polish sociological review 4(232)'25
ISSN 1231 – 1413
DOI:10.26412/psr232.02

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Rural Migrations and Their Consequences: A Case Study of the Masurian Commune of Stare Juchy

Abstract: The Rural Commune of Stare Juchy in Masuria, in northeastern Poland, is sociologically interesting due to the migration processes that are occurring there. Since the 1990s, many residents have emigrated abroad, primarily to Iceland. At the same time, an opposite trend has been occurring: residents of large cities have been migrating to Stare Juchy. These intense migration processes in opposite directions could lead to the gradual social and spatial gentrification of the villages of the commune. But is this happening in Stare Juchy? This article presents the findings of two studies conducted among the residents of the commune. The first study, which was conducted between 2016 and 2017, focused on emigrants, return migrants, and the families of emigrants. The second study, conducted between 2019 and 2021, examined new settlers from large cities. The research concentrated on the consequences of migration for individuals, families, and, most importantly, the local community. The findings indicate that emigrants and returnees were not the primary agents of change in the villages of the commune. Instead, new settlers played a more significant role in transforming the villages and their inhabitants. These newcomers invested in local tourism, initiated various social activities, and took on leadership roles in nongovernmental organizations.

Keywords: rural emigration, emigration to Iceland, urban-to-rural migration, lifestyle migration, counter-urbanization migration, Masuria

Introduction

At the end of the 2010s and beginning of the 2020s, the rural commune of Stare Juchy, in northeastern Poland, was experiencing two parallel processes related to spatial mobility: emigration (both international and domestic) from the commune, and migration into the commune for the purpose of settlement. Longtime residents were leaving for nearby cities and abroad, primarily to Iceland, while, at the same time, newcomers from large cities were purchasing land and settling, either temporarily or permanently, in the commune.

The aim of this article is to describe both of these migration processes taking place in Stare Juchy. Has this specific exchange of population altered the commune's character, and can it be considered an example of early-stage gentrification in peripheral rural areas? To explore these questions, a sociological study was conducted among emigrants from Stare Juchy and returnees, as well as among settlers from large and medium-sized cities who now reside in the commune.

The study examined the consequences of both kinds of migration processes for the migrants themselves, their families, and the rural commune. What role do emigrants,

returnees, and new settlers from large cities play as potential agents of change and actors of gentrification?[1]

In the scholarly literature on rural gentrification, two primary conceptual approaches can be identified: a narrow one, and a broad one.[2] The narrow approach defines gentrification strictly in terms of the influx of the urban middle class into rural areas. This perspective reduces the drivers of gentrification to a single exogenous factor (Phillips 1993; Smith, Phillips 2001). In contrast, the broad approach incorporates additional endogenous determinants, such as the educational boom among rural populations, which has led to the emergence of a rural middle class, or the increasing affluence of rural residents—a process referred to as rural embourgeoisement. This may result from the development of specialized or large-scale agriculture, or from the transformation of traditional farms into small-scale production and service enterprises. The embourgeoisement of the rural population is often accompanied by the appearance of "urban-style" houses in the countryside and the modernization of rural infrastructure (Halamska 2016b: 80; Halamska 2016a: 49–50).

Gentrification may also result from a fundamental transformation in the functional character of a village, for instance, from agricultural to tourism-oriented (Soszyński et al. 2017). Such transformations are typically associated with the acquisition of new skills by rural residents, which in turn leads to an overall increase in cultural capital and shifts in lifestyle. Gentrification driven by rising affluence, educational and occupational mobility, changes in ownership structures, and technological innovations in agriculture, is of an endogenous nature and contributes to broader social transformations and the emergence of a rural middle class.

The analysis proposed in this article introduces yet another source of gentrification: international migration, which may be conceptualized as an exo-endogenous factor. The impact of two migrant groups is involved: first, permanent emigrants who return only occasionally—for instance, during holidays—but who, through remittances to family members or public institutions, may significantly influence local development; and second, return migrants who bring with them new lifestyles, organizational cultures, habits, and aspirations. These returnees may act as agents of change in their communities and thereby contribut to the gentrification of rural areas. This phenomenon is examined here through a case study of the Stare Juchy commune.

The first part of the article presents the research methodology that was used. In addition to emigrants, returnees, and new settlers, the study also included "observers": representatives of local government, local NGOs, and other local institutions.

The second part of the article discusses emigration from Juchy to Iceland. It briefly describes the history of emigration and typologies of emigrants. The consequences of

[1] The study presented in this article is described in detail in the book *Islandory i nowowiejscy. Migracje wiejskie na przykładzie mazurskiej gminy Stare Juchy* (2022). The first part of the research, in an abbreviated form, was published in an article in the book *Polityka migracyjna w obliczu współczesnych wyzwań. Teoria i praktyka* (2018) In those works, the focus was on spatial mobility in two directions, including the patterns and consequences of these mobilities. In the present article, the key issue is gentrification.

[2] A narrow and broad approach to gentrification is also discussed by Zwęglińska-Gałecka (2024: 15). She defines the narrow approach in a similar way, while the broad approach is described as encompassing changes in the social structure related to the migration of the middle class, along with the economic, cultural, and spatial consequences. The broad definition thus includes the multidimensional outcomes of gentrification.

emigration for individuals, their families, and the commune are examined. To this end, two analytical categories are used: Pierre Bourdieu's theory of capital, and the concept of remittances.

The third part of the article concerns migration to Stare Juchy from large cities. It presents the characteristics of the new settlers, who are referred to as lifestyle (counter-urbanization) migrants. The article analyzes what they brought to village life, what activities they undertook, and what barriers they encountered. The article concludes with a summary and findings.

