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POLES APART: MANAGEMENT CONTRIBUTIONS, LESSONS AND ASPIRATIONS OF POLES AND OTHER EAST EUROPEANS WORKING IN UK AGRICULTURE

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Abstract

Dramatic political changes in Poland and elsewhere in Eastern Europe during the 1980s, culminated in collapse of the Berlin Wall in November 1989. Following this, and EU accession in 2004, new opportunities opened for Poles and other East European citizens to work in UK Agriculture, and to experience entrepreneurship. Apparently, many were attracted initially by superior wages attainable through diligent hard work on British farms. Migrant labour, largely of East European origin, now accounts for almost 90% of the workforce engaged in fieldwork involved in field-scale vegetables, and a majority of dairy milkers and managers, particularly from Poland. In conjunction with research within the CEEC Agri-Policy Project, this paper seeks to contextualise focus research findings among a sample of expatriate Poles and others from Eastern Europe now working within UK Agriculture. Cohorts from within English field-scale horticulture and in the UK dairy sector were to be included. The dairy sector declined to respond, and the field-scale crop sector response was small. Coincidence of wide UK media coverage on immigrants working in the UK may have led some to fear a political agenda for this research rather than its purely managerial interest - on management contributions being given on UK farms, lessons being learned and aspirations for future work. Especially of interest is whether or not Poles intend to return to share their management experience for the benefit of Poland, in the context of projected rural depopulation and current agricultural land use trends there.

Keywords: management, lessons, aspirations, migration, change, enterprise

1. Introduction: the context of migration from Eastern Europe to the UK

This paper defines a migrant as per Green *et al* (2005) 'a person from outside the UK who has moved to the UK primarily for employment purposes'. Migration into the UK to work has been considerable. According to Wilson *et al* (2005) those of white ethnic origin predominate, rising from 21,343 in 1994 (94.6% of all migrants) to 23,232 in 2004 (91.0% of all migrants). In late 2012, the total number of non-UK-born people in employment in the UK was 4.27 million, up 208,000 from a year earlier (ONS, UK Government, Labour Market Statistics, November 2012). Migrant workers may obtain visas through the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme (SAWS), which in 2004 provided permits to 25,000 agricultural (including pack-house) casual and seasonal workers. The Association of Labour Providers supplies some 400,000 workers to agricultural and fresh produce trades, of whom most are from outside the UK. Increasing globalisation coupled with downward pressure on farmgate prices by supermarkets has led UK farmers to seek a more flexible and cheaper workforce, with consequent decline in permanent full-time workers and an increase in casual and seasonal labourers. Upheaval in global population movement is predicted to continue towards 2050, not only with an ongoing influx of African and Asian migrants into Europe but also with population

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decline in countries like Bulgaria and Poland – forecast at, respectively, some 35% and 20% drop (Wibberley, Turner, 2008). Many Poles will likely continue to enter Britain for work, and potentially more Bulgarians (up to 75% of whom currently work in their own agriculture) and Romanians after full EU freedom of movement for those two nations for employment from 2014.

The majority of Eastern European countries are still facing the challenges of marketisation and democratisation post-communism. Haughton (2005) notes (p.104) “Unemployment was one of the most visible indicators of those who lost out. The market introduced unemployment where it was (nominally at least) non-existent.” Of the eight CEE States (the so-called A8) of Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia that joined the EU in 2004, only Hungary and Poland were not previously part of communist era federations. In all communist countries, people had been educated as communists and socialised into a context where the market, private property and civil society were largely absent. Although Specialist Farm Production Associations are important in Lithuania (e.g. The Mushroom Growers’ & Processors’ Association) nevertheless regional groups are hindered by lack of good leadership and management in a context cited as being characterised by “people’s reciprocal distrust”. Poland reported a general lack of rural motivation to learn. However, Poland has many Agricultural Chambers and Circles for mutual practical learning, such as those of rural housewives and its extensive Rural Youth Union (Turner, Wibberley, 2007). Furthermore, Poland has considerable inward investment from visionary firms like Greens of Soham, Cambridgeshire, England via their *Spearhead International* business since 1995 that now (as the largest farming company in Poland) farms around 30,000 cropped hectares in Poland, largely on 30-year land lease contracts (www.spearheadgroup.co.uk).

