

“I AM NOT WILLING TO RETURN AT THIS TIME...” – TRANSMIGRATION OF EASTERN EUROPEAN WOMEN AS TRANSFORMATION STRATEGY*

Sabine HESS

Institut für Kulturanthropologie und Europäische Ethnologie
Graefestr. 33, 10967 Berlin, Germany
E-mail: sabinezuhaue@gmx.net

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Abstract: For centuries social and cultural science studies have conceptualized migration as a one-directional move leaving the country of origin behind. This article which is based on a two years ethnographical research project on migration strategies of young Slovakian women to Germany cannot only show that the new migration patterns after the so-called fall of the Iron Curtain are much more of a mobile, temporary culture producing new transnational social figurations stretching at least over two different countries. The article shows as well how these women are positioning their migration strategies in the context of the transformation processes of their post-socialist country. Their practice of mobility and their reasoning of the transformation processes challenge not only the classical conceptualizations of migration but as well the hegemonic reading of the Eastern European transformation in social and cultural sciences. Their practices call for a gender sensible transnational anthropological perspective connecting both processes that of migration and the European transformations.

Keywords: transnationalization, migration, gender, Eastern Europe, transformation, cultural anthropology

“I have a dream: I want to go to Germany and stay there for a while. I do not know German very well, but there you can earn some money and learn German along the way. But no, the other girls stay here at Slavocovce and get their unemployment-benefits. And then a boy shows up and says ‘marry me’, and then the kids are coming. And that is what life is all about?”

No, the 20 year old Nadja, who I met during my fieldwork in Slovakia in 1999, wants to have more from life than what seems to be possible at her small industrial home town. The paper production plant, the only work place around, did not close down but is working on a rationalized level. Whereas the older people still find work

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there, which does not mean to earn a living, the job-perspectives for the younger generation especially the graduates are gloomy. Also the infrastructure of the town is poor and impoverished. Nadja is looking out of her window over the muddy tracks linking the once fashionable blocks of flats and says: "I didn't want to end up in that dump." She is almost furious towards her friends that they do not take any initiative: "They stay here?! But **this** life is not enough for me."

Nadja herself finished college one year ago. Since then she has been preparing her migration to Germany as au pair – which means baby-sitting and domestic work in turn for living-in accommodation and a small pocket-money of 200 Euro: "Now I go for the one year Au pair-Visa to Germany but I would like to stay there longer. But I will see what the future will bring. I can't make decisions such long in advance."

Nadja is one of the thousands of Eastern European women who try to struggle with the upheavals of the transformational processes by extending their action onto the transnational space. They work as nurses for elderly people, as live-in caregivers or domestic workers for western families and as waitresses in bars, hotels, in animation and prostitution. They try to earn money as shopping tourists or suitcase traders exploiting the differences in exchange rates and in the availability of goods. They tactically use the means of mobility and migration which are offered by the restrictive immigration policies of the receiving countries and which are informally negotiated or officially advertised in the countries of origin. Their informal migration-networks reach from the neighboring Western and Southern European countries far to Turkey and South Asia as the empirical studies by Malgorzata Irek or Mirjana Morokvasic have shown (cf. IREK 1998; MOROKVASIC 1994; ÖNCÜ 1999). Not only their practices of mobility are quite often undocumented also their gendered work places in the lower service sector are usually hidden in the private sphere of families or the backrooms of bars. This concealment makes the person related service sector such an important source of employment for migrant women. On the other hand it keeps its actors invisible. But as Bridget ANDERSON (1999) or Saskia SASSEN (1998) have shown also the main social science discourses on globalization and transformation of the Western and Eastern European societies are *writing female migration out of* the master-narratives – reproducing their "invisibility". Here our ethnographic perspective on everyday practices and sense-making is needed. In fact these female migrants are global players from below, who are filling important social and economic gaps torn up by the globalization and transformation processes but they are rarely recognized as such and as actors of transformation.

In the following section I will concentrate on my two-year long multi-sited research project on young Slovakian women like Nadja who migrate as Au pairs to Germany. I want to show how these women are positioning their migration strategies in the context of the transformation processes in their country and how this practice refers as well to their goal for self-biographization in this environment of risk. Their practice of mobility and their reasoning of the transformation processes in their countries challenge in several ways the hegemonic reading of the Eastern European transformation in social and cultural sciences. They also question the classical con-

cepts of migration as an unilinear process of e- and immigration. Their practices call for a transnational anthropological perspective connecting both processes that of migration and the European transformations (see HANNERZ 1996; 2000).