Research Methodology

The study employed semi-structured in-depth interviews (IDI) as the primary research method. This approach allows for a phenomenological exploration of migration experiences at different stages of the migration process and provides insight into how respondents make sense of their social reality. The research sample was purposive, meaning participants were selected based on specific attributes: being an emigrant, a returnee, a member of an emigrant's family, or a new settler from a large or medium-sized city. Respondents were initially recruited through information provided by commune officials and non-governmental organizations, and then in later stages, by the snowball sampling method. Rather than following a rigidly structured questionnaire, the interviews were conducted using guidelines that were adapted depending on the respondents' status—whether they were emigrants, returnees, family members, or new settlers. This flexible format allowed respondents to share their experiences more freely. The interviews lasted from an hour to over two hours. Most interviews were conducted in July and August, as this was the most suitable period: emigrants had returned from Iceland for summer visits, and the new settlers were almost constantly present on their homesteads. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded for analysis.

The research on emigration from Stare Juchy was conducted between 2016 and 2017. The emigrants and returnees interviewed were between 28 and 70 years of age. The group consisted of nine women and four men, only two of whom had a higher education. The younger participants generally had vocational training, while the older ones had only a primary education. Most were married, while two were childless singles. Three participants did not have personal migration experience but were family members of emigrants—parents or partners. In total, 16 interviews were conducted with emigrants, returnees, and family members of emigrants. Some respondents were initially hesitant to participate in the study, and not all were forthcoming in their answers; some responses were brief and given reluctantly. Most interviews took place in the participants' homes, allowing them to share photos and souvenirs from Iceland as part of their narratives.

The research on new settlers was conducted between 2019 and 2021. The new settlers interviewed ranged in age from their early 30s to over 70. Half of them were employed full-time or ran their own businesses, while the others were retired. In addition to receiving a pension, some managed their own businesses, which were most commonly agritourism ventures such as guesthouses, apartments, or rental rooms. The majority of settlers came

from Warsaw, and the others were from Wrocław, Białystok, Kraków, and medium-sized cities in Silesia and Wielkopolska. Some had lived in the commune for around 20 years, while others had been there for 10 to 15 years, though the largest group had settled permanently within the last decade. In total, 18 interviews were conducted with 26 settlers, including seven married couples and one pair of siblings. All interviews in this group were conducted at the homesteads of the settlers, and thus the respondents had an opportunity to exhibit their gardens, crops, and various artifacts related to their homes and local history. Unlike the emigrants, the settlers were eager to participate in the study and often shared their insights and opinions with great enthusiasm. Some even tried to persuade the researcher to consider moving to the countryside.

Beyond interviews with emigrants, their families, and new settlers, the study also included 11 interviews with "observers"—individuals with professional or social roles that endowed them with broad knowledge about the commune. These interviews took place between 2016 and 2021. The observers included a local government representative, commune officials, activists from local NGOs, staff from commune institutions, and a priest. They were asked to describe the socio-demographic situation of the commune and to assess the contributions of emigrants to its development. Most of these interviews were conducted at the workplaces of the observers.

Migrants from Stare Juchy to Iceland

Stare Juchy is a small rural commune in the eastern part of the Masuria region in Poland. During the communist era, it housed six state-owned agricultural enterprises, alongside a growing tourism sector that included campgrounds and vacation homes by the lakes. A popular tourist route passed through the area (Cegiełka, Kawecki 1998). After the collapse of communism in 1989, the state farms were dismantled, and the businesses that serviced them went bankrupt. The economic decline led many residents to seek work in cities and abroad, particularly in Iceland. This migration has been the subject of academic analysis (Budyta-Budzyńska 2017, 2018, 2020) and artistic representation, in Paweł Ziemilski's documentary *In Touch* (2019; Gaintens 2019). By the late 2010s, local officials estimated in interviews that between 400 and 500 people from Stare Juchy were living in Iceland—over 10% of the commune's population.

Migration from Stare Juchy to Iceland began in the early 1980s. The first person to make the move was a 19-year-old woman, who was referred to by one observer as the "mythical Eve of Stare Juchy." She was the first resident to settle in Iceland, and thus she became the initial link in a migration chain. Her migration was a matter of chance. In Stare Juchy, she met an Icelander, who proposed to her; they married and in November 1981 she left for Iceland. The next links in the migration chain were her relatives and friends. By 2016, when she was interviewed in Reykjavík, three generations of her family had settled in Iceland, with only two relatives remaining in Poland.

In the early 1990s, as Poland underwent economic transformation, people from Stare Juchy began emigrating due to job loss or insufficient earnings. At the same time, women working in Iceland's rural fish-processing plants were leaving these jobs and moving to

Reykjavík (Skaptadóttir 2011; Yingst, Skaptadóttir 2018). To fill these vacancies, Icelandic employers began recruiting foreign workers, including Poles (Júlíusdóttir et al. 2013). Women from Stare Juchy started migrating to Iceland for jobs in fish processing, an industry traditionally dominated by female workers.

In the 1990s, migration from Stare Juchy to Iceland was often organized collectively, facilitated by recruitment agencies in cooperation with Poles already working in Iceland, including the family members of the pioneer of the Stare Juchy emigration, who provided contacts to their acquaintances. These emigrations were initially intended to be temporary, lasting from a few months to two or three years. It was a form of "incomplete migration": "You earn there, you spend here"—"in Iceland, you work intensively and save money, while in Poland, you have your family and spend the income earned abroad." Unlike incomplete migration to other countries, which was usually short-term and often undocumented (Okólski 2001), this type of migration was significantly longer and involved a work permit. The vast majority of migrants did not plan to settle permanently; they kept their flat or house in Poland and left behind their families, including young children ("mother-away families"). The primary goal was to secure stable financial support for their households through income diversification, in line with theories of the New Economics of Labor Migration (Stark, Bloom 1985). After several months or years, emigrants from Stare Juchy began bringing their spouses and older children to Iceland, often to work in the same fish-processing plants. This migration pattern remained dominant until 2006.

