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Place, migration and learning: Polish adult migrants in Reykjavik

Małgorzata Zielińska

This article focuses on Polish migration to the Reykjavik capital area. Through semi-structured interviews with Polish migrants in Reykjavik and an ethnographic observation, I try to deduce what places mean for modern Central European migrants. The results show complex relations between migrants and the places they live in. Working conditions, nature and social relations matter most for migrants, while the political sphere and the possibility of democratic voice are considered almost irrelevant.

Key words: migration, place, adult learning, working conditions, Iceland

Introduction:

Research on migration from Central-Eastern Europe to the West has a long tradition, with such important contributions as 'The Polish Peasant in Europe and America' by Thomas/Znaniecki (1918-1920), or works on Polish migration to Britain by Kathy Burrell (2006, 2009).

Different theories and lenses have been used to interpret the daily lives of migrants. One recent example is transnationalism, which focuses on the interconnectivity of people across national borders (e.g. Vertovec 2004). A further example is translocality (Appadurai 1995, Gielis 2009), which entails starting an investigation from a certain place and 'watching the world (with all its networks and relations) moving around', rather than starting the research by focusing on national networks (Gielis 2009: 276).

In this paper, I would like to base my study of Polish migrants in Reykjavik on the concept of place, with a special emphasis on learning in a new place, as well as place-making. Maria Mendel (2006) claims that when an educational researcher and practitioner (whom I consider myself to be) takes 'place' into consideration, the mutual relation between people and places is the most crucial factor. Her concept of 'pedagogy of place' focuses on this relation, in which people make places but are also made by them and learn from them. Such pedagogy can be both a lens for educational research, but also a framework for pedagogical practice.

Looking at migration from the perspective of places resonates with the work of Timothy Cresswell, who argued that mobility 'is just as spatial—as geographical—and just as central to the human experience of the world, as place' (2006: 4). In addition, it also coincides with the way Doreen Massey (2005) described places, namely as being open, relational and constantly changing. Places, according to Massey, are collections of stories 'so-far' (2005: 71) and they are constituted through interactions, relations and practices. Taking this perspective on place as a framework allows us to see migrants as moving not between fixed and stable places, but between processes and between various collections of stories-so-far. Through their mobility they are changed as people and the places they go to change as well.

In this paper, I will focus on the socio-economical aspect of this relation between people and places, looking both at what people learn about socio-economic issues in a new place, and how migrants feel they influence places. In my research, I also looked at what elements of places were vital for migrants, following David A. Gruenewald's elaboration on various

dimensions of place, such as: the perceptual, the sociological, the ideological, the political and the ecological (2003: 623). I will describe these elements very briefly, focusing again on the socio-economic aspect.

Migration from Central-Eastern Europe

This paper focuses on Polish migration to Reykjavik, Iceland, a country outside the EU, but integrated into the European Economic Area (EEA) and the Schengen Area. The European Union's enlargement was supposed to enhance integration between European countries, but it brought about a nearly one-way movement of people. Migrants from CEE are often seen as one group – 'Eastern workers' – in the hosting countries (Ciupijus 2011a). The migrants, however, seldom feel associated with the other migrants from various countries, and tend to maintain their national identity (see Temple 2010). Still, there is a body of research (e.g. Sumption/Somerville 2010; Lulle 2010; Montefusco 2008) about CEE migrants in the West, showing that they have similar characteristics. These characteristics include: the economic motivations of the migrants, e.g., earning money to return home and buy a house; a focus on work and sometimes working long hours without break; a relatively high levels of education but acceptance of employment below one's qualifications; temporality of movement – migrants usually do not plan to stay in the new place for a long time.

The last characteristic, also associated with transnationalism, differentiates the 'new' European migrants from the pre-enlargement ones in particular, and, as has been argued, makes the paradigm of immigration and integration redundant (Favell 2008). Galasińska (2010) describes pre-enlargement Polish migrants in Britain in the following way:

> *[T]he general narrative of post-1989/pre-enlargement migrants is based on a construction of space as fixed and closed. The post-1989 group of migrants narrated their experience of moving as an extremely hard and critical moment in their lives – a rite of passage. Despite having a passport and the possibility of going back and forth, a journey to the United Kingdom was constructed as a final step into leaving one space and moving into another. (943).*

