

POLSKI UNIWERSYTET NA OBCZYŻNIE
W LONDYNIE

ZESZYTY NAUKOWE

SERIA TRZECIA, NR 4, 2016

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THE POLES' RESPONSIBILITY
FOR THE CHANGING IMAGE
OF POLES AND POLAND IN GREAT BRITAIN

The purpose of this article is to draw the readers' attention to the fact that neither the British public nor the media have viewed Poles during the period since the Second World War consistently. While one of the factors which impacted on the way Poles and Poland have been perceived was the altering political situation in Europe, there were other issues which are important. These were the changing nature of the Polish diaspora in Britain and the way Poles present themselves to the British media, to the public, and to British politicians.

I would like to briefly remind the readers of the history of the Polish diaspora because I wish to link that information with my point that Poles have taken active and collective part in the creation of the stereotype of themselves as victims of historic events. This overtly enthusiastic attachment to the stereotype has not prepared them for the fact that the British public and media might become weary of such presentation and that it might become outdated and no longer appropriate in tackling the fact that the present Polish migration is of an entirely different character to the post-1945 one. In other words, Polish media in the United Kingdom should be more sensitive to the fact that they need to cultivate a sense of responsibility for how Polish diaspora members are perceived and, by the same token, should address modern issues and political dilemmas.

The Polish diaspora in the United Kingdom had emerged as a result of several waves of arrivals, none of which were homogenous. Nevertheless, the timing of these arrivals, the way they were viewed, and their understanding of their own situation had an impact on the British view of the Poles' presence there.

1. THE SECOND WORLD WAR

Although there had been some constant movement from Poland to the United Kingdom before the Second World War, the first large group came after the fall of France, when 27,614 soldiers arrived in Britain as part of organised evacuation of Polish troops. These were mainly accommodated in camps in Scotland, where they remained until the Normandy landing. The Polish government in exile stayed in London, as did the military leadership.

The next major inflow of Poles came after the end of the war when Britain, honouring Churchill's commitment not to force the Poles to return to Poland, proceeded to bring Polish troops who had fought under British command to the British Isles. Included in this wave were Polish soldiers who had seen action in Italy under the command of General Anders. Towards the end of the war, the Polish military leadership had sought to increase the numbers of soldiers by continuously recruiting people from POW camps and Poles whom they found in the liberated territories, mainly in forced labour camps. During the years following the end of hostilities and as shipping was freed, Polish civilians who had been housed in camps in British dependant territories and colonies (Uganda, Kenya, Tanganyika, India, and the Middle East) were also brought to Britain as part of the family reunion programmes. The final number was close to a quarter of a million.

2. THE COMMUNIST PERIOD

During the Cold War, movement between Poland and the UK was severely restricted, though never entirely closed. Limited numbers were allowed to reunite with their families after 1956. Next were those who were forced to leave Poland in 1968, mostly victims of anti-Semitism. Some of these migrants settled in the United Kingdom, but that was not the norm. We can think of famous names, such as Bauman, Brus, and Kołakowski, as examples of Poles who came to Britain during that time.

3. THE „SOLIDARITY” PERIOD

Many politically active Poles came to the UK during the „Solidarity” period where they were generally welcomed. Following the imposition of Martial

Law in Poland some decided not to return and instead remained in the West. In this context it is worth mentioned that although Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher expressed support for „Solidarity” and was keen to display photographs of herself with Lech Wałęsa, in reality the United Kingdom did not become directly involved in Polish affairs. Expressions of support for „Solidarity” rarely translated into direct intervention. The Polish migrants were generally made to feel more welcome in the German Federal Republic, Belgium and France. But among those who remained in the United Kingdom most were young, students and professionally aspirational. They did not integrate well into the Polish diaspora and frequently they moved on to other countries, notably the United States and the South African Republic.

4. POST-COMMUNIST PERIOD

This is a migration period which we can see nowadays and which is entirely the result of Poland joining the European Union, which allowed labour to move freely within the borders of the Union. The distinctive feature of this wave of migration is that these are economic migrants. Initially, they came without families but more recently it can be seen that the economic migrants, once they establish themselves in the United Kingdom, bring their families or establish families locally. In comparison with other waves of migration, these Poles do intermarry with non-Poles. Far from considering returning to Poland, they are likely to want to stay in the United Kingdom, with their children becoming fully integrated with the local community.