In May 2006, when Iceland opened its labor market to citizens of the new EU member states, it became possible to migrate without a prior job offer. The regulatory change expanded employment opportunities for immigrants. Polish men started arriving for jobs in construction, transportation, warehouses, and aluminum smelters. Women began working in hospitality, retail, and food services (Wojtyńska 2011). These changes in employment also affected emigrants from Stare Juchy, who began seeking work outside the fish-processing industry. Younger people, in their 20s and 30s, started migrating from Stare Juchy, often bringing their families with them, including spouses and even parents, typically to help with childcare. By this stage, nearly entire families were emigrating, leaving behind only a few individuals—mainly the sick, the elderly, and their caregivers.

By the late 2010s, two main groups of people from Stare Juchy were emigrating to Iceland. The first consisted of those who worked but found their earnings insufficient or unsatisfactory. The second group consisted of young people with family in Iceland. Upon finishing school—or sometimes even before completing their education—and without first seeking employment in Poland, they moved to join their parents, who were already working there.

Both younger and older emigrants relied on migration networks, which were primarily close and extended family connections. There were no cases of solitary or "blind migration" from Stare Juchy. Studies on migration after EU accession suggest that the importance of social networks in migration decisions declined after 2004 (Lesińska et al. 2014). However, this was not the case for Stare Juchy. Migration networks remained a crucial factor, not only influencing the destination but also determining whether people migrated at all.

The motivations for moving to Iceland were strictly economic or family-related—there were no cases of migration for educational or exploratory purposes. Due to the great

distance between Iceland and Poland, and the cost of travel, as well as the nature of the work offered, until the 2010s there were no seasonal or circular workers among the Poles migrating to Iceland. The situation changed in the 2010s due to the launch of low-cost direct flights from Poland to Iceland and the growing demand for foreign seasonal workers in Iceland's rapidly developing tourism sector (Karlsdóttir & Jóhannesson 2016; Mirra 2019). However, at that time, among the emigrants from Stare Juchy who were interviewed, there were no seasonal or circular workers. Some emigrants initially planned to return to Poland after achieving their migration goals, but after bringing over additional family members and repeatedly extending their stays, many decided to remain in Iceland long-term and ultimately settled there permanently. At the time of the interview, most of the respondents had been living in Iceland for close to 10 years or longer.

Permanent returns were rare, and those who did return often were not sure whether they would migrate again in the future to pursue another migration goal. Such a move would be relatively easy, as most of them had family members and numerous acquaintances in Iceland who could help them find a job and accommodation if needed. The residents of Stare Juchy possess significant migration-related social capital, which they actively draw upon and which continues to grow, as each new migrant becomes another link in the chain of migration.

There were no returns to Stare Juchy due to migration failures, with the exception of a brief period during the economic crisis of 2008–2012 in Iceland. The crisis hit men working in construction and renovation particularly hard, as investments were cut and some fish-processing plants went bankrupt. However, the demand for women's labor in services, such as cleaning, elder care, and hospitality, remained stable (Budyta-Budzyńska 2016). There were individuals from Stare Juchy who experienced failure at that time and returned to Poland, but many of them eventually migrated back to Iceland to work. This was a case of "double return migration," as this type of pattern is sometimes described (White 2014)—a return to the country of origin, only to migrate again.

There were no nostalgic returns. In Iceland, the emigrants from Stare Juchy lived in Polish enclaves, watched Polish television, read Polish news sites, travelled regularly to Poland, and stayed in frequent contact with their loved ones through phone calls and online messaging. They didn't miss Poland itself; at most, some expressed longing for their small homeland—Masuria and their home villages.

Some returns were motivated by family reasons, such as the need to care for elderly or ill relatives. A few interviewees mentioned plans to return when their children reached school age, but by 2017 not a single family had returned for that reason. The school in Stare Juchy had no record of any child who had come back from Iceland. "If children go to Iceland, they don't come back. From other countries like Italy or the UK, they do return and attend Polish schools because their families come back—from Iceland, they don't," said a teacher from the primary school in Stare Juchy.

There were also returns due to the fulfilment of specific migration goals, such as buying a house or apartment in Stare Juchy or in nearby Ełk. These returns usually involved individuals with practical and in-demand professional qualifications. They feared that after spending many years abroad—where their qualifications might become obsolete—it would be difficult to return to their profession in Poland. For this reason, they chose to come back.

Some emigrants mentioned the possibility of returning to Stare Juchy in old age, and to that end, they were building or renovating homes in their villages or saving money to buy an apartment in a Polish city. However, by the late 2010s, there were still few retirees drawing Icelandic pensions, and those who had reached retirement age remained in Iceland, often assisting their children with childcare.

Capital Conversion and Migration Remittances

To describe the impact of migration on both individual (micro) and community (meso) levels, two analytical categories are used: capital conversion and capital transfer. In Pierre Bourdieu's theory, capital conversion refers to the transformation of one form of capital into another, such as economic capital into social or cultural capital, and vice versa (Bourdieu 2005). This mechanism can be applied to the consequences of migration (Erel 2010).

In the context of migration, capital conversion can involve turning institutionalized cultural capital from the country of origin—such as diplomas and certifications—into economic capital in the destination country. Such conversion enables employment in one's profession and the securing of a decent income. Conversely, institutionalized cultural capital acquired abroad, such as foreign education certified by a diploma, along with embodied cultural capital in the form of practical skills, particularly language proficiency, can be converted into economic capital upon return, allowing for better-paid jobs in the home country. Likewise, economic capital earned abroad can be transformed into cultural capital when migrants invest their earnings in personal development or further education. Bourdieu's concept of capital conversion applies to individuals, and in the context of migration, it relates to how emigration influences the economic and social status of the individual.

