



**White Immigrants:  
A Portrait of the  
Polish Community  
in London**

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## **White Immigrants: a portrait of the Polish community in London**

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I am in the process of preparing some research on Polish migrants to London. The primary aim has been to explore the problems confronted by this group - which is now likely to become larger with the accession of Poland to the EU. But what I am finding is that by looking at their problems I am becoming aware of how much they overlap with those of black migrants. This in turn has alerted me to a number of difficulties with conventional ideas about discrimination and racism, and persuaded me that a study exploring the position of a white migrant community can also help to clarify the part actually played by 'race' in hindering settlement and social mobility of newcomers.

Since the 1950s most immigration was made up of people who were visibly identifiable as immigrants and they experienced a great deal of anti immigrant feeling and racism on account of this. The government pandered to the hostility by introducing immigration laws aimed at restricting the number of people coming into the country. First in 1962 there was the Commonwealth Immigrants Act which initiated an entry system for Commonwealth workers based on vouchers. By restricting the number of vouchers available for the unskilled the act reduced the flow of immigrants from the Caribbean and the Indian subcontinent. In 1968 Harold Wilson introduced further restrictions through a New Commonwealth Immigrants Act which confined the unrestricted right of entry to those Commonwealth citizens who could demonstrate a close ancestral relationship with the United Kingdom.

By making concessions to the racist and vocal wing of popular opinion the government appeared to back up the view that immigrants were the problem and therefore immigration had to stop. From the Government's viewpoint restricting immigration would help to create an environment in which good relations could be developed between newcomers and the indigenous population and racial equality could eventually be achieved. The government's contribution to bringing this about was firstly the Race Relations Act of 1965 and a further Act in 1968. The 1965 Act established conciliation machinery in the form of the Race Relations Board to deal with complaints of discrimination. This legislation made it unlawful to discriminate on grounds of race, colour, ethnic or national origin in public places or transport however key areas such as employment and housing were left out. This was corrected by the 1968 Act which aimed to prevent discrimination on the same grounds but extended it to include employment, housing, the provision of goods and services and also in advertisements. The Act endowed the Race Relations Board with power to investigate complaints and bring proceedings under the Act. It also set up the Community Relations Commission which assumed

responsibility for promoting harmonious race relations and advising the home secretary in this area.

These Acts may have helped curbing the most brutal forms of racial discrimination which in many places took the form of a colour bar but when it came to getting rid of discrimination more generally they were rather clumsy tools. A great deal of discrimination is very subtle and the manifestation of inequality in the end becomes the clearest evidence that discrimination occurs. This was of course not just any old inequality; that would be dealt with through the gradual evolution to socialism; this was the inequality which occurred between black and white. So what ended up happening was that inequality between black and white people became evidence of discrimination so the way of overcoming discrimination would be to achieve equality between black and white. In this way they lost the whole focus on *relations* between the races, how we feel about and interact with each other is too intangible for policy makers. Inequalities appear far more measurable and manageable; particularly when the categories for measuring are black and white.

Overcoming racial discrimination and racial equality were two sides of the same coin; the question was how was this to be achieved? On one hand there were those who thought that by ensuring equality of opportunity you would eventually arrive at equality of outcome. There were others who believed that while one group of people were continually subject to all manner of different racisms, there was no way that equality of opportunity could actually be achieved. This group became focused on equality of outcomes and since these people were those who ran the municipal authorities where there was a particularly high concentration of ethnic minorities, these people became the authorities on how race relations ought to be carried out.

In practice there was of course still a great deal of racism, discrimination and inequality. At the same time there were carrots and sticks in place to ensure you got the colours right. Since racial equality showed that a borough had come a long way to overcoming discrimination boroughs tried to ensure not that they were race blind in what they did, but rather that their tenancies and staffing reflected the ethnic composition of the area. The fact this was very seldom achieved was not the issue; the issue became the principles on which it was based. Since race issues revolved around principles the whole debate rapidly polarised and escalated, the initial focus on race relations went out of the window and little room was left for common sense.

Those who were opposed to equality of outcome pointed out how such policies divided people into groups, discriminated against whites and generally

undermined race relations. Such policies were also based on notions which were subversive to liberal equality. Those in favour felt they were actually achieving equality and good relations between the races, the others were seen as racists and part of the racist institution which stood in their way. Very little attention was actually given to the processes and causes of inequality and how it was measured, the varied mechanisms of discrimination and how they impacted on a person's life, and how relations were actually developing between different groups of people and what impact policy had.

As a consequence of all this the race relations industry has become so firmly locked into colour it does not yet have the tools to deal with a whole host of issues relating to immigration per se. The possibility that there are difficulties in having people from many different countries living together has never been properly acknowledged within the context of multi-cultural policy. The unwritten assumption seems to be that the acknowledgment of these difficulties undermines the possibility of a multicultural society. However they do not. Rather these issues and tensions should be seen as surmountable problems which we need to work out how to deal with.

