Chapter 7. The Polish perception of Iceland and Icelanders

Małgorzata Budyta-Budzyńska

"How do you say Iceland in Icelandic?"
"Island".
"Wow. Sounds like Easeland".
"Yes. Exactly".
"But it doesn't seem to be that way. My impression is that you, the Easelanders, are never at ease".
"You might say so", answers Gunnhildur.
"We are a very impatient people. For instance, we are totally unable to make a regular queue. We always set ourselves up in a sort of a triangle".
"Why is that?"
"Maybe because there are so few of us. We don't know how to wait, because we never had to do it".
"I don't understand why you are so impatient. I have never seen a more relaxed and quiet country".
"It's because we are so few. Everyone tries to be three different people. We do our best to make Reykjavik seem like New York".
"Well… you must make an effort then".
"I do my best. In the mornings I'm a waitress, in the afternoons I work at the office, and in the evenings I'm learning massage".

(Helgason 2010, pp. 185-186)

Our notions, whether positive or negative, about other nations take shape either through frequent and intense direct interactions (the contact hypothesis), through popular written travel accounts which have become bestsellers, or through a fad that draws interest to a region of the world

or a specific country, to mention the *Shogun* TV series or the fashion for Bollywood movies.

In the case of Iceland none of the above applies – direct contacts between Poland and Iceland have never been intense, and travelers' accounts (such as those by Edmund Chojecki in the 19th century or by Stanisław Helsztyński after World War II) have never gained sufficient popularity to engage the imagination of the masses.[1] Average Poles know about Iceland no more than what they heard in school: that it is an island of cold climate somewhere in the middle of the Atlantic; a few, those well versed in geography, recall that Iceland is the place where two continental plates meet and thus has many active volcanoes, among them the largest and most famous – Hekla; those of somewhat advanced age remember that in the late 1980s Reykjavik hosted a meeting between Reagan and Gorbachev, which some historians consider the beginning of the end of the Cold War. Fans of alternative music can name Bjork and Sigur Rós, while those who watch beauty contests – the long-legged, long-haired blondes from Iceland who were a hit in Miss World and similar pageants. When leaving for Iceland, the average Pole, who has not made a special effort to study photos, movies and books on Iceland, has at most such a notion of the country. He/she is totally unfamiliar with its culture, unaware that Tolkien's magical world was patterned on the world of Nordic myths preserved in Icelandic sources, even the word *skald*, which is somewhat familiar in Poland, is seldom known to refer to Nordic bards of the Middle Ages. Iceland is sometimes confused with Ireland (like Poland with Holland), and Icelanders are imagined to be like Swedes, only yet taller and with fairer complexion (under the influence of the image of Icelandic beauty queens).

In the second half of the 1990s, when workers from Poland were first brought to Iceland by recruitment agencies to work in construction and in the fishing industry, the Polish anthropologist Anna Wojtyńska (2009) carried out research on the image of Iceland and Icelanders among Poles

[1] We may gauge the popularity of travelers' accounts through lending records of the respective books in public libraries. In the neighborhood library visited by the author of this paper, the book by Stanisław Helsztyński (1965), published as a volume of a popular series of travel accounts by the Czytelnik publishing house, has been lent only a few times since it appeared in print, in nearly half a century; and not once since 2004.

living in Iceland. She located her interviewees in small fishing villages, as well as in Reykjavik and the surrounding area.

Nearly ten years after Wojtyńska's study, we approached a similar topic in our research. We were interested in how the island, its climate and landscape, are perceived by Poles; how they cope, how they adapt to the climate, very different from that in Poland, and how they perceive Icelanders – as acquaintances, employers and neighbors; what they like in their contacts with the native population, what they are impressed by and what they find puzzling; and finally, what elements they think we could learn from or adopt in our country and our culture, and what they find totally unacceptable. Perhaps they could point out features of our culture that Icelanders should emulate or things they should learn from us?

It seemed interesting to inquire whether the Polish view of Iceland and its inhabitants has changed in the more than ten years since the original study – or whether it has remained the same, once created and then merely reproduced, so that we may speak of the existence of a stereotype of Iceland and Icelanders among the Polish colony in Iceland. Or perhaps this image is not fixed, and no single dominant vision of the native exists among Poles, as each of the immigrants has a different experience in his/her contacts with the hosts.

The immigrants' opinion about the island and its inhabitants is of interest as a subject in itself, but in the case of our study it was treated as an indicator of the degree of the immigrants' "immersion" in the host society. If Poles feel distanced from Icelanders, do not understand their conduct nor have the desire to get to know them better, and find many aspects of their life strange – then it may be foreseen that the process of "entry" will be arduous and not necessarily successful. On the other hand, should we find that the immigrants speak of their country of settlement with fascination and feel impressed by the hosts, we could wager that adaptation will be faster and more effective. The extent to which immigrants feel at ease in their new environment, the degree to which they have adapted to the new conditions, and whether they see an essential boundary line between themselves and the hosts, may be used to gauge their "immersion" in the host society and provide an indicator of their tendency towards integration.

Iceland's landscape

Iceland evokes extreme emotions – this can be observed both in travel accounts and in the utterances of our interviewees. People can be generally classified into those who are immediately attracted to it and awed by it, and those who regard it as unfit for living. Attitudes towards Iceland are never lukewarm – people either find it a second home, often a better one than the first, or an unpleasant extreme of the world. "Iceland you will either love or hate from the outset. Everyone will tell you so" (interview 45).

To some, Iceland's landscape is awesome, unique and exotic, while others find it melancholy, dull and depressing. What some regard as Iceland's greatest attraction: fields of lava, volcanoes and plains of snow, others hold to be an unbearable endless dullness.[2] "All is gray, gray, gray. There is no tree and no rope to hang yourself on", said one of the subjects (interview 5). What is more, Icelanders do not seem to do anything about this gray and depressing landscape, sometimes even exacerbating its features by their architectural ideas, for instance: "(…) a two-lane highway, they could have done something about it, like some belt of greenery, but they laid all those gray stones instead. Well green would be upbeat and joyful, but they like stones instead" (interview 15).

Some persons chose Iceland as a place to emigrate to very consciously, and their arrival on the island was not a matter of chance. They had read about Iceland and its inhabitants and had the urge to see for themselves what life is like on an island "where on one piece of land you find both fire and ice side by side, a multitude of geysers, hot springs, glaciers and volcanoes" (interview 18). Once there, they were not at all disappointed, and their fascination with the island became stronger yet. Here are accounts from three persons enchanted by the Icelandic landscape:

---

[2] A similar description was given by Maurycy Komorowicz, who traveled to the island in the beginning of the past century. He was not in awe of Iceland, on the contrary – he was quite disappointed. "In spite of colors and movement everything here is cold, monotonous and esthetically lacking any charm. It is indeed hard to comprehend why descriptions of Icelandic landscapes are often so overstated. Mainly the English have sung so many praises on the 'charming and beautiful sceneries' that any traveler who gets here must feel sorely disappointed, having expected far more than he finds" (Helsztyński 1965, pp. 175-176).

(...) my infatuation with Iceland was immediate, it was exactly what I had expected (...) I was lucky, it was a very warm July, with beautiful weather, awesome views. My partner was living in a neighborhood from which the views were beautiful. Suddenly I had the sea, the mountains and the capital city, all in one place (interview 21).

I was happy when I came here, because I had wanted to see Iceland, so I guess I simply had a surplus of endorphins through the first three months. I was simply extremely happy here, so I was full of energy (...) Now I live more normally, without so much endorphins, but I do not know, I simply like it here and many of my friends do as well (interview 42).

When I landed at the airport and looked around at the landscape, I was not happy. The ground looked like bread crust, there were no trees, it was always windy and it rained all the time, the windows did not open the same way as they did in Poland, the food was bad, people wore strange clothes and spoke some hard language, yet there was something magical here, something that made you want to be here, that attracted you. I am at a loss for words, but there is something highly contagious and it must be the awesome feeling of freedom you have here. Like when the summer arrives and it is sunny all day and it is something new to you. The sky looks different, has a different color, there are other breathtaking views, and people start to act in a different way. For instance, in winter they are more depressed, they walk around sad, do not smile, they seem as if under a spell. But once summer comes, they act quite differently, they are smiling and joyful (interview 45).

