

“Aiding Defeated Migrants”: Institutional Strategies to Assist Polish Returned Migrants

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ABSTRACT

This article is based on an exploratory study of Polish “returned” migrants aided by the Barka Foundation, carried out in 2010 shortly after the men were returned to Poland, during the liminal stage of readjustment and decision-making about whether to remain in Poland, return to the UK or migrate elsewhere. The interviews centred on migrants’ assessment of their migration projects; engagement with Barka outreach workers; decision-making processes about returning to Poland; assessment of most pressing needs; evaluation of provided services once they returned to Poland; and plans for the future. Discussions with service providers mirrored these themes to compare the emic or insiders’ (migrants) and etic or outsiders’ (programme staff’s) assessment of the strategies employed to aid Polish “returned” migrants.

INTRODUCTION

For more than a century, Poland has been one of the largest migrant sending countries in Central and Eastern Europe and a vast reservoir of labour for many states in Western Europe and North America. Poland’s accession to the European Union in May 2004, coupled with unrestricted entry to the United Kingdom and Ireland, caused one of the biggest migration flows in the country’s postwar history. In May 2011, Germany opened its doors fully to jobseekers from Poland paving the way for a flood of cut-price carpenters, plumbers and other budget labour of the kind that swept Britain in 2004 (Hall et al., 2011). Norway and Belgium have also become destinations for post-accession Polish migrants (Mostowska, 2012 and 2013). According to the 2011 Polish Census, 2,06 million Poles have resided abroad for at least three months, including 1,6 million who lived outside Poland for longer than 12 months (GUS, 2012).¹

With this exodus Poland became one of the largest exporters of labour within the enlarged European Union. New migration patterns have begun to emerge as Polish migration no longer took the form of unidirectional movement from country of origin to destination country that ends with permanent settlement. Post-enlargement migratory movements from Poland have become much more differentiated and led to a more diverse and floating populations, even when Polish migrants have children born abroad or left in Poland (Danilewicz, 2010; Urbańska, 2009). Paraphrasing Bauman’s (1999, 2005) work on “liquid modernity”, Polish international migration has become “liquid”. The fairly stable migration patterns that marked the post-WWII period have dissolved into more complex, transitory patterns in terms of temporary settlement and shifting migration status (Engbersen, Van der Leun and de Boom 2007). Polish migrants, who for decades regarded the United States as the “promised land,” shifted their focus to Western Europe, much more geographically accessible.

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Polish migration took a form of “pendulum” or “circular” migration and in some cases transnational commuting. These movements have been governed by the ebb and flow of economic demands and the state of labour markets at home and abroad (Favell, 2008; Mostowska, 2013).

Poles are now free not only to leave Poland but also to leave and to come back. They use their spatial mobility to adapt to the new context of post-communist space and EU enlargement. Rather than relying on transnational networking for improving their condition in the country of settlement, many Poles tend to settle within mobility, staying mobile as long as they can in order to improve or maintain a particular quality of life, enhance their professional qualifications, and pursue educational goals. Their experience of migration becomes their lifestyle, their leaving home and going away, paradoxically, a strategy of staying at home, and, thus, an alternative to what international migration is usually considered to be: emigration or immigration. This does not mean that some Polish migrants do not “extend their stay abroad” and decide to settle outside Poland (McGhee, 2013; Ryan et al., 2009; Ryan and Sales, 2013).

Mobility as a strategy can be empowering and can result in “success”. It can become a tool for social innovation and agency as well as an important dimension of social capital, provided that migrants retain control over their migration projects. Mobility, however, may also reflect increased dependencies, proliferation of precarious jobs, and labour exploitation that end in “failure”.