2. Essential contrasts

The central issue of this paper is the concomitant irony that:-

- Poles are migrating to serve UK agriculture within its context of expanding rural population and a historically progressive agricultural management culture, while
- Poland’s rural areas with their largely fertile soils face substantially declining populations coupled with their challenge to sustainably transform farm management.

The key hypotheses are that:

- Improved agricultural management is crucial, and lessons positive and negative learned in the UK about it might reasonably be expected to help Poles to help Poland;
- That a ‘brain drain’ of motivated and trained Polish agriculturalists would thus appear to be needed returning to Poland, leading to the question:
- Do they so aspire to return to Poland, or are they keen to settle long term in the UK?

In the UK in 2013, the matter of immigrant workers has become a controversial political matter with its potential displacement of jobs for British citizens, plus the possibility of migrants claiming UK social benefits after working in the UK for only 12 months. Against such public concerns is the fact that a large majority of migrants, especially from Poland, have a reputation within UK agriculture for reliability, hard work and willingness to tackle tasks deemed too dangerous, dirty, demanding or demeaning by many UK nationals. Meanwhile, Poland faces a projected population decline of around 20% by 2050, more so in its rural areas.

3. The particular case of Polish immigration to UK agriculture

What might be motivating Poles to enter the UK for agricultural and other work? Wrzochalska (2007) noted that the rural population represents about 38% of Poland's 38 million inhabitants, with increased unemployment especially among persons connected with small (2-5 ha) and medium (5-10 ha) farms. Almost half of Poland's 312 km² of land (over a quarter bigger than the UK) is fertile, and the country is 34% arable, 8.4% grassland, 29% afforested. Land prices in Poland have risen inexorably since 2000 and unemployment is officially at 12.3% with significant hidden rural unemployment (Skrzypex, 2013). Of Poland's 2.5 million farms, only 25,000 exceed 50 hectares in size, and average farm size is 10.23ha. Surveys carried out by the Institute of Agricultural and Food Economics (IAFE) in the years 2000-2005 showed the scale of hidden unemployment in agriculture (Wrzochalska, 2007). She asserts that in this situation, the problem of how to better deal with labour surpluses occurring in the countryside can only be solved by taking into consideration their employment on a part-time basis. The number of farms running off-agricultural business activity increased from 249,000 in 1996 to 363,400 in 2002, i.e. by 46.0%. She also noted the considerable regional variation in employment in agriculture, for example from 9.0% of the workforce in Silesia Province to 39.5% in Podlaskie Province. Polish agriculture does receive encouragement within the economy. Some Scientific Research Institutes provide specific training and advice to farmers and Poland maintained some 4500 staff giving free advice within its National Agricultural Extension Service; however, some farmers have to travel great distances to reach official agricultural extension centres in the large territory of Poland (Wibberley, Turner, 2008).

According to the 2011 UK National Census, some 521,000 Polish-born people live in Britain, seven times the number listed a decade earlier. Poland is the most common country of birth for non-UK born mothers in Britain, with 20,495 babies born to Polish mothers in 2011 (Rainey, 2013). Poland's accession to the EU in 2004 gave a huge stimulus for immigration to the UK, with borders open for free movement of Poles for employment there, where they can expect to at least double their hourly wages. Between 2004-06, the Office of National Statistics recorded 264,560 Polish migrants to Britain. In 2011, 45,000 Poles settled in the UK, marking the biggest annual rise in Polish migrants since the financial crash of 2008.

