

# CARBO

# LAND



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# CARBOLAND. THE HISTORY OF POLES EMIGRATING TO WORK IN COAL MINES IN FRANCE AND BELGIUM IN 1919-1939

**C**arboland is an imaginary land of coal and the world of eternal work, a symbolic description of the places to which more than half a million Polish citizens went 100 years ago. Tempted by the promise of employment in the rich mining industry, they went with the hope of a large income and quick return to the country. However, the slow pace of development of reborn Poland and the associated risks convinced them to stay and build family life in mining cities and mining colonies.

The exhibition presents over 350 objects: photos, documents and everyday objects related to Poles working in the northern region of France, Nord-Pas-de-Calais, and in the eastern part of Belgium – industrial centres employing the highest number of Poles. Although emigration to France was much greater than to Belgium (over 600 000 people), the fate of nearly 40 000 Polish workers employed in the Belgian industry could not be overlooked in the exhibition.

The history presented in the exhibition is a universal story about the search for a safe place, about the common need for having one's own home, family and a dignified life among friendly people. It is also an inseparable part of our joint experience, so important because it is still valid. We hope that the exhibition will also give us a better understanding of the motivations behind today's generations moving to find a safe place, including those hundreds of thousands

of immigrants looking for the opportunity of a better life in Poland.

Maksymilian Bochenek  
curator

# THE COAL POL

**D**uring the First World War, France lost around 1 700 000 citizens, and over 4 000 000 more people were injured. In the north-eastern regions, 32 000 factories and mines, 4 800 kilometres of railway tracks and 8 000 residential buildings were destroyed. French industry needed an inflow of foreign workers, as did neighbouring Belgium. Increasing global coal demand stimulated the development of the coal industry in Europe.

## IN HUNGER AND MISERY

After 1918, Poland was struggling with many economic and social problems. Strong demographic growth slowed down the stabilization of the recovering economy. The majority of Polish society lived in villages in great poverty. For the authorities, emigration presented the solution to many problems. On 3 September 1919, Poland and France signed a bilateral convention on emigration and immigration in Warsaw. For the diplomacy of the Second Polish Republic,

this was a pioneering text; France had ratified similar international agreements regulating the influx of foreign workers also with Italy (30 September 1919), Yugoslavia (30 January 1920) and Czechoslovakia (20 March 1920).

## DIPLOMATIC WARRANTIES

The 1919 Polish-French Convention legally regulated the mass movement of labour between the two countries based on equal rights. The signatories agreed to the equal treatment of workers in the areas of labour protection, remuneration and leave as well as accident compensation. Although the Convention was based on freedom of migration, it allowed for the possibility of restricting it depending on the economic situation. France negotiated the exclusive right to select candidates on Polish territory. The document did not mention education or pastoral care in exile and did not regulate the issue of pension and retirement insurance. This gap was filled by subsequent agreements – the convention

of 14 October 1920 on social assistance and welfare and the agreement of 21 December 1929 regulating insurance in the mining industry.

Poland failed to obtain a diplomatic agreement with Belgium on the protection and employment of workers. Belgian authorities considered mass economic emigration from Poland as a temporary phenomenon and did not want to accept legally binding commitments. Workers were employed based on one-year contracts.

# RE- CRU-

# ITMENT

**D**uring the interwar period, economic emigration from Poland was closely dependent on the needs of Western European industry. In both Belgium and France, the mining sector was especially interested in the steady flow of new workforce. It was caused by the global demand for black gold.

## HUMAN RESOURCES

The body supervising the recruitment campaign in Poland was the French Employment Mission, and later, since 1924, the Central Immigration Association (CTI) uniting associations of French employers. The pre-selection was carried out by the Polish employment offices (PUPP), using guidelines on the potential workers France provided to the Polish Ministry of Labour. A candidate for miner could not be more than 45 years old and only *the completely healthy ones* were accepted. The selection was made by a French commission and then qualified workers were sent to rallying points. The first such stations were opened in Warsaw and Poznań, and later in Mysłowice and Wejherowo.

## FIGHT FOR JOB

Administrative formalities related to the trip were completed at the rallying points in Mysłowice and Wejherowo. They were overcrowded and the sanitation was low. Before the journey, all emigrants underwent a medical check-up, and women additionally had a gynaecological examination to exclude possible pregnancy. Strict selection by French doctors led to choosing the healthiest candidates. On average, around 10–20% of candidates were rejected. Once qualified, the emigrant underwent sanitary

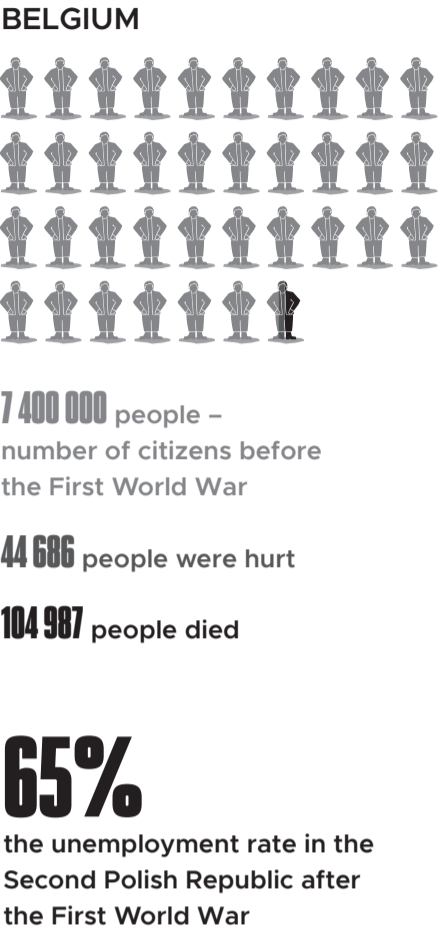
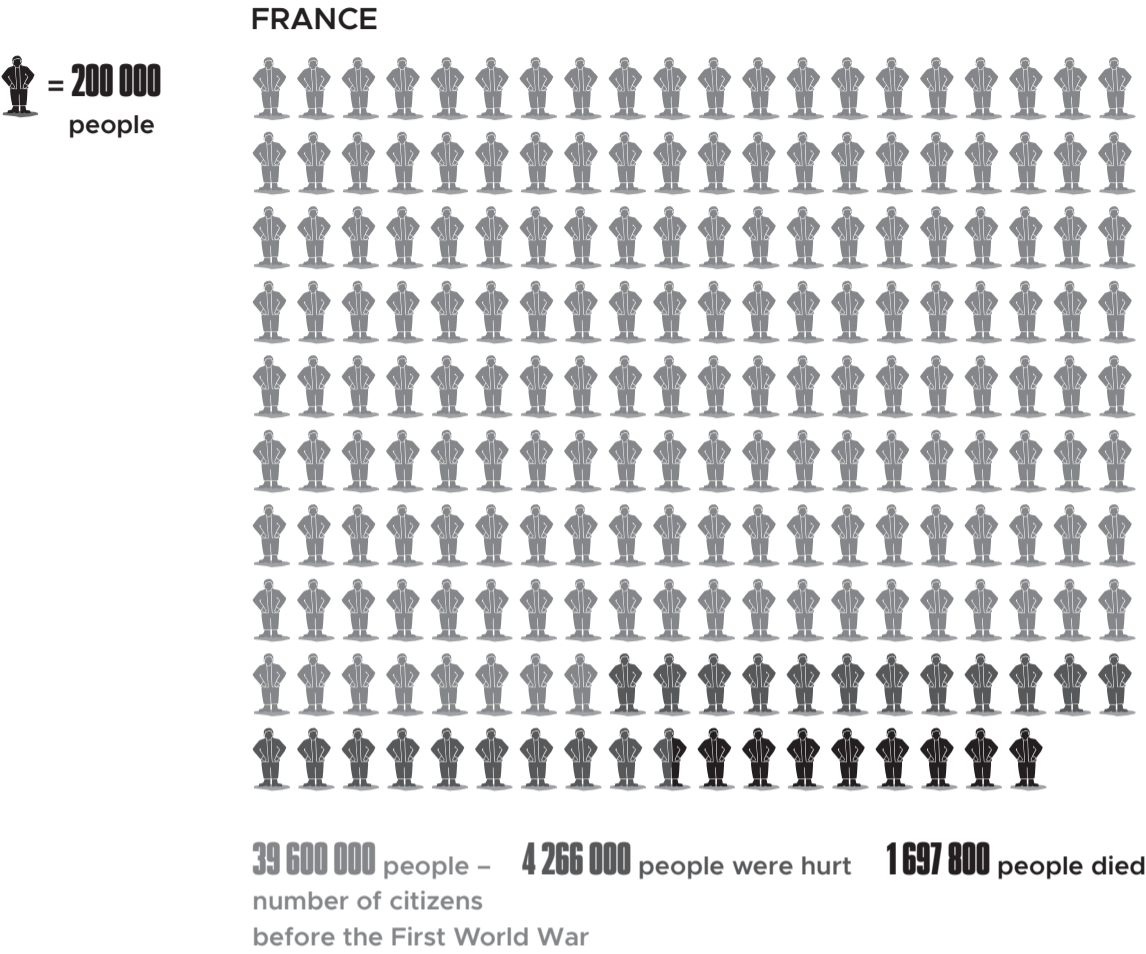
procedures such as disinfection of clothes and bathing. Then he signed a contract of employment (in four copies) and received a passport.