More recently the race relations industry has been challenged by the presence of large numbers of white immigrants (particularly from the former Yugoslavia) who also experience discrimination and inequality but to whom their colour based principles can't apply. This difficulty highlights some of the underlying weaknesses of the race relations industry. The Poles for the moment are one such group of people; they have been little thought about or noticed, they can visibly blend into the white population and therefore the race relations paradigm has not yet been applied. My hope is that by picking on the white population I can explore many of the dimensions of immigration without the issues being clouded by the assumption of racial discrimination. We may then actually be in a better position to understand some of the issues which all immigrants go through and will be better placed to grasp the impact of 'race'.

The research is based on extended contact with Poles living in London and on a pilot study with ten Polish immigrants who have been living and working here for a period of less than five years. They are not necessarily a representative sample and I hope to considerably extend the sample in the main stage of the research. Those interviewed were either men with families back in Poland or young women who had come over here after finishing their studies. I interviewed one married couple who were over here as well. I have not yet interviewed any Poles who are married to English people or who have business visas. Nor have I interviewed any single Polish men. The sample is far too small to make generalizations rather I would prefer it to be seen as a discussion of issues arising which should be further explored. It is very possible

that when I have conducted the 100 or so interviews which I would like to do the picture will considerably change.

In the following paper I start by looking at issues of citizenship and legal status and show how this sets the parameters for everything else. While legal status is of course fundamental its impact is mediated by many different factors and it is these which I will explore next. One of the first is of course their relationship with the job market, what kind of employment are they looking for and what is accessible to them, how does this fit in with their long term plans, are they planning to leave or stay. Then there is the issue of existing social networks, are they pioneers here in terms of their particular ethnic group or were others here before them who have helped to establish institutions and networks which will make it easier to stay. Finally to what extent are they becoming part of British society? Are they integrating or do they prefer to form their own community on the side?

### **Citizenship and legal status**

Poles have a long history of immigration to Britain but here I will focus on that which took place after the Second World War. During the war 248 000 officers and ranks found themselves under British operational command and at the end of the war an estimated 160 000 were to be resettled here.<sup>1</sup> Although they were joined by 33 000 dependents and other Polish civilians in the late 1940s a large number did eventually return home.<sup>2</sup> This was one of the underlying intentions of the policy during those times. Of those who remained attempts to integrate Poles into civilian life occurred under conditions which were very unfavourable to them. One of the stipulations was that no Pole should be employed in any grade in any industry where British labour was available<sup>3</sup>. However even where attempts were made to recruit them into industries such as mining or farm labouring where there were severe labour shortages, tremendous resistance from the unions meant that little recruitment took place. While some professional people were able to find openings in civilian life others were handicapped by their lack of mastery of the English language, lack of knowledge of British work methods and suspicion of foreign qualifications. Consequently very many of these professional people did unskilled work.

Employment was also rendered inaccessible by the policy of accommodating Poles in service camps located in rural areas far from the employment centres. The idea of building new camps closer to employment areas was rejected on account of the resistance expressed by local people. Conditions in the camps were recognised as being well below the standards which would

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<sup>1</sup> Sword K with Davies N, Chiechanowski J 1989 *The Formation of the Polish Community in Great Britain 1939-1950* School of Slavonic and East European Studies University of London p. 247

<sup>2</sup> Sword K 1996 *Identity in Flux: The Polish Community in Great Britain* School of Slavonic Studies University of London p.28

<sup>3</sup> Sword et al 1989 *op cit* p.256

be accepted by any British working man. However they were kept there for as long as possible in the hope that this might encourage them to go home. Poles were seen as a burden and nuisance, rather than an asset<sup>4</sup>. In keeping with this there was tremendous resistance to naturalizing them as British citizens despite Churchill's pledge at Yalta in 1945:

In any event, His Majesty's Government will never forget the debt they owe to the Polish troops who have served them so valiantly, and for those who have fought under our command, I earnestly hope that it may be possible to offer the citizenship of and freedom of the British Empire, if they so desire.....But as far as we are concerned, we should think it an honour to have such faithful and valiant warriors dwelling among us as if they were men of our own blood.<sup>5</sup>

Consequently Poles were issued with an Aliens Registration Certificate and after five years of living in Britain in a civilian capacity were eligible to apply for naturalization in keeping with the process as it currently stood.

In this respect Polish immigrants were at a disadvantage compared to the Commonwealth immigrants who were encouraged to come here during the period of economic growth following the Second World War. Following the 1948 British Nationality Act Commonwealth and colonial citizens had automatic rights to British Citizenship, and expected to be treated as equals on coming to the 'mother country'. However they were sorely disappointed. The British Nationality Act was a product of internal debate which had arisen (with US pressure) as part of the creation of the United Nations and was poorly understood by the ordinary British citizen. While the ordinary British citizen might have been very happy with their Empire they had little regard for the responsibilities it entailed and regarded immigrants from the Commonwealth as being every bit as alien as the Poles. However unlike the Poles there appeared to be no end to their immigration, and when subjected to racism and discrimination they did not have the possibility of moving elsewhere. So even though Commonwealth immigrants had rights to be here, and had been invited over (to help build the infrastructure necessary for a fully functioning Welfare state), they were perceived as an unstoppable tide of aliens who took their jobs, their housing and their social security. And these immigrants, unlike the Poles couldn't blend into the background but were identifiable by their skin colour. So people with a darker skin colour became the focus of intense animosity and it was on this that the whole debate started to evolve.

