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POLISH EMIGRATION IN FRANCE AT THE BEGINNING OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Abstract: The main aim of the article is an attempt to show the life of Polish emigration in France in the first half of the 20th century and, above all, the circumstances and organization of the trips, the number of people, their distribution within the territory of individual departments, working conditions and the problem of assimilation. In those times, Poles were coming to work in France from the territory of Germany (Westphalia) and from Poland. France was a destination Poles were very keen on and emigrated to on several occasions. On the one hand, France needed workers and, on the other hand, the difficult economic situation prompted Poles to leave their country and look for work outside their borders. The Polish-French convention on emigration and immigration, concluded on 3rd September 1919, played an important role in this matter. It set out the rules that gave grounds for many Poles to leave Poland in the following years. Polish immigration in the 1920s and 30s was of economic nature. Poles chose to work in various branches of heavy industry, primarily in mining, metallurgy, construction, textile and, least profitable, agriculture. They had to get used to the new conditions of life such as learning the language, the culture and mentality of Frenchmen, which was different from Polish. For the first groups of Poles arriving in France, French was a serious problem, yet with each passing year the problem started to fade away. Poles were ambitious and tried to educate their children and young people. Working in France, despite many difficulties, meant an improvement of material conditions for them compared to those in Poland. Compared with the French workers, their position was much worse, their status was significantly lower, they performed physical work, they generally received lower wages, and did not have full occupational rights.

Keywords: Poles in France in the 20th century, Polish emigration, Polish-French relations, Polish people, France, Poland, history of Poland, history of France.

The Polish emigration in France had a long tradition. Poles arrived there many times over the centuries, e.g. after the uprising of 1831, 1846 and after the 1848 Spring of Nations.¹

¹ For more information about this subject see the publications: Zdrada 1987; Kalemka 1971; Kalemka 2003; Bielecki 1986; Śladkowski 1980; Borejsza 1966; Gmurczyk-Wrońska 1996; Ponty 1996; 2008; Włoszczewski 1936: 63; Brożek 1984: 146.

Undoubtedly, the so-called Great Emigration constituted the most known, best organised group who created a number of institutions and political organizations, cultural and educational self-help and charity groups, and who launched a variety of publications, about 80 periodicals, most of them of political and polemical nature. Some of the refugees left France later but other remained, assimilating into the French society.

The 20th century also saw Poles coming to France, e.g. in the years 1905–1907 as new emigrants, i.e. workers in different branches of industry and workers on farms.²

After the First World War, a new chapter began in the history of Polish emigration in France.³ The difficult economic and demographic situation in France allowed for the acceptance of immigrants from different countries.⁴ This was caused by severe human casualties: about 1.5 million were killed fighting, about 700,000 died due to injuries and about 2.8 million were unfit for work. As a result of the war, French agriculture lost 40% of its labour force and industry lost 25%.⁵

The reasons for emigration from Poland were, among others, economic relations, retarded agriculture structure, small farms in excess, weak industry, and surplus of labour force over demand. Those who were leaving Poland as emigrants were the redundant unemployed from both towns and villages.⁶

Poland was a country with a high population growth rate of 15% a year. In the years 1919–1939 the population of Poland increased by 7.7 million and in France by 2.7 million⁷. Polish immigration was a mass, well organized and collective community. The influx of Poles was irregular; they were coming from two main directions: Westphalia in Germany and Poland.

The first group of immigrants were Poles from Westphalia.⁸ After the end of the First World War the recruitment to mines and factories in northern France was resumed. Displacement began in 1919 and the Central Committee of Coal Mines of France (Comité Central des Houillères de France) supported by Polish occupational and social organizations from Westphalia managed the recruitment process.

In the summer of 1920 the Polish-French conference was held, the effect of which was Poland's support of the emigration. On 5th June 1920 the Polish-French agreement was signed under which Polish consulates in Westphalia in the cities of Essen and Düsseldorf were made responsible for issuing provisional passports and travel documents enabling the departure.

In 1921 the Central Committee of Mines opened the official recruitment office in Duisburg. According to the data from 1920–1924, about 25,000 workers arrived in France and about further 7,500 were supposed to arrive, so with their families it should have been about 160,000 people.

