

Do you speak art?

Polish artists in Ireland in the context of globalisation and internationalisation. Moving to a new country and living in a different environment and its impact on Polish artists.

Introduction

R. Ligocka – a Polish (Jewish roots) famous painter and writer said when she was opening her exhibition in Stuttgart in the late 90ies that “migrant is someone who lost everything but not their accent.”

This sharp observation applies rather to the emigration waves within Europe and to Amerika before 2004 when the decision to leave a country often meant not to be able to go back there even for a long period.

The current immigration from Poland to Ireland, UK, Sweden and other countries with the open labour market does not carry this heavy burden typical for people who feel cut off from their home culture and can't maintain the regular contact to this.

1. Polish emigration - overview

There are between 12 and 15 Mil. Polish emigrants living all over the world. Around 5 millions of them were born in Poland; the rest are the second generation emigrants, born in the hosting countries.

The history of Polish emigration started in the 19th century, with new waves at the beginning of the 20th, followed by emigration after the 2nd WW, around 1956 and then in the 70ties, 80ties.

Many of these people are bilingual; some of the second generation immigrants lost their Polish or speak it as the second language.

A distinction between the first and the second generation of emigration seems to be important as well as between a short (under five years) and long-term migrations. As depending on the contact to peoples' home culture and the command of the language of the hosting country some people the question of identity arise. Some people will have difficulties with what country/culture to associate themselves. The same problem might face the second generation of bilingual immigrants' children. This fact indicates that “identity” and cultural affiliation are also a process and might be a subject to changes and renegotiations.¹

1. Migration and Cultural Inclusion in the European City, they support the argument that group culture “should be seen as the result of constant renegotiation over time of group

The character the emigration from Poland before 2004 was determined by the fact that most emigrants left the country because of the political situation, were asylum seekers and for a long time did not have a clear citizen status and full rights in the hosting countries

The last wave of the exodus from Poland took place after May 2004 after the enlargement of the EU.

Within two years 2 million people left the country. A vast number of them are young professionals (average 23-35) with completed 3rd level education. Because of the linguistic barriers, immigrants very often start their careers in new countries working in positions commensurate to their educational abilities. However, many of these people are determined to prove their skills in the world, to meet new challenges and to build up an interesting life that includes more than only financial satisfaction. Moreover, for many Poles, it was a decisive experience to notice that despite the communistic past in Poland and quite grey existence in the country their education and their skills are competitive and the cultural achievements of Polish artists present very high standards and can enrich and stimulate the cultural offer in the countries where they live. These facts might explain the high motivation which can be observed within the Polish Community in Ireland to present their culture, and to organise a vast number of events.

2. The Poles in Ireland

Currently, over 300 000 Poles live in Ireland what makes them the biggest minority group in the country reaching 10% of the population.

The Irish market has very quickly adapted to the new clientele with offers and services being increasingly targeted at Polish customers. In September 2006 The National Economic Social Council (NESC) published the report *Managing Migration in Ireland: A Social and Economic Analysis*. The report emphasises the positive effects of migration and states its benefits, such the easing of significant skill shortages, economic growth due to the increased size of the domestic market and increased income from taxes and social insurance. It was also stated that if Polish people would work in Ireland in the

identity and boundaries”1. Neill, William J.V. and Hanns-Uve Schwedler, *Migration and Cultural Inclusion in the European City*, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007

1 Neill, William J.V. and Hanns-Uve Schwedler, *Migration and Cultural Inclusion in the European City*, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, p. 4

fields appropriate to their education, so if this “brain waste” was avoided, Ireland could have increased its GNP by an additional 0,9 per cent.²

It might be seen that Ireland and UK made the best deal within EU through opening their labour markets and the borders as they received young, dynamic, open-minded and to a big extent well-educated people.

. They want to maintain contact with the home culture because it is their home culture and also because of some undefined plans for going back. Most of these people want to contribute to the achievements and values of their culture to the new society. Because of some or of the language barrier which might remain a problem for the first generation of immigrants the cultural events are probably the best opportunity to present and share what they find “they are” in a non-descriptive way.

