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The experiences of Polish migrants in Iceland

Wrocławski Rocznik
Historii Mówionej
Rocznik VI, 2016
ISSN 2084-0578

Sometimes the Icelanders couldn't hide their astonishment, why we are coming here, what attracts us here. Usually they asked about this very gently. They asked about Poland and so on, what is going on there in Poland. They just wanted to know why, what brings us here. Suddenly, on this small island, thousands of Poles appear. They couldn't understand that concept, why so many people all of a sudden want to come and live here. [...] However, what was visible through these questions, was the lack of Icelanders' experience with immigration in general, the notion of immigration and immigrants, which was absolutely marginal here before, say, year 2000. And those immigrants who were coming here were immediately, as if inevitably, maybe not forced, but took on features such like they had to learn the

¹ The paper presents the results of the research project "Poles on Iceland" realized within the project "Oral history – cultural heritage of Poland and Iceland captured in human words" supported by a grant from Iceland, Lichtenstein and Norway through the EEA Grants and co-financed by Polish funds.

language, and by a specific time, they even had to officially change their official name to be registered as an Icelander. This quasi conception of this new immigration, this economic immigration was entirely new to the Icelanders. And they had reasons to be puzzled, to learn where it comes from, why, and so on”².

For a long time Iceland was inhabited almost exclusively by indigenous people. Also, over the decades of the 20th century, the number of foreigners did not exceed 2% of the population. This situation started to change in 1990’s, and particularly after 2005, when a great influx of foreigners was noted as a result of the economic prosperity, industrial development, and socio-economic changes. The economic recession and the downturn of 2008 led to departure of some of the foreigners, but according to the statistics published by Statistic Iceland³, in January 2015 29,192 immigrants lived in Iceland⁴, which is 8.9% of the population. The largest group among them – 10,933 individuals – were born in Poland. Over the last decade, Poles have become the largest minority on the island, ahead of Lithuanians, Danes, Germans, and Filipinos. Iceland is a part of the European Economic Area and opened its job market to Poles in 2006. The factors that contributed to Poles moving over there were:

² “Czasem Islandczycy nie mogli ukryć zdziwienia, dlaczego my tu przyjeżdżamy, co nas tu przyciąga. Zazwyczaj bardzo delikatnie się o to pytali. Pytali się o Polskę itd. Co się tam dzieje w Polsce. Właśnie chcieli wiedzieć dlaczego, co nas tu sprowadza. Na małą wyspę, nagle zjawia się tysiące Polaków. Nie rozumieli konceptu tego, dlaczego tutaj ludzie nagle chcą w takiej ilości przyjechać i zamieszkać. [...] Natomiast, co było widać z tych pytań, to brak doświadczenia Islandczyków w ogóle z imigracją, pojęcie imigracji, imigrantów, które to tutaj było zupełnie marginalne, przed powiedzmy rokiem 2000. I ci imigranci, którzy tu przyjeżdżali, byli od razu jakby siłą rzeczy, może nie zmuszani, ale nabywali cech, takich, że musieli się nauczyć języka, do któregoś tam roku musieli tam nawet zmienić oficjalnie imię, żeby być zarejestrowanym jako Islandczyk. Ten jakby koncept tej nowej imigracji, tej imigracji zarobkowej był zupełnie nowy dla Islandczyków. No i mieli powody, żeby się dziwić, żeby się dowiadywać, skąd się to bierze, dlaczego itd.” Archive of the “Remembrance and Future” Centre (Wrocław), AHM-akcesja, interview with Tomasz Chrapek, 24.08.2015 r. (recorded by M. Szajda). All interviews quoted in that paper are being preserved in Archive of the “Remembrance and Future” Centre.

³ *Icelandic statistics. Immigrants and persons with foreign background 2015*, <http://www.statice.is/publications/news-archive/population/immigrants-and-persons-with-foreign-background/> (accessed December 1, 2015).

⁴ According to *Statistic Iceland* an immigrant is a person born abroad with two foreign born parents and four foreign born grandparents.

the very good economic situation, the accession of Poland to the European Union, and the Icelandic exoticism⁵.

The following paper is divided into four sections. In the first part we present aims of the research project “Poles in Iceland” and methodological approach that was used. In the second and third part we will proceed to the description of different waves of Polish migration to Iceland and the first impressions of the newcomers. In the fourth section of the paper we will discuss the push and pull factors of Polish emigration. In this point we would like to highlight that our remarks should be treated as a result of preliminary research limited by time and scope which could be developed in further research.

