

Chapter 2. History and characteristic of migration from Poland to Iceland

Anna Wojtyńska

Due to its small scale and short history, migratory movements from Poland to Iceland occupy a marginal position within Poles' overall migration. Only a small percentage¹ of all Polish migrants head for this remote North-European island. Also, Iceland is a new migratory path for Poles. It can be assumed that it joined the group of countries with a long traditions of hosting Polish citizens only in the early 1990s. However, from the Icelandic point of view, the influx of Polish migrants has been of key importance, as they form the most numerous group of foreigners. In January 2011 in Iceland, whose population was merely 318 452, the number of registered Polish immigrants amounted to 9 463², 1 023 of whom had Icelandic citizenship (Statistics Iceland 2011a). Poles constitute 3 percent of the whole population, and 37 percent of all immigrants in this country, considerably outnumbering the other ethnic groups: Lithuanians (1 471), Filipinos (1 341), Germans (1 152). The factors that facilitated the growth of Polish migration were to a large extent the fast economic development on the island along with the demographic and social changes that followed, i.e. migration of fishing villages' inhabitants to urban areas, and the growing need for workers, which could not be met by the local labour force (see Skaptadóttir in this volume).

¹ According to estimates based on Labour Force Survey, there are ca. 500,000 people leaving Poland annually (Sakson and Napierała 2010). Statistics Iceland, on the other hand, records the influx from Poland at the level of 3 000-5 000 people. Thus, it can be assumed that Poles going to Iceland constitute less than 0.1 percent of all Polish migrants.

² "Immigrant" is defined by the state statistics as a person born outside own country whose both parents are of foreign origin.

The works on migration from Poland to Iceland published in Polish³ have been scarce so far. Therefore, this chapter will attempt to introduce the history of that migratory movement and present a general characteristic of the Polish diaspora.

The history of migration

In the past, geographically remote and hardly known among Poles, Iceland used to attract mainly travelers and researchers⁴, seldom migrants. Due to this distance and poor knowledge an important role in the growth of migration to Iceland was played by the earlier official relations between the two states. Since 1924, Iceland and Poland have had an economic cooperation agreement (Traktat handlowy... 1999). In 1945, the states established diplomatic relations at legation level. In the years 1956-1981, there was a Polish diplomatic post in Iceland (Stosunki dyplomatyczne 1986). Closed for nearly 30 years, it was reactivated in 2008, when the Polish Consulate General was opened in Reykjavik. In the late 1960s, Icelanders started renovating and building ships in Polish shipyards, which was of significant importance for the development of migration. There was also a cultural and scientific exchange, though to a smaller extent. Moreover, there were cases of Poles invited for contracts to Iceland⁵. These formal contacts were followed by informal ones, and they would also create information channels, enabling migratory processes in the next place.

Migrations from Poland to Iceland have developed since 1960s, although the first Poles are likely to have come here earlier. For instance, a Polish Jew, Abraham Wołowski, is known to have worked in a local sewing factory in the early 20th century. He had to leave the island during

³ The first short overview was written by Jan Sęk and published in E. Olszewski (ed.) (1997). *Polacy w Skandynawii* (Poles in Scandinavia). See also Wojtyńska 2009 and 2010.

⁴ For more on the Polish expeditions to Iceland see Pietrzekiewicz 2002; Chymkowski 2009; *Polskie wyprawy na Ultima Thule*, 1999.

⁵ For instance, in the 1960s the Iceland Symphony Orchestra was led by a well-known Polish conductor Bohdan Wodiczko. Besides, Iceland used to sign up Polish sports coaches. Among them Bogdan Kowalczyk is worth mentioning, as he worked with the Icelandic national handball team.

the Great Depression, when the state tightened migration policy in order to fight the crisis and growing unemployment (Bergsson 1995). Then, in 1938, Icelandic statistics recorded two Polish citizens registered in Reykjavik (*ibid.*).

The beginnings of migration constitute single people's arrivals, often accidental, thus not easy to be analyzed deeper. These pioneers of migration, if we can call them this way, by helping others to come to Iceland, set up the migratory chain. The majority of the pioneers were women in relationships with Icelanders, whom they usually met in Poland. Icelanders were visiting Poland due to the above mentioned economic activities – they would come on trade ships or stay during ship renovation or construction.