Capital transfer refers to the sending or bringing of migration remittances—interpersonal exchanges between at least two actors: the sender (provider) and the recipient. Like Bourdieu's capital, remittances can take different forms, including economic, technological, social, and cultural transfers.

Economic remittances encompass various types of financial transfers. Based on the amount sent, transfer methods, sender and recipient profiles, and their intended use, several types can be distinguished (Goldring 2003):

- Family or individual remittances—These are personal transfers sent by emigrants to their families. Depending on their size and purpose, they can be classified as:
  Wages and income—Regular financial support sent to cover daily expenses and improve the family's standard of living.
  Investment remittances—Larger sums directed toward purchasing a home, land, or durable goods to secure the family's financial future.
  Productive capital investment—High-value remittances used to establish an income-generating business (Durand et al. 1996).
- Collective remittances—These are funds intended to support community projects rather than individual households. Unlike family remittances, which benefit specific families, collective remittances are directed toward a broader community or local population. They are usually sent by organized migrant groups, such as hometown associations,

rather than individuals. The recipients are not private households but community groups or public-sector entities. Collective remittances are not used for immediate consumption but for infrastructure projects aimed at improving the overall quality of life. These contributions are not capitalist investments seeking financial return but rather broad investments in education, health, hygiene, culture, and overall living standards (Goldring 2003: 12–17).

Economic remittances of all types are much more than just money (Goldring 2003); they serve as a visible symbol of connection with relatives and compatriots, as well as proof of continued membership in the family and home community (Carling 2014). Economic remittances, particularly so-called "productive capital investment," can influence structural and economic transformations in rural areas, thereby contributing to the process of rural gentrification.

Political remittances refer to the political ideas, opinions, and expectations regarding the political system that emigrants bring back from their host countries. Having observed public norms abroad and participated in various forms of political activity, they often attempt to promote these ideas in their country of origin. Some migrants believe that sending money back home grants them the right to participate in domestic political life, despite residing abroad (Isaakyan 2015: 30). Political remittances may influence the process of gentrification by introducing new forms of social and political engagement among residents.

Technological remittances encompass the knowledge, technical culture, innovations, and work ethics that emigrants transfer to their home country. If migrants have successfully adapted to foreign work environments and hold them in high regard, they may attempt to introduce and implement similar workplace practices upon their return, and this could contribute to structural transformations within local businesses and, consequently, to rural gentrification.

Social remittances involve the transmission of social and cultural practices, values, aspirations, beliefs, and behavioral patterns that emigrants bring from abroad and introduce into their family and community environments (Levitt, Lamba-Nieves 2011; Levitt 2016, 1996). These influences gradually alter the lifestyles of those in the home society; they may produce gentrification changes similar to those driven by the lifestyle of members of the urban middle class who have migrated to rural areas.

Migration remittances are evaluated in different ways. In positive assessments, economic remittances are seen as improving the living standards of recipient households, reducing economic disparities between families, and contributing to the overall prosperity of local communities. Investment remittances enable individuals to start businesses or modernize enterprises and farms, while social and cultural remittances introduce new skills and ideas (Faist 2008). From this perspective, emigrants are seen as "development agents," driving social and economic change.

Negative assessments of remittances focus on conspicuous consumption by recipients and living beyond one's means. Financial transfers are sometimes criticized for having a deactivating effect on migrant households, fostering dependence on relatives working abroad rather than encouraging self-sufficiency and goal-setting. Regarding professional skills, emigrants may acquire competencies and experiences abroad that have little

relevance in their home country's job market, leading to frustration and a sense of marginalization upon return. At the local level, remittances may not only fail to eliminate poverty but can also exacerbate economic polarization within communities, potentially fueling resentment and social tensions (Solga 2013: 164). In this context, some researchers speak of "new inequalities" emerging as a result of financial transfers from emigrants (De Haas 2007). Additionally, remittances can have conservative effects on local governance. Since migrant-sent funds allow families to meet essential needs and avoid poverty, they reduce the pressure on local authorities to take proactive measures to improve the socio-economic conditions in the rural commune (Koryś 2001). Remittances may therefore inhibit local-level change and delay endogenous processes of gentrification.

The Capital Conversion and Migration Remittances of Migrants from Stare Juchy to Iceland—Analysis of Empirical Data

In relative terms, it seems that the increase in cultural capital among emigrants from Stare Juchy was not high. Most had low qualifications and either basic or vocational education, which did not improve during their time abroad. Their personal development remained limited, with little advancement in institutionalized cultural capital (such as degrees or certificates) or embodied cultural capital (skills and habits). However, this does not mean that they did not learn anything. Some acquired new skills in construction, renovation, equipment installation, or warehouse operations. Others obtained truck-driving licenses or machinery-operation certifications, while some simply got their regular driver's license, which they could not afford in Poland. However, all these newly acquired skills were insufficient to bring about significant change within the commune.

Language skills showed little improvement. Even after years in Iceland, many emigrants admitted that their English remained weak and their Icelandic was only basic. One respondent with nearly two decades in Iceland said, in explanation, "How am I supposed to learn Icelandic when I spend all my time among Poles?" Young people planning to stay permanently were better at language acquisition, but overall, foreign language proficiency did not give returning migrants a competitive advantage in the Polish job market, and none had considered using their time abroad for career advancement.

One highly educated respondent noted that working in a fish-processing plant had introduced him to working-class Poles with whom he would not have interacted in Poland. Another respondent, when asked what she had gained from 16 months in a fish factory, replied simply, "A hatred for fish. I don't eat fish anymore."