² Janowska 1960.

³ Kaczmarek 1928; Janowska 1981: passim; Janowska 1979: 135–144.

⁴ Dzwonkowski 1979: 69–82; Skowron 1982: 19; Stefanicka 2009: 15; Janowska 1965: 87; Wrzesiński 1979: 156–170.

⁵ Bettelheim 1955: passim.

⁶ Śladkowski 1985: 143

⁷ *Ibid.*; Archives of the Polish Library in Paris, Mieczysław Biesiekierski Archive 9: 8.

⁸ Poniatowska 1986.

The second group arriving in France was an organized emigration from Poland. The Polish-French agreement on immigration and migration, regulating legal and financial aspects (including possible collective contracts, salary matters, social welfare) was signed on September 3, 1919⁹ by the Secretary of State in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Władysław Skrzyński and Chargé d’Affaires of Poland Maurice Fouchet. After the ratification it came to power on March 8, 1920. Over the next few years about 100,000 Poles arrived in France, mainly in the northern departments – Nord and Pas-de-Calais.¹⁰ During subsequent months the Polish-French cooperation developed.¹¹

French authorities committed themselves among others to equal treatment of the immigrant employees from Poland and French workers in terms of pay, care and social insurance. However, it was the French party who got the right to the selection of reported workers in Poland.

The French administrative authorities had the right to provide care over Polish emigrants¹² and inspections of the French legislation and of the control of the convention provisions from the moment the Poles settled down and took up work.

Depriving the Polish consular authorities in France of the care over Polish emigrants had unfavourable consequences, such as misunderstanding with the employers or in the case of expulsion.¹³ Establishing French recruitment missions conducting professional and medical selection of future emigrants on the Polish

⁹ The text of this agreement: Dz. U. RP. 1920, nr 41, poz. 246, Journal of Laws of the Republic of Poland, abbreviated Dz. U.; Kołodziej 1982: 166; Janowska 1960: 64–65; Kraszewski 1995: 170.

¹⁰ They came mainly to preserve Polish citizenship, because in 1924, working in the mines of the Ruhr in Westphalia, they had to either take German citizenship or leave the country. The Poles lived primarily in Valenciennes, Douai, Lens, Lille, Bruay-la-Buissière, Houdain. Stefanicka 2009: 16; Cooper-Richet 2002; Archives of the Polish Library in Paris, Mieczysław Biesiekierski Archive 9: 2.

¹¹ In subsequent years, Poland concluded a political agreement with France on February 19, 1921, envisaging cooperation in the sphere of foreign policy, and on February 21, 1921 a secret military convention committing itself to assistance in the event of aggression by the third party (Germany and Russia). On February 6, 1922, in Paris, the first trade convention and oil system were ratified on 12 May. On May 15, 16 and 17, 1939, military talks were held, resulting in the signature of May 19, 1939, by generals Tadeusz Kasprzycki and Maurice Gamelin, of a convention referred to as a military protocol, with the proviso that it would take effect only after signature. Contract, or so called. Political protocol. The contract was concluded only on September 4, 1939. For more information about this subject see the publications: Batowski 1969: 282; Bułhak 1993: passim; Bułhak 2000, passim; Cienciała 1990: 389–390; Mazurowa 1974, passim; Mazurowa 1979: 223–248; Skrzypek 1989, passim; Dzwonkowski, Śladkowski 1992: 379–380; Rojek *at al.* 2007: 26; Noël 1966; Micewski 1961: 202–207; Libront 1982; Batowski 1981: 69–87; Wojciechowski 2010: 231–241; Beauvois 1991; Ciechanowski 1980: 178–191; Wyrwa 1983: 223–236; Kornat 1997: 213–225; Rojek 2002: 108–120; Ewert 1955: 158–161; Dominik 2001: Janasz 1977; Pasztor 1999; Gmurczyk-Wrońska 2001: 57–78; Kraszewski 1995: 145–154; Ciałowicz 1970: 81, 129–142; Kukułka 1970, passim; Łaptos 1983; Baranowski 1990: 75–77, 81; Marton-Domeyko 1999: 216–225; Jabłonowski, Anculewicz, 1999: passim; Sierpowski 1989: 206–208; Gelberg 1958: 118; Jarosz, Pasztor 2008: 14–15; Pasztor 1994: 41–60; Pasztor 1998: 79–101; Archives of the Polish Institute and Sikorski Museum in London, ASSAP A.IV.1/1b, *Sprawozdanie roczne b. Attaché Wojskowego w Paryżu za czas od 1 X 1938 – 10 IX 1939*, k. 68–82; Alexander 1992: 284–290; Jędruszczak, Nowak-Kiełbikowa 1996: 235–236; Zgórniak 1993: 437–441; Pasztor 1999: 59–85; PSZ, vol. 1: *Kampania wrześniowa 1939*, part 1: 1951: 99–100.