## CONTRACTS

Going to France with a signed contract of employment was safe. The model form for such a contract prepared under the 1919 convention was different for each industry. It precisely defined the terms of employment and mutual obligations of both parties. It specified the duration of the contract (1 year), working hours (8 hours a day) and days off, salary and additional benefits. The employer undertook to provide the employee with permanent employment, housing, medical care and travel expenses. The employment contract for a Polish miner in Belgium was also signed for one year and guaranteed conditions similar to France. However, the lack of diplomatic regulations allowed local Belgian employers to freely interpret their mutual obligations.

After one year, each worker could decide to extend the contract, but there were serious sanctions for leaving the workplace before the expiry of 12 months, such as the return of the deposit, deportation, financial penalties. This caused many disappointments when it turned out that hard work in the mine was beyond the strength of many emigrants.

Loss in population in France and Belgium and the unemployment rate in the Second Polish Republic after the First World War



**Source**  
Own study based on data from: Nadège Mougel, World War I casualties [online], <http://www.centre-robert-schuman.org>, tr. Julie Gratz, Centrum Roberta Schumana, 2011 [access: 1 February 2020]

Occupational structure of Polish workers in France and Belgium before 1932

**FRANCE**



**BELGIUM**



**Source**  
Own study based on data from:  
Janowska H., Polska emigracja zarobkowa we Francji 1919-1939, Warszawa 1964, p. 113  
Dzwonkowski R., Polacy w Belgii w ostatnich pięćdziesięciu latach, 1974, Vol. 1, p. 14

## FROM MYSŁOWICE TO TOUL

Emigrants were transported collectively from the rallying points by road, through Germany and Czechoslovakia to Toul, or by sea, from Gdynia to the ports of Calais, Dunkirk or Le Havre. All rail transport from Poland to France headed towards the distribution station in Toul, Lorraine.

The land trip was long and exhausting; the 2 000 km route through two countries and three borders took 44 hours. The cost of travel and meals on the road was covered by the employer. A worker could take up to 30 kg of luggage on the train. The trains were accompanied by an escort representing the Central Immigration Society and a translator.

## DIFFICULT BEGINNINGS

After arriving in Toul, Polish workers went 3 km on foot to the barracks of the distribution station. The conditions prevailing there became deeply embedded in the newcomers' memories. *Everything was dirty, even the staff were dripping with sloppiness*, they complained. The language barrier also posed big obstacles. In Toul, further administrative formalities were completed: a re-examination, disinfection and vaccination. Workers were then sent by special trains to their destinations indicated by the French authorities. Upon arrival, each foreigner had 48 hours to

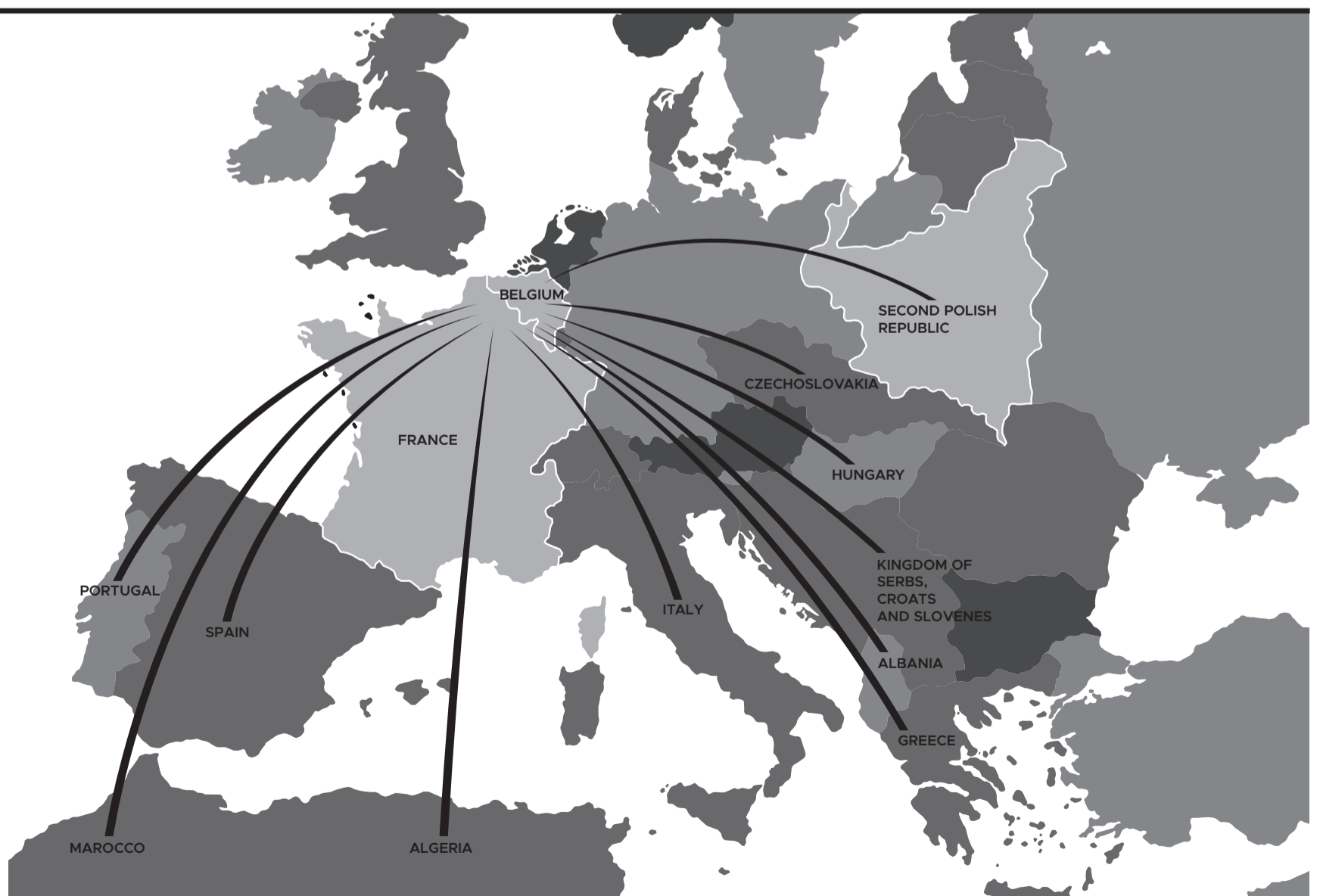
report to the municipal office (mayor) to register and apply for an ID card. Mines' administration completed these formalities for miners.

## WESTFALIANS

In the years 1920–1925, around 100 000 Polish citizens from the Ruhr region, the so-called Westfalians, ended up in French and Belgian mines. Under the Treaty of Versailles, they had to decide on their citizenship, and choosing the Polish option forced them to leave Germany. Economically weakened Poland was very afraid of this mass return. However, the 1919 convention did not regulate the issue of recruitment outside Poland. Industrialists, who wanted qualified miners, took advantage of the situation. French and Belgian mines eagerly employed Westfalians, offering them free transport of entire families and belongings. The motivation for the Westfalians' emigration was political, not economic. They came to Toul with Polish passports, where they signed one-year contracts with the mines. Compared to other Polish emigrants, the Westfalians were distinguished by a stable family situation, a high level of national awareness and great organizational skills. Thanks to them, many Polish associations were established in France and Belgium, as well as some newspapers with a tradition in Poland reaching the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

# DEPARTURE AND ARRIVAL

## Migrations to France and Belgium after the First World War



Polish migration routes to France in 1926



**Source**  
Own study based on data from:  
Salmon-Siama M., Cheminement des femmes polonaises en France au XXe siècle. Catalogue de l'exposition, Ed. Université de Lille, Lille 2014, pp. 6–7

Number of Poles arriving to France  
from the Second Polish Republic and Westphalia before 1932