TRANSFORMATION: AN ANDROCENTRIC PROJECT

Before I come back to the migration strategies and narratives of the young women I briefly want to sketch out the scientific landscape of “transformation studies”. As APPADURAI (1996) once noted for anthropology, in my view it can be extended to the research culture of social sciences in general, there are certain gate-keeping concepts which typify and construct each major region like “honor and shame” for the Mediterranean region. It seems to me that “transformation” has become the gate keeping concept for “Eastern Europe”. It is homogenizing the region and setting it apart from the changes hitting the rest of the globalizing world. But that alone is only half of the problem: in its mainstream version the transformation studies are quite overtly linked with dichotomous cultural assumptions of **the** West and **the** East and with modernization theoretical notions of catching up with western modernity (see KÜRTI 1997).

In this social science view the road for change and its actors are clear: it is a system change towards a capitalist market economy, liberal democracy and constitutional institutions, norms and habits. The suggested actors of that change: individualized, rational, risk taking but law abiding economic subjects – which, according to these studies, are not yet widely spread (see PODOBA 1998; TIRYAKIAN 1998: 45f.). This framework is not only a projection of western type modernity but it is highly gendered in its actor-definition and its focus on the dimension of the public, formal development. Critical development studies or gender sensitive approaches have shown that transformation processes in the age of globalization rather imply in different degrees for peripheral regions at least the following three points: First, informalization as a mode of regulation. Saying that I mean it is not to be conceptualized as pre-modern or parasitic economic form, rather it is to be seen as an intended effect of the new mode of globalized deregulated production and as stabilizing the capitalistic system as a whole. In some parts of Rumania or Russia over 50% of the households are not participating any more in the money circulation economy. Barter economy or trading with goods are getting the only means of existence. At the Russian economy the amount of payments with goods increased to 45% in 1997; the customers got 70% of all goods by barter-channels (HELLER–NUSS 1999: 569; cf. von OSTEN 2001; WICHTERICH 1998). Second, feminist scientists can show that the new international and European division of labor, flexible production and deregulation leads to a process which they call “feminization of labor” (SASSEN 1998; WICHTERICH 1998). Third as a gender analysis of the transformation processes in Eastern European countries sums up: “The logic of transformation means a privatization of the cost of the restructuring processes which is laid to women’s charge” (LEHMKE–PENROSE 1996: 29). That means in contrast to most women specific studies which

analyze the processes as an exclusion of women that rather the creativity and qualifications of women are becoming more and more decisive for the social reproduction of the whole family (NICKEL 1999; see the general report by BÚTOROVÁ-FILADELFIOVÁ et al. 1999).

But also cultural anthropology or European ethnology critically interrogating the master-narrative of “transformation” seems to have their difficulties in coming to terms with the changes and in grasping them methodologically. Our traditional ethnographic research practice brings forth a lot of very detailed and thick descriptions of local appropriations and practices of transformation. Thereby two oppositional interpretations of the nature or better culture of the changes seem to prevail: between the emphasis on moments of persistence on the one hand and on the other hand the interpretation of the post-socialist era as radical break with the past leading to total uncertainty. To me, this binary explanation seems to lead in a dead end for an analysis of the cultural experiences and practices of transformation. It has more to do with our disciplinary traditions as with daily practices of the differently situated actors.

NEW MIGRATION PATTERNS: AU PAIR AS TRANSMIGRATION

Nadja was now for the second time in Germany working without documents in a private household. With her first family she got in trouble quite soon as many of the young au pair women did: too much domestic work the whole day long and to less recognition (HESS 2000). She was arguing about it with her family but nothing seemed to change so she quit very disappointed. Because the au pair agency also did not help her finding a new family as it trusted the story of the host parents more than Nadja's one Nadja decided to go back to Slovakia but with the promise to return: “What should I do back home”, she was asking me and gave the answer herself: “Nothing, there I will stay jobless. Studying? Yes, I would like to, but it's very hard to pass the entrance-examinations and without money you hardly get a place.” After some months at home Nadja was informally referred to a new family by her old au pair friend in Germany who had found an au pair agency that was not asking for a visa. As Nadja phoned me that she was back in South Germany I was quite astonished about her determination and courage to use such illegal means. “Yes and no”, she explained. She legally entered on the grounds of a tourist visa for three months but without a work permit – floating between legal existence and illegalization. Many of the Eastern European migrants whose visa run out manage to stay in Germany for a couple of years by moving back and forth using the legal tourist permission for three months and then returning home, soon coming back again. Au pair as one of the few legal means of migration to Western Europe due to the restrictive immigration regulation by the “Schengen”-Countries in general and Germany in particular has become a main springboard for women to the West leading to such mobile irregular forms of extended stays. The German embassy in Bratislava counted 2500