Several interviewees mentioned that thanks to the money they had earned, they were able to travel and see a bit of the world. Some migrants claimed that they had overcome their fear of new technologies. Iceland has long been a digitalized country, with administrative, housing, healthcare, education, and banking matters handled online. The necessity of staying in touch with family and managing life in a foreign country made emigrants adopt digital tools more quickly than their peers back home. Several interviewees said migration had taught them patience: "Icelanders have this saying, '*þetta reddast*' [it will all work out], and after a while, you stop stressing so much." Others felt that emigration gave them

confidence and resourcefulness: "If you managed at the end of the world, why wouldn't you manage in a town you already know?" said one respondent.

Such an optimistic self-assessment is important, as it influences the life goals migrants set for themselves and their attitude toward future challenges. However, it does not necessarily reflect actual changes in attitudes or habits. Whether migrants have truly become less stressed, and calmer, more self-confident, and more courageous, can only be reliably assessed by an external observer or a researcher conducting longitudinal comparative studies. In a single, qualitative study such as the one described in this article, it is difficult to verify changes in the respondents' attitudes; at best, one can gain insight into their opinions on the matter and the views of outside observers. The latter often expressed doubts about any real transformation in the attitudes of the migrants. A representative of the commune government remarked that "For some, the trip certainly gave them a bit more self-confidence, but it could just as well be the money that makes them bolder. Because there's no sign that they're passing on any Icelandic values here."

No one said they were disappointed with Iceland. The vast majority, when asked about the overall outcome of their migration, said they were satisfied with their decision to leave and evaluated the experience positively, although not everyone was able to articulate clearly what they had gained beyond the financial aspect.

In terms of economic remittances, low-skilled and low-paid workers, who made up the majority of emigrants from Stare Juchy, rarely transferred capital that could be used for business ventures. Their remittances mostly consisted of regular or occasional financial support for their families. Higher-earning emigrants invested in houses or apartments. There were no migrant-driven business investments in Stare Juchy. None of the emigrants from Stare Juchy ever financed or co-financed anything in the public sphere. In Iceland, there is no functioning organization resembling a hometown association, such as those that existed in the past (Bukraba-Rylska 2008, Kantor 1990) and that are still occasionally established elsewhere by migrants from the same small localities (Krzyżowski 2009).

The impact of emigration on the commune was mostly seen in reduced social welfare expenditures, improved living standards for some retirees, and better-maintained homes and properties. The economic capital transferred did not directly contribute to local development, but it did indirectly improve household living standards, hygiene, and education. In this sense, even wage-based remittances were a form of investment.

Returning emigrants did not emerge as local leaders. By the late 2010s, return migration to Stare Juchy and surrounding villages was minimal, and those who did return were uncertain whether they would stay or leave again. Some individuals returned for two- or three-month vacations, but they spent their time renovating their homes or relaxing rather than introducing new lifestyles. Instead, they reverted to their pre-emigration habits and showed little inclination to transfer resources beyond financial support. The emigrants did not provide any social remittances, for example, new patterns of social engagement. None of the returnees became involved in projects organized in the commune, nor did any participate in the activities of a local NGO. This intentional reluctance to share cultural or social capital beyond money is typical of labor migrants focused solely on economic goals (Grabowska et al. 2017).

Among the emigrants from Stare Juchy, there were also no transnational migrants—those functioning within the social spaces of two or more countries simultaneously (Schiller

et al. 1995; Vertovec 2009; Lacroix 2014). They did not develop any transnational economic or social ties or relations. In this sense, they resembled the emigrants of previous decades, and differed only in that it was easier for them to visit their homeland. They maintained daily contact with their families and stayed up to date with news from their hometowns.

According to one observer, a long-serving commune official, two key factors prevented these emigrants from becoming agents of change within their communities. "First, their cultural and mental profile—most had low education levels and little interest in engaging with their host country, making them unlikely to promote change. Second, their migration model—family-based chain migration, which reduced challenges and limited critical reflection on what could be gained from emigration beyond financial earnings."

Significant changes did take place in Stare Juchy, but they were not driven by emigration or remittances from emigrants. Instead, they resulted from EU and Norwegian fund grants and the influx of settlers from large cities.

Migration to Stare Juchy—The Neo-Rurals

In the 1980s, the sale of agricultural land for recreational plots began in eastern Masuria. In the commune of Stare Juchy, the first new settlers were a well-known film director and his artist wife, who were described in interviews as pioneers of the new settlement in Stare Juchy. After the fall of communism, in the 1990s, the trend of purchasing land in Masuria intensified, especially as local farmers, lacking successors for their farms, sold off land and estates. Land was purchased either for recreational plots or as an investment. This was a time when land was relatively inexpensive, the boom in Masurian land was just beginning, and individuals without agricultural qualifications were still able to buy farmland. After a few years, some of the new owners realized that since they owned land they could build a summer house on it. Others bought land with house, which they later converted into a recreational or residential plot. As time passed, some came to the conclusion that, since they had a house in the countryside, they might as well move in permanently. By the early 2020s, in some villages within the commune, only two or three houses contained so-called locals, while the remaining twenty or so "chimneys" belonged to newcomers from the city.

Among those migrating to peripheral villages—such as those in the Stare Juchy commune—two main groups could be distinguished. The first group consisted of those who visited only on weekends and holidays, and treated their stay in Juchy as temporary. They did not integrate significantly with the local community, were rarely involved in the social life of their village, and knew little about it. The second group consisted of settlers who lived in the countryside permanently. These were people from large and medium-sized cities who had chosen to settle in the countryside and become part of the rural community. This study focused on the latter group of migrants. Their motivation for moving to the countryside was based on a negative assessment of urban life and a positive valuation of rural life. For them, migration to the countryside meant a "better quality of life," involving a change in lifestyle and, for some, an opportunity for self-fulfillment and a reevaluation of their lives. The vast majority of the new settlers were lifestyle migrants.