However the Poles were also subject to discrimination. Keith Sword carried out interviews with first generation Poles and found out that there had been complaints when Poles got housing (in preference to 'our boys' who had

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<sup>4</sup> Sword et al *op cit* p.309

<sup>5</sup> Sword et al 1989 *op cit* p.232

fought in the war) and they were discriminated against in shops, in schools and also in the employment market. One of Sword's respondents thought that his early experiences of discrimination explained why even today he had a feeling he didn't belong:

"If I were to lie on a psychiatrists couch, I think I might trace it back to early childhood and going to a shop in Finchley Road when I was three or four years old. I remember getting some very unpleasant vibes from the shopkeeper. We had just gone in for some ice-cream. My mother couldn't then speak English...could just about get by. And there was a very very unpleasant shop assistant who obviously was wondering what were all these foreigners doing coming over here. And I wonder if it hasn't sort of 'stayed' with me. It must have left scars. I remember the incident very clearly"<sup>6</sup>

Sword concludes:

"Poles naturally felt themselves to be outsiders vis-a vis British society, and despite being a 'white' minority, they experienced a level of social and professional discrimination which might seem surprising to those brought up in the more tolerant, cosmopolitan atmosphere of post 1960s Britain. As older generation Poles frequently observe with some irony: "we were not only 'foreigners', we were bloody foreigners"<sup>7</sup>.

Although they were discriminated against, this was nothing like to the same extent as Commonwealth immigrants. This may have been partly because they were fewer in number and getting even fewer when, under the pressures of discrimination, they chose to re-immigrate, and partly because they lived in camps where their presence was less likely to be felt. Finally one of the most important reasons why they were subject to less discrimination was because they were not so easily identifiable and as white immigrants they were not subject to the gamut of derogatory assumptions which for some a darker skin colour implied. However we should keep in mind that discrimination is not only about skin colour but about the whole range of circumstances which influence the relationship between newcomers and the people who are already there.

Polish immigrants cannot normally claim rights to reside here. The one exception are Polish Roma, who came here a few years ago in substantial numbers, although all of those seeking asylum (except one family) have subsequently, in theory at least, been sent back. The main capacity in which Poles enter this country is as tourists or students. As tourists Poles are allowed to stay here six months although they are not allowed to work. As students they may stay for up to four years on a student visa as long as they apply for extensions on their initial student visa and are prepared to pay the high costs of private tuition fees. However even with a fully paid English

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<sup>6</sup> Sword K 1996 op cit p.167

<sup>7</sup> Sword K 1996 op cit p.156



course or money to show you can support yourself, neither the tourist or student visa is guaranteed. In fact from each coach of Poles entering this country normally a couple of the less streetwise are sent back. Since entry to this country is not guaranteed, those who are working here informally on a long-term basis are reluctant to leave. These leads to the paradoxical situation where it is actually lack of legal status which encourages people to stay.

This means that most Poles are here in a very limited capacity, without any of the rights, which go with residency or citizenship. Very many Poles of course overstay their visas and if found out will automatically be sent back. The Poles who are here work in the poorly paid sections of the labour market where British citizens are unwilling to work<sup>8</sup>. Since they have no rights to housing or welfare (apart from the Polish Roma) it is unlikely that even the most cautious xenophobes would find them threatening. They also constitute a less visible part of the population in terms of where they live and the work.

There are of course exceptions to this. Either through marriage or by obtaining a business visa some Poles do gain rights of residency and eventually citizenship, but neither of these routes is automatic; in some sense these entitlements have to be earned. It is usually men who choose to legitimise their status through business visas; however only a few choose this route. There are various motivations for doing so. For example, they may have good connections in the formal economy, which they can only benefit from if they are legitimate and paying tax. Poles can do very well in the informal economy so to opt out of it, these formal links would have to be very good. I also came across a couple of men who felt uncomfortable functioning on the fringes, one explained that he wanted to feel more part of British society which is why he opted for a business visa. That particular respondent was here with his Polish wife and it appeared to be under her influence that the decision to go for a business visa had been made. There are also risks associated with working here illegally and it is not uncommon for Poles to be sent back. Sadly this happens most frequently when Poles spill the beans on other Poles. For example a Polish manager of a club had been working here for many years and was able to provide a kitchen job for a friend. When the club owner decided he no longer needed someone in that position the 'friend' blamed her manager and sold her manager to the police. This is not uncommon. When one Pole was turned down for a labouring job at a building site, he reported the whole site the police. In another instance a domestic quarrel took place in a property rented by many Poles; the person who left reported the house to the police. There are also tales of non-Polish landlords who will rent houses to immigrants and then apparently literally sell the information to

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<sup>8</sup> For more information on the informal economy see: Jordan B Duvell F 2002 Undocumented Immigrant Workers in London: Issues for Public Policy Paper prepared for IPPR Conference on Immigration Policy and Markets for Unskilled Labour 15 March 2002.

the home office. Whatever the truth in these stories the Polish community abounds with them, and the resulting insecurity pushes a few of them to opt for the legal route.

