

# **EMMA HOSTEL**

**WWW.EMMAHOSTEL.PL**

## **BACKGROUND**

Emma Hostel is a cooperative initiative run by six friends in Warsaw who offer a convenient, family-like and environmentally-friendly place to stay overnight. Its organizational structure is horizontal, whereby all members of the co-op have the same rights and the same duties and all decisions are made on the basis of consensus.

## **AREAS OF ENGAGEMENT**

Emma Hostel was conceived by friends with activist backgrounds, who wanted to put some of their ideals into practice by setting up Emma. The ideas that inspire the team behind Emma Hostel can best be understood through the stories behind the names of the hostel and its eleven rooms: the hostel is named after Emma Goldman, a socio-political, anarcho-feminist activist (1869-1940), and the rooms are named after Maria Orsetti and Jan Wolski, two Polish cooperative and anarcho-cooperative activists active before and after World War II; Carlo Giuliani, anti-globalist activist shot dead by police during demonstrations against the 2001 G8 summit in Genoa; Rosa Parks, African-American symbol of the fight against racial segregation in 20<sup>th</sup> century America; Susan B. Anthony, who fought for women's suffrage in the United States in the 19<sup>th</sup> century; Rudi Dutschke, the most prominent spokesperson of the German student movement of the '60s; Dian Fossey, American zoologist who studied gorilla groups over a period of 18 years and who was murdered by poachers in Rwanda in 1985; Rafal Gorski (1973-2010), prolific activist within the Polish anarchist and union movements; Buenaventura Durruti, Spanish anarchist and activist during the Spanish Civil War, and finally Margaret Sanger, American sex educator, nurse and birth control activist.

## **DEVELOPMENT**

17<sup>th</sup> January 2011: Emma opens with 14 beds

July 2011: another 24 beds are added on the third floor

## **FUNDING**

40,000 złoty (about €9,000) funding from the jobcentre; Income from renting hostel beds

## **LOCATION**

Warsaw, PL, 1,716,855 inhabitants

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## **CONVERSATION**

This conversation, between Lukasz Wójcicki, Bianca Elzenbaumer and Fabio Franz, was held in the kitchen of Emma Hostel in Warsaw in July 2011.

### **Bianca Elzenbaumer: Could you give us an introduction to the Emma Hostel and how it all started?**

**Lukasz Wójcicki:** We were five people setting up Emma Hostel as a social cooperative. Social co-ops in Poland are a way to help variously excluded people get back into the labour market—in our case, this exclusion had been related to long-time unemployment. But most importantly, we are all rooted in different anarchist collectives, so when we began to think about setting up our own business, it was natural to us to opt for the co-op model because of its ingrained horizontal structure.

In order to start out, we got support from the job centre—the place where you register as unemployed. For every disadvantaged person involved in the setting up of a social co-operative, you get a certain amount of money in support—for us, it was about 40,000 złoty (about €9,000). Of course, this was not enough. We had to put more money into these flats just to adapt them to our needs. Some of the furniture and other items you see are gifts from friends, or stuff we were able to gather in other ways. Of course, a few things we had to buy, but a lot of the furniture is made by a friend out of recycled wood. However, we did get the chairs from Ikea, simply because stuff there is cheap. As for the rest, we try to avoid buying corporate stuff, but rather to buy ecologically-sound and from small companies, and also from our friend who is running an agrotourism place.

### **Bianca: What response do you get from guests to the way you are running Emma Hostel?**

**Lukasz:** The reactions are quite different, but most of our guests are interested in the idea behind the hostel. They usually have read on our website about how we work and are interested in it, but others are simply looking for a cheap place to stay and don't care. It is easy to feel the difference between these people. It is obvious when someone is only interested in a cheap place to stay because when you are trying to speak about the idea, they just want to know where their bed is, that's it. Then we know it does not make sense to persist.

**Fabio: How cheap is it to stay with you compared to other places?**

**Lukasz:** It is actually quite cheap. Right now, we just reduced the prices because we have very few people booking—maybe because it is July. Now it is 35 złoty for one bed. Normally, the prices are a bit higher because all this ecological stuff is quite expensive in Poland—fair trade tea and coffee from the Zapatistas, etc., is relatively rather expensive. We try to explain to people why it is expensive—that it is not because we are capitalists and want money. It's just the cost of running this hostel. If you come here, you should understand what you are paying for. There are some people who are coming here for the idea. Very often, we are telling people the story of the place—not like we are trying to convince them of something—we simply tell them that it is a co-op, that we have social and environmental aims, that we are supporting some organisations and so on. Sometimes people get really excited about it, and they want to come back for these reasons.