Lifestyle Migration and Its Typology

The term "lifestyle migration" is used to describe a particular type of international migration that is not driven by familial or educational factors, and usually not by economic factors (although there are lifestyle migrants who also aim to reduce their cost of living), but rather by a desire for self-fulfillment, cultural exploration, relaxation, the pursuit of comfort, or a change in lifestyle (Torkington 2012; Korpela 2019; Benson, O'Reilly 2009, 2016). Lifestyle migration is defined as "relatively affluent individuals of all ages, moving either part-time or full-time to places that, for various reasons, signify, for the migrant, a better quality of life" (Benson, O'Reilly 2009: 609). Lifestyle migration is always an individual choice; it is neither the result of economic necessity, as in the case of economic migrants, nor an escape from an oppressive state, as is the case with political migrants and refugees. If lifestyle migrants engage in work while abroad, it serves merely to sustain their chosen way of life—it is not their primary goal, nor is it a career-building step, as it often is for expatriates. Those who opt for lifestyle migration seek to live a qualitatively better life than before—one that is stress-free, focused on personal development, or often both.

International lifestyle migration has been linked to the growth of the global middle class and the aging of the baby-boomer generation. These two global trends have contributed to an increasing number of migrants with accumulated wealth relocating from developed countries to less developed countries or peripheral regions within their own countries (Castles 2010). Lifestyle migration is thus part of broader global migration processes, but what distinguishes it from other forms of migration—most of which also involve the pursuit of a better life—is that lifestyle migrants can relocate more easily due to their relative privilege, which stems from their citizenship status as well as their financial and cultural capital (McGarrigle 2022).

International lifestyle migration occurs in the opposite direction from economic migration: rather than moving from the Global South to the Global North or from the East to the West, lifestyle migrants often move from the Global North to the South and from the West to the East, for example, to Southeast Asia (Korpela 2019; Gosnell, Abrams 2009).

Scholars distinguish several types of lifestyle migration:

Amenity migration—The movement of individuals seeking locations that offer a high quality of life, beautiful landscapes, mild climates, and/or good infrastructure for leisure and sports.

International retirement migration (IRM)—Migration from northern countries to warmer regions or countries with lower living costs, such as the Mediterranean or Thailand.

Residential tourism—A lifestyle in which individuals spend part of the year in tourist-friendly regions, either renting or owning property. Unlike traditional tourism, residential tourism involves longer stays, often property ownership, and greater engagement with the local community.

Second-home migration—Temporary migration to privately owned countryside retreats or holiday homes located away from one's primary residence, often in rural or tourist-attractive areas.

International counter-urbanization—A reversal of urbanization trends, where migrants leave large cities in favor of smaller towns or rural areas, often in a different country, due to a negative perception of urban life (McGarrigle 2022).

All these types of migration share two key characteristics that distinguish them from traditional labor migration or refugee movements: they are voluntary and involve relatively affluent individuals. Moreover, lifestyle migrants often enjoy a privileged position relative to the local population, not necessarily due to their social status but rather because of their citizenship and the economic and political strength of their home countries in the global system (Benson, O'Reilly 2016).

The concept and typology of lifestyle migration can also be applied to domestic migrants who move from large and medium-sized cities to rural areas within the same country. Like international lifestyle migrants, these individuals move in the opposite direction from economic migrants, and their migration is always associated with the pursuit of a "better quality of life" and, for some, opportunities for self-realization and personal reassessment. However, in some cases, migration may also be motivated by a desire to reduce living costs. This type of migration is always voluntary and often results in relative privilege for the migrants compared to the local population, due to the former's higher economic and cultural capital. This category was used to analyze migration from large cities to Stare Juchy: firstly, because the concept of lifestyle accurately reflects the nature of this migration, and secondly—and perhaps more importantly—because the settlers themselves often referred to it.

Lifestyle Migration from Cities to Stare Juchy

Almost all the settlers in Stare Juchy who were interviewed for this study were well educated. This fact aligns with the numerous studies that indicate that it is primarily educated individuals who migrate in search of a better quality of life (Bartolini et al. 2017: 658). All of the settlers held pro-ecological views, cultivated gardens, grew their own vegetables, and made homemade juices and preserves. Some initially aimed for complete self-sufficiency in food production, but this proved unrealistic. All had eco-friendly wastewater treatment systems on their properties, and some collected rainwater for sanitary use. Many gathered herbs, and some even sold them: "A meadow is one big pharmacy," one respondent asserted. Several also spoke of the beneficial effects of physical labor in the garden or in the field.

Escaping to the countryside and slowing down their pace of life had been their response to the rapid tempo of city living and a strategy of emancipation—of "rediscovering oneself" and freeing oneself from time pressures and toxic professional dependencies. The theme of valuing time for oneself appeared in all the interviews. Some respondents spoke of having experienced a professional or existential crisis during their intense urban lives that led them to reevaluate their priorities. All the interviewees viewed their move to the countryside positively. They described their rural homes with affection, as "their place on earth." No one regretted their decision; at most, some felt they had made it too late.

Based on their motivations for moving to the countryside, and their demographic and social characteristics, two groups of lifestyle migrants in Stare Juchy could be distinguished, mirroring the classifications found in other studies on counter-urban migration (Mitchell 2004; Halamska et al. 2017: 130–131). In this article, they were categorized as "lifestyle migrants weary of life" and "eco-living and slow-life enthusiasts."

The "Weary of Life" Lifestyle Migrants

This group consisted of baby boomers in their sixties or seventies, from the upper-middle and middle class, who had spent their entire professional lives in the city. On nearing or entering retirement, they had become disillusioned with their former lives (sometimes experiencing burnout) and sought to leave the city to improve their physical and mental well-being. As former urbanites, their migration to the countryside can be described as ex-urbanization, in accord with Mitchell's (2004) terminology. Their financial security allowed them to take the risk associated with such a radical lifestyle change.

