

THE POLISH FEMALE IMMIGRANT NICHE. DOMESTIC CLEANERS IN NEW YORK CITY AT THE TURN OF THE TWENTIETH AND TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

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Referring to historical and sociological literature, and based on extensive fieldwork in Greenpoint, Brooklyn in 2006 and 2010, the text presents a particular interpretation of the Polish female immigrants' work experience in the position of live-out domestic cleaners in New York City. My interpretation is that their work, as they see it, contains elements of both small business enterprise and live-out servant. Generally, Polish Greenpoint cleaners associated small business-like characteristics with working in the middle and upper-middle class homes in Manhattan, while servitude-like ones – with working in the lower middle class Hasidic homes in Brooklyn.

Keywords: migration, Greenpoint, domestic work, Polish migrants, female migration

BACKGROUND

The text presents an interpretation of the New York City private apartment cleaners' work as perceived by themselves. My interpretation suggests looking at their working experience as containing elements of both an ethnic small business and a traditional domestic servant. What I present here is an interpretation and not a hypothesis to be tested and then turned into theory in the Karl Popper's sense of the terms. Interpretation sheds light on a phenomenon from a certain, one out of several possible and legitimate positions.

This interpretation is inspired most of all by interviews conducted with the cleaners themselves but also by the literature from two domains: the history of hired domestic help in the US and the sociology of immigrant entrepreneurship. The position I have taken to look at the Polish female experience in New York City is motivated by the academic discussions on the nature of hired domestic work, on the one hand. On the other hand, it was inspired by my fieldwork experience itself. The text is based on fieldwork conducted in 2006 and 2010 in New York City. The research included a 13-month-long participant observation in Greenpoint (Brooklyn) and oral history interviews with 50 Polish Greenpoint immigrant community leaders and 23 Polish immigrant cleaners. While interviewing both Polish immigrant community leaders in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, and the cleaners, I discovered a surprising tension between the leaders' embarrassment with Polish female occupational specialization in the city and the cleaners' conviction that the job was much better than alternative jobs available to them in New York City, giving them both more bread and freedom (assumingly, the two basic human needs) than if they worked as laborers in industry and service jobs in an ethnic enclave.

The initial inspiration comes from the debate on ethnic enclaves and enterprises as the most certain way for immigrants to acquire financial success in a new country. The two most fertile participants of the debate which peaked in the 1980s and 1990s were economic sociologists with Alejandro Portes and his Princeton University team, and New York City based researchers with Roger Waldinger and Ivan Light. Portes investigated economic behavior of immigrants in Miami, Florida that has been the Cuban capital in the US since Fidel Castro's revolution in the 1950s and the following influx of political refugees. Portes formulated the thesis that in ethnic enclaves immigrants' jobs provide, on average, higher income than similar jobs in the mainstream economy (Portes, Jansen 1989, 1992; Zhou, Logan 1989; Portes 1995; Portes, Zhou 1996; Portes, Shafer 2006).

Roger Waldinger's and Ivan Light's research on New York City's immigrants shifted the main focus of the debate from the ethnic enclave to ethnic economy (Waldinger 1986, 1993; Waldinger et al. 1985, 1990; Light, Bonacich 1991; Light, Bhachu 1993; Light 2004). Their works indicated that the comparative advantage that an immigrant enterprise enjoys extends beyond ethnic enclaves and also applies to immigrant businesses operating in the mainstream economy. Their research identified ethnic networks of know-how and customers as well as access to cheap labor of co-ethnics as the core of the immigrant enterprises' advantage over American ones.

Subsequent research conducted in other locations and among different immigrant groups confirmed that for most immigrants it is self-employment

in even the smallest businesses in the secondary sector of the economy (paid less and unpopular among the natives) that best predicts their financial upward mobility. Those without skills, language, and culture proficiency high enough to enter the host country's labor market as professionals, find self-employment more beneficial than employment in the mainstream market (Borjas 1986; Model 1992; Bonacich 1993; Light 2004, 2006; Portes, Rumbaut 2006; Nestorowicz 2012; Kohlbacher, Protasiewicz 2012).