Methods and aims of the research project

The goal of the research project “Poles in Iceland” realized within the project “Oral history – cultural heritage of Poland and Iceland captured in human words”, implemented by the “Remembrance and Future” Centre (Wrocław, Poland) in cooperation with the Icelandic Research Centre for Innovation and Economic Growth (Reykjavík, Iceland) was, among others, to record biographical accounts of Poles living in Iceland. The main issues discussed during the interviews were the reasons why Poles chose this culturally and climatically different country and the ways they do or don't fit in, especially taking into account the 2008 economic crisis. The project was based on the oral history methodology, and the decision regarding the type of interview was developed during the workshop on methodology and research questions. The research team selected the topic-oriented interview as a basic tool. The most important aspect, from our point of view, was the interviewees' stay in Iceland; hence we have decided to limit information related to the previous period of our interlocutors' lives only to their place of origin, educational path, family and work. The opening question was “How did you happen to be here?”, which turned out to be the best one, since it combined life in Iceland with its prelude (usually) in Poland. The interviewees who responded to that question briefly presented their life in Poland, the circumstances of their decision to go to Iceland, and automatically passed onto stories about their life in Iceland. During the workshop, we had also defined the basic themes which became the axis of the interviews. One of those aspects was professional

⁵ M. Budyta-Budzyńska, *Wstęp*, [in:] *Integracja czy asymilacja? Polscy imigranci w Islandii*, ed. by M. Budyta-Budzyńska, Warszawa 2011, p. 9.

life and work in Iceland, which we expected to be the main reasons of migration for the majority of Poles. It was important to find out whether they knew before leaving Poland what kind of job they were going to get, who helped them to find work; what they do in their jobs, how an ordinary working day looks like, what kind of obstacles or difficulties they face. We also tried to trace their professional path and understand their possibilities of upward mobility in Icelandic society. The interviewees' language itself was also of importance to us in this respect: whether they "got", "organized", "arranged for" a job. The second major theme for us was their relations with the Icelanders, their opinions about them, whether the native Icelanders counted among our interlocutors' friends; whether they are people our interlocutors spend time with. This question led also to discussing Icelandic culture and mentality in the way it is perceived by Poles. The third leading issue was family. The research team posed the question of whether the whole family is united on the island, whether some kin live in Poland, whether the children learn Polish language and culture, what kind of difficulties they face when raising children in two cultures. Another issue was the role of media in keeping in touch with the family in Poland, finding out news from Poland, and social media as a tool for the integration of Poles in their own group. Topics which we chose during the interviews naturally connected with the issue of Icelandic language skills, which was crucial for relations with Icelanders, or working conditions.

Within the project framework, we have recorded 20 oral history accounts. Our interlocutors were both sexes, born in the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Five of them came to the island in the 1980s, two in the 1990s; two people also came to Iceland before the job market opened to Poles in 2006, and others – between 2006 and 2008. Our interviewees work in the food processing industry, services and as specialists. The recordings took place mostly in Reykjavík, but also in Hella, Hvolsvöllur and Hafnarfjörður in the southwestern part of Iceland.

We found our interviewees in various ways, and the biggest support we got was from the Polish *chargé d'affaires* in Reykjavík, Lech Mastalerz, and a PhD student at the University in Reykjavík, Anna Wojtyńska. We also established contacts with people involved in the "Project Poland" and a Polish school in Reykjavík. In looking for interviewees, we were supported by Halldóra Steinsdóttir and María Smáradóttir Jóhönnudóttir from our Icelandic research team. A few of informants volunteered in response to an announcement placed on one of the Polish websites, and others were contacted through a Polish catholic priest in Reykjavík.

Polish migration to Iceland

The history of Polish migrants in Iceland is more complicated and longer than one may think. Every year the number of Poles on the island increases, but probably no one could say when the first arrivals started. In order to enable a deeper understanding of the case, we would like to present the story of migrations from Poland to Iceland, especially during last four decades, based on our researches.

Iceland is a quite new and not so clearly recognizable country. Icelanders only obtained their independence in 1944. It was the beginning of the big development of the economy that caused so many changes in next decades. A period of economic prosperity in the 1980s and the 1990s was a positive influence and gave rise to Polish migrations. So many changes in recent decades, especially in the economy, reshaped the country into an attractive place for people from abroad⁶.

Historians locate the origin of migrations from Poland to Iceland in the beginnings of the 20th century. That perspective responds to the dozen or more pre-war travellers, some of whom stayed on the island over several years. At the beginnings of the 20th century Abraham Wołowski, who was descendant of a Warsaw Frankist family, was working as a tailor in Iceland, but only temporarily⁷. Travellers from Poland: Maurycy Komorowicz, Ferdynand Goetel or Czesław Centkiewicz visited the island during the inter-war period. Afterwards the following books were published: *Notatki z podróży po Islandii* (Notes from a trip around Iceland) or *Wyspa na chmurnej północy* (The island in the cloudy north).

Another perspective appears during time of the Second World War. In 1942 dozens of sailors, who had worked on a Polish ship called “Wigry”, drowned near the Icelandic coast. After that they were buried in the local cemetery in Reykjavík⁸. For years that graves were the most significant place in Iceland presenting some connections with Poland.

The situation of migration was changed in the 1960s. Cooperation between Poland and Iceland led to some arrivals of Polish engineers, shipyard

⁶ A. Wojtyńska, *Historia i charakterystyka migracji z Polski do Islandii*, [in:] *Integracja...*, p. 32.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 30.

⁸ W. Czop, *Tragedia s/s WIGRY styczeń 1942 roku*, Oficjalna strona Związku Zawodowych Kapitanów i Oficerów, <http://zzkptiof.nw.pl/Tragedia%20ss%20WIGRY.html> (accessed December 1, 2015).

workers and others. That fact was proved by a document entitled *Iceland: an information about the country and trading practical guidance*, published by Polish Office of Foreign Trade in 1958. Probably this group of tradesman and workers erected in 1961 a monument to memory of the Polish sailors. Although some of that people decided to stay for longer in Iceland, it was only a prologue to something bigger that turned up later.