To obtain a business visa you need have skills which are in demand and show that you have a viable business plan. This will involve having a good knowledge of the environment you are working in and having contacts here who will write you letters in support. An immigrant is also unable to return to Poland while the bureaucratic wheels are churning and even when after sometimes 18 months their passport is returned the business visa only remains valid if England is the place where they spend the vast majority of their time. It also involves considerable financial outlay in the form of lawyers' fees. So while on one hand the business visa procedure is well institutionalised and lawyers proclaim their services in the same places where others advertise for cleaners, builders or flats, it actually involves making a significant commitment to this country and is not a decision which is undertaken lightly.

The other way of legitimising your status is through marriage and this is the route more frequently chosen by women. Polish women are more likely to be single than the Polish men who frequently have wife and children back home. They are also frequently better educated and speak better English and since they would never need to support a wife and children can be regarded as a better catch than a Polish man. They are also by fate or design more likely to work in environments where they might meet non-Poles. Most of the women I spoke to were as yet unmarried and most of their socialising was with other former immigrants. It was alleged by one of my male respondents that Polish women will marry people for their passports and a superficial look at the evidence suggest this does occur. When for example Basia was chastised by her father for having such a good for nothing Algerian boyfriend she pointed out that he did have a British passport. However many of those who do marry become British citizens and integrate fully into British society. However it is necessary to conduct further research to establish to what extent this is the case.

A person's legal status will have a considerable influence on their relationship with British society mainly by determining the kind of work they do which as we will see pushes them into functioning in a parallel economy. Some Poles do manage to break out of this, however this depends on individual initiative, the extent to which they manage to integrate with British citizens or meet someone they would like to marry, or alternatively learn the ropes sufficiently to set up a business for themselves. While at the moment the Poles here have few rights to work and no rights to residency, with the immanent entrance into Europe the current position of the Poles is likely to significantly

change. It will be interesting to see to what extent new patterns develop or whether things carry on along the same trajectory as before.

### **The nature of the job market**

The Poles who came after the war had rights to settlement and permanent work. Following on the heels of the post war economic growth there were many other migrants, mainly from the Commonwealth who followed along this route. They too saw themselves as long term migrants although many hung on to myths of return. Gradually, in response to racism and contractions in the economy, rights of residency were restricted, voucher schemes were imposed and eventually rights to work here legitimately were almost withdrawn. At the same time global travel became cheaper and a lot more accessible than it had been before. These dual trends have resulted in the development of a hidden economy which Polish migrants amongst others have helped to create. During the 1980s there was a brief window when many Poles came here 'seeking asylum', but once democracy was installed in Poland it was the possibilities for work in the informal economy which provided the same impetus for migration.

Most of the Poles coming here to Britain are fairly young people seeking work. This has been prompted by increasing levels of unemployment which particularly affect them and unless you are well connected your chances of finding work are slim. A stint abroad can also be lucrative providing the necessary financial capital to help set up a business or finish building your home. Finally travel has become very much easier than it was in the past when your passport had to be kept at the local police station. This has been facilitated by the regular coach journeys to and from Poland. In fact the tour operators are so used to dealing with migrant workers that it is standard procedure to offer advice about how to get back home if you don't get through the border, and once people have, the tour guide will, for a small fee, extend your ticket indefinitely from the standard two weeks which was necessary to help you get through the other side. Poland also has long tradition of labour emigration whether to a nearby town or city or further afield to Germany or even Chicago as Thomas and Znaniecki so faithfully recorded<sup>9</sup>. What is new in all this migration is the proportions who are women; traditionally it tended to be men.

Under communism there were high levels of female employment, facilitated by full employment policies and a certain amount of state provided childcare, however with the transition to a market driven economy this situation has somewhat changed. There is fact more discrimination than there was in the past and employers are reluctant to take on women who are of child rearing

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<sup>9</sup> Thomas W Znaniecki F 1958 *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* Dover Publications Inc New York.

age. There are even stories of private companies that manage to dodge the law and insist that a woman sign a contract to say she won't have children in the next four years. When women do find work this is often for private companies and highly insecure. Even if you do find work you are very unlikely to earn enough to be able to live on your own and young Poles are compelled to live with their parents until marriage and frequently for a long time after. There are also considerable attractions in going abroad, particularly to London. Most young Poles are very keen to learn English since this greatly increases their chances of employment and from my observations as an English teacher working in Warsaw this is something which young women take more seriously than young men. Going abroad for young women also appears to be a liberating experience and the young women I spoke to had acclimatised to a lifestyle which they said they wouldn't be able to lead back home.

For young men migration abroad has somewhat different connotations. Whereas for the women going abroad is something which they are keen to do before they get married and have children, for men migration is much more bound up with family responsibilities. Although very many work abroad in Austria and Germany after leaving school or college working abroad becomes much more important once they have a wife and children to support. Work is very difficult to come by in Poland particularly for those who have practical skills since Polish people tend to avoid employing plumbers, carpenters or electricians, preferring to do all those jobs themselves. However those who have precisely these types of skills can earn very good money in England. While as a labourer you may start off on three pounds fifty an hour, this can quickly go up to ten or even twenty pounds an hour for more skilled jobs once you have proved your worth. This kind of money is very difficult to earn in Poland but makes an invaluable contribution to the economy enabling people to finish building their houses (often employing Russian or Ukrainian immigrants back in Poland) and generally helping to keep body and soul together. While many men come over while their children are small, others come over when their children are grown up to help fund their university places or to help them on getting married to build their own home.

