Chapter 5. Work and corporate culture in Iceland as seen by Poles

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The aim of this chapter is to present the outcome of the research on Polish people working in Iceland, as well as the Icelandic work culture seen through the eyes of Poles. The study on Poles' work in Iceland was a significant part of our project, since the way immigrants function on the labour market reflects their level of "immersion" into the host society, i.e. whether we deal with adaptation, integration or assimilation.

In our chapter we try to answer four research questions:

- Is work the main reason that Poles go to Iceland?
- What is the process of finding a job like to a Polish immigrant?
- What jobs do Poles work at in Iceland and are they satisfied?
- What, according to Polish immigrants, is the Icelandic work culture like?

By trying to answer the above questions we wanted to reconstruct the career path of Polish migrants.

The work culture was described as seen by the participants, i.e. via references to their subjective categories, and we refrained from using data of any different type. By extracting the categories and descriptions recurring in the comments, we managed to reconstruct the dominant type of Icelandic work culture or, to use Max Weber's terminology, the ideal type of work culture. Individual descriptions did differ from the reconstructed ideal type, and none of them was its pure exemplification. This, however, complies with the methodology of creating Weberian ideal types.

The paper consists of two parts. The first one describes the motives leading Poles to migrate to Iceland, the ways of getting a job, including the tendency to use Icelandic institutions, the type of occupation, as well as the degree of job satisfaction. The other part deals with the Icelandic

work culture in the eyes of Poles. This description includes employer-employee relationships and the way the job is performed. The Icelandic work culture, which was reconstructed on the basis of interviews, was juxtaposed with the frequently mentioned Polish work culture, the latter being to some extent a point of reference for the case in question.

Polish labour in Iceland

The in-depth interviews suggest that migration motives can be divided into two key types:

1. economic
2. non-economic:
   a) nostalgia towards relatives who came to Iceland earlier,
   b) a will to change personal environment and curiosity of the world.

Most of the participants of our study emphasized that the reason why they came to Iceland was the opportunity to earn money, not available in their home country, while the Icelandic job market made it possible to, for example, pay back debts in Poland.

The interviewees migrated, as it was much easier to find a job in Iceland than in their homeland. At the same time, a significant portion of the migrants would point out that work in Iceland was not the main goal of migration. Some of them found themselves in Iceland due to personal reasons, however, even this group would find themselves employed. "I came to learn about the country, later when my boyfriend joined me, this stay became money-based in order to earn money for a flat in Poland" (interview 18).

Other migratory motives reported included an interest in a different culture, a wish to change environments, experience new situations and meet new people, but, even in this case, the interest-driven migration was transformed into an economic one.

> *I planned to move somewhere for a year, but I had no precise idea where, it didn't matter, it was more about meeting new people, having new experiences than about any particular place… I came here with practically no cash, with what I had earned for the plane ticket and with some borrowed cash, so the reason to find a job was to earn a living* (interview 21).

A few of the interviewees suspected that for some of the Poles the reason they came was the desire to get rich illegally or to escape a criminal past. Several years ago the Icelandic state abolished the requirement for a criminal record check, which caused an influx of foreigners that had prior convictions. There was, for example, the case of a Polish criminal, one of the main characters of the famous film *Dług* (Debt), whose stay in Iceland was widely discussed in both local and Polish media. For obvious reasons none of our interlocutors acknowledged that they came to Iceland because of one of the aforementioned motives.

One of the participants revealed that he came to Iceland not only because of work opportunities, but due to some problems in Poland: "I had a certain adventure, I lost a lot of money in Warsaw, in casinos, and I simply had to come to settle some issues" (interview 27).

The most frequent way to get a job was through the support of family and friends already living in Iceland: "My brother-in-law, my sister's husband was here. He had been here for two years. He just found me a job and I came" (interview 10). "In fact it was my friend who brought me here, he came here initially (…), so we had a place to stay, a job, legal employment" (interview 20).

Finding a job via networking is a very common way of getting employment as an immigrant. However, in Iceland it is facilitated by the local work culture, in which getting a job through a friend or an acquaintance is something natural. It was much less frequent to find among the participants people who had been employed through a recruitment agency or a job fair. If an agency was involved it was usually a job in either the fishing or the construction industry. Subsequent jobs would, in general, be found independently, which shows a certain degree of adaptation to the Icelandic work environment.

