



Contemporary Polish Migrant Culture and Literature in Germany, Ireland, and the UK

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Introduction

New Challenges for Research in Polish Migration

A number of Polish jokes begin with the following standard formula: “A woman goes to a doctor ...” [Przychodzi baba do lekarza ...]. Shortly after Poland joined the European Union on 1 May 2004, the collection of imagined funny incidents at the doctor’s office was supplemented by another variant: “A woman goes to a doctor ... but the doctor has left for the UK.” While the significance of one joke evidently must not be overestimated, the latter nonetheless captures fairly well two basic assumptions underlying the present volume: firstly, that it is vital to consider *recent* Polish migration whose remarkable scale has made it an incisive phenomenon in contemporary Polish history; and secondly, that migration, regardless of whether it is motivated by political or economic concerns, always triggers distinctive *cultural* responses (as in this case, with jokes). This is why the contributions collected in this volume set out to explore some trends in contemporary Polish migrant literature and culture – the latter understood as encompassing a wide array of creative activities, ranging from film and television to food, newspapers or the internet – with regard to Germany, Ireland, and the UK.

The focus on these three EU member states begs the question of why they were selected and whether they can be at all considered comparable. After all, the historical patterns of Polish migration to these countries differ greatly. In the case of Germany, Poles have for centuries crossed the Western border and settled in their neighbouring country (cf. Kerski 2010). In the late 19th century the traditional seasonal migration “na Saksy” [literally: to Saxony] developed into economic mass emigration to the industrialised regions of Germany, especially the Ruhr area. After 1945 a considerable number of displaced persons with Polish origins stayed in Germany. The expulsion and

subsequent continuous emigration of people with German roots from the newly acquired territories of Poland reached a peak after the introduction of martial law in Poland in 1981 which also triggered a substantial influx of political emigrants.

In the United Kingdom, by contrast, the Polish community was relatively small up to World War Two, when the activity of the Polish Armed Forces and the establishment of a Polish government-in-exile in London led to a first wave of immigration to the British Isles (cf. Sword, Davies & Ciechanowski 1989, Stachura 2004). The opening up of the British labour market for new EU member states in 2004 resulted in a second wave, involving a significantly larger number of migrants, so that in 2005, as Marie-Luise Egbert affirms, “Polish immigrants for the first time ranked highest among arrivals to Britain, displacing the formerly largest group of Indians” (Egbert 2010: 352).

In the Republic of Ireland, the liberalisation of the labour market had a similar effect: the, back then still roaring, Celtic Tiger reversed the hitherto prevalent paradigm and turned a country of emigrants into one receiving foreigners in search of employment and better living conditions. Before 2004, the Polish community in Ireland was, in terms of numbers, almost negligible; yet within the first few years after the accession, hundred thousands of Polish nationals moved to the Green Isle, quickly becoming “the largest migrant group in the Irish workforce” (Krings *et al.* 2009: par. 2.2).

Notwithstanding these historical divergences, we argue that, for at least three reasons, it is justified and, indeed, particularly rewarding to consider Germany, Ireland, and the UK alongside one another. The first reason has to do with numbers: the UK and Germany have, between them, absorbed the largest part of the recent Polish exodus, while Ireland is characterised by the “most visible [...] influx of Poles” (Frelak & Kaźmierkiewicz 2007: 67) into a EU country. It is thus opportune to enquire to what extent the sheer numerical dimension of migration has influenced cultural activity.

Secondly, as, for example, James Wickham and Torben Krings point out, following the events of 1989/90 and, more importantly, 2004, the phenomenon of the ‘new’ East-West migration must be situated within a European, rather than an exclusively national context:

Polish and other migrants from the new EU member states [...] are not only more mobile *across* national borders in an enlarged EU, but they are also more mobile *within* national labour markets, as they can frequently change employer without fear of loss of a work permit. Hence return migration, circular migration and multiple, cross-national employment biographies have become a possibility for all in the new Europe. [...] Thus, contemporary East-West migration is more than just 'labour migration'. In fact it might be better conceptualised as the pursuit of flexible worklife pathways in a unified Europe and a globalised world. (Wickham & Krings 2010: 1-2)

By looking at three different European countries (and their relation to a fourth, namely Poland) and by including articles that open up a decidedly international perspective, we hope to exhibit an encompassing gaze on the cultural reverberations of recent migration. To account for the changeable nature – both spatially and temporally – of Polish mobility across Europe, we deliberately avoid the terms 'immigrant' and 'emigrant' (unless to imply a permanent and definite movement) and speak of 'migrants' instead. Preferring this notion, we concentrate on spatial and cultural mobility and avoid presuppositions concerning its origin and/or destination.

