

Return Migration as a Largely Male Phenomenon

Gendered Dimensions of Transatlantic Mobility from the Habsburg Empire, 1890s-1914

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Abstract

Return migration is a crucial yet often overlooked dimension of the migratory experience. Recognizing return paths challenges the notion of migration as a unilinear, one-directional process, instead revealing the circular and continuous nature of human mobility. Even in the era of transatlantic migration in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, many passengers crossed the Atlantic multiple times. Returning to Europe was often not the conclusion of a journey but simply another stage in an ongoing cycle of movements. Gender shaped the kinds of careers and opportunities available to mobile people. Even if women and men moved within distinct socio-economic power structures, evidence on gender-specific data on transatlantic returnees before World War I remains scarce.

Ida Winkler was born in South Dakota in the United States of America, and in 1905 she returned to Tyrol with her parents and two sisters. In an autobiographical text written in the 1950s, Ida explains that the family's decision to return to the Habsburg Empire was guided primarily by faith and the desire to raise their three little girls in a religious environment:

But the main reason for leaving, as stated earlier, was the children's spiritual well-being and religious security. From a purely worldly point of view, it would certainly have been wiser for us to stay in America. Father

had worked diligently in the gold mill for twelve years... The pay would also have been better.¹

Her father had left Tyrol for the United States in 1883 at the age of 23, and her mother followed her fiancé nine years later, in 1892. Ida recalls in detail how comfortably the family lived in America; their house in South Dakota was well-furnished, with sofas and soft carpets. Yet despite their prosperity, her parents placed greater value on the girls' moral and spiritual upbringing than on economic success. For many Europeans who moved to the Americas, returning "back east" remained a real and tangible option. Like the decision to emigrate, the decision to return was shaped by a complex mix of economic, cultural, and moral considerations.

Migration has never been a one-way process nor simply a single act of moving from one geographic and social locality to another. As early as the late nineteenth century, Ernest G. Ravenstein included in his "laws of migration" the principle of return. In 1912, W.B. Bailey famously described European laborers in the US as "birds of passage", highlighting their frequent intention to go back home. Later, in the 1960s, Frank Thistlethwaite urged scholars to pay closer attention to transatlantic return migration.² Building on this view, Dirk Hoerder emphasized the "remigration factor" as a defining feature of labor mobility, while Nancy Green called for a reversal of perspective – to study not only departures and arrivals, but also returns, even though, as she noted, "it is more difficult to count those who leave than those who arrive."³

Return migration, however, is a crucial yet often overlooked dimension of the migratory experience. Recognizing return paths challenges the notion of migration as a unilinear, one-directional process, instead revealing the circular and continuous nature of human

1 Ida Winkler, 'Ich geh' auch nach Amerika. Lebens- und Familiengeschichte der Fam. Winkler', transcript of an original manuscript from 1950/1953, compiled by Otfried Pawlin (Virgen 1997) 27; Dokumentation lebensgeschichtlicher Aufzeichnungen, Universität Wien; translated into English by Annemarie Steidl.

2 Ernest G. Ravenstein, 'The laws of migration', *Journal of the Statistical Society of London* 48:2 (1885) 167-235, 199 and 187 ff.; W.B. Bailey, 'The bird of passage', *American Journal of Sociology* 18:3 (1912) 391-397 and Frank Thistlethwaite, 'Migration from Europe overseas in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries', in: Herbert Moller (ed.) *Population movements in modern European history* (London 1964) 73-92, 77 f.