It is important to stress that a phenomenon has taken place in Ireland over last three years. Over 300 000 people have arrived in a new country with no or basic language skills and although there were no structures, strategies in place it can be stated that these people became an integrated part of the Irish society. There are almost no problems in terms of the assimilation or problems caused by cultural or mental differences. This can be seen as “natural” integration process, however, the appropriate term to describe it seem to be the “co-culturality” with a still very limited exchange between both communities. It is interesting that despite very limited knowledge about each other cultures both Polish and Irish seem to share the view that both nations have much in common and that their get so well with each other. Indeed there are some similarities in the Irish and Polish history – both are Catholic countries occupied for centuries, fighting for their independence and the language, both countries experienced emigration and are countries in the transition process from very poor economies. These historical and cultural aspects made as well as the internal social sphere of support among the Polish Community itself made the integration process very smooth. Especially if we compare it with previous migration waves to European countries such as Germany, France, Holland where no integration policy was in place, and the cultural differences were too big to enhance the “natural” integration. France pursued a controversial policy of assimilation, which often provoked the opposite effect. Germany with over 3 millions Turkish people living in the country and a few hundred thousands of immigrants from different countries are just starting to review their attitude presented in

² *ibid.* p. xvi

the slogan “Deutschland ist kein Einwanderungsland” (Germany is not a country of immigration)³,

Ireland has an enormous chance and the potential to introduce a new approach towards integration in the European context. The advantages brought with the immigration seemed to be acknowledged. They are attempts to prepare appropriate strategies and to define its role as host country through addressing questions and issues around multiculturalism and integration.

I think it is too early to speak about Ireland’s consistent migration policy. The existing integration programmes are primarily aimed at refugees, asylum seekers and the Irish Traveller community or the provision of basic migrants’ needs like housing, employment rights, combating racism need to be extended.⁴

The potential of art and culture as communication and integration tool enhancing mutual tolerance, broadening the knowledge and contributing to intercultural cross-fertilisation is well recognised but in terms of activities remains still rudimentary.

to encompass the new scope of cultural diversity.

There are three main reasons why the intercultural exchange should be developed and promoted as a vital area in Ireland and other immigration countries as:

It is an opportunity

- The immigration opens a new dimension of creative cultural potential which needs to be harvested and cultivated. There is a great chance to enrich the cultural offer in Ireland and to present works of Irish artists in other countries. The immigrants are very keen to share their cultural achievements with the hosting society, and they see this as a form of repaying for the hospitality and opportunities they found. More and more Irish are interested in Polish or multicultural events as everybody knows at least one person from Poland or other countries. These multicultural interests need opportunities
- Cultural exchange contributes to cultural cross-fertilisation and helps to eradicate xenophobia and social exclusion. It is a tool to broaden the knowledge and to enhance the cultural experience especially in terms of the CE European countries which culture is known only among small circles of experts what is largely the result of the iron curtain and the political situation in Europe before

³ Modood, Tariq and Pnina Werbner, eds. *The Politics of Multiculturalism in the New Europe. Racism, Identity and Community*. New York: Martin’s Press, 1997, p.75 – 80

⁴ *ibid.* p. 153

- '89. It is also a very important tool to enhance the tolerance for different values, culture etc. which is an indisputable necessity for Europe and a chance for Ireland to become the example country for the European mainland policies
- Contact with the home culture stabilises migrants and creates a feeling of continuity. Therefore the strong motivation of Polish community to communicate their art and culture to Irish and other audiences, but is based on voluntary involvement lacking resources needs to be supported and enhanced from both the Polish and Irish authorities.

This lack of any platform to facilitate this exchange and to organise Polish cultural events in Ireland provoked me to found ArtPolonia, Lab for intercultural cooperation and exchange in Sept. 2006 which to date is the only organisation with this focus. ArtPolonia is a voluntary body being run along the full-time employment. The Polish Embassy supports the events with some funding and promotion, but it even does not have a department for culture. Because of the strange political situation in Poland over the last two years, nothing but some promises could be reached. During one year of our activities we were able to organise 5 bigger events including the first festival to promote works of Polish artists resident in Ireland - Polish p-ART-y Summer, where we presented 50 artists representing from film and animation, different musical styles till painting, graphic, sculpture etc. (programme to be presented) The event aimed to create a meeting point for Polish artists and their audiences and to create new pathways of Polish-Irish cooperation. Polish amateur and professional artists working in Ireland were given the opportunity to show their creative potential to an international audience and add variety to the Irish arts scene.⁵ The project was realised without any funding by the Polish government, the Arts Council or the Dublin City Council and succeeded thank to received support in kind

Through the LAB's homepage, I have been approached by many Irish organisers of the cultural events and by many Polish artists. Organisers of the Culture Night, the Fringe Festival, the Dublin Theatre Festival, St. Patrick's Festival and the Festival of World Cultures were asking for advice and co-operation on festival programming as their main problem is that they do not know what is available, whom to contact and also how to promote the events among the Polish Community when they decide to present Polish

⁵ ArtPolonia. www.artpolonia.org/ (accessed June 20, 2007).

programme or to start a cooperation. This tendency for interest in presenting Polish culture in Ireland is growing. ArtPolonia received during one year of our activities more than 30 requests from Irish arts organisations, Festivals, Media representing or promoting Polish cultural programme and asking for support or cooperation. In my opinion, many arts professionals in Ireland noticed both that there is a huge potential audience and a source of cultural stimulation. There is also growing interest among the Irish population in Polish culture as probably every Irish person knows at least one Polish person and this often positive experience gives the motivation to experience more of the country, or its culture.