There are conflicting reports on the outcomes of recent Polish migration. Social workers circulate alarming stories about homeless and jobless Poles in London (Goryńska-Bittner, 2010). Researchers study Polish “rough sleepers” in different European capitals (Garapich, 2013; Mostowska, 2012, 2013). News media report that instead of finding the opportunities that they heard of back home, thousands of Poles have ended up on the streets of London. Newspapers publish articles about Polish migrants addicted to alcohol and drugs (Ramesh, 2010). Polish organizations are reporting high levels of suicide, depression, and poverty among migrant workers (Shields, 2008; Lakasing and Mirza, 2009). Heavy alcohol intake is considered a likely contributing factor (Ranzetta, 2007). Alarmed by the increasingly common sight of Poles sleeping rough in Britain and fearful that they will turn to drugs, prostitution and crime, Polish charities send delegations to London to persuade their compatriots to return home. In Poland, migration is often presented as a necessary evil regardless of the outcomes of migration projects. For example, educators and researchers point to adverse effects of migration on children left behind by parents working abroad (Walczak, 2009; Urbańska, 2010). On the other hand, researchers and popular accounts alike investigate the successes of Polish high-skilled migrants (see Klagge and Klein-Hitpass, 2007; Duvell, 2004).

This article is based on exploratory ethnographic study of a dozen Polish “returned” migrants – all men – aided by the Barka Foundation. The fieldwork informing this discussion was carried out in the autumn of 2010, shortly after the men were returned to Poland, during the liminal stage of readjustment and decision-making whether to remain in Poland, return to the UK or migrate elsewhere. In addition to interviewing the returned migrants, we have also interviewed programme managers and social workers. Follow-up interviews with programme managers took place several months later. Surreptitiously, the interviews with migrants mirror to a certain extent the rich ethnographic details gathered by Michał Garapich (2013) in the course of his research with homeless Polish men in London and the research of Magdalena Mostowska who studied Polish rough sleepers in Brussels (2012) and Oslo (2013). Our study included similar types of migrants, but we engaged them in conversations once they were returned to Poland. The interviews centred on migrants’ assessment of their migration projects; engagement with Barka outreach workers; decision-making processes to return to Poland; assessment of most pressing needs; evaluation of provided services once they returned to Poland; and plans for the future. Discussions with service providers mirrored these themes to compare the *emic* or insiders’ (migrants’) and *etic* or outsiders’ (program staff’s) assessment of strategies employed to aid Polish “returned” migrants.

THE MIGRANTS

The interviewed migrants included 12 men ranging in age from 23 to 61 years old. The majority (9) of respondents were from working-class backgrounds, born in small to medium size towns in different parts of Poland. All had a minimum of vocational or high school education and worked in Poland as carpenters, electricians, gardeners, bus drivers, mechanics, and security guards. One man was a trained technology teacher in a vocational high school and one had a post-secondary diploma in mushroom technology and owned a sizable champignon farm. According to programme staff, these men are very representative of the migrants rescued by Barka.

They had been abroad between six months and 10 years, with returns home for shorter or longer periods of time. Five men migrated before 2004. One migrated for the first time in the mid-1980s, one in the mid-1990s, one in the late 1990s, and the remaining two in 2001 and 2002, respectively. Those who left after Poland's accession to the EU embarked on their migration projects as early as 2005 and as late as 2010. Their latest sojourn included the United Kingdom (London, Reading, Slough, Southampton, Manchester, and West Sussex). Before coming to the UK, they had spent time in other countries, including Greece, Norway, Sweden, the Netherlands, Spain, Portugal, and Italy. One of the men, 46-year-old Tomek,² described himself as a "migrating man" who has been on the go for the past 20 years. "I like this 'Gypsy life'. I cannot stay put in one place, I have to be mobile."

Unlike the men in Garapich's study who "have been victims of high unemployment in their countries of origin, were unsuccessful businessmen unable to pay off their debts, workers of large state owned industries made redundant or long-term unemployed, (...) individuals for whom the economic transition in Poland brought sudden degradation of status, poverty, insecurity and unemployment" (Garapich, 2013), the majority of the Poles in our sample were employed at the time of making a decision to go abroad; most worked in jobs commensurate with their qualifications. Only two individuals were laid off from their jobs shortly before deciding to go abroad. One failed an exam to become a professional officer and was looking for an adventure. True, none were happy about their financial situation, but their motives to migrate were not limited to the desire to improve their economic standing. In several cases, the "push factors" included divorce, break-ups with long-time girlfriends, and poor relationships with parents and adult children or a desire to follow a new romantic relationship, join siblings or friends urging them to come for a visit. In fact, sometimes we felt that the interviewees would have been able to cope better with unsatisfactory employment and poverty if they had stronger familial connections. Mostowska who studied Polish men sleeping rough in Oslo also emphasizes lack of family bonds with spouses and adult children, on the one hand, and close emotional connections with younger children, on the other hand, as factors contributing to the men's continued mobility (Mostowska, 2013).

