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LITTLE BELGIUM by DIANE PFEIFFER

Little Belgium is part of a project entitled Borders in Motion that looked at the shifting nature of Poland's borders and the new relationships these changes create in the flows of people, goods and capital through Poland and its neighbors, Belarus and Germany. This work is part of the Bauhaus Kolleg V: Transit Spaces, 2003-2004.

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The logo for Bauhaus Dessau, featuring the word "bauhaus" in a lowercase, blue, sans-serif font with a small horizontal line above the letters.

In northeastern Poland, in the poorest part of the country, lies a town where an estimated one quarter of the population travel abroad to work in jobs other Europeans don't want. The majority of the migrants from this town, Siemiatycze (Shem-yah-TIH-cheh), travel 22 hours to Brussels in Belgium. There they work illegally hired as housekeepers and construction workers, drivers and waiters. They earn between 7 and 12 euro an hour and work perhaps 60 hours a week simultaneously supporting families in Poland, and arguably the advanced capitalist economy in Belgium with their low wages.

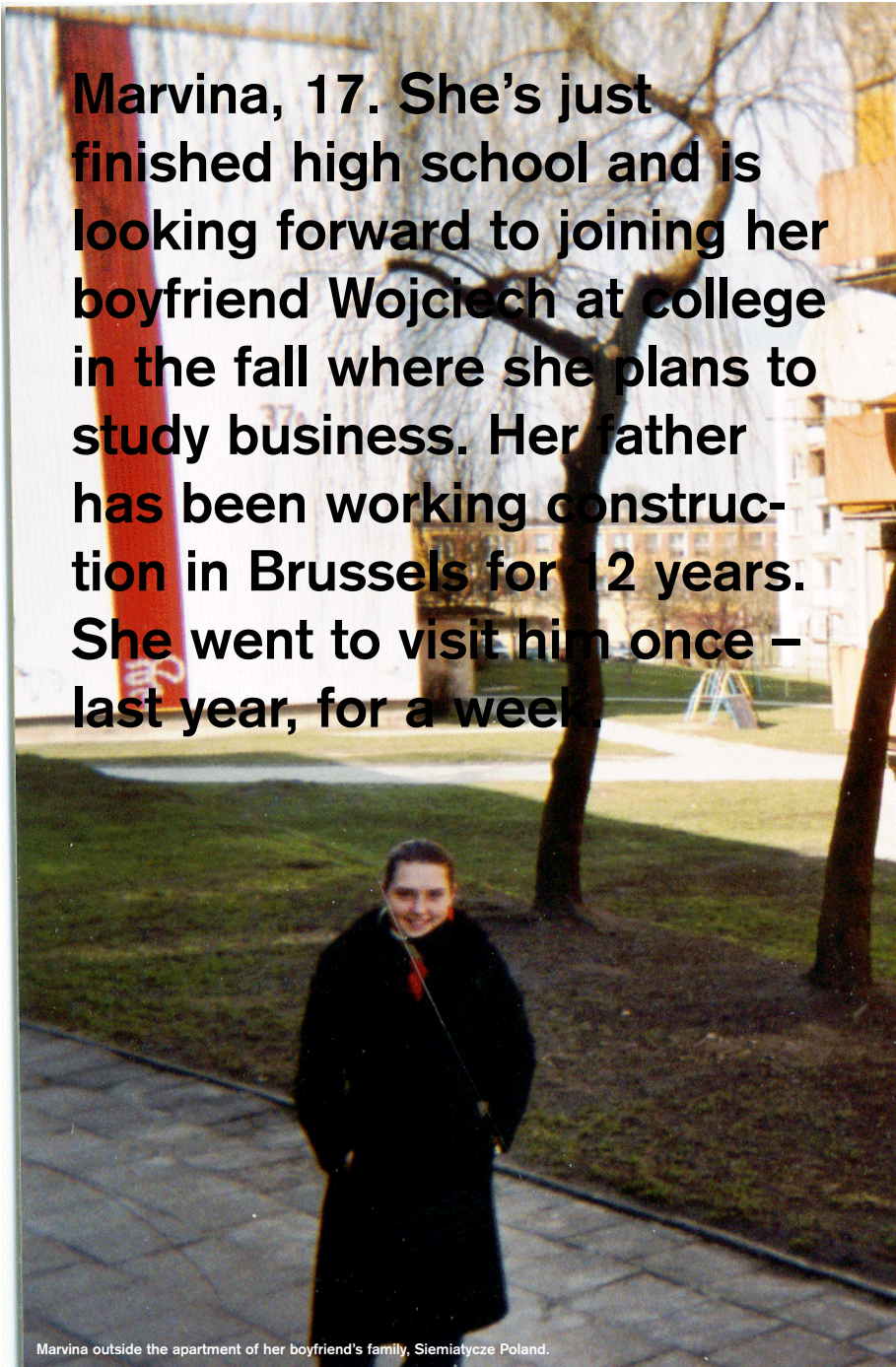
In the beginning it was members of ten families who went to Brussels for work. These early connections provided the base from which grew a social network that now accommodates an estimated 3,000 to perhaps 6,000 of the town's citizens (it's never been officially tallied). These ties connect migrants, former migrants, and non-migrants in a broad pattern of interdependence spanning eastern and western europe.

