

CHAPTER 15

Polish craftsmen in Norway

MONIKA SOKÓŁ – RUDOWSKA



Norway has one of the most open and attractive labour markets in the world. The economy and work market is expanding and the country has a lack of workers in many fields. Norwegian authorities counteract this problem by readily issuing work permits to foreigners, and allowing employment recruitment companies to recruit qualified workers from foreign labour markets.

With the entry of new countries from central and Eastern Europe into the European Union, new groups of workers have started to arrive in Norway to find employment. Currently, Norway is home to about 203 000 people originating from other European countries. The biggest nationality group among the newcomers is the Poles, whose number, according to the research of the Norwegian Census Bureau, published January 1st 2008, exceeds 30 000 people. In the county of Oppland alone, they constitute the sixth most numerous nationality among the immigrants. Most Poles settle in Norway for employment or in some cases in order to join their family working in Norway.

Since 1989, Poland has been undergoing an economic transformation, which took its toll on ordinary people. One of the largest problems in the country was a high unemployment rate. Many people, despite registration in Polish public institutions as unemployed and searching for employment, are not eligible for any

welfare. Even those who have jobs will frequently earn so little that they are not able to sustain themselves or their families.

For many Polish workers, the entry of Poland into the European Union on the 1st of May 2004 gave them the chance to be able to work and earn enough to support their family. Some Poles moved abroad with plans of permanent settlement, though others only planned to leave temporarily. Many of them chose Norway as their target country. The vast majority of the immigrants were male workers, who found jobs in construction. Norwegian employers very eagerly hired Poles who were well qualified, and at the same time a much cheaper workforce than Norwegians. A common occurrence is that because of poor language skills or Norwegian labor laws, Polish workers are exploited by their employers. Polish immigrants are educated to various degrees – from technical high school graduates to university graduates. Many of them find employment in professions far below their qualifications, as unqualified workers. The usual reason for this is lack of Norwegian language skills.

However, the Polish craftsmen – people with a certificate of apprenticeship or other proof of qualification, have gained an important position in the Norwegian work market. In Poland, a craftsman is defined as a certified person who can pursue his craft as an independent worker. Among

certification requirements are: a diploma or certificate of graduation from a tertiary or secondary school of technical or artistic profile, in the profession pertaining to the specific type of craftsmanship, a certificate of an apprentice or the title of a qualified worker in the profession pertaining to the specific type of craftsmanship.

Today, in the era of mass manufacturing of goods, many crafts are fading into obscurity, among them traditional weaving and gunsmithing and so on. Many professionals, such as archeologists, ethnographers, historians and other scholars, wish to preserve the knowledge of craftsmen in traditional crafts for future generations. In some cases there are no practitioners and we only have academic dissertations and reconstructions of the lost memory and practice. Projects are underway to preserve the traditions of less vulnerable crafts. One example is the work of the NADwyras Foundation, which, in cooperation with the Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków and the District Museum in Nowy Sącz, is doing the project „The Traditional Craft Path of Małopolska”, to nurture the cultural heritage of the region.

Within the project “Nyere innvandring til Oppland”, the Oppland County Archive in Lillehammer is doing research on the situation of immigrants that have settled in the region. One of the results of the research has been that only a

relatively small number of Poles who have immigrated to work in Norway are working in the profession they are educated for.

One member of this group is Barbara Woźniak, a thirty-year-old Pole from Kraków, a large city in the Matopolska voivodeship. Barbara graduated from hairdressing school, and achieved a certificate of apprenticeship. For many years she worked in different hairdressing salons in Kraków, and also participated in hairdressing seminars and fashion shows, continually improving her skills. She arrived in Norway in the fall of 2005. The reason was that she wanted to live with her boyfriend who had been working in Norway for several years. Initially Barbara only did odd jobs such as housekeeping. Despite her many years of experience as a hairdresser and her competence in English she could not find a job as a hairdresser. After a year she decided to apply for a language course in Lillehammer. The language basics she acquired there, as well as intensive studies at home enabled her to find a job in one of hairdressing salons in Lillehammer. She worked there for over a year, but was not satisfied with the job, as her employer paid her less than a Norwegian apprentice working in the same salon. Her applications for regular employment were rejected, and she was only offered three- to six-month contracts. Barbara, who is currently pregnant, wants to get a permanent job after giving birth. She likes to work as a hairdresser.

