

Helga Ólafsson  
Anna Wojtyńska

[Reykjavík]



**Icelandic chapter in the Polish book:  
a narrative perspective on Polish  
migration to Iceland**

Wrocławski Rocznik  
Historii Mówionej  
Rocznik VI, 2016  
ISSN 2084-0578

**Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

“There is something strange – writes Tony Fielding<sup>2</sup> – about the way we study migration. We know, often from personal experience, but also from family talk, that moving from one place to another is nearly always a major event. It is one of those events around which an individual’s biography is built. The feelings associated with migration are usually complicated, the decision to migrate is typically difficult to make, and the outcome usually involves mixed emotions. [...] Migration is a statement of an individual’s worldview, and is, therefore, an extremely cultural event. And yet, when we study migration scientifically, we seem to forget all this.” Indeed, in the search for theoretical generalizations, the complexity of migration experience and the intricacy of the decision making process tend to be inevitably simplified. Migration has been often explained by a push-pull model – the number of predominantly economic factors that on the one

- 
- <sup>1</sup> We would like to thank our anonymous reviewers for very informative and extremely helpful comments.
  - <sup>2</sup> T. Fielding, *Migration and Culture*, [in:] *Migration Processes and Patterns*, vol. 1, ed. by T. Champion, T. Fielding, London 1992, p. 201.

hand push individuals from the place of origin and on the other pull to their destinations<sup>3</sup>. Migrants then appear either as rational agents making choices based on the pros and cons calculation or mere pawns governed by economic forces<sup>4</sup>. Although these factors play an important role in generating and structuring migration streams as well as clearly influence individuals' decisions, it is often an impulse, emotions or coincidence that eventually determines the outcome. Recent developments in migration scholarship give much nuanced picture of international mobility, presenting it not only as economic but also social and cultural phenomena and indicating pervasive reminiscences on sending and receiving societies. New approaches try to overcome previous shortcomings as well as more aptly combine macro and micro analyses<sup>5</sup>. Yet, in the academic literature, the attention is rarely paid to elusive aspects of migration process and to analyses going down to more personal levels (partly due to ethical concerns not to violate anonymity of the interlocutor). Differently, in the following article, we present the migration story of one Polish woman, whom we call Irena. We describe her daily routines and reflect upon the challenges she confronts, doubts and feelings in the course of her stay in Iceland. We use the story of Irena in order to give more comprehensive understanding of migration experience on its intimate level. Focusing on single narrative does not imply disregard for broader processes that shape migrations. Conversely, we argue – following Caroline Brettell<sup>6</sup> – that looking at the life of a particular person can inform our general knowledge about migration, migration patterns and migration experiences.

---

<sup>3</sup> D. Massey, *Theories of International Migration: Review and Appraisal*, "Population and Development Review", Vol. 19 (1993), No. 3, p. 431–466; *Migration Decision Making: Multidisciplinary Approaches to Microlevel Studies in Developed and Developing Countries*, ed. by G. F. De Jong, R. W. Gardner, New York 1981.

<sup>4</sup> T. Fielding, *op. cit.*

<sup>5</sup> For review articles about advancements in migration studies, see for example: L. Basch, N. Glick Schiller, C. Szanton Blanc, *Nations Unbound: Transnational Projects, Postcolonial Predicaments, and Deterritorialized Nation-States*, New York 1994; *Migration Theory: Talking across Disciplines*, ed. by C. Brettell, J. F. Hollifield, New York 2000; *A companion to Diaspora and Transnationalism*, ed. by A. Quayson, G. Daswani, Wiley-Blackwell Publishers, 2013; *An Anthology of Migration and Social Transformation: European Perspectives*, ed. by A. Amelina, K. Horvath, B. Meeus, Brussels 2015.

<sup>6</sup> C. Brettell, *Anthropology and Migration: Essays on Transnationalism, Ethnicity, and Identity*, Walnut Creek 2003.

Applying a life story pertains to what is called a biographical approach in the social sciences, which commonly refers to “collection and analysis of an intensive account of a whole life or portion of a life, usually by an in-depth, unstructured interview”<sup>7</sup>. While the usage of these perspectives in social research varies between different time periods and between various social disciplines<sup>8</sup>, life histories and in-depth interviews are traditionally an integral part of ethnographic work and anthropological writing<sup>9</sup>. Anthropologists are commonly engaged in collecting stories and producing narratives through interviews, informal conversations or by interpretation of the events witnessed when doing participant observation. However, to a different extent anthropologists integrate life narratives into their practice and process of analysis, allowing for more or less direct usage of several or just a single account from their informants. For some, life stories are of particular interest and they employ biographical or autobiographical documents in their analyses, or incorporate original personal sketches into anthropological texts<sup>10</sup>. The underlying presumption in favour of utility of life stories is that they can reveal “history and culture as lived” and help to grasp the insights of a given reality<sup>11</sup>. Correspondingly, the biographical method has been increasingly exercised in the migration research, including (or especially in) anthropological studies of migration, where authors widely refer to accounts of their interviewees or descriptions from the field-

---

<sup>7</sup> R. Miller, *Biographical Method*, [in:] *The A-Z of Social Research*, ed. by R. L. Miller, J. D. Brewer, London 2003, p. 15; see also: *The Turn of Biographical Methods in Social Sciences: Comparative Issues and Examples*, ed. by P. Chamberlayne, J. Bornat, T. Wengraf, London–New York 2000; *Advances in Biographical Methods: Creative Applications*, ed. by M. O’Neill, B. Roberts, A. C. Sparkes, London–New York 2015.

