

Polish Immigrants in the Social and Cultural Landscape of Reykjavik

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Abstract: The presence of immigrants has the potential to produce significant changes in the social and cultural fabric of a city, although they may equally well remain essentially invisible. In the present article I discuss the presence of Polish immigrants in the urban space of Reykjavik. Since the first decade of the 21st century, Poles have been the largest non-native nationality in the island, this being the fourth such case in the world – aside from Norway, Ireland and the United Kingdom. The numerical dominance of Poles among immigrants to Iceland is such that immigrant, or foreigner, is frequently considered as synonymous to Pole. Does this predominance of Poles among immigrants translate to their visibility in the urban space? In what ways do they mark their presence? In the article I analyze the presence and activity of Poles in the spheres of culture, local politics, business and sports. I describe Polish organisations and associations, and events held by the Polish diaspora. Some of those are focused on cultivating the culture of the country of origin and on integration within the group, thus being typical Oddiseyan associations; the purpose of others is to facilitate the adaptation of Poles to the host society, and to promote Polish culture within the host society – thus they are reminiscent of Rubiconic associations, to refer to Daniel Joly’s well-known classification. In the article I consider the question: which among the Polish initiatives have gained visibility among the hosts and have the potential to become relatively permanent fixtures of the cultural map of Reykjavik. Is the potential of the Polish diaspora in terms of organisation and culture sufficient to reach a wide audience of Icelanders and foreigners of other nationalities, and to gain their interest?

Key words: Poles in Iceland, history of Polish diaspora, immigrants associations

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Motto: Despite his being inorganically appended to it, the stranger is still an organic member of the group. Its unified life includes the specific conditioning of this element. Only we do not know how to designate the characteristic unity of this position otherwise than by saying that it is put together of certain amounts of nearness and of remoteness. Although both these qualities are found to some extent in all relationships, a special proportion and reciprocal tension between them produce the specific form of the relation on the "stranger".

Georg Simmel, *Stanger*, 1971, pp. 149

Introduction

In his brief text *The Stranger* written over a hundred years ago, Georg Simmel points out the dialectic of proximity and distance present in the category of *stranger*. Both of these categories may refer to spatial as well as to human relationships, meaning they may occur in a number of different connections. *The Stranger* is therefore about proximity in space and distance in relationship². To quote Simmel:

In the case of the stranger, the union of closeness and remoteness involved in every human relationship is patterned in a way that may be succinctly formulated as follows: the distance within this relation indicates that one who is close by is remote, but his strangeness indicates that one who is remote is near. The state of being a stranger is of course a completely positive relation: it is a specific form of interaction (Simmel 1971: 143).

An example of the sociological category of *the stranger* refers to foreigners: economic migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, but tourists as well. Economic migrants are a special case: they live in the midst of the host society, share the slim space of the housing compound, they are neighbors, co-workers, acquaintances from the neighborhood, the street or the corner store. They are close with regard to spatial distance, but far away in terms of social relations. They might be invisible to the hosts and be excluded by them from the community, but they might as well be excluding themselves, by leading lives confined to the immigrant community and refraining from contributing to their new social and cultural landscape.

Are Polish immigrants in Reykjavik *strangers* in Simmel's sense: of a category of people close to the hosts in terms of spatial distance, but far away with regards to relationships and their contribution to the local culture?

The Polish community in Iceland is very small when compared with Polish minorities in other countries (Raport o sytuacji Polonii...2013), yet Poles are the most numerous ethnic group in Iceland, after the natives, and this is one of only four such

² There are four possible combinations, first, where both relations and spatial separation are close; like in the homogenous community; the second, where relations are close and spatial separation are distant, as in contacts of migrants with their family from home country; third, on the other side, where relations are distant and spatial separation are close, as in contacts with strangers, what Simmel described, and fourth, where both relations and spatial separation are distant.

cases in the world – which include Norway, Ireland, and the United Kingdom. The dominance of Poles among immigrants in terms of number is so large that immigrant or foreigner is often considered synonymous to Pole (Loftsdóttir 2017: 74). Does this imply that Poles have much visibility in the social, cultural and political life of Iceland, and in particular of Reykjavik, where the largest number reside? How are Poles present, and how does their presence in Reykjavik display itself? The article is an attempt to answer those questions.

In the first section, I describe the theoretical categories for conceptualising the activity of immigrants in the host country. Here I refer to the category of social capital according to Robert Putnam, and the types of migrant organizations described by Daniel Joly. In the second section I present the history of the Polish minority in Iceland. This is not a long history, it starts in the second half of the 20th century, but even within such a short historical period we may single out several distinct stages. In the third part I portray the Polish associations and organizations operating in Reykjavik, and the Polish events and initiatives that took place in the capital during the last twenty years. Some of them were addressed exclusively to a Polish audience and did not gain wider notice; others aimed at reaching out to Icelanders and other foreigners. In the fourth part I discuss the results of studies, with reference to the theoretical categories described in the first part of the paper.

Note on methodology

The article was written on the basis of studies conducted by the author in Iceland in the years 2010–2016, in the framework of two research projects, a study visit in 2016, and augmented by the analysis of media coverage of the activities of Poles in Iceland, in particular based on the Polish language portal Iceland News Polska and the English language magazine and website The Reykjavik Grapevine.

The first research project was focused on describing the variety of strategies of adapting to a new social environment, and on determining the degree to which the immigrants have made their “entry” into the majority community³. The main method employed was the structured in-depth interview. Nearly 60 (exactly 56) two-hour interviews were carried out in Reykjavik. The sample studied was in no way representative – as is usual in the case of studies on “hidden” communities; it was rather aim-oriented, obtained by the “snowball method”, or by locating prospective interviewees in meeting places or at work. The questions were of an open character, allowing the interviewees to freely lay out accounts of their lives as immigrants.

³ *Integration or Assimilation? The Strategy of Becoming a Member of a New Community: the Case of Polish Immigrants in Iceland (2009–2011)* – carried out by Collegium Civitas and RCIMER (The Research Center on International Migration and Ethnic Relations) University of Iceland – funded by EEA Grants and Norway Grants

The second research project was focused on the modes of self-organization of the Polish diaspora in Iceland. It was carried out in Reykjavik, Akureyri – Iceland’s second largest city, and in Reyðarfjörður, a town in the Eastern Fjords⁴. Two group interviews were conducted with the leaders of the two largest Polish projects in Iceland: the Polish school, and *Projekt: Polska (Project: Poland; PP)*, in addition to fifteen individual interviews with leaders of smaller Polish initiatives and Polish Roman Catholic clergymen working in Iceland. Furthermore, we carried out twenty two semi-structured in-depth interviews with ‘ordinary’ members of the Polish minority, uninvolved in diaspora activity, and three – with representatives of Icelandic institutions: officials and researchers working with immigrants. The studies were based on three scenarios: one targeted at the ‘activists,’ another at ‘regular’ members of the Polish community, and a third aimed at Icelandic specialists. The purpose of the first was to present the association, its history, structure and forms of activity, and to obtain a general reflection upon the topic of diaspora activity; in the second, the questions were aimed at obtaining a narration on the subject’s life in Iceland, his/her knowledge of immigrant organizations and participation in diaspora events, and the significance of such to the subject; in the third, the aim was to learn about how the activity of the Polish community compares to that of other ethnic communities, and about the conditions created for immigrants by Iceland’s legal system. Aside from interviews, another source were webpages of the relevant organizations, and archival materials. Participant observation of diaspora events and visitation of a Polish school provided additional data.