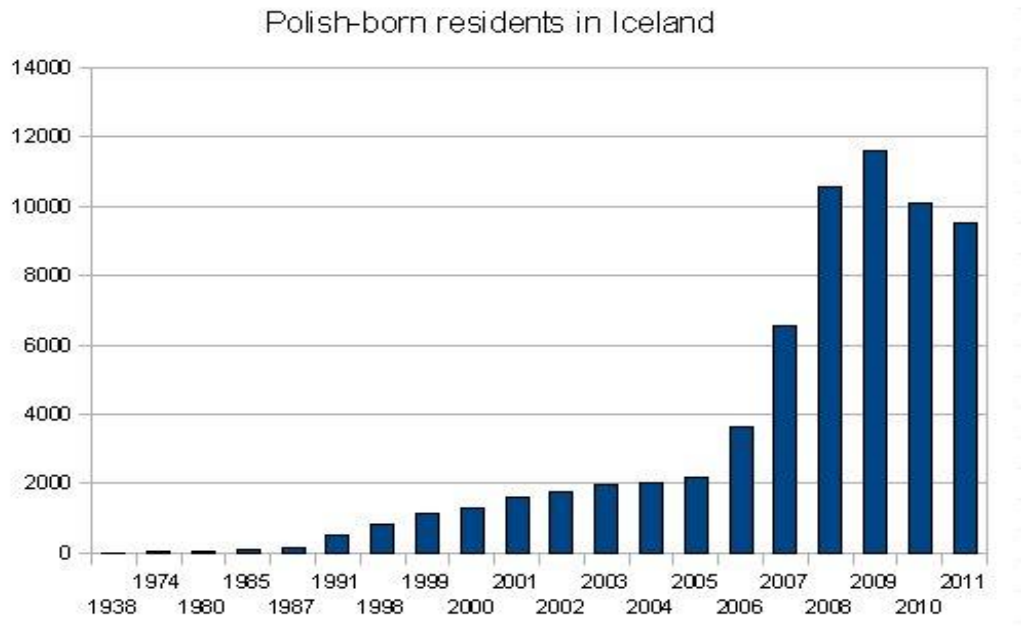
Contrary to this group, post-enlargement migrants, who move more frequently from one country to another, are not considered to have such bonds with any place, sometimes repeating migration and being modern nomads. On the other hand, some researchers argue that the 'new' EU-migrants still have a strong bond with their country of origin, which serves as a reference point and a place where they would finally like to return to, as in the example of Latvian migrants living on one of British islands:

> *The transnational interlude was in reality perceived as 'time off' from the 'real life' in Latvia, less financially rewarding but ultimately the location of their habitus. It had been a dream to be able to cross the borders thereby simultaneously creating the pathway of return – but a return of different selves – richer, in a better social position in their own eyes and those of others. In that sense, the 'return' to Europe was a strategic and provisional mobility, actually a vehicle for its opposite – a 'return' to Latvia. (Lulle 2010: 8).*

At the same time, the host country has been shown only as a means to earn money and not as a place having any other meaning for migrants. A previous study on Poles in remote Icelandic fishing villages shows, however, that for these migrants, 'places continue to be vital, in terms of both their former and current homes, although the meanings of these places are continuously contextualised and negotiated through the transnational migrant experience.' (Skaptadóttir/Wojtyńska 2007: 115). Authors of the study conclude that 'the new place is given meaning, but meanings that may differ from those held by people born in the region.

These meanings are based on daily experiences but they are complex; they may be informed to a lesser extent by the surrounding areas or Iceland in general and instead informed by the knowledge and views that these migrants bring with them.' (124). These complex meanings were a subject of my interest in this study, also conducted in Iceland, but in different settings, that is, in the capital area. Still, Reykjavik is far from being a big city, with only 203,570 inhabitants (Statistics Iceland 2012b, data for the 4th quarter of 2011), which is approximately 2/3 of the country's total population (319,560 people in the same time; Statistics Iceland 2012b). Foreign citizens constituted 6,8% of all the inhabitants of the capital region (Statistics Iceland 2012a), with Polish-born residents constituting the biggest ethic minority group. As one can see in Figure 1, there has been a steady increase in the number of Poles in Iceland since the political and economic transformation in Poland (1989), that is, since Polish citizens could freely leave the country. In 2006, when the Icelandic labour market opened for new members of the European Union, Polish migration to Iceland accelerated significantly.

Figure 1: Polish-born residents in Iceland. Own elaboration.



Sources: Statistics Iceland 2011 and Wojtyńska 2011.