In the 1982, the Icelandic Symphony Orchestra hired the Polish violinist and composer, Szymon Kuran. Not only did his presence prove to be important for the musical life on the island⁶, but also for the growth of the Polish migration, as he initiated the arrivals of other musicians. Some, like Kuran himself, would play in the Icelandic Orchestra, however, most of them worked as teachers in schools all over the island. Polish musicians are an interesting case in Poles' history in Iceland. First, they are a perfect illustration of the mechanisms of migration networks and chain migration, and, besides, they are a well recognizable and highly appreciated part of the Polish community⁷.

Thanks to the efforts of the Icelandic Red Cross, in 1982 Iceland accepted a group of 26 Polish refugees from the transit camp in Austria, who were found there after the imposition of Martial Law in Poland. They were offered accommodation, work and free courses of Icelandic by the local government. Nevertheless, after a couple of years most of these people eventually left Iceland.

In 1980s, the first attempts to recruit Polish workers were undertaken. It was a direct result of the contacts made by Icelanders during the construction of fishing boats. A few groups of metal workers came to work in Icelandic shipyards. For instance, in 1986 ten people were brought to the Vestmannaeyjar island, and in 1988 three to Stykkishólmur. Yet, this

⁶ Kuran's biography is available at www.polmic.pl.

⁷ There are many Polish musicians who live or used to live in Iceland who are recognized in Poland, e.g. Marcin Podhajski, Lesław Szyszko, and Zbigniew Jaremko.

was fiercely opposed by the trade unions, which demanded pay raises and employment of local workers instead of foreigners⁸. This inhibited the arrivals of Poles in this sector for some time. The next attempt to recruit Polish metal workers took place only in 1990s, when the Icelandic Aluminum Co. Ltd. (ÍSAL) in Hafnarfjörður was being expanded, and later when the construction of a similar plant in Norðurál near Akranes in the western part of the island began. It was already the time when the unions started looking more favorably at arrivals of foreign workers. In addition, the need for welders during the aluminum smelters extension and construction was too large to be satisfied with local workers. Moreover, it coincided with mass layoffs in shipyards caused by the political changes in Poland. Polish metal workers used to come for short-term contracts and would go back home after the agreements expired.

It was probably as early as in the 1980s that the first workers for the fishing industry started to arrive. However, this type of migration grew in importance only after 1989. The fishing plants increasingly experienced labour shortages. Difficult conditions and low salaries made this kind of occupation unattractive to the local population. At the same time, people from fishing towns and villages were moving to Reykjavik.

During the Communist era in Poland, when the government introduced quite a restrictive passport policy, thus making foreign travel very difficult for Polish citizens, migration to Iceland took a slow pace. However, the number of Poles on the island was growing annually, e.g. in 1974 there were only 16 people registered as born in Poland, in 1980 – 28, while in 1985 – as many as 73 (Statistics Iceland). At that time, in order to leave the country it was necessary for Poles to have the state authority permit. The official reason for going to Iceland was usually a visit to a relative or friend, but many people would work as well. Some did not return home, which was in accordance to that period's trend, when temporary stays would turn into permanent ones.

The year 1989 was pivotal for the Poland-to-Iceland migratory process. After the political transformation in Poland, when Polish citizens regained their right to travel freely, and the majority of countries, including Iceland,

⁸ The trade unions in Iceland have a strong position. Nearly 80 percent of the society are their members. The foreigners who plan to work in Iceland also have to sign up, as it is one of the work permit requirements. As a result, the unions have a lot of control over the immigration issues.

abolished visa requirements, migration to Iceland became more dynamic. Thus, in 1990 only 146 people came to Iceland. Consistently, within the next three years the population of Poles became four times bigger (from 122 in 1987 to 521 in 1991). Obviously, visa abolition did not equal with an unlimited access to the Icelandic labour market. Poles still needed to have work permits, which were to be granted before their arrival. It meant they had to get in touch with the potential employer in advance, which was usually facilitated by Poles living on the island. The permits were, as a rule, granted for 6 or 12 months with the possibility of extension. What was important, it was received by the employer, not the employee him- or herself, thus the worker was confined to a specific workplace. After a three-year period the employee could apply for an unlimited work permit, so called “green card”.

Soon Poles won esteem among the Icelandic employers, who appreciated their diligence and conscientiousness. One of the fishing plant managers explained his reasons for hiring Polish workers in the following way: “Poles come here for 6 or 10 months and they start working on the very first day. These people learn fast and are very eager to work. They want to work all week long” (DV, February 5th, 1991). Thus, the number of Poles in Iceland was growing each year (see Figure 1). There was also an increase in the number of Poles receiving Icelandic citizenship. In 1998 Polish migrants became the most numerous group of foreigners, outnumbering Danes, who until then had led in the statistics. Gradually the scope of jobs performed by Poles widened as well.