External and internal factors influence on activity and involvement of immigrants – theoretical approach

The level of activity and involvement of immigrants in immigrant associations is influenced by several factors. First are the features of the immigrant community, primarily its size. A community too small finds it difficult to organize, while large communities encounter issues in identifying common plans of action, leading to a sometimes excessive and destructive pluralism of immigrant associations (Schrover and Vermeulen 2005: 823–832). Also of significance is the duration of stay and the motives for leaving one’s country. Those who emigrate temporarily tend to be reluctant to become involved in immigrant activities, and concentrate mainly on work and, to a lesser extent, on sightseeing; although in Iceland one does encounter people whose stay in the country is in their intention temporary, but who still get involved in one of the projects. A second factor is given by the external *opportunity structure*, to use a term

⁴ *Competences and Civic Potential of Poles in Iceland. A Diagnosis with Recommendations* (2014–2015) – carried out by Collegium Civitas – funded by the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the framework of the program *Cooperation with Polish Diaspora and Poles Abroad in 2014*

by Robert Merton (1996) – the formal and legal conditions created in the receiving country for the mobilization and involvement of immigrants, institutional surroundings. The third factor is the organizational culture of the host country and something like a spirit of activity. If the hosts engage as volunteers and carry out a variety of initiatives for their own benefit and that of others, this attitude can prove contagious. Immigrants may adopt the proclivity towards social action, especially if the state creates favorable conditions for such activities. Immigration is, in a way, a re-socialization, potentially involving acculturation toward civic and social activism.

The fourth factor that influences the activity of immigrants is their level of *social capital*, as understood by James Coleman and Robert Putnam (Coleman 1990; Putnam 1993). The level of social capital, i.e. the capability for collective action and self-organization, contributes to the reinforcement of group bonds and as a consequence, feeds back into social capital. Like economic capital, social capital, when invested, not only is not consumed, but instead tends to multiply.

Robert Putnam distinguished between two types of social capital: the bonding type, which binds the group and strengthens social ties between its members, and the bridging type – which enables the establishing of relationships with actors external to the group. *Bonding social capital constitutes a kind of sociological superglue, whereas bridging social capital provides a sociological WD-40* (referring to the world's best-known lubricant – MBB) (Putnam 2000: 23). In the case of immigrant associations and organizations we can use both types of social capital: bonding, having to do with integration between individuals within the group, and on a higher level – of the whole immigrant community, and bridging – related to the establishing of contacts with the host society and other communities of immigrants.

Immigrant associations usually perform a variety of functions, or less frequently – focus on a single priority. Some immigrant initiatives are focused on cultivating the culture, customs and language of the country of origin, and maintaining the bond with the homeland (*home-oriented associations*). Common celebration of holidays, anniversaries and cultural events has the purpose of inner integration of the immigrant community, but often unintendedly underlines the separation between immigrants and the host society. Daniel Joly called this type of organization *Odysean*, being an extension of the home group abroad (Joly 2002). For other organizations, their purpose is to aid the newly arrived in adapting and support their social inclusion in the host society, by providing contacts and information related to functioning in the country of settlement (*host-oriented associations*). Associations of this type were described by Daniel Joly as *Rubican*, with their main purpose being to aid in breaking from the former life and easing into a new life abroad (*idem*). Some associations aim to articulate and represent the interests of immigrants with respect to institutions of the receiving country, or even to influence its policies and legal regulations concerning immigrants. Yet others aspire to perform the role of ambassadors of the immigrants' country of origin. To this end, they organize concerts, exhibitions, and movies by

artists from the country of origin. Their activity is targeted mainly at the hosts rather than the immigrants, thus announcements and promotional material about those activities are provided either in the local language or in English. To a larger or smaller degree, such activities gain notice among the host audience and start becoming a part of the city's cultural environment.

The history of Polish emigration to Iceland

The history of Polish emigration to Iceland is relatively short when compared with the history of Polish emigration to other European countries, and can be divided into several periods. The first covers the postwar period until the end of the 1980s, when only individuals emigrated. In the 1960s the renowned Polish composer and conductor of the National Philharmonic Bohdan Wodiczko spent three years in Iceland, taking part in the musical life of Reykjavik and becoming one of the creators of the Iceland Symphony Orchestra (Sinfóníuhljómsveit Íslands). From the early 1980s onwards the handball coach Bogdan Kowalczyk spent nearly a decade working in Iceland, winning with his team the national championship four times, and leading the national handball team twice in the Olympic Games, in 1984 and 1988, achieving sixth and eighth place respectively. In the beginning of the 1980s a Polish woman from the village of Stare Juchy (near Elk in the Mazury region) arrived in Iceland together with her Icelandic husband, initiating a "great migration" from that locality to Iceland, which has become the subject of a movie, several articles, and a book currently under development⁵. During the period of martial law in Poland, in 1982, 26 persons from a refugee camp in Austria arrived in Iceland (Demig Policy 2015). They spent somewhat over a year in Iceland, but none of them decided to remain there permanently. In the mid-1980s several Polish musicians settled in Iceland, with some of them joining the Reykjavik orchestra, while others took up work as music teachers in Reykjavik or Akureyri in the north of the country. Until the end of the 1980s the Polish community in Iceland was made up of very few: 16 people in 1974, 28 in 1980, in the late 1980s somewhat above a hundred (Wojtyńska 2011); as an ethnic group they were negligible.

The second period of the history of Polish emigration to Iceland spans from the fall of Communism to 2006. After 1989 it became easier than before to leave Poland, while Iceland was beginning to suffer a shortage of labour in the fish processing industry. Women who had worked in fish processing plants in villages along

⁵ The movie we refer to is *In Touch*, directed by Paweł Ziemilski and shown in 2019 at the *Against Gravity Festival*, among others. The film is an artistic account of the emigration of inhabitants of Stare Juchy to Iceland, giving an account of the emotions of family members separated by emigration, their dreams and longings, and everyday Skype conversations. Due to appear in 2021 is my book on spatial mobility in the Stare Juchy township. We observe there two processes: emigration of inhabitants to foreign countries, mainly Iceland; and internal migration, with former residents of large cities moving to the township to take up permanent residence.

the coast began to migrate to larger cities, mainly to the capital (Skaptadóttir 2011, Júlíusdóttir et al. 2013, Yíngst, Skaptadóttir 2018). The employers attempted to fill the resulting vacancies by bringing workers from abroad, especially women (the job market in Iceland is generally gender divided (Júlíusdóttir et al. 2013)), but this was not untypical practice. Similar processes were under way in the labour markets of the Scandinavian countries, with immigrants gradually replacing local workers in those sectors of the job market that began to be regarded as unattractive by the locals, due to harsh working conditions and low wages (Friberg, Eldring 2013, Friberg 2012) Poles began to arrive in Iceland to work at fish processing, either persuaded by their relatives already living in Iceland, or recruited by firms specializing in the recruitment of foreign workers that were already cooperating with Poles living in Iceland⁶.