¹² Archives of Modern Records in Warsaw, Polish Care in Paris 1: 1-2.

¹³ Śladkowski 1985: 144.

territory proved a certain extent of dependence of the Polish state on France (other countries which also concluded similar agreements with France did not agree to it: Italy, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia).

The route to France was not easy as it ran through the gathering stations in Wejherowo¹⁴ and Mysłowice, where immigrants were subjected to medical examinations by French doctors and were tested in terms of suitability for work. Qualified people signed contracts with employers represented by the Central Immigration Association. Then, they were sent to France in groups of several hundred.

They went from Mysłowice by land and by rail through Czechoslovakia and Germany, while from Wejherowo they travelled by sea from Gdynia to the ports of Le Havre or Dunkirk. The concentration point for each transport in France was the camp in Toul (Lorraine, Meurthe-et-Moselle). The conditions in the camp were poor; it did not earn a good reputation. After another medical and occupational check the immigrants were sent to their work places.

In December 1919, the first groups of Poles arrived to France, a total of 800 people.¹⁵ However, in the subsequent years, for example in 1920, 13,400 people¹⁶ came; in 1921 – 9,200; in 1922 – 28,000; in 1923 – 69,500; in 1929 – 81,500; in 1930 – 85,000; in 1931 – 24,000; in 1932 – 8,100; in 1933 – 11,400; in 1934 – 8,000; in 1935 – 1,400; in 1936 – 8,300; in 1937 – 33,000; in 1938 – 20,500¹⁷.

The Polish community in exile constituted a small part of the newly arrived refugees in the period 1918–1919, not counting 25,000–30,000 members of the Polish Army.

In the years 1919–1925, about 210,000 people arrived from Poland including a big number of Poles from Westphalia who constituted one third of the entire population in France. Over the next 10 years the number of Poles in France rose ten times despite the negative balance in 1931–1936 (about 120,000 Polish workers were forced to return due to redundancy).

According to the general census in 1921, Poles constituted 3% of all the foreigners, followed by the next census from 1926, where they constituted 12.9%. In 1926, Poles held the 4th place after Italians, Belgians and Spaniards. According to the 1931 census, they constituted 18.7% of the population and this gave them the second place among foreigners and accounted for 1.2% of the total population of France.¹⁸

In the interwar period, about 700 to 750 thousand Polish citizens came to France with the intention of settling here permanently or finding temporary employment.

Between 1937 and 1938 about 50,000 people came who knew nothing about France. The greatest number of Poles repatriated in the years 1931–1936, i.e. 140,000 of them. Before September 1939 250,000 returned to Poland. Until the outbreak of the Second World War the Polish community in France counted not fewer than 500,000 people.

¹⁴ Archives of Modern Records in Warsaw, Polish Care in Paris 36: 5.

¹⁵ Archives of the Polish Library in Paris, Mieczysław Biesiekierski Archive 9: 20.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*; Śladowski 1985: 144.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Archives of the Polish Library in Paris, Mieczysław Biesiekierski Archive 9: 1-2.

On the basis of the data obtained from censuses it is also possible to specify the exact location of Poles in France.