The pace of Polish migration depended on the economic situation in Iceland. For example, in 1992 there was a beginning of a short recession period. Many fishing factories went bankrupt at that time, which made some Poles leave the island. However, a year later the upward trend was re-established. In 1994 the country regained a better economic situation, which reached its peak in years 2004-2005.

In the early period migrations to Iceland were based on migratory networks. Poles living on the island helped others, i.e. relatives or friends, who were willing to undertake a job in Iceland. Their support would mostly be connected with finding a job and accommodation, but they would also assist in dealing with formal issues. There were also people who, sometimes at the Icelandic employer’s request, would organize a whole group of workers for a fishing plant, occasionally demanding

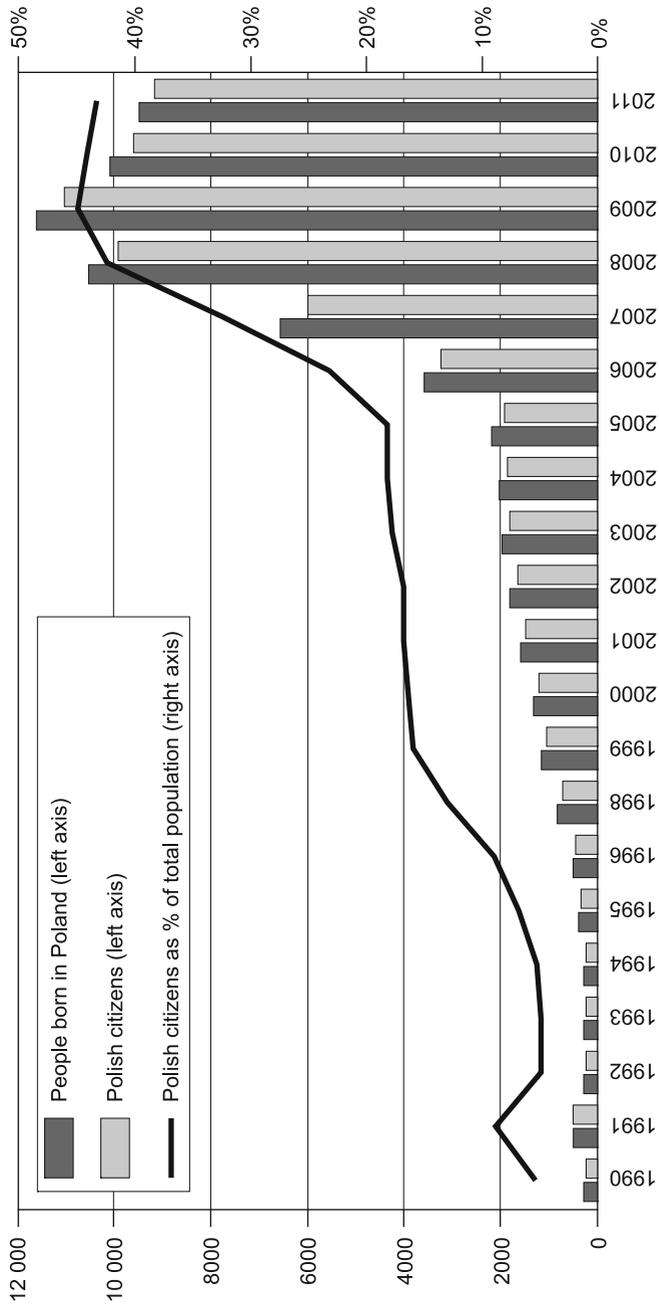


Figure 1. The number of Poles in Iceland in years 1990-2011⁹

Source: Statistics Iceland.

⁹ Apart from the above mentioned category of “migrants”, Statistics Iceland applies two other terms in reference to foreign population: the country of citizenship and the country of birth. It means that foreigners who were granted Icelandic citizenship are regarded as citizens of Iceland.

their countrymen to pay them for this service. Networks used to play a significant role in the migratory process, mainly due to the fact that knowledge about the island at that time was scarce in Poland. Few people knew what the employment opportunities were and that the country offered well paid and legal work. The remoteness of Iceland as well as high travel costs cannot be underestimated either, as they reduced the number of circumstantial visits. Moreover, Icelandic admission policy had an impact on the migration character. The possibilities of illegal entries to the country were practically none, while the above-mentioned job permit requirement limited the number of arriving workers to those who knew somebody on the island who was able to help them find employment. Even the organization of groups of Polish workers, whether for shipyards or fishing plants, relied upon informal contacts.