Historic reasons for the particular affinity between Poles and the UK may be as follows:

- Second World War Polish community that fled communism and came into the UK;
- War effort contributions of Poles: troops, intelligence, equipment (Rainey, 2013);
- After France fell in 1940, the exiled Polish government went to London, plus 20,000 Polish soldiers and airmen;
- Poles made up the largest non-British group in the RAF during the Battle of Britain;
- By July 1945, over 150,000 Polish troops served under British Army command;
- After World War II, British PM Sir Winston Churchill vowed the British would 'never forget the debt they owe to the Polish' and pledged 'citizenship and freedom of the British Empire' for all Poles, many then fleeing communism in Poland;
- The UK Government passed the Polish Resettlement Act 1947, the UK's first mass immigration law;
- The critical mass of Poles within Britain thus established sustained specialist shops for Polish groceries and cuisine, providing a receptive group for subsequent migrants;
- Poles retain their national pride so, accordingly, most work flexibly hard in the UK;
- There seems to be ongoing kindness towards Poles in Britain, perhaps due to history;
- Boston, Lincolnshire, England, has 3,006 Poles out of 62,243 residents (almost 5%).

The mutual relationship is not always smooth, of course. There are employers in UK agriculture against whom charges have been pressed for negligent health and safety at work or else inadequate housing provision for migrants. However, the efforts of Zad Padda (2006); McKay *et al* (2006), rural churches migrant ministries, and the GLA (2011) help to ensure greater responsibility among gang-masters recruiting migrant field workers for UK crops. Against the general trend also, not all Poles in the UK behave well either; there are currently more than 700 Polish migrants in UK prisons. Also, of the 371,000 non-UK nationals currently claiming unemployment benefit, 13,940 are Polish (Rainey, 2013). Overall, there seems to be a future for Poles wishing to settle into British Society long-term, and also a welcome for younger Poles wishing to experience adventure, perhaps gain agricultural management skills and then return to serve Polish agriculture at the heart of Poland's rural economy.

4. The research focus group

At the outset of the present research, it was the intention to harvest a sample of opinions and data predominantly from Polish migrants working in UK Agriculture (but also including other Eastern European migrants). It was hoped to have at least 25 respondents (ideally 50) in each of two cohorts of a) Field Crop workers/managers; b) Dairying workers/managers. Accordingly, easy-fill questionnaires were issued by the author via appropriate contacts within UK Agriculture during October 2012 asking for electronic and, if preferred, anonymous return within two months i.e. by late December 2012. This was to be in time for proper analysis by the author, who is fully occupied within agriculture and rural work in the UK and overseas, with neither time nor resources to fund research *per se*. Despite good contacts and previously high rates of response to many surveys conducted by the author in agriculture internationally over the years, eventual response to this has been very disappointing (thirteen on field crops), and one in the case of dairying although thrice re-issued with revised dates for submission (mid-January 2013; mid-February; mid-March). Why? Maybe those asked were too busy at the time. However, it seems a core reason may be fear, despite efforts to assure potential respondents that this is purely an agricultural management enquiry:

- Fear on the part of some employers that this information might somehow lead to more of the dreaded bureaucratic intrusion that bugs EU/UK agriculture;
- Fear perhaps from some employers that these data might reveal inequities in treatment of migrant workers;
- Fear by some migrants that their answers may be open to misinterpretation by employers, and risk job security for migrants unless compliant with 'expectations';
- Fear by migrants that information given might inflame already edgy immigration politics in the current UK media;
- Fear that data from such research might help (albeit in a small way) to clarify the maybe conveniently opaque UK statistics/data regarding migrants at work in the UK.

Respondents were sought all over England. Those who replied were 3 from Herefordshire in the West and 9 located in England's fastest growing Eastern region in terms of population (projected to rise by around 19.5% between 2010 and 2030), specifically with one esteemed employer in Cambridgeshire. Eastern England has a high concentration of fertile arable and, in particular, field-scale vegetable growing land. It has been the location of previous studies on migrant labour. For example, in Norfolk, it is noted that there is insufficient local labour willing to work in agriculture, food processing and packing industries; hence migrants play a vital role in the local economy. In Norfolk there is a multi-agency migrant support group, co-ordinated from Norfolk County Council (McKay, Erel, 2004; McKay, Winkleman-Greed, 2005).