As a result, Polish enclaves began to appear in Iceland in the vicinity of fish processing plants. Poles sporadically also found employment in aluminum smelters, and in the construction of electric power plants and of smelters (Wojtyńska 2011, Loftsdóttir 2017).⁷ At that time, to migrate to Iceland required obtaining a work permit, issued in advance by application of a concrete employer. The migrant was bound to remain at a particular job for a specified period of time. Only once the contract ran out, after three years working in Iceland and taking 150 h of Icelandic language he or she could apply for a permit to remain and seek further employment on his or her own (Skaptadóttir, Innes 2017; Wojtyńska 2011). In those times Poles enjoyed a rather good reputation. They were appreciated for being hard working, scrupulous, dutiful, and (perhaps surprisingly) punctual (Sigurgeirsdóttir 2011)⁸.

A third period in the history of Polish migration began once Iceland's labour market was opened to nationals of new EU member states in 2006. As EU citizens Poles were no longer required to apply for work permits (until 2006 they were also required to present certificates of having no criminal record), and this was compounded by Iceland's thriving economy at that time; workers were in great demand, especially in the fast-growing construction business. Both these circumstances contributed to a growing influx of Polish migrants. In the 1990s the largest group were women employed in the fish processing industry, dominated by female workers; with the economic boom of the early 21st century, there began an influx of males coming to work mainly in construction, leading to the change in gender ratio (Skaptadóttir 2015).

⁶ The research showed that women from Poland had significantly lower job satisfaction than women from the Philippines, who worked together with Polish women in fish processing (Yíngst, Skaptadóttir 2018).

⁷ There is a reference to Poles working at an aluminum smelter in the North of Iceland in the Netflix series *Trapped* (season 2). One of the minor characters is a Pole, Paweł Nowak – a homophobe and racist who engages in blackmail. He isn't quite the most despicable character in the series, which includes members of an international racket engaging in slave trade: a Lithuanian and a native of the Faroe Islands, in addition to Icelandic politicians, portrayed as corrupt and focused on their own careers, and an assortment of homophobes and right-wing radicals from the local small-town community

⁸ This punctuality might however have been a result of Poles commuting to the fish factories or construction sites where they worked by company vans.

Since 1998 onwards the Polish minority in Iceland became the largest ethnic group, other than the natives (Statistics Iceland a); in 2006, Poles accounted for over 3500 of Iceland's residents, while the second largest minority, the Danish, were less by almost three thousand. From 2006 to 2009 the Polish minority in Iceland more than tripled in numbers, reaching over 11 thousand in 2009 (Statistics Iceland a). As it was now possible to come to Iceland without previously obtaining a work permit, more and more Poles began to seek jobs on their own, in sectors of the economy other than fish processing; primarily construction, health care services, restaurants, hotels. (Skaptadóttir 2015). As a consequence Poles were no longer settling primarily in villages along the coast, or in the vicinity of aluminum smelters, but in increasing numbers in Reykjavik and its suburbs.

Until recently Iceland had been a nearly entirely ethnically homogeneous society, and all of a sudden they were faced with a relatively large new national minority. In Iceland, foreigner became synonymous with Pole. As mentioned by Poles in interviews, The phrase *þessir bölváðir Pólverjar* (those damned Poles) grew common, an expression of concern about the ubiquity of Poles⁹.

A fourth period was that of the financial and economic crisis that broke out in Iceland in 2009–2012. During those years the number of Poles in Iceland began to drop slightly, though in no case can this be described as a massive exodus, as claimed by newspapers in Poland (Budyta-Budzyńska 2016a)¹⁰. Although the rate of unemployment among immigrants was nearly twice as high as among native Icelanders, and among Polish migrants more than twice as high, in 2009 18% among Poles, as the rate for Icelandic citizens 8.2%, in March 2011 unemployment rates among Poles reached 23.6% (Directorate of Labour).

A great majority of Poles decided to weather out the crisis and remain in Iceland, because the demand for foreign workers did not disappear with the financial crisis and some sectors had become dependent on employees from abroad (Wojtyńska, Zielińska 2010; Skaptadóttir, Wojtyńska 2021)¹¹. Some of them decided to stay and even bring their families to join them in Iceland because it was too expensive for them to maintain two households – and continue a transnational way of life in Poland and Iceland (Skaptadóttir, Wojtyńska 2021: 170). My sociological research has shown that Polish immigrants were less affected by the crisis than the natives of Iceland, in spite

⁹ One interviewee quoted the following ethnic joke heard from Icelanders: *An Icelander, American and Pole are flying on an airplane, and suddenly something fails and excess weight must be dumped. The Pole opens his suitcase and gets rid of his sausages and meats, the American dumps a bunch of dollars, while the Icelander grabs the Pole and throws him out saying: we've got too much of that [...]*"

¹⁰ Sample headlines from *Gazeta Wyborcza*: *Poles fleeing Iceland* (Oct. 10, 2008); *Poles retreating from Iceland, in face of slump of Icelandic crown* (Oct. 10, 2008); *Iceland, the former paradise, now escaped* (Apr. 7, 2010).

¹¹ The scale of the outflow could have been larger because the official statistics include only those persons who were officially registered as residing in Iceland but omit those who have a so-called temporary personal ID number (*utanþjóðskráar kennitala* (Skaptadóttir, Wojtyńska 2021: 166).

of the higher rate of unemployment among them; firstly, because they refrained from investing in Icelandic securities, and thus were unaffected by the crash of Iceland's stock exchange; secondly, because they were more hesitant than the locals to take credits, and therefore did not suffer from high debt payments; and finally, few of them lost their savings to the devaluation of Iceland's currency, because they seldom kept savings in Icelandic crowns, but rather either made monthly transfers to their accounts in Poland, or regularly exchanged surplus money to euros (Budyta-Budzyńska 2011, 2016a). Everyone was of course affected by the growing prices of consumer goods, some lost their jobs, while others only saw a reduction in side jobs or overtime. The crisis did however curb the growth of Polish diaspora in Iceland, and caused it to change in character: instead of emigrants arriving to stay temporarily and aiming to earn money to be spent or invested in the country of origin, migrants began to settle permanently, not gaining enough saving to make it worthwhile to return, but securing for themselves sufficient income for comfortable living in the country of settlement. During the initial period of the crisis, Poles and other foreigners sometimes became the target of accusations of taking jobs away from the Icelanders. Admittedly however, unlike e. g. In Great Britain (Fomina, Frelak 2011) there was no strife against immigrants (Wojtyńska, Zielińska 2010: 8), (other than sporadic graffiti and a website¹²), and the Icelandic Confederation of Labour conducted a campaign of informing about the contribution of immigrants to the nation's development, apparently to good effect.

At the beginning of the crisis one charity introduced different waiting lines for Icelandic and foreign citizens. According to some authors, this proved that migrants were often not seen as rightful clients, clearly reflecting existing social boundaries that define migrants as less than full members of Icelandic society (Skaptadóttir, Wojtyńska 2021: 174). In general, after the economic collapse, immigrants in Iceland experienced a changed attitude towards them (Wojtyńska, Skaptadóttir 2019: 10).