The analysis of the interviewees' occupations suggests that they deal mainly with physical tasks, requiring low qualifications. The most frequently reported job, at least in the first years of stay, was one in fish or meat plants, which, as the interlocutors would stress, was by no means satisfactory. The next in this category was work on a construction site (before the economic crisis), then a shop assistant, a cook in a restaurant, warehouse work, cleaning jobs and, finally, painting or carpentry. Two of our interviewees were shop owners in Iceland, another two were planning to open their own coffee shop. Most of the participants started their career

path in Iceland with a job they had never done before, and this was also true of their subsequent occupations. In addition, we also came across nurses working in their chosen profession, a manicurist, teachers working in schools or nurseries, translators and teachers of Icelandic as a foreign language. Nevertheless, those working in their original professions were considerably less numerous.

Among the interviewees there were also some teachers who, apart from teaching in Polish schools on Saturdays, where their salary was rather low, also worked physically at Icelandic companies. In this case we can notice a discrepancy between statuses. In Polish schools they would fulfill their roles as teachers, while on the Icelandic job market, which usually does not take into account the level of education achieved in Poland, their status was low as a result of the type of tasks undertaken. The work in Polish schools was to some extent a symbolic compensation for their daily demotion in the professional field.

People working in accordance with their education were very happy with their working conditions, but, interestingly, even those who had a job they were over-qualified for were in most cases satisfied with it. The lack of satisfaction was compensated by high salaries, since "a job is like any other, what matters is the financial outcome" (interview 27).

The issue of trade unions and social institutions was of particular importance, and it was mentioned in most of the interviews. All the participants would talk about the obligatory trade union membership, which shows a quite high level of familiarity with matters related to the job market. Most commonly this membership would be used to get financial support for a range of training courses (the most popular one being Icelandic language lessons), renting a summer cottage or legal assistance in dealing with employer conflicts. One of the interviewees said: "… they didn't pay me my salary and the Trade Union carried out the case for me so that I would get the money back. It took 18 months. I just didn't worry, but handed in the papers and they won this for me. I didn't have to do anything" (interview 42).

However, Poles sometimes had exaggerated opinions on the role of trade unions. One of our interlocutors was a board member of Efling, one of the largest trade unions in Iceland, and he described the Polish attitude in the following way:

> *…There were many myths… It was believed that Efling pays for a ticket once a year if you travel home, which is complete rubbish. There are different stories about your rights when it comes to school fees reduction, e.g. that you can get money for your glasses, for going to the gym you get some money back. These were various numbers and various offers and services, which supposedly one could buy* (interview 41).

The majority of the subjects mentioned the possibility of getting housing benefits from the Icelandic welfare system, as well as benefits for those on maternity or paternity leaves, but at the top was the opportunity to get a job seeker's allowance, which was called *kuroniówka*[1] by a couple of participants. However, this is the point where the similarities between the Polish and Icelandic benefits end, because in Iceland: "The benefit allows me to pay my rent and so on, to live a normal life. It's obvious that for 600 PLN in Poland you can hardly get anything" (interview 5).

In general, the interviewees were satisfied with the opportunity to receive unemployment benefits, as it is one of the ways to survive a crisis and have a pretty decent level of life. Thus, the benefit becomes a decisive factor, which has an impact on the decision of many Poles not to return to Poland; some would even send part of this money to their families in their home country. There were those who argued that it did not make sense to get a job, since the amount they would earn would only be slightly larger than the benefit.

> *(…) if I am to work for 120 or 130 thousand, then I get as much on benefits, and I have time to go to the pool, time for yoga, to go places, to cook for the children and do their homework with them. While working for this kind of money I need to get to work, to pay for transportation, I have no time for cooking, I buy ready foods to get something done quickly when the kids get home… not everybody cares for a job* (interview 2).

Among the participants there was no-one who would be unemployed with no benefit, and only one was being supported by another person – their life partner. Neither was there a homeless person and none of the interlocutors had heard about any, because: "It is also a different climate. How can you be homeless when you get fucked up because of this wind.