During the difficult period of the early 90s, the local bus system PKS Siemiatycze (state-owned and facing bankruptcy) began offering routes to Brussels for the growing number of town residents who were capitalizing on the relaxed Belgian government's position toward illegal workers. It was the director of PKS Siemiatycze, Zbigniew Radomski, who began the international route. Today Radomski is mayor of Siemiatycze and PKS offers weekly international service to England, Belgium, Belarus and Lithuania, making it one of the most successful bus companies in Poland.

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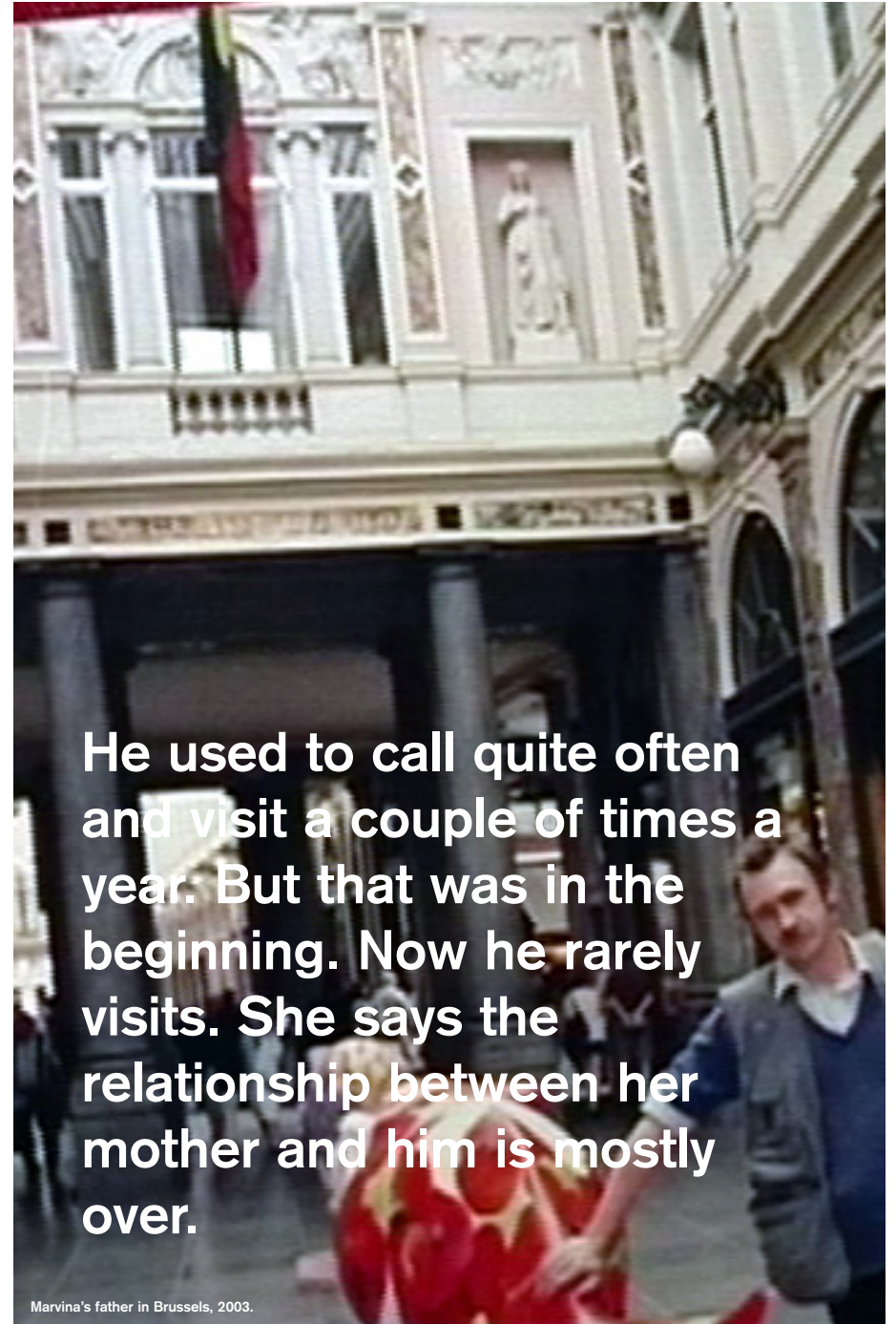
**Marvina, 17. She's just finished high school and is looking forward to joining her boyfriend Wojciech at college in the fall where she plans to study business. Her father has been working construction in Brussels for 12 years. She went to visit him once – last year, for a week.**



