Poland – going where the work is – and coming home

Amelia Gentleman, *The Guardian*, 6 April 2011

The UK remains a promised land in popular Polish mythology. When someone returns from a stint working there, they are expected to come home driving an expensive car, with a suitcase full of savings. For some, like Michal Novak, 30, the return was triumphant. He came back after 14 years in Britain with enough money to buy a smart flat in a good part of Warsaw, and the prospect of a good job in Poland, paying almost the same salary as he had received in London.

Even so, friends and colleagues were puzzled by his decision to return. "People asked me 'Why did you come back? It's so horrible here.' As if it is a dogma that living in the UK is better. And it's not true," he said.

Less triumphant will be the return of Lukasz Z, 24, and Adam B, 22, due to travel back by coach imminently, their fare paid for by the Polish charity Barka, that seeks out Poles sleeping rough in London, and encourages them to abandon their attempt to make it in the UK. It gives them tickets to get home and offers them somewhere to live once they arrive.

Adam has spent the past six months since he lost his factory job sleeping in parks, railways stations and squats, stealing food to survive. Lukasz has spent several chunks of the past year in Pentonville prison, sentenced for stealing and carrying a knife, after work as a painter and decorator dried up.

Neither man had been in trouble with the police at home, and neither has anything positive to say about their time here.

Their stories illustrate the successes and failures of UK-Polish migration, a phenomenon that exploded on an unexpected scale with Poland's accession to the EU in 2004.

Neither Poland nor the UK predicted the scale of the rush to work in the UK but there is an absence of data to quantify precisely what has happened. Neither Polish nor UK officials have a system that

allows them to keep track of the numbers arriving and leaving. The Polish embassy in London believes the pace of arrivals has slowed dramatically since a peak in 2006, and says more and more are returning to Poland, particularly in the wake of the economic downturn here. But it is hard to quantify the size of this reverse migration.

Whilst the vast majority have found work in the building industry, or as carers, cleaners or waitresses, not everyone has been happy.

Trained lawyers have found themselves working as barmen, older people with communist-era educations - and poor English - have found it difficult to adjust, and others have simply felt homesick.

Migration is not easy; there are winners and losers, and the losers are visible in the streets around Waterloo station before dawn, huddled under thin sleeping bags, sometimes in pairs for the shared warmth.

Adam, who asks for his surname not to be printed, embarrassed at some of the details of his story, has been homeless for six months. He has had enough of his UK experiment, and is taking up Barka's offer of a free ticket home.

"This is not the life I dreamed of. This has not been a positive time for me. I have been unhappy all the time, to be frank," he said, interviewed alongside his friend Lukasz at the charity's headquarters in east London, as they prepared to return home.

He left the cramped Warsaw flat that he shared with seven members of his family last June to travel to Burton-on-Trent where a Warsaw neighbour had secured him a minimum wage job packing sports food supplements. He was thrilled to go because after leaving school at 16 with no qualifications, he had found it hard to get a job in Warsaw. No one from his family had been abroad before. Everyone was excited and hoped that his good fortune would trickle back to them.

The work was fine. He had to scan barcodes and check the contents of each box were correctly packed. He found himself working an 80-hour week - often 12 hours a day, seven days a week - for about £5.93 an hour. He spoke no English, but the factory managers said it didn't matter. There were hardly any English employees there; they showed him what to do with their hands, occasionally getting other Polish employees to step in and translate.

He spent £28 a week on rent (sharing a flat with three other people), £50 on food, and sent the rest home to his mother. Money at home was in short supply, because his mother is the only person with a job and her job in a cotton wool bud factory brings in only about 1,600 zloty a month (about £350).

"My mum was so grateful; it's not easy to live on that salary. It was helpful to be able to send some money back home – it helped them to pay bills, to cover everyday expenses," he said. "I was happy working there. I was prepared to work. I wanted to work; I didn't come here to play."

But even when things were going well, he found it a culture shock. Although Adam looks streetwise, with a tattoo running up his arm declaring "respect to the people of the streets", Burton seemed dangerous to him. He felt vulnerable because of his lack of English. "There was no one I knew, it was a new environment, you can't speak to anyone, you can't explain your problems to anyone. People were taking drugs, drinking, getting beaten up. I was very homesick; whenever I had money I would call home," he said.

He hated the food in the UK. "The bread tastes like plastic. In Poland the food is natural, real, with a lot of fruit and vegetables. We don't have much money in Poland, but once a week my mum will fry a chicken, and serve it with fresh vegetables, cucumber, tomatoes. The rest of the time we eat fresh soup," he said. "Here you buy food frozen and put it in a microwave."

The only thing he acquired a taste for in England was baked beans, which he liked mainly because they were cheap.

After six months he was made redundant because of a downturn at the company. He was one of the first to go because he still spoke almost no English. He tried to find a new job, but without English it seemed impossible. At first he stole to pay the rent, but Burton is a small place, and shop assistants began to call the police when they saw him. He had to leave the shared flat, and started sleeping at railway stations or in the park.

He moved to London, because he thought things might be easier in the capital, but Polish workers there were queuing for a handful of jobs.

Gradually he began to lose any confidence in the prospect of finding work.

He stole because he considered it to be less shameful than begging, but he hated his new lifestyle.