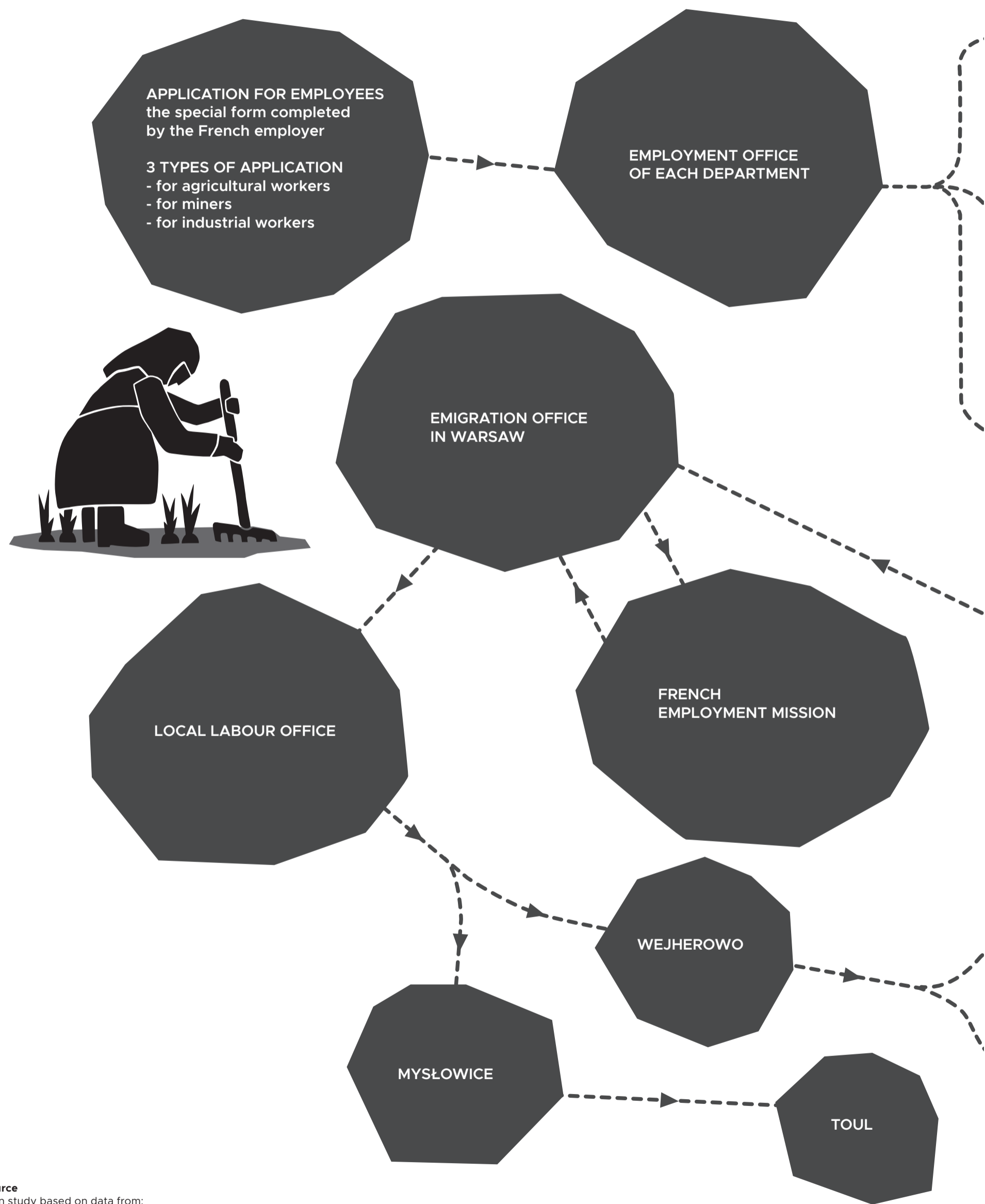
BEFORE 1932, OVER

530 000 POLES FROM THE SECOND  
POLISH REPUBLIC AND

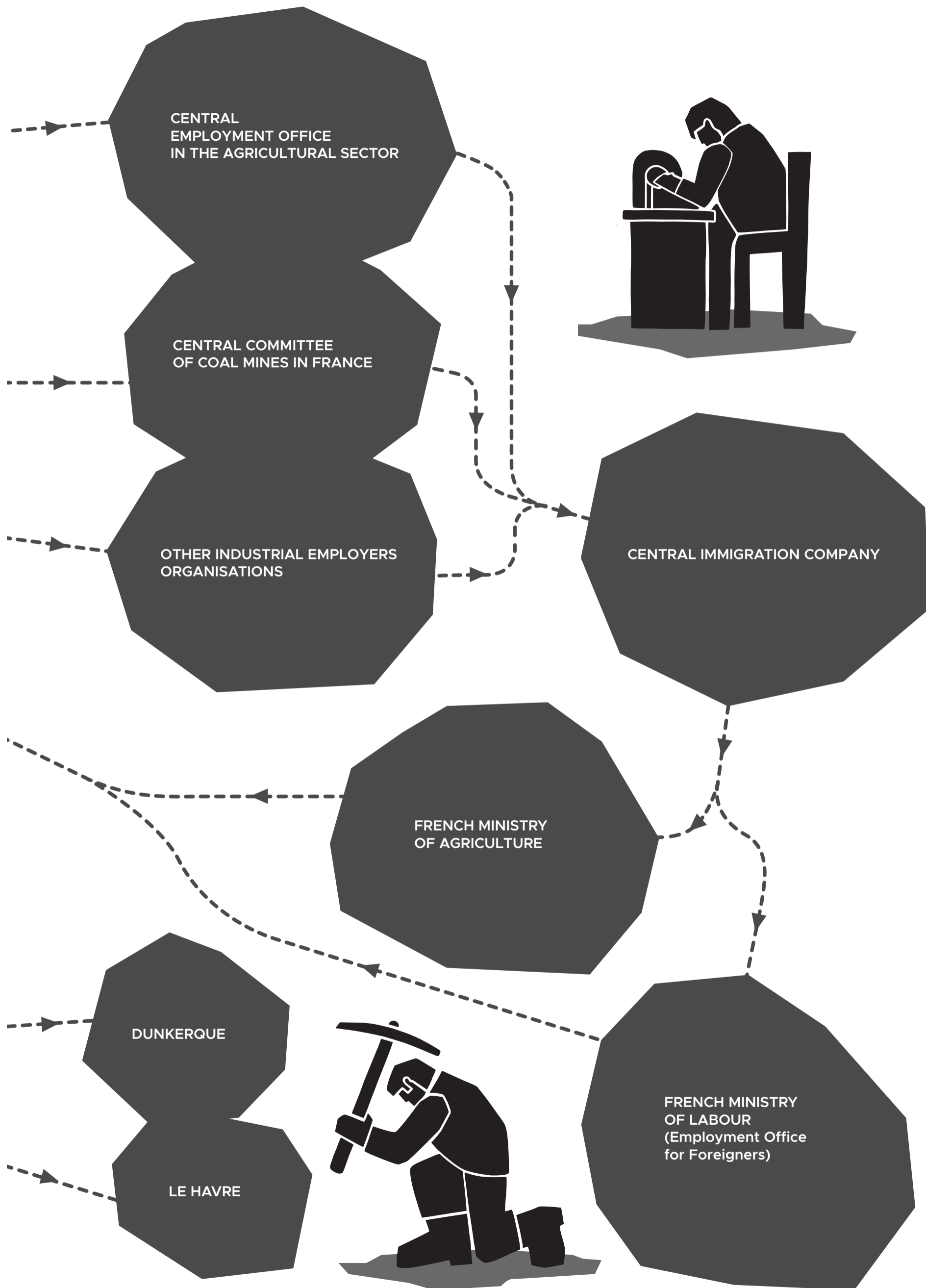
80 000–100 000 POLES FROM WESTPHALIA ARRIVED

TO FRANCE WITH THEIR FAMILIES TO WORK IN THE COAL MINES

**Source**  
Own study based on data from:  
Ponty J., Polonais Meconnus: histoire des travailleurs immigrés en France dans l'entre-deux-guerres, Publications de la Sorbonne, Paris 1988, p. 425.  
Dzwonkowski R., Polacy w Belgii w ostatnich pięćdziesięciu latach, *Studia Polonijne* 1974, Vol. 1, p. 8  
Gruszyński J., Społeczność polska we Francji, Warszawa 1981, p. 38



**Source**  
Own study based on data from:  
Ponty J., *Polonais Meconnus: histoire des travailleurs immigrés en France dans l'entre-deux-guerres*, Publications de la Sorbonne, Paris 1988, p. 78



The main centre of Polish immigration in France was the coal basin in northern France, in the Pas-de-Calais and Nord departments; 35–40% of all Poles living in France lived there and in 1931 there were 191 000 of them. Other areas with a strong concentration of Polish people included Lorraine-Alsatian, Parisian, Picardy-Champagne and central districts. In Belgium, the largest concentrations of Polish workers were established in the four mining provinces of the country: Limburg, Brabant, Liège and Hainaut. About 9 400 Poles were employed in the Mons, Centre, Charleroi, Namur and Liège coal basins. Almost everyone who lived there worked in the coal industry.

### COAL BASINS

In the years 1919–1939, in northern France, several private mining companies operated and employed miners of 29 nationalities, including Poles. Hoisting and transporting equipment dominated in the technical infrastructure. Each mine was divided into a ground part, serving logistic and coal processing purposes, and underground deposits from which the raw material was extracted. Only miners and supervising staff had access to the underground section through the cage elevator system. Working in French mines was generally very dangerous because of the hard-to-reach deposits that were unsuitable for mechanical exploitation. There were frequent landslides of rocks, cave-ins and floods. Workers complained about low work safety, poor infrastructure and hygiene (no showers or baths).

### WORKING PEOPLE

Poles constituted the largest percentage of workers employed underground; most of them came from the countryside. The first trip down into the mine was usually a shock. Over time, most workers got used to it, but there were also cases of desertion. Each newly employed miner was photographed and received an identification number. It was used to control the number of people working underground and their return to the surface. Despite progressing mechanization, traditional tools such as pickaxes, axes or saws were used to work the drift, while hammers and drills were used for drilling. The work of a miner-drifter in low-ceiling drifts, with poor lighting and high temperature, could break the most durable. They worked in shifts and on piecework. The amount of extracted raw material was the most important. Poles wanted to save money as quickly as possible, so they worked very diligently, setting high standards, which often caused friction with miners of other nationalities.

### EARNINGS

The Polish-French convention guaranteed Poles equal wages with the French or Belgians employed in the same sector. Regardless of the position held, all mine employees were subjected to the pressure of extraction volume. The underground career followed a 10-point promotion scale, but a Polish foreman (head of work forming part of the mining process) in French mines was rare. The average monthly earnings of Polish miners were 900–1000 francs. The remuneration was usually paid twice a month,

at intervals of up to 16 days (called ‘the fifteen’). The mining salary was sufficient to maintain the home and food for the family, but rarely for savings.

Polish miners’ sons rarely managed to abandon their fathers’ profession. French law allowed the employment of children from the age of 13 but limited their work to 10 hours a day. Juvenile miners started with above-ground activities, usually in the sorting plant.