The last period so far in the history of Polish emigration to Iceland are the years following 2012, when the economy began to recover from the crisis and the number of Polish migrants started growing again. Net migration from Poland to Iceland has again been positive since 2013, and in 2020 the number of Poles living in Iceland was estimated at 20 thousand – one third of all immigrants, and nearly 5 percent of Iceland's population (Statistics Iceland a). The exponential growth in Icelandic tourism is unthinkable without the contribution of thousands of foreign migrant workers (Skaptadóttir, Loftsdóttir 2016; Karlsdóttir, Jóhannesson 2016). Poles increasingly find employment in hotels, car rentals and bus companies. Research shows that at the end of the 2010s, 30 percent of the tourist industry workers in Iceland were foreigners (Wendt, Jóhannesson, Skaptadóttir 2020; Mirra 2019)), in hotels they account for $\frac{3}{4}$ of the staff, among which 40 percent are Poles, and Polish is the second most used

¹² Web-based Society Against Poles in Iceland was created, apparently by a 14-year-old boy. It was shut down very quickly (Loftsdóttir 2017).

language among the Staff of hotels and guesthouses. Poles also find employment at horse farms, which are one of Iceland's major attractions (Karlsdóttir, Jóhannesson 2016). The Icelandic labour market is ethnically segregated and the tourist sector significantly so. Poles are concentrated in low paid jobs, often jobs the locals no longer want. Tourism is a labour demanding sector calling mostly for un-skilled laborers (Mirra 2019).

Research shows that migrants from Poland reproduce their social position prior to the crisis, in spite of benefitting from the rule of free movement within the EU and the EEA, which was meant to provide equal opportunity to workers from all countries of the region (Wojtyńska, Skaptadóttir 2019: 4).

With the subsequent crisis affecting mainly the construction business, it was mainly men who lost jobs, leading to some of them departing. Meanwhile, few jobs were lost in services, cleaning, care of seniors and children, where mostly women were employed; thus fewer women than men became unemployed, and fewer left Iceland. The gender ratio became more even. With the recovery from the crisis and growing rate of construction there is a growth in jobs for professions in that business, therefore once again the ratio is slightly tilted towards men, and this holds both for Reykjavik and on a nationwide scale.

In recent years new features are observed in Polish emigration to Iceland, as result of the transnational character of modern migrations. The first is circular migration, not previously observed in Polish migration to Iceland, although this system is not a new solution on the labour market – business, services and industry have applied it in the USA and Europe. An example is the case of 18 men who work in a 2/2 rotation system in the construction industry in Iceland. They call the system "two-on-two" (2/2) because they work in twelve-hour shifts, two weeks in Iceland, and have two weeks off in Poland (Dziekońska 2020).

A second new form of migration is the seasonal emigration of young Polish students and graduates to work in the rapidly expanding tourist sector in Iceland (Karlsdóttir, Jóhannesson 2016). Yet another new feature is returning emigration. During the crisis, some Poles left Iceland, but after a time decided to return (Budyta-Budzyńska 2020: 128).

Also new is the appearance of people with more ambitious professional plans than employment at manual labour or simple office work – for instance, adult children of immigrants from the 1980s and 1990s with a bicultural background. Another observation is the rise of the first Polish businesses in Iceland: Polish food shops, bakeries, car repair shops, barbershops and salons, Polish driving instructors. Polish businesses cater to the local Polish community, but find customers among native Icelanders as well (Budyta-Budzyńska 2016).

From March 2020 onward, due to the partial lockdown in response to the pandemic, unemployment in Iceland grew considerably. In December 2020 the unemployment rate exceeded twelve percent, the level reached during the memorable

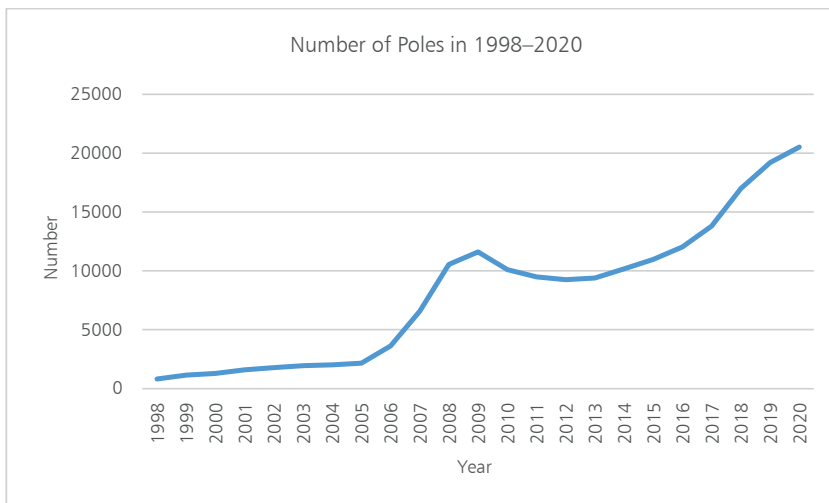
crisis of 2009, when in February/March it exceeded the previously unheard of figure of nine percent. And just like then, immigrants are the group most affected, despite comprising about 14% of the total population, 41% of all of Iceland’s unemployed are foreigners. Poles have been hit especially hard, making up 20% of Iceland’s unemployed, over four thousand (The Directorate of Labour, Massey 2020).

Immigrant workers from Poland became a hot topic in mid-2020, when a fire broke out in a building in Reykjavik inhabited by immigrants. Three Polish residents of the building died in the fire; the premises were repeatedly reported as unsafe before this incident. In the context of this tragedy, the living conditions of immigrants became once again a topic of discussion. (Fontaine 2020)

Chart 1 displays the number of Poles living in Iceland – referring to those immigrants who were born abroad with parents also born abroad, across the years 1998–2020.

Chart 1

The number of Poles (according to place of birth and place of parents’ birth) in Iceland in the period 1998–2020

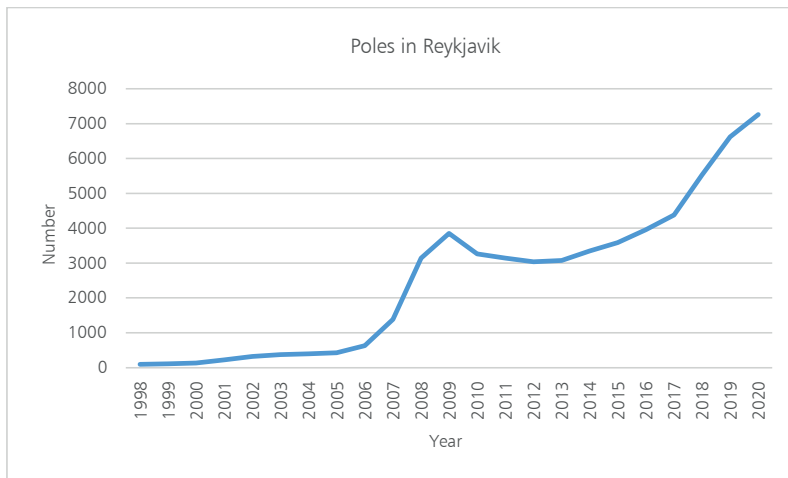


Source: Statistics Iceland a

Chart 2 displays the number of Poles living in Reykjavik across the years 1998–2020. We see that the Polish community in the capital city saw a rapid growth somewhat over a decade ago, once Poles were able to move to Iceland without needing to apply for permits and to seek employment on their own. Currently nearly two thirds of all Poles in Iceland live either in Reykjavik or its suburbs and in Keflavik in the municipality of Reykjanesbær (Statistics Iceland c), and the remaining third is scattered around the country, in small Polish communities in villages along the coast.