3 Dirk Hoerder, 'Immigration and the working class. The remigration factor', *International Labor and Working-Class History* 21 (1982) 28-41 and Nancy L. Green, 'The politics of exit. Reversing the immigration paradigm', *Journal of Modern History* 77 (2005) 263-289, 286.

mobility.⁴ Even in the era of transatlantic migration – when journeys involved long sea crossings and arduous train rides – many passengers crossed the Atlantic multiple times. Returning to Europe was often not the conclusion of a journey but simply another stage in an ongoing cycle of movements. Understanding these return paths, along with their social and economic consequences, is essential to any comprehensive account of migration history – a dimension that, despite its centrality, has only recently begun to receive serious scholarly attention.⁵

Although some transatlantic migrants returned with empty pockets, damaged health, or shattered illusions after struggling to adapt to American societies, the returnees themselves should not be regarded as failures. On the contrary, they formed a vital component of a global migration system in which some people circulated across continents as easily as others moved within more confined local spaces.⁶ Many Central Europeans crossed the Atlantic without any intention of permanent settlement; their aim was to earn money abroad and repatriate it in order to improve their economic circumstances.

Women and men based their decisions about returning on their immediate situations or prospects in the host economy, though also – despite limited access to reliable information – on anticipated developments in their countries of origin.⁷ Even as they

4 Agnes Gehbald, Philipp Horn and Rea Vogt, 'Atlantic crossings. Temporary migration and labour around 1900. Introduction', *Comparativ. Zeitschrift für Globalgeschichte und vergleichende Gesellschaftsforschung* 35:1-2 (2025) 9-29, 11 and 18.

5 For works on transatlantic return migration, see Walter D. Kamphoefner, 'The volume and composition of German-American return migration', in: Rudolf J. Vecoli and Suzanne M. Sinke (eds), *A century of European migrations, 1830-1930* (Urbana (IL) [etc.] 1991) 293-312; Karen Schniedewind, *Begrenzter Aufenthalt im Land der unbegrenzten Möglichkeiten. Bremer Rückwanderer aus Amerika 1850-1914* (Stuttgart 1994); Mark Wyman, 'Emigrants returning: The evolution of a tradition', in: Marjory Harper (ed.), *Emigrant homecomings. The return movement of emigrants, 1600-2000* (Manchester 2005) 16-31, 17; Agnes Gehbald, 'Earning and returning. Emigrant registration and migration statistics in the Americas (1857-1911)', *Comparativ* 35:1-2 (2025) 47-65 and Sarah Oberbichler and Lorella Viola, 'National narratives and immigrant voices. Transatlantic return migration to Italy and Austria, 1850-1950', in: Sarah Oberbichler, Eva Pfanzer and Valerio Larcher (eds), *Return and circular migration in contemporary European history* (Berlin 2024) 115-141.

6 See Alexia Grosjean, 'Returning to Belhelvie, 1593-1875. The impact of return migration on an Aberdeenshire parish', in: Harper, *Emigrant homecomings*, 216-232; Colin G. Pooley and Jean Turnbull, *Migration and mobility in Britain since the eighteenth century* (Bristol 2005) 278; George Gmelch, 'Return migration', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 9:1 (1980) 135-159, 141.

7 Christian Dustmann and Yorma Weiss, 'Return migration. Theory and empirical evidence from the UK', *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 45:2 (2007) 236-256 and Małgorzata Dziekońska, "'There is time to leave, and there is time to come back'. Polish migrants' decisions about returning from international migration', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 50:18 (2024) 4484-4500, 4487.

navigated similar migration circuits, women and men did so within distinct socioeconomic power structures. As Marlou Schrover has demonstrated in multiple studies, gender shaped the kinds of careers and opportunities available to mobile people.⁸ While scholars working on contemporary return migration have identified gender as a crucial analytical lens – evidenced by studies such as “Challenges of Reintegration for Returned Migrant Women in Northern Albania” and “How Highly Skilled Female Return Migrants Try to Shape Gender Norms in Kosovo” – gender-specific data on transatlantic returnees before the First World War remain scarce.⁹

