

Chapter 8. Polish labour workers in the construction industry in Reykjavík: Bosses' perspective

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International migration is a new but rapidly growing phenomenon in Iceland, with the number of foreign citizens in Iceland rising from 1.4% in 1980 to 7.4% of the total population in 2008 (Skaptadóttir and Wojtyńska 2008, p. 117; Statistics Iceland 2011a and b). The migration flow to Iceland reached a high peak in 2009, when the proportion of immigrants (persons born abroad with parents born abroad) went as high as 9.0%, but in the aftermath of the financial crisis in 2008, migration to Iceland came to a turnabout and fell again to the rate of 8.1% in 2011 (Statistics Iceland 2011a and b). In a large survey conducted in 2009, when immigrants in Iceland were asked about their main occupation, and most of the participants (29%) responded that they were working as labourers in non-selective, low-skilled jobs (Jónsdóttir, Harðardóttir and Garðarsdóttir 2009, p. 68). Poles are, by far, the largest group of immigrants in Iceland, and in 2009, 11 003 Poles were registered in the country, compared to only 347 in 1996 (Garðarsdóttir, Hauksson and Tryggvadóttir 2009, p. 1).

As Wojtyńska (2009, p. 4) has pointed out, the motives for migrating to Iceland vary, but are generally economical. During the economic expansion, Poles in Iceland were mainly employed in the construction industry, but also in other jobs, for example food-processing, manufacturing and cleaning. The construction industry often employs migrants in low-skilled jobs and is one of four major sectors that have suffered severe job losses during the current recession (Martin 2009, p. 674). When the financial crisis hit the Icelandic economy, during the autumn of 2008, unemployment rates rose rapidly in the construction industry in Iceland (Skaptadóttir 2010, p. 314; Wojtyńska and Zielińska 2010, p. 1). Only

weeks later the sector, which had received a large number of migrant labour during the years leading up to the economic crash, was left with the highest unemployment rate in the country, 18% – and rising. At the end of 2010 the number of unemployed Poles in Iceland was 1 319, or 61% of all unemployed foreign workers in the country, the majority came from the construction industry (Directorate of Labour 2011).

Methods

The purpose of this chapter is to explore how Icelandic employers in the construction industry in Reykjavík perceived Polish workers and their work during the economic efflorescence. In order to grasp their perception I conducted in-depth interviews with a sample of bosses in the sector. My sample consists of 5 bosses, both construction managers and foremen, in 4 different firms located in Reykjavík, who worked on site with Polish workers during the economic boom. As Esterberg (2002, p. 87) points out such an interview technique is especially useful for exploring a topic in detail. The interviews are intended to depict the various views present in the construction industry in Reykjavík and give a close-up picture of individual perspectives and attitudes towards Polish workers in the construction industry, in the aftermath of the economic meltdown. I describe the views I encountered during those interviews, and while doing an observation at one of the construction sites. The interviews this chapter is based on were conducted as a part of my MA thesis in Anthropology at the University of Iceland, under the supervision of Professor Unnur Dís Skaptadóttir. They are semi-structured, in-depth interviews, and build largely on the recollections of those interviewed, since most of the Polish workers had been laid off by the time the interviews took place. I chose this method to highlight some of the Icelandic attitudes, opinions, views and perspectives towards migrant workers and to bring a reflective or explanatory depth to the research, as described by Davies (2007, p. 152). In each case the interview took place during working hours at the construction sites. The interviews were conducted in the place where the workers normally had their coffee and lunch breaks, which were usually barracks that had been set up and furnished as a coffee break room.

As mentioned above, all the informants worked as bosses in the construction industry. In addition, they had all worked within the sector for

well over a decade and up to 40 years. All of them had worked with Poles, and some of them had also worked abroad and had, therefore, personally experienced being foreign labourers. It was sometimes difficult to follow the direction of the interviews as some of my interviewees tended to contradict themselves and they often contradicted each other. However, I will underline some of the factors my interviewees seemed to agree upon or were frequently brought up during the interviews.

