

Dok. 3

POSITIVE EXAMPLES OF IMPARTING INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCY

(The Polish Experience): Herzogenrath (Germany), May 6-9, 2004

Whatever definition we may have, it virtually boils down to the fact that 'Intercultural Competency' is a social science dealing with the phenomenon of social and cultural harmonisation in society between nationals and non-nationals. This has an impact on the economic and consequently the political fibres of a nation, with Culture as a catalyst. Even if clothed in different allegories and words, Culture is what and how one eats, what one wears. It is the language one speaks and how one looks and sees. In a nutshell, it is how one functions both as an individual and member of a group both at home and abroad.

People find it hard to understand someone whose culture isn't known to them. Bury culture and man is reduced to a nonentity. He becomes virtually a vagabond ghost with nothing to hold to, having being deprived of the spiritual equilibrium embedded in culture.

This brings us back to the hypothesis of 'Harmony in society between nationals and non-nationals'. How to ensure that a migrant or refugee, functions effectively through successful integration in a new society, with minimal friction between himself and his hosts? This in my perspective, is what 'Intercultural Competency' is all about.

Coming to the theme 'Positive Examples of imparting Intercultural Competency', drawing from the Polish experience, the best approach would be to start with an area where I am most familiar with. And as I belong to the Media world it would be appropriate to start here.

THE POLISH MEDIA & INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCY

It's important to state from the onset that the role of the mainstream media within the framework of intercultural competency is not institutionalised, hence it is informal. However since the largest forum for public debate is the media, its role cannot be underestimated in a field which deals directly and largely with the general public. Since the media influences public opinion and attitude, its impact is felt more than even that of institutions in particular cases especial with the issue of building or breaking stereotypes.

Two working hypotheses to consider here are:

- a). What role does the Polish Media play in the framework of the integration of non-Poles in the Polish society?

- b). 'Are there some positive examples of Intercultural Competency in the Polish Media worth imparting?'

To begin with, it's worth noting that for an immigrant or refugee, the process of integration in a new environment and society is akin to a transported seed seeking to sprout in foreign grounds. The seed through a natural process must seek to adjust to the temperament of the new soil, which is not always sensitive to its needs. It requires a farmer, an overseer to ensure that the right conditions are put in place so that the seed does not poison the soil and that the soil isn't hostile to the seed, for their mutual good. In our case, Institutions play the role of 'the farmer'. And one of the most powerful institutions at the service of society is the Media. The fact that someone in my position is able to practice his vocation in Poland goes a long

way to exemplify the role of the media in Poland. To a praiseworthy extent, the media in Poland is quite independent. Time and again articles pop up in the Polish media written about minority groups, foreign culture, cases of foreign individuals, etc. The articles in mind here are written in such a way that they portray a positive side of the subject they treat or have an educational dimension for the reader. Readers were taken by surprise on Saturday, April 26 2003 when they bought the largest and leading daily newspaper in Poland, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, and realised that there was a special supplement of over four pages in the newspaper, which was entirely in the Vietnamese language. The same features article was also in Polish. The Vietnamese form one of the largest minority groups in the country.

The weekly newsmagazine *WPROST* on April 1 2002 published a special edition dedicated to the contributions of foreign nationals living in the country to Poland.

Quite often, some newspapers approach foreign experts to write a particular subject for them. I for one, I was approached by 'Metropol' (Global chain of free newspaper), to be a columnist for them. It is worth pointing out that I am free to write on any subject of my choice. And so far, all the articles I have written for them have been published without censorship. There are cases similar to mine. There are others who are co-hosts and even hosts of entertainment and cultural programmes on Radio Stations in the country. I work for the weekly newsmagazine *The Warsaw Voice*. It is interesting to note that when I got there, at a certain point in time there were more foreigners contributing to the paper than Poles. There was a Canadian, a Russian, and English two Americans.

I joined *The Warsaw Voice*, just when Laura Klos, an American journalist was about to leave. Klos later wrote a book, *Shortcuts to Poland*. The book is an in-depth view of Polish culture from the perspective of a foreigner. Though written in English, the book has become such a success that it will soon appear in Polish. Thanks to *The Warsaw Voice* this was possible. The

paper is quite innovative and open to, one might say, 'Cultural Experimentation'. Currently it features elementary Polish lessons to its foreign readers.

The conclusion here is that the contribution of the media in building a culture of tolerance is seen and felt on a daily basis.

INITIATIVES OF STATE INSTITUTIONS

(Within the framework of Integration)

In an attempt to decentralise the integration process of refugees into the Polish society, the Mazowiecki office in charge of the integration of refugees carried out an extended training campaign in five districts in the Mazowiecki province. The training exercise ran throughout a whole week. The Mazowiecki Government Office which initiated the sessions, carried out the project with partner organisations including the Polish Humanitarian Action, Association of Refugees in Poland, Helsinki Foundation, Office of Social Politics, International Organisation for Migration. The strategy was to engage social workers in the various towns and districts in debates related to the subject of refugees. The aim was to convince these towns to open their doors to refugees and immigrants. Most of the towns welcomed the idea cordially. However of the five towns visited it emerged that Radom was the only town that declared they were not interested in hosting refugees, "You can't bring these people here, asking us to give them houses and jobs, when our own people are suffering", a member of the social department is quoted as saying. The speaker and the audience accepted the better side of the argument when they were reminded by a representative of the Association of Refugees that "By accepting refugees you would be creating job opportunities in the various departments working with refugees and those who would be called in to take the jobs, wouldn't come from outside." The

reaction briefly but powerful portrays the advantage of creating common forums for debates between nationals and non-nationals to exchange ideas and seek solutions.