The first migration group, or more precisely – a wave, is rather connected with the 1980s, when the Polish diaspora could be really noticeable in Iceland. One group which settled in the capital in the middle of the 1980s consisted of several musicians: violinist, singers and music teachers, who signed contracts in a local orchestra. In our opinion it was possibly thanks to the good reputation of Bohdan Wodiczko, who had conducted the Reykjavík orchestra several years earlier for a couple of years. We had a great opportunity to talk with representatives of that group, for example Robert Rydzewski recorded an interview with Andrzej Kleina⁹ and Alina Dubik¹⁰, people who have worked in Iceland since the end of the 1980s.

The second important group of the first wave were Carmelites nuns. Sister Agnieszka, who was in a pioneering group of sisters, told us a story about her life in a Convent on the island. She arrived in 1984 into Hafnarfjörður, where she has lived since than. In her narration it is worth seeing the various contexts of moving into Iceland:

There was a search for Carmelite nuns for Iceland. And primate Glemp asked the Carmelite Convent in Elbląg, because there were a lot of vocations to live in convent and many nuns in the community. He asked if sisters are ready to make a decision and come to Iceland, and to settle down in a Carmelite Convent. Of course, when we are thinking about Carmel, it is specific community, because every convent is autonomous and if a girl decides to join a chosen convent, she stays there all her life. When an expedition to the Iceland was being considered, the voluntary agreement of individual nuns was demanded. I was then in novitiate and I thought that it was a kind of challenge from Jesus and I couldn't refuse something like that, to go out of Poland. Not only to utterly different things, but also the leaving of the homeland and not being in touch with family. You have to know, that in December of 1984, it was communism regime [in Poland] and contact with

⁹ Interview with Andrzej Kleina, 20 & 24.08.2015 r. (recorded by R. Rydzewski).

¹⁰ Interview with Andrzej Kleina, 24.08.2015 r. (recorded by R. Rydzewski).

people abroad was quite difficult. As an example I can say, that after our arrival here, the mother of one sister wanted to call. She was waiting one week for to be connected, and she received the call at nearly 2.00 am. in the morning. It was a reality. And in that time such an expedition seemed to have no contact with family and was something like going to a missionary country. In March 1984 the group of Polish nuns, the Discalced Carmelite Nuns, arrived and I was in this group. In such a way I came here. And perhaps so did other sisters¹¹.

In the 1980s other Poles came to Reykjavík. Among our respondents were Stanisław Bartoszek¹², the author of the Polish-Icelandic dictionary and Witold Bogdanski¹³, who for years served as an unofficial Polish consul on the island. Last but not least we must mention that during the martial law in Poland a group of Polish migrants arrived to Iceland, but we didn't have a chance to contact anyone from that group¹⁴. Some of them migrated to the USA and Canada after they had received Icelandic citizenship.

¹¹ “Właśnie było poszukiwanie takich sióstr karmelitanek, czyli mniszek, dla Islandii. I prymas Glemp zwrócił się do karmelu w Elblągu, ponieważ tam było sporo powołań, sporo sióstr we wspólnocie, czy siostry nie są gotowe podjąć takiego wyzwania i przyjechać na Islandię, żeby tutaj się osiedlić w karmelu. Oczywiście, jeżeli chodzi o karmel, jest to specyficzna wspólnota, bo każdy klasztor jest autonomiczny i jeżeli jakaś dziewczyna wstępuje do danego klasztoru, to jest w nim na całe życie. Więc jeżeli chodziło o wyjazd na Islandię, potrzebna była dobrowolna zgoda poszczególnych sióstr. Ja byłam wtedy w nowicjacie i pomyślałam o tym, że to jest takie wyzwanie Jezusa i nie mogę mu odmówić czegoś takiego, żeby wyjechać też z ojczyzny. Nie tylko wyrzec się dla niego różnych innych rzeczy, ale też ojczyzny i kontaktów z rodziną, bo trzeba powiedzieć, że w [19]84 roku były to czasy komunistyczne i bardzo był utrudniony kontakt z zagranicą. Jako przykład podam, że już po przyjeździe tutaj mama jednej z sióstr chciała porozumieć się telefonicznie, to na połączenie czekała tydzień, otrzymała je o drugiej w nocy. Takie to były realia. Więc jeżeli w tamtych czasach taki wyjazd dla nas oznaczał brak kontaktu z rodziną i w ogóle jakby takie..., wyjazd do jakby bardzo misyjnego kraju. Więc przyjechała tutaj w marcu 1984 roku grupa polskich mniszek, karmelitanek bosych, i ja byłam w tej grupie. W taki sposób się tutaj znalazłam. Może i jeszcze inne siostry.” Interview with s. Agnieszka OCD, 20.08.2015 r. (recorded by M. Szajda & K. Żłobicka). See also the edition of the whole account of s. Agnieszka's account earlier in this yearbook.

¹² Interview with Stanisław Bartoszek, 19.08.2015 r. (recorded by K. Żłobicka).