[1] *Kuroniówka* is the name of a free meal which was provided to the poor in Warsaw at the beginning of the 1990s. by the then Minister of Labour and Social Care, Jacek Kuroń.

You give up straight away, you go, take a loan, buy a house and you'll stay warm" (interview 47).

The Icelandic work culture as seen by Poles – the Weberian ideal type

While describing their collaboration with Icelanders, Poles would point to the following issues: the way of getting a job in Iceland, the respectful attitude towards employees by employers, attempts at building deeper relationships at work based on private interaction with employees, as well as Icelandic carelessness.

As mentioned earlier, Polish people in Iceland used to find a job through help from family and friends, and did not regard this as in any way improper. Getting employment in this way, in fact, fits into the uniqueness of working relationships in the Icelandic community, which results from the small number of inhabitants on the island. This peculiar Icelandic nepotism is used by the employers as a means of finding reliable employees and seems to be an integral part of the local work culture.

> *...in Poland we say nepotism is huge, but in Iceland nepotism is explicit. It is, in fact, desired. Because they assume that those who work for us are good people, we know them... It's very wise. They first do research in their previous companies, among their own people and make this recruitment very overt. We take only those who we know, and besides that on the application form you need to state clearly who you know, whose friend you are* (interview 1).

Working relationships in Iceland can be defined as close and this proximity can be seen in the employers' involvement into their employees' private lives. Only on a few occasions were private issues during conversations at work perceived negatively by Poles, e.g. one of the people stated that Icelanders' attempts to establish close bonds lacked authenticity:

> *Very often it's hypocrisy, one big lie (...). You know what? Icelanders in these managerial positions are quite well trained in human resource management. They go through these PR-courses, training on how to steer people. And I can see it. There's nothing that annoys me more than this*

cheap way, so subliminal, used to control me… And then I can't integrate well with my close co-workers, that's why I know it's a marketing tool towards me (interview 1).

However, in most cases, the participants would perceive an interest in one's private life as positive: "(…) my accountant sometimes surprises me with her behavior, the way she treats me. Like my mom, really, she'll approach me 'cause she can see I'm sad, and': 'What happened Agatka?'" (interview 40).

Situations were mentioned when managers tried to maintain relationships with their co-workers by organizing various events for them, the range of entertainment types being quite wide.

Starting with regular house parties at somebody's place, the director's or the deputy's, or anybody's, to some wild trips. My first trip – I'll never forget that – the director didn't tell us exactly where we were going and it turned out that we ended up at a clairvoyant's. Next we went to some famous cooks, who made a dinner for us, then they took us dancing, so you can really have a good time with Icelanders (interview 18).

My friend goes to England for some football matches. His boss buys him tickets (interview 14).

You can go for 2-3 days on a farm and you get this Icelandic pony, and you ride up these mountains and gather sheep, and that's just a time to party (interview 23).

Several people mentioned spending Easter time with the employer. Yet, the crisis also reached this area of life, and now corporate events are less frequent.

Icelandic employers would pay attention to immigrants' language skills in English and Icelandic, but, interestingly, only a few people mentioned that their supervisors were also interested in educational issues. In general, the managers did not care much about the Poles' professional skills, as they were hired for unqualified jobs. However, in the case of posts requiring specialist skills, Polish people's education was appreciated by the Icelandic employers.

At first I didn't go and say (…) I'm a college graduate. Only my boss knew about it, 'cause I brought him the papers. But once it started spreading, they began to treat me the way you treat a teacher. Maybe I'll know, maybe

> *I'll help. Here higher education is not as common as in Poland, where an MA is not a big deal. Here such people are respected* (interview 4).

Another feature of the work culture picked up on by Poles was respect towards an employee:

> *Here there's no punishment for anything. It's like in a nursery. If you do well you get some kind of merit. And if you don't, there are some bonuses every now and again, some kind of added value called "today we buy you breakfast", "today we buy you a trip", "today we'd like to thank you for your outstanding results at work". Even though there is disciplinary action and tension, one isn't treated as a piece of rubbish, which I had experienced quite often in all the posts I had held in Poland* (interview 1).

Nearly two thirds of the interviewees emphasized that they were treated respectfully by Icelanders, the employers always treated them in the same way they would treat others, and the employer him- or herself would often be like an equal: "Here it's completely different, even if someone is your supervisor the person doesn't treat you like a subordinate. Wherever you go and see two employees chatting you won't be able to tell who's the employer and who's the employee" (interview 33).