SUCCESS OR FAILURE?

The study participants have been described to us by service providers as "people who failed in the West", homeless men down on their luck, alcoholics sleeping rough in the streets of London, men too ashamed of their failure to turn to family members for support, and victims requiring a helping hand. Social workers indicated that the migrants were a valuable resource to their families while sending remittances from the West, but a burden and "extra mouth to feed" when they returned home.

The success-failure dichotomy is heavily debated in the migration literature, especially in the context of return migration (Haas et al., 2009; Wang and Fan, 2006). Within the neoclassical migration theory, return migration is mainly interpreted as a result of failure to integrate in the

receiving societies: “winners” settle, “losers” return, claims the traditional adage. The human-capital approach also views return migration as a result of migrants’ inability to thrive in the destination (Caldwell, 1969). However, research on migrant networks and transnationalism (Glick-Schiller et al., 1992; Portes, 2003) has questioned the assumption that maintenance of economic and social ties with homelands and return migration are necessarily a manifestation of migrants’ failure to integrate (Haas et al., 2009). Empirical research has identified circumstances under which migrants are motivated to return not because they are not able to find employment but because have reached their goals (Wang and Fan, 2006).

The increased mobility of Poles post-accession and resulting multiple migration projects and multiple “returns” (Isański, 2013) have had little effect on the success-failure dichotomy that persists in the popular Polish discourse and continues to affect how outsiders and migrants evaluate and narrate migration trajectories. Migration has become part and parcel of contemporary life in Poland and even non-migrants treat it as a normal occurrence. However, the same cannot be said about returns. Interviews with Polish social workers indicate that return follows certain unsuccessful performances in the labour market, unemployment, and personal disappointment. Moreover, migrants who have not succeeded abroad *should* return or *be returned* home. There is no alternative to their predicament. These opinions are not isolated among the wider Polish society.

Looking in from the outside, we saw that many of the migrants in our study were indeed in trouble at some point in their migration process. A casual observer might have been hard pressed to describe their migration projects as successful. The narratives of the returned migrants, however, emphasize how long they managed to survive abroad and how resilient and resourceful they were in the face of adversity.

In several (5) instances the root cause of their problems was alcoholism and brushes with the law. While some of the men drank excessively in Poland, most started drinking in Britain either because they had disposable income and could afford pub hopping or because things were not going well. Franek said about his drinking habit: “My adventure with alcohol started 37 years ago. I drank all the time, with a short sobriety stint when I was in jail for six weeks.” He continued to drink in London, particularly after a falling out with his adult son. While Franek did not have any difficulty in securing employment – he worked as a gardener, construction worker and mineworker – finding affordable housing was a problem. One thing led to another, and Franek ended up squatting in an abandoned factory where he met two other Polish men. “We stuck together, we were drinking together, recovering from hangovers together, and working in construction together,” he said. While squatting he managed to hold on to his job. Ryszard, too, blamed his troubles on alcohol. He said: “I was making pretty good money [working as a carpenter] and got a big head. I did not know my limits.” Tomek, who lived in a rented apartment in Reading, was apprehended during a police raid on a car park where several Polish homeless men lived. Tomek befriended one of them and on the night of the raid was visiting and drinking with them. Tomek had passed out when the police arrived, but his friends provided the police with his name and he was summoned to appear in front of an immigration officer. While Tomek worked and even at some point owned a small business, at the time of the raid he was jobless. Threatened by immigration officials that if he did not find work he would be deported and barred from entering the UK for five years, Tomek decided to return to Poland. Piotr – by all accounts an upstanding young man with a good command of the English language, a graduate of a British culinary school, with a good job as a chef in holiday resorts – also had a brush with the law. Polish friends talked him into going on vacation with them. He said: “I went with them against my better judgment. I knew they would want to go out and drink all the time.” Indeed, one day the group went out to a bar where a group of South Asian men expressed unfavourable opinions about Polish women. Piotr confronted them and a brawl erupted. The bar owner called the police, and Piotr got arrested.