This trend stopped during the economic crisis, which hit Iceland especially hard and the Icelandic currency dropped to nearly half of its pre-crisis value. Some migrants left Iceland at that time, but not as many as the media had anticipated (Wojtyńska/Zielińska 2010). Still, the fact that the interviewees from this study did not leave straight after the onset of the crisis could mean that they were already 'settled' in Iceland, at least to some extent.

Research Method

My research on Polish migrants in Reykjavik focused on questions regarding learning in a new place, and the migrants' perceived impact on it. Such questions require a qualitative methodological framework in order to find meanings, rather than test hypotheses. With this in mind, I started my field work in Reykjavik in September 2009[1]. I decided that in order to study the relations between people and places, I needed both to interview people and to conduct some ethnographic observations of migrants' lives in the city. Thus, I took research notes from participating in various activities in the Polish community, including events at the Polish consulate and Icelandic language courses. I also talked informally with many Polish

migrants, as well as with other foreigners and with the Icelanders I found around me. These informal conversations helped contribute to my understanding of the migrants' life and enabled me to review my interview questions.

I decided to interview a diverse group of Polish migrants and started to look for respondents: firstly, among people that I had already met and talked to; secondly, in various workplaces, and finally, in a canteen serving free food, where I was told that I could find some unemployed Polish migrants. During a few interviews I was assisted by Piotr Kowzan, who added questions regarding the migrants' financial obligations. I recorded interviews with 34 Poles who had stayed in Iceland for 1.5-25 years (with the majority coming after 2006), including 16 women and 18 men, aged 19-60; 16 with higher education, 13 with secondary education and five with basic vocational or primary education. Still, even though I was trying to avoid it, there is an over representation of adults with higher education in the research, as well as a substantial number of kindergarten teachers (9/34). Although most interviews were conducted on an individual basis, there were three couples among my respondents, and they were interviewed together. A group interview was also conducted in the canteen, which involved two interviewers and three respondents, although only two at a time (one left around the time when the third one appeared in the canteen).

Since the group of Polish migrants in Reykjavik is relatively small and people can be identifiable if too much information is given, I have decided to arrange quotations according to themes and not according to certain migrants' stories. Only a small amount of information will be given about the respondents, so that they can remain anonymous.

Learning and sharing knowledge in a new place

One of the key questions in the interviews was related to learning in a new place. Answers to this question varied; some respondents talked generally about changing social environments, going abroad and leaving home. Leaving home was mentioned quite often by young people, for whom leaving their country of origin was a major life event. They talked about gaining more self-confidence, maturity, independence, as well as learning to cope in foreign environments, by learning foreign languages, for example. All respondents considered life in Iceland to be less stressful and hectic than life in Poland. Especially in relation to working life, they mentioned a relaxed atmosphere at work, long breaks and good relations with the boss. Thus, when answering the question about learning in a new place, some respondents said they learned how to relax, keep calm, enjoy life, be patient, but also to be lazy, and not as hard-working as he or she used to be before. A 34-year-old woman answered:

> *[I have learned] patience. Here, Icelanders do not run, there is no such hurry, as in Poland, that you always have to do something, and you have to do it by tomorrow... Icelanders just say – whatever happens, happens, if not tomorrow, than next week or in two days time […] that's the mentality – they don't run, there is no stress, no nerves in doing any business.*

Interestingly, although some respondents said that they had learned to relax, others, when asked if they would like to share some of their knowledge of their new places, said they could teach Icelanders how to do things faster. Two women talked about conflict resolution as an important task that they were able do, in contrast to some Icelandic employers. Helping Icelanders to make people redundant was mentioned by both these women, which is interesting, considering the fact that one of them also said that foreigners lost their jobs more often during the crisis. One said:

> *There have been some conflicts in other shops... I think they [Icelanders] are worse at coping in crisis situations, and I think we could... They can't solve difficult situations, it's very difficult, it takes them months to decide to fire somebody. […] And now there is crisis, so people from other countries could help them.*

Moreover, some people said they thought they could provide Icelanders with knowledge related to their profession, as they have found that there were different practices in the same profession in Iceland. These people, however, worked below their qualifications, and had no opportunity to share their knowledge.

Looking back at learning in a new place, my respondents talked about Iceland as an egalitarian country and considered it something positive that they have learned: 'Maybe it [life in Iceland] taught me to appreciate that they are so... because it is a very just and a very social society, that's how I see it. […] you don't see the richest people, the level is quite even. Even if you are rich, you don't show off.'