### *Purchasing power of money in the Second Polish Republic and in France – the average salary of miners and the prices of basic food products in the 1930s.*

#### SECOND POLISH REPUBLIC



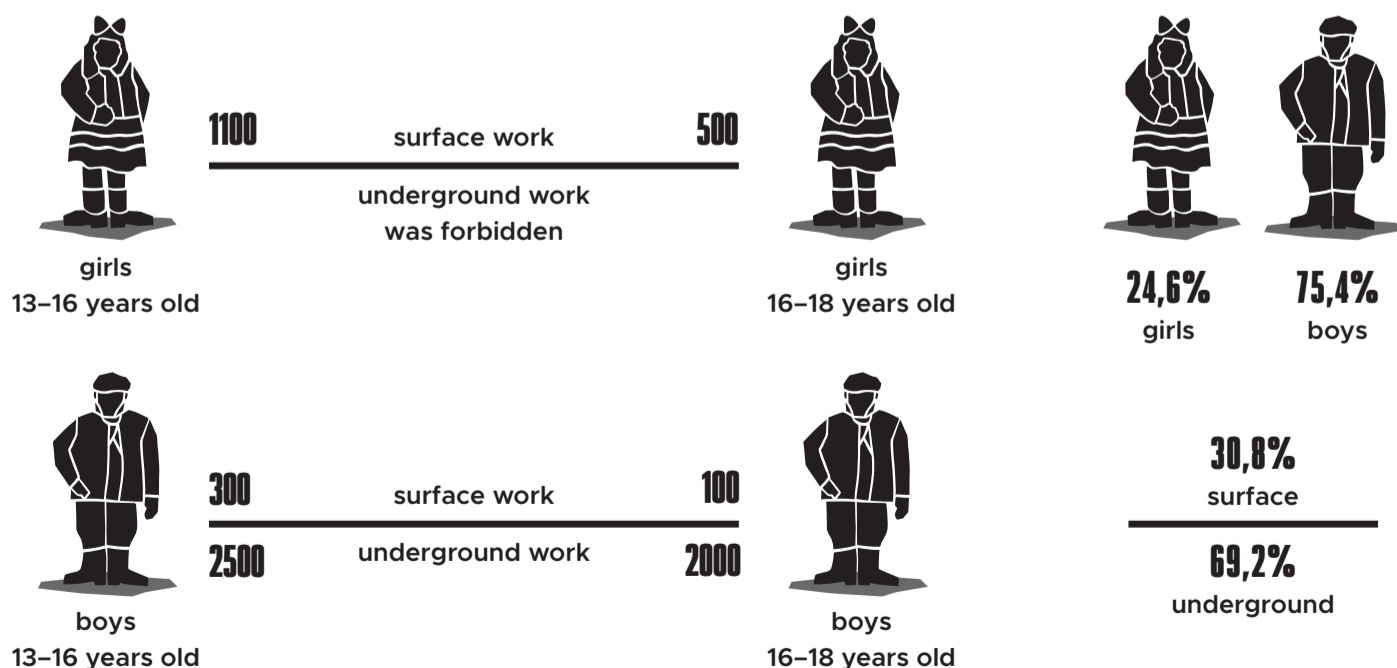
#### FRANCE



#### Source

Own study based on data from:  
Janowska H., Polska emigracja zarobkowa we Francji 1919-1939, Warszawa 1964, p. 147

### *Average number of children employed in the mines in 1927 on the example of the Nord-Pas-de-Calais region*



#### Source

Own study based on data from:  
Janowska H., Polska emigracja zarobkowa we Francji 1919–1939, Warszawa 1964, p. 137

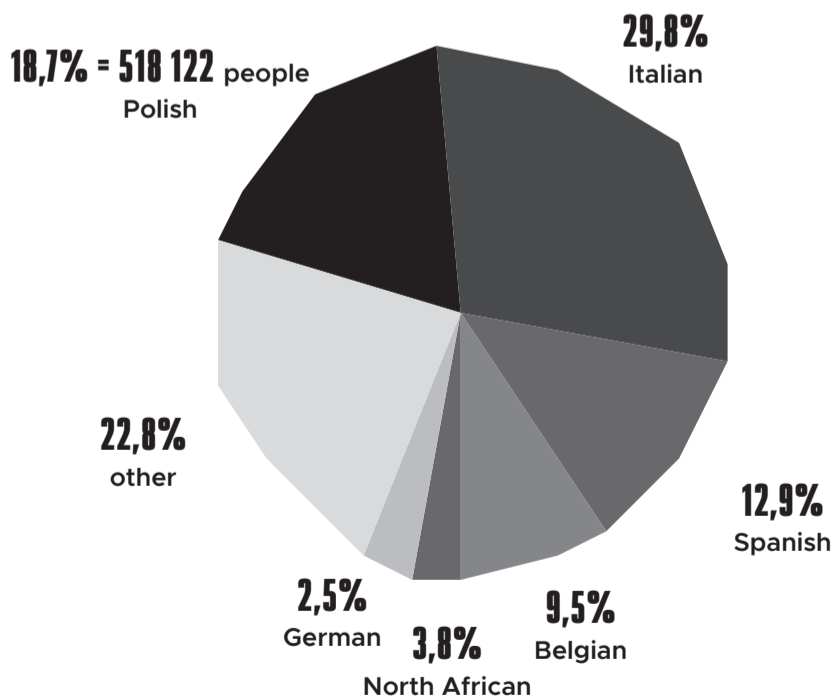
# WORK AND EMPLOYERS

The Nord-Pas-de-Calais region in France and the province of Limburg in Belgium

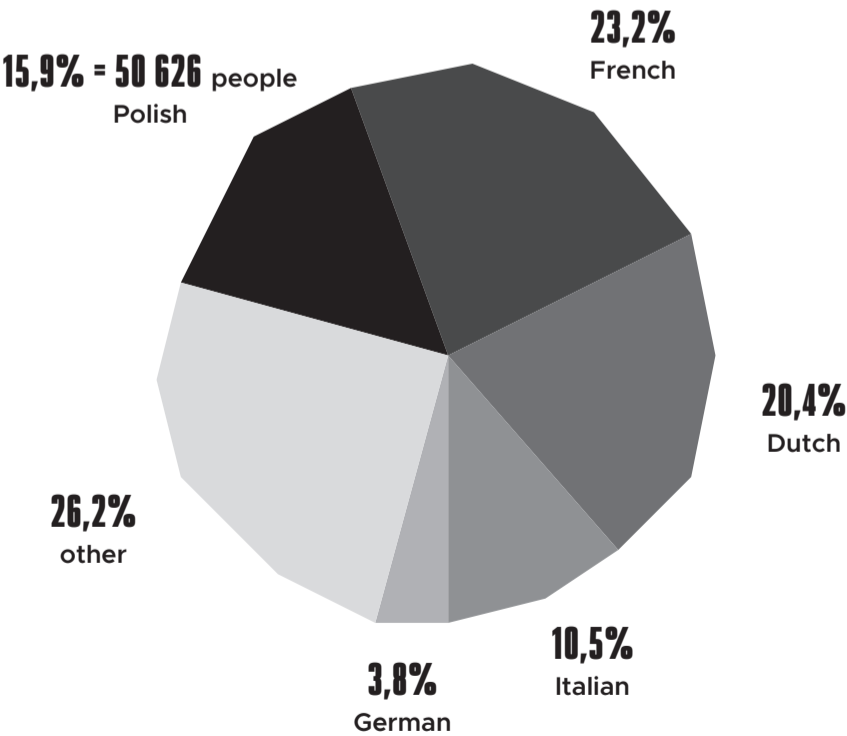


Poles and other minorities—the national composition of immigrants in France and Belgium before 1932

FRANCE



BELGIUM



Source  
Own study based on data from:  
Janowska H., Polska emigracja zarobkowa we Francji 1919-1939, Warszawa 1964, p. 109  
Eder W., Dzieje Polonii Belgijskiej, Wydawnictwo Epoka, Warszawa 1983, p. 4

**SAFETY**

From 1920, Polish workers in France had the right to social security, medical care and benefits guaranteed, which was extremely important given the high risk of fatal accidents in mining. Along with technological progress, increased attention was paid to safety issues and mining equipment was improved. Emergency teams were also organized. Despite this, knowledge of health and safety regulations remained insufficient due to the lack of sufficiently qualified staff, as well

as the lack of language skills. Mining management published dictionaries and information brochures in many languages, including Polish.

**MINER'S HEALTH**

Working underground was not good for the health of miners, not only because of the dust in the air and the limited space but also because of the ubiquitous humidity. Many miners died before reaching retirement age, mainly due to respiratory diseases. Aware of these devastating effects of

underground work, mine management provided miners and their families with medical care, built hospitals, clinics and sanatoriums. Silicosis was only officially recognized in France as an occupational disease of miners in 1946, although people working underground had been dying of it earlier. Widows and orphans of victims of mining accidents had the right to benefits. They also received help from support funds run by Polish diaspora organizations.