While many of the interviewed men talked about their brushes with the law or incidents of excessive drinking, they considered these episodes to be exceptions in otherwise successful

migration experiences. They ascribed their problems to bad luck, not to inherent character flaws or lack of skills. Seven of the men we talked to were sleeping rough in the streets, but three of them indicated that they never looked for an apartment or a house but preferred to squat in abandoned buildings or live in semi-finished houses while working for the owners, "because it was cheaper". They certainly did not consider themselves homeless. Local government workers in London or street workers from the Polish NGO affixed them with this label.

In general, most of the study participants were very resourceful and knew how to take advantage of various assistance projects. One man in particular kept convincing us how easy it is to survive in London "on projects" (*na projektach*): "In one church they distribute warm clothing, in another project they give hot coffee and sandwiches, across town there is a hot shower," he said. The remaining four managed to maintain decent accommodations for long periods of time and became homeless as a result of a job loss, theft or some other calamity. One of the interviewed man told us that he managed to make ends meet in London for several years when he lived with a friend who knew English, but when his buddy had to go back to Poland to take care of his ageing parents, things deteriorated: "I couldn't negotiate a job contract or talk to my landlord without him, because although I lived in Britain for 10 years I did not learn any English. My boss started taking advantage of me and my landlord kicked me out." What the men considered to be their ability to beat the system, to find resources where there were none, the social workers labelled inability to integrate into the host society.

Like the men in Garapich's study, all the study participants worked in the UK for quite some time. Several respondents started working in the UK before Poland's accession to the EU, without work permits. Eight continued to work under the table after accession despite the fact that they now had access to legal employment. Old habits die hard: the men did not want to leave their long-term employers and crews. They were satisfied with their working conditions. Mostowska confirms similar patterns of undocumented employment in Oslo, particularly among Polish men who came to Norway some years ago and secured short-term jobs via friends and relatives and continued to depend on these informal networks post-2004 (Mostowska, 2013). The narratives indicate that the men in our study, particularly those with limited English language, worked in a segmented labour market where certain jobs were reserved for certain segments of the labour force defined by gender, age, ability to communicate in English, and resident status.

Five of the interviewed men, however, were registered with appropriate authorities and paid taxes. Several registered with employment agencies – some while still in Poland, others upon arrival in the UK – but many found jobs through word of mouth. Most experienced some upward mobility, including considerable wage increase, although in some instances the prosperity did not last. Tomek opened his own business, employed five people, and was doing quite well. His business went bust when a client cheated him and he was short by 2,500 pounds to make up the payroll. Marek, who spent a total of five years in the UK, held several different jobs in Manchester and in London. At first, he got 6-7 months contracts, but as the economic crisis deepened all he managed to secure were weeklong assignments. He said that as long as he was dealing with English employers he was fine; the difficulties started when he began working, illegally, for Poles. Marek's Polish employer owed him two months of back wages and Marek could not pay rent, started drinking, and ended in the street. Without any money, he could not afford a return ticket to Poland. He heard about Barka and decided to ask them for assistance. Franek, Piotr, Tomek and Marek are examples of very resourceful and hard-working individuals who, unfortunately, got in trouble because of alcohol, criminal activity or exploitation by unscrupulous employers or clients. Despite limited or nonexistent English language abilities they managed to stay gainfully employed for long periods of time. Their narratives defy the media reports, which portray Poles as homeless alcoholics who are a burden on the host society. They also resist being labelled a "failure" by assistance programmes that see them as hopeless and hapless victims who need to be rescued. Time and time again we heard our respondents say: "I would not call this a "failure" (*porażka*). I slipped

(*podwinęła mi się noga*), but I intend to go back...” Many admitted that they learned a valuable lesson from their misfortunes and would be more careful, would know what to do when – *when, not if* – they migrate again.

NOAH’S ARK: ASSISTING RETURNING MIGRANTS

Return migration has been a priority for the Polish government who wants to attract Polish migrants back due to labour shortages and Poland’s aging population. The government hopes that return migrants with new capital will make investments and boost the Polish economy. In November 2008, Prime Minister Donald Tusk started a government campaign entitled “Have you got a PPlan to return?” that aims to facilitate smooth returns and showcase employment opportunities.