Some acknowledged the beauty of the landscape and the uniqueness of many places, yet admitted that this was "not a climate for them", and not a preferred place to live, mainly due to the lack of greenery and trees. Yet others were of the opinion that the landscape, rather than pretty, is highly peculiar – crude, difficult, challenging. Iceland has drawn them by its exotic features and therefore they do not want to leave before they have carried out all their sightseeing plans. "I would like to stay here for a little more. I do not know for how long, but I still need to take in all of this (…) I have been all over Iceland, except for a few regions, but now I want even more, I want to get to places that cannot be reached by an ordinary car. And also, I feel free" (interview 14).

Many participants in the study complained about the climate – winds, frequent rain and very cool summers, but there were others, who claimed not to mind the climate at all, who had grown used to low temperatures

and frequent precipitation. Life in the "land of ten degrees Celsius", as Iceland was referred to by Toxic, a character from the book by Hallgrimur Helgason (2010), quoted in the beginning, seems to suit them well. One of our subjects recalled:

> *A Pole recently back from Iceland said that he misses those winds when in Poland. Well, we of course start laughing, is he not crazy. But you know, one really gets used to it. When I went to Poland in September I think, I felt hot, people wore jackets, while I went around in short sleeves. A totally different climate.*
> *So you say you do not mind this climate at all?*
> *No, no, no. It suits me very well* (interview 48).

Icelanders' appearance

We asked our interlocutors about the outstanding features in the external appearance of Icelanders: what is different about them in comparison with the Poles or other nationalities? The way the natives are perceived is not without significance, because if evident external differences are observed and found difficult to accept, the readiness to integrate may be adversely affected.

All participants in the study pointed out the distinctive appearance of Icelanders – the difference in facial features and body shape. They are paler, their hair and eyebrows are either blond or red, several persons also pointed out their "upturned and short noses" (interviews 26, 15, 21). "They have this Viking appearance. You can see right away you are dealing with a descendant of the Vikings" (interview 4).

To some, Icelanders are very becoming. Icelandic women are beautiful and well-shaped, "blue-eyed blondes, slim and svelte" (interview 27), "most of them look like models, wear strong makeup, dye their hair and spend big money on clothes" (interview 21). Icelandic men are extremely handsome as well: "(…) I really like the Scandinavian types. When I first came here, I had the notion that Icelanders are like Swedes, only yet fairer and taller. It turns out they are a mixture. My husband's family believe they must be descendants of Basques or something like that, because their hair and eyes are dark" (interview 11).

To others Icelanders seem "pale and nondescript, a sort of cavemen (…) their faces are not very presentable" (interview 46).

A few subjects, when asked about the typical external features of Icelanders, described two distinct types of women and men: one type being "a sort of large women, blood and bones, a kind of female Vikings. The other type is blonde, tall, pretty and so on, so Icelandic. It must be true that in the past the Vikings used to kidnap the prettiest women and bring them here" (interview 3).

Likewise with men, there is one type of well-shaped, rather small brown-haired or sometimes blond men; and another, a tall and powerfully shaped Viking.[3] The latter care little for their appearance, while the former, the "somewhat smaller, more petite guys, dress smartly and always sport a well-done haircut, crew-cut style" (interview 21).

According to our subjects, the typical Icelander wears a warm sweater, preferably hand-knitted. Hand-knitting is an old and thriving tradition across Scandinavia. In the humorous book *Xenophobe's Guide to the Icelanders*, its British author jested that hand-knitting was practiced since forever and under all conditions, even during lovemaking (Sale 1999, p. 33).

Our interviewees were divided in their opinions on how Icelanders dress; most claimed that they care very little about what they wear, they dress sloppily and carelessly. They do not pick their garments by color or style, and pay no attention to whether their clothes go well with their

[3] The poet Tadeusz Nalepiński traveled around Iceland in 1914, and in an essay titled *On Ultima Thule* he gave the following description of Icelandic women and men: "During my journey around the island, I was more than once stunned by the royal beauty of Icelandic women, and the crusty ugliness of men (not to say husbands). What is the origin of such a screaming disproportion between the sexes, I can hardly guess. One can be sure that the female type has not changed at all since the times described in the oldest sagas, such as the story of Burnt Njal. Nearly every Icelandic woman from the island's interior could serve as model for a caryatid; some seem to be like moving statues, so hard and stony is their gaze, their look and touch like gravel. Their temperament so volatile. Lymphatic one might say, possibly due in part to their diet of fish. In spite of the predominant beauty of the females, the worship of women has not yet been adopted here. Like among the Eskimos, the women perform the most arduous household labour, perhaps that makes their shapes so exuberant and their members so well-developed. They spend their entire lives on the farm, traveling to Reykjavik barely a few times a year. As for the men, all the opposite. They live their lives on horseback, thus their walk is awkward and lumbering, their posture usually humped, their trunks thick and heavy, and faces pale as if covered with ashes, without the blush proper to the Scandinavians, rather round or square than oval. Not at all like the men spoken of in the old sagas, where descriptions of the typical inhabitants of Thule centuries ago are given" (Helsztyński 1965, p. 179).

body shape, especially in the case of the bulkier people. In general, "the Pole is more tidy than the Icelander. Icelanders pay no attention to their clothes, they walk around slovenly, most of them" (interview 36).

However, a few of our interviewees were of the opposite opinion – that Icelanders are a highly "modeled" people, who pay excessive attention to fashion in dress: "The typical party-going Icelander is a dandy, with his slim-fit pants and shirt, hair gel on and fringe to the side. He must have spent hours in front of a mirror" (interview 21).

Icelanders dress fashionably, wear expensive brand-name garments since no others are available (open-air markets with Vietnamese-made clothes, so common in Poland, are not present here), but their apparel lacks colors – it is usually gray, beige or black, and when something becomes fashionable, everyone wears it.

As in the case of human types, based on what we heard from our subjects we may reconstruct two very different styles of dressing: one that is laid back, ostentatiously indifferent to fashion, putting comfort first; and another that is elegant, well-kept, at times excessively fashion-conscious – the "dandy". In the case of women, their style sometimes depends on age:

> *Women under 40 look ill-groomed. Pretty girls but they do not take care of themselves, the young ones as well. Badly fitted clothes, whether dots or stripes. Meanwhile ladies over 40, Icelandic ladies, you can see they take better care of themselves. In our country, our generation, the children and the young, we all try to pay attention to making sure that things fit together, that colors match, so as not to look like the homeless. While Icelanders, they do not. They just are like that (...) laid back* (interview 29).

Young Icelandic women wear sneakers and men wear a "coat, tie and tennis shoes, all the time. You can tell an Icelander by the crotch of his pants hanging nearly at the knees" (interview 29). "I would never wear a combination of green sneakers, red tight-fitting pants and a pink shirt" (interview 44).

Those observations made by our countrymen are somewhat surprising, as tight-fitting pants and sneakers, or "rapper" pants with low-hanging crotches are a part of international fashion at the turn of the first and second decade of the 21st century, and are often worn by Polish teenagers and college students as well. The fact that Poles in Iceland were taken aback

by such attire is a consequence, first of all, of them originating from the somewhat more conservative, as far as fashion is concerned, communities in Poland, and second – that they have outgrown the juvenile style of clothing (though not necessarily by age) and are unaware that an identical attire is worn in their home country. Generally all of our interviewees pointed out that Poles and Icelanders differ both in appearance and in attire, some of them observing a difference in favor of the Poles (whose clothes are more colorful and cared for), while others in favor of Icelanders (who dress fashionably and wear better quality garments).