Once over here Polish immigrants occupy the poorest paid sectors doing jobs which are largely invisible but fundamental to the smooth running of a service economy. Polish men renovate houses and work on building sites but they can also be found working behind bars or as kitchen porters, picking fruit or in other areas of food production. Polish women can also be found cleaning houses, and hotels, looking after children or working as waitresses or in kitchens. Often the women work for cleaning agencies and the men work for building companies. While some have business visas and 'dodgy' insurance

numbers and therefore pay taxes others do not. These find employment in local businesses and some work for other Poles.

It is possible to argue that the reason they work in the poorly paid sections of the job market is because they function in the hidden economy, I suspect that once Poland joins the European Union and they can work here legally not a huge amount will change. There are various factors which conspire to keep them there. On one hand there are barriers of language although the appetite with which Poles have taken to learning English (particularly as stated previously, the women) suggests that it won't be long before these are overcome. Some of my respondents also complained that they are unfamiliar with the system and this would undoubtedly apply to the processes of seeking work. In Poland most jobs are found through personal connections and those who grew up particularly under communism may be daunted by the hoops you have to jump through in order to find formal work. There is also evidence to suggest that personal contacts play an important role in finding legitimate work over here however when you are working in what often is a literally 'hidden' economy you are unlikely to find many of these.

There are also certain advantages to this type of work. Firstly it is fairly easy to come by and Poles often learn about cleaning, waitressing or building jobs through other Poles. If work is found through someone you know the employer is likely to be tried and tested and providing an acceptable wage. These are also the sorts of jobs which are advertised at the 'Wailing Wall', the Newsagents opposite the Polish Cultural Centre where every newcomer knows they can look for work. Girls will sometimes walk from one restaurant to another until they find someone who will take them on. Also house renovation and cleaning happen within the home where it is easy to employ someone without paying any tax. Migrants are far more likely to take on this work than British people who need to show they have paid tax and national insurance. Also from an employer's point of view migrants who are more difficult to trace in the bureaucratic system are to be preferred.

It should also be pointed out that a Polish person's point of comparison is Poland and therefore they are likely to feel that they are actually doing perfectly well. After spending about a fifth of their wage (or less) on rent and food men often send the rest of their earnings home where it can actually go quite a long way. The women I spoke to complained about not being able to save money but on the other hand they had their own rooms, lived in a better standard of accommodation, were able to buy clothes and party all things which would have been very much more difficult were they back home. Few of the people I spoke to complained about their working conditions. Krzyszek, who did, attributed this to the fact that he was working for a Pole. English people had a good reputation as employers since they

would pay extra for working on a Sunday, paid better and were more lenient about taking time off work. A number of people I spoke to also said that work was respected here in a way it wasn't in Poland.

Finally by working in these environments they are able to maintain contacts with other Poles which provides a form of social capital which they otherwise might not have. Other Poles provide information about better work, cheap accommodation and the best places to shop; these networks also provide access to food and cigarettes that are brought over by those making regular trips over here. The only and rather contradictory disadvantage of these networks is that Poles are rather suspicious of and don't seem to particularly enjoy the company of other Poles. On a couple of occasions Poles would compare themselves to the Jews who apparently help other Jewish migrants, and ruefully ask why they couldn't be more like them.

Poles may become more integrated into mainstream employment once they are have legal status however, without further research it is difficult to say whether this is actually the case. I heard of Polish women who on marrying Englishmen worked in social work, or catering and integrated into the employment market like everyone else. However this of course will depend on the individual and their level of English and there are of course plenty of British women who once they are married and have children will choose not to work. It also appears that a number of Polish women are pairing up with fellow migrants from other countries who have already obtained British citizenship. Whether these women also become integrated on equal terms into the employment market is difficult to say. In the case of men, acquiring a business visa often enables them simply to function more effectively in their well established building niche. Therefore obtaining a business visa does not necessarily mean they become more integrated than before. Also one of the benefits which they have over their British competitors is their inroads to cheap Polish labour so they are likely to stick to this line of business employing others on the same basis as they were employed themselves.

The position of immigrants in the employment market is often seen in terms of a presence or absence of discrimination however I would suggest that an accurate understanding of their position requires a multi-dimensional view. What needs to also be taken into consideration is the immigrants' point of comparison and the extent to which his economic viewpoint is oriented around the sending country or where he or she is currently living. It is also necessary to take into consideration various advantages in terms of social capital which might be invisible to the external observer but which are invaluable to the immigrant concerned. Rather than seeing such immigrants as functioning on the fringes of society perhaps we would be better off broadening our concept of the employment market.

## **Cushion of community?**

As we saw in the previous section Poles have a rather ambivalent relationship with other Poles. On one hand they will socialise with each other which provides some kind of social support system but is a source of practical knowledge as well. On the other hand they are wary of each other, suspect others are out to use them, and may do the dirty on them once the tables are turned. So while the networks are strong the relationships themselves are often weak. These rather contradictory dynamics extend through the Polish community encompassing the post war or 'Polonia' migrants, those who came during the 1980s (who may have a bridging function) and the younger economic migrants who are living here today. Normally one would expect that the presence of a migrant community, particularly one which had been here a long time, would ease the experience of migration. By examining these dynamics I will try to establish to what extent this is actually the case.