These initiatives focus on highly skilled Poles. What about less skilled individuals? Garapich indicates that “most agencies working with the homeless [Polish migrants] point to structural exclusion of A8 migrants from some provision of the social security system stemming from transition arrangements imposed on citizens of A8 states in 2004” (Garapich, 2013). Iglicka (2009) writes about “double economic marginalization” of return migrants, who are caught in a “migration trap” as they face lack of employment commensurate with their qualifications. It begs the question: What kind of assistance in reintegration to the job market and the wider society can migrants access when they return to Wielkopolska?

At this time, lesser skilled individuals are encouraged to rely on assistance programmes supported by local governments or charitable organizations. Returned migrants are eligible for services provided by public unemployment programmes, however, city or county governments do not see migrants’ needs as distinct from the needs of other job-seekers. Perhaps because public programmes lack specialized knowledge and skills to address the needs of migrants, returnees who need help limit their search for assistance to requests for cash to pay rent or heating bills. During the time of our research very few returned migrants sought help from public programmes. In 2011, the unemployment office in Poznan served a total of three returned migrants.

In this article we focus on the Barka Foundation for Mutual Help. Barka or Noah’s Ark was established in the late 1980s as a response to increasing social problems during the transformation years. Barbara and Tomasz Sadowski, two psychologists from Poznan, wanted to create conditions in which the “forgotten and unwanted” could have a chance for personal growth and social development. This mission influenced the creation of an alternative system of support, which gathers at-risk individuals, giving them opportunities to rebuild their lives, upgrade vocational skills, and find their way in the new socioeconomic reality (Sadowska, 2009).

Before founding Barka, Tomasz Sadowski worked in a juvenile reformatory, a maximum-security prison, and a psychiatric hospital. He described his jobs in these institutions as Sisyphean, indicating that individuals who leave prisons or reformatory centres needed normal environments, family warmth, life-coaching, and entrepreneurial training. The original Barka community (*wspólnota*) was supposed to serve mentally ill individuals released from state hospitals. However, in the post-1989 climate, Barka started serving people evicted from their apartments, alcoholics, and those unable to cope with the new social and economic situation. Democratic decision-making process, egalitarianism, self-sufficiency, mutual assistance, and sobriety were the main tenants of the programme. Much has changed since then – Barka has undergone considerable growth and now operates several different communities, has paid staff, both professional and home-grown – but continues to be recognized mainly for its work with the homeless and alcoholics. Barka’s Christmas gatherings for the poor are televised and receive many accolades, which enhances the charismatic aura surrounding the organization. Barka likes attention and is open to visitors, including researchers. Perhaps the fact that one of us is based in the United States also helped to open the door. We had no

problem gaining access to the men we interviewed and the social worker was also very receptive to our project.

Although an increasing number of Polish NGOs are beginning to serve or advocate on behalf of refugees or international migrants settling in Poland, migration has not been on Barka's radar screen until 2006 when the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham, in association with Housing Justice UNLEASH and The Simon Community, contacted Barka to offer a solution to the growing homelessness among Polish migrants. In June 2007, Barka UK was born. Between 2007 and 2010, Barka returned 600 homeless Poles from the UK. In late 2010, Barka used to bring back approximately five migrants a week from the British Isles but the flow of return migrants ended when the London government stopped supporting the program. In 2010/2011, Barka started to collaborate with German organizations working under the banner "Returns" (Powroty) and in 2012 established another programme in the Netherlands. Gathered information indicates that these new initiatives are based on the model developed in London without much attention to the local context or social and migration policies in Germany or the Netherlands. According to the programme manager, 12 return migrants arrived in Chudobczyce in the first six months of 2012 since the funding from abroad has ended.