Many persons pointed out the very easygoing attitude towards clothes in Iceland, for instance it surprises no-one when a person goes out to buy bread in the morning wearing a bathrobe. "My daughter went to the bank in her pajama pants. Nobody paid the least attention" (interview 24).

Icelanders, being accustomed to low temperatures, rain and wind, like other Scandinavians, dress much lighter than Poles, they "are more undressed. Women basically walk around with the legs naked, wearing sandals even when it is 10 degrees, or 2 below zero" (interview 49).

Meanwhile, Icelanders attach great importance to having a high quality car, preferably a four-wheel drive SUV, used not only for trips to the interior of the country, but also for driving around the narrow streets of Reykjavik. "They are always in motion, driving the children somewhere, doing shopping, picking up the children, going swimming. Since they are never without a car, Reykjavik seems to be a city with twice as many cars as an average city of the same size" (Sale 1999, p. 12). "Icelanders drive their cars so much that driving may be regarded as a pastime of theirs" (Sale 1999, p. 35).

Our interlocutors made very similar observations. One of the interviewees, when asked how to recognize an Icelander, responded:

> *He sits behind the wheel, talking on his phone and not paying attention to anything.*
> What if he were walking down the street?, asked the researcher.
> *Well, it is hard to find an Icelander walking down the street. They all ride in cars. When you see a pedestrian, it is 89 percent certain he is a foreigner* (interview 48).

Icelanders seem to be aware of this feature of theirs. In the already quoted *Manual of a Household Killer* – a novel that Włodzimierz Pessel

called "a literary ethnographic description" (Pessel 2010, p. 57), because it says so much about contemporary Iceland and its stereotyped view, a character states: "Cars are to these people like camels to the Bedouin. They all look brand-new, their roofs shining, adding radiance to the clear spring night. And nobody puts their car in a garage… Garages are like shrines, with the four-wheel drive golden calves resting before them, although most of them are in fact black" (Helgason 2010, p. 81).

The Icelander does not use public transport nor his/her own feet, because "Buses are for old ladies and lunatics. And for the new people (…) Poles and Asians (…) an Icelander never takes the bus" (Helgason 2010, p. 176). At one point, the book's character, a foreigner notices: "I am the only pedestrian in a land without pedestrians" (Helgason 2010, p. 88).

Traits of character

All of our interlocutors described Icelanders as very laid-back people, who are never in a hurry to get anywhere and always have time for everything. This trait causes them to be very relaxed and peacefully disposed towards the world, and this attitude often becomes acquired by the Poles, and they become more calm too: "I am under the impression that generally, emigration to Iceland serves Poles well. There is not such an incidence of muggings and thefts here. It is as if the gentle character, the openness, tolerance, and the social norms held by the Icelanders mellowed down our aggression, our arrogance and impetuousness" (interview 1).

According to our subjects, Icelanders are calm and have the ability to weigh matters appropriately – they know what matters in life, do not tend to become excessively exalted and would not make high drama out of some insignificant matter, as Poles tend to do.[4]

[4] Helsztyński quotes an article by Mieczysław Gumkowski, a Polish government representative in Iceland in 1956-1960, which was published in the communications of the Society for Polish-Icelandic Friendship, where the Icelanders are described in the following terms: "Icelanders differ in character from the other Nordic peoples. They are sincere, emotional and temperamental. Their sense of humor and practical approach allow them to solve a variety of problems in a moderate and reasonable way. They do not, however, avoid a dose of daring in arranging their private and social life, following the principle: always in the lead of technological advancement" (Helsztyński 1965, p. 167).

> *They are less focused on what I would call trifles. If your house burns down it is a problem, if your child dies it is a problem; but if your car burns, it is not a problem, because it is just a car and you will have a new one soon. It is not just about material things, it is that they become concerned only about fundamental matters… Being here teaches you what is really a problem in life, and makes you realize that you do not have that many of them* (interview 33).

They believe there is always a way out of even the worst situation, to any problem a solution can be found, and it is pointless to worry in advance. Harsh living conditions have taught them to be calm and to view life from a distance. On top of that, they are extremely tolerant, and this is a trait some of the Poles strive to learn. Some authors (Thomasson 1980) are of the opinion that the traditional Icelandic tolerance follows from pragmatism rather than from traits of character. In a small society, it could happen that someone whom you insulted or entered into a conflict with today will become your brother-in-law or colleague tomorrow. There is no way to know when you will encounter him or her again, but it is clear you will meet sooner or later. The unusually high level of tolerance in Iceland, which is confirmed by many of our compatriots, results from the primeval tribal relations in Iceland and from the size of the society.

In spite of their laid-back attitude and tolerance, Icelanders are fully capable of staunchly upholding their position, as shown recently in their negotiations with Britain on the payment of the Icesave debt. Poles are impressed by the independence and self-assurance demonstrated by Icelanders and are envious of these traits: "(…) I wish I had the self-assurance of Icelanders. It comes naturally to them, from childhood on – by all means, it is their independence of opinion, in general they are a very independent people (…)" (interview 41).

Along with this self-assurance comes a strong attachment to Icelandic tradition and language, and therefore if an immigrant makes an effort to learn Icelandic, he or she is treated more amiably, sometimes even if he/she expresses a desire to learn and to try to speak (However, the natives are not fully consistent about this. When they want to settle a matter quickly, they will switch to English when speaking with a foreigner, because listening to his or her efforts in broken Icelandic is something they find boring and tiresome).

Icelanders as a nation are very proud of their achievements, sometimes to the point of nationalism.[5] "They regard their country as the best on Earth. It is the best place to live, here you can buy whatever you like, they are fed on this from childhood on and they simply believe in it, and all of a sudden it was over" (interview 42).

Even Andri Magnason, the author of *Dreamland*, a book that is very famous in Iceland, who is highly critical of his country, speaks with ostensible disapproval, but actually with pride, of the singularity of the Icelanders. It is a particular sort of pride in being somewhat odd and at the same time fascinating and curiously eccentric. "Though there aren't many of us, we have succeeded in working out a non-monotonous mode of being; compared with larger countries, Iceland has a good number of paradoxes and coexisting opposites. Here one can see clearly how important ideas directly influence everyday life" (Magnason 2010, p. 145).

Poland has always displayed an inferiority complex with respect to the West, the point of reference with which it has been comparing itself, and remains so still today, sometimes with amusing consequences. A similar inferiority complex towards the West used to exist in Iceland, but it was partially overcome as the standard of living grew. What remains is the constant stressing: "we have all that, too", "what we have is the best".

Some Icelanders are aware of their own ethnocentrism and make fun of it. The character of the above-mentioned book by Helgason (2010) is told by his hosts that "Here is where the world-famous dairy product called scare (actually: skyr – MBB) is made, while here you have one of the world's best swimming pools. Actually they do their best to convince

[5] Richard Thomasson (1980) wrote that the Icelanders are a highly achievement-oriented nation, and ambition is a trait they value highly. This focus on achievement and success makes them similar to Americans, to whom they often compare themselves, stating a similarity between Icelandic and American values – unsurprisingly, as both are "frontier" societies.

Before the crisis, the government and opinion makers often spoke to Icelanders about the traits that set them apart from other nations: a particular work ethic, being goal--oriented rather than process-oriented, the habitual constant assessment of risks, minimal bureaucracy, mutual trust, ease of forming task groups (the latter three traits resulting from the size scale of the society), a style of management based on joint work of leaders and teams, the Viking heritage and the related longing for adventure and discovery, and above all their creativity. Following the fall of 2008, this uncritical self-complacency has been analyzed many times, e.g. in Magnusson 2010, pp. 261-270.

me that their country is 'the best in the world'. They dwell at length on people living the longest lives here, and being the happiest, that the air is the cleanest, and so on. It makes me want to tell them that a country with no brothels or firearms stores can hardly dream of aspiring to such a title (…)" (Helgason 2010, p. 69).