Poles have a familiarity with Britain, it scores quite highly in Polish public opinion and they seem to have forgiven Winston Churchill for the part he played in Yalta. This may be because it was the home of the Polish government in exile for so many years and because it has been the destination of many Polish emigrants since the war. Many Poles lay claim to having a distant relative in England, often someone who has been here since then. Some kind of significance is attached to that connection regardless of whether they have actually had any contact. There may be closer connections established if this relative has been over to Poland or if they have visited him or her over here. Although I don't think too much should be made of these connections if you dig deep into a migrants background one might find that they do have a role to play. This started to emerge in the pilot study. For example one Pole living over here had followed his first wife to England. Although she had grown up in Poland she was in fact half British; the product of a union formed in the war. Another young woman had very nice accommodation with an elderly English woman who always rented out to Poles out of respect to a distant wartime memory. A couple of my respondents had relatives who ran businesses over here, although interestingly they had not actually worked for them. As one respondent explained: 'family are for photographs'. Perhaps there is a worry that financial transactions may not function very efficiently when the people are too close.

More significant are the various organisations and institutions which were established by immigrants after the war. For example there is a large institute in Hammersmith with conference rooms, restaurants, cafes, a disco, where all kinds of activities are held. There are churches cultural institutes, Saturday schools, Polish newspapers and Polish delicatessens. Most of these

organisations are there to serve the needs of the community who established themselves after the war but they are also used by the new economic migrants. For example the Posk disco is a place where young people meet. Nearby is the notice board 'the Wailing Wall' which is the biggest information exchange for those seeking accommodation, employees or jobs. Several hundred Poles will gather at churches in Ealing and Angel particularly at Christmas and Easter time. Attached to the Church in Ealing there is also a very popular Polish pub with cheap Polish beer and a coffee room upstairs which the women prefer. These places provide the sorts of environments where new migrants can go to learn about jobs and accommodation, get tax free goods informally and perhaps meet people until they have developed their own personal community and found their feet. Many Polish people do not use these resources, or at least only very rarely but there may be some comfort in knowing they are there. If a person finds a job or one friend through such an organisation it has served a functional role.

The established Polish newspapers are not used by new migrants and do not cater for them. They are called things like 'Soldiers Weekly' and in terms of subject matter haven't moved on since the war. However there is a new and far more glossy free magazine 'The Alternative' with interesting articles and advertisements which has. These articles focus on the positive aspects of living in London, present the migrant as a forward looking adaptable person and look at issues which are of interest to people with their feet in both homes, although the focus is more on life over here. This publication no doubt contributes to the awareness of themselves as a community in London and in some sense suggests they have arrived.

These two types of publication in some way mirror these two types of migrant; they may all be Poles living in London but that is where the similarity ends. The Polonia migrant is of a much older generation and was brought up on stories of a very different Poland, one that existed before the war. They have tried to hang on to a type of Polish culture which contemporary Poles long since moved on from and may never have properly adapted to being over here. However they have been legally employed and have been concerned to better the status of their children. The new Poles working in the informal economy in working class positions they regard with disdain. For their part the new Poles have little interest in the Polonia generation and some said that they never went to Posk because they associated that as a place for them.

I conclude that the presence of these older migrant institutions is not terribly significant for the new migrants. If these pubs, discos and churches hadn't existed when the young migrants came over they would have found other pubs and churches around which to congregate. However the presence of



Polish migrants since the war does perhaps give England a familiarity for the Poles which somewhere like France or Italy might not necessarily have. Also perhaps much more important are the Poles who came here in the 1980s seeking political asylum. These Poles may have more contact with Poland and may act as a bridge for those coming over here now. I suspect that many of the Poles running businesses are this generation but have not yet interviewed them to establish whether this is the case. What is perhaps of much more importance to incoming migrants is the presence of a large contemporary migrant community. Although they are fairly widely dispersed around London there are enough of them for other Poles to know that they are around. One of the young women I spoke to commented on the fact that she heard Polish being spoken so frequently it helped her to feel at home. The fact that there are so many of them increases possibilities for social networking and the stock of social capital this implies.

The other interesting community cushion is the role played by the Polish Roma and the Jews. A few years ago large numbers of Polish Roma came over here to claim asylum. While their applications were being processed they were given council flats which they rented out to other Roma but also, to the Poles. A number of the Poles I have spoken to have in the past been approached by Polish Roma in the supermarket or on the street keen to make extra money renting out their flats, the process facilitated by the fact they share the same language. However these relationships have also sometimes ended unhappily (not least when the council decides to take the flat back) and since word gets around quickly it is a relationship which some try to avoid. One of the people I spoke to had a very symbiotic relationship with some Jews. This was helped along by the fact that they both spoke German, since Germany is another popular place for Polish emigration it is a language which Poles over here have acquired. It would appear that the Jewish community is quite active in the property market and renovate many old houses for which they predominantly employ Poles.