“Most of the Bohunks came to America intending to stay two or three years ... work to the limit of their endurance ... and then, returning to the Old Country, pay the debt on the old place, buy a few additional fields and heads of cattle, and start anew,” recalled the Slovenian writer Louis Adamic, who left Imperial Austria in 1913 at the age of sixteen.¹⁰ Between 1900 and the start of the First World War, the majority of Habsburg subjects who moved to the United States had no intention of settling there permanently. A similar pattern has been observed by Adam Walaszek among Polish labor migrants, who made strategic use of opportunities in the American labor market to address financial pressures at home.¹¹ Young couples hoped to build their own homes; others aimed to purchase a few acres of land, establish themselves in agriculture, or save enough to open a small shop or workshop equipped for modest self-employment. In the early twentieth century, the cost of living in Central Europe was considerably lower, making it economically sensible for returnees to spend and invest the earnings accumulated overseas upon their return.¹² From 1890 to the 1930s,

8 See for example, Marlou Schrover, ‘Gender and social exclusion in European migration. A socio-historical perspective’, in: C. Menjivar, M. Ruiz, and I. Ness (eds), *The Oxford handbook of migration crises* (Oxford 2018) 1-21; Marlou Schrover and Deirdre M. Moloney, *Gender, migration and categorisation. Making distinctions between migrants in western countries, 1945-2010* (Amsterdam 2013).

9 Marsida Tafilica, *Coming home. Challenges of reintegration for returned migrant women in northern Albania* (PhD diss. Clemson University, Clemson (SC) 2023) and Janine Isabelle Pinkow-Läpple, “That’s so sexist!” How highly skilled female return migrants try to shape gender norms in Kosovo’, *Central and Eastern European Migration Review* 12:2 (2023) 117-133.

10 Louis Adamic, *Laughing in the jungle. The autobiography of an immigrant in America* (New York 1932) 104.

11 Adam Walaszek, ‘Preserving or transforming role? Migrants and Polish territories in the era of mass migration’, in: Dirk Hoerder and Jörg Nagler (eds), *People in transit. German migrations in comparative perspective, 1820-1930* (Cambridge 1995) 101-224; see also Tara Zahra, *The Great Departure. Mass migration from Eastern Europe and the making of the free world* (New York 2016) 14.

12 J.D. Gould, ‘European inter-continental emigration. The road home. Return emigration from the USA’, *Journal of European Economic History* 9:1 (1980) 41-112, 51.

nearly 18 million people left Eastern and Southern Europe for the United States. Citizens from the Habsburg Empire formed the largest group of Europeans entering the country between 1902 and 1911, and for many of them, returning to Europe had always been part of the plan. The numbers illustrate how, with expanding global labor markets, migrations that had once been lifelong commitments increasingly became temporary movements. Between 1908 and 1913, 1.2 million individuals left Austria-Hungary and roughly 460,000 returned.¹³ In 1908, according to records from the US Immigration Bureau, the return rate to Imperial Austria stood at 40 percent, while the rate for those returning to the Hungarian Kingdom was slightly lower at 38 percent. Although the historical documentation provides limited information on gender ratios, the Habsburg Empire nonetheless offers a compelling case study of circular and temporary migration in the early twentieth century.¹⁴

European states kept records of arriving foreigners, but not of their own citizens who returned from abroad. As Agnes Gehbald has noted, when the field of migration statistics first emerged, it largely overlooked the numbers and proportions of returnees.¹⁵ Even though Hungarian data on return migration are among the weakest in the country's statistical records, their very existence for the years 1899 to 1913 provides an invaluable resource.¹⁶

The years 1905 to 1907 marked the peak of Hungarian emigration, with more than 550,000 passengers crossing the Atlantic – representing nearly a quarter of all transatlantic migration in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The year 1907 saw the highest number of new arrivals from the Hungarian Kingdom (209,169 people) despite rising unemployment from 1906 onward and a US recession that took

13 Julianna Puskás, *Ties that bind, ties that divide. 100 years of Hungarian experience in the United States* (New York 2000) 22; Kristina Evans Poznan, *Migrant nation builders. The development of Austria-Hungary's national projects in the United States, 1880s-1920s* (PhD diss., The College of William and Mary, Williamsburg (VA) 2018) 93.

14 See Annemarie Steidl, *On many routes. Internal, European, and transatlantic migration in the late Habsburg Empire, 1850-1914* (West Lafayette (IN) 2021).