<sup>8</sup> *The Turn of Biographical Methods...*, *op. cit.*; B. Roberts, *Biographical Research*, Buckingham 2002; *Advances...*, *op. cit.*

<sup>9</sup> L. L. Langness, G. Frank, *Lives: Anthropological approaches to biography*, Novato 1985.

<sup>10</sup> For reviews and examples, see: L. L. Langness, G. Frank, *op. cit.*; *Anthropology and Autobiography*, ed. by J. Okely, H. Callaway, Abingdon 1992; J. L. Peacock, D. C. Holland, *The Narrated Self: Life Stories in Process*, “Ethos”, Vol. 21 (1993), No. 4, p. 367–383.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 367.

work<sup>12</sup>. For instance, in his book about Mexican migrants in New York, Robert Courtney Smith elaborates on the nuances of transnational life with support of numerous references to experiences and narratives of his key informants collected in the course of an extensive multi-sited ethnography conducted in Mexico and New York<sup>13</sup>. Another interesting example is Micaela di Leonardo's study of a group of Italian-American families in Northern California, where she combines oral history approach and auto-ethnographical methods to produce a narrative interpretation of white ethnic identities, placing them in "the context of broader regional, national, and global economic-historical change"<sup>14</sup>. However, in most of these studies life-stories are typically applied to support the authors' reasoning and to illustrate different aspects of migration process; they serve as starting points for further discussion or are incorporated into academic analysis. In our article, the biographical account constitutes an essential and actual part of the article. What is important, we tell the story of Irena in the form of literary journalism<sup>15</sup>. This means it does not clearly follow conventional academic writing, but is more of an example of a non-fiction essay. Yet, in our opinion it meets one of the purposes of this journal to present different applications of oral histories. Furthermore, the criticism of anthropological practice and representation along with acknowledging lack of transparency of ethnographical texts resulted in turn towards reflexivity and literatu-

---

<sup>12</sup> Again, we would like thank our reviewers for turning our attention to existing academic literature applying biographical method to the studies of migration, as for example articles in the "Forum: Qualitative Social Research", Vol. 4 (2003), No. 3; and review article U. Apitzsch, I. Siouti, *Biographical Analysis as an Interdisciplinary Research Perspective in the Field of Migration Studies*, "Research Integration" (2007), [www.york.ac.uk/res/researchintegration/index.htm](http://www.york.ac.uk/res/researchintegration/index.htm) (accessed March 20, 2016).

<sup>13</sup> R. C. Smith, *Mexican New York: Transnational Lives of New Immigrants*, Berkeley 2006. See also: P. Levitt, *The Transnational Villagers*, Berkeley 2001.

<sup>14</sup> M. di Leonardo, *The Varieties of Ethnic Experience: Kinship, Class and Gender among California Italian-American*, Ithaca 1984, p. 12. See also her methodological discussion on combining ethnography and oral history: M. di Leonardo, *Oral History as Ethnographic Encounter*, "Oral History Review", Vol. 15 (1987), p. 1–20.

<sup>15</sup> Helga Ólafs would like to thank Mark Kramer for introducing her to narrative journalism during his seminar at the University of Iceland in 2007.

re<sup>16</sup>. More often ethnography is considered a kind of writing practice. Also, in the times of “blurred genres”<sup>17</sup>, anthropologist increasingly resort to alternative ways of obtaining and presenting research and reaching the audience, for instance to creative writing, photography, film, art exhibitions or comic books<sup>18</sup>. Already Oscar Lewis emphasised importance of literary narration in production of anthropological knowledge. In his classical *The Children of Sanchez*<sup>19</sup>, he gave voice to five members of a Mexican family and so provided an epic picture of poverty culture. Such method – Lewis argued – “preserves for the reader the emotional satisfaction and understanding which the anthropologist experiences in working directly with his subjects but which is only rarely conveyed in the formal jargon of anthropological monographs”<sup>20</sup>. More recently Maggie O’Neill and Ramaswami Harindranath<sup>21</sup> pointed out the importance of biographical approach and artistic creation in participatory action research (ethno-mimesis) with asylum seekers and refugees. In their opinion, one way to combat simplistic, normative and often “sanitized, demonized or hidden”

---

<sup>16</sup> *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. by J. Clifford, G. E. Marcus, Berkeley 1986; N. Rapport, *Representing Anthropology, Blurring Genres: Zigzagging Towards Literary Anthropology*, [in:] *Mediterranean Ethnological Summer School*, Vol. III, ed. by B. Baskar, B. Brumen, Ljubljana 1999; R. Behar, *Ethnography in a Time of Blurred Genres*, “Anthropology and Humanism”, Vol. 32 (2007), No. 2, p. 145–155; C. Geertz, *Thick description: Towards and interpretative theory of culture*, [in:] *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York 1973, p. 3–30; V. Crapanzano, *Preface & Introduction*, [in:] *Tuhami: Portrait of a Moroccan*, Chicago 1980.

