

Chapter 11. Celebrating and relaxing as isolation practices

Monika Nowicka

As previous chapters have dealt with aspects of everyday immigrant life, in this chapter I will focus on holidays, festivities and forms of celebration. I will examine how Poles observe those holidays they regard as essential, what knowledge they have about Icelandic celebrations and holidays, and whether and how they take part in them. This analysis seems important, as it may show which values are preferred, and therefore cultivated, by individuals. A holiday commemorates or celebrates an important event. Religious and national holidays reference different spheres of social life, and yet both function similarly from a sociological perspective.

“A holiday is, in fact, the phase of social life in which its mechanisms become particularly explicit, especially its value systems. The latter, in turn, (...) fulfill a role of social stabilizers, provide real continuous support both to individuals as well as communities, give an opportunity to choose and evaluate one’s own actions, help orient oneself within the reality, are necessary for shaping one’s personality. A common system of values is a foundation for interpersonal communication, for establishing lasting relationships and resolving conflicts”. (Żygulski 1981, p. 7; translation by KS)

Examining celebratory form is important for two reasons. First, since the holiday event activates cultural life, requires the passing on of traditions and values from one generation to another, it is a time of intensive initiation and cultural socialization of individuals. Second, as opposed to “everyday issues”, which one can learn in daily and common interactions, the knowledge of “celebration” practices requires an increased cognitive activity on the part of the immigrant, a will to “find out” how the local people celebrate their holidays, not only those unique to their culture, but also those relatively more universal, such as Christmas. In addition,

opportunities to acquire holiday traditions are limited due to their infrequent recurrence. Celebration practices can hardly be learned during work hours, even if the immigrant works in the Icelandic milieu. In order to learn about the ways of celebrating in a given country it is necessary to rely on information from books, or to establish closer relations with the locals. Thus, by observing how Poles spend Icelandic holidays and to what depths they comprehend them, an attempt can be made to assess whether those observed want to adapt to the host culture or are inclined to become culturally isolated.

Those Polish immigrants familiar with Icelandic holidays and customs, by taking part in Icelandic celebrations are likely to exhibit behaviors that demonstrate their gradual integration into the host country. Those immigrants who lack basic information concerning Icelandic celebration patterns, who cannot name local holidays, and who spend their holidays in a traditionally Polish way surrounded by Poles, tend to isolate themselves from the Icelandic society. As a result, holiday celebration may be perceived either as an integrative or an isolating practice, depending on how the process evolves. In the text below we will provide an analysis of how Polish people in Iceland celebrate religious holidays and private occasions, how they participate in specifically Icelandic holidays and what they know about them.

Religious holidays

Our interviewees emphasized the importance of celebrating religious holidays, Christmas in particular¹. When asked how they spend Christmas they would stress that they try to recreate the Polish atmosphere and organize this time in such a way as to make it as similar to the holidays spent at home in Poland as possible. Poles celebrate holidays in various circles: with the closest family, if they are present as well, with friends

¹ The main celebration period is between December 24th and 26th. December 24th is Christmas Eve, with family supper being its focal point. The supper begins with sharing blessed wafer after the first star appears in the sky. 12 meatless dishes are served, on Christmas Eve Poles exchange gifts, which “are brought” by Santa Claus. Later, there is Midnight Mass. December 25th and 26th are spent mainly with family, less frequently with friends, Christmas trips are very rare, unless these are returns home from various migratory stays.

from Poland or with a partner; they do not spend them with Icelanders, unless they are married to one. If the migrant is on her or his own, the family is replaced by friends and acquaintances, none of the participants acknowledged spending holidays on their own. Another strategy taken up by Poles on such occasions is a trip to Poland, to visit the family, or inviting them to Iceland for the holiday period.

What are then Polish holidays like in Iceland? “Traditional, home-like – Polish” (interview 35). Their traditional character would mostly be based on the above-mentioned family-orientedness and preparation of Polish, or resembling Polish, dishes. Some would also mention the Christmas Midnight Mass (so-called *pasterka*).