15 Gehbald, 'Earning and returning', 48.

16 With the Habsburg Constitution (*Staatsgrundgesetz*) of 1867, the Kingdom of Hungary and Imperial Austria collected its own statistics; *Auswanderung und Rückwanderung der Länder der Ungarischen Heiligen Krone in den Jahren 1899-1913* (Ungarische Statistische Mitteilungen, new series, vol. 67) (Budapest 1918); see Julianna Puskás, 'Some results of my research on the transatlantic emigration from Hungary on the basis of macro- and micro analysis', in: Julianna Puskás (ed.), *Overseas migration from east-central and southeastern Europe 1880-1940* (Budapest 1990) 45-50.

hold in late 1907 and 1908.¹⁷ By 1908, the pattern had reversed: only 52,942 people from the Hungarian Kingdom reached Ellis Island, while 53,770 returned eastward. In the same year, the Cunard ship *Carmania* arrived in Rijeka/Fiume carrying 1,700 return passengers and sailed back to New York with just 239 passengers on board.¹⁸ The recession of 1907/1908 thus stands out as a moment when factories and mines from Pittsburgh to St. Louis laid off tens of thousands of laborers, prompting many to return to Europe.

Back in Europe, the German-speaking press of the Habsburg Empire portrayed returning migrants during the economic crisis alternately as a potential benefit and as a threat to the domestic labor market and political stability. In November 1907, the Tyrolian *Innsbrucker Nachrichten* warned of the consequences for local employment, noting that “the thousands who return from the inhospitable New World are coming in search of work and compete with the local workers.”¹⁹ German-language newspapers also reported that after experiencing greater personal and political freedoms in the United States, these individuals would return as pioneers in the struggle for their national identity and “noticeably strengthen the anti-Magyar nationalist movement.”²⁰ Both governments – Imperial Austria and the Hungarian Kingdom – feared that rising numbers of returnees would spread ideas of nationalism, democracy, and socialism. In December 1907, the Hungarian administration even sent an official communication to Reich Chancellor Bernhard von Bülow, explaining that the German government likewise regarded the surge in returnees from the Americas as a potential threat:

The flow of returnees has grown increasingly stronger in recent days. Traffic jams have occurred in both Fiume and Oderberg, and it is difficult to provide work and accommodation for the thousands of returnees with the resources at hand. The government has therefore decided that the

17 Bradley A. Hansen, ‘A failure of regulation? Reinterpreting the panic of 1907’, *Business History Review* 88:3 (2014) 545-569 and Michael J. Greenwood and Zachary Ward, ‘Immigration quotas, World War I, and emigrant flows from the United States in the early 20th century’, *Explorations in Economic History* 55 (2015) 76-96.

18 Ulf Brunnbauer, *Globalizing southeastern Europe. Emigrants, America, and the state since the late nineteenth century* (Lexington (KY) 2016) 57.

19 ‘Volkswirtschaftliche Wochenschau’, *Innsbrucker Nachrichten* (November 30, 1907); cited by Oberbichler and Viola, ‘National narratives’, 133.

20 ‘Die Heimkehr der Auswanderer’, *Reichspost* (December 17, 1907); cited by Oberbichler and Viola, ‘National narratives’, 132.

returnees will be provided with appropriate information upon departure from America and later at the port of disembarkation.²¹

By February 1908, media discourse had shifted from portraying returnees as a looming threat of mass unemployment to emphasizing the economic benefits of the remittances these people brought home. Newspapers now noted that “among the recent returnees were few poor people; most had worked in America for a few years and returned with their savings.”²² After the US labor market recovered, migration patterns from the Hungarian Kingdom largely reverted to earlier levels, though they never again reached the heights of 1907. Throughout the following years, the number of returnees consistently remained slightly higher than before 1907.²³