At the time of writing, ahead of the IFMA 19 Paper submission deadline of March 31st 2013, only a cohort of 9 male field crop migrant employees from a highly respected Cambridgeshire farming business responded (Shropshires, Ely: www.gs-fresh.com). These were all males aged from 27 to 35 (average 31). Their origins were:- 3 Poles, 3 Bulgarians, 2 Lithuanians, 1 Ukrainian. All are in managerial roles – from General Manager UK Harvest Operations employing 900 people, to Site Supervisors and those responsible for delivery of particular crops from field to customers. Hence, their responses are both highly informed and very relevant to the interest of this paper. Their management responsibilities involved personnel, policy and harvest production. Bearing in mind the small size of this sample, Tables 1, 2 and 3 record the mean and range of results on, respectively, Management Lessons being Learned (Table 1), Personal Skills being Developed (Table 2) and Preferred Future Job Aspiration in 5 years' time – including whether they wish to return to their own nations to use their acquired skills and experience (Table 3).

Table 1. Management Lessons being Learned; % of respondents (n = 9)

Enterprise	55	Entrepreneurship	55
Decision-making	67	Risk-taking	78
Leadership	89	Teamwork	89
Line Management	44	Strategic Planning	89
Technical Husbandry	33	Marketing	67
IT & Computing Skills	55	Other	NR

Leadership, Teamwork and Strategic Planning lead the management learning for most.

Table 2. Ranked (1 = Very High, to 5 = Very Low) Personal Skills Developed (n = 9)

	Mean	Range
Confidence to embark on my own rural business back home	2.9	2 to 4
Competence to start my own business with relevant skills learned	2.7	2 to 4
Motivation to now return to my home country and be enterprising	2.9	2 to 4
Networking links with other professionals to help me Manage	2.8	2 to 4
Knowledge to equip me for future working life whatever I do	1.9	1 to 2

At the Cambridgeshire operation, respondents are clearly 'pretty happy with the organisation for which they work' and with 'all the skills and knowledge developed, with all training provided'. 'I keep learning every day and deal with different challenges'. Experience elsewhere is not always so conducive.

Table 3. Preferred (1st and 2nd choice) Job Aspirations in 5 Years' Time

	No.1st	No.2nd
a. Own rural business back home in my country of origin	1	1
b. Equivalent management job to my UK job now back home	-	-
c. Promotion in my UK job & stay in the UK	8	1
d. Retain my same UK job as at present	0	3
e. Move to another country and pioneer new farming work	0	1
f. Leave agriculture/horticulture to work in another sector	0	3
g. Other – please state what?:-	NR	NR

Almost all aspire to achieve promotion in their present jobs within the next five years and stay in UK agriculture, while one prefers to return home and start his own rural business. If such promotion did not arise, one third of the respondents second choice might be to leave agricultural work for another sector. Three subsequent replies from Herefordshire in April 2013 were from males (two Romanian and one Bulgarian) average age 31 (as for Table 1 Cambridgeshire cohort) who had spent 9 years working in the UK. All three wish to stay within their UK job with promotion in five years' time. If not, an equivalent job back home or a rural business back home or stay in the same UK job were their second choices.

Among the biggest surprises or shocks about living and working in the UK, the following were cited:- weather and language barrier; new technologies; work organisation; health & safety emphasis; level of wasted food, especially on the field; lack of understanding from the UK population about the agricultural sector and the difficulty [for farmers] of delivering the finished product; lack of interest by English people to work in agriculture (while many other nationalities work in the field, English people don't want such work).

Clearly, the Shropshire family's Cambridgeshire business is much appreciated by respondents, providing 'a fantastic opportunity to grow', inspiring allegiance among their migrant worker managers, achieving 'year-on-year better results'.