By outlining the waves in which Poles arrived in the UK, I hope to draw attention to the fact that each wave came with different motivation and as a result had different perceptions of what they were about. The implication of this was that they related to Britain differently and conveyed different images of themselves to the British public.

The post-war emigration was focused on recovery and building lives since they believed they could not return to Poland. Those in London were distinct because of the highly charged political atmosphere surrounding the government in exile and the military leadership of the Polish units abroad. These divisions can be outlined on the following basis:

- Andersowcy v. the others;
- Zamek v. SPK;
- Catholics v. non-Catholics (Jews).

The interesting question is why, in spite of the evident diversity of the Polish community, a stereotype of a Pole has become so fixed in British minds. This stereotype used to be that of a hard-working unskilled worker (outside London) or

an ex-officer with many preconceptions about his status (London). They were seen as fiercely anti-Communist with an inability to distinguish between Communism and the Labour government. They were usually equally hostile towards trade unions which was the norm in all the branches of the economy in which they worked. They were religious but rarely if ever attended services led by non Polish priests. The fact that the Polish episcopate was allowed to establish a network of Polish churches outside Poland, is an unique situation in the Catholic Church. The consequence of that is that most Poles in the United Kingdom have no links with the non Polish Catholics and do not participate in any Church activities outside the Polish parish. This isolation extends to the way the Polish priests in the United Kingdom function. Since they are appointed by the Bishop of Warsaw and because they are accountable to him, they have no contacts with the British Catholic hierarchy. They rarely, if ever speak English. By British standards they are conservative and remain separated from the debates which are taking place within the British Catholic community. This sense of distinctness which is fostered by the Polish church in Britain reinforces the Poles isolation and creates a bar to integration. It also prevents interaction with the British people and as a result is a barrier to that community understanding and working with the Poles.

The Cold War created an atmosphere in which the injustice of the Poles' situation was stressed, but not much was asked of them. They were undisputedly victims of the war and of Big Power politics. Since the Polish community did not build bridges with any of the civic organisations, which is the norm in British life, the context of the time excused them from having to account for their limited engagement with Britain. Poles residing in the UK remained isolated, in places of employment and in the still functioning Displaced Persons' camps. There was no urge from within the community to integrate; in fact, this was seen in negative terms (Polish *wynarodowienie* 'denaturalisation'). Building bridges with other immigrant communities was not for the Poles, instead racism and insularity were seen as a way of holding back the unwelcome influences of secularism and loss of identity. While this might not have been noted by the British media at the time, the world changed, but the Poles did not.

The post-1968 and the „Solidarity” migrants did not find it easy to integrate with the Polish community in the United Kingdom. In fact, they encountered a sympathetic audience only among the progressive and left-wing groups in the United Kingdom, and they were quicker to move on to building bridges with the media and like-minded political organisations. The fact that many were Jewish only strengthened their separation from the predominantly Catholic Poles who had been residing in the United Kingdom since the war.

When Communism fell and later when Poland finally became a member of the EU, the next wave of Poles had nothing in common with the old diaspora and the image which that group had created and to which they clung in the United Kingdom. The recent migrants are economically integrated into life in the UK but they are neither media savvy nor politically active. Only recently have the Polish Consulates become aware to become more active in the media. Clearly there is a need to shake off the old post war anxiety of not attracting attention to themselves and to balance that against the need for a well thought out media campaign which would combat negative stereotypes.