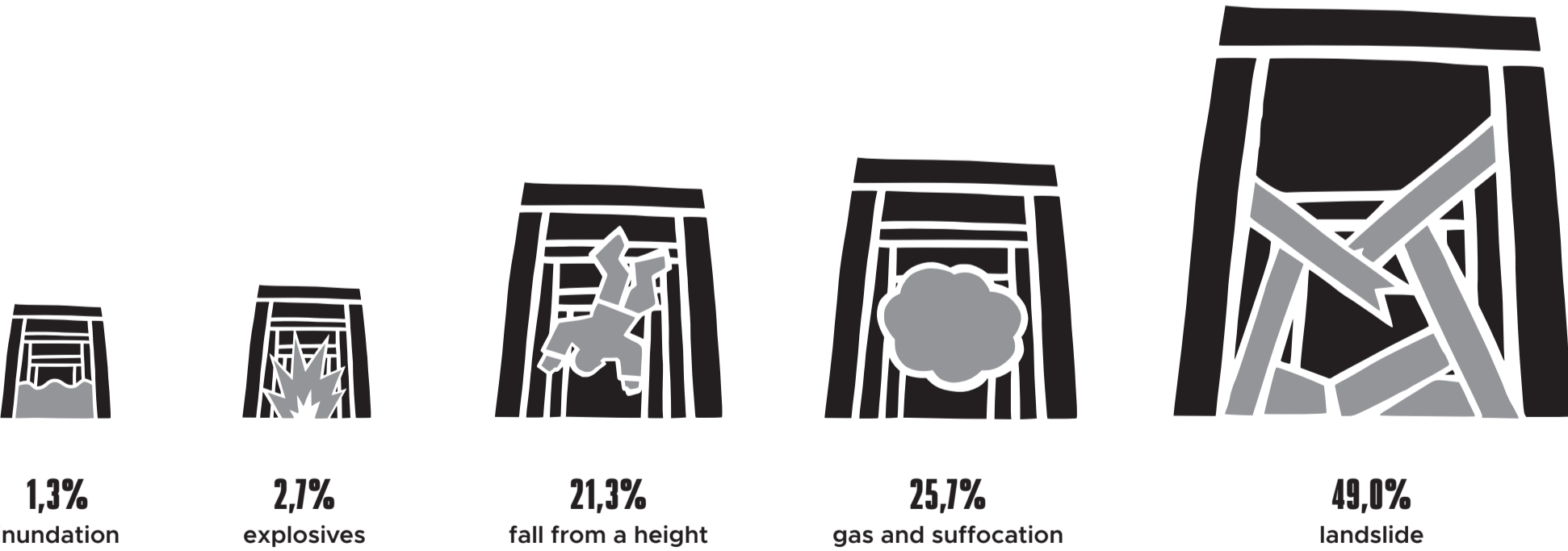
*Mortality rates of miners in France and Belgium in 1921–1939 and causes of accidents based on data from Belgium*

ON AVERAGE

10 ON 10 000 MINERS DIED

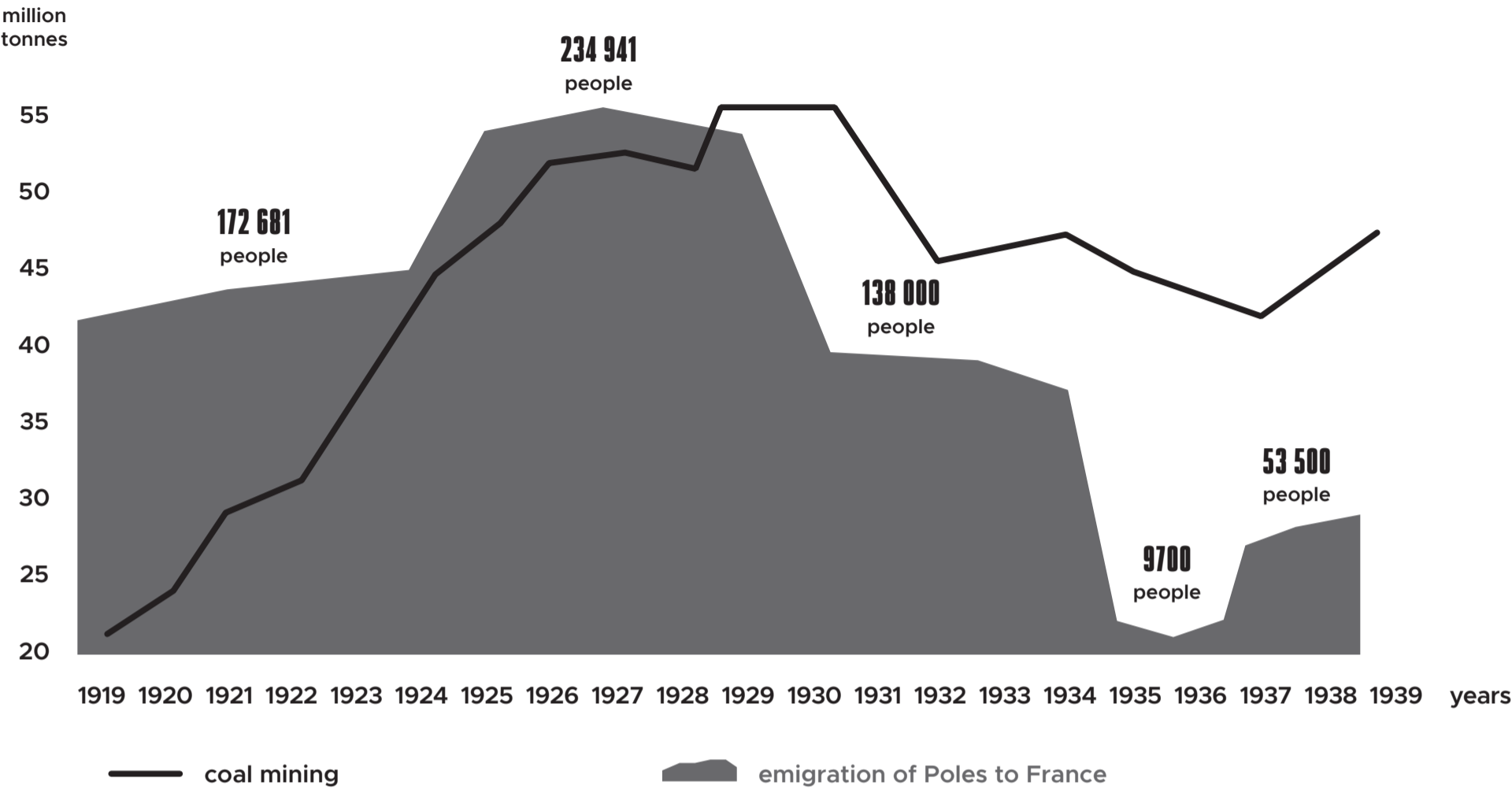
IN THE FRENCH AND BELGIAN

MINES BETWEEN 1921 AND 1939

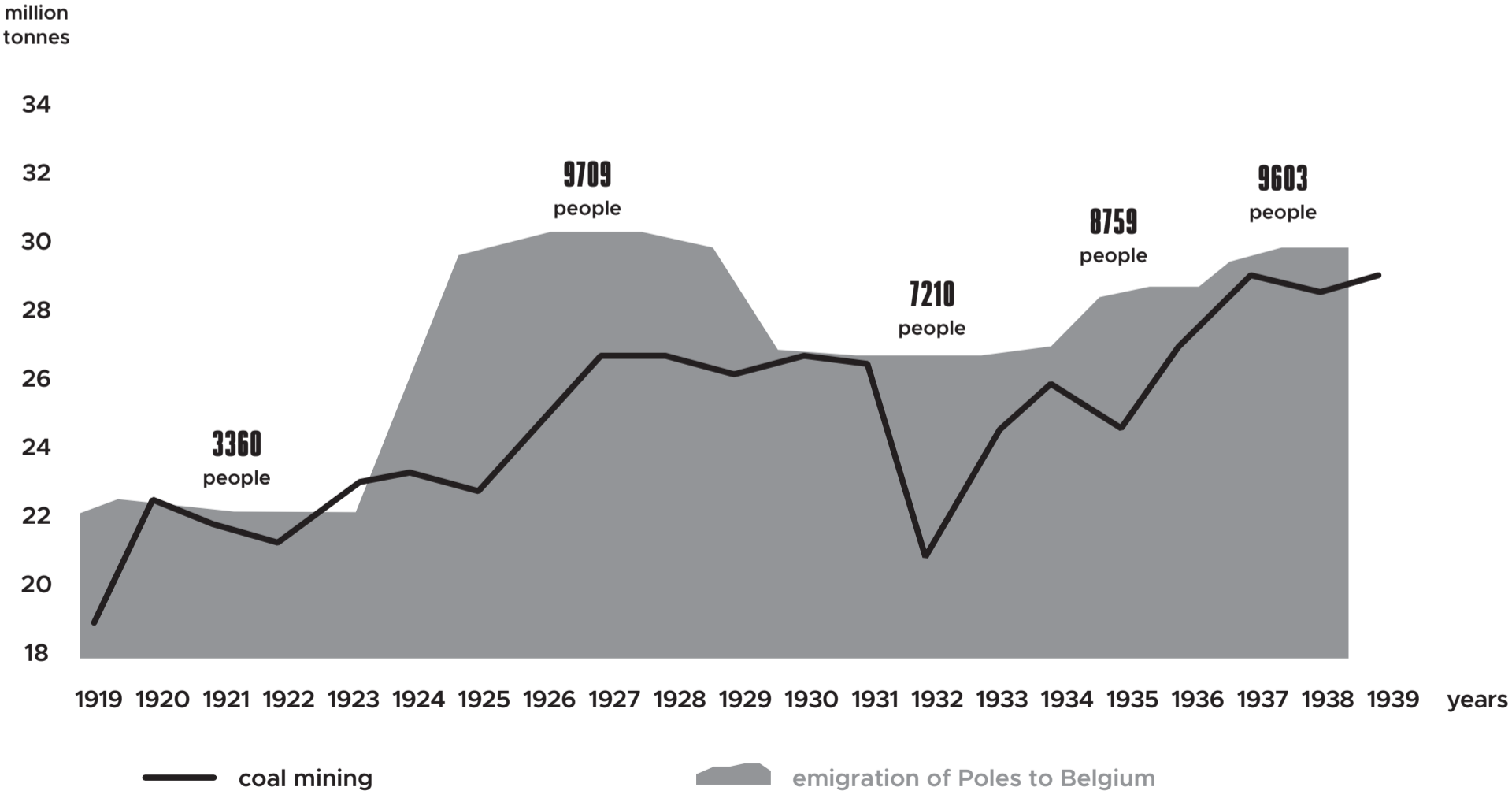


**Source**  
Own study based on data from:  
Leboutte R., Mortalité par accident dans les mines de charbon en Belgique  
aux XIXe-XXe siècles. *Revue du Nord* 1991, Vol. 73, no. 293, pp. 703–736