As it has often been argued (e.g. Thomas/Znaniecki: 1918-1920, Skaptadóttir/Wojtyńska 2007), migrants' construction of what their new place is comes from comparison with their home country, rather than from the way the host population identifies itself. A recent study by Koźmiński/Zagórski (2011) shows that Poles generally appreciate elements of the Scandinavian welfare system and would like the state to counter inequality, among other things, through progressive taxes, even though the prevalent economic and political discourse in the country is neo-liberal. A discovery made by many migrants that a different social system is possible was one of vital lessons they mentioned.

Place-making

For a researcher focusing on place, the ways in which people make places visually is important. I would argue here, however, that the presence of Polish migrants in Reykjavik was not particularly visible. Apart from candles in front of the Polish consulate after the crash of the Polish presidential plane and two Polish shops which were hardly noticeable from the outside, the only way of telling that the city had a population of migrants from Poland was through meeting one or through reading signs and announcements in shops and public places. One such sign in a supermarket chain asking people not to carry rucksacks in the shop was not written by Poles, judging from the context and grammatical mistakes in the message. The Poles themselves seemed to try to blend in with the rest of the population, limiting the display of pictures or symbols related to their home country to the inside of their homes, to the Polish shop or to educational institutions where they were encouraged to do it by the management. The only exception which made it possible to distinguish with some probability a home of Polish migrants was a satellite dish installed outside. Such objects sometimes caused conflicts between Poles and their Icelandic neighbours, as neighbours needed to agree on the instalment of each satellite dish. A bus driver told a story of his attempt to install one:

> *[The boss] told me: 'If you want to have a satellite dish, you need to ask your neighbours.' […] I did not do it, I thought: how would I communicate with them? […] A short while later, another Polish family moved in, they installed a satellite dish and I asked them if nobody [protested]. [They said:] 'There were protests, but we have children, we can't deprive them of the contact with the Polish language.' […] So we also bought a satellite dish and we installed it.*

Satellite dishes were, arguably, the only objects countering the invisibility of migrants in their places of living. Apart from being visible in neighbourhoods, migrants were also supra-visible in terms of criminal behaviour described by media (see also Birghenti 2007). Migrants were aware of this discourse, where Poles and Lithuanians were often associated with crime

(Ólafs/Zielińska 2010). When asked if they thought that they had had any impact on their new place, the most common answer was positive, and it related to acting as an example of a Polish person who is decent and different than the negative media stereotype. The workplace was the place where migrants met Icelanders and other foreigners, and even if they also spent their free time with people of other nationalities than their own, it was mostly together with co-workers. Thus, this change of image was generally described in relation to co-workers such as customers, children in the case teachers or other people one would meet at work. A kindergarten teacher expressed his impact in the following way:

> *I have a very philosophical attitude to education. It is not just education […] in the most important part of their [children's] life I have an impact on them, this is fascinating. I am sure that if they are told one day that foreigners or Poles do this or that... I am totally sure, that they would say 'It is not true, my kindergarten teacher was Polish!' It's a very nice feeling. That's why I feel that I have influence in this place.*

Another person, working as a teacher, told a story of how she was trying to bring together Icelandic teachers with Polish parents and teach them to be open to one another. She felt that this was her particular impact on Icelandic society, and something that she would also like to do in the future.

Both for teachers and others who were not involved in education, showing one's practices and way of doing things meant having an impact on place. An unemployed man said: 'No, I don't feel any strong impact. But I feel a small one. When I meet Icelanders, I tell them my opinion, information, knowledge, and they become richer because of that, there is some contact. I always think they are learning something from me, from us.'

Very often, the impact was considered to be collective, that is by all Poles in Iceland. One 30-year-old student and worker expressed it this way: 'I think I am just a drop in the sea, in the Polish culture, that we, Poles, introduce here the Polish culture. To Iceland.'

Later, he mentioned a case when his Icelandic co-workers learned Polish Christmas carols and sang them. This was an especially emotional moment for him: 'How beautiful this was! […] And that's a kind of cultural impact. I feel a part of this impact, because I am Polish, because Poles are here, so I don't feel it is just me who has some influence on this society, but it is me as a part of 'we, the Poles'.'