Just after the end of the war 38% of the largest Polish centres were located in Paris and 27% in the eastern region (Poles came mainly from Westphalia and found employment in industry, agriculture and crafts), but there were also centres in the departments of Nord, Pas-de-Calais (Poles were employed in mines), Alsace and Lorraine (Poles worked in mines or steelworks). In the Picardy region, farm workers were employed, while in the central region Poles worked as miners in coal mines in the Chalon-sur-Saône Basin, in metallurgical plants in St. Etienne and in the textile industry in Lyon.

From 1926 it was possible to observe a new pattern of distribution of the Polish community, with 53% in the northern departments. The majority were located in Pas-de-Calais and Nord¹⁹ and in the Lorraine-Alsatian regions. Poles worked there in iron ore mines in the metallurgical industry. The number of Poles in some regions of the country was considerable, Poles accounted for 10.4% of the inhabitants of Pas-de-Calais, 4.4% in Moselle, 4.0% in Nord, and 3.9% in Aisne.²⁰

In terms of social and occupational structure, the Polish community in France was a homogeneous group, 90% of whom were employees – workers employed in various industries and in agriculture. Upon arriving in France in the 1920s most of the Poles working professionally found employment in industry (for example, according to data from 1926, 72% of people were employed in industry and 16% in agriculture).

The most significant and strongest group in the French economy were the Polish miners working in coal mines in the northern Nord and Pas-de-Calais mines – 58% of all coal miners in the coal mines in France.²¹

The majority of them worked below ground in the most difficult conditions at the most dangerous workstations. French people usually took up managerial positions or worked on the surface. Similarly in steel mills, in the textile industry and the construction industry Poles usually worked as unqualified workers.

The situation changed in the 1930s when the percentage of foreigners employed in the coal mining decreased, but their significance continued to rise and they still constituted the largest group.

In 1936, the direction of the recruitment of Polish workers changed. The unemployment rate in industry made the employment in agriculture rise by 23%, while in industry the figure was 60%. The change to the previous employment pattern did not happen because of the recruitment from Poland but also due to secondary migration. It started to happen after the arrival in France, when contracts expired or when workers left the village earlier and looked for jobs in industry, so as few as one third remained in the countryside to work on farms. The demand for farm labour in France was bigger than in industry. The agricultural needs were greater than those of industry.

¹⁹ Cegarra 1999: 21–26; Frey 2003; Dudziński 2004: 27–29.

²⁰ Śladkowski 1985: 144.

²¹ Archives of the Polish Library in Paris, Mieczysław Biesiekierski Archive 9: 1-2.

Farm workers were also a relatively large group, between 1920 and 1926 there were 53,000 of them and with their families there were about 90,000 of them.

In the following years, the majority of emigrants were sent to work in agriculture. In the years of economic crisis, unemployment and mass displacement of Polish emigrants from France, workers were transferred to agricultural work. Most of the farmers worked in large estates, so working conditions were similar to those in industry: teamwork, joint housing, fixed hours of work and meals.

As a result, Poles preferred to work on these properties as smaller farms needed more intensive work. Among those Poles there was a group of people “statistically elusive” called “loose people” because they were breaking contracts, changing their place of residence, wandering from one settlement to another.

Along with the workers from Westphalia, merchants and craftsmen arrived in France. In 1931 they constituted about 7.3% of the population. They started working in the northern departments of the Polish Merchants Association and the Polish Industry Association in France. There were about 2,000 Polish companies: about 300 slaughterhouses, about 200 bakeries, about 220 hairdressers, about 210 tailors, about 400 grocery stores, over 800 cafes and bars.

A small group of about 2% were the intelligentsia residing in the Paris region. They were mainly teachers, clergy, translators and lawyers, originating mainly from the so-called old emigration.

Between 1925 and 1939 the emigrating groups included 2% of Jews and Ukrainians. The Ukrainians lived in dispersion and they did not create any compact environment. They dealt with crafts and worked in cottage industry. A large part of the Jews kept in touch with the Polish Association of Moses Confession, the Polish Section, Union de Juifs de l'Est and the Union of Polish Jews in France. Their clusters were organized in the eastern departments of Metz and Strasbourg so contact with other Poles outside Paris was minimal.