Another Polish craftsman working in Norway is Aleksander Pencak from Oświęcim, a city in the Matopolska region. Aleksander is over fifty years old, and is a carpenter with a Master's diploma in carpentry and a teacher's degree. For more than a decade he worked at a school teaching carpentry. For a time he also owned a carpentry company, and before immigrating to Norway he worked in a State-run company. He was forced to migrate to Norway because his income was too low to support his family. He found

a job advertisement in a newspaper and decided to apply for a job. The recruitment company provided him with a monthly course of Norwegian language, an apartment and a job in Norway. Since winter 2007 Aleksander has lived in Lillehammer and worked for the staffing company Job Zone as a carpenter. After his arrival Aleksander was enthralled by Norway, particularly by Lillehammer. He is very satisfied with his job and his earnings. In his free time he goes skiing, fishing and on sightseeing trips on foot. He is planning to stay in Norway permanently and for that reason he wants to master the Norwegian language. Since the spring of 2009 he has been unemployed because of the recession, but hopes to find a new job as a carpenter.

Robert Tomasz Samburski is another person who found employment in Norway. Robert is over forty years old and comes from Busko-Zdrój, a small town in Świętokrzyskie voivodeship. He is a carpenter by education. He graduated from a technical high school as a car mechanic and later received education in carpentry, as well as a certificate of apprenticeship in carpentry. He claims working with wood is his passion. In Poland he was the owner of a carpentry company, as well as co-owner of a restaurant he had with his wife. Unfortunately, because of great problems procuring a bank loan, the restaurant went bankrupt after eight months. Robert's carpentry company also suffered financial trouble, caused chiefly by lack of payment from customers. He lost a considerable amount of his own money because of his financial problems. The final and decisive reason for his emigration to Norway was the Polish labor laws that imposed serious financial burden on employers. Like Aleksander Pencak, he found a job advertisement from a company looking for carpenters. After a basic, and according to him insufficient Norwegian language course, he travelled to Lillehammer in December 2007, where Job Zone company provided him with an apartment and job. He liked the

job, found the salary good and liked the Lillehammer region immensely. Robert Tomasz Samburski wants to buy a house in the Lillehammer area and hopes soon to be reunited with his wife. She visits him in Norway about once a month. He is also very determined to learn Norwegian better, which he believes he should do, if he wants to spend the rest of his life in the country. He is currently unemployed, but hopes that soon this state of affairs will change and that he will get a job offer as a carpenter.

A different outlook on emigration is presented by yet another craftsman, who chose to be anonymous. For him, Norway is only a place where he must earn a specific sum of money as soon as possible, and as soon as he achieves that he will return to Poland. He is a car mechanic by education, and in his homeland he has both worked as an employee and running his own business as a car mechanic. Due to financial mistakes he went into debt, and decided to move to Norway. He found his first job in 2007 through a Polish staffing company which, as in the previous cases, provided him with a monthly language course and sent him to a garage in Oslo. Unfortunately, after six months, when his contract expired, it was not renewed because of his poor language skills. He found a new job himself in Lillehammer, as a carbody repair mechanic. However, he hopes once more to find employment in Oslo. The most important thing for him is work and he is happy to work overtime.

He does not like Norway, particularly not the Lillehammer region which he finds to have too few people and with nothing happening. He got bored living in Lillehammer and found life better in Oslo where there were more Poles and he did not get as lonely. The Norwegian language he finds very difficult to understand and to learn to speak. He travels back to Poland on the average every three months and had hoped that 2009 would be his last year in Norway, but due to the global recession and low probability of finding a good job in Poland his return has been postponed

indefinitely. As in the case of the three previous craftsmen, Bartłomiej Górski found a job in Norway in 2007 through a staffing company. As a car mechanic, well skilled in English, he got a call-back from the agency three days after applying. A month later he left for Gjøvik, where he has been working in a garage. Bartłomiej finds it very important to learn Norwegian. Along with his wife, who joined him in January 2009, he has participated in a Norwegian language course at a language school. Bartłomiej tries to only use Norwegian at work, both when talking to his customers and his coworkers. He and his wife are planning to undergo another language course, because they believe that they must learn the language of this country in order to settle permanently.