Many of our subjects mentioned how obsessively the Icelanders were sensitive about themselves, how curious they were to know how others saw them, but under one condition – that they be seen as unusual and special, and the Icelandic landscape as fascinating. One of our interviewees reported:

> *To the standard question: how do you like it in Iceland, they would always like to hear the answer that you like it very much. And if you do not, you had better say nothing. And the water is excellent, the landscapes are beautiful. They are very much in love with their country and expect the same from outsiders.*
> Expecting affirmation?
> *Yes. If you came here you should appreciate it, if you do not – say nothing, or leave. But they will not say that out loud, it is a taboo to them to say something or someone is bad* (interview 1).

Explaining the Icelanders' strong attachment to their island, Helsztyński writes: "Iceland's nature leaves a very strong mark on the life and mind of the man who lives there. Its harshness has made him resilient, uncompromising and prudent. At the same time, its charming beauty inspires him with the need to admire and be in contact with nature. I have never seen elsewhere such a great love towards the homeland's scenery, so much constant wandering devoted exclusively to admiring in tranquility the beauty of the homeland" (Helsztyński 1965, p. 169).

Some Poles are of the opinion that such an uncritical affirmation of Iceland and everything Icelandic makes Icelanders essentially arrogant.

All of our interlocutors stressed that Icelanders are in general very cooperative and helpful in all sorts of situations. One of those persons had the following recollection of the first days spent in Iceland:

> *I go into an office and look, it seems like a ballet or music school, I ask a woman* [for directions]*, I show her the address and a map so she may show me where I am and which way to go. And she says, wait, I will drive you there, just wait ten minutes. She finishes writing some email, packs*

me into her car and drives me to my destination, and says good luck and good fortune, simply welcome to Iceland and best fortune (interview 45).

In addition, our subjects perceive Icelanders as very open and trusting without being gullible or naïve, and these traits result from the development of Icelandic society through history. In a small and isolated nation, where all people know each other, mutual trust is a necessity. "Here, they had no interest in making enemies. Nobody here cheated on others or did them wrong, because it would have stayed with him forever, the stain of having done somebody wrong. Everybody knew about it, it simply did not pay to make enemies" (interview 18).

The Poles found themselves in situations that they would have never imagined in Poland:

> *After two weeks of working in the pre-school I say that I need to go someplace, and the Icelander just gives me her car keys and says: "Go on, you do not have a car". "Sorry?" "Well go on, since you need to go there". "No, I cannot just take your car, I would be afraid to do that, and well I do not even know you, what if I break something in your car…" "Come on, that is what insurance is for". Knowing me for just two weeks. I cannot imagine under what circumstances someone in Poland would give you her keys and say "just go on"* (interview 18).

They can be hot-tempered at times, though not to the same extent as Poles, and are seldom as loud. "They usually speak softly, calmly, and do not make a fuss about their person" (interview 45). Even when inebriated, they are not aggressive, "(…) for the most part, even having drunk alcohol they are very funny, they do not start brawls, they are sort of more well-behaved" (interview 7).

In general they love entertainment, all of our interviewees stressed that the hosts are great at having fun.[6] Entertainment begins past midnight on Friday night, preceded by drinks taken to set the mood. They go to town already partly drunk, because alcohol in clubs is very expensive and most cannot afford to drink heavily all night.

---

[6] As remarked in jest by the author of the already cited *Xenophobe's Guide*, the need for company and entertainment must be an effect of spending cold and dark nights in peat-covered shacks in the past centuries.

They are really crazy in this respect… Come the weekend, Friday begins and they start having fun until the next morning, and then again until the next morning – Friday, Saturday. Go downtown and you will see – it is full of people and the partying starts at 2 am. Get there before that and you will find a place anywhere, but later than 2 am it is hopeless (interview 44).

Icelanders drink a lot, but our subjects stressed that their drinking customs differed from those in Poland. While Poles drink on any day of the week, Icelanders get drunk on weekend nights, and sober up on Sunday to be in shape for work on Monday. Drinking is not a part of their daily routine, it is reserved for holidays or weekends. The Icelandic sagas describe many incidents of drunkenness related precisely to sporadic drinking.

These drinking customs have their origin in the past. In the early 20th century in Iceland, like in other Nordic countries, an attempt was made to restrict drinking by imposing a prohibition. This was introduced on the island seven years earlier than in the USA, in 1915 (the bill was passed in 1908, but partially implemented only in 1912), but was partially repealed already in 1922, when Spain threatened to stop buying Icelandic fish unless Icelanders resumed imports of Spanish wine. A compromise was reached to allow import of wines with alcohol content below 21 percent, and in 1934 strong liquor was allowed as well, but import of beer above 2.25 percent was illegal until the mid-70s. The latter ban was based on the rationale that beer is dangerous to young people, a first step to addiction to stronger beverages.[7]

After having drunk a fair amount, the hosts become very loquacious, and: "(…) at that point they become quite like Poles. They become very open. The way we are every day, our people, it is how they become when they drink, because in general they are rather frosty" (interview 42).

[7] Richard Thomasson (1980), who conducted a sociological study in Iceland in the second half of the 1970s, observed at that time the beginning of a change in drinking patterns: while the parents continued to drink little or not at all, the young tended to drink far more than their parents, and drinking became the rule rather than an exception among the younger generation. The society is especially permissive towards drinking by youngsters on the 17th of June – Independence Day. On that day young people may drink as much as they wish.

Some Poles also pointed out that Icelanders dance very little during their nighttime parties, they prefer to talk.

In his description of the Icelandic character, Tomasson (1980) mentions a strong need for all types of experience – hence their fondness for travel and adventure, but also a desire to learn, to engage in artistic endeavors, and… a tendency to reject moral restraints in their lives. This is not a recently acquired trait, it can be already observed in the characters of the sagas – who often traveled abroad, usually to Norway, had many adventures, experienced a variety of extreme situations, and were driven by powerful passions. Some of the Poles have observed the hosts to display such traits. When an Icelander wishes to try something, he/she will; if he/she wishes to go live in a specific place, he/she will fulfill that wish. As a nation the Icelanders are highly mobile,[8] restless and agile, and fond of challenges, which impresses the Poles:

> *They have a different way of thinking and living, they are sort of like the Vikings. On the one hand very free and independent, ready to pack up and move to the other end of Iceland because they found something there that attracts them. They may spend time breeding sheep on a farm, and then return here to Reykjavik to work in a bank. If they get tired of working in a bank, they will go to Denmark or some other country and do something there. They travel a lot and they are such a very free people, they attach little significance to material possessions* (interview 45).

Being a people with a strong yearning for adventure, the Icelanders are very physically active and love sports. Every day one may encounter a great number of people running, roller-skating or cycling along the downtown lake or on paths along the ocean. Going to the gym is very common (Polish women enjoy having access to female-only gyms), as is visiting a swimming pool by entire families. By virtue of their physical activity, Icelanders "nearly never fall ill, and once they are ill, they die. Or they do not go to see the doctor until they are actually dying" (interview 1).

Several of our interviewees pointed out that Icelanders have an interest in art – they enjoy creating and exhibiting. There is a large number of

[8] Some Icelanders were driven by their contacts with Poles to come to Poland. For some reason, a Spa near Kartuzy seems to be especially popular.

galleries in Reykjavik, an opera, a musical theater and a philharmonic, and nearly everyone plays some instrument or another. This need, according to our subjects, stems from their history: "(…) because they were always an isolated nation and they needed some way to express themselves and to present themselves as a nation" (interview 18).

Negative traits

Poles also found the hosts to have some negative traits, and some of the above-mentioned characteristics were annoying to some of our subjects, who regarded them as shortcomings. The laid-back nature of the Icelanders, which is so highly valued by many Poles, was seen by others as imprudence and irresponsibility. They were also annoyed by the Icelanders' slowness and their tendency to postpone tasks until the last moment.