Chart 2

The number of Poles living in Reykjavik across the years 1998–2019



Source: Statistics Iceland c

The lifestyle of Poles in Iceland varies considerably, depending on the purpose of their arrival and their plans for the future. Those who decided to remain strive to live like the locals: spending money on all the regular living expenses, not squandering excessively, and attempting to integrate with the local society; those who plan to return to Poland work and economize in excess, and while their stay is purportedly temporary, they tend to postpone the return time and again. Lacking the ability to fit into the new social surroundings and short of language skills, they tend to stick together, live and walk around in groups.

Poles interviewed in 2010 claimed that they easily recognized their countrymen in the street. In the case of it being a middle-aged man, he surely had a mustache, short-cropped hair or shaved head, blue jeans and trainer shoes, and usually carried a Bonus shopping bag (*Bonus*: a discount store chain):

Men are often recognized by their mustaches, and the clothes they wear, not so much scruffy as outmoded [...] some pair of white trainers that must be Adidas, Puma or Nike, white trousers or some tracksuit and carrying a shopping bag. Men from Poland, they have no purses or wallets, they carry everything around in shopping bags

One can find similar description of immigrants in others studies: men in working clothes became visible in the first half of 2000s as walking alongside heavy traffic roads holding plastic bags from low budget grocery stores on the way to the industrial areas where they stayed (Loftsdóttir 2017: 72)

A similar image of Poles was presented by Hallgrímur Helgason, the author of the famous *101 Reykjavik*, in his 2008 novel *The Hitman's Guide to House Cleaning*.

How to Stop Killing People and Start Doing the Dishes: A Pole is a mustached man in a cheap suit, if dressed for a ceremony; if at work, he wears overalls, or some funny trousers. The novel's main character, himself a Serbian, for a while impersonates the Pole Tadeusz – a house painter, speaking broken English, *with an accent as strong as a wrestler on cocaine*. He describes Poles as *seven-eleven*, meaning they start work at seven AM and return home at eleven PM, working for sixteen hours a day like robots¹³

Polish associations and initiatives in Reykjavik

One of the largest Polish initiatives in Iceland is the Janusz Korczak Polish School in Reykjavik, established in 2008 and operated by Stowarzyszenie Przyjaciół Szkoły Polskiej w Reykjaviku (the Association of Friends of the Polish School in Reykjavik). The school does not have premises of its own, and for the past several years has been operating in the premises of the Icelandic school Fellaskóli located in the Breiðholt district of Reykjavik (opposite the Polish shop Minimarket). The Saturday Polish school in Reykjavik provides teaching on the pre-school and elementary school level, in the Polish language, history, geography and civic education. In the school year 2018/2019, the school had 360 pupils, six times as many as it had in its beginning, testimony to the initiative's considerable success. In addition to teaching, the school organizes a number of events, such as meetings with notable persons, and yearly ceremonies at the graves of Polish sailors at the local cemetery, contributing to the integration of the Polish community. It also mediates communication between Icelandic institutions and the Polish community, for instance by divulging election-related announcements. In 2018, the school celebrated its tenth anniversary, and the ceremony was attended by Iceland's Prime Minister, the Minister of Education, the Mayor of the Breiðholt (neighbourhood in Reykjavik where the school is located), and the President of the Reykjavik City Council. In 2020, the school was nominated for Iceland's educational award Íslensku Menntaverðlaunin (szkolapolska.is, Iceland News). After over a decade in operation the school has become a permanent fixture on the educational and cultural landscape of the Polish diaspora in Iceland; however, its activities take place only within the Polish community, and while they have gained notice from Iceland's educational authorities, it has not made a presence in the city's so-

¹³ In September 2012 a poster for a then new comedy show *Johnny Naz* portrayed a man with a large mustache in a t-shirt with an eagle and a rosary around his neck, showing his middle finger. In a TV ad for the show the same man was shown walking in the street carrying a pack of beer cans in one hand and a stuffed shopping bag from the *Bonus* cheap discount chain in the other. Some in the Polish community found this ad insulting, while others regarded it as an accurate portrayal of Poles. The TV ad triggered a protest from the Polish consulate, and the TV station issued an apology for the inconsiderate ad (*Eagle t-shirt, mustache and middle finger. Iceland TV mocks Poles, the Polish community indignant* – 26.09.2012) Meanwhile, the comedy film *Stanislav* (2012) portrays a young Pole in very favorable terms: more than handsome, he's also hard working and industrious. An Icelander is amazed by how quickly he built a house, which wasn't even there yesterday. It was possible only because a Pole – Stanislav was in charge.

cial landscape. It is therefore a typical bonding type initiative, aimed at strengthening bonds within the ethnic group itself.

Until recently the most widely known Polish initiative in Iceland was "Projekt: Polska". It is connected with the association "Projekt: Polska" that operates in Poland, though the association in Iceland is incorporated in its own right. Projekt: Polska in Iceland was initiated in 2012, the founder and first chairman was previously an activist of Projekt: Polska in Poland¹⁴. The association made itself known with several spectacular activities, which included the participation of Icelanders and were covered by the Icelandic media. In December 2013, Projekt members released floating "freedom lanterns" on the lake in central Reykjavik. Though floating lanterns is not a particular Polish tradition, members of Projekt: Polska had held such activities in the past in Poland, and decided to repeat that in Iceland's capital. Residents of the capital were impressed by the event and the capital's Mayor took part as well, awarding Projekt for this activity. Another activity by the association was inviting residents of the capital to read the Polish poem *Kto ty jesteś, Polak mały* (*Who are you, little Pole*), and distributing a video of this event on the internet. In February 2014, members of Projekt gave out copies of an Icelandic-language edition of the Polish newspaper *Metro* free of charge on the streets of Reykjavik. This was a special edition with texts on Poland and Poles in Iceland, sponsored by the manufacturer of Prince Polo wafer bars, which are highly popular in Iceland. In 2014 on Poland's Independence Day, members of Projekt held an event by Harpa Reykjavik Concert Hall and Conference Centre where members of the Polish community donated blood. The event in the vicinity of the capital's most prominent cultural establishment attracted considerable attention from the residents, unfamiliar with initiatives of this kind, and was repeated yearly until 2017 (Budyta-Budzyńska 2016b).

In 2018 the celebration of the centenary of Poland's independence took a different twist. The *Zabiegani Reykjavik* (*Reykjavik Runners*) Foundation, established in 2018, held a street running competition¹⁵. The five-kilometer running route, and a two-kilometer marching route, were laid from the Harpa building along the coastline. There were about 300 participants, among them both Poles and other nationalities. The run was repeated in 2019, in 2020 the event was not held due to the pandemic. It is hard to say at this point whether the yearly run will become a tradition of Iceland's Polish community, such as the yearly WOŚP funding drive held every January. The WOŚP charity (The Great Orchestra of Holiday Help) is one of the main events for the Polish community, engaging a numerous group of people, including many youths. Every

¹⁴ The initiative was launched under the ironic slogan "Iceland is the world's most hipster nation": M. Pawłowska, *Young Poles in Iceland Join Forces in the Framework of Projekt: Polska. "Iceland is the world's most hipster nation"*, *NaTemat.pl*, May 12, 2012

¹⁵ In addition to training runs, *Zabiegani Reykjavik* organize charity runs *Running to aid*, dedicated to gathering funds to aid beneficiaries of the foundation, mainly families with children suffering serious illness; they also represent the Polish community in other running events held on the island

year a different group takes over organization of the drive; this sort of “relay cup” as it was described (Iceland News) ensures the initiative’s continuity, unlike the case with many other Polish initiatives. WOŚP attracts attention among the locals, when every year on the second Sunday of January volunteers with red heart badges turn up on the streets of downtown Reykjavik. The Independence Run and the WOŚP charity collection aim at the integration of the Polish community and strengthening bonds with the home country, but being street events gains them visibility to the host society and makes them a part of the capital’s event landscape.