Even though Poles have the opportunity to take part in rituals that, in terms of religious practices, allow them to fully experience the holiday, they see holidays spent in Iceland as “incomplete”. While the spiritual dimension of the holiday was listed as of a secondary importance, the family ties were foregrounded. Only one of the interviewees did openly admit that he is not religious, so for him the celebrations were about culinary experience. In general, however, nostalgia and the feeling of “incompleteness” prevailed. Yet, there were some opinions in which the positive side of holidays spent away from home was mentioned, mainly the limited house duties connected with preparations: “I celebrate Easter, Christmas Eve better than at home, ‘cause here everybody will bring something, will do something and there is so much of it. Generally, I’ll go to someone who feels like organizing it. But, generally speaking, I don’t think that if all those people weren’t around me that I would feel like making all that stuff” (interview 42).

During interviews our interlocutors talked mainly about Christmas; when asked about Icelandic holidays they would also tend to mention Christmas². As a rule, they know little about Icelandic holidays and

² In Iceland Christmas period lasts 26 days. It starts on December 12th, when *jólasveinar*, the sons of mean mountain trolls *Grýla* i *Leppalúði*, arrive. At present, *jólasveinar* play the role of Santa Claus, but they used to play tricks on farmers. There are 13 Santa Clauses, with one appearing on every day until Christmas Eve. After Christmas they leave, one after another; the last one disappears on Epiphany on January 6th. *Jólasveinar* bring gifts to good children, placing them in shoes left on windowsills. The naughty ones will find a potato instead. On the 23rd at midnight there is a mass to commemorate St. Thorlak’s Day, a priest who died in 1193 and was canonised five years later. Similarly

customs, but they are aware of their different character, which they associate with Lutheranism. There was one exception, i.e. a female study participant who, for professional reasons, had to learn about Icelandic customs and she described them in the following way:

They have 13 Santas. They call them Santas, but in fact these are some kind of dwarfs or mischievous creatures. They laugh that it's the Christmas mafia, 'cause there is mum Grilla, a dad and these 13 rogues: one, for example, knocks on doors, another steals meat and yet another candles; they are always doing mischief. What's more, there's this cat that is said to kidnap anyone who isn't wearing something new, so people had a good excuse to buy new clothing. And kids generally think only about these 13 Santas, 'cause 13 days before Xmas they arrive one after another day by day, and it's paradise for kids, 'cause they are given a present every day for 13 days in a row – unlike the Polish kids who receive gifts only on the 6th of December. Instead of a rod as in the Polish tradition, here in Iceland naughty kids get a potato for a present (interview 18).

Opinions on how Icelanders celebrate holidays were divided. In some responses one could sense a hint of disapproval: “Christmas is not a great religious experience for them” (interview 18).

However, others found the Icelandic “otherness” interesting and positive when compared to Polish pre- and holiday customs.

In the first place they have a different menu, so to begin with we eat different things. In the first place our pre-holiday period is very busy, it's simply so intense, everything practically happens at the very last moment and people are nervous, tired, while here people go out into the streets, the streets are beautifully decorated and people go for walks, get together, there are such traditions that one day you spend with the family, the next day you go out, drink chocolate, drink coffee, eat some of their special holiday dishes. And they go out to meet friends, it's like us, on the second Day of Christmas [December 26th], it is more about people outside the family. But in the first place everything goes so very calmly, slowly, they enjoy this time. We, in turn, rush, get annoyed, tired, so that's in the first place the difference (interview 16).

to Poland, presents are given on Christmas Eve. Traditionally everyone should get a new garment, otherwise he will deal with *Gryllii the cat*. Like in Poland, Christmas is celebrated on December 25th and 26th. Typical Icelandic dishes include smoked lamb, ham and Ptarmigan stew with potatoes and peas.

It should be stressed that some subjects strongly emphasized similarities between Icelandic and Polish holiday customs: “During Christmas they also have Christmas Eve. I don’t know if they have the eggs blessed on Easter or not. But generally it’s similar as well, ‘cause they have these Easter eggs. And that’s all, I can see no differences” (interview 42).

The description of Icelandic celebration practices presented by Polish immigrants was quite superficial, in general, Poles lack knowledge of Icelandic traditions. The interviewees, with minor exceptions, did not provide any details about Icelandic celebrations, and even when they did, the information would not always match the reality.