Only around the year 2000 the first agencies appeared that were offering a job in Iceland to Poles. Initially, these offers were for baby-sitters. Occasionally Icelandic agencies would collaborate with Polish labour offices in order to recruit Polish workers for Icelandic factories. Also, during the period of highest demand, small agencies which were focused on finding labour in Poland appeared in Iceland. Poles were generally regarded as effective, thus preferred workforce. The recruitment of Polish workers for the construction of Alcoa Fjarðaál, the aluminum smelter in Reyðarfjörður and the hydroelectric power plant in Kárahnjúkar in the eastern part of the country can serve as a classic example in this respect. Following the advice of the Icelandic Directorate of Labour (Vinnumálastofnun) the Bechtel company brought over 1,600 Poles, i.e. nearly half of the Polish diaspora in Iceland at that time. Moreover, a large group of Poles worked at the construction site of the dam and hydro plant in Kárahnjúkar. The significance of this case cannot be overestimated, as due to this sole project the number of Poles rose dramatically within a year, from 3,629 in 2006 to 6,572 in the early 2007.

Another breakthrough came in May 2006, when after a two-year transition period Iceland opened the labour market to citizens of the new European Union members. The increase in arrivals of Poles was immense. What is more, Iceland was experiencing a boom in the construction sector, which resulted in a high demand for workers in this branch. Within a year, the number of Polish migrants grew by 81 percent. From the 1st May 2006

till the end of the year 3 079 new work permits were issued for citizens of Poland.

This continuous growth of the number of Poles in Iceland was inhibited by the financial crisis that hit the country in September 2008. The value of the Icelandic crown fell by a half in comparison to the Polish zloty¹⁰, making the work there less profitable. Practically within one day, construction sites were terminated, leaving many Poles without jobs. Unemployment reached a level unknown in the post-war history of Iceland, i.e. 4.8 percent in December 2008, increasing to 9.1 percent in April 2009 (Vinnumálastofnun 2010). In March 2011 the average unemployment in the country was 8.6 percent, however, the estimates for the Polish citizens are at more than 20 percent. Poles constitute 9 percent of all unemployed and 61 percent of the unemployed foreigners. In March 2011, 1 468 Polish citizens were taking advantage of their right to benefits in Iceland (Vinnumálastofnun 2011a). Some people decided to leave, but the scale of return migrations did not reach the level commonly reported in the Polish and Icelandic media (Wojtyńska and Zielińska 2010). According to official statistical data, in 2008 about 2 700 Poles left Iceland, and the number was similar in the following year. In 2010, it was already less than 1 500 people (Statistics Iceland 2011d). Interestingly, some of those who had decided to leave came back after they could not find a job in Poland or the one they got did not meet their expectations. Often the Polish salaries turned out to be smaller than the Icelandic benefit. Besides, returns to Poland were not so widespread, since not everybody lost their employment. What is important, the crisis did not erase the demand for foreign workers completely. The years of economic prosperity solidified the division of the labour market, with the sphere preoccupied by foreigners. Although the demand diminished, it did not vanish. The native residents are no longer so willing to undertake jobs identified as immigrant work. Finally, some Poles decided to stay, as they see their future in Iceland. Still, since the value of money sent to Poland diminished, many families faced the dilemma whether to maintain two households or live together in one of the countries.

¹⁰ According to the rates of the National Bank of Poland, in January 2008 1 PLN = 25.5 ISK; in September 2008 1 PLN = 36.5 ISK, while in December 2008 1 PLN = 47.6 ISK (www.nbp.pl).

Characteristic

Migrations to Iceland are an inherent part of the contemporary economic migrations from Poland (Kaczmarczyk 2008). As a rule, they are of temporary character, however, the considerable remoteness of Iceland as well as high travel cost make the migrants stay longer and visit Poland less frequently than it is observed in the case of migration to other European countries. Thus, probably, cases of the whole-family migrations are more frequent in Iceland. At the moment of arrival the majority of Poles planned to stay only for 2-3 years. However, there is a tendency to prolong the stay.

As was mentioned earlier, in the early 1990s Poles used to be employed mainly in the fishing factories. Gradually the range of their occupations broadened, including other food industries, services, cleaning and social care (nursing homes, hospitals). In the last period Poles would come mostly to work in the construction industry; in 2007, for example, 40 percent of all work permits granted to Polish citizens were assigned to this sector (Vinnumálastofnun 2011b).

