

The Orcadian catches up with health board's recruits from Poland

Dentists settle in to a new life in Orkney

'I was looking for a different challenge,' says Bogna

The Iron Curtain has lifted in more ways than one for a Polish dentist currently working in Orkney.

For Bogna Poczekaj-Ryszczuk, going to work could be fraught with danger, with convicted criminals, handcuffed and watched over by guards, her patients.

Now she has the idyllic harbour setting of Stromness to look out on and state-of-the-art facilities — a far cry from the concrete and barbed wire of the prison walls of Vronki, Poland's largest jail with 1,500 "residents".

"It was a strange place and part of the reason I am here. It was stressful. I didn't want to know what the prisoner had done," she said.

But it was actually thanks to a relaxing holiday in Turkey that swung her decision to move to Orkney.

"It was a spontaneous decision," she said. "I was in Turkey, lying on a beach, and I thought I would like to change something in my life to challenge myself, to have an adventure; to see another place. "We had been living behind the Iron Curtain, now I thought, 'I have a chance to do something with my life'."

Bogna arrived in the country to start work at the Garson Dental Clinic in Stromness in April — the end result of a successful national recruitment scheme to attract Polish dentists to Scotland.

Prior to coming to the country, she spent two months



Bogna Poczekaj-Ryszczuk, left, and dental nurse, Sheila Sinclair, at the Garson Dental Clinic.

in the UK, based in Dundee for an induction course, where she, and 13 others, were shown different dental techniques used in this country.

"I had heard about Orkney as being a beautiful place, full of nature and archaeological sites."

Previous to that, her only visit to Scotland was ten years

ago, to Edinburgh, for about a month.

Now she has been working with Orkney patients for a month, she has been able to assess the main differences.

Whereas people in the UK are given the information to allow them to make an informed choice about their treatment, Bogna said the availability on the NHS in Poland is more restrictive.

"Patients in Poland do not pay for NHS treatments, it is all free, but we are much more limited in what is available. If you want a crown, then you would have to go private.

"The hygiene here is much better and there are less people smoking cigarettes."

Bogna, who is from the tiny village of Orliczko, which has a population of just 100, also ran her own private clinic.

But the money dentists earn in Poland is still a third of what the NHS salary is in this country and the Polish pension is inadequate.

"The cost of living in this country is much higher so it tends to even itself out," Bogna explained.

Her partner, retired policeman, Stas Senator, has stayed at their Polish home to look after their three rescue dogs — Bogna's "babies" — but they plan to visit each other several times a year, and he is actually in Orkney at the moment.

With the help of Orkney's chief administrative dental officer, Moya Nelson, Bogna has managed to find a property to rent in Dundas Street and bought a car.

But she has several more Orkney ambitions up her sleeve.

"I want to learn to make the special Orkney chairs — that is my dream. There is one in the house where I live. I also like to dance and would like to learn the traditional Orkney dances."

With a permanent contract with NHS Orkney — much to Moya's relief — Bogna says she is even thinking of buying a small house in the country.

She is prepared for the difference of what her money will buy her here in comparison to back in Poland, where everything is much cheaper.

"For example, my house, which is in a very nice place beside a lake, cost about £54,000 — here it would cost £300,000."

There are no language barriers for Bogna, who speaks almost fluent English, after learning the language at school as a child.

While the dentist is relishing her new found home, Moya is delighting in a successful recruitment programme, which is helping to alleviate the dental shortage in the country.

However, Moya stressed that the situation will not be rectified overnight.

"This is making a big difference to the dentists here already; they can see light at the end of the tunnel. We have a huge backlog at the moment so it will be 2007 before we come out of the woods.

Moya added: "It cheers the whole team up, morale goes up when you think you will really be able to make a difference."

Bogna said the welcome she had received in Orkney had been second to none.

"The staff have all been so nice. Myself and my partner have been welcomed with open arms."

More dentists to come — NHS boss

Orkney's chief administrative dental officer, Moya Nelson is delighted that Michal and Bogna are happy here, and is delighted with their progress.

She said: "I think they have settled in very well. They certainly seem to be taking to the job and their patients. Feedback from the patients is that they are delighted, even just to be able to come to see

a dentist. "It's difficult for the dentists who are here too — all you need is one to be ill to upset the whole thing.

"We'll be getting a couple more in August.

"One's a fellowship dentist, who should be here for three years.

"The other is a vocational dental practitioner, who will be here for a year."

Michal can't wait to bring his family over

"The teeth are the same, and the illnesses are the same, but the facilities here are better."

This is the view of Michal Meszka, who has been working at Kirkwall's Station Dental Practice for over a month now.

The 28-year-old is enjoying finding his feet in Orkney, and looks forward to welcoming his wife, Anetta, and two boys, three-year old Filip, and two-year-old Maciej, who are still in Gdansk, in Poland.

He hopes they will join him in Orkney by July, and admits he misses them terribly.

"I spend a lot of time talking to them on the computer, or on the phone sometimes. I speak to them every day.

"They were here for ten days for a quick visit to see what they had to look forward to. They really enjoyed it."

Michal came to Orkney through a national recruitment scheme to attract Polish dentists to Scotland.

Along with Bogna Poczekaj-Ryszczuk, who is stationed in Stromness, he was part of a second group of ten dentists to be trained in Poland and recruited to work in Scotland.

It was hard work, admits Michal, who had to learn more than most trainees, despite having obtained a degree from Gdansk Medical University, and having four years experience on the job.

He says he decided to come to the UK because he knew the dental profession here was "more experienced."

"There was a lot of advertising in newspapers to come and work in the UK," he explained.

"There was an interview in the UK, and an English exam and then after that we visited Orkney and had an interview here.

"I had an English exam in Warsaw. It was very good

preparation for working here. We had to do some language and some treatment skills, and some new behaviour skills, and because people are different and habits are different.

"There are different forms of treatment, and we had to learn," he added.

In comparison to practising back in Poland, Michal says that working in Orkney is in a different class.

He said: "It's different. The standard of the facilities here is high-class. It is the best that you can have."

"The teeth are the same, the illnesses are the same, but the facilities here are better. Compared to Polish services, that standard here is much higher."

Michal admits that working an 8am to 5pm day is a different routine for him — Polish dentists would either start or finish work in the afternoon — but he has still found time to socialise, and see the sights, taking up cycling as a means of getting around.

"It's nothing like I imagined here. People are very friendly. I was on Hoy, and in Stromness — I've been almost everywhere on the Mainland, and I'm looking forward to seeing more of the islands.

"I have almost joined the sailing club. I'm going to do the sailing training. It is very nice of them to take me in," he added.

After only a short time in the county, Michal is certain that he will enjoy living here with his family.

He said: "I think I will stay here for a long time. I was hoping it would be a good place to bring up the children."

Michal is very grateful to all the staff from the Orkney Health Board and the team at the Station Dental Clinic.



Michal Meszka, with Orkney chief administrative dental officer, Moya Nelson. (Pictures: Kenny Pirie)