Waldinger also pointed to the phenomenon of 'ethnic queuing' (Waldinger 1996) among immigrant businesses and in the labor market. The idea is based on the premise that members of certain ethnic groups are seen as more suitable for jobs within specific sectors than members of other ethnic groups (Waldinger and Lichter 2003). In several works on the immigrant labor market, Waldinger (1989, 1996), also with Lichter (2003), demonstrated that on such a segmented immigrant labor market ethnic groups form a queue. This queue of ethnic groups is related to economic niches. Ethnic economic niches are understood as sectors in which members of a given group are overrepresented. Ethnic groups – both immigrants and their descendants, being either laborers or self-employed – form a queue to be employed in possibly high positions or lucrative businesses in more profitable sectors. As a result of this queue, as well as due to competition, the influx of subsequent groups of immigrants, upward mobility of the older ethnic groups, and ethnic succession, ethnic niches can be formed, as happened e.g. in New York City. These include niches well recognized by sociologists such as Chinese restaurants and sweatshops, (Logan, Zhou 1989), a Jewish lawyer or theater manager (Waldinger 1996), a black MTA bus driver or a clerk in a municipal office (Waldinger 1996), Korean store keepers and nail room owners (Foner 2001), a Greek restaurant owner (Class Matters 2005), a Pakistani taxi driver and an owner of a newsstand (Gupta 2005), Mexican dishwasher and a store help (Smith 2005), as well as a Mexican or Dominican industrial worker (Grasmuck and Pessar 1991) or Jamaican help in a city hospital (Kasinitz 1992; Foner 2001).

The other source of inspiration for my interpretation of the Polish cleaners' work experience in New York City was the historical research on domestic servants in the United States. Its most interesting and sociologically informed branch deals with the transformation of the help's work in the modern economy and society of the last 200 years. David M. Katzman's classic book *Seven Days a Week* (1981) initiated the research on the impact of industrialization and urbanization on the servants' position in the American North and post-antebellum South. A more recent book *Cleaning Up* by Alana Coble (2006) summarizes the quarter of a century of subsequent research. Her own focus was on the situation

of the New York City's domestics throughout the twentieth century. Historical studies confirm that, just as today, low prestige and the relationship of personal dependence from a mistress have discouraged white Americans from this job through the modern period. Hired domestic work has become a niche of the 'marginalized groups': new immigrants in the North-Eastern region throughout the 19th and early 20th century and black women – traditionally in the South, and between the 1920s and 1960s, in the period of low immigration level, also in the North, including New York City.

Both Katzman and Coble stress that labor relations in modern, industrial societies allowed for the transformation of the hired domestics' position from personally dependent live-in servants to independent workers whose relations with the employer depend on a negotiable contract between two equal partners. An inspiring conclusion by Katzman is the following: domestic help was considered to be incompatible with modernity in the American context. A relationship between a mistress and her help was seen as 'highly personalized' and unequal, and psychologically humiliating for the help. Therefore, in the industrial towns and cities of the North, working class women preferred having a job 'in the city' rather than the one of a live-in domestic. The job of a industrial laborer, a waitress or a sales girl offered much more autonomy, higher self-esteem, and higher social status than the domestic help's work. It also provided a young woman with more opportunities for exciting social life and getting married. Therefore, working class young women more willingly chose 'the city job' despite the fact that domestic servants' jobs were slightly better paid (a part of which was a room and board provided by the employer) than those of waitresses and sales girls, as some (but not all) data discussed by Katzman seems to suggest (Katzman 1981: 143–144, 268–271).

In *Cleaning Up*, Coble demonstrates that in the beginning of the twentieth century, new immigrants from Europe were considered as the most appropriate candidates for domestic servants in the city. These immigrant girls were undemanding and characterized with pre-modern, rural, traditional docility, internalized industriousness, practical wit, and physical endurance. These were the characteristics that women used to the modern city life had already lost for the sake of cunning (according to the employers) or wit and assertiveness (as would be interpreted by the city girls). Among the live-in servants' non-financial benefits, there were those appreciated by traditional communities: security of bed and board, a substitute of home in a place far away from family and home country. The servant's work, despite being exhausting and humiliating, was also an occasion to acculturate – that is receive paternalistic education – in the new country, and eventually, as an Americanized girl, to marry well. Coble

points out that the servant's job was ethnically profiled. In the early twentieth century New York City it was performed most often by Irish immigrants while Scandinavian immigrants were most appreciated.

In the course of the twentieth century, the hired domestics' work was increasingly reminding a contract job. It became emotionally cold, and the stress was more and more about performing a set of obligations under conditions that were agreed upon in advance: pay, days out, conditions of living, and period of employment. Such a contract protected a servant against an employer's abuse that was more likely in the pre-modern 'warm' relationship. At the same time, however, it also liberated employers from the moral obligation of care over a young woman. The division between work time and private life became clearer than in the past.