ASSOCIATION OF ASYLUM SEEKERS IN POLAND

The Association of Refugees in Poland, which is the first self-help organisation in the country run, by refugees, has emerged as a potential partner in fostering the integration of refugees and immigrants into the Polish society. Their activities centre mostly in the area of raising public and institutional awareness on the potential of the immigrant community as well as bringing to light their problems. They target both refugees and Poles. The Association publishes 'Voice of Exile', which is a bi-monthly magazine aimed at enhancing dialogue between nationals and non-nationals. It treats a variety of intercultural subjects, receives and shares information from the sub-region and acts as a medium for cultural exchange. Because it targets schools, public, private and governmental institutions, it plays an increasingly vital role of uniting races, cultures and professionals.

The Association last year in partnership with Football Against Racism in Europe (Austria), The Never Again Anti-racist Association and several districts in Warsaw organised the Football Against Racism campaign in Poland. Matches were played between minority groups in Poland and Poles. Quite recently the Association organised the European-wide Tolerance Week in Warsaw. A team including foreign poets in the country and others went to schools to give lectures on tolerance and integration.

THE UNION OF FOREIGN WRITERS IN POLAND

The Union of Foreign Writers in Poland is a literary Club made of writers, poets, journalists, scriptwriters, and artists living in Poland from other countries. The Club presently boasts of about 20 members, drawn from five continents. The main goal of the Club is to promote the work of foreign writers living in Poland and also educate the society of their culture. Once a month, the members read their work to the public in 'Casablanca Cafe', which is perhaps the most informal intercultural point in Warsaw. Members of the Club select a theme and give readings, poetry, prose, essays, short stories, etc. on the theme selected. The theme to be treated will be 'The Outsider'. The members will be expected to draw from personal experiences and closely look at what it means to live in a foreign society like Poland and the challenges of integration they face in this respect. During the encounters, there is simultaneous interpretation. In the very near future the Club hopes to put out an anthology of the writings of its members.

THE CHURCH AND I.C IN POLAND.

With a long-standing tradition as a religious society, mainly Catholic, the contribution of the church in Poland in building a culture of tolerance towards foreign nationals is extensive. It should be made clear from the onset that the role of the church in this area is restrictive and follows a particular pattern with respect to Catholic principles. The church has a series of programmes that have been running for years aimed at educating youths and adults alike in the framework of intercultural competency.

The Divine Word Missionaries, a branch of the Catholic Church, publishes a monthly magazine called MISJIONARZE 'Missionaries'. The policy of the magazine is to show to the

Polish public the rich elements found in different cultures around the world where their missionaries live.

The Divine Word Missionaries plays an active and dual role in Poland with minority groups in assisting them with integration. Some of their activities include harnessing the cultural potential of minority groups and talented individuals in such communities and promote these among Poles. This is done through publications, recordings, tours, cultural encounters, forums, etc. A good example is a CD, which was sponsored by the DVM and released by a group of African artists in Poland. The CD track titled 'Africa Brzewa Show', is very intercultural in the sense that the groups of artist (Africans and Poles), made lyrics from the rhymes of a Polish poet and combined this with African rhythms.

One of the minority groups in the country that enjoys organised spiritual protection is the Vietnamese community, which is one of the largest minority groups in the country. The spiritual father of the Vietnamese in Poland is Rev. Edward Osiecki. Beside taking care of their spiritual needs, he also gives counselling, lobbies on their behalf and works to protect the rights of the Vietnamese in Poland.

There is also a competition open to high school children known as MY SCHOOL FRIEND IN AFRICA. The competition runs for months in many schools where students are judged as to their knowledge of African culture, etc. The overall winner ends a trip to an African country of their choice. The programme is jointly carried out by the Church, Schools and is run under the patronage of the Polish branch of UNESCO. In this year's programme, an anthology of poems by an African poet in Poland was published in bilingual version, i.e. in English and Polish. One important element in realising this project was that some of the poems were translated by the students from English to Polish. The anthology now serves as a learning material.

Through its numerous missionaries in various parts of the world, the Divine Word

CONCLUSION

It is almost impossible to cite all the examples of intercultural competency activities going on in Warsaw alone, let alone the whole country. Much more is being done than has been cited here and ironically, much less is being done in this area. I have deliberately restricted my presentation to informal examples partly because I believe that the private sector and individual initiatives in fostering the integration of foreigners should be encouraged as those who implement these initiatives usually get little attention. Another point also is that expatriates, refugees, immigrants, if given the right push, could contribute enormously in fostering harmony in society.

Simon Mol (*Moleke Mo-Njie*):

Journalist, The Warsaw Voice, Poland.

Association of Asylum Seekers and Refugees in Poland:

assref@hotmail.com

Personal profile: www.molsimon.art.pl

E-mail: molsimon@hotmail.com