official applications in 1999 which is nearly one third of the total amount of officially registered work migration to Germany (*Migrationsbericht* 1999). But as almost all EU countries refuse durable immigration with a right to legal settlement and try to channel the migration streams into temporary modes they produce a large array of disguised migrational practices. Recent social and cultural studies on East–West migration have generally noticed that permanent emigration from Eastern European countries has not really increased since 1989 but what really increased is an irregular transnational mobility. Shuttle, commuting or circular migration has become the dominant feature of the new European migrational space (CYRUS 1997; MOROKVASIC 1994; ROGERS 2001).

Nadja was quite content with her new family. So she told me during our next meeting that she did not know when she will finally return, but on the other hand she was quite sure that she did not want to stay in Germany permanently either: “For a while I can do such maid-jobs but eventually I want to study and get a good job. And that I cannot do in Germany. Therefore I have to leave Germany for a short period again.” Some of the young women especially from countries further East who were excluded from the EU-tourist visa-regulation as all non-EU-candidate countries tried to marry as the only means of permanent residency. Others slowly found their ways into the diaspora and au pair networks and stayed. Certainly there were also the women who returned home in time. Either they had already arranged for themselves a follow up perspective at home. Or they hoped to get now a place at university or a good job but in many cases this hope was soon heavily disappointed. But over half of the women which I met during my two-years research tried to extend their migration taking up any migration possibility. They took the restricted means of mobility as a resource and option of which they tried to get the most out of.

TRANSNATIONAL PRACTICES AS TRANSFORMATION STRATEGIES

Au pair what at first sight seems to be a precarious and spontaneous practice of young women revealed to be a strategy well adapted to the challenges and risks of the transformation period Slovakia was facing.

I hope that the picture I already gave indicates that it is always a complex mixture of motivations and reasons why the young women opted for transnational mobility: They mentioned individual, family related, structural, cultural and gender specific reasons. But everyone I met linked their migration to the demands and difficulties of the transformation processes. Thereby their narratives showed specific common argumentational patterns which I want to outline now. It can be classified as a specific discourse of young adults, who wanted to go ahead, for whom socialism and the “Velvet Revolution” of their countries of origin were only mediated events where they had no own experience with. What counted for them was the actually experienced social reality which was described as “gloomy”, “narrow” and “boring”.

All addressed the social and economic situation of the country, their families and themselves as “difficult”. All of the young women were jobless after high school. The skeletons of the former social security system had little employment benefits to offer but which was not enough to live for their own. Additionally they complained about the steadily rising prices of daily living which they connected to Slovakia’s political efforts to reach the EU accession requirements in 1999. So they were even more dependent on the family economy and their multiple activities to earn a living. Also their attempts to study did not only fail because they did not pass the examinations but most parents could not afford to pay the education. In this sense the pocket money of the au pair job which was almost as big as a teacher’s income in Slovakia at that time was an incentive for the young women to take on the domestic work abroad. They all longed for a job and their own money to become self-reliant and to pay for their university education themselves.

However their step to transnationalize the social risk of unemployment and use the transnational space for generating income abroad in order to go on with their education at home was soon heavily disappointed in Germany. There they had to realize that the pocket money was really only pocket change for German conditions and that they could not save a lot. So they tried to find a second job as baby-sitter or cleaner and tried to extend their stay. But also unexpectedly for me they all were very fast in adapting to the new situation, and broadened their perspectives as enjoying their independence and enriching their western experiences.

This relates to another common argumentational pattern why they took up the au pair work. All argued that they wanted to get western experiences and that they wanted to learn a foreign language. First I understood it as a tactical move to meet the au pair requirements, because au pair is still officially seen as a form of cultural exchange in the Western European countries. But all were going on saying: “Yes, if you can speak German very well, you will find a good job in Slovakia, then you get a good salary.” This belief in the cultural capital of knowing a foreign language also motivated parents to support the migration of their daughters. Also all the Slovakian intellectuals with whom I spoke told me: “Western experiences are now important!” Then I had to understand that it was not the general economic risk of impoverishment but what really troubled the young women was the social experience of dequalification, career-breaks and hence declassification. All blamed their joblessness after high school on the devaluation of higher education in the context of the new capitalist market economy which seemed to favour fast private enterprises over work in the public sector. Additionally they had already experienced that their parents were suddenly confronted with unemployment or were dequalified at their workplaces. In the context of marketization, privatization and a rapidly westernizing economy traditional skills, qualifications and status hierarchies became uncertain, devalued and the social strata were being newly mixed. New skills, strategies, habitual and capital forms in a Bourdieuan sense seemed to be needed. And practices, knowledge and lifestyles which were ascribed to the West were not only of high symbolic value. They apparently could be directly converted in the few expanding sectors as the private service and foreign capital sector. A joke which I often heard in Slo-

vakia confirmed this trend. It said that even advertisements for cleaning jobs demanded knowledge in German language skills. The young women had understood this lesson and mobilized the resources they had left: education, creativity, mobility and a vision of their future.