<sup>17</sup> C. Geertz, *Blurred Genres: The Refiguration of Social Thought*, “American Scholar”, Vol. 49 (1980), No. 2, p. 165–179 (reprinted in C. Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretative Anthropology*, New York 1983).

<sup>18</sup> *Advances in Biographical Methods: Creative Applications*, ed. by M. O’Neill, B. Roberts, A. C. Sparkes, London–New York 2015. Journal “Anthropology and Humanism” is one of the platforms that encourage publishing in different genres, “including fiction and creative narration, poetry drama and photo essays” as it is informed on the web-side of the journal. An interesting example of research report being published in a form of a coming book see: A. Bartoszko, A. B. Leseth, M. Ponomarew, *Public Space, Information Accessibility, Technology and Diversity at Oslo University College*, Oslo 2010.

<sup>19</sup> O. Lewis, *Children of Sanchez: Autobiography of Mexican Family*, New York 1961.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>21</sup> M. O’Neill, R. Harindranath, *Theorizing narratives of exile and belonging: the importance of Biography and Ethno-mimesis in “understanding” asylum*, “Qualitative Sociology Review”, Vol. 2 (2006), No. 1, p. 39–53.

representations of asylums is to “create spaces for the marginalized to speak for themselves”<sup>22</sup>. In their project they were collecting biographical narratives which were then represented through art-forms, such as photography, poetry and creative writing, and finally launched as an exhibition. In a similar spirit, we decided to present fieldwork results in a non-fiction narration.

Literary journalism<sup>23</sup> adopted by Helga Ólafss in her work, combines a journalist’s endeavour to present facts with literary concern for style and narrative construction. It forms a distinct genre and differs from daily newspapers writings in the level of personal involvement of the narrator. The narrator is expected to be intimate, frank, puzzled and even judgemental; which means applying “qualities academics and daily news reporters dutifully avoid as unprofessional and unobjective”<sup>24</sup>. The reporter is not to become socialized as an insider, as Kramer puts it<sup>25</sup>, but to comprehend the subject’s experiences and perspectives. Literary journalism requires the journalist to be involved with the informant for months, or even longer, and stay alert for meaningful twists of narrative and character<sup>26</sup>. To be a narrative piece the prerequisite is firstly to have a character to build the story around. Here the character is Irena. Secondly, one needs a leading theme that the character is representing, which in this case is Irena’s migration experience combined with love affair she got engaged in. Narratives involve specific details that illustrate the story and take the reader there. For both the writer and the subject it takes trust, tact, firmness and endurance, and together they confront a wide spectrum of challenges in the period. This methodology in fact adapts the anthropological fieldwork of participant observation, especially the approach in ethnography that emphasizes the interactional character of data collection and life stories as co-constructed

---

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 41, 43; see also: A. Thomson, *Moving Stories: Oral History and Migration Studies*, “Oral History”, Vol. 27 (1999), No. 1, p. 24–37; R. Coleman, *Oral and Life Histories: Giving Voice to the Voiceless*, [in:] *Qualitative Research in Journalism: Taking it to the Streets*, ed. by S. Iorio, Mahwah 2004, p. 93–107.

<sup>23</sup> Literary journalism is also referred to as narrative journalism or creative nonfiction.

<sup>24</sup> M. Kramer, *Breakable Rules for Literary Journalists*, [in:] *Literary Journalism: A New Collection of the Best American Nonfiction*, ed. by N. Sims, M. Kramer, Ballantine 1995, p. 21–35.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 30.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*.

by the teller and the listener<sup>27</sup>. For this reason literary journalism is also referred to as ethnographic journalism<sup>28</sup>.

The shift towards creative non-fiction in journalism can be seen as somehow parallel to the anthropological movement towards “person-centred” ethnography, focused on portraying lives of ordinary individuals. Both share a common purpose to transfer a stranger into a friend; and common premise that telling in depth story of a particular individual is a better way to familiarise the reader with distant cultures, convey directly the reality of lives different from ours, and so increase our understanding. Rather than presenting mere evidences, “the narratives breathe life into the facts”<sup>29</sup>, and so can be more appealing to the reader. For journalists the narration can often be a purpose in itself, the way to tell the story that “hugs and holds readers”<sup>30</sup>. Describing revealing moments in the lives of people enables the journalist to transform “tedious topics” into “titillating narrative”<sup>31</sup>. However, narrative journalism simultaneously can be informing, if focusing on socially relevant issues, and in this way it can influence imagination and sensitivity of the public. It is also bringing to life the voices of the underrepresented groups, in which again it converges with anthropological writing (and oral history), as already mentioned. Researchers have shown that immigrants are inconspicuous in the Icelandic media, and therefore find themselves as excluded from the dominant culture and political discourse. Additionally, they have been negatively portrayed and presented as a problems or a threat; often discussed in relation to crime news<sup>32</sup>. At the same time the voices of immigrants are hardly presented in the mainstream Icelandic media. Therefore, presenting migrants’ narratives can bring an unknown group closer

---

<sup>27</sup> J. Cramer, M. McDevitt, *Ethnographic journalism*, [in:] *Qualitative Research...*, p. 127–144.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>29</sup> J. L. Peacock, D. C. Holland, *op. cit.*, p. 370.