Their path to settlement often followed a similar pattern: they had visited Masuria to stay with family or friends who owned a second home there, or they had spent several consecutive summers vacationing at the same guesthouse. They had fallen in love with the area and decided to purchase a plot or homestead in the region: "At first, it was meant to be a nice getaway, a place to come and relax by the lake, in peace and quiet." At some point—sometimes due to leaving a job, losing a job, or retirement—they decided to settle permanently in the countryside.

Some in this group engaged in agritourism, though not as their primary source of income but rather as "a way to offset living costs that we would have incurred anyway." They described their businesses as small, intimate, and atmospheric, and often referenced regional history and traditions. Their vision of these places was shaped by books, films, and sometimes their travels to Tuscany or Provence. These settlers primarily operated within their own social networks, and rarely formed close social ties with the locals. A significant social distance existed between them and the long-term rural residents, with most of their interactions being work-related.

The "Eco-Living and Slow-Life Enthusiasts"

This group was younger than the first, consisting of individuals in their 30s and 40s, all well educated. Moving to the countryside was a conscious life project, motivated by their dissatisfaction with urban life and a conviction that slowing down and returning to nature was necessary. Motivated by ideological convictions such as environmentalism, anti-consumerism, and a strong belief in the superior quality of rural life, they had left the city at the beginning or mid-point of their careers. Their migration can be classified as anti-urbanization, in accord with Mitchell's (2004) terminology.

Unlike the first group of lifestyle migrants, they typically found their properties online rather than through personal connections. Before moving, they usually did not know anyone in the area. Upon purchasing a homestead, they relocated immediately and permanently. They renovated their homes gradually, sometimes initially living in a tent on their property. They undertook much of the renovation work themselves and consequently the process might last several years.

Another key difference between this group and the older lifestyle migrants was that entire families relocated to the countryside at the same time. In contrast, in the older group, it was common for the wife to move first, with the husband joining only later, after retiring. Despite having small children attending preschool or school, the younger group

often chose remote properties near forests, with difficult access roads, as their place of settlement.

The vast majority of the younger settlers continued to work in their professional fields and earned a living through non-agricultural means. Only a handful engaged in organic farming, and even for them, it was merely a supplementary activity rather than a primary occupation.

The new settlers from the second group were highly skilled in writing and implementing socio-cultural and educational projects aimed at the local villagers. Some even felt a sense of mission to transform the countryside. They actively engaged with the local community, attended social events hosted by longtime residents, and participated in traditional rural initiatives such as the Volunteer Fire Brigade (OSP) and Rural Housewives' Associations (KGW). This type of involvement distinguished them from the older group of settlers, who were engaged only in projects related to civic associations.

Consequences of Migration from Cities to the Commune of Stare Juchy

The spatial landscape of Stare Juchy has changed due to the presence of urban migrants. Compared to other rural communes, it now has a larger number of restored old German homesteads. Most migrants from the cities have chosen to renovate rather than to demolish the old Masurian houses and replace them with new ones, and this fact clearly distinguishes these migrations from those to suburban rural areas (Zwęglińska-Gałecka 2024; Kajdanek 2012). All the new settlers were deeply interested in the history of their properties and the surrounding area, and had considerable knowledge of the subject. They sought to preserve as much of the natural landscape and prewar architecture as possible. For example, they took care of historic rural cemeteries and opposed the cutting down of roadside tree alleys, which are characteristic of areas formerly inhabited by Germans. These newcomers also contributed to higher commune revenues, as most of them officially registered their residence in the rural community and paid income tax locally.

Beyond economic contributions, they transformed the social life of the commune. Some ran for local elections and initiated various cultural and educational projects. Others worked to strengthen neighborhood bonds by organizing social events for the other villagers, sometimes even hosting concerts in their own homes. They were also involved in improving rural infrastructure, such as revitalizing village beaches or renovating buildings for community centers. Additionally, they co-founded local civic associations, which began to emerge in rural areas after Poland joined the EU (Goszczyński et al. 2013). Some of the new settlers aspired to reform the local community, a fact that distinguished them from suburban newcomers, who often establish organizations oriented toward the interests and goals of the gentrifiers themselves (Kajdanek 2012; Zwęglińska-Gałecka 2024: 40). The new settlers in Stare Juchy founded associations that, in their view, were meant to serve the local population, as they felt a sense of civilizing mission toward the working class.

During the 2010s, four civic associations were established in the commune and significantly revitalized the local community. There was a buzz of activity, and Stare Juchy was recognized as an exemplarily active rural commune that successfully integrated its

residents. However, a decade later, at the end of the 2010s and the beginning of the 2020s, when this study was conducted, local civic activity had declined sharply. The once-thriving civic associations had either been dissolved by their urban founders or been left inactive despite their formal existence. The former leaders felt exhausted and burned out; they were disheartened by the lack of engagement and interest on the part of the local population. No new leaders had emerged to continue their efforts for the community. As a result, civic associations in Stare Juchy ultimately proved to be short-lived, existing only as long as their founders had the passion and energy to sustain them (Budyta-Budzyńska 2020, 2022).

Summary and Conclusion

In the twenty-first century, two parallel spatial mobility trends have been occurring in Stare Juchy: migration to and from the commune. While longtime residents have been leaving for cities and abroad—primarily to Iceland—at the same time, migrants from large and middle-sized cities have been settling in this area, either temporarily or permanently. Emigration from the commune was purely economic and driven by migration networks. It was primarily directed toward a single destination, Iceland, and differed from emigration from other peripheral areas in that it often involved entire families, who rarely returned. This model of migration led to depopulation and the rapid aging of the local community, as it was mostly young people who left. Permanent returns were rare, and those who did return remained uncertain about whether they would leave again to pursue further migration goals.