An interesting general conclusion from the research by both Katzman and Coble is that what has driven away potential employees from domestic work in the modern society – the industrializing, industrial, and post-industrial ones – were the feudal elements of this job¹ (Coble 2006: 6, 79; Palmer 1989). These were the elements that made this labor market sector the least attractive and prestigious. Coble argues that the occupation changed under the pressure of increasing demand for female work in the industry and therefore lower supply of servants. In the course of seven initial decades of the twentieth century industrial work in the West became popularly unionized, regulated by the national codes of labor law, and based on rationalization and specialization. These changes also influenced the relations between domestic help and their mistresses. “Pracownice uzyskały większą równowagę w relacjach z pracodawczyniami, zajmując na skali władzy podobne pozycje.” (Coble 2006: 2), a “[t]he power relationship was transformed. No longer an employer-dominated hierarchy, domestic service now had a more level playing field”. (4)

Coble, very much like mainstream immigration researchers, points out that nowadays immigrants from developing countries are once again the main segment of the labor force in the low pay, low prestige sector of domestic cleaning in New York City, similarly to other Western metropolises of advanced capitalism. American studies of contemporary domestic cleaners in both New York City and California emphasize that that foreign born laborers are more likely to accept paternalistic relations with employers, characteristic for pre-modern servant-mistress relations (Romero 2001; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2007).

¹ Another interpretation (Palmer 1991; Janicka 2012) emphasizes that the jobs perceived as most humiliating (Janicka) or least prestigious (Palmer) are the ones that deal with human or household waste.

SMALL BUSINESS WITH AN ETHNIC BRAND

My interpretation stresses that the Polish domestic cleaners' overall employment strategy is to define their work as a small business enterprise. In several aspects their work reminds other small businesses operating in the personal service sector in an immigrant economic niche relying on an ethnic trade mark. I argue that what the Polish live-out cleaners themselves liked about their job in private houses was that their work relied on what literature identifies as the principles of an enterprise. These include both the general characteristics of a company operating in a free market economy, and features of a small business in modern economy, particularly in the sector of personal services. They also appreciated the already established brand of a Polish cleaner in New York City.

AN ENTERPRISE IN FREE MARKET ECONOMY

1. An institution born out of an entrepreneur's will – personal autonomy coming from self-employment

The entrepreneur's will could be associated with the autonomy of one's decision to start a company and sustain its activity. I use the term 'autonomy' inspired by the conclusions from Melvin Kohn's book *Class and Conformity. A Study in Values* published in 1969. This classical work identifies the ways in which the experience of work differently shapes values in various social classes. Values shaped in the middle and upper middle class' working environment, such as autonomy and creativity, are more respected in a society than those characteristic for lower classes (Sennett&Cobb 1993). Kohn's basic distinction invented for the purposes of the industrial society was between work of middle class and working class. On the one hand, the middle class allegedly worked under the conditions of higher autonomy, understood as one's influence over the work process. The typical objects of middle class work were ideas and people. On the other hand, the working class's work involved less autonomy and had material objects as its object and effect. This distinction only partially applies to the post-industrial society. Yet, higher level of autonomy is still a characteristic of the jobs performed by the upper classes. A small business owner – industrial or postindustrial – is qualified as lower middle class in the stratification classifications (Gilbert 2007), yet his or her social status and psychological predisposition is different from the one of a hired laborer. Even if an entrepreneur performs exactly the same type of work as a hired laborer (e.g. shelving goods, distributing goods to stores, dressing customers' hair, or – finally – cleaning), a small business owner has more autonomy and the sense of agency than a laborer. He or she established this

workplace out of his or her will, is his or her own boss, understands the entire processes of his or her work – starting from customer search, through signing a contract, to purchase of means necessary to manufacture a product or provide a service. A sense of personal freedom should be stronger in such a person's identity while the sense of alienation – weaker.

Monika, a 50-year-old illegal immigrant since the 1990s in the US, has worked as a cleaner in various establishments. She was convincing me that she favored this job over others that she could have performed in the US. It was so because only as a live-out cleaner could she feel as her own boss. Whenever she cleans somebody else's house, she treats it as an act of will to cooperate with an employer:

“Here, I come in, nobody tells me what to do, I have apartment keys, I open it up, I clean, they thank me pleasantly, give me a present, never say they don't [like my work]. I left those who tried to set the rules and I did so such long time ago, as I've had a chance to do his through the years. And now, that's why I stay here that I am a boss for myself. I have kept those who are nice to me, who appreciate me and don't oppress me (...) They've got to know me that I'm not a thief or something, that they can leave all their wealth and I most certainly won't steal anything. I've got to know them, that they appreciate my work and treat me as equal”.