In 2006, the several-day Festival of Polish Culture in Reykjavik became a major cultural event, due to the participation of prominent guests. A number of concerts were held, including one with the participation of Krzysztof Penderecki, and another by Krzysztof Jagodziński Jazz Trio, and encounters with Polish writers, Olga Tokarczuk, picture exhibition by Chris Niedenthal, and two performances given by the theatre of one mime by Ireneusz Krosny. In charge of organizing the event was the oldest Polish association in Iceland, founded in the late 1990s: the Icelandic-Polish Friendship Society (Vinattufelag Íslendinga og Polverja, VIP). Among its members are both Poles and Icelanders who are interested in encouraging contacts between Iceland and Poland, and therefore the Society is a typical bridging-type institution; however, since the Festival the Society has been dormant.

In 2001, members of the VIP created another organization: the Association of Poles in Iceland (Samtök Pólverja á Íslandi, SPI), with the aim of integrating the Polish community. The SPI holds yearly ceremonies in commemoration of Polish sailors from the cargo ship *Wigry*, which sank in January of 1942 near the coast of Iceland. Two members of the 27-man crew survived, one Pole and one Icelander. Every year on All Saint’s Day (Nov. 1) and on the anniversary of the ship’s sinking (Jan. 15), members of the Association together with Embassy representatives, and children from the Polish school in Reykjavik lay wreaths at the collective grave of the disaster’s victims located in the Fossvogur cemetery outside Reykjavik. For the Polish community this is an integrating event, symbolic and identity-building, reinforcing its bonding capital. The SPI Chairman Witold Bogdański is referred to as “custodian of the memory of *Wigry*”, as for years he has stood behind activities in commemoration of the *Wigry* sailors and efforts to divulge information about the disaster through Iceland’s media. In June 2017, Bogdański organized an exhibition at the Maritime Museum in Reykjavik “Their Memory Will Not Be Lost”, dedicated to the tragedy of the *Wigry* sailors. Thanks to him the burial ground of Polish sailors in Fossvogur and memory of the *Wigry* have become a fixture of the Polish landscape in Iceland.

The Polish-language news portal Iceland News Polska is a media initiative addressed to Poles exclusively. It has been operating since 2010, and in addition to news about Iceland and the life of the Polish community there it carries all sorts of advice, serving as a vehicle for communication between the Polish embassy and Poles in Iceland, and as media partner of numerous diaspora events. The portal has been noticed by the

Icelandic authorities, and in March of 2016 was awarded by the daily *Fréttablaðið* a prize for initiatives furthering the integration of immigrants.

Another media initiative, meant to be addressed to the host society as well, was to be the “Social and Cultural Review ROK”, founded on the centennial of independence of Poland and Iceland. The year 2018 marked an anniversary of importance to both nations, in the Icelandic language *rok* means a very strong gale, of 10 degrees on the Beaufort scale. The magazine was meant to be a powerful and refreshing gale in intellectual and artistic terms. It was to carry articles by authors both Polish and Icelandic, written in both languages, on topics of history, people, hobbies and art. Four issues of the magazine appeared in 2018, but in 2019 the initiative withered¹⁶. One might say that before it had a chance to secure a place in the capital’s cultural landscape, the magazine turned out to be a transient and ephemeral initiative.

An event that enjoys relatively large popularity among Poles in Iceland is the Polka Bistro, Polish food fairs, held since 2013. This is an initiative within an international project called Restaurant Day, whereby one-day “restaurants” can be opened by anyone, whether at home, in the yard, in a school, or anywhere else, without needing to apply for an individual license, by just registering on the Restaurant Day webpage. The event takes place four times a year, on the same day worldwide. Usually the one-day restaurants offer some specific kind of food for either on-site tasting or to carry. Polka Bistro decided several years ago to offer Polish cuisine, in order to gather the Polish community and at the same time, show off Polish flavors to Icelanders. The event goes along with the popularity of “slow food” and world cuisine. The idea of eating together is generally aimed at furthering bonding, however the participation of Icelandic friends and people of other nationalities gives it a bridging role as well.

An initiative addressed to Poles of a specific age group, namely pre-school children and their parents, is *Razem Raźniej (More Fun Together)*. *Gaman Saman* – the original Icelandic name of this initiative, is a Scandinavian project offered in Iceland to members of two national groups: Polish and Spanish. The aim is to maintain knowledge of their mother language among children of immigrants, through encounters and group play of children from a single ethnic group under the supervision of immigrant teachers. The meetings take place once a month and being addressed to pre-school children, are held in an Icelandic kindergarten. The project was initiated in 2010, and while in the Spanish language group it lasted only a year, in the Polish language group it expanded and currently has been running for ten years¹⁷.

In small towns, a popular form of initiative addressed to children are meetings of Polish children, usually organized by a local Polish leader, dedicated to the reading

¹⁶ In 2018, the year of the centennial of Poland’s and Iceland’s independence, a large number of events took place: concerts, encounters, song meetings and exhibitions

¹⁷ Another initiative addressed to children was the *PLekhús Association* (PL: Poland, and Leikhús: theatre in Icelandic). This was an amateur theatre group which existed in 2015–2016, showing plays for children in Polish, sometimes with children acting as well

of Polish children's stories. Such encounters have by now become traditional in Hafnarfjörður near Reykjavik, and in Ísafjörður in the West Fjords; in 2020 story telling sessions addressed to groups of immigrant children began to be held by the City Library in Reykjavik as well.

Razem Razniej and story reading sessions have an eminently ethnic character, the purpose being to teach children the Polish language, thus strengthening bonding capital among the youngest generation. Such events are totally invisible to the host society, even if often organized and funded by them.

Some Poles are active in cultural or sporting initiatives unrelated to Poland or the Polish community. An example is the "Positive" Photography Association, originally established by Poles but currently international in membership. An informal meeting space for young Polish women in Reykjavik is provided by zumba and yoga classes organized by Polish instructors¹⁸.

In Iceland there exists a Catholic ministry dedicated to Poles; but there are no Polish Catholic Church structures in Iceland, such as the Polish Catholic Mission that functions and organizes Polish Catholic and social life in countries like Germany, England, Wales, France and Italy. In 2019, there were five priests from Poland working in Iceland, in Reykjavik and nine other towns Holy Mass in Polish was celebrated (once a month in smaller towns). Other than in the context of religious services and holidays, Polish Catholics have little visibility in Iceland. The Catholic Church was never a focus of organized Polish community life here; first, because Polish immigrants were late to arrive in Iceland, and this happened when the role of the Catholic Church in immigrant communities everywhere began to wane; and second, due to the spatial dispersion of the flock, priests are kept busy by purely religious activities and being so few, have hardly time to spare for extra-religious activities. In Reykjavik's Catholic church Landakotskirkja services for Poles are celebrated in Polish, thus the language barrier makes them exclusive and inaccessible to Filipino Catholics, who attend services celebrated in English at the same church.