"I can't go on living like this. I don't want to end up in prison. This is not what I came here for. I didn't have the experience I hoped for. I can't find a job, I can't find money to send to my family," he said, avoiding his friend's eyes, staring at the floor.

A friend has found a job on a construction site for him in Poland. His return will not be triumphant, and he will draw a veil over the details of his time here. "I haven't told my mum about my situation here. I don't want to worry her," he said.

"I'm never going to go abroad again. There's nothing I will miss about this country. Soon it will be just a bad memory. Even if you paid me good money, I wouldn't come back here."

His friend Lukasz, who he met while squatting in London, thinks he will go back to Poland for a while, and then try his luck in Germany when the country opens its labour market to workers from 10 eastern European countries from May. His experiences of the UK are less profoundly negative than Adam's, but only because he sees things as not quite as bad as they could have been.

Prison in the UK, for example, was not as bad as it would have been in Poland - just one or two people in a cell, compared to six. To begin with he had a good job as a driver for a Polish construction business, picking up materials and delivering them to buildings sites, but he lost it when his stepfather, who ran the business, died of a heart attack in a London car park – the combined result, Lukasz thinks, of over-work and too much drinking.

When he was out of work, he still found good accommodation here, once he worked out the art of squatting – identifying empty houses by tracking the rubbish bins that remained empty week after week, using his plumbing and electrical skills to reconnect electricity and water supplies. The only headache was being evicted by the council or, worse, waking to find himself trapped inside the house after council workers erected anti-squatting metal sheets over the windows and doors.

He was destitute, and stole food to survive, and was not entitled to claim benefits because he had never worked legally. "I didn't want benefits. That's not what I came here for. I wanted to work." He

went repeatedly to the Polish employment agencies, but was quickly disheartened to find there were "15 people for every job".

Many expect a similar surge of migration to Germany later this year, and anticipate similar problems. Barka has already opened branches there to help those from Poland and other eastern European countries who are losers in the next wave of migration.

For the winners, success in the UK does not always breed lasting affection for the country. Robert Szaniawski of the Polish embassy in London says many choose to return when they have children. "People say 'We had a good time here, we earned some money and now we decided to go back because we decided that our children should be educated in Poland and we decided to choose our future in Poland instead of Britain,'" he said.

Novak was not thinking about children, but had a ill-defined sense that he would feel more at home if he returned to Warsaw. He left Poland at 16 in 1997, to take his A-levels at a British boarding school, Uppingham in Rutland. His parents were rare examples of Polish entrepreneurs, who had quickly built a successful clothing company in the aftermath of liberalisation and could afford the fees.

Having been to a fairly average suburban Polish high school, he found English boarding school a shock. "Often stereotypes give the wrong impression, but stereotypes of public school life are really true. It wasn't the friendliest environment," he said, smiling grimly at the memory.

He went on to university, and did a masters in economics at Warwick and got a job with PriceWaterhouseCoopers. He liked London, but he could never envisage living there permanently. Increasingly he was drawn to the Polish community and became vice-president of Polish Professionals in London, a networking and support group. When he was offered a job with Orange, it was an easy decision to move back.

Of his Polish contemporaries in London, many came back to Poland because they lost their jobs in London, but he made the decision after deciding he had a greater affinity with Polish people than he had with the English.

"I felt that I really get along with Polish people and there are 38 million to choose from here," he said, waving towards the other clients in the dimly-lit, fashionable Warsaw café, Chlodna 25, where, at 4pm, people are playing cards and gazing at their laptops, stretched out over purple sofas, drinking freshly squeezed juices. "I feel that I am in place."

He sold the house he had bought in Reading, gave up his flat in Bayswater and bought himself a flat in his favourite part of Warsaw, Ochota, the equivalent, he thinks to Pimlico. "To buy that kind of flat in London would cost around £500,000. I couldn't have afforded it."

His friends remain mystified at his decision to give up the London dream, a vision they have constructed, he says, from films about England, admiring of his job in the city, his central London flat. He explains to them that he is able to live similarly well in Poland. He earns much more than the average wage of 4,000 zloty, (around £874) a month, mainly because his foreign education and work experience has helped him gain a better job and salary than his Polish school friends can aspire to.

Recently, when he was looking for a cleaner in Warsaw, a friend recommended a Ukrainian woman.

It is an example of the pulling force of migration from east to west: while hospitals and homes in England are still being cleaned and painted by Poles, in Poland homes are being cleaned by Ukrainians, and the building industry relies on people from Ukraine and further east – Moldova, and Russia.

"Her story is very sad. She has a degree in economics and a degree in law from her own country, but she couldn't get a job there so she is working here as my cleaning lady.

"I used to come across so many similar stories in London – of young Polish people with economics degrees working as waiters," he said.

"Typically, they left Poland five years ago because they couldn't find any work here, but they fail to find anything proper there. So they got jobs much below what their education has prepared them for, and they spent four or five years of their lives, working in a bar, not getting any experience. What can you do here after four years as a waiter in the UK?

"They don't tell their families, who think they are doing so well in England and expect them to come home with money saved up. Often these people are too ashamed ever to return home. "

"The moral? the moral is that there is no easy life in the UK. There is no promised land. There are opportunities but you have to work your ass off."