Relating back to Doreen Massey's way of seeing places, as made by the practices and relations, and 'woven together out of ongoing stories'(2005: 72), we can see that the impact on place felt by migrants is precisely what we could call 'making places'; relations with people and different practices are what has been emphasised by the migrants. Still, this place-making was only related to social contacts, especially contacts at work.

Surprisingly, even though Poles were invited to Iceland to help solve labour shortages, few of them felt that they had an impact on the economy of the country. Some said that they had a small impact on life in Iceland by doing their job well, whereas one man realised after some time that he was invited to Iceland in order to prevent the growth of salaries in the company:

> *Why are we here? Because four years ago the workers demanded a pay rise. Because the pay in this company is the lowest in this sector in whole Iceland. And they threatened with a strike. But the bosses said: 'Absolutely not, this is a private company, the conditions are like that. If you don't like it, you can leave.' So a number of drivers quitted and (…) they had to hire people from abroad. And they chose Poles. (...) I got to know about the strike after some time, after a couple of months, and frankly speaking, I was surprised, because from the beginning of my work here there were no (...) difficult situations that would discriminate me in any way.*

Such an impact of migrants on local economies, by providing cheap labour and preventing wage rises, has been called a 'race to the bottom' and has been highly discussed in Europe after the 2004 enlargement (e.g. Krings 2009). Migrants themselves, such as the one quoted above, found this situation uncomfortable and expected they could be discriminated against by their bosses or their Icelandic colleagues. Most, however, preferred to see themselves as a positive element of the Icelandic economy and society. One person described it in the following way:

> *I've heard some stories, but I don't know how reliable they are... that at the beginning of this whole economic crisis, they stopped hiring [foreigners] in some fish factories in some small towns and they kept the jobs for Icelanders. And they started having problems, because Icelanders wouldn't come to work. So they needed to hire Poles again. […] And they realised, that without Poles... [they would not cope].*

Such narratives were based on the opinion, common among my respondents, that Poles were much more hard-working than Icelanders, at least while working abroad. A study on Poles' attitude to work and corporate culture in Iceland (Gutowski/Maranowski 2011) shows similar results:

> *The Icelanders' laid-back and occasionally lazy attitude was contrasted in the interviews with Polish diligence, understood as work speed and effectiveness: 'they are lazy, we are hard-working' (interview 49). Some people admitted, however, that within the Icelandic reality Polish diligence can be perceived negatively. A few participants totally questioned the idea of diligence being a Polish characteristic. Some stated diligence is not a part of Polish work culture, but it is an outcome of being a migrant Pole in a foreign environment: '...when I started work I tried so hard, 'cause it's a foreign country, quick, quick. The [Icelandic female colleagues] would say: 'Teresa, nej, nej', not to do so. They were shocked we do it this way''* (interview 22). (85).

Elements of place

Even though migrants felt that they had had an impact primarily on the social and cultural sphere, they also mentioned other elements of place as being important to them. Since this is not a quantitative study, I cannot say which elements of places are important for the Polish Diaspora in general. Nevertheless, I can indicate which elements emerged from the interviews as being very important for migrants and which ones were irrelevant. These findings can be seen in Table 1. The table shows, however, only the elements that came out in interviews, not the ones that were absent, either because they were unimportant or because I did not ask about them in a given interview.

Table 1: Elements of place importance for migrants.

Very important	*Somewhat important*	*Unimportant*	*Viewed negatively*
-Social structure **-Working conditions and functioning of the labour unions** **-Earnings** **-People and their attitude** **-Nature (landscape, geysers, hot springs)** **-Safety and peacefulness** **-Culture: films and music**	**-History** **-Myths** **-Facilities** **-Culture: museums and sagas**	**-Politics: demonstrations** **-History**	**-Politics: party politics and people in power** **-People and their attitude** **-Culture: ideology (consumptionism)** **-Weather in the winter**

Source: Own elaboration.