Very little is known about the impact of Barka's programmes on returned migrants. There are a lot of media reports about the foundation as well as publications by the founders (Sadowska 2009; Sadowski 2008), but surprisingly no evaluation research.³ Because Barka and its founders are the darlings of national and international media, it is politically incorrect to critique the organization. Monika Oliwa-Ciesielska (2000) is the only researcher who has analysed the effects of negative social control on the homeless in Barka's care. Our study is the first independent attempt to assess the programme's services for returned migrants. Barbara Goryńska-Bittner (2007, 2010, 2011) has published different versions of the same report on homelessness among Polish migrants and Barka's involvement in returning them to Poland. However, this report was commissioned by the NGO when the author was an employee of Barka.

Our findings mirror to some extent the results of Oliwa-Ciesielska's study. Despite good intentions, Barka does not have experience working with migrants. Prolonged stays in the isolated community do not bode well for reintegration into Polish society. Barka could provide a nice respite for those migrants whose most recent migration ended in difficulties and who want to embark on another migration project. However, the organization doesn't have the capacity and is not interested in facilitating safe migration and equipping returned migrants with skills that would increase their employability abroad. Virtually all activities focus on the Barka community and all jobs are performed to support community gardens and farms and to keep the place tidy and organized. These "jobs" constitute a kind of "payment" for room and board offered "free of charge" to the migrants. "It's work that is performed for show and to placate the management" (Oliwa-Ciesielska, 2000: 52). Programme managers could not provide us with any data on how many returned migrants gain socio-economic self-sufficiency and reintegrate into the wider Polish society or embark on another migration project. The only data they had were the numbers of people who left Barka. According to the programme administrator, departing migrants do not provide the front office with any information about their future plans. The programme staff talked compassionately about "building a supportive community" which provides respite to the migrants and other homeless and/or addicted Poles. They use the term integration, but the concept is applied to integration into the Barka community (*wspólnota*) and not necessarily to re/integration into a wider society. The geographical location of Barka communities is also not conducive to social integration. For example, the community we visited is located off the beaten track in the countryside without access to public transport, which severely limits the possibilities of associating with anyone outside the community. The homeless have no opportunity to participate in social life, food shopping is a problem for them as they have no idea how much things cost; they are totally isolated from the wider society (Oliwa-Ciesielska, 2000:62).

Marcin, one of the outreach workers who regularly travels to London to offer migrants assistance in returning to Poland, said that some people he worked with over the years returned to “the community” as many as three times. Marcin is a good example of (over)dependence on Barka. While he never migrated, he is a recovering alcoholic who has been sober for 14 years. When asked if he is ready to leave the community and live on his own, he said emphatically that he is not ready. He has no interest in being on his own and getting a fulltime job. What he gets for his outreach work in London is sufficient. He does not have any expenses as Barka provides him with room and board. While Marcin might be a good role model for the migrants who have alcohol addiction problems, he certainly does not inspire confidence in becoming economically self-sufficient. Marcin uses his status as a recovering alcoholic for economic gain. By his own admission, he would not have been able to make the money he makes in London as an outreach worker in Poland, at least not that easily.

Almost all of the men interviewed indicated that Barka outreach workers combed the streets of London for Polish men sleeping rough in London and promised them assistance in getting back on their feet in Poland. Some of the returned men do work, but they are either employed by the businesses or farms Barka owns and the fruits of their labour are “for the good of the community” or they get occasional jobs where they can make a few zloty. Marek works in a sawmill owned by a local co-operative. Franek, one of the outreach workers, works as a guard when he is not in the UK. Janusz keeps busy helping out with small repairs and has his eye on a job in the carpentry workshop, a local co-op business. He too is planning to return to London. Janusz said: “The first trip [abroad] is to gain some smarts, the second to make money.” He is disillusioned with Barka.

Barka volunteers lie and talk nonsense (*bzdury*)! They told us that they would provide jobs and smokes, but neither one has materialized. It is true that we live in two-person rooms and can watch TV, but that’s it! I wished they told us that we would have to talk to social workers. Not everybody wants to be written up! I call them “soul hunters” (*łowcy dusz*). They are very rude; they ask: “So you had a drink, didn’t you! Did you piss in your sleeping bag?” They forget that they were pissing in their sleeping bags not so long ago. When I asked them in London to get me into a detox programme, they didn’t do anything. As long as I did not want to leave, they would not help. Once I agreed to leave, they organized a return trip in one day! They should be honest and tell us that the only thing on offer is a return trip!