Marvina outside the apartment of her boyfriend's family, Siemiatycze Poland.

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**He used to call quite often and visit a couple of times a year. But that was in the beginning. Now he rarely visits. She says the relationship between her mother and him is mostly over.**



Marvina's father in Brussels, 2003.

Labor migration can be seen from two distinct perspectives: those who take a top down perspective (the economists, employers, politicians and others) who see it as the maximization of profit through the mobilization of cheap labor. And then there is the view from the people involved in the labor migration and for whom it is a bottom up perspective of differing levels of viability which offer the possibility for solving economic problems.<sup>1</sup> These positions are further colored by the point of the migratory stream at which they occur; sending, transit or receiving country.

For countries such as Poland, labor migration has been a response to the bankruptcy of local factories and collective farms that resulted from the disintegration of the national economy in the late 80s and early 90s. As the economies of the countries from the former Soviet bloc later stabilized, international flows of migrants provided continued relief for high unemployment as well as accessibility to markets and goods otherwise unavailable. It also helped to spawn a stair-step migratory flow of its own as people from countries further east came west to find work in cities and towns like Siemiatycze for wages native inhabitants could not, or would not, consider viable. In this way, the conditions that initiate international movement may be quite different from those that perpetuate it as new conditions that arise in the course of migration come to function as independent causes themselves.

Poles looking for illegal work enter Belgium on three-month tourist visas. They work for months or years at a time, separated from their families, returning home on holiday a few times a year to see their spouses and children. During the past 15 years they have been on the lowest socio-economic level in Belgium, living cheaply and sharing flats. Yet when they return to Poland they buy new cars, build new homes, send their kids to college, and some even begin their own businesses. They are better off. In this context, their mobility is a kind of economic freedom - it helps them make ends meet in their hometown where there are few options for earning money and supporting their

families. They have taken the opportunity to capitalize on the incongruities and imbalances between countries on an individual level with the lower cost of living in Poland making their labor more marketable in the west.