The types of jobs performed by foreigners are reflected in the gender distribution of the Polish population. In fact, the first years of migrations were female-dominated, since the jobs in the fishing industry were traditionally regarded as feminine (Skaptadóttir 1996). Between 1992 and 1995 women constituted more than 70 percent of all Polish citizens registered in Iceland. In the following years the gender ratio gradually became balanced. Since 2004 there had been a shift towards a male dominance; during its peak, men made up 73 percent of immigrants. In January 2011 the proportion of men fell to 55 percent. This can be explained by the fact that due to the crisis, which hit the construction sector most severely, more men than women decided to leave Iceland.

The Polish migrants' population in Iceland is dominated by young people. In 2011, 32 percent fit into the 20-29 age group, and 29 percent into the 30-39 group (Statistics Iceland 2011b). What is interesting, Polish female migrants are, in general, slightly younger than the males; as much as 35 percent of women were between 20 and 29 years old, while only 29 percent of males would fit this age bracket.

Polish migrants can be met practically all over Iceland. The biggest population of Polish diaspora is in Reykjavik and the surrounding areas,

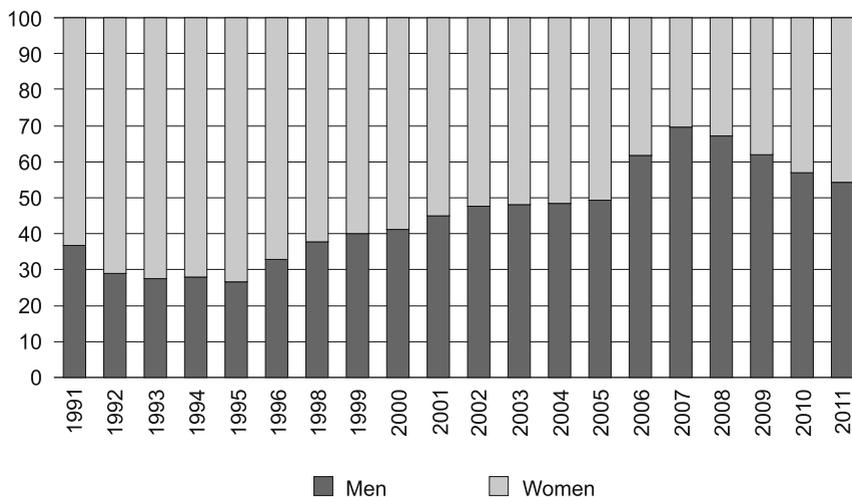


Figure 2. Gender distribution of people born in Poland and registered in Iceland in the years 1991-2011

Source: Statistics Iceland.

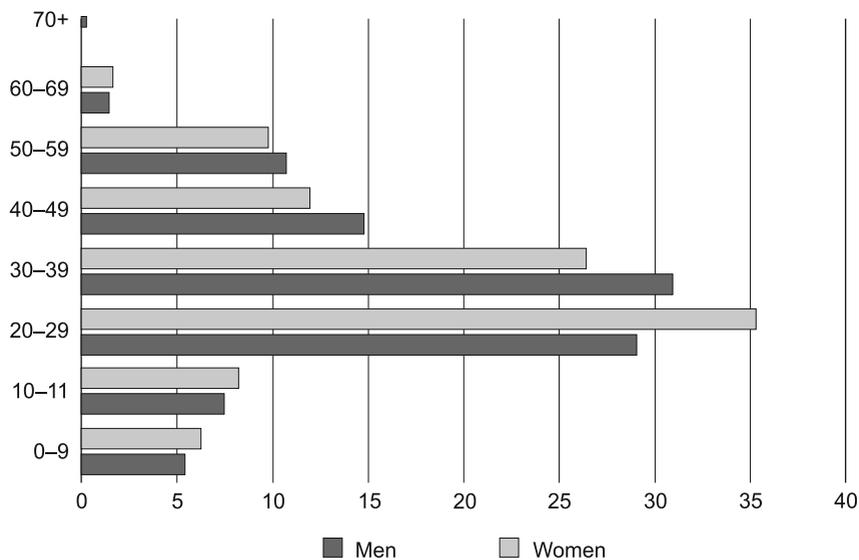


Figure 3. Age distribution of people born in Poland and registered in Iceland, 2011

Source: Statistic Iceland.

where 56 percent (5 096) of all Polish citizens reside. In addition, many Poles (14 percent) live in Suðurness, the neighboring south-west region (Statistics Iceland 2011c). Yet, this significant concentration around the capital is a relatively new phenomenon. Previously, Poles were coming mostly to the fishing villages located along the island's coast. For instance, in 1998, 32 percent of Polish citizens lived in West Fjords (Vestfirðir), while merely 17 percent in the capital city area (ibid.). Thus, in Iceland the trend was opposite to the one observed in the UK, where post-accession migrants would mainly head towards smaller towns or the rural areas.