> *It annoys me that everything gets barely finished on deadline, because of this many things do not get done well… There is this saying, "everything will be okay", "everything can be arranged", "no big deal". Such behavior can be annoying (...) though I actually sort of like it. It makes people more relaxed, not prone to panic. This applies to the economic crisis, a volcano eruption, anything. The Icelander worries for a while, but soon later breathes a sigh of relief* (interview 11).

The same person mentioned yet another habit: that of constantly "nipping out" for a moment to run some errands. "Their favorite word is szkreppa. Very often you are calling someone on the phone and he/she is not there, and you hear szkreppa, that person 'nipped out' for a moment. At work somebody says 'let me just nip out'. It is a very popular habit, that suddenly you leave work and run someplace for a moment, on some errand" (interview 11).

Poles often mentioned the Icelanders' messiness – especially Icelandic homes are unspeakably unkempt: "A short time ago I visited a home like that – he is a dentist, she is a nurse at a hospital, a beautiful large home, but as we were walking through the home there was no place to set foot. There were garments and toys everywhere. You had to watch your step. They are very messy. Not all of them of course, but the majority are" (interview 48).

Icelanders are friendly, very polite and helpful, as stressed by all our subjects, but this does not mean they are easy to make friends with. They know how to keep their distance and they let their superiority be felt. One of our subjects described this trait rather eloquently:

> *If you approach an Icelander, you know, like in the street, and you ask for a light, you will of course get it. If you ask him to show you the way to some destination, some place you want to go, no problem, he will smile and show you the way. If you ask him for ten krona, he will think about it and ask himself, "hey, isn't something wrong here?". But if you try to, you know, make friends with him then and there, say like "you know, let's go to a pub or somewhere" – he will say "get lost"* (interview 14).

Icelanders are patriots, they take pride in their achievements, and this was taken note of by many of the Poles. However, they have also noticed that this Icelandic patriotism sometimes has a tinge of racism. It is never expressed openly, but it exists and some of our interlocutors have experienced it. They mentioned cases when an immigrant's head was pushed into a toilet bowl and tales of swastikas and offensive graffiti on walls: "pigs, go back to Poland" (interview 15).

Social relations in Iceland are also less than perfect – like elsewhere, the strong and wealthy are allowed more. The Poles spoke of this in the context of the crisis.

Some of our interviewees mentioned instances of rude behavior, such as flatulence, belching, blowing noses, expectorating in public places. To some it was shocking that this is done in public with no apologies. Yet others were forgiving of the hosts, explaining that first of all, such behavior is not frequent; secondly, according to the natives, those acts are natural and healthy, and therefore justified; and thirdly, while Poles indeed do not commonly belch or expel gases in public, the language they use is often vulgar and filled with profanities (which have already caught on with the Icelanders, who start to use them towards Poles) and this is far more rude and reprehensible, because it is easily controlled; profanities and vulgarisms are used quite consciously.

Icelanders have a very relaxed attitude towards sex and speak of it without embarrassment, "they are sex-crazy and could talk about it all the time" (interview 1). As heard from one of our interviewees (female): "I could not quite understand the openness and chattiness of Icelanders

after the weekends, when persons whom I hardly knew told me in detail about their nighttime escapades and sexual adventures, what they did and where" (interview 21).

A liberal attitude towards sex, in spite of the puritan tradition, has characterized Iceland for long – there are many jokes and stories on this subject. In his travel memoirs, Stanisław Helsztyński writes that in the early 1960s, several years before the sexual revolution took hold in the West, single motherhood was rather common in Iceland and in no way stigmatized the woman.

Many Poles are happy with this freedom and praise the legalization of civil partnerships (one of the first decisions of the new Prime Minister, a declared lesbian, was the legalization of civil partnerships and same-sex marriage). Some were however of the opinion that such a sexually liberal society does not make a good environment for establishing a serious relationship.

> *Life here is fun and easy, yes – it is a great adventure, but for creating something serious Iceland is not the place. To me, for instance, all those family values do matter. Here we had this discussion, between Pole and Icelander [women]: "Well how in the world can you stay with the same man all your life?" But to that: "How are you able to have three in a lifetime?" "Well it's normal isn't it, if we can't get along, or get bored, we split up".(...) In my pre-school there are no more than four kids out of sixty who have full families, as for the others it is one weekend spent with my children, the next with yours, and the third – with ours. I just do not want my children to grow up in such a society and learn such values. I do not accept such values and I will not take the risk that my children might say "if they can, so can I"* (interview 18).

Icelanders are aware that tolerance in the area of social norms is greater in Iceland than elsewhere – as jokingly stated by Helgason, "Iceland is a nation where the Pride Parade is celebrated with more splendor than the June 17th Independence Day… sex is for free, while beer costs serious money" (Helgason 2010, p. 53).[9]

---

[9] Here's a dialogue between characters in the book by Helgason, concerning the duration of relationships in Iceland:

"We were only dating".

"For how long?".

Some Poles refer to the natives using the derogatory term *Islandor* or *Islandur*, Icelanders in return say *Polveria* – actually meaning Poles, "but there is a frigid sound to it" (interview 40), "those damned Poles" is also a common phrase.

Some of our countrymen use a yet more disparaging term to refer to the hosts: "sheepfuckers". In Iceland the most crude insults have to do with animals – referring to someone as a ram, or a sheepfucker. One Pole gave the following explanation of this offensive name, unknown in Polish culture (although familiar to and used by Poles in Great Britain): "They have so many of these sheep and I know that there was a time when they used them sexually. Just like goats are used in Greece. Well, sometimes they say: 'you're right, what else would you do with such a sheep?' It is a sort of a joke, like between pals" (interview 44).

Relations at work

The place where Poles meet Icelanders most often and spend the most time with them is of course the workplace, therefore a large part of our interviews was devoted to interpersonal relations at work. We asked the subjects about their opinions on working in Iceland, what they thought of their employers, and about their relations with their colleagues – Icelanders as well as people of other nationalities. And finally, we asked what they thought of how work was organized in Iceland and of the social benefits that were provided.

Nearly all of our interlocutors stated that, compared to Poland, working in Iceland is: "One hundred percent better. The rhythm is slower, it is less stressful, people do not tend to get upset about things. You have something to do, so you do it, if you cannot get it done in an hour, then take your time (…)" (interview 5).

A majority stressed that relations at work were very good, especially those working in Iceland in their original profession. They praised

---

"A year and a half".

"In this country that's nearly a marriage" (Helgason 2010, p. 141).

A "red light district" does not exist in Reykjavik or in any other city on the island, prostitution is illegal, and in June 2010 the Parliament in addition delegalized strip-tease. This is not inspired by puritan principles, but results from concern for the image of women.

Icelanders for their directness and lack of distance between the employee and his/her superiors: "[The superior] will listen to you, and you never see anyone treated as garbage (…) and you are appreciated, that is the next advantage here. So many times I have heard praise from my boss, I wish I had heard someone talk to me like that in Poland at least once" (interview 40).

As in daily life, also at work the attitude is more relaxed, people do not get upset often, nobody is told to hurry, working hours are often flexible: '"If you come late, well it happens, I just overslept and got late. It is not so rigid, I will not be scolded right away for coming late to work" (interview 47).

Comfort at work is given priority, one of the subjects described the start of a day at her firm as follows: "You come to work at eight, but first it is time for a coffee, because of course you did not have time for one at home. Then there are ten minutes more to finish your coffee, ask people what is up. Later, at nine thirty there are ten minutes for breakfast, later yet a lunch break" (interview 4).

The working day is not much different in many places in Poland, however what is described above would be regarded as procrastination and feigning work. In Iceland such a rhythm of working is accepted and common. Employers in Iceland treat workers' rights seriously, everyone who works is hired on a regular contract, which has become difficult to get in Poland, has days off and sick leave guaranteed, and "nobody will ask you why or get back at you with anger" (interview 45).