<sup>30</sup> B. Giles, *Sharing the Secretes of Fine Narrative Journalism*, “Nieman Reports”, No. 56 (2002), Vol. 1, p. 8.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>32</sup> H. Ólafs, *Polish immigrants and Icelandic media*, [in:] *Integration or Assimilation? Polish immigrants in Iceland*, ed. by M. Budyta-Budzyńska, Warsaw 2011; A. Wojtynska, U. Skaptadóttir, H. Ólafs, *The participation of immigrants in civil society and labour market*, 2011, unpublished report available at: [mark.hi.is/skyrslur](http://mark.hi.is/skyrslur) (accessed March 20, 2016); H. Ólafs, M. Zielińska, “I started to feel worse when I understood more.” *Polish immigrants and the Icelandic media*, [in:] *Rannsóknir í félagsvísindum XI*, ed. by G. Th. Jóhannesson, H. Björnsdóttir, Reykjavík 2010.

to the majority and balance the one-sided views usually presented in the media. In this way, narratives, give agency (advocacy) and empowerment, while applying creative writing gives a better chance to reach the broader audience. Accordingly, that is the purpose of this article.

Importantly, the events in the story are not directly narrated by the informant, but mediated by Helga. Compiling the story of Irena, a sixty-year-old Polish woman, who decided to come to work in Iceland in 2007, Helga immersed herself in Irena's life during her entire stay that lasted for 18 months. They came to unofficial agreement that Helga would write Irena's story and in return she would assist in her integrating into the Icelandic society. In the course of her fieldwork, Helga participated in Irena's everyday activities, following her to work, language courses and shopping, as well as played a vital part in her life. Since they did not have a common language, they communicated with the help of a dictionary mixing Icelandic, Polish and Italian. They remained in constant contact, mostly through text messages. Additionally, they met at regular and irregular intervals during that period for the interviews that were moderated by an interpreter. Some of the meetings were on Irena's request as she needed emotional support and intimacy of personal contact. At the end, Helga had several hours of recordings of Irena's story and reflections on her daily existence that were later transcribed, as well as photographic documentation and an extensive collection of text messages.

As a result of such intense interaction, their lives became intertwined and the story of Irena became a part of Helga's narration; narration of encounter with a stranger so to speak, and thus inevitably ethnocentric. This kind of research method poses obvious epistemological and ethical challenges. Assuming the role of Irena's gatekeeper, trustee and adviser imminently implied moral considerations<sup>33</sup>. Moreover, Helga not only had direct effect on Irena's life, but also had a decisive role in selecting what episodes to bring forward and which to leave in the background when writing the story. This clearly discloses their, after all, unequal positions, both as an author and a subject as well as a local and an outsider. This in turn requires reflexivity, a practice when the reporter becomes self-conscious about his or her social location in

---

<sup>33</sup> This has been in a way acknowledged by Irena herself, when she was repeatedly addressing Helga as her godmother.

the relation to the individual he or she writes about<sup>34</sup>. However, Helga's position and her role in telling of Irena's story is clearly presented in the narration and in this way we tried to avoid illusion of objectivity.

### **The story of Irena**

Sometimes we say things without literally meaning them! Sometimes we do not think before we talk, or consider the meaning our words can have! I first met Irena in Italy in 2002. Her daughter was getting married to an Italian man, Mario, I got to know through a mutual friend. Four years later, in 2006, I met Irena again in Italy. I and a couple of friends from Iceland decided to rent a summer house along with Mario, his wife and her mother – our Irena. All together we spoke three different languages: Icelandic, Italian and Polish, but communicated in English. Irena knew few words in Italian, the words in English she could speak were scarce, and she spoke no Icelandic! Her daughter explained to us that her life took a different path from what she had hoped. Her husband had left her for another woman, she had no job and her life annuity was not enough to live a decent life. She was trained as a needlewoman, and my friend, Alexander, ran a sewing room back in Iceland. Plenty of Poles had moved to Iceland at that time. And Alexander actually needed a needlewoman! “Why don't you just come to Iceland?”, we said. Her daughter interpreted what we had suggested and that was it. Later that year I received a message from Mario: “Irena is coming to Iceland!”