Though the initial intention is often that of a temporary relocation, many migrants become long-term settlers. Migratory networks develop, linking areas of origin and destination, and these informal networks generate huge flows of money and people. Most everyone in Siemiatycze has either worked in Brussels themselves or knows someone in their family who has. There are 2,100 registered Poles in Brussels, but there are estimates that 35,000 Poles (most from the country's northeast where Siemiatycze is located), live and work there.

The Social Law Inspection Service in Belgium, which inspects 15,000 firms a year, estimates that 40% of Belgian firms use illegal labor. Of the developed western countries, Belgium has one of the highest incidences of shadow economy activity. Greece, Italy, Belgium and Sweden, which had the largest shadow economies in 1996, also had the highest tax and social security burden respectively 72.3%, 72.9%, 76.0% and 78.6%. Taxes, social security, and insurance costs double an employee's costs, which for small firms are enough to push them into the informal economy. Jobs exist for illegal migrants because employers do not change these hiring practices very readily while 'established' or legal immigrants are capable of finding better paying, more secure jobs outside of the shadow economy.

In November 2003, The Belgian government proposed to make foreign aid conditional on cooperation from migrant-sending countries to reduce illegal migration. This is one way countries exert 'discrete' migration controls through policy decisions - linking economic assistance and good relations to (in this case, Poland's) effective regulation of international migration.

**Cezary, 30. He and his father started the CEZAR Restaurant and Pension a couple of years ago with money his father had earned in Brussels doing construction. He doesn't speak English. In the past year he's been quoted in at least 3 international news articles about Siemiatycze. It's a hot topic these days with Poland recently joining the EU. His business does ok. According to the BBC, he's hopeful that Poland will change for the better, the Nation and World says that he believes EU membership is Poland's best way forward. Cezary even met the Ambassador of Belgium when he came to Siemiatycze in March of 2004. The local paper, 'Glos Siemiatycze' carried a photo of the two of them in the bar.**

“A lot of Belgians exploit them.”

“A lot of diplomats exploit them and they are the ones who make the laws against them... with their nannies that they don't pay properly.”

-Brussels Resident

Cezary and the Belgian Ambassador. Cezar Restaurant, Siemiatycze Poland.

Radomski was elected Mayor of Siemiatycze with an unusually high percentage of the vote. He was expected to do for the community what he did for the PKS bus company. He is very positive about the growth of Siemiatycze and speaks of the nurturing business environment they have developed. Officially, the perception is that the migration is a very positive development and that it will take care of everything. During the Belgian Ambassador's visit to Siemiatycze on invitation from the Mayor. Radomski discussed with him the development of a sister city in Belgium for Siemiatycze. The proposal is for the San Gilles district of Brussels to be that sister city. This district is also the area in Brussels where the Polish immigrants live.

Przemyslaw Golanski, a local journalist for the Gazeta Wspolczesna, says that Siemiatycze doesn't develop directly because of the people working in Belgium. "Although it's easy to see nice villas, they're just for a few people and not for everyone. It's actually rather poor in Siemiatycze and the city does very little for its own citizens. There is no sport hall, no indoor swimming pool like in similar towns nearby, and instead it's the citizens who are doing something for the town because of the money they bring back." And as for the Belgian Ambassador, Przemyslaw made jokes that it was really more of a comedy with people greeting him in traditional clothing with salt and bread, singing folk songs; "when more or less it looks like he really just came here to ask if it's possible to stop this migration."

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As the numbers of labor migrants grow in any one area, so too does the demand for additional services to support them abroad. Hence the transportation boom in Siemiatycze of buses and mini-vans that transport people and cargo between the two locales. Sought after products include Polish sausages, bread and alcohol plus commodities like Polish language videotapes, newspapers and magazines, all of which travel into Brussels. What returns to Poland is clothing and furniture (used and often found for free) for use in Siemiatycze or to be sold in neighboring cities where “people don’t know where it came from.” When asked about the use of formal means of remitting earnings back to Poland, a current resident of Siemiatycze replied, “Of course we don’t really trust Western Union, we trust friends.” And that is how the money is often transferred, given to a driver with the understanding that it will make it to its destination the next day and “sometimes as a commission you can buy him a bottle of whiskey.”