Generalization, discrimination and prejudice

All my informants emphasized that they liked Poles and spoke fondly of them. It sometimes even felt as if it was important for them to convince me of their positive attitude towards Poles and, for the most part, they did not speak of migrant workers from other countries in the same positive tone. Some of them emphasized that they tried to socialize with the Poles and even learn some Polish words or phrases, while others were indifferent to any social contact with them outside work. However, all of the informants would, after praising the workers both as a group and/or as individuals, and maintaining that they could not generalize about them, since that would be wrong, generalize about them anyhow. What I found prominent was that each and every one of my interviewees tried to distance themselves from prejudice and xenophobia. Some of them went as far as claiming that there was a lot of prejudice and xenophobia in the Icelandic society in general, but denied these existed within the company they worked for. They seemed to emphasize what might be perceived as a politically correct attitude and underlined as much as they could that all employees in the company stood on equal ground. They stated that no employee would ever be valued based on nationality, all would be judged by their ingenuity and abilities, as the company was looking for ingeniousness and smart solutions – and all would be paid according to their skills. However, after emphasizing equality within the firm and rejecting the use of generalizations, they often made a statement about Poles as a group, or as one of the bosses said: “The Poles think like other workers, but the thing with the Poles is that they always need a carrot, they don’t want to take on any responsibility or think independently, but I don’t want to generalize, it’s not right”. Then later he would go on and say: “The Poles are more grateful than the Portuguese, the Poles

understand the reorganization that needs to be done now, the Portuguese on the other hand do not... The Portuguese are different and I sometimes feel as if they are kids at kindergarten”.

Another informant put it like this: “... if we take the Portuguese for example, and then the Eastern bloc, if we take Poles, Latvians, Lithuanians and Russians as one unit, men from Eastern bloc countries, they think differently you know...”

As evident by these statement, the bosses would, despite denying the use of generalizations, generalize not only about nationalities, but also on much larger scales. Another prominent factor, also visible in the above statements, is that most of my informants spoke in a negative manner about the Portuguese in comparison to Poles.

Wages and perquisites were factors that no one seemed to agree about, but were frequently brought up. As mentioned previously, some claimed that every employee would be paid according to skills, regardless of nationality. Yet others stated that there was a great wage difference between the migrant workers and Icelanders, but that the Poles were content since their wages in Iceland were so much higher than what they could earn in Poland. Still others stated that perquisites, such as free lodgings, plane tickets to Poland and not having to pay for gasoline to get to work, would compensate for the wage difference. Lastly, it was also stated that the Icelanders were working according to a piecework system that the Poles were denied to partake in. Moreover, that the Icelandic workers would make the Poles do work that fell under piecework routine and in that way increase the workload on the Poles, even though the Poles would not get paid accordingly, in order to get the job done faster and increase their own salaries.

My informants distanced themselves from discrimination and prejudice by saying that neither occurred at their work place. However, they confirmed that they were aware of it taking place in society in general, as the Poles had spoken of experiencing both discrimination and prejudice. This might happen at the shops or out on the town, especially if the Poles hooked up with Icelandic girls. For as one of them said, referring to Icelandic men other than himself: “We don’t like just anyone fiddling with our girls”.

Moreover, an interesting point was made by one of the bosses. He was actually the only one who did not make an effort to create a distance between

the workplace and discrimination and prejudice, though he did distinguish himself from it. He claimed that Icelanders were very xenophobic, did not want to associate with foreigners and, consequently, used the language as a barrier and an excuse for not wanting to communicate with them or get to know them. “The Icelandic attitude goes like this: this is a foreigner, he doesn’t want to learn the language, we don’t understand him and he is taking our jobs away from us”.