That is how it all started. Irena came to Iceland early in January 2007. We didn't know each other when she arrived. But we were close when she left. Two women. Two generations. Two different languages. The airport was crowded with Poles greeting other Poles arriving in Iceland. It was a time of a the booming economy in Iceland that created an extensive need for foreign labour and thus resulted in an unprecedented migration to the country, predominantly from Poland. As I was waiting with my daughter Emma, we wondered if we would recognize Irena again. “She is a brunette? Isn't she?”, I asked Emma. Finally Irena arrived with a big suitcase and a stroller and gave us a big smile and kissed us back and forth when she saw us and held us tight when we greeted her. “Dzień dobry” (Good morning) was all I could say, even though it was late in the afternoon. Those were

---

<sup>34</sup> J. Cramer, M. McDevitt, *Ethnographic Journalism*, *op. cit.*

the words I knew in Polish. Fortunately, I had learned a little Italian and Irena had picked up some Italian vocabulary from her stay in Italy with her daughter and son-in-law. I had bought a Polish-Icelandic and an Icelandic-Polish dictionary for each of us. That is how we communicated for the next following days, or rather the next 18 months!

We found Irena a place to stay; she started working at the sewing room and gradually got to know her way around the city, and even some words in Icelandic. One day we met downtown. She was walking through the snow, wearing a thick coat and a knitted cap. When she approached me she said: "Irena church", in Icelandic and handed me an obituary of a young man. I smiled to her: she had decided to go to church and evidently she had joined a funeral. She had added another Icelandic word to her vocabulary. Irena showed me the room where she stayed. The landlord had bought some furniture, among other things from a sale from the American defence force. Irena would sleep on a mattress previously owned by an American soldier! She was excited to get to know her neighbours, as other Poles had rented rooms in the same house. "I have started to take the bus. I did so today and yesterday", she explained to me through our dictionary communication. She added: "It is all going to be okay".

Irena was one of 6000 Poles registered in Iceland at the beginning of 2007, and one of 5600 to arrive in Iceland that year alone. The majority were men, not many in her own age; most of them coming to work at one of the many construction sites in the capital region. Besides this, Poles were finding jobs also in food processing or unskilled services like cleaning, caring for the elderly or in commerce as shop assistants<sup>35</sup>.

I wanted to ask Irena so many questions but to do so I would need an interpreter. I was working at the Intercultural Centre at that time and was able to get access to one. The following weeks and months we met regularly or irregularly at the Centre and she texted me if she needed anything. I was there for her, but she was also there for me later, when we went together to visit her family in Warsaw.

---

<sup>35</sup> A. Wojtyńska, *History and characteristics of migration from Poland to Iceland*, [in:] *Integration or Assimilation?*, *op. cit.* For other studies about Polish migrants in Iceland see for example: M. Zielińska, *Migration and Adult Education: time, place and power – Polish migrants in Reykjavík, Iceland*, "Power and Education", Vol. 5 (2013), No. 2.

**“Life is not always predictable!”**

“My life didn’t turn out...”, she cried when we had our first meeting at the Intercultural Centre. She wasn’t able to finish her sentence. She told me about the time when her daughter had a baby and she went to Italy to help her with the baby. “I stayed with her for three months but at that time my husband met another woman and fell in love with her”, she said. “My life annuity in Poland is very low, so life is very hard”. I wanted to put my arms around her but instead I continued to ask her how she felt. “I felt very good when I arrived in Keflavík and was happy to see you, and grateful for your assistance”, she said and smiled to me. She was satisfied with her job and the people she worked with were nice to her. She had even got to know a Russian woman working with her, and since Irena had learned Russian in grade school, they were able to communicate with each other. I asked her if she wouldn’t like to meet other Poles in Iceland? “Yes, of course”, she said. The next step was to sign her up for an Icelandic language course. That decision was to lead her to new adventures.

**Irena goes back to school  
after more than a 40-year-long break**

“Klukkan er korter yfir fimm” (*The clock is quarter past five*), explains Anna the Icelandic teacher and points to an explanatory diagram at the blackboard. “And when the big hand of the clock is 15 minutes to six, then the clock is quarter to six. And when the hand is on 30, then the clock is half, or 30 minutes to six or past five”, she explains in Icelandic. The students watch her – this is not going to be easy! It was the first Icelandic lesson of five, a so called intensive course. Few students have attended while six cancelled in the last minute. Anna can’t rely on English to explain as Irena and another student from Poland understand limited English. This will be interesting, I think to myself! “What is your name?” asks Anna Irena. Irena looks at me with a question mark written all over her face, but I ignore her question. Anna helped her by saying: “My name is Anna. What is your name?” Each correct answer boosts up the confidence among her fellow students. Each sentence is a small victory, one of many.

Learning Icelandic turned out to be difficult for Irena like for many Poles that after many years got back to school. Moreover, most of them did not plan to settle in Iceland and found it a bit useless to learn a language spoken by so few. The classes were often held after many hours of work, which did not help the students to concentrate. Trying to find and pronounce words in this strange language made them often feel humble as I got

to realize when we sat down with the interpreter. “I got a headache after the first lesson. When I hear people talk Icelandic I am fully aware it is going to be difficult learning it. I am rather shy and if anyone would have said to me five years ago that I would end up alone in Iceland I would have asked the one if he is not okay.” She said that her daughter had supported the idea of coming to Iceland and helped her to make the decision to come. “At first I didn’t take it seriously, but maybe this is my chance in life”.

