

Migration and Settlement

by Elizabeth Drozd

In 1991, when I started my involvement with the Australian-Polish Community Services, I was a lone worker employed by this agency and we have come a long way in terms of our development.

Today, the Australian–Polish Community Services (APCS), employs eight full-time and 52 part-time staff and in addition to that our work is supported by 46 volunteers. On average, the agency receives 10,000 client inquiries and requests for assistance annually. The majority of these requests come from older persons who seek information about services, require practical assistance in their daily living and ask APCS to be the go-between them, and other service providers. Common also are requests for assistance in writing or explaining business letters, seeking compensation from Germany and advocacy. Younger clients seek our assistance with finding employment, and dealing with immigration and family matters. Many of our clients are in difficult financial situations due to being on disability pensions and often require extra funds sometimes to just simply get by from week to week. Amongst APCS's clients are those who are unemployed and do not receive any Centrelink benefits because they are not eligible in the first two years of their arrival in Australia. These are sometimes some of the most difficult cases, along with clients not having money for food. Some Polish migrants continue to have difficulty in communicating in English and APCS is often asked to organise English-language classes, especially in the southern and eastern areas of Melbourne. In recent times, APCS has also starting assisting three other eastern European groups and offer personal care to non-Polish service providers on a fee-for-service basis. All of the above-mentioned clients and their requests are given our utmost attention in offering information and providing immediate support and action.

APCS's achievements to-date are a cause for celebration. We have played a key role in the planning, developing and provision of services. We have rightly been concentrating our efforts on services for older people. Our success to-date has been possible due to the funding provided by the relevant State and Commonwealth departments and other funding organisations. APCS acknowledges the support given to us by the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs through the Community Settlement Services Scheme program. It is through this program that we have been able to work on service development, agency management and assistance to clients including new Polish migrants. Today, we also wish to thank the State Department of Human Services, in particular for supporting our proposals regarding meeting the needs of the Home and Community Care target group within the Polish community. This includes provision of a day care program in Geelong, a highly valued HACC Access program which has almost state-wide coverage and recently the Polish Older Outreach Program provided with the support of a Polish-speaking missionary sister who has been so well welcomed by Polish older persons. Our appreciation also goes to the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing for the Community Aged Care Packages Program and a volunteer-based Community Visitors program for residential care facilities. We value all programs which we manage, regardless of size or duration of funding.

I think what also may be of interest to you is what have been other factors which contributed to our development? These can be summarised in the following way:

- Good working relationships with funding bodies and fulfilment of contractual obligations, including service standards;
- Highly competitive and well targeted applications for funding;
- Partnerships with other ethnic welfare agencies, mainstream service providers, teaching institutions and recently the religious;
- Lobbying
- Committed and competent staff and volunteers

- Committee of Management that is supportive and not afraid to give staff autonomy
- Use of community development principles in our work

The current situation

APCS clearly needs to continue with the current service provision. The current Community Settlement Services funding to our agency ends in September and we hope that the Polish community will not be treated differently to other similar ethnic groups.

APCS is part of the Polish community infrastructure in Victoria and it is important to consider the situation of other Polish community organisations. Based on our contact with the community, we detect three aspects which need to be considered when we think of the future and these include:

- Polish community leaders being tired from doing voluntary work or simply being too unwell to continue with their responsibilities.
- The difficulty of recruiting new members to committees of management.
- Financial difficulties such as not having enough funds to cover the cost of running Polish community centres or to organise activities.

These are only some of the issues raised and discussed by Polish community groups. They are important because they indicate and reflect the changes that are occurring in Polish organisations and the general Polish community as a whole. On the one hand, the group of very involved and experienced community leaders is coming to an end and there is no one following behind them. On the other hand, new Polish migrants sometimes say they have an aversion to being members of organisations as a result of living in communist Poland where they experienced pressure to join the Communist Party and its associated groups. As a result, one gets the impression that some of the Polish organisations are not sure of the future, they feel vulnerable, or as pessimists might say, they are

falling apart or are approaching that point. This disintegration is typically associated with difficult situations involving quarrels, blaming each other and divisions.

The picture I have described of the Polish community would not be complete without mentioning the 30,000 Poles who have arrived in Australia in the last 20 years. I will now share with you some of the findings of my postgraduate studies about the largest wave of Polish immigrants which I undertook at RMIT University under the supervision of Prof. Desmond Cahill.