We heard from several other men that the stories they heard from street-workers were making the organization look larger than life. The media contribute to the myth making (*mitologizacja*) (see Kunach, 2007). Andrzej remarked that before he left Slough, Barka volunteers talked big about finding him employment, but now the staff is urging him to file for welfare benefits. Ryszard too feels deceived by Barka. Although he was panhandling in London at the time Barka outreach workers approached him, he regrets he allowed them to talk him into returning to Poland. One of Barka’s stated goals is “to give these ‘unfortunate souls’ a chance to believe in themselves and a chance at normal life” (Kunach, 2007: 52). However, it is hard to see any evidence of tangible strategies to empower these men. Ryszard feels very dependent on Barka. He said: “I feel too dependent on the programme. I cannot even go to the doctor by myself, because there is no transportation.” He does not like to be thought of as an alcoholic: “Just because I came back from England, I am not an alcoholic. Here everyone has a label. I don’t like it.” Ryszard seems to be in denial about his addiction; he told us he did drink excessively and alcohol got him into trouble and caused some health problems, but he wants to be treated with dignity and not reduced to this one vice.

But even those men who think Barka is helpful do not want to stay. With one exception, all of the interviewed men want to migrate again and treat their stay in the community as a temporary respite that will allow them to wait out winter and embark on a new sojourn in the spring. When

we contacted the programme 18 months later, only one of the returned migrants we interviewed at the beginning of our research was still living in the community. He was on welfare and his welfare check supported his stay in Chudobczyce.

The biggest disappointment the study participants expressed was lack of assistance with finding employment. They perceived lack of work as their main problem and employment assistance as their biggest need. They also had quite high expectations as they compared Polish working conditions and wages with those in the UK. Perhaps that is why most wanted to go abroad again. Several emphasized that losing a job in the UK prompted them into drinking, not the other way around. Now they feel trapped in the system of care that means well but cannot deliver the solution that they need and want: employment opportunity.

These men are not isolated in their desire to migrate again. As Krystyna Iglicka (2009) points out in a much larger study, the majority of Polish return migrants had very firm plans to embark on another migration project and considered their return to Poland to be temporary. Interestingly, 90 per cent of those who migrated were employed before leaving Poland, upon return only 60 per cent found jobs. According to Iglicka's study, inability to find employment in Poland upon return is the main factor pushing Poles to search for better economic opportunities abroad. Only three per cent of those studied by Iglicka registered with state unemployment programmes. It is difficult to assess why more return migrants did not avail themselves of this assistance: perhaps they did not know about its existence or, more likely, did not have much confidence in its efficacy. The prevailing sentiment we heard was that welfare involves so little money that it's not worth applying for assistance. Pride was also mentioned; people who benefit from public assistance do not want to be seen as poor.

The men in our study certainly did not have any confidence in Barka in terms of assisting them with finding jobs and did not much care for the psychosocial and anti-addiction programming. They did not equate their return to Poland with a return to the Polish society; they remained quite isolated both from the Barka community and from the wider society. The assistance programmes treated them as people who failed, a label they resented very much.

UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES OF COMPASSION

The increasing number of media and research reports describing misfortunes of different migrants—irregular Chinese migrants found dead in a cold storage container of a Dutch truck, asylums seekers drowning en route from North Africa to Spain's Canary Islands, or Poles sleeping rough in London – have resulted in “a number of seemingly innocuous, exceptional, humanitarian measures” aimed at “protecting basic human dignity in the face of acute suffering”. We have seen similar responses to refugee situations and humanitarian emergencies (van Ewijk and Grifhorst, 1997; Watters, 2001; Goździak, 2009). These programmes “are grounded in (...) the moral imperative to relieve suffering” (Ticktin, 2011: 2). They often take the form of psychosocial interventions, with more emphasis on psychological and less on social, and little or no consideration for the economic or the political. They come together through a diverse set of actors, with NGOs leading the way.