The third reason, finally, for simultaneously discussing the countries in question is that the historical idiosyncrasies outlined above provide an illuminating background against which the migrant culture(s) and literature(s) of Poles may be analysed and compared. Although we believe that the three countries are marked by significant analogies, we do, of course, acknowledge that, for example, the cultural activity of migrants to the UK and Ireland has palpably gained in intensity after 1 May 2004, which date is not as critical in the case of Germany where Polish migration has been more steady and continuous over the years and the liberalisation of the labour market postponed to 2011.

The recognition of such differences translates into the time frame covered by the term 'contemporary' in our volume: we deliberately look back further than Poland's accession to the European Union and, due to their relevance for the case of Germany (cf. Pallaske 2002), include the 1990s (and, in some cases, the 1980s). Since the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989/90 Polish migrants are no longer political fugitives fleeing from the repressions of a totalitarian regime, but people

departing voluntarily, encouraged by the freedom of movement granted in a unified Europe and the general mobility made possible in a globalised world. What is more, a well-educated and curious generation of young Poles considers temporal migration an important asset for their future careers and thus confidently embarks on the adventure of living abroad. Increasingly, these people combine economic with cultural purposes, which underlines the importance of a focus on the cultural aspects of this migratory wave.

When we set out to contribute to this – from our point of view neglected – area of migration research, we were intrigued by questions such as these: do cultural artefacts posit the existence of a sharp distinction between, on the one hand, the traditional political emigration dating back to World War Two or at least to the time of the People's Republic and, on the other, the recent wave of migration – as Daniel Koziarski does in his UK-based novel *Socjopata w Londynie* [*A Sociopath in London*] (2007)? Presuming the existence of a palpable, even if gradual, difference between (political) emigration and (cultural) migration, is the culture of migrants belonging to the recent wave, especially of the shuttle migrants among them, characterised by transnationality and transculturality? Or, as Wickham and Krings put it: “To what extent does the migration experience impact upon notions of (trans)national identity?” (Wickham & Krings 2010: 3). Further, how does the quantity of this new migratory wave influence its cultural quality? Does migration as a mass phenomenon change the attitude of the migrated minority towards the majority societies? One might, for instance, venture to claim that the mass presence of Polish migrants as it has become visible especially in Ireland changes the patterns of linguistic minorisation and deterritorialisation as described by Deleuze and Guattari (cf. Inoue 2007).

Can approaches from postcolonial studies prove fruitful when discussing contemporary Polish migrant culture (see Artwińska 2010)? Given that nowadays, Polish migrants both in Germany and the UK have a wide range of newspapers, websites, and internet chat rooms at their disposal, can we still assume, in the spirit of the ‘classic’ postcolonial studies, that migrants occupy a subaltern position in the public discourse (cf. Rostek & Uffelman 2010)? How can categories from postcolonial studies be put to use when, for example, Poles

identify with Ireland's colonial past, as is the case in the Dublin-based novels by Iwona Słabuszewska-Krauze and Magdalena Orzeł?

How do related aspects of gender and the family situation of migrants influence their cultural attitude towards the host culture? Think of the obvious gap between, on the one hand, Polish students coming to Oxford, Cambridge or St. Andrews and, on the other, mothers leaving their children, the so-called 'Euro-orphans' [euro-sieroty], in Poland to work in Germany or Britain. Do similar social gradations alter the relationship between high culture (for example literature) and the culture of everyday life? One might wonder whether a venue such as the Berlin-based *Klub der polnischen Versager* [Club of Polish Losers] is symptomatic of the renegotiation of cultural hierarchies (cf. Helbig-Mischewski & Graszewicz 2006). If so, how does the way in which the interrelation between high and low culture is negotiated differ between migrants on the one hand and the non-migrated populations in Poland and the receiving countries on the other?

How do institutions such as the Polish-Scottish Gappad Theatre in Glasgow, agit-polska e.V. in Bremen, ArtPolonia in Dublin or the Polish Cultural Institute in London partake in the creation and distribution of the migrants' cultural products? To what extent does the phenomenon of mass migration influence cultural activity in Poland? How is Polish migration presented in British, German, and Irish works of art – for example in Polly Courtney's novel *Poles Apart* (2008), Catherine Grosvenor's play *Cherry Blossom* (2008), Stefanie Peter's encyclopaedia *Alphabet der polnischen Wunder* [*Alphabet of Polish Wonders*] (2007) or Achim Hagemann's TV comedy *Der Popolski Show* [*The Popolski Show*]? Do anthologies presenting the literary production of Polish migrants such as Piaszczyński & Załuski's *Napisane w Niemczech – antologia. Geschrieben in Deutschland – Antologie* [*Written in Germany – an Anthology*] (2000) or Polish Books UK's *Na końcu świata napisane* [*Written at the Edge of the World*] (2008) reach a broader public or is their reception confined to readers with a comparable migratory background? What is the actual impact of book awards for Polish migrants such as the Adelbert-von-Chamisso-Preis 2009 for Artur Becker's novel *Wodka und Messer. Lied vom Ertrinken* [*Vodka and Knife: A Song of Drowning*] (2008)?