

Wanted: Polish Workers

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OCT. 27, 2005 12 AM PT

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WARSAW —

Globalization is working when a Pole dresses like a leprechaun and hands out international job applications in a palace built by a dictator.

Elbow to elbow, with tattered suits brushing against low-cut sweaters, hundreds of Poles crowded into the communist-era Palace of Culture recently to peruse job prospects in Ireland, Britain and Sweden. Booths were set up, paperwork was aflutter. Pitchmen spoke in cute brogues and the world seemed suddenly smaller.

Poles sat beneath chandeliers listening to spiels on foreign taxes, health benefits and how to avoid unsavory business characters. There were nods, winks and jokes, but when national drinking preferences were broached, the Poles, ever fond of vodka, turned earnest at the mention that beer the color of butterscotch and molasses was the favorite of the Irish.

Workers here are a sought-after commodity on a continent that needs truck drivers, computer specialists, doctors, dentists, nurses and the occasional puffy-lipped model. Poles are reliable, cheap labor, and unlike workers in some Central European nations, such as the Czech Republic, they have few opportunities at home.

“It’s wonderful Europe is opening up to us,” said Marlena Modzelan, an unemployed political science graduate hoping to find work in London as a caregiver. She listed her qualifications as the man in the leprechaun costume wandered nearby, applications for an Irish agency at the ready. “We have all these possibilities,” she said. “The world is out there waiting. I don’t think I’ll lose my identity. I’ll always be a Pole first, not a European.”

Tens of thousands of Poles are peering west to escape an 18% unemployment rate at home. Their chances have improved since last year, when border and work restrictions in some countries were eased after Poland joined the European Union. Poland is helping define a new and integrating Europe -- a nation once on the dark political fringe that now exports English literature teachers to Scotland and dentists to Manchester.

“It’s a win-win. Opportunity is everywhere,” said Adam Ringer, whose recruiting company this year sent 350 Polish doctors to Sweden, Denmark and Britain. “It’s not just Poles leaving. Europeans are coming here for cheaper dental work and cosmetic surgery. My dentist’s office in Warsaw is full of Italians. We’re seeing implants manufactured in Sweden

being mailed to Gdansk and other Polish seaside towns where Swedes are vacationing while having their teeth fixed.”

Since their country entered the EU on May 1, 2004, about 500,000 Poles have found work in Western European countries. Many of them had already been traveling to Germany as seasonal construction and agricultural laborers, but increasing numbers of professionals and service-sector workers are taking advantage of more stable openings in Scandinavia and other northern countries. About 60% of the 75,000 Poles legally working in Britain arrived after Poland’s entry into the EU.

“There’s been an average of 10,000 Poles a month coming to Ireland,” said Tony Watson, a recruiter for an Irish employment service who spoke at the job fair. “The Irish and the Poles have a lot in common. We’re both Catholic and we’ve both lived under the jurisdiction of our neighbors. Ireland used to have 18% unemployment, so we know what it’s like.”

Fifty-six percent of workers in Britain who come from new EU nations are Poles. That figure is 64% in Norway and 87% in the Netherlands. Poles have long slipped into neighboring countries for black-market work, but these days, with Poland’s new political status, there’s growing respectability.

There is also widening fear. The struggling economies of France, Italy and Germany worry that low-paid Poles will bring capitalist-style competitiveness that will jeopardize the welfare state. These countries are becoming more selective in the quality and education of foreign labor. Their wariness underscores a larger European divide articulated by the “Polish plumber” -- a French euphemism to warn against legions of eastern workers invading western borders.

The Poles grimaced at first but then decided to turn the slight into a bit of clever marketing: a handsome model wearing plumber’s overalls and carrying a big wrench looks out from a tourism poster that reads: “I’m staying in Poland. Come to us.”

It may be the sexy plumber and his counterpart, the come-hither nurse, or it may be burgeoning budget airlines, but tourism in Poland jumped 19% from last year and is up 30% in steeple-shadowed Krakow.

“We’re changing the image of Poland from a dirty, snowy, ultra-Catholic country,” said Christopher Turowski, a presidential advisor at the Polish Tourism Office. “People can touch Poland. It’s a normal country like any other European nation. We’ll never advertise in the Financial Times. That’s not my client. I’m looking for the average guy.”

He paused and contemplated his country’s new identity as it drifts toward the West.

“There are two Polands, a young one and an old one,” Turowski said. “Among older people, there’s a large group who don’t understand the transformation from communism.”

Communism is still in their minds. But then we have the young, well-educated people doing everything they can to take advantage of opportunities.”

Built as a gift from Russian dictator Josef Stalin, the Cultural Palace in Warsaw was once an icon of oppression. But the other day its lumbering elevators lifted Poles to the international job fair on the sixth floor. A few stepped out with briefcases and manicures; others wore ties and colors from the drab past, but almost all hurried in newly polished shoes that shone on the marble floor. Some did not seem quite right for the jobs they sought -- two men, looking more like truck drivers than sexy plumbers, waited behind a brunet in tight jeans at the Swedish modeling agency booth.

Inside a conference room of buffed wood and smoky wallpaper, where flowing English collided with splintered syntax, Lukasz Bednarek listened to a man from an Irish employment agency tell Poles that if they went to Dublin, they shouldn't worry about “slagging, which I'm not sure how to interpret, but it means we like you and tease you in a friendly way.” Notes were scribbled; eyebrows were raised. A slide from the Irish tax officer appeared overhead.

Like many at the fair, Bednarek, a computer designer wearing a buttoned-up shirt with no tie and a sport coat, lives in an economically depressed town. “The Polish market is not promising,” he said. “I've been looking for a job for one month, but there's nothing of interest in information technology. They want programmers, but I do networks. Twenty-five of my friends are thinking about moving, and five are already working in Ireland.”

Across town at Ringer's recruiting agency, doctors paged through English dictionaries. Bound for Denmark and Britain, the physicians receive weeks of instruction on language, professional requirements and tips on navigating multicultural societies, or, as Ringer says, “How do you as a Polish doctor tell a 17-year-old Muslim girl sitting with her mother in a British hospital that she's pregnant?”

In Poland, the average monthly income is \$760. Most doctors moving to Britain can earn five to 10 times their salaries and have more time for research and continuing education.

“Right now the Polish healthcare system is unstable,” said Krzysztof Biskupiak, a general practice physician on his way to Britain. “It's a real distress for doctors and patients.”

His colleague, Aleksandra Makojnik, said that as a child during the Cold War she never imagined she'd have a passport to other countries.

“The opportunities in Europe are big,” she said. “They accept our medical degrees, and it's easier to move. We'll see up close a multicultural society, which we don't have in Poland. We'll have to be sensitive and try not to push a patient toward our beliefs too strongly. We're learning to negotiate with patients.”

Biskupiak and Makojnik took a break from English class and sat on a couch, trading thoughts about what lies ahead. “A male doctor will probably not be able to examine a Muslim woman,” Biskupiak said.

“There are health, philosophy and religious ideas we have to learn,” Makojnik said.

“One day the whole healthcare system will be globalized,” Biskupiak said.

The prospect of leaving their country did not bother them; an integrating Europe will not diminish who they are. “We won’t lose our national identity,” Makojnik said.

“We didn’t lose it when we lost our independence 200 years ago. We didn’t lose it through two world wars and Soviet occupation. It will survive globalization.”



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