After living in Australia for 20 years, these immigrants have come a long way in their settlement. This includes their English-language proficiency, occupational status, social support networks, and job and life satisfaction. These achievements did not come easily, they resulted from hard work, further education, compromises and utilisation of skills and knowledge which they brought with them. Also helpful was the range of support services available to them and the Australian policy of multiculturalism. The most difficult thing to cope with in the initial years of settlement for these immigrants was learning English and not being able to communicate in that language, yet it was essential to establishing their lives in Australia. As well, they experienced high levels of isolation and stress and missed their families in Poland. Their occupational adjustment was also difficult although with time many have regained their occupational status and now work in positions commensurate with their skills and qualifications.

When I conducted interviews with 60 immigrants in the mid 1990s, only eight per cent frequently had difficulties in understanding English and another 16 per cent had difficulties occasionally. That means that 76 per cent of the second largest wave of Polish migrants can understand English well or very well. However, their written English proficiency was significantly lower, 34 per cent experienced difficulties often or very often and another 20 per cent sometimes. Just over half

were especially interested in improving their written English skills. This difficulty with writing in English continues to be a significant one for those who have come to Australia in the last 20 years, including those who work as professionals. In other words, we have significant literacy problems in our community.

Not all have succeeded and many paid a price such as marriage break up, deterioration in health, unemployment or no contact with families in Poland. Let me now give an example where settlement was and continues to be difficult.

Case study 1: 'Jan' was a 43-year old male when he arrived in Australia in 1982. Although upon arrival Jan had no knowledge of English, he had a good command of the English language at the time of the interview in 1994. He had technical qualifications as an electrician with 20 years' experience from Poland. These qualifications were recognised but he was not allowed to practise as an electrician in Australia because the relevant accrediting body believed that electrical work in Australia is different to that in Poland. Consequently, he undertook and completed an electrician's course at TAFE of two and half years duration. He then worked as an electrician with the railways for five years, then had two other jobs as an electrician totalling four years employment. He then decided to work for himself - a dream he had since his arrival in Australia as a result of having a successful business in Poland. He set up his own business as an electrician and in the last two years has been self employed. Jan believed that while he is self-employed, the sky will be the limit with regard to the amount of hours he will be able to work. Unfortunately, Jan's income has been low due to limited availability of work, and as a result the then Department of Social Security supplemented his income with an unemployment benefit.

In 1991, Jan's wife died suddenly. He lives in the southern part of Melbourne, an area that has been badly affected by the 1990s recession and has high levels on unemployment. Jan lives in a house with his two children, his mother-in-law and his sister-in-law. Jan's case was one of, if not, the saddest that the interviewer

came across because the willingness to work was so strong, yet forces out of his control made his dream and life satisfaction out of reach. Even worse, because of his age, it seemed that Jan's situation was unlikely to improve. In December last year, Jan contacted our office to ask for emergency relief and continues to be in a difficult situation.

The future

The title of today's conference is "The Polish Community: Where to now?" and I would like to offer some suggestions based on the needs of our community as we know it today:

- APCS needs to continue the current service provision and consider other settlement gaps, involvement of the more recent migrants, young people and future leadership of the community.
- Service providers and government departments need to be aware that a percentage of Polish migrants require assistance in their settlement, including some of those who have been here for ten or twenty years.
- There continues to be a strong need to offer English-language learning opportunities including written English, one-to-one conversations and English grammar.
- Given the impact of unemployment and underemployment on a person's life, I strongly believe, relevant departments, employment agencies and Polish organisations need to make a special effort to offer help in that area.
- We as a community need to initiate strategies that will attract greater involvement in the welfare of the community. Last year was the International Year of Volunteering and we need to promote the concept and benefits of voluntary work.
- That we intensify discussions within Polish organisations regarding their aims, current difficulties and ways of preventing and resolving them.
- Last year, 2002, could be considered as the 20th anniversary of the largest number of Poles arriving in Australia and it would be beneficial to organise a

celebration of what the migrants of the 1980s have achieved and their successes.

I have no doubt that the Polish community despite its specific difficulties is capable of finding solutions. We have strengths and are an important group within multicultural Australia, and together, with support from the relevant Australian state and federal departments and other organisations, we can think about our future full of hope and peace.