But as he pointed out, Polish workers were brought to the country since Icelanders were reluctant to fill certain jobs and because they were considered “cheap labour”. Besides being considered “cheap labour”, the migrant workers were also seen as economically efficient since they usually didn’t have a family in Iceland and therefore didn’t have to attend to any family issues during working hours – as Icelanders often did. Though there were incidents when Polish workers had to ask for leave from work, in order to attend to their family in Poland. The incidents mentioned, concerning family issues, involved, among other things, adultery and alcohol abuse. In one case the wife, who still lived in Poland, had become pregnant while her husband was in Iceland and in another case a Polish man with drinking problems was left by his wife, who returned back to Poland with their child, after which his problems increased dramatically and he no longer attended his work properly.

In the search for efficient, low wage employees, it seemed as if none of the firms had looked to other countries for migrant labour and it was even stated that in spite of scraping the bottom, getting less and less qualified labour and suspicious characters from the agencies in Poland, there was never any serious consideration of recruitment of labour from other countries. Reflecting over the massive import of Polish labour during the economic boom, one of my interviewees stated the following: “During the economic upswing everybody came here, those who couldn’t get a job in Poland, those who couldn’t work in Poland because of a criminal conviction in Poland or those who just wanted to leave the country, all came to Iceland... whether they were thieves or murderers or whatever”.

Stealing tools is a classic

Theft seemed to be a known problem in all the firms, but as one of the bosses said: “Stealing tools is a classic, but the Poles don’t steal any more

than the Icelanders do. The Icelanders are no angels either. This does not depend on nationality...”.

He then told of an incident he had witnessed, where he had been contacted by the police since a package with tools from the company had been seized by the customs. The odd thing was that despite all evidence pointing in the direction of a Polish worker employed by the company, the boss said that he could not and would not believe that the man in question had stolen the tools. Even though the package had been seized by customs and was marked with the employee’s name and address in Poland, the boss insisted on the man being trustworthy and honest. Another told of tools disappearing and turning up at street markets in Poland, still marked with the company’s name. Yet another told of a container where tools were stored, being emptied the day after the Poles, who had been laid off, had turned them in. “The funny thing”, he said, “is that they had lined the tools up so neatly, that we took pictures of it, we were so impressed, and the next morning it was all gone”.

All of the bosses mentioned incidents like those listed above and usually there was plenty of evidence, but often the companies were not interested in pressing charges or making an effort to get them back since all the tools were covered by insurance. Also, none of the informants quite understood why the Poles stole tools from the firms and sent them to Poland, since sending the tools was more expensive than buying new tools in Poland, as the shipping fees from Iceland are extremely high.

Education and working methods

Most of my interviewees had strong doubts about Polish education and did not think that the workers actually went to formal schools, and usually migrant workers would not be asked for any certifications regarding education. My informants all seemed to agree upon the Poles using lies and deceptions in order to get jobs, and out of fear of being laid off, and that the Poles would claim to have whatever expertise needed or wished for by the company. It was also stated that after hiring the workers, based on incorrect information about their qualifications, the employer would often not discover the deception until much later, after having employing the worker for weeks or even months. Hence, the workers would actually be selling an expertise they didn’t have. As one of the bosses put it:

They would ask when they first arrived: "What kind of certification do you want? Do you want me to be a carpenter or perhaps a welder?"(...) The thing is, from what I understand, there is no technical education in Poland. It's more like if you work with a hammer, well, then you're a carpenter putting nails into roofs, and then you're a specialist in that field. Then that is what you do. If you put up doors, well, then that is your specialty.

My informants were not always in concordance and two of them, colleagues working close together at the same firm, had completely opposite views of the qualities and abilities of the Polish workers. One of them would claim that the Poles would not do a thing without being told what to do by a higher-ranking person. They would not even make the slightest adjustment that needed to be done, without getting an order from a boss to do so. The Portuguese, on the other hand, would have done the adjustments without even blinking an eye. This perspective seemed to be corroborated by others and only the colleague working at the same firm said the complete opposite, and claimed it was the other way around.