A relatively large proportion of Poles admitted receiving support from their Icelandic supervisors, the scope of which was considerable: from help in finding accommodation to sponsoring Icelandic language courses or assisting personally in various offices. A moment when Polish employees received special support and kindness was after the Smolensk crash. "The boss, an Icelander, approaches a Polish woman [the participant's supervisor]: 'If you need to burn candles, expose some symbols, do anything to express your feelings, you can count on us in every single respect, we're at your disposal'" (interview 1).

The majority of Poles also discussed the pleasant working atmosphere. One of them remembered how her boss dismissed an Icelander who was bullying Polish female employees. With similar frequency the participants would mention the fact that their work was simply appreciated: "I heard nice words from my supervisor so many times, I'd love to hear that in Poland at least once in my life…" (interview 40).

When talking about the respectful attitude towards employees, Poles emphasized the employers' honesty, which was reflected in equal pay for people in the same positions regardless of their ethnicity, respect for employees' rights, and in the employers' positive attitude towards workers who were to be laid off. There were few reports of employers' dishonesty with respect to financial issues and work agreements. There were instances when Poles would earn less than Icelanders in the same posts, but they did not feel particularly hurt and were able to provide explanations for it:

> *Definitely, we always earn less. Not always but as a rule. Not in a big factory, 'cause it has own pay scheme and everybody gets what they get, but in smaller companies it's clear that a Pole gets less. But, on the other hand, if you don't speak Icelandic you can't, in fact, expect they'd treat you exactly the same as somebody who was born here* (interview 43).

There were only few reports of mistreatment due to ethnicity: "'Cause when I've worked three years and have no free weekends and the lady [an Icelander] who comes, works for two months and gets every other weekend off (…) Then I feel bad, it's unfair. I feel as if I was inferior, it's not fair" (interview 36).

A couple of subjects stated that they found it hard to keep their dignity, a few discussed unpleasant atmospheres, the fact that supervisors would not take into account their ideas and that there were difficulties with communication. "What worries me most at work (…) is the way our bosses treat us. 'cause they treat us as robots (…). Yesterday, for example, they didn't let us talk with one another, as it's only work that counts, if we don't fancy it, they'll simply fire us" (interview 23).

Regarding those who work below the level of their qualifications, we observed a certain type of defensive mechanism which was to rationalize their occupational choices. One of the people, who had to switch from an office job to a cleaning job, described her feelings this way:

> *(...) you totally lose self-confidence, besides, many such workers also experience this kind of external humiliation, this "who do you think you are, don't step out of line". And that's why Poles, males and females, stay within their own groups, in their Polish circles, which to some extent helps them to regain self-esteem, independence and is incomparable and not understandable to the external environment* (interview 1).

But at the same time she admitted:

> *(...) on the one hand, I'm grateful that I can live in a dignified way and have trust and respect from people, even though I do one of the socially lowest jobs in some kind of work hierarchy. But I couldn't afford that in Poland* (interview 1).

In the Icelandic work culture there is no stigma attached to physical labour and it does not evoke embarrassment:

> *Those people who are now in offices, worked on ships, in fish plants. They did all kinds of physical jobs, here even girls laid asphalt in the summer. Girls! In Poland it's unthinkable. One drives the roller, the other sweeps the asphalt. Or the girls who are dustmen. (...) These people are simply experienced as physical workers and they know how it is* (interview 43).

In general, an employee in Iceland is respected, work atmosphere is good, not stressful, and that is the difference between Polish and Icelandic working conditions. The final issue mentioned by the subjects was the Icelanders' carefree nature at work. "As much as they are laid-back [in everyday life], they are laid-back at work" (interview 47).

There are two attitudes of Poles towards this issue that can be identified: positive and negative, and they were represented in nearly equal numbers. Some Polish migrants defined the Icelandic carefree attitude as a negative phenomenon when opposed to Polish diligence. They would point out Icelanders' lack of long-term thinking, good company management, as well as low resourcefulness and inability to economize: "Now it's not so striking 'cause I got used to it, but at first my heart ached when I saw how they treated tools or materials. How much material they disposed of. And now they just started slowly in doing it a different way, the crisis came, but earlier it was simply (…) unbelievable" (interview 48).