Until the Great War, the majority of those returning to Central Europe were men, as they often travelled alone and maintained close ties with their families at home.²⁴ The story of Branko Grado from Dalmatia, who reportedly made seventeen transatlantic journeys, may appear exceptional, but it was not as unusual as one might assume.²⁵ Unfortunately, the detailed Hungarian statistics for 1899 to 1913 do not record the genders of returnees, although some information exists about those who crossed the Atlantic. From the turn of the century to the start of the Great War, roughly one third of all people who left the Hungarian Kingdom in the direction of the US were women. Their numbers increased steadily, and by 1913 more women than men left for the New World. Contemporary Hungarian demographers worried that the increasing participation of women in US migration would result in permanent population loss. In their view, women were less likely to return because they either intended to reunite with husbands already in the United States or hoped to start new families there, making them less inclined to move back to Central Europe.²⁶

21 Cited by Agnes Gehbald, “Riesige Personenzahlen”. *Transatlantische Rückwanderungen von Buenos Aires und New York um 1900*, *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 64 (2024) 41-64, 3; translated into English by Annemarie Steidl.

22 ‘Bei Rückwanderung aus Amerika übertrieben’, *Salzburger Chronik von Stadt und Land* (February 17, 1908); cited by Oberbichler and Viola, ‘National narratives’, 133.

23 Auswanderung und Rückwanderung.

24 See for example Agnes Gehbald, ‘To return from Buenos Aires. Gender, labour, and migration statistics in the 1920s’, paper presented at the *European Social Science History Conference* (Leiden 2025) 2.

25 Frances Kraljic, *Croatian migration to and from the United States, 1900-1914* (San Carlos (CA) 1978) 38.

26 Auswanderung und Rückwanderung.

Table 1 Return Migration from the US to the Kingdom of Hungary, in percentages

Years	Hungary		Croatia-Slavonia		Kingdom of Hungary	
	male	female	male	female	male	female
1905-1907	21.8	9.5	20.2	8.8	21.5	9.5
1908-1913	44.1	16.3	43.7	9.2	44.0	15.7
1905-1913	32.0	13.5	30.5	9.5	31.8	13.1

Source: Auswanderung und Rückwanderung der Länder der Ungarischen Heiligen Krone in den Jahren 1899 – 1913 (*Ungarische Statistische Mitteilungen, new series, vol. 67*) (Budapest 1918) 34.

Table 1 presents gender-specific return migration ratios from the United States between 1905 and 1913 for Hungary proper and Croatia-Slavonia. The Hungarian statistical office accounted for the economic downturn of late 1907-1908 by dividing the figures into pre- and post-recession periods. The contrast between these two phases is striking: return ratios more than doubled after 1907, particularly among men. Women, by contrast, were far less inclined to return to Central Europe. Between 1905 and 1907, only 9.5 percent of all women who crossed the Atlantic came back to Hungary; the proportion for Croatia-Slavonia was even lower at 8.8 percent.²⁷ In comparison, in the years following the 1907 recession up to 1913, roughly 44 percent of the men returned to the Kingdom of Hungary. In the years before the Great War, the number of men coming back from the US continued to rise – approaching half of those who had migrated there – while the number of women returning steadily declined, dropping from 6,133 in 1911 to 4,441 in 1913.²⁸

Comparing migrants from Hungary and Croatia-Slavonia reveals another noteworthy pattern. People from the Kingdom of Hungary had begun moving overseas as early as the second half of the nineteenth century and were already forming families in the United States. During this period, the proportion of returning women increased until 1913. This trend can likely be explained by family migration dynamics: many of those women were married and moved back together with their husbands – and, in the same cases, with their children. One such returning family mentioned earlier was the Winkler family, although they did not go back to Hungary but to Tyrol in Imperial Austria.

²⁷ Italian women showed similar low transatlantic return ratios of around 15 percent in the 1900s, see Gehbald, 'To return from Buenos Aires', 5.

²⁸ Auswanderung und Rückwanderung, 38.



Illustration 1 A man who returned to Kittsee, a small community at the border between Austria and Hungary, called a new district “Chikago”, because at the beginning of the twentieth century this part of town was growing as fast as communities in the United States.