Those who left family members behind in Stare Juchy provided financial support. Some migrants invested in a house or flat, anticipating a possible return, but there was no investment in local businesses. In general, remittances did not stimulate local development. Migrants did not sponsor public projects or social initiatives in their villages, and there was no association of Stare Juchy emigrants in Iceland. Additionally, they did not bring back social remittances in the form of new models of civic engagement, and none of the returnees participated in local non-government organizations. While some transfer of skills and qualifications from Iceland was observed, it was mostly limited to manual labor, with no significant improvement in linguistic or cultural competencies that could have enabled migrants to seek different types of employment in Poland upon their return.

In terms of broader social impact, emigrants and returnees contributed little beyond economic capital and did not become agents of change in their villages. Instead, the group that had a greater influence on the local community was that of the new settlers from large and medium-sized cities. They initiated various socio-educational and historical projects and sought to encourage local residents to become more active through their own example. Some took an idealistic approach to rural life and felt a strong sense of mission to transform the countryside and the mindset of its inhabitants.

The urban settlers were lifestyle migrants whose relocation was not driven by economic necessity. For all the respondents, moving from the city was a personal and voluntary choice aimed at improving their quality of life. The new settlers in Stare Juchy were almost a textbook example of counter-urbanization migrants; they were tired of city life and sought peace, a slower pace, and closer contact with nature.

While all the settlers in Stare Juchy focused on improving their personal well-being, many also felt a responsibility to contribute to the local community. Some took on what they saw as a civilizational and educational mission, engaging in projects through NGOs they co-founded or participating in traditional rural organizations. However, after a decade, these organizations ceased to function, as their founders experienced burnout and no successors emerged to continue their work. Ultimately, they proved to be short-lived initiatives, with events organized by these associations serving as temporary interventions rather than long-term stimulants for community engagement. They did not lead to the formation of lasting social ties, and local residents and settlers remained two distinct groups.

The two migration flows—those leaving Stare Juchy and those moving in—were moving in opposite directions, yet the influx of urban migrants did not fill the gap left by those who emigrated. The newcomers from the cities did not replace former rural residents who had moved abroad, as they had different lifestyles, cultural and economic capital, needs, and ambitions. These parallel mobility trends reshaped the commune and may, in the future, lead to spatial and social gentrification. For now, there has been no displacement of local residents from their homes or land, as is common in more advanced stages of gentrification (Quastel 2009; Śpiewak 2016). However, land and old homesteads remain available for purchase, and the growing demand for such properties among urban dwellers suggests that this trend will continue to intensify.

To conclude, let us return to the question of the role of international migration in gentrification processes. The qualitative research presented here did not confirm the hypothesis that international migration has a fundamental impact on rural gentrification. The primary driver of change in the commune was the migration of the urban middle class to the countryside, while the changes brought about by international migration—apart from population decline and the ageing of residents—were of rather secondary importance. However, in order to determine whether this is a general pattern, further research on gentrification processes is necessary.

The research conducted in Stare Juchy contributes to the broader body of literature on rural gentrification, specifically within non-suburban contexts. The distinction between two forms of rural gentrification—suburban and peripheral—is analytically significant, as the dynamics of gentrification in suburban villages (often categorized under the process of suburbanization) differ markedly from those observed in peripheral rural areas located at a greater distance from urban centers. These differences manifest in distinct outcomes, are driven by divergent structural trends, and are shaped by varied migratory motivations and the adaptive strategies employed by newcomers (Heffner 2019; Kajdanek 2012; Halamska, Hoffman, Stanny 2017; Śpiewak 2016; Zwęglińska-Gałecka 2024).[3]

This case study of Stare Juchy offers additional empirical value by addressing a notable gap in the literature concerning rural gentrification in peripheral areas of Poland's so-

[3] Failure to differentiate between these two forms of rural gentrification and migration can lead to oversimplified conclusions, such as the oft-cited assertion of a general increase in net migration from urban to rural areas in Poland since the early 2000s. In reality, this trend is largely attributable to population growth in suburban zones proximate to large and medium-sized cities. For example, the highest population increase in the past decade was recorded in Stawiguda, a suburban municipality near Olsztyn (GUS 2024). In contrast, peripheral communes are experiencing markedly different demographic trajectories, characterized by depopulation and village decline, even in those where gentrification processes of the kind observed in Stare Juchy are underway.

called Recovered Territories—regions incorporated into the Polish state following the Second World War. Analyses of gentrification in such contexts must account for the historical and demographic specificities of these villages, namely, whether they are traditional settlements inhabited by multigenerational indigenous populations, or post-war settlements in the western and northern territories, where the so-called local population consists largely of first- or second-generation descendants of postwar settlers. These regions were historically dominated by state-owned collective farms, shaping a distinct rural structure. The gentrification process in these areas differs substantially from that observed in traditional rural regions of southern, southeastern, or central Poland, where contemporary in-migrants and owners of "second homes" often have ancestral ties to the area. In such cases, the rural repopulation involves the return of descendants of former residents—individuals who reclaim properties that have been part of their family heritage for generations (Wrona 2020). In contrast, in villages located in the western and northern territories—such as Stare Juchy—such intergenerational return migration is virtually absent. New settlers from urban areas lack genealogical ties to the village; both "second homes" and permanent dwellings are being acquired by individuals with no prior familial connection to the Mazury region. While this pattern may evolve over time, in the early decades of the twenty-first century it remains a defining feature that differentiates gentrification in formerly German and post-state-farm villages from gentrification in Poland's traditional rural settlements.

Finally, it is important to emphasize the value of comparing qualitative case studies with quantitative research. The quantitative indicators of gentrification based on statistical data proposed by Monika Zwęglińska-Gałecka (2024: 68–80) pertain to counties and therefore cannot be applied to communes such as Stare Juchy. Nevertheless, it would be possible to develop maps of gentrification processes at the commune level.

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