2. Risk, uncertainty of the market and competition

A domestic cleaner takes risk and works under uncertain conditions. Both demand for her work is variable depending on the competition with other cleaners and the predisposition of his or her employers. It is the cleaner himself or herself who bears the consequences of unsuccessful negotiation, increasing competition, and drop of prices. There is no other boss than himself or herself, neither are there any labor organizations that would take responsibility for, prevent, or assist a cleaner in case of economic downturn. Joanna, a respondent with a highly developed identity of a small business owner, spoke of her job in such terms.

- What are the pluses?
- That I am independent (...). When [an apartment owner – A.S.] blames me for doing poorly, I know at least for what, don't I. (...) And minuses? It is easy to lose the job. When I don't work, I don't earn money. I have no [pension, insurance – A.S.] benefits. (...) Once I asked for a [pay] rise and the guy responded with ‘thank you, bye’. That's it.
- Did you expect this? Did you take this into account at all? Or did you think ‘I do not lose anything. The worst case, he won't raise my pay’?
- Exactly the latter. And what I found out was the former. That's it. (May 2010)

3. Business calculation, profit orientation

A domestic cleaner runs his or her own business as he or she himself or herself is responsible for paying (or not paying) taxes, obtaining (or not) health insurance, and making (or not) contributions to a pension plan. In opposition to employees in legally operating companies in Europe and unionized sectors and respectable companies in the United States, a domestic cleaner has no social benefits, paid vacation, health insurance or pension plan provided by an employer. Only some cleaners whom I interviewed, including several unauthorized ones, paid taxes from at least a share of their income. Most of the cleaners counted on the city provided health insurance for the poor or their husbands' health insurance and pension plan.

Cleaners themselves pay the costs of entering the market and operating a small business. The latter are not high. Typically, they are limited to the purchase of a work uniform including gloves, transportation costs, and sometimes a "purchase of a job". "Buying (working) places" reminds buying a company or its shares, along with its reputation and position on the market. This is the way in which Edyta, a 30 year old unauthorized immigrant with experience of working as babysitter and sweatshop worker, secured a profitable position when entering the market. She thought of buying working places as business investment: "So, I bought several places as I had no work. A granny who was leaving back for Poland did not want to give her places but to sell them" (May 2010).

SMALL BUSINESS IN MODERN ECONOMY

1. The work is performed on the basis of a contract between relatively equal partners

None of my respondents has ever worked on the basis of a written contract. Yet, they spoke with content about their relations with employers, when they worked on the basis of a task agreement, with clearly stated tasks to be performed, a price and time set in advance. This was either agreed upon at the job interview or on the first occasion of providing services. Such an arrangement gave the cleaners' job the character of a small service business. As Coble emphasized, it was the lack of such an agreement that exposed a cleaner to become a servant. – Is it to be cleared out in the course of work? Is it a subject to change [in the course of cooperation – A.S.]? Is it set in advance?

Joanna: Generally, I try to set an agreement in the beginning. Later, it tends to pile up, to be added, to multiply. It develops later by multiplication. And there are unpleasant situations later... And there are unpleasant situations. While when it's settled what is to be done in advance, you know what's to be done and what you're paid for. And if they [suddenly] want something else – sorry, no."

2. Equality of the transaction's partners

In the live-out cleaner's job, Polish immigrants appreciated yet another feature of a small business – a sense of balance in the relationship with an employer. They liked the places where the style and effects of their work were appreciated.

Cecylia, even though she was an undocumented immigrant, spoke no English, and decided for work in Williamsburg where the prices were lower as she was afraid of subway trips to Manhattan, had a sense of balance in her relationship with the employer. Her employer was a woman in Cecylia's age, a working mother of a huge family of multiple children, a wife of a rabbi of the local Hasidic community.

And I speak as much as I can, although I hardly speak (...), but they somehow get to understand what I mean. Sometimes, I laugh and she laughs, and she knows [what I mean]. When I'm angry, she knows that I'm angry. That I'm nervous (...) That I dislike something, don't I. She's angry and I'm angry, that's it.

Respondents that cleaned houses in middle class homes in Manhattan, Queens, Brooklyn and Long Island spoke even more about a direct and egalitarian character of their relationship with female employers. Coble emphasizes that the change in the relationship between an employer and a cleaner from a hierarchical one to the one based on partnership should be seen not only as a result of the New York City's cleaners' self-organization and mobilization effort, but also a of the general change in the American culture in the last couple of decades. New York City, a cosmopolitan, liberal city, attractive to subsequent generations of the youth, artists, dreamers, and rebels was at the center of change of the 1960s and 1970s called counterculture. The middle and upper middle classes of the baby boomers' generation, today already in their middle and retirement age, as well as younger generations in New York City are liberal, tolerant toward immigrants, and feminist in their attitudes more often than people from other regions of the United States. Coble argues that in their attitude toward immigrant cleaners, the city's liberal female employers might have a sense of guilt. After all, this might have been only a matter of historical accident that they, as employers, take more privileged social positions than their employees. This sense of guilt is eased by their generosity toward cleaners and egalitarian attitude in the personal relations. Peter Bearman (2005) discovered a similar attitude toward immigrant doormen among the upper middle class inhabitants of New York apartment houses.