I would suggest on the basis of these findings that processes of immigration are facilitated once the number of immigrants passes a particular mass. However it should not be assumed that just because a particular group of immigrants shares a national identity with another group of immigrants that they have anything in common, as the assumption of 'ethnicity' implies. The new generation of Poles share an ethnicity with the 'Polonia' Poles but they actually have more in common with immigrants from, Spain or Italy and are in fact more likely to socialise with them. For the 'Polonia' Poles the class barrier differentiating the younger Poles from themselves would outweigh their common relationship with Poland.

### **Types of integration taking place**

The Poles are white immigrants, definitely white, and therefore they should not be subject to the consequences of direct and indirect racial discrimination which is considered one of the biggest barriers to settling in. There are however many other factors which affect integration apart from discrimination but they tend to be ignored. By looking at the situation of the Poles I hope to be able to illuminate what some of these other influences are.

The fact that the majority of Poles are working in the hidden economy limits the extent to which integration with British citizens is likely to take place. Their work places them in a subordinate position where it is difficult for them to have contact with non immigrants, let alone contact with them as equals. Most of the areas of work in which they find themselves are occupied by fellow immigrants rather than what one of them referred to as the 'normal English'. The environments where they may have contact with British people is behind bars or serving food in restaurants and sometimes when they are cleaning people's houses or looking after children in their homes. Social contacts on an equal footing are unlikely to develop on this basis.

To the extent that they may have contact with English speakers barriers of language intervene. One of the builders I spoke to, Xenek, had worked in places where there had been English builders working on site, he reported positive relations with these people, who appeared to be praising his work and felt sorry he couldn't respond. When I did meet a Pole who had mastered the rudiments of English he had chatted with Irishmen and Australians on site and a young Englishman from Sunderland, in a very similar situation to himself had become a best friend.

The young women were less likely to be working here illegally and had somewhat better English and I would suggest that these factors contributed to them having slightly more extensive social networks than the men. Women unsurprisingly felt less comfortable working illegally since this can lead to situations where you are suddenly thrown out of your home; a situation in which women feel vulnerable than men. Therefore Polish women preferred to pay the fees for a year long English course, through which they could obtain a student visa which allowed them to work twenty hours a week. Learning English wasn't just about legal or illegal status. Many of the women over here are highly educated and motivated to learn English. While I have met a number of men happy to live here for many years without apparently learning a word of English I have never met a woman who has done the same. Despite this, only one of my female respondents reported having an English friend, otherwise they tended to socialise with the Spanish, Moroccans, Italians; often people they had met on English courses who were immigrants like themselves. Although they appeared to go out more than the men the

long hours which they work and study, plus the environments they work in mean that their social networks are not as extensive as they might otherwise be.

Another way in which they differ from the non-migrant population is in their patterns of living accommodation. They frequently live two or three people to a room in a small house or flat which they share with the landlord and his family, conditions which the majority of us would not consider living in. As these properties are often council properties the landlord or rather registered tenant would avoid renting to British nationals whose linkages with bureaucratic systems through tax, national insurance etc means that they would be more likely to be found out. Therefore they seek out immigrants advertising in those places where they are more likely to look. Once a person has rented out to an immigrant, the informal links which he or she has with others in their network means that the 'landlord' is unlikely to need to re-advertise. Polish immigrants usually find somewhere to live through word of mouth finding accommodation with relative ease.

People interpreted the lack of contact with English people in various ways. Sometimes it was explained to me that English people operated in a completely different environment and had a different set of concerns. Grzeszek explained to me that the British had always had others doing their dirty work and this was the structure of the system and how he expected it to be. Yet another, who had had considerable experience with being an immigrant both in Germany and Italy said that immigrants always had a second class status. These immigrants interpreted their position in structural terms, this was the position, which they had chosen, and which they benefited from and they had little quarrel with it. One Pole I spoke to thought that he was well treated by the other Englishmen on site and compared this favorably with the treatment Ukrainians might experience in Poland.

Then there is the question of the English character and I have heard both from Poles in Poland and the migrants here that they are closed and difficult to get to know. This was seen as being specifically English rather than Scots, Irish or Welsh. I also heard the English compared unfavourably to the Americans, apparently because everyone in America is an immigrant it is easier to mingle in. Alternatively the fact that the English are difficult to get to know is politely attributed to the stresses and strains which come from living permanently in a big city (London) which causes people to become more closed. A respondent pointed out that much more interest was taken in people from other countries in Poland than is in London. I could confirm that this is true; but this may be partly the novelty value they have over there. On the rare occasions that they do strike up friendships with English speakers they are normally immigrants themselves from Ireland or simply further north.

Otherwise Poles see themselves as occupying a separate substrata of society with a completely different set of concerns and little in common which could provide the basis for a deepening relationship.

The other factor determining levels of integration is the relationship maintained with the sending country and in the case of Poles this differs significantly for women and men. Women come here after college with the idea that if they want to see the world and work abroad they had better go now, before life's rhythms set in. As they have few ties in Poland, apart from their parents they establish a social base here more easily. Usually when they make the move they will be following in the heels of a friend and will therefore already have access to a ready made social network. They are keen to improve their English and therefore seek environments where they will be forced to speak English and establish a wider network of friends, for example through waitressing jobs, bar work or English language schools. It would appear that after about a year Polish women feel in many ways at home. Although they have little contact with English people and feel in many ways disadvantaged in British society (they complain about not understanding the customs and ways of doing things, of being treated as if they are stupid and of course language barriers) they have opportunities which are unheard of back home. They can actually afford to rent somewhere to live. The relationship between wages and cost of living is more proportionate, even for people working in this part of the employment market, making it much easier and more comfortable to survive. The girls I spoke to made the most of the opportunities to go out frequenting clubs in Brixton and central London. They also felt freed from inhibiting social pressures which they might have been exposed to back at home.