Despite being aware of the distortion inherent in generalizations, all my informants generalized about Poles in one way or another. They all, for example, praised the Poles for being punctual. "You can set the clock by the Poles, never fails", one of them stated. The bosses seemed very content with this ability they had assigned to the Poles and thought of it as a distinctive feature for the Polish groups. As to why the Polish workers never showed up late, took long breaks or left work early, the general ideas seemed to be that it was a natural asset they had, plus they were afraid of bosses and of being fired. The fact that they were actually picked up in the morning, and brought to work and back again at the end of the day, did not seem to have anything to do with it. There were also stories of Poles trying to get away with as little work as possible, groups that would put up a guard that would warn them if the foreman was coming, then everyone would take their post and pretend to be working, and as soon as the foreman was gone they would all sit down again. As I understood it, incidents like that were rare, but happened from time to time. Another thing the bosses agreed upon was the need of Poles to work in groups and usually this need was linked to their lack of language skills in Icelandic.

Language and communications

All my interviewees mentioned lack of Icelandic language skills as a major problem obstructing communications with Polish migrant workers, as preventing integration both at work and in society in general, and impeding progress at work. They all mentioned the immigrants lacking interest in learning the language and/or finding it too difficult to master. Skaptadóttir (2007, p. 51) states that the majority of immigrants in Iceland, who participated in her study, mentioned not knowing the Icelandic language as the greatest obstacle and the most difficult task to deal with, when they first arrived and settled in. This was also mentioned by all of my informants and, again in accordance with Skaptadóttir's findings, my participants stated that some of the Polish immigrants they had worked with were mainly interested in learning work related words and phrases that would make it easier for them to understand what went on at work, since their purpose for coming to Iceland was merely temporary work. The lack of English skills, among the Polish workers, became evident in expressions like: "The thing with the Poles is that most of them don't know any English when they arrive here, men from other countries do, but not the Poles. I don't know how it is, maybe they don't learn any English at all".

Poles were also said to be willing to learn the language if they had moved to Iceland on permanent basis, this too corroborates with Skaptadóttir's findings and that of a large survey conducted by the Social Science Institute at the University of Iceland (Jónsdóttir, Harðardóttir and Garðarsdóttir: 2009). Some of the bosses reflected over their own role when it came to the language requirements and why many Poles didn't speak Icelandic in spite of being in the country for years. They stated that even if the Poles did learn Icelandic they would speak English to them, either because they didn't have the patience to speak Icelandic with them, or they simply forgot that they spoke the language, since the majority of Poles didn't. "There are many who have lived here over a length of time and still they only speak English... I think it might be because they are not given a chance to learn Icelandic, we don't have the patience to speak Icelandic to them. It's much quicker to tell them what to do in English".

Moreover, it was also mentioned quite often that with every group of Polish workers there would either be an interpreter, or someone in the

group would speak English and, hence, would function as a spokesman for the group and an interpreter. Customarily, that person would also be given the role of a supervisor for the respective group of Poles, since he would be able to communicate with bosses and other workers while on site. This was thought of, by the bosses, as a possible conflict maker within the groups, as those who spoke English were usually young men who did not have authority to give their seniors orders, according to Polish tradition. Moreover, if they did, they would get in trouble at the camp after work for giving orders to their seniors.

A scent of profound arrogance

Yet another prominent issue was how condescending my informants could be while talking about Polish workers, and one could at times sense profound arrogance in their attitudes. What surprised me was how much they praised the Polish workers in one sentence and yet they would disparage the same workers by saying degrading things about them in the next, but in a caring, protective way, as if the men were children that needed to be taken care of. As one of my informants said about a man he had praised dearly and said was a dear friend:

(...) he lives here, he is Polish and he is a carpenter. He is so well-behaved, and he is no trouble at all. He does whatever he is told. If I would tell him to sweep the floors, he would sweep the floors and not a word about it (...) Naturally, he has become like an Icelander, he lives here in the city, shows up in the mornings and he always comes home at night (...) Again, if we take the Eastern bloc countries (...) these men absolutely fascinate me, they have so many qualities.