FRANCE



BELGIUM



Source  
Own study based on data from:  
Jaros J., Zarys dziejów górnictwa węglowego, PWN, Warszawa-Kraków, 1975, pp. 257, 259  
Ponty J., Polonais Meconnus: histoire des travailleurs immigrés en France dans l'entre-deux-guerres, Publications de la Sorbonne, Paris 1988, p. 425  
Dzwonkowski R., Polacy w Belgii w ostatnich pięćdziesięciu latach, *Studia Polonijne* 1974, Vol. 1, p. 8

# MINING

**W**hole cities grew on coal and thanks to miners. The shaft marked the centre of the world around which life was organized. Next to the old mining buildings, new, more spacious housing estates or colonies with gardens were created, ready to welcome new residents. Great attention was paid to the development of public spaces, squares and parks. The heart of each settlement usually included a local church and commune office, but the main road always led to the shaft. The management's luxury villas dominated the terraced layout of mining estates. Married miners with their families were usually awarded a 3–4 room apartment with a garden and an outbuilding. Singles were located in lodgings, housing barracks or the so-called canteens. Mine policemen supervised the order and cleanliness of each of the settlements. They were also responsible for allocating houses.

## LITTLE HOMELANDS

The self-sufficiency of mining settlements fostered the creation of specific ghettos. In settlements inhabited by Poles – the so-called colonies – Polish shops, restaurants and cafés, craft and

service establishments quickly began to appear. Almost every mining settlement had its Polish bakery, butcher, tailor, shoemaker, carpenter and hairdresser. The streets attracted passers-by with bilingual boards and advertising of straight-from-Poland products. In exile, efforts were made to create so-called little Poland, a substitute for life in the home country. In the first years, adult immigrants saw no need to learn a new

# COLONY

language or familiarize themselves with the new culture, hoping for a quick return to their country. Contacts with the local community were mainly limited to professional relations.

## HOUSE

Mining houses – detached or terraced houses – were relatively comfortable and provided good housing conditions. The first floor included bedrooms, while family life went on in the ground floor rooms. The lack of sanitation and washing facilities, electricity or running water did not bother emigrants since they were not used to such conveniences in Poland either. They usually decorated houses very traditionally, showing nostalgia for their homeland. The walls were decorated with family photographs, embroidered tapestries or pictures of the patron saints and the Black Madonna of Częstochowa. The houses in the colony were owned by the mine and were only available to working miners. Therefore, the eldest son often followed in the footsteps of his father to ensure the continuity of the assignment.



## OWN PEACE OF LAND

For many workers of peasant origin, the backyard garden, on average 400 m<sup>2</sup>, was a substitute for the land they left in their homeland. It provided them with a way of spending free time. They planted mainly vegetables such as dill, horseradish, potatoes, parsley, cucumbers and cabbage. They also kept pigs, geese, ducks, rabbits, pigeons and chickens. This was a contribution to the home diet and budget. The garden harvest allowed for making preparations for the winter, such as sauerkraut or pickled cucumbers. Flowers also played a large role in Polish homes, and Polish families often won competitions for the best-kept garden. Neighbourly life went on outside, among their own.

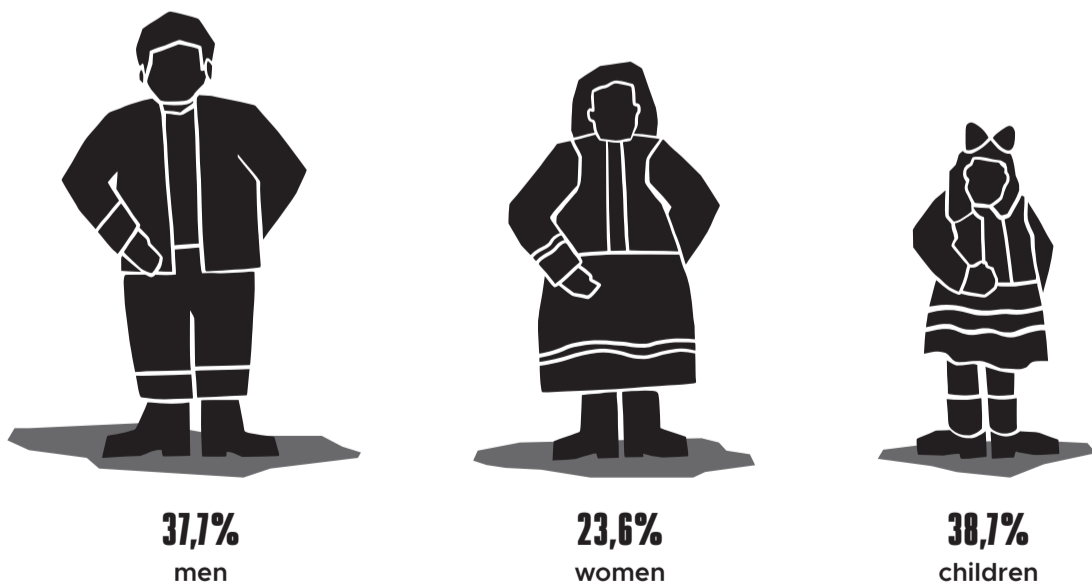
## FAMILY

Employers wanted stability for employed foreigners. Any miner who came to France without a family could begin their efforts to bring them back from the country of origin after 2–3 months of stay. The condition was to have a suitable flat and a certificate issued by the employer. With this document, families could apply to the representatives of the General Immigration Society in Poland to set the departure date. Employers incurred 35% of the cost of bringing families, and the people applying covered the rest of the expenses.

It was preferable to establish new relationships with compatriots, as the common goal at that time was to return to their homeland as soon as possible. Public opinion discouraged mixed marriages. Young people succumbed to family pressure and the influence of the emigrants' environment. They feared language and cultural differences, as well as being deprived of their national identity.

The malady of emigrant life – far from home, in an indifferent environment and foreign cultural conditions – was the loosening of social ties and, consequently, broken families, a large percentage of illegitimate children, wives escaping with lodgers, the so-called wild marriages or bigamous relationships.

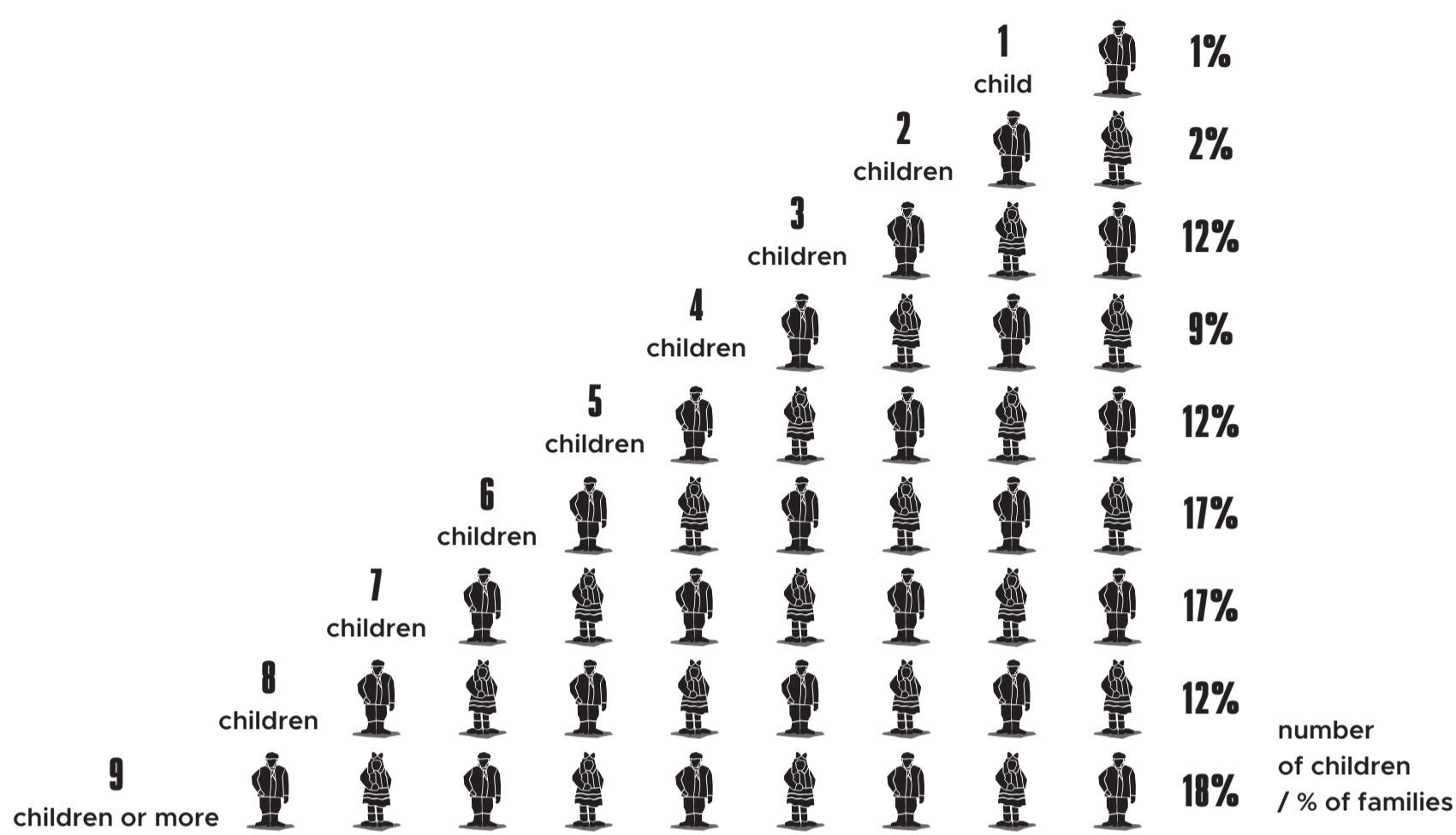
## Demographic proportions of the Polish community in France before 1932 on the example of the Nord-Pas-de-Calais region