As their ties with England grew stronger their relationship with Poland waned. The young women I spoke to said that when they went back to Poland their friends no longer had time for them, had different sets of problems and they felt that they had less and less in common. For a country with such strong traditions of patriotism and nationalism these women's attachment to Poland was surprisingly weak. Although some think about returning to Poland others don't have any particular plans to go back. This feeling is much stronger once they have a boyfriend over here. Although these women don't have such strong attachments to the country, Polish customs and traditions still form a significant part of their life. They may not go to church but when it comes to Christmas and Easter they have parties, invite round friends and carry out traditional celebrations as they would in Poland. In some ways Polish women are truer immigrants than Polish men. They forge stronger links with UK society, start to see London as home and rather than having a myth of return probably welcome opportunities which would make it more difficult to go back.

Polish women are not yet integrated into British society functioning in a twilight zone of waitressing and cleaning when they often have the education and experience, and even the language which would qualify them for better paid jobs. I have not yet interviewed anyone who has married someone from this country but it seems very possible that those who do become much more fully integrated and do have the possibility of working in a professional capacity. However many women appear to pair up with immigrants from other European countries and I suspect that in these circumstances the same levels of integration may not occur. If your partner is himself an immigrant he may not have 'know how' and contacts to pass on. However, regardless of the country which your husband is from once a Polish woman has married and in particular had children she will become part of British society in a pretty fundamental way.

Polish men are in a different situation from their female compatriots. There may also be many single men over here but I haven't met them yet. Those who were single when they first started working abroad subsequently married women in Poland and all of the men I have spoken to so far have wife and children back home. This family then is the pivot around which they organise their life. Their reason for being here is to make money and they save in a way in which the women don't in order to provide an income for their wife as well as money to finish building their house or set up a business back at home. This means that while Polish women will seek out better living conditions over here, eventually at least having their own room, Polish men will go on sharing rooms and leading frugal lives. Where Polish women talked about their inability to save money, men would talk about the latest gifts, which they had sent to their children. Unlike the Polish women they never think of England as their home. When they do go out it is usually to meet Poles and other previous work acquaintances and exchange news down at the pub. Those who are married appear to have little contact with women, at least on any long term basis. On the other hand if they had only girlfriends in Poland they are more likely to establish a new relationship over here and I heard stories from Polish girls of how their boyfriends had come over here before them and subsequently met and married someone else. In both instances when I heard of this happening the Polish men had married Irish women, Catholic immigrants like themselves. However these cases are more exceptional and even when they have lived in London for a long time there is still a strong myth of return.

Polish immigrants occupy a structural position in the employment market, which it is very difficult to break out of and which sets the parameters on any integration which could take place. I would suggest that this isn't a problem for those Poles whose lives are focused on back home. However for those

who come here with an open mind about their future may find their lack of integration into British society more of a problem. The longer they live in England the more difficult it is for them to go back home. They find themselves restricted to the sorts of jobs which they would never consider doing in Poland and for which they are too well qualified. They don't have the language abilities, knowledge of the system or legal rights which enable them to function on the same terms as everyone else. Even when EU membership makes it easier to get work permits it is questionable whether their situation will significantly change. Developing strong personal communities of friends or even marriage may be the best way out of this twilight zone.

## Conclusion

The position of Poles in this country appears to be largely a product of their status here, the majority are either working here illegally or on student visas and all else seems to follow from that. This leads to a situation in which they function in a sort of parallel universe. Most of them are doing the kind of work we don't see for example cleaning or building or else they are doing the types of jobs for example waitressing which we don't really want to do. Once in this environment they become part of a social network which includes Poles and other immigrants but very few English people and this becomes self-perpetuating. Through these networks they learn where they can buy food really cheaply, where the good jobs are, and where to find accommodation. Some may venture out of this environment to varying degrees but this tends to be the women rather than the men.

However functioning in this environment is not something which is simply imposed by their legal status, but is also something which many would choose to do even if their status did change. Many of them are oriented around Poland and staying within this 'Srodowisko' (a Polish word which means environment but one formed by the people who make it up) provides a way in which they can somehow remain at home. Also they are not only functioning in an informal Polish economy but in an 'immigrant' economy and since immigrants are very active in a wide range of business services (particularly catering) the opportunities are really quite extensive. These businesses save themselves money by employing other immigrants and some of this money will come the employees way. Consequently in the financial rewards, particularly if you don't need to for to support a family in this country or live in regular accommodation, are really not bad.

The Poles lack visibility not only because they can physically 'blend in' but also because they are functioning in this parallel universe which we may depend upon but which we don't really see. Their lack of legal status here means that the concept of discrimination in terms of measured inequalities is something

which we cannot even apply to them. However it does raise questions about Britain's ability to husband its own manpower resources and why it needs to be dependent on those who have not grown up here and do not have access to material benefits if they don't work.