

Where did all the Poles go?

By Anna Olejarczyk

Months after the fatal taser confrontation between a Polish immigrant and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police at the Vancouver airport, the incident continues to spark international conversation and has launched an investigation. A 10-minute video captured by an onlooker depicts the final moments of Robert Dziekanski's Canadian dream, while raising questions about police procedures and the kindness of strangers. One issue highlighted by the incident, however, has received little attention: that a Polish middle-aged man wanted to relocate to Canada at a time when fewer and fewer Polish or European citizens – once the mainstay of Canada's population growth – are choosing to immigrate here.

During the past five years, European immigration to Canada has dwindled, even as overall immigration to Canada has been on the rise. According to a Statistics Canada survey, Canada is now home to its largest population of new Canadians in 75 years, with 1.1 million newcomers arriving between 2001 and 2006.

Of these, Europeans accounted for just 16.1 per cent of newcomers, far fewer than those from Asian and Middle Eastern countries. That is down from 60 per cent 30 years ago. The decline in the number of Poles relocating to Canada reflects the steady decline in European immigration to this country. In 2005, more than 1,200 Poles came to Canada. In 2006 that number dropped to 1,100 and in the first half of 2007, only 487 Poles arrived here.

Indeed, Poles continue to emigrate from their homeland, but many are now deciding to stay within Europe. It is this current trend of European migration that is raising attention in Canada.

A number of factors have contributed to this trend. First, the push back from Canada: Requirements and restrictions on immigrants have become tighter. Poles seeking a visitor's visa to come to Canada line up in vain at the Canadian embassy in Warsaw to receive one of the handfuls of visas issued per day.

Marek Kucmierz, president of the Association of Polish Engineers in Canada, Alberta Chapter, talks of the humiliation for Polish engineers and tourists of standing in line at 4 a.m. in Warsaw. He describes his brother-in-law's reluctance to come to Canada. "He told me, 'Forget it. I'm not coming to Canada until they get rid of the visa,'" says Kucmierz.

According to the Polish embassy in Ottawa, talks have been ongoing for three years to abolish the visitor's visa requirement. Recently, the Czech Republic had its visa requirement to Canada lifted, but if a change is on its way for Poland, it is not happening soon enough for some. "It seems that Polish immigrants don't have a lot of voice in Ottawa and I can't see Polish engineers coming to Canada," says Kucmierz.

A second factor affecting the trend is the increasing pull from within Europe. Following the European Union enlargement in 2004 to encompass Poland and five other Central and Eastern European, in contrast to countries such as Germany, France and Austria, the United Kingdom, Sweden and Ireland have opened their borders to Polish workers.

A third factor implicated is migrants' desires to stay closer to their families. With Canada being such a great distance from Poland, many find it too costly to travel. By contrast, travel within Europe has become cheap and convenient. Poles no longer need to voyage half way around the globe when they can fly to the UK and find a job that fits their skills.

The few Poles who are venturing to Canada do so either because they have family already living in Canada, or they are able to secure a job contract. Polish-Canadian immigration consultant Maria Krajewska has been trying to influence positive change in

the immigration system. She notes that Canada still opens its door for skilled labour workers from Poland, but those with fewer qualifications do not stay.

Krajewska fights for Poles who face deportation after their contracts expire. “They are skilled, but never make the bar that is required. They cannot compare themselves in the average to people who have a university education and are fluent in English and French. They never make the points,” she says.

Immigration requirements have become a barrier for Poles entering Canada since 2002, as they have been for anyone from Slavic countries. Language requirements and general immigration standards are high enough that those people who are not relatively fluent in English or French have little chance of entering Canada, due to the established point system.

Canada continues to recruit construction and mechanical workers on contract basis to fill employment gaps, but these workers cannot stay here, even if they have been here for several years.

It is the contrary in Europe, says Krajewska, where Poles do not need to apply for a visa. They can travel. They pay taxes. Polish workers are legally employed in a number of countries and can stay for as long as they want: workers such as Gabrysia Kondraciuk in London.

Kondraciuk left Poland on May 13, 2007, because she could not find a job. At 22, she decided to take an educational leave. She moved to London to study English where one of her friends was already settled. Through the friend, she found a job at a sandwich bar and works from 6 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Now that Kondraciuk is legally employed, she is thinking about her future. She wants to continue her education, but not in Poland.

She likes her job because it gives her contact with people; “Not only Polish people,” she says. She is happy with her life in London and the opportunities she has found. She would not have the same kind of life if she had stayed in Poland, she says.

“I don’t think there’s any sense comparing life in England and life in Poland. In Poland, you need to make minimum 2,000 zloty (\$820 CAN) a month in order to sustain yourself, pay for rent and all the bills. Here, you need £800 (\$1,500 CAN), but my job gives me even more than that. I can put money away,” she says.

Little wonder that fewer Polish immigrants are choosing Canada.

Further, after the controversy surrounding the tragic death of Robert Dziekanski, some speculate that even fewer Poles will make the move. “The recent taser incident has dimmed the attractiveness of Canada for many,” says Andrew Kureth, Editor in Chief at the Warsaw Business Journal.

Like many Poles, Kureth wonders for how many Dziekanski’s death will symbolize the end of a Canadian dream.