¹³ Interview with Witold Bogdański, 23.08.2015 r. (recorded by K. Żłobicka).

¹⁴ A. Wojtyńska, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

The second period of migration appeared in new political and social circumstances. After the first free election in Poland and political breakthrough Poles got a new opportunity to go abroad. Not only to close European countries, but also further. An increase of migration during the decade was based on a need for a better job and honest wages. What is more, newcomers from Poland built a specific migration network that pulled friends and acquaintances to arrive into Iceland. Beata Grochowska, who worked in fish processing industry, described that fact in an interview:

The first time I heard about Iceland was when my sister came to me. She said that she was leaving home. It was a little surprise for me, because then in Poland was various information that Polish women had been taking to various mafias and [take away] passports and so on [...]. For me it was a shock. I said: where are you going? To the end of the world! What about staying in touch with us? My sister went. I bought the ticket in December, but because we were scared and we were in group of 5 women, and each of us had children, our future employer let us stay during the holidays in Poland. We came here on 7th of January, just in time after Three Kings Day, the year [19]97¹⁵.

Next, the third wave of migration was triggered by the Polish accession to the European Union. The opening of the labour market in various countries of Western Europe intensified migrations. Poles wanted to find legitimate, well-paid jobs. One of the most important target destinations was Iceland, which opened its labour market to foreigners from the new EU countries in 2006. It resulted in a rapid increase in the number of Polish migrants on the island. Within the next three years, the group had doubled in size and exceeded 10,000 people. The vast majority of our interviewees went to Iceland during this period and have been living on the island ever

¹⁵ “Pierwszy raz usłyszałam o Islandii, jak siostra przyjechała do mnie. Powiedziała, że wyjeżdża tutaj do pracy. To było dla mnie troszeczkę takie zaskoczenie, bo wtedy w Polsce były takie różne wycieki, że właśnie zabierają Polki do różnych mafii i [zabierają] paszporty i tak dalej [...]. Dla mnie był to szok. Mówię: gdzie ty jedziesz? Na koniec świata! Jaki z tobą będzie kontakt? Po przyjeździe jej [siostry] tutaj przyjechałam, bilet miałam kupiony na grudzień, ale szef ze względu na to, że są święta, a myśmy, nas było 5, że nas było 5, przyjechało Polek, i każda miała z nas dzieci, więc zostawił nas na święta w Polsce. Przyjechaliśmy tutaj 7 stycznia, akurat na Trzech Króli, rok [19]97”. Interview with Beata Grochowska, 22.08.2015 r. (recorded by M. Szajda).

since. Most of them were young people who were able to find a better job, not necessarily in fish processing, but also, after a few years of learning the Icelandic language, in their profession. Today, we can see in that group the beginnings of a process of assimilation and, in many cases also, acculturation. Children who were born to migrant families are already raised both in the Polish and Icelandic traditions.

A crucial period in the process of migration to the island was the economic crisis, which began in 2008. When the economy collapsed, not only the number of migrants from abroad fell down, but also the emigration of natives from Iceland was quite noticeable. Many Poles did not take the risk of staying in Iceland¹⁶. A good example of a return to the homeland is the situation of Anna Wojdałowicz, who at this time returned to Poland¹⁷. This experience confirmed to her that it is worth doing it once again and to return to the island. Her re-migration coincided with the end of the crisis. That certainly had an impact on staying in Iceland.

Currently post-crisis migrations are creating the fourth period, which appear to be on a solid, stable and increasing level. There is not as dynamic growth of Polish citizens as there was after 2006, but number of arrivals is still rising, and the incoming groups are still relatively young.

Notably, the Poles currently residing in Iceland do not form a unified society that could be called a Polish community. In fact, each of the above groups is of separate migrations assigned to particular periods and created their own organizations, for example: the Association of Polish-Icelandic Friendship, Project Poland, etc. Only a few of them are working together to integrate immigrants. Also, the Catholic ministry, which in many countries plays an important role, isn't a strong centre gathering Poles together in Iceland. One of the reasons for this phenomenon is certainly the large distances between the towns and villages in which they work, and weather conditions that make it difficult to travel, especially in winter. Moreover, the fact that lots of jobs are seasonal and employees return regularly to their native countries does not support strong social relations in a group.

¹⁶ M. Budyta-Buczyńska, *Strategie adaptacyjne Polaków w czasie islandzkiego kryzysu finansowego 2008–2010*, "Center of Migration Research Working Papers", 66/124 (2013), p. 12.

¹⁷ Interview with Anna Wojdałowicz, 23.08.2015 r. (recorded by H. Gospodarczyk).

Landing on the Moon - first impressions from Iceland

In the eyes of Poles the very first moments in Iceland are very diverse. The perception of the natives and environment depends on the kind of emigration wave, period of arrival and pre-departure knowledge about the hosting country. Nevertheless, some preliminary remarks can be drawn for our informants.