Source: *Burgenländisches Landesarchiv. Regierungsarchiv. XII. 1951. 196/37-1951*

Passenger manifest samples from transatlantic ships departing from Bremen and Hamburg to New York in 1910 show that around 36 percent of the nearly 6,000 passengers from the Hungarian Kingdom had previously returned to Europe at least once. Among these repeat movers, fewer than one quarter were women aged over 14, and more than 80 percent of these adolescent and adult women were recorded as married. Men who traveled back and forth between Europe and the United States were even more firmly embedded in family networks: approximately 87 percent were listed as married.²⁹ These rudimentary calculations suggest that married men and women – often migrating as couples – made up the vast majority of those engaged in circular migration between Europe and the United States.

People from Croatia-Slavonia, especially from the Dalmatian coast, were relative latecomers to transatlantic migration. They began moving to the United States in larger numbers only in the first decades of the twentieth century. Since the overwhelming majority of them were men, it is unsurprising that only 9.2 percent of women – already heavily

²⁹ U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, 1891-1957. [Record Group 85]. Passenger and crew lists of vessels arriving at New York 1897-1957. National Archives and Records Administration [NARA] microfilm publication. The numbers and percentages are based on a sample of 22 ship passenger manifests from Bremen and Hamburg.

underrepresented – returned between 1908 to 1913.³⁰ The 1910 passenger sample reflects this pattern: only a small number of South Slavic speakers from the Hungarian Kingdom were recorded, with 491 passengers identified as Croats and another 70 as Serbs. Less than 20 percent of these were adult women, and the vast majority of them were married.³¹ Neither the US labor market nor the marriage market offered compelling opportunities for single women from the Dalmatian coast. The few who did cross the Atlantic tended to migrate within family units or to follow husbands and fiancés.

Imperial Austria did not keep systematic records on transatlantic return migration, which makes it rather difficult to reconstruct return rates for its citizens. A case study of transatlantic mobility in the village of Babica, Rzeszów County, Western Galicia, indicates, however, that circular migration was common: 34.5 percent of all pre-World War I returnees had traveled to America more than once, 20.7 percent had returned twice, and 13.8 percent three times.³²

Table 2 draws on the 1910 ship manifest sample, which documents repeat US migration by ethno-linguistic groups from the Habsburg Empire. People from Bohemia and Moravia, as well as Jews from across the whole empire, were among the earliest groups to seek opportunities in the US, beginning already in the mid-nineteenth century. Many Czech speakers established themselves in rural American communities, where they created businesses, as did many Jews. As a result, their return rates were comparatively low. When they did return, they often did so as family units, reflected in the relatively high proportion of women among these returnees. Violent antisemitism, particularly pogroms in Eastern Europe, further contributed to the low return rates among Jews, who often perceived Europe as unsafe and the United States as offering more secure prospects.

Individuals who migrated to the United States to acquire cheap land through the Homestead Act exhibited notably lower return rates. In contrast, people who relocated for industrial employment tended to cross the Atlantic repeatedly, a pattern especially visible among Slovaks and Croats, of whom roughly 40 percent moved multiple times.

30 Auswanderung und Rückwanderung, 34.

31 U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, 1891-1957.

32 Adam Walaszek, 'Migration from a Galician village. Babica before World War I', in: Annemarie Steidl et al. (eds), *European mobility. Internal, international, and transatlantic moves in the 19th and early 20th centuries*, (Vienna 2009) 79-87.

Table 2 Repeated US Migrations from the Habsburg Empire, 1910, by gender

Ethnicity [*]	numbers ^{**}	% of repeat mig. ^{***}	% of women among repeat mig.
Czechs	935	9.6	41.1
Jews	397	10.1	30.0
Germans	1,258	21.5	29.9
Hungarians	497	30.2	24.7
Slovaks	2,295	40.0	18.0
Poles	3,861	20.8	15.8
Ukrainians	1,034	23.0	14.7
Romanians	217	30.3	10.4
Slovenes	186	32.3	8.3
Croats	510	33.7	2.3
All	11,290	25.2	19.5

^{*}The ethnic classification is based on language indication in the ship passenger manifests.

