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The Polish plumbers who annoy Brexit supporters come from towns like this one

By [Andrew Roth](#)

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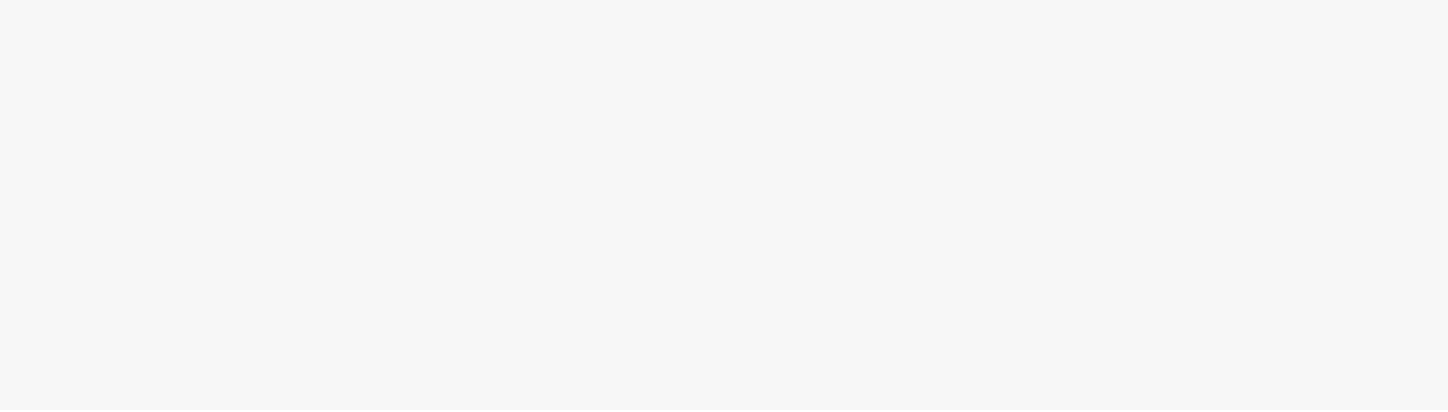
MONKI, Poland – Joanne Klepadlo’s daughter was 2 years old when her husband left to work in Germany, driven by the closure of a local factory and what she called a “spirit of immigration” ingrained in this northeastern region of Poland.

He was gone for 12 years. Cellphones were still rare when he left, so they wrote letters that took two weeks to arrive. She saved their correspondence, years of notes that lie in a foot-tall pile at home.

“We were both young and beautiful then,” she said in an interview at the preschool where she serves as director. “We spent our most beautiful years in separation.”

Decades of emigration by families like the Klepadlos have quite literally shaped Monki, a town of about 11,000 that sent so many young men and women to the United States in the 1980s and 1990s that people throughout Poland started saying it was “built on dollars” they sent back. Shortly before Poland’s 2004 accession to the European Union, the migrant flow shifted toward the capitals of Europe: mainly Brussels, but also London and Berlin.

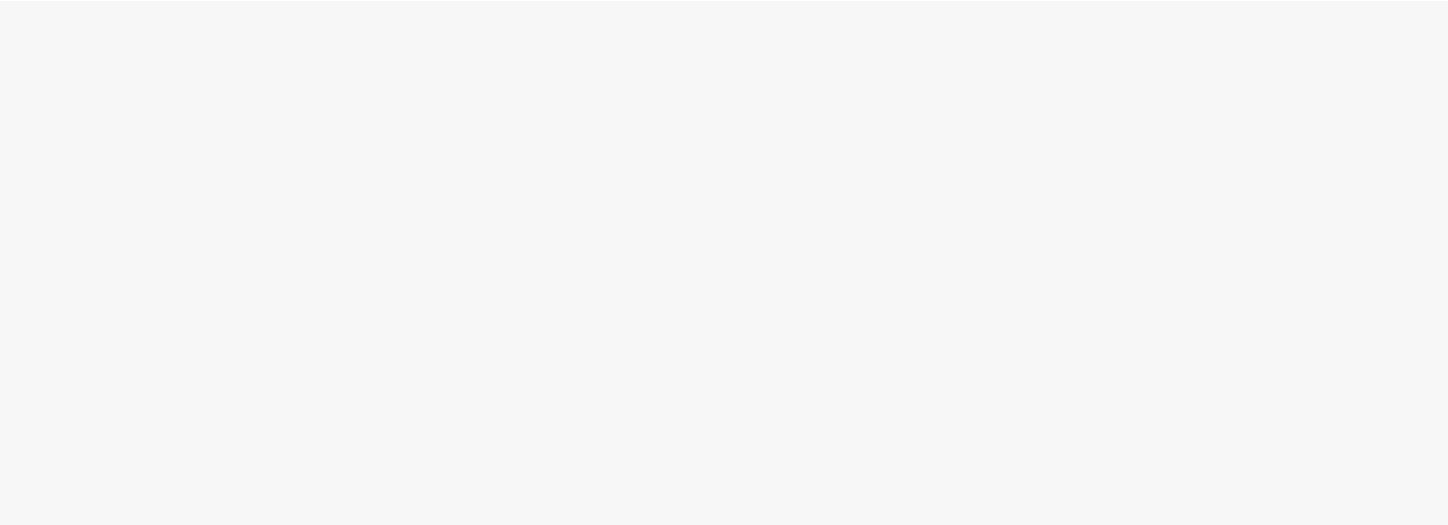
Britain’s historic decision last month to exit the E.U. will directly impact towns like Monki if conservative British politicians make good on their promise to tighten controls on immigration. According to Poland’s official statistics office, more than 2 million Poles live outside the country, most in Europe, and an estimated 853,000 Polish citizens live in the United Kingdom, according to a 2015 Office for National Statistics report. Since Poland joined the E.U., the northeastern Podlaskie voivodeship, or province, where an unemployment rate of 11.1 percent in May slightly exceeded the national average of 9.1 percent, has been one of the country’s leaders in exporting its labor.