3. Rationalization and planning, depersonalization, standardization, and professionalization of service

Polish immigrant cleaners appreciated places where they could rationally plan their work. Since sociology classics Max Weber and Emil Durkheim, the terms ‘rationalization’, ‘depersonalization’, ‘standardization’, and ‘professionalization’ have been used to describe changes characteristic for modern societies. Weber’s diagnosis emphasized increasing disenchantment and increasing rationalization of the human world. Modern societies have tried to free their actions and institutions from the influence of tradition, beliefs, and emotions and make them effective, predictable, calculable, and performed by machines (Rationalization of Society 2014).

My respondents’ ideal job was one that could be planned and performed efficiently with a minimum amount of work, time, and emotional engagement and with the use of machines.

Zofia, a 60-year-old immigrant, legalized her stay several years, after her arrival in the 1980s, when she was lucky in the diversity visa lottery. Since her arrival she has worked as live-in cleaner in hotels, as a provider of elderly care, worker in a food processing factory, and domestic and office cleaner. When she compared her own style of work with others, she emphasized planning, and time and energy saving strategies:

“I get satisfaction, even for a while... I have it done, I move ahead. One has constantly be focused on working the way not to get tired. In the meantime, I get things prepared, things that I need to work with, then I step aside, have a sip of coffee and I have a plan what to do. I do not look behind, do not go into details, I don’t even enter a room that I have just cleaned, do I. There are cleaners who start with messing things”. (May 2010)

Marzena, a 35-year-old authorized immigrant who worked five days a week for a wealthy family in the Upper East Side was used to starting her Monday shift from a conversation with the apartment owner about the tasks assigned for the entire week. Some of them had to be performed every day, some of them weekly, and some even less often, e.g. cleaning curtains. Planning these task for the course of each day, week, and longer periods was Marzena’s privilege and responsibility: I plan what I need to do today, tomorrow, the day after tomorrow, don’t I. (May 2010)

Respondents who liked their job appreciated if they could plan their working schedule in a way which enabled them to clean as many places as possible in the shortest possible time span. Halina, a 70 year old Polish retiree and authorized immigrant since the 1990s, collected ‘a set’, as she called the list of customers.

Typically, she cleaned two apartments in the course of each working day in a weekly cycle. She arranged her appointments so that the places she cleaned on a given day were located in the same area.

- Is the system that you arrive in a different place every day?
- Yes, a different place. It depends. Some [owners – A.S.] call [for cleaning – A.S.] every second week, some – once a week. [It depends – A.S.] how one calls me for. For example, I had two clients in a one day, as one called me for four hours, so I offered four hours to another one. Each of us [cleaners – A.S.] does this, doesn't she? (...) To have clients living next to each other, so that the transportation is easy.” (May 2010)

As Coble claims, depersonalization of relations between an employer and a help was a change which cleaners first had insisted on and then defended it. The depersonalization of the relationship transformed a servant into a professional service provider. Polish immigrants appreciate depersonalization when it results from the lack of supervision, absence of employers at the time of cleaning, as well as a kind but distant approach characteristic for a relationship between strangers. Especially in wealthy and spacious homes the encounters with employers are rare and the sense of personal dependence is weak. Even the sense of alienation coming from working in somebody else's private space that was so emotionally uncomfortable, as Katzman pointed out, is relatively weak in huge or empty houses or apartments.

Domestic helps also appreciate their sense of being a professional – a person providing a professional service. ‘Professionalization’, as much as ‘rationalization’, belongs to the key terms describing the transformation from a traditional to a modern society. The term originates in Durkheim's observation that modern societies are characterized with an increasingly complicated and precise division of labor and increasing job specialization. My respondents often expressed the conviction that they performed tasks which the employer not only had no time to do but which he or she was not able to perform. In this interpretation helps sell a professional housekeeping service: cleaning or preparing meals. Cecylia, a 50year-old unauthorized immigrant with long experience as a bakery worker both in Poland and New York City worked full time for a huge, busy, wealthy, and respected Hasidic family in Williamsburg. She was convinced that her own expertise in baking or making pierogis exceeded that of her employer:

“Initially, didn't want to undertake work in this house as it was in terrible condition. thought I was unable to make it [clean – A.S.] (...) I did not admit, you know, when I was looking at her doing this, I laughed to myself as I knew she wasn't doing this right. (...) I got to correct her a bit. And with time, I was

slowly, slowly admitting [the baker's experience – A.S.]. (...) I ended up making three hundred pierogis. I have taken over the entire work, I stick pierogis as they need to be pressed, and she was fulling around with them. (...) And she now says: 'Cecylia, look, it is all garbage'. So, I do this now." (May 2010)

Monika was assured that she had furnished her own apartment much more tastefully than some of her employers. Both the fact that her clients' apartments were so poorly arranged and that the former hired a cleaner testified, according to her, to her employers' lack of skills, wit, and taste which could be partially made up for by a service that Monika provided.

SMALL BUSINESS IN PERSONAL SERVICES

The two characteristics of a small business operating in the sector of personal services are the following: 1. it involves trust and relies on personal recommendation, and 2. it concerns emotional labor in service provider-customer relations.

1. Trust and emotional labor

Trust and recommendation are the basis of the small business activity, especially when the latter deals with personal services pertaining to a customer's body and identity and when it involves personal contact between the service provider and the customer. The role of trust is higher in domestic cleaning work as it is performed in the customer's most private space – at home. In comparable businesses, also involving body, looks, and identity, such as e.g. dry cleaning, hair dressing or groceries (as they provide food), the role of trust is still lower as the service is provided outside of customer's home.

Therefore, the reputation, and the stability of employment and income of a domestic cleaner highly depends not only on the quality of one's work but also on one's skill to raise and maintain trust. They acquire new customers through a recommendation from the current customers. In the way characteristic for many of my interviewees, Halina told me that she acquired the subsequent jobs gradually. She was convinced that the key to profitable new jobs was a good recommendation from her current customers.

- Could you, please tell me what it takes to get a place [to clean – A.S.]?
Halina: Sweetheart, well. When you clean at somebody's place, you see she is happy, you know that she can recommend you, can't she?
- Did you start with just one place?

- No, I had two. (...) Later, one [customer] to another and you can put together five days, as they say (May 2010)

Seemingly, trust as a basis of the business stands in contradiction to depersonalization. How is it possible that providing a depersonalized service involves any personal quality or relationship such as trust? In agreement with the way of thinking about small businesses by Benjamin Franklin, I suggest to consider one's honesty here. Small businesses require this particular personal quality more than any other, e.g. fondness of chocolate or horror movies. These two dimensions – depersonalization and trust in a cleaner's personal honesty – are not in contradiction.

Like a hair dresser's or beautician's work, a domestic help's service includes providing emotional comfort coming from a good look of one's body or apartment. Both the historical research and my own interviews indicated that cleaners treat the employer's expectation that they emotionally engage in the family life as psychological burden which increases the subjective costs of providing a cleaning service. Yet, among those of my respondents who saw themselves as professional cleaners, it was exactly work with emotions – a careful and patient attitude toward customers that Anna Kordasiewicz (2010) calls 'personalization' – that was a part of their professional strategy. They saw their customers as expecting a service that is tailored to their needs, taste, conditions, and personality but is performed professionally – fast, flawless, discreetly.

2. Ethnic brand

Finally, Polish domestic cleaners' businesses take advantage of the existing immigrant networks and the appreciated brand of 'a Polish cleaner' in New York City.

Polish immigrants expressed certainty that they are the most appreciated ethnic group of cleaners in New York City. A similar opinion was expressed by Polish Greenpoint community leaders. To use the Roger Waldinger's terminology, the convictions of my respondents could be described as certainty that Poles are at the front of an ethnic queue in the sector of live out cleaners in the city.

SERVANTS

The elements of domestic cleaners' work that they themselves disliked could be interpreted as those ascribed to a traditional servant – personal dependence on the employer, a mistress/a master, and despotic relations between the two.

Coble contrasts modern, egalitarian, and contractual labor relations that cleaners appreciate with ‘feudal relations’, as she calls them, that the cleaners dislike. Although she is a historian, Coble uses this phrase in an almost frivolous way, as an invective. I suggest to treat the distinction between feudal and modern, capitalistic relationships between people of unequal social status seriously. Following Marc Bloch (1999), a classic of medieval studies and the author of *Feudal Society*, to be “a man of another man – this phrase belonged in feudal language do the most frequent and full of content – (...) expressed the personal dependence as such, without referring clearly to the legal nature of this relationship (...) emphasis was here on a single crucial common element: subjugation of one person to the other” (Bloch 1999: 163). I suggest a distinction be made within more broadly understood feudal relations, so that they include also the non-Western legal culture – despotism and paternalism. Both terms refer to pre-modern political and social relations. Despotism implies complete personal dependence and obligation to be absolutely obedient. Paternalism implies an exchange of obedience and subjugation of a servant for the care and responsibility of a master.

