

INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

Safe Emigrant

Robert Klonowski



Initially, we felt uncertain about the invitation sent by the fire service of Northumberland County (United Kingdom), asking us to participate in a project aiming at the improvement of fire safety among Poles living in the United Kingdom... Today we have no doubts – wherever there are Polish citizens, Polish firefighters have to be there as well. Especially, as it turned out that we are needed there and the State Fire Service has become the third institution from Poland (after Catholic Church and social service organizations) to support our compatriots in the UK in an organized way.

From the very beginning of the mass settlement of Polish emigrants in Great Britain (according to different sources some 1-1.5 million Poles have emigrated there since 2004), they have been reluctant to the idea of preventive cooperation with the local fire service. To overcome the cultural and language barriers, Britons invited experts from Poland to promote safe behaviours among Poles living there. They asked the SFS from Poznań for help, as in the last years the Northumberland Fire and Rescue Service (NFRS) has developed working cooperation with the City HQ of the SFS in Poznań and with the Fire Service College located

there. When it comes to the selection of experts, their linguistic and technical preparation were the most important criteria.

Social Prevention

We spent six weeks in Northumberland. In this time we managed to identify the most frequent problems of Poles concerning fire safety. We conducted the observations during home fire safety checks in houses occupied by Poles. The check service has been in the offer of the British fire service for several years. It includes checking household fire safety and installing new smoke detectors free of charge [*sic*]. We collected the applications from Poles e.g. by distributing information leaflets in churches. Here is the content of such a leaflet.

The biggest problem of Poles in the United Kingdom is the proper way to deal with British electricity, or how many ways there are to put a two-pin plug into a three-pin socket. There is even a "tutorial" to be found on Polish websites, showing how to outsmart British electricity. Poles put often screwdrivers, scissors, ear cleaners or hair-slides into the third hole in an electrical socket. The risk following such practices is so high that the British Association of Electrical Engineers organized an educational and information action addressed to Polish emigrants already last year. Unfortunately, the results of educational actions conducted only by the British side are insignificant, as Polish migrants simply do not trust the actions of British authorities and perceive them as oppressive. Therefore, during home fire safety checks in houses occupied by Poles we distributed (also free of charge!) additionally electrical adapters and we explained how to use English electricity safely, as the electricity there, as most things in England, is ... of specific character. British rental flats are usually equipped in a whole arsenal of safety devices. Electric cookers have additional switches on the wall cutting off electricity. No electrical appliances are allowed in a bathroom – there are no washing machines there or even no light switches (to turn on the light it is necessary to pull a string hanging from a ceiling). In some houses and hotels there are (two-pin!) sockets in the bathroom but they are intended only for low-voltage electric shavers. Many Poles neglect the warnings and plug in normal appliances there. Poles often tinker with British plugs equipped in fuses, replacing 3-ampere fuses with 7- or 10-ampere ones. This leads to household electricity overload, wire overheating and ... of course to a fire.

Another important element of our joint preventive and educational activity included introducing Poles to the idea of smoke detectors, their role and the rules of their proper

exploitation and maintenance. This turned out to be one of the biggest challenges in this project, as Polish emigrants had no knowledge in this area (as how could they know anything?). Common in British houses, the smoke detectors have such a drawback that they require batteries which have to be replaced from time to time. In the case of cheaper detectors, the batteries have to be replaced every year; more expensive detectors have batteries working for 10 years. A detector signals a low-battery condition with repeated beeping, which is often perceived by Poles as a sign of a malfunction. Some people may put blame for the beeping on cigarette smoke or air freshener fragrance [*sic*]. Others, annoyed by the continuous beeping, dismantle the detector and throw it away. This problem required the greatest effort, as we had to convince every family separately about the advantages of having a working smoke detector at home. British firefighters were unable to comprehend this, as smoke detectors have been an integral part of **every** house in the UK for years and the measurable decrease of the number of fatalities resulting from fire for over a decade has convinced all the sceptics about the preventive effectiveness of those appliances.