Bartłomiej has been forced to emigrate due to the difficult economical situation of the country, as well as the very rigid hierarchy in employer-employee relations in Poland. Bartłomiej is happy with his stay in Norway, and as a qualified car mechanic with many years of experience he is not afflicted with unemployment or low wages. He is planning to establish his own garage in Gjøvik together with a friend. Bartłomiej would also like to buy a house. He finds that mortgage payments on a loan will only be slightly higher than the monthly rent for hired accommodation.

He does not intend to return to Poland, even though he misses it. His very frequent visits to his home city and reuniting with his family and friends are enough for him. What he values in Norway the most is the fact that his daily life in this country is not dominated by stress, as was the case in his homeland. He finds that he can live a great deal more calmly and easily when not worried about losing his job.

The Polish emigration has increased every year. On January 1st 2007, 18 834 poles were registered, and one year later 32 069 were registered. Most of the workers are men. Polish craftsmen

mainly find employment on construction sites and in garages as car mechanics. The Poles are usually hardworking, qualified, undemanding, but most have poor Norwegian language skills. Many of them only use the most basic English mixed with some Norwegian. Since many of them work together with other Poles they do not feel the need to learn Norwegian. Most of them do not plan to return to Poland. The good work market and the high level of pay are the main factors for wishing to stay in Norway. The pay in Norway is many times higher than in Poland. The pay level allows them to support their families and therefore gives them a sense of security. Compared to Poland the security of life is much higher. Many of them later bring their families to Norway, buy or plan on buying houses here.

In the Spring of 2009, due to the recession, many Polish craftsmen in Norway have lost their jobs and are registered as unemployed and live on welfare benefits. The group of workers most adversely affected by the recession is construction workers, such as carpenters and masons. Some of them returned to Poland, but most of them wait in Norway and hope that the problems are temporary. They are not even discouraged by the fact that they earn much less than Norwegians in the same position or with inferior qualifications.

Joining the European Union and opening up the Norwegian labour market allowed many Poles to raise their living standards. Many Norwegian companies signed contracts with Polish recruitment companies that recruited people with specific education or experience in Poland, and provide them with basic courses that acquaint them with the basics of Norwegian language and lifestyle. Polish craftsmen have relatively good working conditions. Most of them have the same rights as Norwegian workers, however there are a number of Poles not informed of their rights. Another occurrence is that,

despite heavy fines imposed on dishonest employers, some Polish workers are hired illegally and thus work in the black work market, obtaining none of the rights of the workers in the legal work market. However, in general craftsmen arriving in Norway find the income level and working conditions to be satisfying and far better than in Poland.

LITERATURE/SOURCES

Friberg Jørgen and Tydlum Guri (2007) *Fafo-rapport 2007:27*. Oslo: Fafo

Oppland Archive (2008) Interview with Barbara Woźniak, electronic archive of *Oppland Archive*: Maihaugen Lillehammer

Oppland Archive (2008) Interview with Barbara Woźniak, electronic archive of *Oppland Archive*: Maihaugen Lillehammer

Oppland Archive (2009) Interview with Bartłomiej Górski, electronic archive of *Oppland Archive*: Maihaugen Lillehammer

Oppland Archive (2009) Interview with Aleksander Pencak, electronic archive of *Oppland Archive*: : Maihaugen Lillehammer

Oppland Archive (2009) Interview with Robert Tomasz Samburski, electronic archive of *Oppland Archive*: Maihaugen Lillehammer

Oppland Archive (2009) Interview with an anonymous polish immigrant, electronic archive of *Oppland Archive*: Maihaugen Lillehammer

Statistisk Sentralbyrå (2009) *Innvandring og innvandrere*. Oslo: Statistisk Sentralbyrå

Statistisk Sentralbyrå (2009) *Folkemengde 1. januar 2007 og 2008 og endringene i 2007, etter innvandringskategori og landbakgrunn*, Statistisk sentralbyrå, www.sbb.no

Szlak Tradycyjnego Rzemiosła Matopolski (2009) Szlak Tradycyjnego Rzemiosła Matopolski www.handmade.pl

Wikipedia (2009) <http://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rzemieslnik>,