As one can see in the first column, some elements of the society were considered vital for migrants, especially a good working atmosphere and satisfactory earnings. Notably, the respondents talked about the working conditions predominantly as good or even 'too good', that is, 'spoiling' the worker. Some people talked about being abused at work and not being paid overtime, but framed it as individual experiences resulting from the bad character and abusiveness of the boss. Similarly, in the study by Gutowski/Maranowski (2011), 'the majority of Poles also discussed the pleasant working atmosphere. (…) There were few reports of employers' dishonesty with respect to financial issues and work agreements.' (82). Migrant workers even in low-skilled employments, who are often described in literature as working long hours and living in substandard conditions (especially in British studies, such as Ciupijus 2011b, Holgate 2005), were in my study generally satisfied with their work. One bus driver explained:

> *In Poland, the working conditions will never be as good as here. […] My boss is a dream boss. The whole company too. When I arrived here, I wrote to my colleagues 'it is like holidays, don't think twice, just go abroad.' Knowing the pressure they work under, it really doesn't make sense to work for such little money. […] It's fantastic here. No comparison. […] Even though I am a foreigner here, I am treated well, although now [in the crisis] maybe a little less. But in Poland... one can't even describe that. […] [In Poland] when a bus was out of order, you had to go to the [public transport authority]. They recorded the whole conversation. They could say that I had taken a wrong decision as a driver to withdraw the bus, because it was in order. And in my depot I can bear financial consequences if I don't report the breakdown and continue driving.'*

Comparing their working conditions to that of other workers in Poland rather than Icelanders, Poles are generally satisfied with their jobs and constitute what Turner (2008) called a 'contented proletariat'. In a study about Polish migrants in Ireland he found that 'a majority of respondents reported being well treated by Irish employers (68 percent), their direct supervisors (73 percent), and other Irish workers (69 percent). Only a small proportion had experienced poor treatment in these areas. Not surprisingly, most respondents (64 percent)

rated the experience of working in Ireland as good, and a mere 6 percent rated it as poor. There is little evidence here that any grievances or problems encountered by Polish workers in the workplace were attributed to their immediate managers and employers.' (2008: 120). Employers in Iceland were perceived as helpful, friendly and supportive of Polish workers outside the workplace both in my study and in Gutowski/Maranowski's (2011) study.

A lot of attention was also given by my respondents to the Icelandic labour unions, which were almost exclusively treated as a very positive actor in the Icelandic labour market; only one man was sceptical claiming that sometimes people in the union are related to the employer and they do not want to be against him/her. Asked what she liked most about Iceland, a teacher in her thirties answered:

> *'Here I see a big difference in the functioning of labour unions. [...] You can get some profits just because you are employed and in the union. In Poland I think about unions only in relation to some crisis situation, when there is bankruptcy, mass redundancies, some scandals or misunderstandings in companies... then the union comes out, shows that it has been there all the time... or is being formed just then. You can get some help from them, but this help is... kind of intangible, so to say. Here you can get some profits, you get language courses refunded. [...] It depends on the union [...]. You need to ask, because each one is different and has different privileges. You can get a refund for swimming pool cards, for fitness, for buying glasses. [...] Even for doing a driving licence. [...] I got some small money for medical treatment, physiotherapy....'*

The functioning of labour unions surprised Poles, who came from a country were they are often seen as harmful to the economy and the free market (see e.g. PKPP Lewiatan 2008). A foreman in a building company attributed unions with the Polish past: 'I remember when I first came here, I felt like in the old times in Poland. Everybody was talking about labour unions. [I wondered:] Do they work so well here? But they actually do! They manage!'. Also two unemployed men described labour unions as a crucial part of the Icelandic society:

> *A: Here the system is different than in Poland, some unions work here. And they are strong. Maybe not as they used to be... [...] They used to be very strong, the bosses were afraid of them. If the boss wouldn't pay, one would go directly to the unions. [...] The rule here is that the human being is in the first place. [...] He works and he has to get paid. The unions don't care if the boss lost money on gambling or some company did not pay him. It [the wage] needs to be paid. And if the unions don't pay, because it's too much, then the state will. Is there anything like that in Poland? It's pure robbery! B: Politicians only talk, but they don't do anything. A: Only swindles and scams. B: They talk, people clap their hands and believe it will be true. Has anything changed? Nothing!*

Another important element of the place was other people and social relations. Most respondents said, however, that social contacts were different in Iceland and in Poland. One explanation was that Icelanders were more open and nice to others. Very often, however, respondents complained about the host population being shy, withdrawn and not easy to make friends with, which is why people are mentioned both in the first and last column of Table 1. Sometimes, both characteristics were given of Icelanders being generally nice and polite but difficult to come into closer contact with. Some other respondents chose coming to Iceland deliberately because they did not like crowds of people, and preferred peacefulness: 'I think I am a type of guy who likes being alone, but have friends at the same time. So I like it that it is so peaceful, I can walk around and not see any people at all, right?'