Even though Irena was adjusting in Iceland the first few days had been difficult for her. I realised that after a telephone call from her daughter: “My mom is so lonely. She feels like she is alone in the universe and has no one to lean to”. I felt so bad for Irena. She said that everything is okay during our previous meetings, but that is obviously not true. I reassured her daughter that Irena was doing fine and we all did our best. But there was a sorrow in her voice. I knew the reason; she was unhappy in Italy and she missed her mother. They were close. But soon the sun would shine in Irena’s life. I received the news all the way from Italy that Irena had met a Polish man in Iceland.

**“Too old to learn Icelandic  
but love doesn’t ask about age!”**

“Tell me all about it”, I asked her when we met to prepare for our trip to Warsaw. “What?” She replied grinning. “Well, I read about it in the tabloids”, I said laughing. Irena: “I have to thank you that I got to know him. You are my god-mother”, answers Irena laughing. “You know him!” Irena says. I try browsing through all the Polish men I know in my mind. “We met at the Icelandic course. He then invited me to his home. We drank beer and then we have met since in a coffee house. His name is Mirek”, she replies and smiles like a shy girl. I started laughing and I tell her that I and Anna, her teacher, had actually had a discussion about introducing them to one another. Irena is different. She seems happy. So I ask her how she anticipates her nearest future. She replies without hesitating: “As long as Mirek will stay in Iceland, so will I.”

**“I would rather learn English”**

Irena’s success in the Icelandic language course was to find her love, but she refused to go back to learn more Icelandic. Even though both I and the interpreter encouraged her to learn more Icelandic she refused. And our visit to the Polish Mini Market in Reykjavík didn’t help. I asked the owner

what they were talking about as Irena starts laughing as they spoke. “I just told her it is a piece of cake to learn Icelandic. It just takes time. Maybe five years or so”, the owner replies. “Thank you. This was very helpful”, I replied and Irena put on a triumphant smile. “Irena learn English. No Icelandic”, she said with confidence in her voice.

In Mini Market I felt like a stranger. It was all new to me. Like I had suddenly arrived somewhere else than in Reykjavík. The food packages were so bright and colourful. But I felt Irena was relieved, and she smiled when she saw a crossword magazine in Polish and other products she had missed for many months. Mini Market was a society within another society. Customers picked up their weekly papers and Polish advertisements covered the walls. We saw a familiar face; one of the interpreters from the Intercultural Centre. The world is small for the Polish society in Iceland. I was glad that I took Irena to Mini Market. I was happy to see her smile and go home with Polish products in a shopping bag. This good feeling was not to last. Few days later I received an e-mail from her son-in-law: “She hates the dark. She is lonely and she feels unwelcome among other Poles. She says it is typical among Poles. Those who came first don’t want anything to do with those who arrived recently. And they don’t try to hide their opinion. The Polish shop is miserable. Very old newspapers, no books and really unexciting variety of products.” I was totally miserable after receiving the message from Mario but I appreciated it. She was here to stay unless she would decide differently.

### **Keeping secrets in Warsaw**

The day has finally arrived. We were going to Warsaw. We were both excited. I watched her cross her chest before takeoff. We stopped in London and while I was looking for a place to sit down for a beer she unpacked her sandwich from home and offered me the other half. I accepted and while I took a bite of the two days old bread I came to think about how different our world were. “Don’t tell anyone about my relationship with Mirek”, Irena said in a combination of Italian and Icelandic as we had eventually sat down at the airport with a beer and enjoying our potato skins waiting for our flight to Warsaw. “I don’t want my family to know for now”, she added. “Your secrets are my secrets”, I reply and saw that she felt relieved.

It was a happy re-union when Irena and her son Witek met at the airport in Warsaw. He drove us to her home. I was shocked. I had seen pictures from Eastern-Europe and now I was there. I looked at the big gray blocks

side by side and giant advertisements covered some of the walls. The walls in the hallway of Irena's block were mint-green coloured and I smelled cat urine when I walked in the house. We had to go through a door with iron grills. You could not go through any door without unlocking them. Finally we walked into her apartment and she welcomed me to it; a small apartment with one bedroom. She insisted that I would sleep in the bedroom and she would be in the living room and would not take a no for an answer when I tried speaking against it. Her mother, Maria, a woman close to 90 years old, who lives in the same building, came shortly after we arrived. She cried when she saw Irena. She kissed me and talked to me in Polish. I didn't understand a word she said. Her son Witek brought a basket filled with Polish gourmet food. Irena offered them Icelandic dried fish and I looked at them chewing the fish with inscrutable looks on their faces. The family had lived all their adult life in this apartment and I wondered how she and her husband with their two children fitted in a one bedroom apartment. Irena had a tight schedule while in Warsaw; family meetings, doctor appointments, and we agreed upon that the Icelandic Eurovision song was a little better than the Polish one.