Private occasions – birthdays and name days

In Poland it is customary to celebrate both birthday and name day. These are not only family occasions, friends are invited more frequently than in the case of the religious holidays mentioned above, often a name day is celebrated at the workplace. Some Poles, following the example of Icelanders, started celebrating only birthdays, but many maintain the tradition of name day celebrations, “we have to celebrate, otherwise we’d get bored to death” (interview 19).

Poles celebrate name days and birthdays mainly in the company of other Poles, which is reflected in the quite typical quote below: “I invite lots of mates from my home town (...) So there’s a party (...) Just like at home. Usually when you worked it was [held on] Saturday, then a disco or a place like a pub, you know” (interview 5).

When asked about Icelanders’ birthday celebrations, Poles explain that the former do not tend to celebrate every birthday but rather round anniversaries, when they invite family, relatives and friends. Poles, however, are seldom invited to such occasions. But this non-integration is mutual, Poles do not invite Icelanders either. One of the reasons is the limited ability to communicate. Polish-Icelandic families in which Polish customs are adopted are an exception: “They don’t have name days, they don’t celebrate name days, but we try to celebrate name days, so my husband changed his name into saint Nicholas (Mikołaj) so that he could have his name day” (interview 51).

Icelandic national holidays

We also asked our interviewees whether they participate in Icelandic national holidays and other non-religious holidays. The intention was to see whether Poles in Iceland have a desire or need to take part in public events, not necessarily as active participants, but at least as tourists-observers. In addition, this question helped us to determine to what extent our interviewees are familiar with Icelandic holidays.

Some subjects would take part in events held to celebrate the Independence Day, gay pride parades, the First Day of Summer, Culture Night, end-of-summer concerts, but, in general, Poles did not participate in Icelandic celebrations often, the degree of their knowledge on the issue was small as well.

Passive observation was how most subjects participated in Icelandic holidays. Poles would be there as spectators, watching, taking pictures from a distance, but they did not report active participation, e.g. marching in a parade. Icelandic holidays were frequently treated as merely leisure time spent in the circle of family and friends.

Corporate events

Is there then any sphere of social life where Poles and Icelanders interact having a good time? Apparently, the answer is “yes”, and these are corporate events. Poles who mentioned them were very enthusiastic about the subject: “My first trip – I’ll never forget that – the manager didn’t tell us exactly where we were going and it turned out that we ended up at a fortune teller. Next we visited some famous cooks, who prepared a dinner for us, later we went dancing, so you can really have a good time with Icelanders” (interview 18).

The quote above proves that Poles and Icelanders may and can have good time together. At times corporate events served as opportunities to share with co-employees the joys of private lives:

Recently we’ve had a Bonus party, a ball where all people from all Bonuses meet, and what happened there was this engagement, my boyfriend proposed to me. An Icelandic woman recorded this on a camera belonging to the boss of all bosses, and they just played that back at this ball. (...) Icelanders would come up to me and congratulate. When we

were leaving, some young Icelanders would run up to us and say it is you who are getting married (...) it was nice (interview 34).

Corporate events are the moments of social life when integration between Icelanders and Polish immigrants takes place. There are various reasons to explain this phenomenon. First, Poles may feel social pressure stemming from the fact that all employees partake in such events; not participating would result in strengthening the status of “the other”, which is already strong due to different nationality. Second, the will to participate in such events could be, though it sounds rather unlikely, caused by the fear of losing a job. Third, and probably most important, Poles highly value Icelandic work culture, they are full of admiration for workplace relations, respect for employees’ rights and towards the employees themselves. Interaction with Icelanders in the workplace fills the void caused by the lack of such experience in Poland. For that reason, participation in corporate events does not pose a threat to immigrants’ identity and tradition.

Leisure time

Free time is a separate category for analysis. While a holiday carries certain values with it, leisure, unless it is regarded as a value in itself, is neutral in axiological terms. Free time is associated with free choice and individualism, as opposed to a holiday, which, as mentioned earlier, is connected with duty and community life (Żygulski 1981, p. 86).

Poles spend their leisure time with Poles, Icelanders or other foreigners, though meeting own countrymen is the prevailing pattern for spending free time, especially in the case of Polish couples. “...as a couple we usually meet with Poles, like the last time when we went to a TEAPARTY organized by our friends, Poles. There were 21 people there, all of them Polish, and almost all were paragliding but that’s only a detail” (interview 33).