Another person mentioned different origins of people in Iceland as an advantage: 'I have lived in Reykjavik and I like the fact that in this city and in Iceland as a whole, there are so many people from different countries. It's really great, because you can meet different people,

interesting people, whereas in Poland you would really have to live in some big city if not in a travelling office [to meet such people].'

Apart from people and society, nature also proved to be very important for migrants. Nearly everybody, regardless of age, social status and educational background, mentioned travelling around Iceland as a very pleasurable activity. A young kindergarten teacher said: 'It is just beautiful here. I love Iceland for what it is. I revive in the summer, we go camping any time we can.' Another young woman, who decided to return to Poland, had a similar opinion: 'Yes, the trips are great. Really, the landscape is incredible, very pretty. The ocean on one side, mountains on the other.... It's just a beautiful island, beautifully located.'

Although there were also some Poles who complained about missing the forest, trees, birds and mushrooms, others said they liked the distinctness of the Icelandic nature: 'I've always been attracted to rough nature. Both me and my wife. All the waterfalls, geysers... when it's summer, we're outside every single weekend. We just take a map, fill the car up and go to some wild place – it's great.'

Finally, Icelandic politics[2] was almost exclusively perceived either negatively, or as totally uninteresting, and sometimes both. Respondents explained that they still felt like guests in Iceland, that they did not know enough Icelandic or that they were disgusted with the Polish way of doing politics and, therefore, they did not want to engage in it either in Poland or in Iceland. There were different ways of criticising it, such as: 'If you are a good person, and want to do good things in your life, and live according to some moral rules, you should not deal with politics.' None of my respondents took part in demonstrations that started after the onset of the financial crisis and continued every week throughout my nearly 1-year stay in Reykjavik, even though the impact of the crisis on migrants' lives was vast (Wojtyńska/Zielińska 2010). One teacher explained: 'I just listen, I keep a distance. It's not my country, so I'm not tempted to do it that much.' Another migrant, a Polish bus driver said: 'We are strangers here and we'll always be. […] We didn't take part [in demonstrations], we didn't feel like. In Poland I would not take part in such demonstrations either, because it doesn't make sense.' Some migrants decided to cope with the crisis, spending less or sending less money home, while others decided that it was time to leave.

Altogether, the lack of political participation, as well as a lack of participation in struggles at work, including taking part in labour unions shows that respondents were using the strategy of exit, rather than voice (see: Hirschman 1970). This strategy was used both while dealing with problems in Poland and later in Reykjavik. They did join labour unions in Reykjavik, but described it mostly in terms of profits one could get from a union, such as financial support for language courses or sports activities.

Conclusion

In this paper I tried to look at migration from Poland to Reykjavik from a 'pedagogy of place' perspective (Mendel 2006), including both the way in which people learn from places and the way migrants influence places and 'make' them. The study shows that migrants see many learning outcomes of their stay in Iceland, some of them related to learning a new social structure and working culture. Being relaxed at work was one of the things migrants claimed they had learned, although others called it laziness and wanted to show Icelanders how to work fast. The relation between migrants and their new places, referred to as Iceland rather than Reykjavik, which shows that the national perspective is still strong among migrants, can thus be perceived from a learning perspective. Some respondents even saw change and mobility as a prerequisite of learning.

In terms of observing how migrants make places, there was little to be noticed outside migrants' homes and shops, and it seemed that people wanted to be invisible; even the Polish shops were difficult to notice, and in order to visit one, I had to search hard for it or come with a guide. Some migrants who stayed in Iceland for a long time and learned the language

even tried to avoid speaking Polish with each other in public places, in order not to be associated with other Polish migrants.

Still, my respondents argued that they were not visible in a proper way, that is, their criminal behaviour was highlighted by the media, while the cultural impact they had made went largely unnoticed. Therefore, the workplace served for them as a place where they could fight the negative stereotypes by showing their co-workers or customers their practices, keeping good relations with them and telling them about their cultural background. This was the biggest impact migrants perceived having on their new place. Paradoxically, this meant fighting the impact of other Polish migrants, i.e. the criminals who shaped the media discourse. When it comes to the economic impact, most did not mention it at all, while some mentioned their hard work or admitted that they were hired by their boss in order to keep wages low in a particular sector.