In Hafnarfjörður near Reykjavik there is a nunnery inhabited by Polish Carmelitan nuns originally from Elbląg, who took over the establishment in the 1980s when it was abandoned by Dutch nuns who resided there previously; in 2019 there were 12 of them. In 2019 the convent celebrated a double anniversary: 80 years since the arrival of Carmelitans in Iceland, and 35 years since the arrival of nuns from Poland. The celebrations were attended by the President of Iceland and this was reported by the media (Carmelitans in Iceland).

¹⁸ On a Children's Day two Polish doulas organized an online meeting for breastfeeding mothers, as *Tales of Milk*. Another form of cooperation and aid was called *Metamorphosis* – an auction of services of hairdressing, cosmetics, spa, dieting consultations, massages and such, organized by Polish small business to raise support for the Running Reykjavik foundation to aid Polish families with ill children.

Political participation and cultural presence in the landscape by Poles in Reykjavik

Political participation, meaning taking part in elections to local and central government bodies, is yet another kind of participation by immigrants in public life. About a dozen years ago one Polish nurse, who had lived and worked in her profession in Iceland since the 1990s, ran in parliamentary elections and became a supplementary MP – though she never got to start work in Parliament, because as she said in an interview given in 2010, the MP she would be filling in for “was neither elderly nor sickly”¹⁹

In the 2014 local government elections, 32 Poles ran for office, the most successful among them being Tomasz Chrapek, an activist of *Projekt: Polska*, who became a member of the Reykjavik City Council and sat on the Council’s Committee for Sports and Recreation. The year 2014 marked a breakthrough, since for the first time Iceland’s political parties decided to reach out to Polish voters, holding election rallies dedicated to Polish speakers and including Polish candidates on their slates. The reason for this was that a meaningful number of Poles gained the right to vote and run in local elections. The right to take part in local elections in Iceland is granted to any person who has legally resided in Iceland for at least five years, irrespective of citizenship. People from outside the Nordic states were allowed to vote for the first time in 2002, however at that time very few Poles were entitled to vote. Following the 2018 local elections, the post of Chairman of the Reykjavik City Council was taken by Paweł Bartoszek, a renowned journalist and social activist, son of Stanisław Bartoszek, who was the author of a Polish-Icelandic dictionary. Several years earlier, when work was started on a new constitution for Iceland (in late 2020 the process has yet to conclude), Bartoszek Jr. was elected a member of the Citizens’ Constitutional Committee (as one of 25 from among 522 candidates; viz. Bergmann 2014: 177, Fontaine 2017). Poles with Icelandic citizenship are still few, however membership in the EU has made citizenship less desirable to Poles. In 2020 somewhat over two thousand Poles by origin held Icelandic citizenship (Statistic Iceland b), and in the upcoming years more Polish immigrants will gain the right to apply for citizenship, having fulfilled the residency period requirement. Citizenship may be granted following seven years of continuous residence and upon passing a state examination in the Icelandic language (having taken welfare aid during this period, or been punished with as much as traffic tickets can extend this process in time).

Poles who are employed on work contracts in Iceland are members of trade unions, as union membership is not mandatory but the majority of the work force is

¹⁹ In order to avoid stalling the activities of the national assembly due to lack of quorum, in case of an MP’s absence extending for more than two weeks, he or she is replaced in sessions by a designated supplementary.

a member in one union or another. However, few Poles take part in union activism, although many take advantage of union benefits: union-funded language or vocational courses, material and legal aid provided by the unions, or union-owned summer cottages and one Polish woman is the vice chairman of The trade union Efling – union of low skilled workers. In the spring of 2020, some Poles and workers of Polish descent decided to establish their own trade union, *Kópur Stéttafélag* – the reason being discontent with the level of protection provided by the unions to foreign workers (Budyta-Budzyńska 2016: 217–223). By late 2020 it is too early to say whether this initiative will fulfill expectations and become a success.

Poles have an increasing presence in Reykjavik’s social and cultural landscape, yet not a significant one, nor one that makes an impact on Iceland’s culture. Even in the field of cuisine, currently so popular, the lack of Polish restaurants or pubs in Reykjavik is remarkable. In spite of the diversity of restaurants to be found in the city, among them Asian, African, Lebanese, Moroccan, Japanese – there is no Polish restaurant to be found, nor a Polish pub; although there do exist Polish shops and bakeries, and there is even “Polish-style Icelandic sausage”. This is difficult to explain in view of the presence of such a large Polish minority, added to the great demand for and interest in exotic cuisines. Perhaps this is explained by lack of capital, there being no large or even medium-sized capital in Polish hands in Iceland; another possible explanation is reluctance among Iceland’s Poles to take risks, such as those involved with entry in the restaurant business.

Polish cinema is rather well known in Iceland. Since 2012, the studio cinema theatre *Bió Paradís* has held a yearly event called *The Polish Film Days* (formerly Festival of Polish Films), in collaboration with the Polish embassy. They are attended by a Polish audience longing to experience Polish-produced films, though also for the opportunity to meet together. Some Icelandic audiences attend as well, as all films shown are subtitled in English. Some of the more interesting films are described and reviewed in the press²⁰ (Robertson 2018, Gunnarsson 2019).

In 2019, the Polish documentary *In Touch*, about emigration from the Stare Juchy commune in Mazury, directed by Paweł Ziemilski, won the top prize for documentaries at the Skjaldborg Film Festival. The picture was reviewed in the newspapers, and its director gave several interviews; without question, the movie’s topic: emigration to Iceland of 400 inhabitants from this one village – something like a quarter of the population – was interesting for Icelanders. One somewhat hyperbolic quote: “Just as Iceland has its own origin myth, that of Ingólfur and his columns, and Icelandic-Canadians have theirs, about drifting over Lake Winnipeg to found Gimli, so the Poles here have the makings of their own origin story”. (Gunnarsson 2019, Gaitens 2019).

²⁰ The same cinema holds regular commercial screenings of Polish films. In March 2020, the public TV station RÚV screened the Polish series *Belfer* (The Teacher).

Some Polish concerts take place in Iceland, though usually for a rather small audience, consisting of Poles and their Icelandic friends. In recent years two shows took place in Reykjavik's Harpa, the Iceland's largest concert hall: by the bands *Lady Pank* (2017), and *Kult* (2018), being major events for Poles, but also widely mentioned and commented on by Iceland's media.

From time to time exhibitions are held, historical ones – commonly on account of some anniversary (e.g. on September 17, 2019 a show titled *Fighting and Suffering. Polish Citizens during World War II* was opened at the University of Iceland main building); art exhibitions (e.g. *Polish Posters under Northern Lights* in the Gerðuberg House of Culture), or presentations of the work of Polish artists residing in Iceland, whether amateurs or professionals, though the latter usually don't work at art for a living in Iceland. Such exhibitions are totally niche, take place in small premises and do not attract major attention from an Icelandic audience.