Poles often spend their free time at home, watching TV, films on DVD or talking to their family via Skype. Unfortunately, spending time at home sometimes leads to extensive alcohol consumption. As a matter of fact, none of our interviewees acknowledged this, however, rumor among Poles is that such practices are quite frequent: “... there are people who

only lock themselves up at home, especially if they, for example, share the flat with others and then, as far as I know, the weekend comes and they simply do nothing else but drink and party at home” (interview 16).

In general, however, Poles do not have too much free time due to the number of jobs they work at: “(...) they have three jobs at the same time and they don’t even have time to rest [at home – MN], they have time for nothing else, ‘cause they came here to earn money, 7 days a week” (interview 18).

However, we also met people who spend their leisure time traveling around the island or, following the Icelanders’ example, go regularly to the swimming pool or the gym, as well as to clubs and discos. Some places are more frequently chosen by Poles, in the past there was even a Polish pub, “Polonia”, which was eventually closed, probably due to the brawls that took place there. “Polonia” was a meeting place for those Polish immigrants for whom adaptation to the new environment was most problematic.

We were also curious about whether Poles take advantage of city entertainments, whether there are places where they do not go or where they feel unwelcome. As it turned out, Reykjavik is perceived as a city open to all inhabitants regardless of their nationality. If there are places Poles do not visit it is not because they are not welcome, but rather due to their limited cultural competence, mainly their inability to speak Icelandic. Lack of free time and fatigue are other factors which make spending leisure time actively difficult for Poles: “And sometimes I’m so fed up after work that I don’t even answer any phone calls. I’m tired, I’m so tired. I just feel like taking a bath, laying down and watching TV” (interview 36).

Some of the participants felt alienated in Reykjavik, others believed they had too few friends with whom to spend free time. Collective leisure is a learned model of spending free time: “Time at work somehow passes by. Recently we started going to the gym to make this time nicer, then we go back home and go to sleep. That’s life. I don’t have too many friends here to go out with, hold a barbecue or something like that. And Poles are different abroad” (interview 34).

Amongst women there is one more obstacle: home duties stemming from a typical patriarchal role division in the family. Moreover, limited financial resources, especially during the crisis, present another obstacle.

I guess there are many clubs here where events and concerts take place, where Poles do not show up for the simple reason that for many it is quite costly. When the earnings are not so high, going out to a pub, a club becomes rather costly. That is money you take away from the home budget, I guess there are such places, such clubs where Icelanders go and Poles don't (interview 16).

Conclusion

Holidays constitute the part of reality in which “Polishness” (understood in a very particular way) is particularly manifest. The holiday period is the phase of social life when the tendency to recreate “Poland” abroad becomes most apparent and forcefully verbalized. The analysis of Poles’ opinions regarding holidays, and Christmas in particular, shows that to them holidays are primarily a family occasion, with stress placed on the atmosphere of gathering together at a table (on Christmas Eve). The spiritual and religious dimensions are of lesser significance in this case.

As far as the Icelandic holiday calendar is concerned, it was, with minor exceptions, barely familiar to the interviewed Poles, who did not take active part in Icelandic holidays. If they decided to participate in any events, their role was limited to passive observation. The attitude that prevailed was to treat Icelandic holidays as time off from work that can be spent with acquaintances and friends. The subjects did not show interest in Icelandic anniversaries either at the cognitive or behavioral level.

Poles in Iceland tend to isolate themselves from Icelandic society. The isolation refers mainly to the cultural dimension and is reflected in the lack of familiarity with the customs and, in the first place, with the language. Poles who do not speak Icelandic have very limited opportunities to acquire knowledge about the country they live in. The inability to speak Icelandic also affects migrants’ social capital, as their primary networks consists of “own people” and other foreigners, with Icelanders occupying secondary roles. The lack of Icelandic social and cultural capital has an influence on the ways of spending free time and celebrating. During holidays Poles are conspicuously absent from Icelandic celebrations, they are completely withdrawn from Icelandic traditions and customs, but actively cultivate Polish traditions instead. Passive participation is a behavior observed when it comes to non-religious holidays. Active

participation takes place when it comes to spending free time – here the Poles' customs, excluding integrative corporate events, resemble the Icelandic ones to the largest extent.

Translated by Katarzyna Szczepaniak