The consequence of the events which have been described above is that Poles had neither ever been good at managing their own image nor have they been aware that there is only limited interest of the locals in East European history. Britain has historically maintained stronger links with the old imperial dependencies and there was never much in terms of involvement with Eastern Europe. The British guarantee to Poland before the outbreak of the war was an exception and has to be understood in those terms. The Cold War had allowed the Poles in Britain to strike a particular posture, but it was not one which was either flattering or appropriate in the long term. It was a static image. If one is to be polite this could be described as a preoccupation with victimhood. On a more truthful level, it could be described as one of an inflated sense of self-importance and of historically justified sense of entitlement. Nothing illustrates this better than repeated calls for settling of accounts dating to the war, when Polish forces fought under British Command. While these calls can be understood when they emanate from the community publications, they are not helpful when they are uttered by the embassy or the Ministry for Foreign Affairs. But a glance at publications dealing with Poland and Polish issues reveals the frequent use of the word „betrayal”. Hence the frequent and relentless milking of what is seen as public sympathy for Poland’s war time and post-war fate without a commensurate desire to go beyond that well-rehearsed approach. The other characteristic feature of the Polish presence in the UK has been insularity and an overt attachment to the perceived Polish speciality.

The questions which must be asked and surely the leading theme of this paper is why and with what aim Poles should seek to influence the public perception of themselves, of Polish history, and of life in Poland. My blunt statement is that Poles need to consider the need for managing their own image, an image which is modern, up-to-date and has relevance to their presence in the United Kingdom.

If the aim of the image thus created is to once more reaffirm the high moral ground of victimhood, then Poles have failed because this image is neither interesting to the British in the long term nor actually correct. This is also a debate which

does not deal with the Polish question in the context of present British preoccupations. Victimhood implies that what will come next will be demands for some form of restitution. We, Poles, have to accept that Poland is not the only country that has suffered in the past and that Polish demands mean little to the British public. British politicians, with few exceptions, are likewise used to representatives of various states trying to persuade the government that they are owed something from the British exchequer. We know that none such claims have been successful.

But what do the British public expect, not from the Poles, but from all immigrants? Britain is unique in accepting a high degree of diversity and is happy to see communities retain their own identities but that has to be within a clear framework which can be defined in several points:

- integration and not separation – no ghettos;
- assurances that immigrants will fully contribute to British life and to the British exchequer – no tax avoidance or grey economy;
- compliance with British values and norms – respect for British institutions and laws.

Can the Polish community and religious leaders open a dialogue with the British media, the public, and political leaders on the basis of what the British expect? How can we become responsible for establishing a modern, up-to-date and relevant dialogue without trailing our own inferiority/superiority complexes? These are the challenges facing the Polish community in the United Kingdom.

The results of the referendum to withdraw from the European Union has created new and urgent challenges for the Polish community in the United Kingdom. The Polish Consulate and Embassy has assumed a more active role in responding to attacks on Poles and on Polish community premises. UKIP had successfully milked British anxiety about the volume and economic implications of migration to the United Kingdom. While we all wait with baited breath for the government to formulate a policy of migrants who are in the United Kingdom the need to feed correct information to the media remains important. More than before it is vital that the Polish community, its leaders and its representatives are active in conveying the positive image of the Polish migrants and in stimulating an open and well informed debate.

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ODPOWIEDZIALNOŚĆ POLAKÓW ZA ZMIANY WIZERUNKU POLSKI I POLAKÓW W WIELKIEJ BRYTANII

STRESZCZENIE

Od końca II wojny światowej Polacy osiedlali się masowo w Wielkiej Brytanii. Środowisko emigracyjne nigdy nie było jednolite, a w ostatnich latach uległo całkowitej zmianie. Powojenna emigracja była głównie polityczna, natomiast obecna – ekonomiczna. Dzisiejsza sytuacja polityczna wymaga uwagi i współpracy z mediami angielskimi, by umocnić i uwypuklić pozytywne charakter polskiej emigracji w Wielkiej Brytanii. W tym celu potrzeba zakwestionować dawny stereotyp Polaka – bohatera II wojny światowej, pokrzywdzonego przez rozstrzygnięcia jałtańskie. Polacy muszą angażować się w życie w Anglii i brać czynnie udział w stwarzaniu pozytywnego obrazu polskiej emigracji w kraju, w którym mieszkają, ponieważ to jedyna metoda na wpłynięcie na zmianę wizerunku Polaka tutaj. Polski Kościół w diasporze i polskie konsulaty też ponoszą odpowiedzialność za stworzenie pozytywnego obrazu emigracji.

Słowa kluczowe: Polska, Wielka Brytania, Polonia, emigracja, integracja, media