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**“Of course we  
don’t really trust  
Western Union,  
we trust friends.”**  
-Siemiatycze Resident



“Belgians think Siemiatycze must be a really big city because everyone seems to be from here.”

-Siemiatycze Resident

Social norms reorganize around the labor migration where, for example, a single family member will work abroad for long periods of time supporting an unemployed spouse and children back home. In Siemiatycze it is often the women in the family who travel away from the family for extended periods of time as it is the mothers and grandmothers who find relatively well paid work more easily in 'feminine' jobs such as housekeepers in Brussels than the men find construction or similar laborer positions.

Retiree, 77. His wife has been working in Brussels for five years. He's been to visit her eight times, most recently with their three grandchildren. She works as a housekeeper but according to him, plans to return to Siemiatycze soon. Until a few years ago he also worked in the US, but he has no interest in working in Brussels. What would he do there?

The mobility Siemiatycze residents have, however, also divides families and community. Often single parents or other relatives raise the children for much of the year while their family members are in Brussels and this has led to higher levels of teenage drug abuse and problems with the police.

Bi-national or mixed marriages between Poles and Belgians are another outcome of the Siemiatycze migration. These marriages provide legal residency to the Polish spouse that in turn allows him, or more often her, the legal right to work in Belgium. From a small survey of Siemiatycze residents, it's acknowledged that these marriages, though difficult, are genuinely for love. Last April, not long after the Belgian Ambassador's visit to Siemiatycze, Mayor Radomski himself travelled to Brussels on an unofficial trip to attend his granddaughter's first communion.

The growth of Siemiatycze over the past 15 years is most visible in the new neighborhoods sometimes referred to as 'Little Belgium.' Here, single-family homes, duplexes and the occasional small business have appeared out of the money earned abroad. It's estimated that more than 30 million euros have been brought back to Siemiatycze over the years.<sup>2</sup> This is a lot of money in a place where the minimum wage is barely above 1 euro an hour and 40% of the dwellings only recently acquired sewer and gas service. Officially, unemployment in Siemiatycze is 7,8%, probably the lowest in Poland where it usually averages 20%. Land prices are said to be the highest in the region. Business in the transportation sector is doing well with a number of new companies registered in the past few years, plus there's all the unofficial transport companies operating too. Building materials, construction, and second-hand clothing stores are businesses that have seen positive steps recently. But this can be deceiving.

Despite the rosy picture it is still incredibly hard to find a job. The unemployment rate is kept artificially low by the volume of people working off the books abroad and this of course impacts the town's tax revenues. A newly required VAT on building materials is already negatively impacting home building in the town. Zbigniew Pykalo, owner of a service shop that repairs mobile phones and sewing machines says, "I don't know how it happened, but in our country there is an opinion that Siemiatycze is vibrant and developing. Everyone knows that the majority

of people who work are working in Belgium and not working here. I can personally attest that in the last few years nothing has been happening. How can you talk about development and investment if I have fewer and fewer clients? People simply don't have money. If those who work illegally in Brussels came back here and went to the job office, the unemployment rate would jump to 30 percent. Year by year it's getting worse. The majority of the money earned goes to pay everyday bills."<sup>3</sup>

The labor migration as seen from above is double-edged. On the one hand, the migration of low-skilled workers eases the labor market and remittance payments have a positive impact on income, consumption and demand. On the other hand, the prospect of a significant youth brain drain is a serious challenge for Siemiatycze's economic and social development. Looking from the other direction, traveling to Brussels has been a relatively simple means to make ends meet. People invest in themselves; their houses, their cars, and their kid's education. The mobility provided by the transportation links has given them their economic freedom. Socially, the process takes a heavy toll as lives are split, families split and fears of deportation dictate behavior. Now it seems like it will all slowly come to an end. Joining the EU is everything many residents have wanted, as they will be able to work legally and openly throughout the EU. But it also means that their ability to secure employment that is as profitable as it has been over these past 15 years will be harder to come by as newer immigrants willing to work for even less erase the marketability of people from Siemiatycze.