Many Poles said that Icelanders were negligent, disorganized, "unpunctual (…), messy or, let's say, they don't treat order as seriously as we do" (interview 51). The interviewees blamed the hosts for being lazy or slow in decision-making and executing their work:

> *(...) before an Icelander does something he or she has to organize ten meetings – a Pole will forget by then that he or she's done something. (...) With regard to Icelanders I have to explain longer, more – not only*

because of the language barrier – they also think in a different way. (...) "Why, if it's OK this way why should anybody try something else", and you can really see the difference (interview 18).

The Icelanders' laid-back and occasionally lazy attitude was contrasted in the interviews with Polish diligence, understood as work speed and effectiveness: "they are lazy, we are hard-working" (interview 49). Some people admitted, however, that within the Icelandic reality Polish diligence can be perceived negatively. A few participants totally questioned the idea of diligence being a Polish characteristic. Some stated diligence is not a part of Polish work culture, but it is an outcome of being a migrant Pole in a foreign environment: "…when I started work I tried so hard, 'cause it's a foreign country, quick, quick. The [Icelandic female colleagues] would say: 'Teresa, nej, nej', not to do so. They were shocked we do it this way" (interview 22).

Only a few described Icelanders as hard-working, rejecting the concept of locals being lazy. In one person's opinion, the image of Icelanders as lazy stems from a stereotype, not knowledge based on direct contact: "'Cause everybody thinks Icelanders are lazy. (…) It's because they [Poles] just don't know Icelanders at all, 'cause they don't work together, don't talk to them" (interview 42).

The other group of subjects saw the Icelanders' carefree attitude as a very positive phenomenon, since by interacting with them: "You become more of a free person, laid-back, whatever comes along is fine, you don't care about so many things or the climate here, these people and their life start influencing you" (interview 45). "Sometimes my wife will complain that 'you're like an Icelander now, don't care about anything'" (interview 48). "A carefree approach to work translates into peaceful working, you don't feel like you're in a chase all the time, even though people here do work a lot" (interview 55).

The Icelandic kindness and helpfulness stood in opposition to the lack of such behavior either in Polish firms in Poland or among Poles in Icelandic companies. Only three people said they work with other Poles in a nice atmosphere or that Polish co-workers are helpful. However, the lack of respect from other Poles or their anger, jealousy and envy were much more frequently reported.

Conclusion

Before the crisis Iceland could offer quick employment and relatively good pay. However, our findings do not completely confirm the hypothesis that Polish migration to Iceland was of a typically economic nature. It is true that earning money was one of the dominant motives of migration, but it turns out that it was not the only one. This is proved by stories of people who came to the island because of personal reasons or driven by the desire to learn about another country.

It would be worth considering to what extent the Icelandic *kreppa*, i.e. crisis, will influence the next wave of Polish migrants. The people we interviewed stayed in Iceland despite the crisis. Therefore, we had no opportunity to inquire whether those who returned to Poland did it only because of Iceland's financial problems or for other reasons. Apart from the purely economic factor, i.e. decent pay, work culture and conditions turned out to be another reason to stay on the island, and were mentioned as such by many of our interlocutors.

Polish labour in Iceland can be viewed in terms of the main research question: adaptation, integration and assimilation. Each of these notions is connected with the level of acquisition of the Icelandic work culture. Adaptation can be seen as a general understanding and following of the rules of the Icelandic work market – that is the most basic level. The analysis shows that the majority of the sample reached the level of adaptation. They understand, at least at the basic level, the procedures of entering the Icelandic work market, they can interpret work relationships and specific elements of the Icelandic work culture, and adapt to it. The level of integration, which is based on complete work culture acquisition, was represented by only a few participants, e.g. the teachers working in Icelandic educational units, members of trade union boards, translators, a museum employee or the two shop owners. These subjects, apart from understanding and applying the rules of the local work culture, would participate in the Icelandic labour market by taking advantage of the opportunities it offers fully and consciously. The highest level of "immersion", i.e. assimilation, that is associated with rejecting one's home culture and accepting the host culture, was observed in none of the participants.

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