“Our feelings about the United States are about emotions, family relations and traditions,” Mayor Zbigniew Karwowski said in an interview. “But the European migration is more for the reasons of money. People go, it’s close, they earn the money, and bring it back here.”

Migration has touched virtually everyone here. Karwowski jokes about E.U. regulations on the proper length of cucumbers, but he proudly calls himself “a Euroenthusiast, not a Euroskeptic.” He has a good reason: His niece is studying in England, and his wife has worked as a nurse in Ireland for the past 10 years.

“There are not many chances for her professional development here,” he explained in an interview in his office in the town’s administration building, adorned with a Catholic cross and Poland’s white eagle coat of arms. Karwowski estimated that 3,000 of the district’s 40,000 residents are at any moment working somewhere else in the E.U., but he says firm statistics are not available.



“It’s very hard to see what’s going to happen to our people in the United Kingdom,” he said of Britain’s referendum, mentioning a friend who drives a taxi there. “Many people do worry.”

Monki, which sits near a national park of pine and birch and is surrounded by farmland, is a relatively affluent town for Podlaskie, with hotel guesthouses on the outskirts and two-story homes lining the well-maintained streets. But even when times here were good, with an unemployment rate half the national average, locals traveled abroad for higher wages and because family and friends could help them get settled.

“There is a sense there that it is easier to go to London than even to Warsaw,” said Agnieszka Radziwinowicz, a researcher for the Warsaw-based Center of Migration Research who studied the nearby border town of Sokolka, which sends direct overnight coach buses to London each week. “It is what we call migration culture. At some point you have this impression that everybody is leaving, or has left, to London. You might even be better off in Poland, but it is more exciting there.”



Nearly every family here has a tie to someone living abroad, either in the United States or Europe. Unlike Karwowski, many with family in Britain see the referendum as little more than an inconvenience and expect the country’s exit from the E.U. to be mired in bureaucracy. In a roadside cafe serving generous portions of chłodnik, a cold soup from beets, Makgorzata took a call from her daughter, Munika, 29, who has been working for two years in a London hotel. In that time, she has risen from the reception desk to a management position and says she isn’t concerned.

“They have said it will take two years for Brexit, and by then I’ll be able to apply for residency, so I won’t have to worry about being kicked out,” she told a reporter by telephone in lightly accented English. Polish friends working at a furniture factory are more concerned about the economic consequences, such as layoffs, than about visa issues, she said. “They talk about maybe more racist incidents,” she said. “But there have already been those problems.”

Podlaskie is staunchly conservative, a stronghold for the Law and Justice party that toppled the centrist ruling party Civil Platform in parliamentary elections in October. But while the new government has been at odds with Brussels and is viewed by opponents as broadly Euroskeptic, the vast majority of Poles, including those in Monki, overwhelmingly support continued integration with Europe, analysts say.

“In eastern parts of Poland, you can get very traditional and very pro-European at the same time,” said Lukasz Jasina, a columnist for the newspaper *Kultura Liberalna* and a historian at the Polish History Museum who is from the town of Hrubieszow in eastern Poland. “The things you care about in the European Union are not liberal traditions or liberal ideas, but the level of living, and the comfort you have.”

Controlling migration, in particular migration of refugees, is an issue on which voters (and even migrant workers) here and in much of Britain may agree: Karwowski, the mayor, said the region was “careful” on the subject of immigration, while Law and Justice leader Jaroslaw Kaczynski and senior Polish officials have vowed not to accept refugees under an E.U. quota because of security concerns. Marcin Michaluk, the manager of a cellphone shop near Monki’s main square,

told a journalist that he didn't "want to sound nationalist" but that he sympathized with people in England who felt there were too many foreigners with dark, or "beige," skin there.

Pawel Kieniewski, a stocky 31-year-old traveling to Warsaw, the capital, to catch an overnight bus to Birmingham, England, said that people in England "have a right to be angry" about immigration to their country. He has worked for the past two years as a cook at a bar in Kingston, England, where he earns a salary six times as high as he could in Poland. Like most others interviewed who work in Britain, he said he doesn't fear Brexit: He expects to have residency by the time negotiations conclude.

"I understand them, because they didn't ask for us, they didn't know how many people would come to their country," he said. "But as long as we have the right, we're going to travel there."

In the worst case, others said, they would choose another country in the E.U.

"If they close the borders, I'll just move to Ireland," said Marta Jaroslawska, 22, who was waiting with her family for an overnight coach to London from a downtown bus station in Warsaw. She plans to join her boyfriend in London and find work as a beautician. She does not intend to come back.

Karwowski, the mayor, emphasized the benefits of generations of migration: a spirit of entrepreneurship, a culture of openness, and of course, the economic benefits from remittances.

But Klepadlo, the school director, said she saw the negative impact in her young students, where one or even both parents were working abroad, producing so-called “euro-orphans.”

“I can see very clearly the excitement when a parent is going to visit,” Klepadlo said. “And then, when the parent leaves, a longer period of sadness and the anxiety of separation again. This is compensated with the new toys that the kids are given when the parents come back. But it’s just a compensation for their absence.”

 **15 Comments**

Andrew Roth

Andrew Roth was a reporter in The Washington Post's bureau in Moscow. He left The Post in February 2018. He covered politics and society in the region since 2011, reporting on a variety of topics, including conflict and contemporary art, in the diverse republics of the former Soviet Union.