### Source

Own study based on data from:  
Ponty J., Polonais Meconnus: histoire des travailleurs immigrés en France dans l'entre-deux-guerres,  
Publications de la Sorbonne, Paris 1988, p. 425

Average number of children in Polish families in France  
in 1919–1939 on the example of the Nord-Pas-de-Calais region



Source  
Own study based on data from:  
Girard A., Stoetzek J., Français et Immigrés. L'attitude française. L'adaptation des Italiens et des Polonais,  
Ined Éditions - Institut national d'études démographiques, Paris 1953, p. 61

Percentage of Poles arriving to France alone or with families  
in 1919–1939 on the example of the Nord-Pas-de-Calais region



Source  
Own study based on data from:  
Girard A., Stoetzek J., Français et Immigrés. L'attitude française. L'adaptation des Italiens et des Polonais,  
Ined Éditions-Institut national d'études démographiques, Paris 1953, p. 61

# WOMEN

In the basins, the Polish community implemented a traditional family model. For most women, marriage meant the end of work, since it was the miner's ambition to support his family and his wife's duty was to take care of the household and educate children. The husbands entrusted their wives with money management, expenses and savings. Polish families were generally large. Great importance

was attached to maintaining native traditions, which was fostered by the neighbourhood of their fellow countrywomen. Housewives attended embroidery courses and organized special evening parties.

## WORKING WOMEN

From the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, French legislation has forbidden women to work underground, but did not preclude them

from being employed above-ground, for example in a lamp room (mining lamp storerooms), sorting plant or washrooms. Mostly women of pre-marital age started work, although sometimes married women also earned some extra money for their family budget when one salary was not enough. A large percentage of young girls also found employment in the textile industry, in suburban factories. Education allowed only a few to escape from the mining world.

## POLISH COMMUNITY ACTIVISTS

From the moment of their arrival in France, Polish women were actively involved in educational and cultural activities. The first circles of the Association of Polish Women in France

were already created in the early 1920s. Soon they became centres of Polishness. Readings, talks and courses were organized. The Rosary Mothers supported the organization of Christmas celebrations, first Holy Communions, processions and religious instruction. Most immigrants took part in Polish community events in their town, took care of orphans, supported the activities of the Educational Society. Women readily took part in sewing or housekeeping courses. Active participation in the Polish diaspora was considered to be the duty of Polish women in exile. The motto of the movement declared they should be *The force of the homeland, the pride of the nation*.

## Occupational structure of Polish women in France before 1932



**32,2%**  
textile and clothing industry



**33,5%**  
agriculture



**14,0%**  
domestic help



**20,5%**  
other

### Source

Own study based on data from:  
Janowska H., Polska emigracja zarobkowa we Francji 1919-1939, Warszawa 1964, p. 113

# EDUCATION

French legislation provided for universal compulsory schooling for children under the age of 13, regardless of nationality. In addition to free state schools, there were also private schools financed by mines. The children of Polish workers who came to France were obliged to attend school in France, but the problem of a lack of vacancies quickly appeared. Another obstacle was the lack of language skills. At home, the children only spoke Polish. The French authorities did not allow national minorities to open schools, and the 1919 convention did not raise the issue of Polish education in France.

## POLISH EDUCATION

Poles managed to obtain permission to organize additional teaching in Polish in private schools from the French mine representatives on 17 April 1924. The one condition was that the number of Polish children had to be higher than 65. The management of mines paid for Polish teachers, and the Polish side was responsible for recruiting them. In Polish state schools, additional Polish language courses and so-called Thursday courses were organized. Children were taught to write and speak in Polish, native history, geography and knowledge about the country. The shortage of teaching staff was

a pressing issue. There was also a lack of uniform programmes and textbooks; most of the teaching aids and books were imported from Poland. In 1939, around 22 700 Polish students were taught in 240 schools throughout France and 8 000 children were enrolled in the so-called Thursday courses. In Belgium, Polish schools were established from 1926. Polish language courses were also organized as part of extra-curricular lessons at Belgian schools.

## EDUCATION AND UPBRINGING

National programmes for children and youth were supplemented with

programmes offered by various organizations and active leisure activities. The first Polish kindergartens in France, called *ochronka*, were established in the early 1920s. In 1939, 3 500 Polish children attended them. In national education in exile, special attention was paid to providing the necessary resource of knowledge about the country. To this end, trips and camps were organized for Polish children in the 1930s in their home country. Polish consular authorities also actively supported the development of scouting.

**P**astoral care was not included in the 1919 convention. Its legal basis was provided in the form of regulations for chaplains established in 1924 by the French episcopate and the Polish Catholic Mission in Paris, which only allowed for appointing Polish clergy to the positions of associated vicars. Mine managements paid for their work and accommodation. Along with the mass influx of emigrants from Poland, the mines financed additional places of worship. Due to the lack of a sufficient number of Polish missionaries in France and Belgium, priests often travelled with religious services to many neighbouring towns.

**FAITH**  
Religion and patriotism have always been closely associated in Poland. Emigrants cultivated faith in a folk,

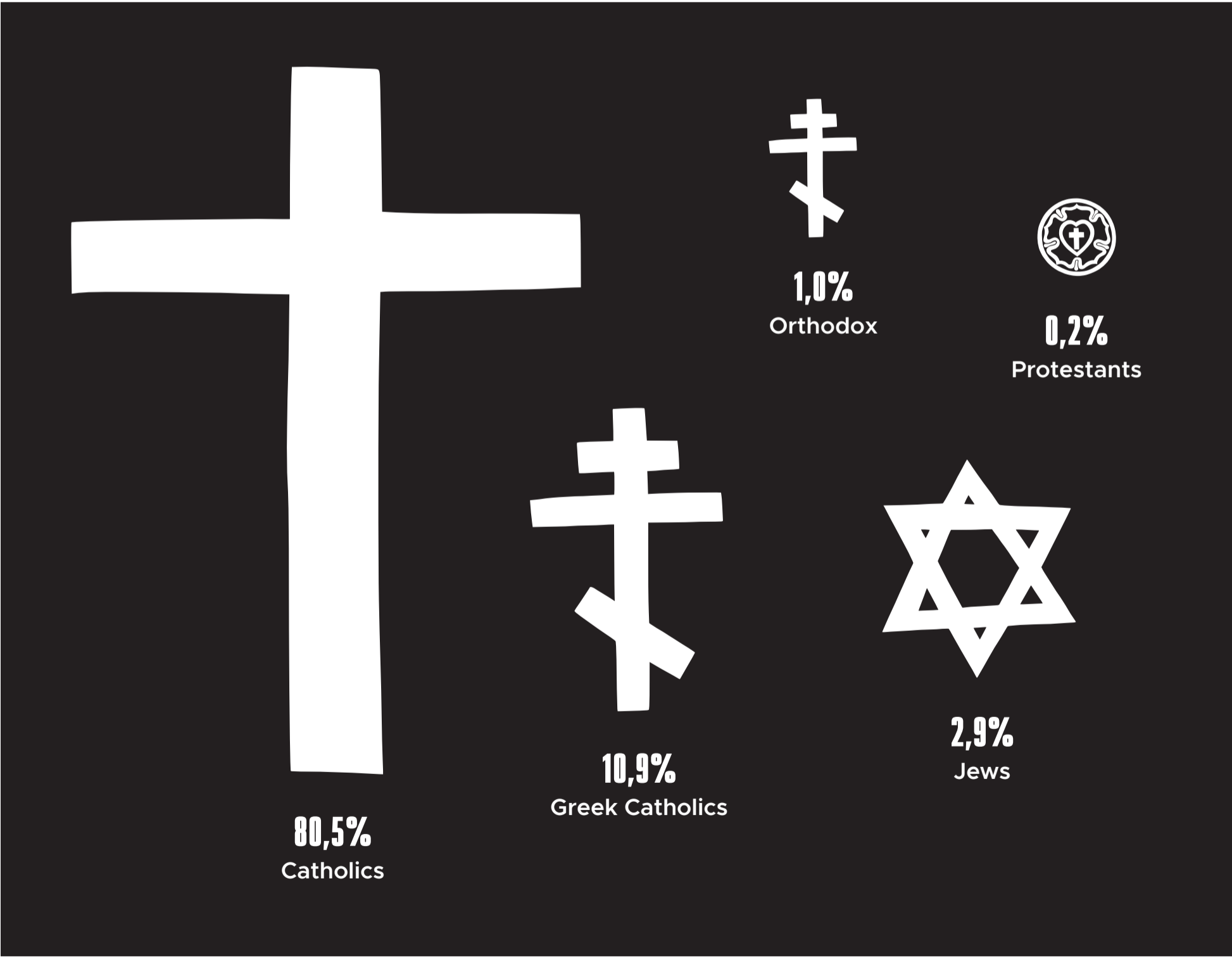
traditional way with many patriotic overtones. In exile, special significance was attached to celebrating the most important church ceremonies, such as Easter, Corpus Christi, Pentecost or Christmas, with a traditional Midnight Mass and a priest's traditional round of visits to parishioners. Equally important was experiencing the first Communion, weddings and funerals. Religious education of children also had deep national overtones. Polish religiosity was manifested primarily outside, in collective processions and services, with singing and the forest of banners.