Polish artists resident in Ireland often faces the same problem as they do not know the existing structures, the ways or the “culture of co-operation”. It takes them at least one year establish relevant contacts or to find out where to apply for jobs, cooperation opportunities or how to join the local artistic communities.

There are also other Polish events in Dublin

- 2 x the Polish Film Festival in IFI (organised by one individual girl, supported by the Polish Film Foundation, Polish Embassy and AIB)
- There is a big exhibition of the Polish paintings from the 19th century until the modernism in the National Gallery in Dublin
- During the last two Fringe Festivals, Polish productions were shown, this year's best actor of the Fringe Festival was From Wroclaw, Teatr Polski
- Cracow Klezmer Band (now Bester Quartet) toured through the country with 14 concerts – most of them sold out
- Last year Polish Community was represented in the St. Patrick's Parade and a concert by Polish very famous traditional musicians took place. The project initiated and financially run by Dublin City Council won this year's parade.
- Polish Cultural week took place in Belfast
- The concert by a foremost Polish jazzman T. Stanko filled the Vicar Street venue with a capacity for 800 people; the audience was international
- The Polish community especially has a very developed media network with several newspapers, a TV programme and various homepages providing information and services

From the perspective of the intercultural cooperation and exchange which is the main focus of my work following summary and recommendations can be presented

- - There is certainly awareness for the advantages of promoting cultural diversity through intercultural dialogue, but there is no dedicated infrastructure for this “diversity is still a declaration of good intentions and acknowledgement. While national agencies like the Arts Council, Create and Culture Ireland indicate that within their grant schemes they also include intercultural projects, these opportunities are not immediately visible” The National Economic Social Forum (NESF) published a report on *The Arts, Cultural Inclusion and Social Cohesion* in January 2007. The report finds inter alia that legal and policy requirements to increase participation in the arts are weak, data information on access to the arts is still lacking, and the funding situation needs to be improved.⁶
- There is a demand on the part of Irish arts institutions to work with ethnic communities, but the volunteer-led organisations can not offer inexhaustible resources for collaboration.
- Events organised within Dublin’s cultural sector to promote cultural diversity through intercultural dialogue are subject to individual initiatives and show no common approach.
- Polish community organisations are very motivated to participate in the promotion of cultural diversity through intercultural dialogue. However a lack of resources and recognition limits their working capacity.

Finally and before I present some works and comments by Polish artists resident in Ireland, I would like to address some theoretical questions raised by the organisers and participants of this conference and to stress some controversial aspects of them.

⁶ National Economic and Social Forum (NESF), *The Arts, Cultural Inclusion and Social Cohesion*, Dublin: National Economic and Social Forum, 2007, p. 113-125

An interesting theoretical reference for describing the processes taking place in the new multicultural Ireland seems to be the concept of “transculturality” by W. Welsch.

According to Welsch, only transculturality can define the processes happening in a culturally diverse society, namely interconnectedness and entanglement. The prefix ‘trans’ characterises the advancement, hybridity and transition of cultural identity through reciprocity and interaction. Though it is not a new concept and the transculturality or exchange, seem to be the oldest and most common practice within the arts as there is and was probably no one so-called purely national arts school within Europe, but probably also in the most countries in the world.

Also, the co-cultural theories by Prof. Mark P. Orbe’s are a good tool to describe the current development in Ireland.

[t]he word co-culture is used here to avoid the negative or inferior connotations of past descriptions (e.g., *subculture*, *minority*) while also acknowledging the great diversity of influential cultures that simultaneously exist in this country.⁷

The intercultural cross-fertilisation used to be very common and appreciated practice within Europe at least till the 2 WW. It’s true that this practice did not prevent Europe from the destructive concept of the national states in the XIX century and from racist wars and destruction, but it doesn’t mean this concept can’t be adopted today without its devastating side effects. I hope this is the right and necessary concept for Ireland and Europe.

In this study, the terms ‘cultural exchange’ and ‘intercultural dialogue’ will focus on local forms of direct dialogue between people of different cultural backgrounds. Initiatives enhancing the artistic exchange of ideas, values and traditional practices between participants will, therefore, be the centre of attention.

⁷ Orbe, p. 1