5. Discussion

The sample of informants cited here may exclude some more experienced individuals who have already returned home to Poland, or moved on to other managerial level jobs in the UK. The broad statistics seem to suggest that many, perhaps most, migrant workers come for a period only – often intentionally short-term - during which they save, remit funds back home, gain experience and then return with a good basis (funds, plus experience and contacts) on which to build whatever their entrepreneurial inclinations suggest. It may be also that many of the migrants we see are among the more capable and dynamic of their peer group (a microcosm of this phenomenon occurred during the unification process of Germany, with poorer parts of the former East being left with the less able, the more able having gone to West Germany to seek better prospects). The single Polish dairyman respondent aged 29 had worked in Oxfordshire UK for 7 years taking responsibility for breeding policy with the cows and for personnel in the farm team, gaining substantial management experience. Despite gaining very high motivation to be able to return home and be enterprising, he aspires to stay in his present UK job or be promoted in it. He cited the reasons as 'a well-developed [UK] economy', that he feels 'part of the community' and had received in the UK 'a nice welcome'.

6. Conclusions

The reported exploration of this politically controversial yet intentionally constructive topic of migrant workers in UK agriculture originating from Eastern Europe suffered from limited baseline data. However, indicative information gleaned both from the migrant worker cohorts in Herefordshire (West of England) and in Cambridgeshire, Eastern England, from the literature and from other Eastern Europeans in the UK suggest that those given managerial responsibility here are likely to want to stay. The more altruistic motive to support the development of Polish agriculture does not appear as yet sufficiently weighted to attract significant numbers of such skilled migrants back to Eastern Europe.

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Appendix I. Survey Questionnaire

Management lessons learned & future plans of East Europeans now on UK crops

I am interested to know what benefits are being gained by those from Poland and other East European countries who are currently working in UK Agriculture & Horticulture, where their contribution to farm work is considerable. I will be much obliged if they will kindly answer the following questions **by February 15th 2013**. With thanks, Professor John Wibberley, UK.

1. Your Name (Optional) _____; AGE ____; GENDER:- Male __ or Female __;
2. Country of Origin/Nation of Birth? _____; No. of years working in UK? ____;
In which County in UK do you work now? _____;
3. **Present Job title?** _____;
4. Please TICK (✓) which of the **Management responsibilities** you have for crops:-
Nursery ____; Fertilising ____; Spraying ____; Policy ____; Personnel ____;
Other?:
5. Please TICK (✓) what **Management Lessons** are you learning of use for future work?:
Enterprise ____; Entrepreneurship ____; Decision-making ____; Risk-taking ____; Leadership ____;
Teamwork ____; Line management ____; Strategic Planning ____; Technical husbandry ____;
Marketing ____; IT & Computing skills ____; Other (please state:- _____
_____).
6. Please RANK on 1 to 5 scale (1=Very High; 2=High; 3=Average; 4=Low; 5=V.Low)
 - g) **Confidence** to embark on my own rural business back in my home country ____;
 - h) **Competence** to now start my own business with relevant skills learned ____;
 - i) **Motivation** to now return to my home country and be enterprising ____;
 - j) **Networking** links with other professionals to help me as a Manager in farming ____;
 - k) **Knowledge** to equip me for future working life whatever I choose to do ____.
7. What is your preferred 1st choice (1) & 2nd choice (2) **Job aspiration** in 5 years time?:-

A. OWN RURAL BUSINESS BACK HOME IN MY COUNTRY OF ORIGIN	
B. EQUIVALENT MANAGEMENT JOB TO MY UK JOB NOW BUT BACK HOME	
C. PROMOTION IN MY UK JOB & STAY IN THE UK	
D. RETAIN MY SAME UK JOB AS AT PRESENT	
E. MOVE TO ANOTHER COUNTRY AND PIONEER NEW FARMING WORK	
F. LEAVE AGRICULTURE/HORTICULTURE TO WORK IN ANOTHER SECTOR	
G. OTHER – PLEASE STATE WHAT?:-	
8. What have been the biggest surprises or shocks about living and working in the UK?
9. What other comments in relation to farm experience gained would you like to share?

Man thanks for taking time to complete/return survey to: ejwibberley@btinternet.com