Contrary to the provisions of the convention from 1919, working conditions, social care and earnings of Polish emigrants in the mining and in the industry were generally lower by about 20% compared to earnings of French workers. Frenchmen earned 900–1000 Francs monthly (in the mining and the metallurgy), while Poles earned 600–720 Francs, with earnings in other branches amounting to only 600–700 Francs monthly.

Poles were employed seasonally or under one-year agreements, so they were more exposed to redundancy and unemployment, even though as employees they usually earned a good name. French authorities harassed them, applying the penalty of expulsion especially in the period of crisis.

Worse working conditions were definitely found on farms: very long working days e.g. 14 working hours per day, total dependence on the patron-owner. The labour market for the village helping hands was almost always open.

The adaptation of Poles to new conditions in the unfamiliar environment on the French territory took a long time because of the unknown language, a different mentality, level of the culture, and material level of France. The setting was alien to Poles in every respect.

Also the hostile, distrustful attitude contributed to adaptive problems towards strangers. In diaries and memoirs it is possible to find information referring to such problems like funds, language, adaptations associated with the initial period in terms of the emigrants' nature or mentality.

After a short stay some groups of Poles decided to change their whereabouts, the town or the region in France, or to simply return home, which about 50,000 Poles (or 1/9 of them) did in the 1920s.

Irrespective of the mentioned unpleasant experiences in individual feelings of many Poles, they generally adjusted well to the new conditions, however it took them long before they got rid of distance and the mistrust towards the French community.

The adaptation process was diversified, difficult for the first strangers, seemingly simpler for the ones who arrived later. The process of the assimilation of the second emigration generation proceeded faster; here the ability to speak French played a crucial role.

The convention from 1919 did not include education issues. This problem was raised by the Polish party in 1924 during the Polish-French Advisory Board, which dealt with the whole issue of emigration. At that time the Central Committee of Coal Mines of France agreed to organize schools in Polish for Polish workers' children.²² The teaching was to take place in private schools. Where there were over 65 children, the lessons in Polish covered Polish language and literature, history, and geography, while other subjects were taught in French. Another system included extra afternoon hours of Polish language and literature, history and geography in French schools or during school holidays.²³

A group of parents came up with the initiative of the so-called "Thursday courses", where children learnt the Polish language and acquired knowledge about Poland on days when they did not go to school.

An additional problem was the limited number of teacher posts awarded by the Ministry of Religious Denominations and Public Enlightenment. Before the economic crisis there were 52, but in subsequent years this number was reduced. For this reason "Thursday courses" were conducted by emigrants themselves – educated workers, Polish students, and priests from Polish parishes. They combined the teaching of Polish with catechesis. "Thursday courses" were always the most popular form of education.²⁴ Since 1934 the education system was based on three types of schools. Everywhere, the same subjects were taught: the Polish language, knowledge of Poland with elements of history and geography yet in different curricula: 9-15 hours in private schools, 4-8 hours in French schools, 2-3 hours on "Thursday courses".²⁵ Only 30% of Polish children and young people used to have access to education in three types of schools. In relation to

²² Archives of Modern Records in Warsaw, Polish Care in Paris 5: 1.

²³ Archives of the Polish Library in Paris, Mieczysław Biesiekierski Archive, temporary signature 11: Order of the French Ministry of Education concerning the teaching of the Polish language (history and geography) in public and private public schools in France, without pagination.

²⁴ Śladkowski 1985: 154.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 1985: 154.

existing needs, the existing network of schools was insufficient. As a result, most Polish children could not learn Polish systematically.

The characteristic feature of the Polish emigrant environment was the flourishing of social and cultural life and the development of Polish institutions in France. In the period 1919–1939 the Polish community in France planned about 50 organizations of extra-local character. These were associations, societies of various characters (the secular one – the Gymnastic Society “Falcon” or religious ones – Society of St. Barbara).

The wide and diverse activities in terms of subjects had a great impact on the preservation and development of culture of national awareness and it strengthened the feeling of being part of the community.