The first wave of Polish emigrants in the 1980s knew very little about Iceland. Those who knew something about the country were people who dealt with international trade and who had the chance to travel abroad or had friends in Iceland. Some of the few places in Poland where one could get information about the world beyond the Iron Curtain were shipyards and harbors in Poland. Witold Bogdański, a worker at the port of Gdynia in communist times, rally co-driver and later an activist fighting for the rights of the Polish minority in Iceland, got his first Icelandic newspaper from a foreign sailor. From it he found out that Iceland has very low population density and lives on fishing. Others, who had not have contact with foreigners knew no more than it was spread in common knowledge in that time in Poland about Iceland, that is to say: Gorbachov and Reagan meeting in Reykjavík in October 11, 1986.

Thus, the very first moments in Iceland were shocking for all newcomers. It is worth mentioning that especially for the first wave of Polish emigration it was often their first travel outside the Warsaw Pact countries. In the narratives of Poles we have heard that they had a feeling that they landed on the Moon. Alina Dubik, who arrived in 1989, said:

I was shocked. Now when go from Keflavík to Reykjavík you can see something. Those times, when I arrived, the airport was far from being pretty, but beside this I was shocked that there was no trees, it was March, full of snow, from time to time behind the snow stuck out a crater, you know, some bulges on the ground. I had a feeling that we had landed on the Moon. [...] When we landed I said: oh no, we should go back home¹⁸.

¹⁸ “Ja byłam w szoku. Teraz jak pan jedzie z Keflavíku do Reykjavíku, to teraz coś widać, a jak ja przyleciałam, to mało tego, że port lotniczy nie był zachwycający, to szokiem dla mnie był brak drzew, to był marzec, pełno śniegu, gdzieś spod tego śniegu wystawały jakieś kratery, wie pan, jakieś nierówności. Ja miałam wrażenie, że wylądowałam na księżycu. [...] Po prostu, jak już tutaj wylądowałam, to pomyślałam, no nie, chyba trzeba wracać”. Interview with A. Dubik.

The austere and volcanic landscape, wind and low temperature present even during summer – all those elements stand out in interviews with emigrants. Nevertheless, the harsh climate seems not to be any obstacle for those who want to settle down in Iceland.

All waves of Polish migrants were positively surprised with the welfare system and the high absorbency of the labour market, particularly before the financial crisis in 2008. Many Poles were expecting long days or even weeks looking for job. This caused misunderstandings. Emigrants keeping in mind that Iceland is an expensive country brought food supplies with them from Poland. Border police, who come across tea and coffee in the baggage, were confused. There were asking about every single product, as recounts one of emigrants. Therefore, newly arrived Poles felt offended and Icelandic officers were suspicious. A few hours later newcomers noticed that all those supplies were senseless because workers who were invited to work received at the beginning free of charge accommodation, and an advance of a few thousands Icelandic krona in order to cover basic needs. Others, who were not invited to work and had to look for a job after arrival found one within a few hours or days.

Trying to describe the perception of the host society we will recall statements of Poles about Icelanders, however considering the sample was limited, we do not lay claim any deeper analysis. Many Poles do not keep in touch with Icelanders outside work. There appears to be a clear distinction between professional and private life. In their free time each group enjoys time with the closest family, in case of Icelanders or with friends, in case of Poles. Poles and Icelanders rather do not mingle. However these who live longer on the island say that Icelanders just need more time to build a friendship. “Once you get to know them better, you will be friends forever” – as some of interviewees told us.

Although, there were rarely complains about discriminatory statements and practices against immigrants, many newcomers were surprised how helpful Icelanders were in their first days. Janusz Zacharek, who had arrived to Iceland with his children in 2006, recounts his first encounter with Icelanders:

I came with children. Baggage on my back and nothing more, because I could not take anything more. So they [neighbours] have seen that I am with children. Literally after one day of my arrival they knocked the door

[...] and brought me tableware and a few the most important things [...] saying it is to start your new life with your family¹⁹.

As we can see in the size of Polish population in Iceland neither the harsh climate, nor the closed, at first glimpse, Icelandic society discourages Poles to immigrate. One of the most important factors that incited Poles to come to the island was work which we will discuss in following subchapter.

Work as a pull factor

Discussing different views on the work ethic and the meaning of work in individuals' lives can help us, to some extent, understand cultural differences between Poles and Icelanders. Talking about the workplace and the economic situation with Poles in Iceland enabled our research team to sketch some preliminary thoughts on what it means to live and work in Iceland.

Even though some tend to think about Iceland in terms of lone, remote island with its own mythological logic and customs, this country underwent rather typical economic changes. At the beginning of 1990s, Iceland implemented a programme of rapid privatization and liberalization of the economy. After joining the European Economic Area (EEA) in 1994, Iceland opened its market for foreign investment and labour force needed especially in the construction and fisheries sectors. The accession of Iceland to the EEA significantly changed the landscape of labour market in this country. Before, workers moved seasonally within Icelandic regions to factories needing a bigger labour force. They were mostly Icelandic and lived in special housing provided by companies or factories. From the late 1990s, the influx of foreign workers to the construction and service sectors changed this pattern: new nationalities started to come to Iceland for work purposes.