It has to be admitted that the picture of Polish emigration we saw in the UK is completely different than the stereotypes popular in Poland. It turned out that Polish emigrants in north-eastern England are quite well organized. Since the Second World War there has been a Polish club here. Polish emigrants have also their own association: North East Polish Community Organisation, a chapel, they have a newspaper, restaurant and pub; moreover, they organize an annual large cultural festival "Made in Poland". They meet with a friendly reception from local authorities and organizations, which help substantially the emigrants to settle down and feel at home. Of course, there are also some problems (discrimination at work, language problems, racism, isolation from the local community), but, surprisingly, it is the British fire service who significantly helps the emigrants to join the mainstream of the community. This concerns both the adults and children. Thinking about Polish children, we organized together an educational Fire Adventure Day.

The children could feel like real firefighters – in combat uniforms of British firefighters they climbed ladders, unwound fire hoses and had drills in a fire simulator. Children could see also vehicles and rescue equipment; they ate free lunch and listened to a talk about safety at home and school. At the end of the training each child received a "Fire Academy Graduate Diploma" and a souvenir. Such educational projects have been carried out by the British fire service for over a decade. Currently, they are one of the more important spheres of activity of the fire service; the division dealing with this (*Community Safety Academy*) is the largest organizational unit of the county fire service HQ. Comparing Polish and English fire service,

we observed the greatest difference (unfortunately, to disadvantage of the former) in the sphere of social prevention, which is still in its infancy in Poland.

One Project – Many Advantages

- "Safe Emigrant" (Migrant Worker Engagement Strategy) was probably the first project of this type conducted by the units of the State Fire Service abroad.
- Participation in projects of this type is of prestigious character; it strengthens the position of the State Fire Service as a respected partner in the public safety area in Europe.
- Not only did we educate Polish emigrants in the field of safe behaviours, but also we overcame their barriers in contacts with the British administration.
- Within the framework of the project we had had several dozen meetings with representatives of: British and Polish government and local government administration, services, institutions and organizations dealing with emigrants and public safety in a broad sense – at all those meetings our initiative met with recognition and full approval.
- The project made it possible for us to learn the specific character of the preventive and educational actions of the English fire service (which are much more complex and developed there than in most other European countries).
- In Northumberland, because of the direct subordination to the County Council and because of the efficiency in previous actions, the scope of activity of the fire service has been significantly broadened. It is extended on other areas concerning public safety (crisis management, city guards, road safety, recently even anti-drug and alcohol council and emigrants). On one hand this means more duties, on the other hand this gives them an unusual room for manoeuvre and an actual influence on the shape of the local and regional safety policy.
- "Safe Emigrant" has perfectly fitted in "Fire Kills – You Can Prevent It" promotional and educational campaign conducted by the British government. It is worth to mention that we distributed the educational materials (in Polish) used in the campaign during home fire safety checks. I strongly recommend *Fire Safety in the Home* brochure, which is available on the website of the programme.
- We managed to convince the British side to implement another project increasing road safety. The project assumes giving Poles and emigrants from other countries vouchers for learning how to drive in the left-hand traffic – this should be available next year.

- Participation to the project enabled Polish firefighters to win invaluable experience in the field of dealing with emigrants. Poland will probably have a similar problem in several years (just now there are about 50,000 Vietnamese living and working in Warsaw).
- The project is a base for future Polish (the Wielkopolska province) and British (Northumberland) projects, among other things in the scope of fire investigation and social prevention.
- "Safe Emigrant" project met with a surprisingly high interest of Polish mass media, both regional (*WTK* TV channel, *Radio Eska*, websites: *e-poznan*, *blubry.pl*), and nation-wide (*Gazeta Wyborcza* daily, *Radio Zet*, *RMF* radio channel).
- All the costs concerning the participation of the Polish side in the project were covered by the British side.

Junior Brigadier Robert Klonowski is the head of the Organization and Supervision Division of the City HQ of the SFS in Poznań

photo Robert Klonowski