> *Here, there is no habit of punishing for everything. It is like in a nursery. If you do well, you get some kind of praise. And even if you do not, there are some bonuses every now and again, some kind of award, like "today we buy you breakfast", "today we buy you a trip", "today we would like to thank you for your outstanding results at work". Even though there is disciplinary action and tension along the way, one is not treated as a piece of rubbish, which I had experienced quite often in all the posts I had held in Poland. You are not held responsible for everything if the boss or a superior fails at something. It is not a cascade of shoving down responsibility like you see in Poland* (interview 1).

Poles often stressed that employers respect their workers. In part this is an effect of a history of permanent shortage of labour in Iceland.

There has always been plenty of work and few people, and therefore children started to work at an early age (also a result of poverty and of the educational system),[10] and foreign workers were brought in to work in fishing and later in construction. The employer had to respect his/her workers, because demand for labour exceeded supply. The crisis of the last two years and the concomitant and unprecedented 9 percent unemployment rate are an exception. In spite of the current surplus of labour relative to the number of available jobs, concern for employee satisfaction and provision of social benefits remains the rule.

Many among our interlocutors spoke very well of their bosses and employers, describing them as helpful and very obliging, caring for the employees' well-being and trying to keep the atmosphere at work friendly rather than stressful. Superiors were also helpful in private life – they often helped to find a home or buy a car.

> *If they get you to come to work here, they provide you with housing, in some cases for free. They also provide entertainment: when I was working at the warehouse or in construction, we had some sort of event every two weeks, be it a barbecue, bowling or a game of billiard, well I cannot complain, because I can draw comparisons. I have worked in Germany, in Italy, in the States, you will not have something like that over there. Here, they take care to create good conditions for people* (interview 12).
>
> *The boss was very generous, he even gave us early advances before payday, that is before the first of each month. The first month of accommodation was free, the firm paid for it. The boss, who was the owner of the firm, was very kind and helped us in many ways. We went on trips, of course using a company car, we only needed to pay for fuel* (interview 12).

Quite likely not all of the kindness displayed by Icelandic employers is selfless. The variety of employee events organized by management are often very pragmatically inspired, as explained by one of the subjects:

> *You know what? Icelanders in these managerial positions are quite well trained in terms of human resource management. They go through these PR courses, training how to manipulate people. And I can see it. There is nothing that annoys me more than this cheap way, so subliminal, used to*

[10] About child labour in Iceland in the 19th and 20th century, see Magnusson 2010, pp. 210-221.

control me. And then I cannot integrate well with my close co-workers, that is why I know it is a marketing tool used against me (interview 1).

The Icelandic work ethic, which the Icelanders believe to still be in force, is a long working day (usually two jobs), scrupulousness in performing one's duties, and responsibility (T. Lacy, cited by Wojtyńska 2009, p. 164). Most of our interviewees could hardly see the features of such an ethic in the conduct of the hosts; interestingly, similar observations were made half a century ago by Stanisław Helsztyński, during his travels through Iceland. Having observed Icelanders at work, he concluded that the puritan work ethic is a myth.

In contrast, Richard Thomasson, commenting on research carried out in the late 1960s and early 1970s, claims that Icelanders at that time displayed a traditional Protestant approach to work, for instance they regarded free time as wasted time. In a comparative study performed in 1978, it was found that the mean number of hours worked in Iceland was greater than in other OECD countries (Thomasson 1980), which is quite understandable considering the harsh living conditions and high material aspirations of the island's inhabitants.

Only one of our interviewees had employers from a breed of businessmen which is probably becoming extinct in Iceland – people driven by the principles of the Protestant ethic (even if nonreligious). Our subject described them as follows: "At work my bosses are extremely frugal and this is in general the motto of their life. They live to work and save. Maybe that is why I have such an opinion of Icelanders and am so positively inclined towards them" (interview 41).

A few among our subjects had dealt with dishonest employers, especially in small firms, where supervision is more lax. This dishonesty usually shows in their failing to pay retirement and insurance contributions, and falsely calculating overtime or per-item pay. In such cases, however, the employee is not left alone, any irregularity can be reported to trade unions which will make sure the matter is settled to the employee's satisfaction. Several of our subjects had appealed for union intervention.

We went to the painters' union and for every apartment or group of apartments we summoned a union appraiser who calculated the majling – the amount worked, and sent the documentation to the boss (...) The boss

> *of course did not like this at all, because he had to pay for every union intervention. Such is the law* (interview 14).

In some cases Poles were paid less than other workers. "Not likely in a large factory, a factory has its wage scale and everyone is paid according to the scale, but in smaller firms it is a known fact that Poles are paid less" (interview 43).

Moreover, not in all cases employees were treated equally by Icelanders, the locals were given preference in professions that require education. One of the subjects recalled:

> *Sometimes they ask where I am from, because they cannot hear an accent. But when I send in my CV and they see the name and surname, it is sometimes rejected without reading, as a sort of defensive reaction: this is a job for an Icelander. That is why unemployment is higher among foreigners, simply speaking, "we give jobs to our own people". They do not regard us as a part of their society, they still think of us as a work force* (interview 3).

Let us add that this was said by a person who functions well within Icelandic society and works in her original profession.

Nevertheless, the general opinion among our subjects is that Icelandic employers value Poles and seek to employ them, because "there is the general opinion that Poles do better at work, they do steal more often but they work better" (interview 15).

According to a majority of our interviewees, Icelanders are slower and less responsible at work, they have time to spare and their style of working is "sluggish, sort of drawn out" (interview 39).[11]

[11] The already mentioned Komorowicz, in his memoirs of travels through Iceland, wrote of the unbelievable laziness of Icelandic farmers. "I will readily admit that Icelanders are a burly and vital race doted of certain virtues; they are by no means endearing, however. Above all, the farmers display an unmatched laziness. I had the opportunity to observe this quality day by day in my guides. Those people ate until full, but were hardly capable of doing any decent work. Also in farming settlements I noticed that the farmers spent all day chatting with my guides, looking at our baggage, etc. However, when I asked why the local farmers do not cooperate and start building the roads Iceland needs so much, I was answered that work on the farm keeps them so busy they have no time left for anything else" (Helsztyński 1965, p. 176).

The Icelander may work for two or three hours, then comes the obligatory break, a phone call or something, and it is faking it for the rest of the day. Meanwhile, the Pole is accustomed to working 8 or 10 hours a day with just the prescribed breaks. The Icelanders have a more relaxed approach to their work. Work is not their life, they do not work to live (interview 6).

As employees, they sometimes cause problems when they find something does not suit them well, hence there are cases when the employer lays off Icelanders and hires Poles instead. For this reason, Icelandic workers are sometimes not happy to be working together with Poles. "(…) they get literally angry with Poles due to them [the Poles] working so damn hard. A regular Icelander will tell you: respect your work, do not rush it" (interview 5).

Due to being overzealous at work, Poles, as they themselves claim, tend to be disliked also by co-workers of other nationalities.

Some of our interlocutors were of the opinion that the hard-working Pole is by now proverbial; we are accustomed to work. Others claimed that this conduct is rather the result of the situation of an emigrant who strives to present him/herself in a favorable light. "The foreigner is more efficient than the native, because he always wants to prove his/her higher qualifications" (interview 12).

Several persons pointed out that the Icelanders' slowness and the hard-working of the Poles are stereotypes stated repeatedly by Poles, but lacking solid grounds. It may be true that initially, after their arrival, Poles do work faster, but once adapted to their new workplace and when they feel more at ease, they decrease their efforts and tend to become aggressive and arrogant at times.

Some of our interviewees regarded Icelanders as not very bright. This may be true of those they encounter at work, thus they tend to generalize these observations to the entire society, which is always misleading. In addition, in most cases their work experience in Poland is quite inconsistent with the work they perform in Iceland. In Poland, they worked in professions where a certain level of qualifications was required; in Iceland, they perform the simplest jobs and thus the Icelanders they encounter are simple and uneducated people, to whom the work they do is neither a challenge nor a pleasure. Only a few of the Poles realized that in Iceland they dealt with a totally different category of workers then they had in Poland:

> *In Poland I was not quite the regular manual worker. I did high-altitude work, everybody I worked with was from the mountain-climbing club and were all college graduates, so things were different. Here I simply work together with people who never got beyond grade school, so often they are not too bright. In my country I almost never dealt with such people, I had a different choice of acquaintances, while here those are my work colleagues and that is a negative thing* (interview 43).