A major part of these Polish projects, whether artistic, theatrical or cinematic, is marked by the immigrant experience. Carried out by migrants, this experience is their top theme. Such projects may be of interest to Poles and other immigrants, and perhaps to the locals as an expression of the experience of strangers in their country, however they do not convey universal meaning. Such is the case with the drama *Polishing Iceland*, running with an interruption for the lockdown in 2020 on the theatrical stage *Tjarnarbió* and produced by the Ensemble International Theatre Company. The play's author, a Polish woman with a complicated past, tells her story of emigration. The play is shown in three languages: Polish, English and Icelandic, which is to reflect the linguistic situation of Polish immigrants in Iceland. The play is rather novel, was noted in the newspapers, and the troupe was awarded with the title of City of Reykjavik Art Group of the Year 2020 and nominated for Iceland's Gríma 2020 theatre award (Beckett 2020).

One artist who has gained some renown in Iceland is the Polish visual artist and performer Wiola Ujazdowska, whose installations are regularly described and commented on in the media; however she too, draws mainly from her immigrant experience. Ujazdowska aims at being a voice of immigrants, to convey their problems through art. In a recent performance at the city library she was dusting off a sign saying "Scandinavian Dream", which was supposed to on one hand symbolize the working class, which includes most immigrants, and on the other – to represent the vanishing dream of immigrants aspiring to Iceland's paradise (O'Donnell 2020).

In another installation, *Rituals, Sweethearts and More* (April 2017) Ujazdowska displayed vials filled with saliva, nail clippings, eyelashes and menstrual blood hung from a wall. As she said, through those pieces of the female body, she wanted to point to the objectification of women – which is hardly original, but at the same time to draw attention to the fact that the same body fragments are viewed differently depending on whether they are in the body or outside. The installation was well received, a critic for *The Reykjavik Grapevine* wrote: "it stands out as an extraordinarily

powerful testimonial to feminine energy, physicality and human sexuality. Her work revolves around her Otherness – as a woman, an artist and an immigrant. For her, Otherness is a stigma as well as a privilege, offering her insights into the world that can only be glimpsed from the periphery” (Dunsmith 2017).

Discussion and conclusions

Iceland provides favorable conditions for associations of immigrants, establishing and formalizing an association is rather easy, it is also possible to apply for the funding of projects according to general rules which apply equally to all NGOs. Icelanders are a people open to other cultures, and immigrants are encouraged to take action and self-organize. The opportunity structure offered by the state for immigrant activities is convenient and friendly (Budyta-Budzyńska 2016a).

In spite of the relatively small numbers of the Polish diaspora, compared with Polish communities in other European countries, and their brief period of stay in the country, about ten diaspora associations and other less formal initiatives are functioning. They may essentially be classified in two types: *Odysseyan* and *Rubiconic*. The former’s aim is to maintain the culture and community of the country of origin, in other words – strengthening the bonding capital while the latter work towards integrating the immigrants with the host society and presenting Polish culture to the locals and building ties between the two countries, and therefore – creating bridging capital. Different aims lead to different addressings of activities; in the former case they are addressed to fellow immigrants, and in the latter, also to the local community and to immigrants of different origin. Initiatives that are addressed to Poles exclusively, and where Polish is the language of meetings, take place within the closed confines of the Polish community. They are maintained through volunteer work and with financial support from the embassy, and follow a traditional model of diaspora organizations as they operate in other countries which are destinations for Polish emigrants. They are invisible to the host society and do not make a mark in the capital’s social landscape. Another group are organizations that follow the model of modern European NGOs, task-oriented and financed by grants from local governments and government ministries. Following such a model are diaspora associations of the *Rubiconic* type, focused on activities addressed to both their countrymen and the host society, from which they adopt certain forms of activity, and via the grant model of funding, and also certain organizational rules. Their primary aim is bridging capital between the immigrants and the host society. Those projects are addressed to a wider audience, and therefore the language of communication is usually English. While some Polish initiatives did attract attention of the host society, in no case can one speak of a transfer of cultural or organizational patterns, nor of a marked influence or high visibility of Polish events in Reykjavik’s urban landscape.

One might pose the question of whether Poles could possibly become a greater presence in Reykjavik, in cultural, social and political terms? They are the largest minority in Iceland, being about 20 thousand, with 14 thousand of them in the region of Reykjavik and Keflavik – in absolute numbers that is very few. Among those 14 thousand there are children and youngsters, and temporary migrants who have arrived to earn some money and leave soon, and will not get involved in any way nor take part in any social or cultural projects. A large majority of Polish immigrants are either manual workers, or engaged in simple office or care occupations (e.g. kindergarten assistants). Even college graduates from Poland work either at manual labour or simple office work. Polish artists: visual artists or photographers, who show their works in Iceland, usually earn a living with other crafts and practice art in their spare time. The Polish community in Reykjavik, has too low a level of cultural capital and (so far) too low of a social status to be a significant and interesting voice in the nation's capital.

One place where Poles are visible, other than at work, is the yearly intercultural parade that takes place in Reykjavik; another are children's festivals, where every nationality presents itself according to its own concept. The Catholic Church in Iceland does not play a role in organizing Polish diaspora activities. While there are services celebrated in Polish and there exists a Polish ministry, it concentrates mainly on religious activity within the Polish community.

A strength of the Polish community in Iceland is its concentration in Reykjavik, making it easier to organize events than would be the case for a scattered group; it's relatively young age and higher level of education than in the case of pre-accession migrants, and generally better command of the English language, though still far from the level characteristic of Scandinavians. Their weaknesses are limited financial resources, relative lack of leaders and poor access to premises. Reykjavik lacks a space for Poles to meet, assemble, hold rehearsals or youth activities, like a house of culture or a Polish club like those that function in Great Britain, France and other countries.

An important obstacle to integration with the Icelandic society is the Icelandic language, which immigrants are often unwilling to learn, and even those who would be willing to learn are discouraged by working long hours before they can engage in study (Skaptadóttir, Innes 2017; Wojtyńska, Skaptadóttir 2019). As is known, language is an element of inclusion or exclusion to the host society. Learning the language is promoted as the only way to gain full understanding of the Icelandic society and culture, but whilst classes have been made available for migrants, many have little access to the Icelandic language community. Many Polish Immigrants who have attended classes but work mostly with other immigrants experience the language requirements instead as a boundary marker in terms of participation and belonging in Icelandic society. The language offers access to Icelandic social mores and understandings whilst it also may be used as a tool of exclusion and a boundary marker.

Studies indicate however, that this strong emphasis on Icelandic Society can hardly be justified by the character of the job but rather serves as an exclusion mechanism

and a tool to favour Icelandic workers over foreign workers” (Wojtyńska, Skaptadóttir 2019: 10). Studies show that immigrants learn the language for instrumental reasons – out of a desire to function better in society, and to ease everyday communication; they have little interest in Icelandic literature or history nor in Icelandic culture (Skaptadóttir, Innes 2017).

Returning to the question posed at the outset: If Poles in Iceland remain *strangers* in Simmel’s meaning: close in spatial terms, but still distant with regard to social relations and to their presence in the capital’s social, cultural and political life, I would like to answer this question positively. Poles and Icelanders share a common geographic space, live in the same neighborhoods, they work together – but in most cases they spend their leisure time separately, with their families, or members of the Polish community at events held by Polish associations. Being a new and relatively numerous ethnic group in Iceland, Poles are visible in physical meaning, by language and customs, but they still have a weak presence in the social and cultural space of the nation’s capital.

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