**Bianca: You mention that you are supporting organisations through Emma Hostel. What does that mean?**

**Lukasz:** Sometimes, we cooperate with associations that work with refugees and migrants, for whom we host people here. Very often, these people stay together with the guests and then we try to explain in what sense they are different. It is not always easy when we have refugees here—not easy for us, not easy for guests. So, we always try to explain why we are having them staying in the hostel and, usually, people's reactions are very friendly. Last week, for example, we had eight people from Romania who had been forced to work and to beg in the streets here in Poland. They lived here for a few days. They were very engaging and very nice. They talked to other guests a lot, trying to form very close relationships with them. This was difficult and we had to talk to them about this, to explain that this was not the way they should behave with guests: this is a commercial place, not a detention centre or something—it is simply the only commercial place in Warsaw that is willing to host migrants waiting for deportation. Sometimes, it is not easy to deal with such things, but usually it is OK. So, we always say, if we have space, it is absolutely no problem to host them. And they always receive a discount on their bed and, sometimes, when they don't have any money, we just say that is OK and let them stay for free.

**Bianca: So things are going well on the business side for now?**

**Lukasz:** Actually, right now we don't have much money—we have been open since February and have worked for free ever since. So, for us, it is not so easy not earning money right now; we are working here almost every day, if not on the reception, then doing stuff around. Right now, we are six and because it is quite difficult, we just need to do shifts in pairs to make things easier. So of the six, Anna and Kasia also have a different job, Piotrek works only here but his wife works somewhere else, and me and Gosia work only here, so, for us, it is really difficult to survive sometimes. None of us are living in the hostel, we are all renting flats—except Jacek who lives in a squat just across the road. So, from time to time, we have to do different jobs in order to survive.

When you run your own business, it is really tough at the beginning. So, right now, we are trying to borrow money from an organisation that helps out social enterprises. This means lots of paperwork. We are not business people; we are very often just learning how to do business. Fortunately, there are a few people that help us with business advice. Probably, without this help, we would not be here. We did some free workshops on managing a business and accounting, but basically we just learn by doing. We seem to make mistakes, all the time, on every step. But we have spent a lot of time and effort on this place, so to quit right now would be too much. We couldn't do that. Maybe in two, three or four months time, something will move. We've invested a lot in this place and also, we have a five-year lease. Moreover, the money we got to form the institution is linked to an obligation to run the business until December this year. If we fail, we need to give back the money. This is ridiculous because when your business is going down, it means you don't have money. So how can you pay this money back? It is ridiculous. And the people from the job centre don't realise that getting us off the list of the unemployed with a salary of 100 złoty per month, does not really allow us to survive. They just care about their statistics. They don't realise that this is volunteering and that it is really hard for us. Last month, we made just enough to pay the rent—10,000 złoty—but there are still taxes and bills to cover. Before we started, we made a business plan and calculated that with a 50% occupation rate, we could survive. Right now, it is less. April, May and June were very good months—we easily had enough for our bills, rent, everything—not for the salary, but for the rest. This month—shit.

**Fabio: So how do you deal with things when problems like this come up, but also how do you take decisions more generally?**

**Lukasz:** Of course, it is not so easy to manage a place with a non-hierarchical structure. In theory, it is easy—horizontal, common responsibility, but sometimes, it could be that someone was responsible for something, someone else didn't know—very basic problems with communication. We are also trying to rotate duties—sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. The level of engagement in the cooperative varies between the six of us. Sometimes, this creates a problem, but, in general, we believe that this horizontal approach is a very good way of managing. We have meetings and we discuss what to do and what needs to be done, who is responsible for what. Sometimes, it is very difficult to get things done without authority—someone takes on a task, but it simply doesn't get done. When this happens, things are difficult and we need a lot of talking to resolve the issue. Maybe it is also complicated because we don't earn money. Probably things are different when you take money for your job. There is a different kind of responsibility, no?

**Bianca: How do you feel about the horizontal aspect of the co-op, is it something that you manage to achieve quite easily?**

**Lukasz:** We really need to be careful not to build an unofficial, invisible hierarchy, but of course, you can't avoid this. It is tough: I might have my own initiative all the time, but I can understand that someone else might not, that someone might simply be waiting for instructions. So, we have to understand all these differences and the need to deal with them, the need to spend time to sit down and discuss. At least we have past experiences with collectives, because for someone who doesn't have experience in this collective work, I think it is extremely difficult. People just seem to need someone in power, to know what to do exactly. So it is a long-term process just to learn this way of operating horizontally.

**Fabio: How do you see this place and your collective develop in the future?**

**Lukasz:** In the future, I imagine the development of a huge network of cooperatives that support each other and draw on each other's skills. So, this is why we are always very happy when we have guests that are in-

terested in this idea and we can spread it. But, on the other hand, it's not like we are doing this just to promote some idea, we also want to make a living from it. Before Emma Hostel, we were all doing different political and social things with different collectives and initiatives. Compared to that, the socio-political stuff here in Emma is only a small part and it is fine like this as we can still do polemical, political stuff outside. Within Emma, the idea for the future would be to set up a kind of fund to support some social and political actions for which there is always money lacking.

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