It is surprising that the awareness of such an obvious fact is so low among the Poles. Our countrymen mindlessly compare their work environment in Poland – at schools, offices, government institutions, travel agencies – with the work environment they deal with in Iceland – on construction sites, in warehouses, or previously in fish processing plants. Many among our interviewees expressed opinions like the one below: "They [Icelanders – MBB] regard themselves as superior. They look down on us as lowly menial folks, but it seems to me it is quite the opposite. It is they who are pretty lame" (interview 14).

A known defensive mechanism used to maintain dignity, social standing and self-esteem is to disparage others: neighbors, foreigners, minorities, immigrants, or the majority – the hosts. Some of the Poles feel uncomfortable in an alien social environment, and attempt to relieve their insecurity and feeling of relative deprivation by expressing negative opinions about the hosts. Economically – with respect to income and wealth – we may be in an inferior position compared to the locals, but morally, in terms of standards of conduct and culture, we are superior, we have a clear spiritual advantage. One of our interlocutors (female), rather well integrated with Icelandic society, gave the following explanation for this rationalization:

> *(...) this follows from an inferiority complex, from an inability to adapt to a new situation, perhaps from intolerance, leveling of opportunity, boosting self-esteem. Poles regard Icelanders as feeble-minded, dirty and foolish. Somehow, we try to look down on this nation which we make our living from, from which we draw money and generally try to take the most advantage of. Why is that? Well, the only reason is that we are not able to attain the same level as the Icelanders. We need to belittle them to feel better in this situation. That is the experience in Polish communities, those of people without an education nor prospects for advancement* (interview 1).

Many persons have noticed that the attitude towards manual labour in Iceland is quite different than in Poland. In their lifetimes, Icelanders work in different professions, today's office workers may have worked at fish processing plants in the past, students had manual jobs, and nobody regards this as humiliating. The result of such experience is that, first of all, manual labour does not stigmatize; and second, that the natives are quite able to cope with a variety of everyday situations which require practical abilities, "even if you work at an office, you know how a car works. It means that, when something breaks, you will just open the hood and see what is wrong" (interview 43).

Several among our interlocutors drew attention to the rampant nepotism present in hiring for jobs in Iceland. It is also quite frequent in the Polish context, but it is officially condemned there, while in Iceland nepotism is overt, approved of and regarded as desirable. Such nepotism is a consequence of the country's peculiarity – nearly everyone is everyone's relative[12] – but also results from a pragmatic approach: it is worthwhile to know the opinions of an applicant's previous employers and to take into consideration their recommendations. That among the previous employers there likely was a relative is an effect of the size of the society. Nepotism in Iceland serves as an acceptable recommendation: "(…) they start by running an inquiry in the previous firms, among the people they know, and they carry out this recruitment very openly. They will take only someone they know, and anyway, in the application form you must openly name who you know, who you are a friend of" (interview 1).

[12] The endogamy that until recently could be spoken of in Iceland creates unusual conditions for genetic research. This is taken advantage of by several Icelandic pharmaceutical firms, such as DeCode Genetics, which is known for its pioneering applications of genetic studies.

The motif of inherited illnesses in a small society was used by Arnaldur Indridason, author of the crime novel *In the Swamp*, known also in Poland. One of the novel's characters, employed at DeCode Genetics, is able to discover certain facts concerning himself and his family, which had been the motive of a crime. His discovery would have been completely impossible in a different society, a larger and more diverse one.

What Icelanders might learn from us, and what we could learn from them

To better learn the opinions of our countrymen about Icelandic culture and about the hosts themselves, we asked them to tell us what it is that Icelanders could learn from Poles, and likewise Poles from Icelanders. Some of our interviewees – generally those with a short stay in Iceland behind them – were unable to name any trait or ability that the Icelanders might learn from us, and *vice versa*. However, those who did have an opinion on this subject – and those were a sizable majority – all pointed to the same thing: Icelanders might learn from Poles to work harder, in a more organized way, and "to get things done faster than they are generally done" (interview 21).

Icelanders are proud of being hard-working people, they regard this as a national trait due to harsh living conditions. However, in the opinion of one of our subjects, being hard-working means something essentially different to Icelanders than it does to Poles – Icelanders rather spend time at work than actually get work done. What they might learn is a more efficient and systematic approach to their tasks, and resourcefulness – described by one of our subjects as "scheming, in a good way" (interview 18). Icelanders are slow to take decisions and need many meetings to discuss any issue, and therefore they waste more time. A Pole takes action quickly, resolves issues without being too finicky, and is more determined (interview 18).

Poles are not famous for being exceedingly orderly, the *Polnische Wirtschaft* is proverbial in Germany as a synonym of disorder. It therefore came as a surprise how many among our subjects pointed out that what Icelanders might learn from Poles is orderliness, cleanliness, and caring for one's own belongings as well as for public property. They also thought that Poles could teach them thrift, economy and responsible spending. Those are traits that, according to our subjects, are displayed by Poles to a clearly greater degree than by Icelanders. A few also mentioned family values. One of those persons summarized those observations as follows: "(…) I could count on my fingers those Icelanders who have permanent relationships (…) And their children are really poor, frustrated – one weekend with mom, the next one with dad. This is something that is terrible here, makes me feel sorry for this society and I would very much wish that they finally learned some values" (interview 18).

All our subjects voiced the opinion that Poles might learn from Icelanders a more relaxed attitude in work and life, being calmer and less stressed, and a proper weighing of issues and seeing them in proportion. "Poles tend to get too upset about everything, take things too seriously. Icelanders do not, and it seems to me it makes their life easier. My wife often scolds me, saying 'you are like an Islandur already, you do not care about anything'" (interview 48).

Poles might well benefit by learning the ability to enjoy life and to appreciate whatever one has: "(…) above all that you do not need to rush, that we do not need to run all the time, that we should respect ourselves more. Here people teach us that you do not talk about money. Money is not what matters in life, what matters is above all the human being, myself, money is far behind" (interview 7).

What Poles clearly lack when they compare themselves with Icelanders is self-assurance and "the constant push forward, a sturdiness of living – when something is wrong, get up and change it" (interview 7).

Especially Polish women could learn some more independence and resolve, so often displayed by their Scandinavian counterparts:[13]

> *(...) what I like is that they display more of this resolve and character, and that they undertake all sorts of professions. I have seen Icelandic women drive trucks, shift weights, while in Poland it would be out of the question for women to do such work (...) As for family matters, I think the woman is more the head of the family than the man* (interview 3).

Some Polish women are envious of Icelandic women having caring partners, who are able to show great involvement in taking care of the children (interview 38).

Many among our interlocutors mentioned the Icelandic tolerance, which Poles would do well to imitate, and the politeness, kindness and respect for others. "You might say that Iceland is a cold country, but relations here are rather warm" (interview 16).

---

[13] An image of strong women is present throughout the Icelandic sagas (legend has it that one of the authors of the sagas was a woman). In the saga of Gudrun, the character – "as for beauty and wits, the first among all women born in Iceland" (Górski 1960, p. 79), was courted by many eminent warriors, and ended up having four husbands whom she herself accepted. Her story shaped the fate of several Icelandic lineages.

When asked about traits that are common for Icelanders and Poles, nearly all of our subjects responded that both peoples are prone to excessive drinking. Poles and Icelanders like family encounters, even though these are carried out differently – in Poland, it is usual for the visitors to stay overnight with the family, in Iceland this is not the practice, the visiting relatives stay at a hotel.

Another observation was that there is a certain kind of folly in common, a tendency to improvise. Icelanders "are romantic in their own way. In the beginning, it seems rather cool, no butterflies or fireworks, but in the course of weeks, months, or a lifetime spent here it gains a totally different meaning. They are somewhat insane and so are we" (interview 45).