“The imagined suffering body is a victim without a perpetrator – a sufferer, pure and simple, caught in a moment of urgent need. No one is responsible for [his] suffering; those who act to save [him] do so from the goodness of their hearts, out of moral obligation” (Ticktin, 2011: 11). Moreover, the victim is often perceived as a vulnerable individual, lacking resiliency and agency, a passive recipient of action from the compassionate and well meaning, but ill equipped, helpers. The study participants wanted to be active and did not want to stay in the isolated Barka community. They felt they had a lot of agency and took advantage of the limited assistance Barka provides to accomplish their own goals: have a respite from sleeping rough in the London streets; wait out cold winter weather; and devise another migration project.

Some researchers suggest Barka stands out, because “it emphasizes support for returned Polish migrants and creates conditions for social re-integration (through job placement, training and advice on establishing small enterprises, social cooperatives, therapy, legal aid, psychosocial and medical assistance, transitional and social housing)” (Gorynska-Bittner, nd: 162). Our research, however, suggests that these are simply declarations that have not materialized. The promises Barka makes do not meet the needs of the migrants. Irek described the situation in the community as follows:

I am not held against my will here. But... the atmosphere here is not nice. It seems that everyone is ‘working’, but it’s busy work, work that needs to be performed in exchange for three square meals and a place to sleep. We do not get anything else.

He also complained that there is no privacy in the community:

Everyone knows everything about everyone else, whether anyone visited you, whether you received money or what you ate. My roommate does not ask if he can have any of my coffee or my detergent, he simply takes what he needs.

These behaviours are considered acceptable and part of community building. Moral rehabilitation and community building are the main principles emphasized by Barka’s founders. They talk about the need to instill in the members of the community a feeling of belonging. However, despite or perhaps because of the emphasis on the therapeutic aspects of the community, many of the interviewed migrants do not want to stay, particularly if it means living in the community indefinitely. And it does. Rehabilitation in Barka equals acceptance of community life and tying one’s future with the community. As a consequence, rehabilitated individuals are capable only of operating in a group and do not become independent of the community, economically or socially. Individuals, who want to sever their ties with Barka do not have any alternatives. As one of the rare critics of the therapeutic approaches employed by Baraka indicated “Comprehensive assistance provided by the community is limited to individuals ready to conform” (Oliwa-Ciesielska, 1999: 174-176). Non-conformists do not have any alternatives and end up in the same situation they tried to escape.

CONCLUSIONS

What needs to be done to facilitate reintegration of returned migrants? Some authors (e.g. Bittner-Goryńska, nd: 162) call for solutions at the EU level, including migration and social policy coordination, with a special emphasis on the creation of transnational assistance programmes and local and faith communities within the “social economy” or “economy of inclusion” framework. Many of these propositions do not take into account migrants’ agency and their self-image as strong and resilient people in the process of creating appropriate solutions. We are not suggesting that the narratives interviewed migrants put forth should be taken at face-value – after all, every narrative is a social construction – but dismissing them and pathologizing migrants’ experiences is also not conducive to creative solutions.

There is also no discussion in the literature about the responsibility of the local government or the civil society in prevention efforts. We do not want to suggest that efforts need to be undertaken to prevent migration (after all, the right to migrate is a basic human right), but that migrants should know their rights and have realistic expectations regarding integration in destination countries, in other words to be prepared as well as possible for their migration projects in order to prevent unfavourable outcomes or receive an adequate assistance upon return.

Of course, even with the best preparation, there are always going to be return migrants in need of assistance. Poland is at a very opportune moment in time to engage more critically with existing

assistance efforts: civil society is playing a larger and larger role, but some of the approaches are adopted uncritically. Szarfenberg (2010: 6), for example, indicates that nonprofit organizations should reconsider some of their service and assistance approaches as well as offering alternatives to avoid overdependence on a particular programme that may not suit all migrants. Most importantly, public and private institutions should realize that there is no shame in returning home and return migration should not be seen as "failure". There is a need for more emphasis on agency and resiliency of returned migrants and less on vulnerability and victimhood.

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NOTES

1. GUS (Główny Urząd Statystyczny or Central Bureau of Statistics) includes in these statistics Poles who maintain a residency address in Poland. These statistics do not include Poles who have severed formal contacts with Poland.
2. All names used in the article are pseudonyms in order to protect the identity of our informants.
3. The pilot project in Hammersmith and Fulham was supposed to be evaluated but we could not find any proof of its existence.

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