The Polish men were viewed by all the bosses as wanting to keep to themselves, form groups and be with “their own people”, both while working and during breaks. This was in some cases seen as a problem, as it could create consistent closed groups on site. Furthermore, most of my informants emphasized that it tended to be more difficult to get foreigners to work together than to get foreigners to work with Icelanders. In order to prevent such groups from forming, forced group mixing of foreigners from different countries was tried. But, according to my informant, making Poles work with, for example, the Portuguese was impossible as there

would be endless conflicts and power struggle between them. However, this was not mentioned as a problem when it came to cooperation between Icelanders and Poles, nor Icelanders and the Portuguese, nor Icelanders and workers from other countries, for that matter. Moreover, having two or more men of the same nationality working together was not well seen and so, as one of my informants said: “Despite having two highly skilled Portuguese carpenters, I do not allow them to work together, in order to prevent group formation... I never let them work together, except during the weekends, then the men are allowed to enjoy themselves (i. dúlla sér) a little, but apart from that, I never let them be together”.

Discussion

Migration in Iceland is increasing fast and during the economic efflorescence a great number of Poles were employed in low-skilled, low-wage jobs in the construction industry in Iceland. The sector suffered great contractions during the economic meltdown. As a consequence, unemployment rates in the sector rose rapidly, and Poles who had been working in the construction industry became the largest group among unemployed foreign labourers. In reminiscing the economic heyday and the mass import of Polish workers to Iceland the bosses in the industry seemed to make an effort to keep an open mind and a positive attitude towards Poles, and it even looked as if they were preferred over workers from other countries. Despite this, one could not overlook the tendency of the bosses to generalize and degrade the workers, while at the same time they were trying to create a distance between their person and their company on the one hand, and prejudice and discrimination on the other.

The bosses emphasized equality, rejected generalizations and ideas about employing workers based on nationality, while still claiming to prefer Poles over labourers from other countries and generalizing about the workers on both broad and narrow scales. At the same time, they claimed that all employees were hired and paid according to skills and abilities. There was, however, a great inconsistency between the statements of the bosses when it came to wages and perquisites of foreign labour. Some stated that there was no wage difference, others claimed that there was an enormous wage difference between the migrant workers and Icelanders, and some stated that perquisites compensated for the wage

difference. It was also stated that Poles were denied to work according to the piecework wage system that the Icelanders were offered and that the Icelandic workers took advantage of this by transferring parts of their assignments to the Poles, in order to increase their own wages.

Polish workers were said to be brought to Iceland since the locals were reluctant to fill certain jobs and because they were considered “cheap labour”. In order to meet the demand for cheap and efficient labour, none of the firms seemed to have given recruitment of labourers from other countries any serious consideration, despite getting less and less qualified workers from Poland.

Theft was seen as a general problem in all the companies. Stealing tools was, however, not connected to nationality and some of the bosses were reluctant to accept that the Polish employees stole from their firm, despite existing evidence.

The level of education among the Polish workers was a matter of doubt among the bosses and most of them thought the workers had no formal education, and usually the workers would not be asked for educational certifications. The Polish workers were also suspected of deceiving the Icelandic employers in order to get jobs and, therefore, often thought to be recruited on false premises.

The lack of Icelandic language skills amongst the Polish workers was seen as a major problem hindering communications and preventing integration. The workers were seen as lacking interest in learning the language, although some of them were interested in learning work related words and phrases and some were said to be willing to learn Icelandic if they had moved to the country on permanent basis.

Despite showing willingness to keep an open mind and to be politically correct, being aware of the distorted picture drawn by generalizations and stating that all employees were treated fairly within the firm, a scent of unfathomed arrogance still lingered in the air and the bosses seemed to view the Polish workers as children in need of their praise, protection and restraint. The workers were seen as wanting to form groups with their “own people” and cooperation and communication between foreigners from different countries was seen as close to impossible, because of an almost congenital power struggle and unavoidable tension, while no foreigners were seen as having problems cooperating with Icelanders – implying the natural order of things.

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