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A Land of Opportunity Lures Poles Back Home

By [KIRK SEMPLE](#)

For 19 years, Elizabeth Baumgartner, a Polish-American from Queens, has been publishing a series of how-to books aimed at newly arrived Polish immigrants trying to find their way in the United States. The books cover topics like buying a house, investing in mutual funds and starting your own business.

These days, however, her best sellers are guides to a once-familiar place, [Poland](#), with titles like “Returning to Poland” and “Retirement of a Re-Immigrant in Poland.”

“This is a sad trend for me,” Ms. Baumgartner said.

New York’s Polish community is shrinking, as waves of immigrants and their families are being lured back to Poland by a vibrant economy there.

Tighter [immigration](#) enforcement, gentrification and the overall aging of the Polish population have contributed to the decline. But the biggest catalyst, community leaders say, was Poland’s admission to the [European Union](#) in 2004, which created immense employment opportunities for Poles in Europe and spurred a return migration.

At the same time, the influx of new Polish immigrants to New York has slowed to a trickle, these community leaders say. As a result, the population of Polish-born people in New York declined to 60,153 in [2006](#), down from 65,246 in 2000, a 7.8 percent drop, according to the Department of City Planning. During the same span, the number of New Yorkers claiming Polish ancestry fell to [211,389](#) from 213,447.

The erosion has been felt most deeply in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, where Poles have been migrating for decades. Polish businesses are losing customers and closing down. Polish employers are struggling to find Polish-speaking workers. The sale of one-way tickets for flights from New York to Poland is soaring.

Tomasz Deptula, an editor and columnist at Nowy Dziennik (The Polish Daily News), the oldest of three Polish-language dailies published in New York, said that unlike the rest of the city’s ethnic media, which is robust, his paper’s advertising revenues and circulation numbers have fallen precipitously in recent years, forcing staffing cuts.

“It’s a rather sad story, especially from my point of view,” he said. “I’m feeling like I’m facing extinction.”

Even before the migration back to Poland began, the Polish community in Greenpoint was fracturing under the pressure of gentrification, which drove up property values. Young families, new immigrants and those of modest means have in turn settled in nascent Polish communities in the city, including Maspeth and Ridgewood in Queens, and Borough Park in Brooklyn, while others have moved out of the state.

But Poland's admission to the European Union sharply accelerated that trend, business owners and residents say. They note that the momentum has increased as the dollar has weakened against the Polish zloty, the American economy has faltered and the United States has been more aggressive in enforcing immigration rules. (Similar reverse migrations have occurred recently among other New York immigrant populations whose homeland economies have improved, like Brazil and Ireland.)

Meanwhile, many Poles, particularly young people who once might have considered coming to the states after high school or college, have decided instead to stay in Poland or get work in Dublin, London or other booming European cities. The euro is robust, they argue, and home is never more than a cheap two-hour flight away.

LOT Polish Airlines, Poland's largest carrier, is carrying more passengers from New York to Poland than in the opposite direction, said Andrzej Kozłowski, a media relations officer for the airline in Warsaw. "The trend here is clear and the gap is widening," he wrote in an e-mail message.

While Polish shop signs and Polish conversations still dominate Greenpoint's main street, Manhattan Avenue, evidence of erosion is ubiquitous, from shuttered Polish stores to shorter lines at the Polish butcher shops and the proliferation of new businesses catering to the newcomers, like Thai restaurants.

Polish-American business owners in Greenpoint have had to be nimble — reinventing themselves to adjust to the neighborhood's demographic shifts — or go out of business.

Polish bookstores, for instance, have increased their stock of English books, and one recently began to sell lamps. Other businesses have followed their customers and moved out of Greenpoint into the newer Polish enclaves.

The Polish & Slavic Federal Credit Union, which was founded in 1976 and became a crucial engine for the development of Greenpoint, has seen its membership level out in the past few years.

In response, the bank is "reaching into new markets," said Marian M. Ponanta, vice president of marketing and public relations for the credit union. A new branch recently opened in Garfield, N.J., and two others are scheduled to open in Maspeth and Trenton. The bank has also stepped up its advertising in the quest for new members.

"Before, we didn't have to do much marketing," Mr. Ponanta said. "They would come to us. They would be thrown into our laps."

Every Polish-American in the New York region seems to know several people who have either moved back to Poland in the past few years or are considering such a move. Many of those people are college-educated and in their 20s and 30s.

Three years ago, Monika Just left her native Poland and came to New York on a six-month tourist visa with plans to start a new life in the United States. She found a job as a waitress, worked long hours and lived cheaply.

In an earlier time, she might have been among the thousands of young Polish immigrants who, after several

years of working as restaurant servers, housecleaners, construction workers or nannies, might have decided to make a longer commitment to the United States, investing in property, starting businesses, trying to become naturalized and raising families.

But like many of her compatriots, Ms. Just has decided to bring her American experience to an abrupt end. Weary of living as an illegal immigrant and settling for low wages, she is planning to return to Poland for good in December. There, she said, her employment prospects will be better and her lifestyle will improve.

“I don’t have a life here,” said Ms. Just, 26, as she prepared for the lunchtime rush at a restaurant in Greenpoint. “I just have a job. All I do is work.”

Not all the returnees are young and flying under the immigration radar. There are also many who have lived legally in the United States for years, built families and businesses here, and are now pulling up stakes and going home.

Some entrepreneurs, seeing a great business opportunity in the economic opening of 2004, quickly closed their enterprises in New York and built new ones in Poland.

Others have come to the decision after much angst-ridden reflection.

Malgosia Szupica-Pyrzanowski, 39, who immigrated to the United States 18 years ago, said that she and her husband, Darek Pyrzanowski, 46, who immigrated 22 years ago, planned to return to Poland next year with their two young children.

Ms. Szupica-Pyrzanowski, a doctoral candidate in neurolinguistics at the [City University of New York](#), said that Poland’s economic improvement was among several key reasons for their return. But it was a hard decision to make, she said, especially for her husband, a professional D.J.

“You have to be courageous to go back,” Ms. Szupica-Pyrzanowski said. “You remove yourself from a rather comfortable life here and go back to your own country, but it’s not the country that you left. I think he was lacking this courage for quite some time.”

For those Poles who have developed businesses and lives that are not dependent on the Polish community for sustenance, the changes have not been terribly disruptive. For some, particularly those Poles who invested in Greenpoint property when it was a blighted neighborhood, the gentrification has been a boon.

Krzysztof Rostek, a prominent Polish-American developer in Greenpoint, said that he has benefited from the rise in property values. He has built 10 residential buildings around the neighborhood and is currently building eight more; many of his buyers are newcomers to the neighborhood.

He is not sentimental about the neighborhood’s upheaval or the dissipation of the Polish-American community.

“Nothing is guaranteed forever, so I’m always open to change,” said Mr. Rostek, 42, whose first job after arriving in New York in 1989 was working as a \$5-per-hour assistant at a Polish deli in Greenpoint.

He pointed out that Greenpoint, like most other New York neighborhoods, has had a revolving ethnic

makeup since the 18th century, with Italians, Germans, Irish and Latinos holding sway at various times.

“The neighborhood is changing for the better,” he said. “That’s what the city is all about.”

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