Firstly, it was the fishing industry that absorbed most of workers – by 1996, 70% of all new work permits granted to foreign workers in Iceland were issued to firms from this modern and industrialized sector²⁰. The two

¹⁹ “Ja przyjechałem z dziećmi. Wiadomo, walizki na plecach i nic więcej, bo nic więcej nie mogłem ze sobą zabrać. Więc oni widzieli dzieci, że jestem z dziećmi. Dosłownie następnego dnia do drzwi pukają ludzie [...] i przychodzą Islandczycy z kartonami na przykład, zastawa prawda tam, kilka talerzy różnych tam potrzebnych [...] żebyśmy na początek mogli w jakiś sposób rodzinie funkcjonować”. Interview with Janusz Zacharek, 24.08.2015 r. (recorded by M. Szajda).

²⁰ U. D. Skaptadóttir, A. Wojtyńska, *Gender Migration from Poland to Iceland. Women's Experiences*, [in:] *New Subjectivities: Negotiating Citizenship in the Context of Migration and Diversity*, ed. by D. Golańska, A. M. Różalska, Łódź 2008, p. 21.

year adjustment period for newly accepted UE members which lasted from 2004 to 2006 only slowed down the influx of immigrants. When in 2006 a work permit was no longer needed from new-comers, a large number of Poles came to Iceland. In 2007 alone, the Polish diaspora on the island increased from 3,221 to 5,996. Overall, during the Icelandic economic boom in the years 2003 to 2008 overall employment increased by 14%²¹. What's important, it is in this period that the foreigners started to work not only in a factories or construction sites, but also in service sector (such as retail, health care or public transport) and thus had more occasions to have everyday contact with the Icelanders. The crisis which hit Iceland in late 2008 led to many lay-offs especially in the construction sector. It forced Polish migrants to apply different survival strategies: some of them left Iceland for another Western country, some returned to Poland some stayed in Iceland but changed their work specialization. For example, Ryszard²² who first came to Iceland as a construction worker, after the crisis changed his vocation and now works in a hotel. This trend is visible in the division of the labour market in 2010: most people are employed in cleaning (20%), hotel and restaurant work (16%), followed by manufacturing (16%) and the construction industry (16%).

Why Iceland?

Poles who came to Iceland decided to leave their home country mainly in hope of receiving higher salaries than in their homeland or obtaining stable work in general. This motivation was cited by 61% of Poles in the study from 2010²³. In our interviews, we could observe how important for choosing Iceland as a place of immigration were familial and friendship ties. Our interviewees came to Iceland hoping that they would get a job and because they knew someone who had already worked there. As Anna Wojadłowicz presented it:

So it started like that: my friend was here and one summer she came to Poland for holidays and asked if I wanted to come to Iceland for work. At

²¹ A. Wojtyńska, *Polish workers in the capital area of Iceland*, Rannsóknir í félagsvísindum XIII. Erindi flutt á ráðstefnu í október 2012, Reykjavík 2012.

²² Interview with Ryszard & Jadwiga Hukało, 20.08.2015 r. (recorded by H. Gospodarczyk).

²³ H. Þórarinsdóttir, A. Wojtyńska, *Polonia Reykjavík 2010*, MIRRA – Miðstöð InnflytjendaRannsóknna ReykjavíkurAkademíunni, Reykjavík 2011.

first I thought: Iceland, what a place – dark, gloomy, etc. and I hesitated a little. But then I was like: why not? I didn't see any perspectives for me in Poland²⁴.

The lack of “perspectives” as she calls it, encouraged her to leave Poland for Iceland. After almost a year in a small town she decided to stay in Iceland for good, this time with her little daughter. “*nagrywanie pracy*” (helping to get a job, arranging a job) by friends and kin meant that in the beginning networks existing in Poland reproduced themselves in Iceland. As Tomasz Chrapek describes it, the circle of friends from the university served as a point of reference while coming to Iceland:

My friends stayed there and their social life flourished and they found the apartment and what's interesting is a lot of people from our tourist club that year [...] went to Iceland to visit, to work a little, knowing that there is a base in Akureyri, that they would find a job there²⁵.

However, with more and more Poles coming to Iceland each year, the regional identity ceased to constitute an important factor in social life of Polish immigrants, with more importance given to the circles of family and coworkers. Before the crisis in 2008/2009 the salaries were significantly higher than those in Poland and enabled Poles working in Iceland to support their families in the homeland. Marcin Cieśliński mentioned that financial conditions before the crisis were appealing and often helped Poles to maintain two households – in Poland and in Iceland:

For sure, financial conditions attracted us. It was a huge difference in salaries: here and in Poland. When I started working here, in 2007–2008, I got

²⁴ “To się zaczęło tak, że właśnie moja koleżanka była tutaj i któregoś lata przyjechała właśnie na wakacje do Polski i pytała się mnie, czy miałabym ochotę przyjechać do Islandii do pracy. W ogóle najpierw myślałam, że: Islandia, gdzie to w ogóle jest, daleko, zimno i w ogóle. I tak troszeczkę wahałam się, nie wiedziałam, czy jechać. Ale tak sobie pomyślałam, że raz kozie śmierć, spróbuję. Nie widziałam dużych perspektyw, co robić w Polsce później”. Interview with Anna Wojdałowicz.