<sup>1</sup>Teodor Shanin. From an Interview by Joanne Richardson and Regina Bittner. Moscow, March 25, 2004.

<sup>2</sup>Challenges for the National Migration Policy in the Context of the EU. Center for International Relations, Warsaw. 2003.

<sup>3</sup>Gazeta Współczesna. "No Such Miracle Again." Barbara Kociakowska and Przemyslaw Golanski. February 26, 2004.





# The Pessimist's Reality

Following the example of Portugal and Spain's accession to the EU in 1986, Poland's cost of living slowly rises to meet the standard expectations of EU membership. Over the next ten years in Siemiatycze, wages go up, as does unemployment. Funding from above streamlines infrastructure, but ultimately generates little growth in the town. The bright future has lost its sheen.

18 EU membership initiates migration flows of Poles, but this time of primarily the young and well-educated who leave in search of careers in larger cities in Poland and the EU; a journey made all the more easy by the improved infrastructure to the rest of Europe. Those who are in Belgium, no longer have problems with deportation as they are now legal EU citizens, but their jobs as housekeepers and construction workers are more difficult to find and hold onto as 'Russians' (read Ukrainians, Belorussians, etc.) take over the market working for one quarter of the wages the Polish earn. As a result, many who were living abroad return to make their home in Siemiatycze once again.

Going to Brussels is no longer a viable option for the chronically unemployed, or the semi-skilled workers that fifteen plus years of 'transition' have generated. The cost of living increases have erased their marketability as high quality, low-wage labor in Belgium and their legal working status makes them twice as expensive to hire with the attendant taxes and insurance costs.

Ultimately little changes in Siemiatycze. The town stagnates in its dependency on the state for revenue and the citizens are unable to find viable alternatives as simple and lucrative as Brussels once used to be. It becomes a quieter, sadder town populated primarily by those who are retired and living off their pensions and those who receive unemployment benefits from the state.

# The Optimist's Dream

Always the innovators, Siemiatycze citizens create another agent for themselves, this time focused on the untapped resource of the large number of families of 'mixed' Belgian-Polish marriages who live in Belgium. Capitalizing on their cultural heritage and the Polish diaspora, Siemiatycze residents forge family business connections with their relatives in Belgium, managing and developing markets for the production of Polish goods and services.

The supply side is coordinated in Siemiatycze and their city becomes a manufacturing and distribution center for locally produced organic sausages, cream and pirogi, as well as nationally produced Polish language services and commodities. Exports flow along newly constructed highways and rail lines to Belgium, and when needed through Belgium's under-utilized sea port in Antwerp to other countries with large Polish communities.

19 For a short time the food manufacturers in Siemiatycze raise local wages, as competition for semi-skilled laborers becomes tight with twice as many processing plants in town - that is until the Belorussians and Ukrainians really begin to arrive, willing to work longer hours for less pay, off-the-books. There is tension, but eventually the majority of Poles move into white-collar positions created by the growing number of nearby distributors and management companies. The local farmers band together to create a consensus-based farming collective to keep up with demand for their organic products and - much to the dismay of the EU CAPs program, to bargain for better agricultural legislation in their favor.

From their early adoption of French and English in the 1990s, the youth of Siemiatycze are later sought as adults to be translators and teachers in many communities. The language schools in Siemiatycze grow large and prestigious among eastern Europeans and draw academics from Russia and the US who theorize about the roots of the alphabetic border - latin and Cyrillic - that sits only 30km to the east. Siemiatycze is home to some of the best-loved Polish dubbing actors, who thrive in the local Polish film and video industries - one of the many spin-off businesses associated with a culture distribution point like this one. And for many Polish-Americans, Polish-Italians and Polish-Belgians, Siemiatycze is a brand that comes to mean 'The Real Poland.'