^{**} Only those passengers who were either 15 years of age or older.

^{***} All repeated passengers, no matter how often they crossed the Atlantic.

Source: U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, 1891-1957. [Record Group 85]. *Passenger and Crew Lists of Vessels Arriving at New York, NY, 1897-1957. National Archives and Records Administration [NARA] Microfilm Publication. The table is based on a sample of 22 ship passenger manifests.*

Return rates were therefore shaped not only by economic or personal considerations, but also by broader migration and settlement regimes.³³

The frequent journeys made by Slovaks vividly illustrate the temporary and cyclical character of transatlantic labor migration in the twentieth century. According to the Dillingham Commission, more than half of all Slovaks (59 percent) returned to Europe between 1908 and 1910, after spending five to ten years in the United States. Their data further show that most returnees were men (approximately 82 percent), and that more than 85 percent of them were between 14 and 44 years of age.³⁴

These rudimentary calculations confirm that return migration was overwhelmingly a male phenomenon. The gender ratio among returnees underscores not only the structural constraints facing women, but also the need for a more nuanced analysis of gender within migration and labor history. For many married laborers, a common pattern was to leave their families in Europe, work in the United States

33 See Pooley and Turnbull, *Migration and mobility*, 285.

34 See William P. Dillingham, *Reports of the immigration commission. With conclusions and recommendations and views of the minority* (Washington (DC) 1911) 112-118.

for several years, and then return once they had accumulated savings.³⁵ Women on the other hand participated in repeat transatlantic crossings in far smaller numbers, with the proportions of Croatian, Slovenian, and Romanian women being notably low. Of the women who did move back and forth, more than 80 percent (753 individuals) were registered in passenger manifests as wives or housewives. Another 12 percent were listed as domestic servants accompanying their employers on multiple journeys,³⁶ while approximately 6 percent identified themselves as independent laborers employed in US textile or tobacco factories.³⁷

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the US population was dominated by men of European origin between the ages of eighteen and thirty. This surplus of men created a highly 'lucrative' marriage market. In contrast to many married men who migrated temporarily, young single women were more likely to leave Europe with the intention of settling permanently in the United States and establishing their own households.³⁸ Their decisions to migrate independently can be understood as part of broader shifts away from older, patriarchal social norms toward new forms of autonomy. Economically, marriage migration could also function as a strategy for building a more prosperous life alongside a husband. For many women, however, such choices were far more difficult to reverse than for men. Returning to their communities of origin meant returning to restrictive patriarchal structures. As a result, women were generally more reluctant to return, fearing the loss of freedom and opportunities they had acquired in their host countries.³⁹

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, most women in the Habsburg Empire lived in traditional patriarchal societies, where men dominated social, economic, and political relationships. According to the 1910 ship manifests, the majority of young and single

35 Similar mobility patterns can be found between Southern Europe and South America, see Agnes Gehbald, "Riesige Personenzahlen", 41.

36 A vivid example of such a mobility pattern by a domestic servant for Argentina is presented by Gehbald, 'To return from Buenos Aires'.

37 U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, 1891-1957.

38 Annemarie Steidl and Wladimir Fischer-Nebmaier, 'Transatlantischer Heiratsmarkt und Heiratspolitik von MigrantInnen aus Österreich-Ungarn in den USA, 1870-1930', *L'Homme. Europäische Zeitschrift für feministische Geschichtswissenschaft* 1 (2014) 51-68 and Suzanne M. Sinke, 'Moved to marry. Connecting marriage and cross-border migration in the history of the United States', *L'Homme. Europäische Zeitschrift für feministische Geschichtswissenschaft* 1 (2014) 11-29.