²⁵ “Później znajomi zostając tam, ich jakby życie społeczne tam rozkwitło oczywiście i znaleźli sobie mieszkanie i też, co ciekawe wiele osób z tego właśnie naszego turystycznego klubu w ciągu tego roku [...] wyjechało na Islandię, żeby zobaczyć, żeby trochę popracować, jakby z wiedzą, że już jest tamta baza w Akureyri, że znajdzie się tam pracę itd.” Interview with Tomasz Chrapek.

a few times more money for a few times less work. [...] Here, cost of living is very high but in comparison to Poland... people sent money to Poland, it was a lot of money²⁶.

However, the fact that especially before the crisis salaries were high, meant for some that one member of the family worked abroad and sent money to Poland, to children and spouse who stayed in the homeland. Some families of immigrants after some time decided to join their husbands or fathers, others split.

Women joining their husbands in Iceland rarely just take care of children and household – they, immediately after arrival, enter the labour market. For instance, Danuta Radwańska²⁷ came to Iceland following her husband who had come 8 months earlier. After her daughter was admitted to nursery, she started to work in a job arranged by her husband before she came. In the case of families without small children, the entrance to labour market was similarly quick for men and women alike. Especially in the pre-crisis times, getting a job could take less than an hour – as Tomasz Chrapek remembered it:

We really found a job in an hour. It was unimaginable. The first place we went to was the Labour Office. During the meeting with the counselor she tried to find us a job, she was sending our applications to various companies. And during that meeting my phone called with an offer! It was like half an hour of job searching. So it went really fast²⁸.

According to quantitative research from 2010, the level of deskilling (worsening of one's professional position and skills) among Polish immigrants

²⁶ “Na pewno też kwestie finansowe [przyciągały]. To naprawdę była bardzo duża różnica w zarobkach tutaj i w Polsce. Ja zaczynając później pracę już tutaj, właśnie na przełomie 2007/2008 roku, no to zarobiłem kilka, kilkakrotnie więcej, robiąc kilkakrotnie mniej. [...] Życie bardzo drogie tutaj, ale jednocześnie to przełożenie na polskie warunki... Jeżeli ludzie wysyłali pieniądze do Polski, to było bardzo dużo pieniędzy wtedy”. Interview with Marcin Cieśliński, 20.08.2015 r. (recorded by M. Szajda).

²⁷ Interview with Danuta Radwańska, 24.08.2015 r. (recorded by H. Gospodarczyk).

²⁸ “Pracę znaleźliśmy naprawdę w ciągu godziny. Nie wiem, jak to stwierdzić, bo to było aż niewyobrażalne. Poszliśmy do urzędu pracy, to było pierwsze miejsce, do którego poszliśmy, skierowaliśmy się szukać pracy. I podczas rozmowy z urzędniczką [...] ona na bieżąco próbowała znaleźć nam pracę, co polegało na tym, że przesyłała nasze aplikacje przez Internet do różnych firm. Co ciekawe podczas tej rozmowy z nią już zadzwonił mój telefon z ofertą, więc generalnie ciężko powiedzieć, to było naprawdę pół godziny szukania pracy, tak. Więc zaczęliśmy bardzo szybko pracę. Potoczyło się to bardzo szybko”. Interview with T. Chrapek.

was very high: 75% women did not use their education in their work in Iceland²⁹. Among our interviewees we saw a different process: some of them got higher education, vocational training or gained new skills and climbed upwards on the professional ladder in Iceland. For instance Anna Wojdałowicz, who started as an average production worker got promoted to a position of mediator between the Icelandic employer and Polish employees and works nowadays in the office. As she explains, in Iceland formal education is less important than skills and capacities:

Here there is this attitude that if you are up to a job, if you know how to get things done and you do your job right, that's fine – work and do it!³⁰

Nevertheless, it should be underlined that Anna gained her position thanks to her good knowledge of the Icelandic language and the fact that she negotiated with her employer for the change of her position. After few years in a chicken processing assembly line she decided that for health reasons she needed a change and started to seek a new job – only then the employer offered her clerical work. Anna's story shows the importance of the Icelandic language in fully participating in the Icelandic labour market and striving for a better paid position. Other interviewees who did not know Icelandic well continued to have low-skilled jobs such as cleaning or working in the food industry. However, even they noted big differences between their work experience in Poland and in Iceland, mainly because they had “dual frame of reference” – they compared working conditions in their homeland and abroad³¹.

Putting the salaries and financial conditions aside, the Icelandic labour market was very absorbent: jobs were relatively easy to find and well-paid. Icelandic workers are mostly unionized and Polish employees tend to gain on collective bargaining. They had to learn what their labour rights are and how to use them, but in one case we heard of it helped getting paid by unreliable employer:

Often immigrants, the others abuse them. They don't know their rights, they don't use their rights. Once I didn't get my salary, nobody did. Everybody whispered behind their backs, this and that. And I went to labour

²⁹ A. Wojtyńska, *Polish workers...*

³⁰ “Tu jest coś takiego, że jeżeli ty się nadajesz do tej pracy, że jeżeli masz coś w głowie i umiesz i robisz to dobrze – to pracuj, rób to!” Interview with Anna Wojdałowicz.

³¹ See: A. Wojtyńska, *Polish workers...*

union and got paid after two weeks. And then others did it. You have to know your value, if you know who you are, it's OK³².