My interviews in Greenpoint indicate that the perception of the cleaner’s work as servitude is associated with employment in Hasidic families in Williamsburg. However, my analysis of the interviews demonstrates that the attitude toward work resembling small entrepreneurship in providing personal services also appears among the cleaners in Williamsburg. Cecylia, quoted above, would be the clearest example of such an attitude. Williamsburg has become in Polish immigrants’ narratives – both the leaders’ and non-leaders’, including cleaners’, and both those who have and have never worked there – a symbol of what is unwanted in the pre-modern work relations.

A sense of personal dependence comes in a cleaner’s job from the fact of working in somebody else’s home. They did not like working under direct and strict supervision, humiliation of being treated as inferior, dependence on employer’s personal characteristics and moods.

The elements of the cleaners’ work experience that could be qualified as belonging to the sphere of servitude included: personal dependence, strict supervision, dishonesty and exploitation, and cultural difference perceived as an accelerator of despotism.

PERSONAL DEPENDENCE AND DESPOTIC RELATIONS

The most frequently mentioned weakness of the cleaner’s job was her personal dependence from an employer in her (and rarely his) own private space of home. This situation exposes cleaners to their employers’ despotism – arbitrary decisions

made from the position of natural advantage, behavior that cannot be criticized and therefore humiliation when a mistress has a worse day and bad mood. The despotic character of the relationship was more likely when the payment proceeded the fulfillment of a task. The situation opened a possibility that if the relationship goes wrong, the cleaner will end up without payment. Cleaners perceived their relationship with an employer as more despotic if the cleaning took place not only in the presence but also under the observation and with the comments of an employer.

Romero (2001) and Hondagneu-Sotelo (2007) approached the problem of personal dependence in the relationship between Latin American immigrant domestic helps, cleaners and baby sitters, and their white American employers in California. Both authors emphasized that even though the dependence was mainly psychological and informal, it was stronger when a help lived in, was a fresh immigrant unaware of cultural and legal norms of the host country, was young, raised in an authoritarian atmosphere, was used to obedience and craved protection, had no place to go (e.g. was an orphan or fled home), was an unauthorized immigrant afraid of contacts with the US police and other public institutions, or when she (or he) originated in a country with corrupted public institutions. All these circumstances create an emotional platform, where an employer's normally mild authoritarian predisposition can develop into despotism in a relationship with a defenseless and dependent help.

Another practice that cleaners described in terms of dependence and despotism was picking day laborers on a street corner in Williamsburg. Róza, a mother of three school-aged children who subsidized her income from a full time job in a factory as an elderly care provider on weekends in Hasidic Williamsburg, described her early New York City work experience: "whoever comes can pick one. A lady comes in and whomever she likes she approaches her and takes her. There is not even a line there so that 'first comes, first taken'... A Jewess approaches and picks the one that she wants".

STRICT SUPERVISION, LACK OF TRUST

Another aspect of work that cleaners often complained about was direct and strict supervision. Once again it was typically associated with Hasidic Williamsburg where house owners were said to accompany cleaners at work. Most likely, as mothers of numerous children, Hasidic employers spend most of their time at home, anyway. Supervising cleaners, especially day laborers picked at a street corner in periods preceding holidays seems understandable. Yet, scarce existing research on Hasidic sects also indicates low trust to outsiders as a group characteristic (Marwell 2004).

Cecylia, who at the time of the interview worked as a full time live-out housekeeper to a Hasidic family, recollected her experience as a day laborer in other Williamsburg houses:

- They exaggerate their demands. They exaggerate. I was hurried up as hell, as if – as they say – she could she would even beat me with something. It doesn't work this way, it doesn't.
- So, you are cleaning...
- Yes, and she's behind your heels. (May 2010)

Behavior that was probably aimed at saving time in the case of work paid per hour and supplementing for a linguistic barrier was perceived as stressful and as an expression of lack of trust and respect for a cleaner as a person. Marzena recollected her short experience of cleaning the Hasidic homes in Williamsburg: “she points out: here, with her finger, here to clean. She checks her watch all the time. It just that Jews have less respect for other people”.