Polish press was developing by publishing many magazines such as: “Głos Wychodźcy”, “Kurier Polski”, “Narodowiec”, “Wiarus Polski”, “Echo Polski”, “Gazeta Polska”, “Ognisko”, “Polak we Francji”, “Polonia Nowa”, “Prawo Ludu”, “Żaba”, “Polskie Pacholę”, “Siła”, “Sokół i Sportowiec”. The years 1923–1924 saw the greatest number of emerging organisations. In November 1924 the Executive Council of Polish Societies in France was created. It incorporated the Gymnastic Society “Falcon” (Towarzystwo Gimnastyczne “Sokół”), the Association of Singing Circles (Związek Kół Śpiewaczych), the Association of Catholic Societies (Związek Towarzystw Katolickich), the Association of Theatre Clubs (Związek Kół Teatralnych), and the Association of Polish Industrialists in France (Związek Przemysłowców Polskich we Francji). Such societies like the Association of Polish Societies of Eastern France (Związek Towarzystw Polskich Wschodniej Francji), the Polish Teachers’ Union, the Society of the Social-Cultural Work for the Polish Emigration in France (Towarzystwo Pracy Społeczno-Kulturalnej dla Wychodźstwa Polskiego we Francji), the Polish Sections at Confédération Générale du Travail (Seksje Polskie przy Confédération Générale du Travail), the Poland Workers’ University (Polski Uniwersytet Robotniczy), and the Polish Football Association in France (Polski Związek Piłki Nożnej we Francji) did not join the Council.

According to the French Ministry of Internal Affairs, in 1926 there were 138 Polish associations, 126 Italian, and 34 Spanish. At that time the number of emigrants from Italy was twice as big as that of the Poles. Polish institutions were created according to the needs of local communities, some of them operating for a short time, others definitely longer.

To sum up, it is possible to make a statement that the Polish emigration to France in the period 1919–1939 was of economic nature. Poles arrived to France along with their families coming from urban agglomerations and the countryside. They took up work in different branches of industry (mining, metallurgy, construction, textile industry) and in the farming.

Despite trouble and inconvenience, work in France brought improvement in the financial and social situation compared to the dwelling in Poland – it is only within this scope that one can speak about improvement in life. Compared with French workers, the immigrants’ status was much worse: they were doing manual labour, were usually paid less and were not offered full social packets of benefits.

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ПОЉСКА ЕМИГРАЦИЈА У ФРАНЦУСКУ НА ПОЧЕТКУ XX ВЕКА

Резиме

Циљ рада је покушај да се прикаже живот пољских емиграната у Француској у првој половини XX века, а пре свега околности и организацију путовања, број људи, њихову дистрибуцију по територијама појединачних области, услове рада и проблем асимилације. У то доба Пољаци су долазили да раде у Француску са територије Немачке (Весфалија) и из Пољске. Француска је била одредиште које је веома интересовало Пољаке и емигрирали су у неколико наврата. С једне стране, Француској су били потребни радници, а с друге, тешка економска ситуација је подстакла Пољаке да напусте земљу и траже посао ван њених граница. Велику улогу у овој ситуацији је играла пољско-француска конвенција о емиграцији и имиграцији која је усвојена 3. 9. 1919. Она је поставила правила која су пружила могућност многим Пољацима да напусте Пољску у годинама које су следиле. Пољска имиграција двадесетих и тридесетих година XX века је била економске природе. Пољаци су одабрали да раде у разним гранама тешке индустрије, првенствено у рударству, металургији, грађевинарству, текстилној индустрији и најмање профитабилној пољопривреди. Они су морали да се навикну на нове услове живота, те да науче језик, културу и упознају менталитет Француза, који су били другачији од Пољака. За прву групу Пољака који су стигли у Француску језик је представљао озбиљан проблем, али сваке наредне године ти проблеми су полако нестајали. Пољаци су били амбициозни и покушавали су да образују своју децу и омладину. Упркос многим проблемима рад у Француској је за њих значајно побољшање материјалог статуса спрам оног у Пољској. У поређењу са француским радницима Пољаци су имали много лошији положај и знатно нижи статус, радили су физичке послове, примали су генерално нижу плату и нису имали станарска права.

Кључне речи: Пољаци у Француској у XX веку, пољска емиграција, пољско-француски односи, Пољаци, Француска, Пољска, историја Пољске, историја Француске.