Irena and I were back in Iceland. Irena and Mirek had been in close contact while we stayed in Warsaw. We often smiled secretly to each other when they were texting and her relatives were close by. Sometimes she walked to other room to be able to talk to him in privacy. Just before coming to Warsaw Irena and Mirek were planning to start living together. Irena and I looked at several apartments to find suitable one for them. She was so excited. But now she heard nothing from him. He had gone back to Poland. Irena was sad. My birthday was coming up and I had invited Irena for my birthday party. I received a text from her in the morning: "Helga. Irena not come. Irena feel bad. Mirek no contact". For the next few days I received more similar text messages from her. We met. She had finally contacted Mirek. He had forgotten his phone and didn't remember her telephone-number. I was relieved that she had finally heard from him. But it struck me that something was wrong. "Yes, me stress no good. Irena stress no good. Stress my husband", she said when we met and handed me a birthday present. She was sorry that she hadn't come. I tried to cheer her up. Summer was here and the weather was good. "Bello summer", she said and smiled.

**“I don’t feel like having fun”**

Irena was sad. Her relationship with Mirek was over and she missed her daughter and her grandchild she hadn’t seen for almost two years. “I know so few people in Iceland. There is nothing for me to do during the nights. I mostly talk on the phone to Poland”, she said with such a sad voice. I felt so bad for her and because of her loneliness, so far away from her family. She had got to know people through Mirek but after they stopped seeing each other she didn’t meet with them any longer. “In Poland families stick together and after he broke up with me I automatically stopped meeting friends I got to know through him,” she replies. “But what do you want to do?” I ask like a worrying mother. “I would like to go to Italy to see my daughter. I am bored. It is boring here. Everyone works days and nights. It is difficult doing crosswords every night and go to sleep after work without having done anything”, says Irena and looks at me and her interpreter: “Maybe I should work more so I won’t have to be so much alone. Then I can save more money”. Irena talks about how the Euro has improved and she has already lost a lot of her savings. The Euro is worth almost 100 Icelandic *krónur* having been previously around 80 ISK. The same time has the Polish zloty gained towards the Euro. “It doesn’t make any sense for Poles working in Iceland any longer”, she says with sadness in her voice.

“The reason that I didn’t want to learn more Icelandic is that I don’t intend to stay here very much longer. I am a living example of many Poles that come and don’t know for how long they will stay. They often stay longer than they had planned but for that reason they always postpone learning Icelandic”, Irena says, and adds: “I have already been in one course and met one man. That is enough”, she says laughing. Mirek is still in Iceland at that time but they no longer have contact. “I don’t know why”, she says. It came as a surprise for her but she is doing okay, but misses the people she got to know through him. “I haven’t been successful with men in my life.” She has contact with some Poles but they work a lot, and many at irregular shifts. The young people meet more during the nights, they go out for a drink. “This is not for me”, she says. “I don’t feel like having fun”.

**Lost fifth of her savings**

All the time in Iceland Irena had saved money. She had lived sparingly and taken available extra jobs. For a time being Irena and Mirek planned to buy a house together in Warsaw and she had saved over one million Icelandic *krónur*. But the *króna* was dropping. She monitored the currency in the daily

paper and often showed it to me. She was getting worried in March 2008 and texted me: “Good day Helga. Helga question. Euro today cost 104,29 krónur. Change? No change? Wait. Helga decide what do. Maybe talk to man?” I tried to explain the uncertainty and I would try to ask around for advice. But the answers were not clear. A few days later I received another text message: “Good evening Helga. What to do? Euro change, no??? Speak to man?” I told her that she would have to make a decision whether to change all her savings or part of it. To a large extent our communications were through texts, and our dictionaries were used a lot. When she decided to go to the bank to change her Icelandic *krónur* to Euro she had lost fifth of her savings. It was a good decision as the *króna* continued to lose its value.

In the beginning of July 2008 we had our last meeting with an interpreter. I was reluctant. She had become a big part of my life. I felt responsible for her. There were times I got exhausted, but I did care for her, and she sure could make me laugh. Yet the responsibility was overwhelming at times. I received numerous following text messages from her: “*Irena fara eyrnalokkur*” (Irena go earring). I was never to find out what she meant. Maybe she looked at a wrong line in her dictionary. Communicating through a dictionary can never be more than limited. A better dictionary was expensive. She couldn’t afford it, and neither could I. “I am very happy” – she says although I know that her feelings had been hurt. “I got to know many people and everyone was so good to me. I am very happy that I decided to come here, I am happy with everything unless the fall of the Icelandic *króna* towards Euro”, she tells me laughing and I recall how emotional she was and her fear when she watched her saving almost go up in smoke in front of her. “Poles who live here, live for work. They think about work every hour of the day. Life is work. They think about work, save money and go back to Poland and buy an apartment or a car. I do also know people that live here happily with their families and they want to live here until they are ripe for old age pension. While people have work and can work most people want to be here. But of course the fall of the *króna* has changed plans for many”.