Not everybody in the study felt like a 'place-maker', but some did, and they saw their role as cultural mediators and ambassadors of their country of origin. Still, this impact was rather cultural and interpersonal. Migrants were indeed making the places with their 'stories' (Massey 2005), rather than using their political voice. In terms of politics, migrants were not only uninterested, but also some claimed they were unsure if Icelanders would like them to have any impact. One Polish bus driver asked: 'Do they [Polish migrants] have an impact? Maybe some small one, but I'm not sure Icelanders would like that. It's rather a closed society. They are proud to be Icelanders.' Here, the respondent tried to look from an Icelanders' perspective, basing it on his experience with installing a satellite dish on his roof, which made him think that Icelanders 'did not want any foreign intrusions'. Otherwise, migrants often referred to what they thought the host population would think, basing their assumptions on how they would expect foreigners to be treated in Poland or what they thought a good guest should and should not do. Considering oneself as a guest rather than a place-maker was also one of dominant discourses on a Polish internet forum in Iceland, where the reminder that one is a guest and needs to behave like one was mentioned a number of times. It can also be argued that the attempt to be invisible was an element of behaving like a good guest and not bothering others with one's differences.

In the study described above, place mattered for migrants, although to different degrees. In general, Iceland's nature was especially valued, even though some migrants said they missed Polish forests and lakes. Travelling to see geysers, volcanoes and waterfalls were frequent activities undertaken by my respondents. This suggests that economic migrants do not limit their life to work, even if working is the main goal of their stay in a given country. The results of the study, thus, are not in line with the findings of Lulle (2010) or even Skaptadóttir/Wojtyńska's (2007), who studied Polish migrants in the Icelandic West Fjords. Both studies considered nature as relatively unimportant. Skaptadóttir and Wojtyńska concluded that:

> *Those without families in Iceland, especially, accept extra hours eagerly and commonly work more than ten hours a day. After such a long working day there is not so much time to socialise or explore the area. Thus, many of those we interviewed have not developed a strong attachment to the locality and do not feel emotionally connected with the place. They have no knowledge of its history, unlike the Icelanders living there. Many of them perceive the locality merely as a physical context of work. The landscape in particular, which is usually depicted as exceptionally beautiful by Icelanders, and a source of strong feelings, is talked about as more of an obstacle by the migrants. Whereas the Icelanders describe the harsh nature as playing a key role in the formation of their strong national character, the immigrants commonly complain about the constant danger of avalanches, long and dark winters and strong winds.* (2007: 120-121).

Working conditions and the world economic crisis can be seen as explanations for the differences in the results. Even though some respondents talked about focusing only on work

at the beginning of their stay, most said they calmed down with time, either because of a relaxing atmosphere at work and in the society in general (at least in the perception of migrants, as it was not necessarily shared by Icelanders) or because of the crisis, which resulted in working hours being cut. Thus, migrants had more time to go and see the nature. Moreover, in contrast with Lulle's study, the contracts were rarely time-limited and neither were the migrants' stays in Reykjavik. Finally, another possible explanation of why Polish migrants travelled around Iceland was that many had already lost a substantial part of their savings in the crisis. Having realised that money is transitory, they decided to enjoy life rather than to just work (compare: Wojtyńska/Zielińska 2010).

Even though their work changed during the crisis, and it became more stressful for some (Wojtyńska/Zielińska 2010), the working conditions were generally viewed as very good, compared to one's experiences in Poland and to what the respondents had been expecting upon arrival in Iceland. A relaxing atmosphere at work, good relations with the boss and satisfactory pay, even after the currency crisis when its value calculated in Polish zloty dropped about 50% of what it used to be, have all contributed to the migrants' contentedness. At the same time, respondents criticised the functioning of labour unions in Poland. Facing difficult working conditions in Poland, they chose exit rather than voice (Zielińska 2011; see also Meardi 2007)

The social sphere was also very important for migrants, including both relations with Icelanders and being with one's own family. Family was at the same time one of the reasons for returning to Poland or going to a country closer to it. The latter choice, i.e. deciding to go to Denmark, Germany or Norway because it was easier and cheaper to visit their family in Poland from there, as opposed to just seeing them on Skype, suggests that geographical distance does in fact matter, contrary to theories claiming 'the end of geography'[3].

Notes

[1] The project was supported by Iceland, Lichtenstein, and Norway, with a grant received from the Norwegian Financial Mechanism and the European Economic Area Financial Mechanism through the Scholarship and Training Fund.

[2] Understood as voting, standing for election, or taking part in demonstrations.

[3] More on space and the end of geography in: Graham 1998.

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