Despite the religious mosaic of the society of the Second Polish Republic, the majority of Polish emigrants in Belgium and France were Catholic, although there were also Poles who believed in Judaism, Orthodoxy and Jehovah's Witnesses.

**CLERGY**  
Despite the administrative restrictions, the role of the Polish priest in exile went beyond the sphere of religion. In addition to spiritual ministry, priests often served as animators of social life, translators or intermediaries in contacts with the commune authorities and mine management. Employers valued cooperation with priests who kept their countrymen away from the subversive union and party environments. As a spiritual authority, the priests supervised the morality of their communities. They took part in most events and sat on the boards of Catholic organizations. The priest was a pillar of Polish diaspora life, a moral mentor, and the dynamics of local communities often depended largely on his spiritual charisma.

# CHURCH

**Religious denomination of the Polish community arrived to France in 1927–1929**



**Source**  
Own study based on data from:  
Girard A., Stoetzek J., Français et Immigrés. L'attitude française. L'adaptation des Italiens et des Polonais, Ined Éditions-Institut national d'études démographiques, Paris 1953, p. 61

# POLISH ORGANISATIONS

**T**he Polish community in exile was characterized by an extremely rich association life. Under the 1920 convention, Poles had the right to form associations on an equal footing with the French. *Every Pole in the Polish organisation...* – declared the ideological credo. The Westfalians transplanted most of their historical organizations to French land. Each of them had its statute, patron and banner. In the interwar period, around 2 400 Polish patriotic social, cultural, religious, sporting and veteran associations were active.

## CATHOLIC ASSOCIATIONS

The goal of each organization was to provide a sense of community, security and cultivate national traditions. Societies established at religious centres, which associated their members based on a community of faith, enjoyed the greatest popularity. This category included brotherhoods associated with mining traditions, such as the associations Saint Barbara, Saint Joseph or Saint Adalbert. The Brotherhood of the Living Rosary, the Children of Mary, the Catholic Association of Polish Youth (KSMP) and the Children's Crusade also stood out with a large number of members. The life of these associations took place in parish rooms.

## PATRIOTIC ASSOCIATIONS

Among the patriotic organizations, undoubtedly the most prominent were paramilitary associations (The Marksmen's Society, Falcon, scouts), veteran organizations (Association of Former Military Men and Reservists) or socially engaged associations (The Józef Piłsudski Educational Society, Association of Polish Women in France). The guiding motto was *Honour and Homeland*, and the goal was to

promote the national spirit and cultivate Polishness. Members of these organizations were also active in the field of education, striving to strengthen ties with the country also among young people.

## WORKING ASSOCIATIONS

The 1919 convention granted workers the right to join French trade unions but ruled out the possibility of creating unions of their own. Among the Polish

**Source** Own study based on data from: Ponty J., *Polonais Meconnus: histoire des travailleurs immigrés en France dans l'entre-deux-guerres*, Publications de la Sorbonne, Paris 1988, p. 425

emigrants in northern France, two left-wing French trade union centres were active: the United General Labour Confederation (CGTU) with a communist tinge and the General Labour Confederation (CGT), associated with socialists. Both organizations had similar assumptions and goals, focused on the postulate of liberating the working

class from the oppression of capitalism. Syndicates established the so-called Polish sections, where extensive propaganda was conducted. Socialist ideas also had a significant impact on the Polish community in Belgium. The attitude of Polish consulates was entirely negative towards communists.

IN THE 1930S IN FRANCE, OVER  
100 000 POLES WERE ASSOCIATED  
IN 2350 POLISH LOCAL  
ORGANISATIONS

**A**ttachment to native culture was manifested in the activities of cultural associations. Amateur choirs, orchestras and theatre groups were created in large numbers, and Polish libraries were established at the beginning of the 1920s. Most of them had Westfalian roots. Cultural and educational organizations were also active in Belgium, especially in the Limburg region. The performances of Polish music groups, which included mandolin, violin or bandoneon (a type of concertina), were particularly popular. Music always accompanied various manifestations of life in exile, uplifting hearts and souls.

## PRESS

The interwar Polish press, including newspapers published in exile, played an important opinion-forming role for Polish emigrants. The most widely read were two competing dailies: *Narodowiec* [The Nationalist] moved to France from Westphalia (from 1924 in Lens), and *Wiarus Polski* [The Old Polish Comrade] in Lille, as well as *Głos Wychodźczy* [The Voice of the Exile]. The weekly magazines: *Ognisko* [The Fire], *Polak we Francji* [A Pole in France], *Prawo Ludu* [The Right of the People], *Gazeta Polska* [The Polish Magazine], *Żaba* [The Frog] and magazines addressed to a narrow group of readers, such as *Polskie Pachole* [The Polish Kid], *Siła* [The Force] or *Sokół* [The Falcon] were also very popular. All magazines published in exile reported news about the country and the world, informed in detail about the social and organizational life in exile and published announcements. Additionally, they provided valuable instructions and legal advice. In France and Belgium, numerous communist and leftist magazines, such as *Robotnik Polski we Francji* [The Polish Worker in France],

# CULTURE

*Emigrant*, *Opieka* [Welfare], *Dziennik Ludowy* [People's Journal], *Proletariat*, *Wolność Polska* [Polish Freedom], *Tygodnik Polski* [The Polish Weekly] were also popular.

## SPORT

Sport constituted a significant aspect of living abroad. The *Sokół* [Falcon] Gymnastic Society, present in France before the First World War, enjoyed

great popularity among Polish workers. *Sokół's* members stood out from other organizations not only because of their exceptional gymnastic shows but also by their attachment to organizational symbolism and uniforms. Football was the most popular discipline in exile. From 1924, the Polish Football Association existed in France and had its own league. There were numerous clubs and sections for boxing, athletics, cycling, classic wrestling and bowling. Despite the emigration conditions, many talented sportsmen-miners managed to achieve international success.

# CRISIS

**BEFORE THE OUTBREAK  
OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR  
ABOUT 36% OF POLES,  
WHO HAD EMIGRATED TO FRANCE  
BETWEEN 1919 AND 1939,  
RETURNED TO THE SECOND  
POLISH REPUBLIC**

**T**he great economic crisis, with its peak in 1929–1934, shook the global labour market. Demand for coal dropped sharply and its price collapsed. The continuing recession forced France and neighbouring countries to change their emigration policy. The inflow of new emigrants was limited, and the staff was reduced as well by first letting go of foreigners. The situation of the unemployed Polish miners was dramatic because despite the provisions of the convention they did not receive any allowance. In the coal basins of northern Europe, there was an atmosphere of fear of losing a job or being deported to Poland.

## STRIKES

From the moment they arrived in France, Polish workers jointly engaged in most of the strike actions, even though mine managements used various forms of repression for agitation activities, especially among foreigners. In Belgium, the attitude of trade unions towards foreign workers was less loyal, especially during a crisis. Poles were accused of ‘stealing their bread.’ The most famous strike in which Poles took part was the protest organised in the Escarpelle mine in Leforest in August 1934. As a result, 150 workers lost their jobs, and 77 together with their families (approximately 250 people) had

to leave France within 48 hours. Fear of an uncertain tomorrow reigned among those who remained.

## FORCED RETURNS

The menace of deportation concerned almost every Polish home. Workers were let go on any pretext. For the first time since the mass arrivals, the economic crisis was depriving immigrants of basic living guarantees. In the absence of work, around 140 000 people decided

or were forced to return from France (1931–1934). The fate of the returning miners was unenviable. They usually didn’t have much savings and couldn’t count on working in the country. The wave of re-emigration from France caused serious perturbations in the domestic labour market, contributing to a significant increase in unemployment in the Second Polish Republic.

**Source** Own study based on data from:  
Ponty J., *Polonais Meconnus: histoire des travailleurs immigrés en France dans l’entre-deux-guerres*, Publications de la Sorbonne, Paris 1988, p. 425

## EPILOGUE

**T**he outbreak of the Second World War caused chaos in the mining world. Workers of different nationalities living nearby – Italians, Greeks, Belgians – suddenly became potential volunteers for hostile armies. For most of them, the war meant the end of their dream of a quick return to their homeland, which now required their courage and sacrifice. Poles massively and spontaneously reported to recruiting points from the first days of the September campaign. Compulsory conscription included over 85 000 soldiers registered in France, 60 000 of which came from economic emigration. At the request of France, all miners and Polish workers employed in the war industry were excluded from conscription. The military service allowed the immigrant community to prove their relationship with their compatriots in the country.

## THE AGE OF CHANGE

After the Second World War, the coal and steel mining industry was the foundation for the reconstruction of the European economy. The world was divided by the iron curtain, but the demand for energy did not decrease. Given the strong competition between the Soviet Union and allied countries, Western European countries decided on extensive economic cooperation within the European common market. The consequence of the Treaty of Rome signed in 1957 was the creation of the European Economic Community. In the early 1960s, the transformation of the French mining industry began and led to the final closure of the mines in France and Belgium 30 years later. In 2004, Poland’s accession to the European Union re-opened Polish citizens’ access to the European labour market based on full partnership. However, at that time, French and Belgian mining had already become history.

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