CULTURAL DIFFERENCE PERCEIVED AS AN ACCELERATOR OF DESPOTISM

This attitude raises an interesting and surprising point. Polish cleaners, both those with and without working experience in Hasidic Williamsburg typically interpreted cultural difference between themselves and their employer as an accelerator of despotism – their own humiliation coming from the employer's display of superiority. Despotic behavior described by Polish cleaners reminds of that described by Coble and Katzman as experienced by immigrant domestics in the early twentieth century American homes: the mistress's superiority over a servant was not only of social class but also cultural nature. Yet, what is surprising is that my respondents saw their relationship with Hasidic, and not mainstream American middle or upper class employers, as more despotic. They perceived cultural difference as sharper in the field of religion and ethnicity when it came to Hasidic Jews. They did not associate this difference with the fact that one side of the relationship was an employer and American citizen and the other one – an employee, an immigrant, and often an unauthorized one. It remains an open question, to what extent Hasidic ways bothered them as they created more hardship in the work place and to what extend this perception resulted from pre-employment anti-semitic attitudes (Sosnowska 2010, 2013b).

The most frequently mentioned practices – religiously and culturally obvious from the Hasidic point of view – that were perceived by Polish cleaners as despotic included: a ban for non-kosher food or water that a cleaner could

consume while working; calling them ‘goyim’ in the conversations in Yiddish; numerous children that interrupted their work.

Cleaners who used to work long hours every day in Williamsburg complained that they were not offered any food or drink. Initially, I interpreted such complaints as characteristic for cleaners with a servant attitude, interested in finding a ‘kind’ mistress. Yet, Cecylia was convinced that a necessary condition of working in Hasidic homes was relying on their food and drinks as non-kosher food was forbidden there.

- I had such an employer once, you know, that I carried my own water in my purse. I used to work there for six, seven hours, it was always Wednesday, and I had to have some drinking water as she would never offer me a drink. And finally, I left her. She doesn’t even ask whether I feel thirsty. Yeah, it happens. Strange things happen.
- So, you carried you own water, didn’t you?
- Yes, and I drank secretly.
- Secretly?
- Secretly, so that she didn’t see, as it was non-kosher. They do not allow outside food at their homes, so that a piece of bread doesn’t drop there. (May 2010)

After several years of working for the same Hasidic family, Cecylia had a chance to talk to her employer about this practice only to learn that Hasidic employers – mothers of large families – often just forget about their cleaners’ needs. They hire help to ease their housework and not to add one of caring about hired laborers.

CONCLUSIONS

My interpretation stresses that cleaners were not consequent in their pro-small business strategy and dislike for and employers’ paternalistic attitude toward them. They actually appreciated employers’ paternalism if they only benefited from it. They were eager to accept their care in the form of an additional meal, gift, or a generous bonus. They were also happy to receive emotional and organizational support in difficult life situations of illness and family distress. They were happy to receive advice – a classical paternalistic transfer. This is the situation in which they saw themselves as an immigrant, ignorant of the rules of life in a different country and their American and middle class mistress as source

of superior cultural knowledge and acculturation. In that cultural exchange the employer-employee relation reminded the one between village servant girls and town middle class mistresses. The relationship so characteristic for both early modern Europe and America has differed in that in the US, domestic helps have more often originated from foreign villages in economically peripheral countries.

These are issues for (fascinating) discussion and further research:

1. to what extent are Poles' experiences as apartment cleaners similar to that of cleaners of other ethno-racial backgrounds? In terms of predominant occupations and socio-economic position, Polish immigrants are slightly similar to a new group of immigrants from the English and French speaking Caribbean – a number of whom are employed in working class jobs but have relatively high earnings when compared to other members of this group. Existing research provides evidence that Polish cleaners compete with English speaking Caribbean immigrants in the upscale parts of the market while with Latin American immigrants in the least lucrative sectors of the apartment cleaning market in New York City. (Coble 2006) Central Eastern European women, similarly to Afro-Caribbean ones, have a strong position on this market. As much as being a native English speaker, familiar with British middle class culture of self-improvement and discipline (Vickerman 2013) is an Afro-Caribbean women's advantage, Polish women take advantage of their whiteness, European cultural background, and well developed ethnic networks.
2. to what extent is the Polish female immigrants' experience in the cleaning sector similar to the experience of Polish cleaners in European cities? Existing research provides evidence that working in the cleaning and care sector – as home attendants, maids, baby sitters and elderly care providers – has become a Polish niche also in other destinations of Polish labor migrants: Germany, Belgium and Italy (Grzymała-Kazłowska 2001; Urbańska 2012; Sakson 2005; Kordasiewicz 2010; Slany 2006; Grabowska-Lusińska 2007; Fihel i Piętka 2007; Kowalska-Angelleli 2007; Napierała 2008, 2010; Stanek 2012; Małek 2012).

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