39 Marita Krauss, 'Frauen und Migration. Eine einleitende Problemskizze', in: Marita Krauss and Holger Sonnabend (eds), *Frauen und Migration* (Stuttgart 2001) 9-19, 13; Tafilica, 'Coming home', and Pinkow-Läpple, "That's so sexist!".

steerage passengers were women. For these women, the transatlantic journey may have opened up new possibilities: a sense of independence and the prospect of earning enough to build a more autonomous life than was available to them in Central Europe. Access to wage labor and the potential for economic self-sufficiency in the US likely contributed to their willingness to challenge the gender hierarchies and constraints that had shaped their lives in their societies of origin.⁴⁰ Instead of facing the restrictive expectations of family – where young women were pressured to marry, run a household, or work as domestic servants – many mobile women saw greater possibilities in the United States to shape their own lives. Pauline Jackson, for example, argues that nineteenth-century migration of Irish women to the US was not merely an economic strategy but “an escape from an increasing patriarchal society whose asymmetrical development as a colony generated insufficient social space for women even as wife and mother”.⁴¹ In contrast to those who remained in Europe, the relatively small number of women who returned had experienced forms of economic independence through the US labor market. Even those who returned as wives and mothers had been exposed to a society in which gender roles and expectations differed significantly from those in traditional Central European communities.

Migration reshaped ideas about gender and consequently made reintegration far more difficult for women who returned to their countries of origin.⁴² Building on the concept of economic remittances, Janine Pinkow-Läpple introduces the notion of social remittances, defined as the knowledge, norms, and practices that mobile people carry back with them. Today, women from traditional societies who move to the Global West or to more economically advanced societies and cultures often experience their time abroad as empowering. Highly skilled women who return to their countries of origin can therefore be understood as agents of gender equality.⁴³ Similar analyses, however,

40 Mirjana Morokvašić, 'Bird of passage are also women...', *The International Migration Review* 18:4 (1984) 886-907, 892.

41 Pauline Jackson, 'Women in 19th century Irish emigration', *The International Migration Review* 18:4 (1984) 1004-1020.

42 See also Janine Dahinden et al., 'Are you who you know? A network perspective on ethnicity, gender and transnationalism. Albanian-speaking migrants in Switzerland and returnees in Kosovo', in: Charles Westin et al. (eds), *Identity processes and dynamics in multi-ethnic Europe* (Amsterdam 2010) 127-148, 129 and 139.

43 See Pinkow-Läpple, "That's so sexist!", 118 f.

are still largely absent for women who returned to Central Europe from the US prior to World War I.

Transatlantic migration, even in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was never a unidirectional process. As the cases from the Habsburg Empire demonstrate, not everyone who left for the United States settled there permanently. Rather than conceptualizing human mobility as a simple move from A to B, circular and ongoing migration patterns must be seen as integral components of individual migration trajectories. Yet return migration continues to be framed primarily as a male phenomenon – associated with men who sent remittances back home or returned with savings.⁴⁴

A fuller understanding of gendered mobility requires analyzing transatlantic migration as a series of temporary moves undertaken by both men and women. Return migration should not be attributed solely to the maintenance of transnational family relations, nor exclusively to women's emancipation or patriarchal control. Agricultural transformation, shifts in industrial labor markets, and evolving gender roles all significantly shaped the opportunities available to those who crossed the Atlantic before the Great War. The proportion of women who engaged in repeat crossings varied by ethno-linguistic group within the Habsburg Empire and by year of departure. This analysis offers an empirical foundation and analytical lens for examining gender relations within transatlantic return migration. Despite increasing attention to gender in migration studies, there remains a clear need for more nuanced and systematic analysis of how gender shaped – and was reshaped by – patterns of mobility.

44 Annemarie Steidl, "Dear brother, please send me some more dollars..." Transatlantic migration and historic remittance between the Habsburg Empire and the United States of America (1890-1930s); in: Silke Meyer and Claudius Ströhle (eds), *Remittances as social practices and agents of change. The future of transnational society* (Cham 2023) 99-119.

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