At the turn of September and October 2008 Iceland was hit by financial crisis that started period of economic recession in the country. Three major banks were nationalised. The value of *króna* dropped significantly, leaving many Icelanders heavily indebted, especially those who took loans in foreign currency. Government introduced strict monetary policy, limiting international transfers. In the aftermath of the collapse, thousand of people, including immigrants, lost their jobs. The events led to social unrest and

many went on streets to protest. Immigrants seemed particularly confused, not always understanding what is happening; without a job and not certain about their future in the country.

### **End of a chapter, and the beginning of a new one**

“What about Mirek?”, I asked her at our last meeting. “When I first met him I wasn’t particularly fond of him. He wasn’t my type. But he was caring and gentle so I came to like him. In fact our relationship never ended. It just was over when he went back to Poland. When he came back he never contacted me. He didn’t call or explain to me why he wanted to end our relationship. I think he is just like this – very different from how he was when I got to know him in the beginning. It must have been a game for him, a game that he played”, she explained with sadness. But – the sound of her voice suddenly changed when she told me she had met someone else. “He is a cab driver. I got to know him through a Polish woman who cleaned his house. When he said goodbye to me he said he loved me”, she said laughing. “Look. Most Icelandic men are handsome but he is not. But he is a really good man and sweet and good to be around him. But he wasn’t handsome enough”, Irena says and laughs loud.

Irena went back to Italy where I got to know her. Her brother had offered her a job but she did not accept that. Before she went to Italy, she stopped by in Warsaw to say goodbye again. She had saved enough to be able to be with her daughter and her grand-daughter. To start a new chapter.

### **Conclusions**

We have presented the story of Irena mediated through Helga’s narration about the time they shared in Iceland. Applying non-fiction writing we tried to avoid producing a static picture, but instead we provide a dynamic encounter between two women – Irena, a 60-year-old Polish woman, and Helga, a 40-year-old journalist, who became close to Irena during her stay in Iceland. A migrant and a journalist. Therefore, we were able to show multidimensional position of an individual, not limited to her migrant status. We present our character, a middle aged divorced woman, as a person with all her complexities, full of emotions, hopes and expectations.

Although focused on the particular person, the story reveals some issues that can be familiar to many of the Polish migrants that are living in Iceland or many migrants in general. It discloses some common elements of the everyday reality as experienced by Poles in Iceland – their struggles

with integration and learning Icelandic, encounters with Icelanders and relations with other Poles. As many other Poles, Irena took advantage of opened labour market in European Union to search for work abroad. Like many migrants, she relied on informal contacts to get help in finding job, accommodation and emotional support. Moreover, the Irena's example illustrates so-called migrants' transnationalism, the maintained relations with family and relatives across the borders; occasional visits or frequent contacts mediated by communication technology – phone calls, text messages, e-mails and skype. As for Irena, it is not only linkages back to home country, where her son was still living, but also included Italy where her daughter had moved. Again, it shows how the geographical borders of our lived-spaces are stretching nowadays.

Yet, it is primarily a story about Irena; as it was our main concern to contextualise migration experience on the intimate level of an individual, which in our opinion gives a better understanding of the interplay between different factors influencing one's choices and decisions. Migration rarely is a complete project, but often involves ongoing personal "struggles" whether to continue to live abroad, return home or move elsewhere, so the initial decision needs to be constantly re-evaluated and re-assured. Encouraged by Helga and prompted by her family situation, Irena decided to come to Iceland, even not fully anticipating what she can expect in the country.

The story of Irena brings close the very meaning of migration and how it is subjectively perceived. It seems that for Irena coming to Iceland was her chance for better life, break from her old routine and a new beginning. Definitely, it takes courage to migrate to another country. Moving to Iceland, Irena added a whole new chapter, totally different from what she had written insofar. Irena had hopes, expectations without knowing who they were. A new purpose. Love and loss. She missed and she was missed. Confrontation with the reality challenged her decision and she needed a new reason to continue being in Iceland. It was a love affair that gave her a purpose and helped her to conquer the loneliness she had suffered from. Eventually, when her relationship came to an end, combined with new unfavoured economic situation, she decided to move away. Apparently even though migration is a "major event" it does not have to be a definite one. When she wrote the last paragraph of the Icelandic chapter she was enriched with new experience, but with anticipation and not turning back she left to start a new one.

**The paper presents a narrative perspective on Polish migration to Iceland based on one example of a woman, called Irena. Her biography served for an anthropological analysis used in biographical approach in social sciences with the assumption that the story of one life of a particular person can give some general knowledge – in this case about migration patterns and experiences.**

**The story of Irena presented in this article is also an interesting example of the narrative journalism, since the biography is presented like a non-fiction essay, written by a journalist who accompanied Irena for several months during her stay in Iceland and was actually a part of her migration experience.**

**Helga Ólaf,  
Anna Wojtyńska**

*Icelandic chapter in the  
Polish book: a narrative  
perspective on Polish  
migration to Iceland*