Poles compared themselves to Icelanders and contrasted their diligence and work effectiveness with the Icelandic laid-back attitude towards work. Ryszard, who worked before the economic crisis in construction, mentioned that during the construction boom, Icelanders wasted a lot of resources and felt no rush to finish their work quickly. As he joked about his first works experience on the island:

During two months, we built 84 kilometers [of fence]. And when 7 Icelanders stayed there – we went for three weeks to Poland, they built only one kilometer! [*laughs*] One kilometer that collapsed and we had to rebuild it!³³

At the same time, most of Poles we spoke to in Iceland value the slower pace of work and life, the work-life balance in Icelandic society. Marcin Cieśliński even used the metaphor of “handbrake”:

I have this impression that after I came here from Poland it was like somebody put a handbrake on me. My life slowed down here, it was... I didn't know what to do with my time. And I think this is a reason why we are here. You don't have this craziness you have in Poland. When we were in Poland... [...] you had to [work] from dawn to dusk. And today, if we were in Poland, I wouldn't be home by this time. And here, I finish work at four, I have time for my children, I can play with them [...]!³⁴

32 “A właśnie z tym wykorzystywaniem, często emigranci sami dają się wykorzystywać. Raz, nie znając swoich praw, a dwa, nie wykorzystując swoich praw. Ja powiem taką sytuację, taki przykład, że pewnego razu nie dostałem wynagrodzenia i nikt nie dostał wynagrodzenia. Wszyscy mówili po cichu za plecami, że coś tam, coś tam. A ja poszedłem do związków zawodowych i za dwa tygodnie miałem to wynagrodzenie. No i później wszyscy zrobili tak samo i też dostali. Trzeba jakby znać swoją wartość, jeżeli człowiek zna swoją wartość, wie kim jest, to OK”. Interview with Marcin Cieśliński.

33 “My przez dwa miesiące zrobiliśmy 84 kilometry. A jak zostało siedmiu Islandczyków – bo byliśmy tylko trzy tygodnie w Polsce, zrobili zaledwie jeden kilometr [*śmiech*]! Który jeszcze się zawalił, musieliśmy go poprawiać!” Interview with R. & J. Hukało.

34 “W ogóle takie moje wrażenie, jak właśnie przyjechałem z Polski, to tak jakby mi ktoś włączył hamulec ręczny po prostu. Tu moje życie tak zwolniło, że to było... po prostu ja nie wiedziałem, co mam zrobić z czasem. I myślę, że to jest też powód, dla którego jesteście. Że nie ma takiego wariactwa, jak w Polsce. Jak byliśmy w Polsce... [...] trzeba było od rana do wieczora [pracować]. I dzisiaj na przykład gdybyśmy byli w Polsce, to jeszcze nie byłbym w domu. A tutaj kończę pracę o czwartej, mam czas dla dzieci, mogę się z nimi pobawić”. Interview with Marcin Cieśliński.

Especially those who did not succeed in Poland found in Iceland decent working and living conditions. Difficulties with integration, the tough climate and the longing for family left in Poland notwithstanding, relatively good working conditions encouraged Poles to stay in Iceland.

Concluding our preliminary remarks on Poles working in Iceland, the quote from one of our interviewees, Marek Cichocki, tells us a lot about the reasons why some Polish immigrants stay in Iceland longer than just for summer job and plan their future there:

I liked here that an employee is an employee here. I would be surprised if somebody didn't receive his salary here or something. I was hit by this melancholic calm that is not to be found in other Scandinavian countries. You can work, you can melt in this society³⁵.

Conclusion

The oral history method which enabled our Polish informants to present their shortened life biography and, more importantly, their experiences of immigration to Iceland turned out to be very productive in grasping different feelings about living in Iceland. We can conclude that the experience of working, living, raising children and getting to know Icelandic culture in most cases changed the ways in which Poles define and talk about society, family, justice and landscape. For some of them, Poland remains their homeland that they would like to come back to eventually (for example for retirement); others plan to stay in Iceland or to move to another country. We hope that oral history interviews collected during the research project "Poles in Iceland" will serve also to other scholars in their analysis of different immigration patterns and experiences or in constructing their research agenda. What we could notice, is that in the former waves of Polish migration to Iceland the pull factors, that is lack of job opportunities, unemployment, the difficult economic situation in Poland played a great role. Later, in the recent wave of migration, also pull factors started to emerge – for example, some knowledge about Iceland, previous touristic visits there, opinions of friends and family. Emigration to Iceland was only

³⁵ "Spodobało mi się to, że pracownik jest pracownikiem. To znaczy, że tutaj zdziwiłbym się, gdyby ktoś komuś nie chciał zapłacić za nadgodziny albo coś. [...] Uderzał mnie ten melancholijny spokój, którego chyba nie ma w innych państwach skandynawskich. Można pracować, można się rozpuścić w tym społeczeństwie". Interview with Marek Cichocki, 21.08.2015 r. (recorded by H. Gospodarczyk).

a part of the recent changes in the Polish presence abroad. Iceland can constitute a very attractive country for Polish skilled and unskilled employees and we can assume that Poles will remain a significant minority in Iceland. More research, focused on the developments of the Polish community and its internal dynamics on the island, mixed marriages and the raising of children in a different cultural context or ethnic niches could deepen the knowledge on the impact of migration on individuals and communities.