of the illusory nature of some of these structures. At the same time, the structures whose use would allow her to change the course of her life remain – due to intrapsychic reasons and structural conditions – inaccessible. Finally, let us recall the opinions of symbolic elites cited in the introduction to this part of the book about the “inept, unable to adapt numpties,” “guilty themselves,” “ordinary citizens,” “civilizationally incompetent,” showing a “general lack of discipline and diligence” (Buchowski 2008, Sztompka 1996, 2000 cited in: Buchowski 2006). In the light of this analysis, the narrator seems to be trying to act rationally, creatively, flexibly, autonomously, responsibly to meet the challenges of the free capitalistic labor market, and yet, despite the enormous effort, she remains in a constant biographical drift. In 2004, Pola was still waiting for her chance.