Due to its chain character, migration to Iceland was initially confined to a few regions of Poland – areas where the pioneers came from. These were mainly: northern Poland, but also the areas around Białystok, as well as Masuria, later also Silesia and Rzeszów with the surrounding areas. The distribution of Poles' origins would diversify with time. According to results of a survey carried out in Reykjavik, the largest number, i.e. 14 percent of the respondents, used to live in the Warmian-Masurian voivodeship before coming to Iceland, nearly 12 percent came from Podlasie, 11 percent from the Pomeranian voivodeship, 11 percent from Masovia and nearly 10 percent from Silesia (Thorarins and Wojtyńska in print).

Organisation of the Polish diaspora's life

Migrations to Iceland have a short history, thus some structures of the local diaspora are still being shaped. Many of initiatives are of grassroots, spontaneous and temporary nature. At present, Consulate General of Poland, Polish school, as well as the church are the main integrative centers for Poles. There are also some immigrant organizations. For many years, the Polish government had no official post in Iceland, so all the consular issues had to be settled in Oslo. Only in 2008 was the Polish Consulate General opened in Reykjavik. Apart from the consular and diplomatic activity, the institution holds various events, where representatives of the local Polish community have a chance to meet.

In 2008 the Polish School in Reykjavik, run by the Polish School's Friends Association, was established. During the first year there were 60 pupils in years 1-6 of the primary level, and one class of middle school

was opened as well. In 2011 the number of students increased to 180, and the school's activity range was widened by adding pre- and high school departments¹¹.

An important role in the Polish diaspora's life in Iceland is played by the Catholic Church. Since Lutheranism is the dominant religion in the country (over 80 percent of the population), Poles belong to a religious minority (Statistics Iceland 2011e). Also, they constitute 75 percent of all the Catholics on the island. In 1984 nuns from the Carmelites' order moved from Elbląg to Hafnarfjörður, near Reykjavik. In the late 1990s Polish Chaplaincy, run by the Society of Christ Fathers for Poles Living Abroad¹², launched its activity. Currently, there are three clergymen on the island: in Reykjavik, Akureyri and Ísafjörður.

In Iceland there are also different types of Polish organizations. The oldest one is the Icelandic-Polish Friendship Society, parallel to the Poland-based Polish-Icelandic Friendship Society founded in 1959. The former deals mainly with cultural activity, promoting the knowledge of Poland on the island. Therefore, it is not a typical immigrant organization, and its members include also Icelanders. Moreover, there is the Association of Poles in Iceland located in Reykjavik, the Association of Poles in West Fjords located in Íslafjörður as well as the Polish Cultural Association in Reykjanesbær "REJS" in Keflavik.

A popular place of information exchange for the Icelandic diaspora is the www.iceland.pl website. It was created in Poland and, according to the original idea, was supposed to provide information on the issues of Iceland. The key role is played by the discussion forum, which gathers not only Iceland's admirers, but also the Icelandic diaspora. In 2010 a group of Polish immigrants launched the information portal www.informacje.is, where the latest Icelandic news are translated into Polish.

Summary

To summarize, there are four main periods in the history of migration from Poland to Iceland that can be identified. The first one is the period when the migration was of individual character. Then, a fast growth in the

¹¹ More information available at: www.polskaszkoła.is.

¹² The Chaplaincy's website: <http://islandia.chrystusowcy.pl>.

migratory movements that took place after 1989 and was generally based on networks. At that time most of the Poles worked in fishing plants. A symbolic beginning of the third period is May 2006 and the opening of the Icelandic job market for the new EU members, which activated a rapid influx of Poles, mainly to the construction sector. The last period is the time of the economic crisis, when the net migration fell and leveled at a negative value. Migrations to Iceland are mostly of economic and temporary character, however, they tend to turn into a prolonged or even permanent migration. An important role in facilitating departures from Poland was played by migration networks, only later joined by the recruitment agencies.

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