A huge difference concerns profanities. In Iceland they do not have to do with body parts or sex, the names of the devil are thrown about instead. As we heard from one of our interviewees, an interpreter: "When I interpret for the police and I need to translate a profanity, I often have a problem translating it well from Polish to Icelandic while ensuring that is sounds equally forceful and acute as it does in Polish" (interview 21).

Another difference concerns acts of politeness in certain situations:

> *When you are getting on a bus, a man or boy will stop to let a woman go first. Icelanders do not do this. If it happens, I might as well respond saying "thank you" in Polish, because I can be sure it was not an Icelander. Meanwhile, if someone drives over my toes on a pedestrian crossing, I can be pretty sure it was a Pole. An Icelander will stop half a meter before the crossing whenever he sees someone standing nearby, even if that person has not even started crossing* (interview 18).

One of our interlocutors (female) told us of the peculiar Icelandic custom of hiding from the sun. In Poland, when spring arrives, windows are opened wide and fresh air is let into the rooms, closets are opened to let fresh air in and bed linen is taken out to be aired. In Iceland, according to her, it is totally different:

> *When it gets warm, people go for a walk, but at home the curtains are drawn. This is usual, and it is something I do not understand. They say they are protecting their furniture so the sun will not harm it. They seem to cover themselves from the sun, as if it bothered them. At school it is the*

same. At my daughter's, when the sun was out, they had dark curtains drawn and electric lights turned on inside. It is really unbelievable, my husband has started to pay attention to it by now. My mother in law also did it, she told me she does it to protect the sofa, which has leather upholstery. To me it is natural that as soon as there is a bit of sun, I throw everything open (interview 11).

Conclusion

Comparing the opinions expressed by Poles about Iceland and Icelanders which we gathered during our study in 2010 with those registered by Anna Wojtyńska over ten years ago, we observe a general similarity. Our interlocutors pointed out the same traits and situations as did Wojtyńska's subjects, also similar were the behaviors they found surprising or amusing. We might therefore speak of the existence of a stereotype of Icelanders among the Poles in Iceland. Although this stereotype is little known in the home country, it is quite likely that a Pole newly arrived to Iceland would be overwhelmed by opinions about the Icelanders of the sort we have gathered during our study. These convictions appear to be somewhat persistent and are worded in a similar manner, using the same adjectives and associations.

The differences we have noted relative to what was described by Wojtyńska concerned rather the degree of intensity of some traits – for instance, Wojtyńska's subjects made frequent mention of the Icelandic custom of belching and releasing gases. In our study, the single trait most frequently pointed out by our interlocutors was the laid back approach to life and work. Such subtle differences in perception can be explained, it seems, by the difference in times and places where the interviews were carried out. At the time Wojtyńska was performing her study, most Poles came to Iceland to work in fishing villages along the coast, and that was where a part of her interviews was carried out. We performed our study exclusively in Reykjavik, and not one of our subjects was employed in fish processing at the time of the interviews (although some did have such experience behind them). This obviously matters, because the work environment determines what type of people the immigrants deal with, and therefore affects their perception of the host community.

We did not encounter at all in our material statements about isolation and the feeling of being locked in, which can be found in Wojtyńska's

study. Clearly, one has a different view of life on the island when living in the capital city – which might not be large, might even be described as a small town, but it is the capital – as opposed to a small village located far from any centers of civilization.

Another factor is provided by the economic crisis in Iceland and the shifting of the income ratio between Iceland and Poland. In the mid-1990s and slightly later, intense work in Iceland allowed a person to gather a considerable amount in savings, sufficient to consider setting up a business or buying a home on return to the home country (emigration for means). Nobody among Wojtyńska's subjects was considering staying in Iceland – even though they extended their stay on the island, they did not declare having plans of permanent settlement. At present, gathering means in Iceland is no longer so easy, there is not enough to bring back to Poland and often there is nothing to go back to. Poles have no illusions, they realize they would have to start anew, and since they have grown unaccustomed to conditions in Poland, they prefer to stay. We have found a rather sizable group of Poles who decided to settle in Iceland permanently – have bought apartments or houses, are learning the language and sending their children to school in Iceland.

We have met with few cases who expressed an unmistakably negative attitude towards the landscape. There were also persons in our study to whom the Icelandic landscape appeared depressing, barren and monotonous – those were the most frequent adjectives, although many people admitted that they were attracted by the exotic and unique character of many locations, enchanted by spectacular views and the closeness of mountains and the sea.

Wojtyńska's interlocutors repeated that their initial contact with the island had made them think of lunar landscapes (in the author's interpretation, meant also in a symbolic sense, as something alien). Such associations appeared in our study as well, but relatively infrequently. Nobody spoke of a sense of seclusion or isolation, feelings of claustrophobia, only a few admitted that they feared an eruption of Katli and would consider leaving the island for that reason. Such a lack of fear is interesting, since our study was carried out at the time when the Eyjafjoell volcano was spitting ashes into the atmosphere, and inhabitants of the island's southeast were being evacuated. There were forecasts that this might be the prologue to an eruption of a far larger and more dangerous

volcano – Katli. This lack of concern regarding further eruptions may be explained by the fact that in Reykjavik itself the eruption was not felt at all. The capital's residents, like inhabitants of other regions of the world, saw the eruption and its fumes only on television. Many among the Poles undoubtedly shared the Icelanders' calm and conviction that "somehow things will work out".

Some among our subjects stated, like Wojtyńska's subjects had, that Icelanders are boors who cannot behave themselves and lack good manners. However, such opinions were not dominant in our interviews. What was given as an outstanding trait of Icelanders was their relaxed attitude and slowness at work, but also their ability to weigh issues and become involved when it is needed and worthy. Some pointed out the distanced attitude Icelanders display towards aliens, but a large majority drew attention to the hosts' helpfulness, cordiality and politeness.

The traits our subjects singled out in the Icelanders are not a hindrance to their becoming part of Icelandic society. They did not find attributes or customs they would see as revolting and that as such would be an impediment to integration. Even such customs as belching and releasing winds in public were seen rather as amusing faults than as habits making coexistence impossible. What some Poles (it should be stressed that not all of them) saw as a problem affecting their "entry" into Icelandic society were: a latent but persisting racism; an exaggerated pride in being an Icelander, bordering on arrogance; an egalitarianism that applies only to one's own people, while aliens are looked down on; an openness only to a certain degree, while in fact the attitude towards immigrants remains rather distanced.

Translated by Robert J. Budzyński

References

Górski A. (1960). *Sagi islandzkie*, Warszawa: Ludowa Spółdzielnia Wydawnicza.

Helgason H. (2010). *Poradnik domowy kilera: jak przestać sprzątać ludzi i wziąć się za zmywanie*, trans. J. Burzyńska (in English: *The Hitman's Guide to House Cleaning, How to Stop Killing People and Start Doing the Dishes*), Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Słowo/Obraz Terytoria.

Helsztyński S. (1965). *Wyspa wikingów*, Warszawa: Iskry.

Indriđason A. (2009). *W bagnie*, trans. J. Godek, Warszawa: WAB.
Magnason A. (2010). Kraina marzeń, in: *Islandia. Przewodnik nieturystyczny*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej.
Magnússon S. (2010). *Wasteland with Words. A Social History of Iceland*, London: Reaktion Books.
Pessel W. (2010). Literacka krytyka wyspy antropologii, in: *Islandia. Przewodnik nieturystyczny*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej.
Sale R. (1999). *Poradnik ksenofoba – Islandczycy*, trans. P. Łuków, M. Derlacz-Popławska, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Adamantan.
Tomasson R. (1980). *Iceland. The First New Society*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
Wojtyńska A. (2009). Islandia i Islandczycy oczami polskich imigrantów, in: R. Chymkowski, W. Pessel (eds.), *Islandia. Wprowadzenie do wiedzy o społeczeństwie i kulturze*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Trio.