“If you want you can find a job at Slovakia. You just have to try hard.” Marta is determined about that. She was working at a Slovakian bank partly owned by a German one and went as au pair to Germany. Although she considered the working conditions as domestic worker as humiliating she saw no other affordable opportunity to improve her poor German: “I do everything to learn German. Then I can get a better place at the bank.” So quite a lot also extended their stay as an au pair in Germany in order to finish their German language courses with a certificate which enabled them to be employed as elementary school teacher at Slovakia. Others realized that the competition in the field of language skills was growing as more and more Slovakian women went abroad. Therefore they tried to go to another western European country to learn a second foreign language, because “two were better as one” as some au pairs put it.

In the light of few economic or social capital of their parents they rationally tried to enhance their intercultural and knowledge capital not to loose out in the transformation. In view of the deteriorating educational and social infrastructure of their home country they developed informal, transnational strategies – a move which was quite often supported by the whole family. The au pair migration is therefore to be seen as an individual and family based qualification strategy with the aim to enhance one’s own chances after the return. In regard of the other possibilities the young women had at hand it is a highly functional practice to cope with the social risks experienced by the transformation processes. Temporary migration is in this sense a individual transformation strategy.

TRANSNATIONALIZING SOCIAL RISKS: ONE FOOT AT EACH COUNTRY

But many women once experienced the migration extended their one-year au pair stay and some managed to stay in Germany for years by commuting to and fro. Apart from other reasons one of the main criteria for staying or leaving were the developments at home and their comparison with the conditions in Germany. And the women had enough occasions to compare when they communicated with friends still living at Slovakia or traveled home due to the visa requirements: “Back home I only would hang on the dole as many of my friends are and I cannot just sit around”, said Vera after her last visit. Also some parents tried to persuade their daughters to extend their stay bridging longer the bad situation of their home country even when the women wanted to return. In view of this also the migrational strategy of commuting over years between Slovakia and Germany appears in a different light. It is definitely not a new practice by Eastern Europeans taking into account empirical studies on traveling Eastern Europeans far before the fall of the Iron Curtain. These

traces seem to be taken up today on a surprisingly wide scale (MOROKVASIC 1994; WESSELY 1999). But traditional social science theories of migration, conceptualizing it as a one-directional move of emigration and immigration as uprooting and reintegration, either could not recognize these forms of mobility as migration. Or they perceived those multi-local living practices as deficient, “the marginal man” torn in between two environments (see BASH-SCHILLER et al. 1994). Certainly these mobile patterns are owed to the strict immigration regulations of Schengen-Europe. On the other side the short distance between the neighboring Eastern and Western countries makes the shuttling easier.

But the apparently unsteady and indecisive multi-local practices of the young women are to be understood in their own right as a migration strategy well adapted to the changing social, economic and cultural landscapes of their home country as well as well adapted to the possibilities the countries of immigration had to offer. Shuttle migration is a flexible and risk minimizing strategy of using the whole transnational space and to evaluate the chances and difficulties which each environment had to offer. With one foot in each country the women explored if their cultural and knowledge capital gained during migration was enough to resettle with both feet at home. Or if they had to stand the hard work as a domestic servant further on in order to improve their financial and cultural capital. So many tried to keep both options open: while having a work-place at a German family they attempted to pass the entrance examinations or to find a job at Slovakia. Some migrant women lived for several years a life which was functionally divided between both countries realizing their aims there where it was possible. This mobile and multi-sited lifestyle seems to be the “new” lifestyle of the age of neoliberal globalization in the Western and the Eastern European countries and the commuting migrant *the* social and cultural figure of it. The US cultural anthropologist Michael Kearney argues in his research on transnational migration in the Americas that this transnationalized mobility has to be understood not only as a creative cultural practice of survival – as many cultural anthropological accounts on globalization intend (cf. Appadurai) – but as well as a new form of social reproduction forced to live a transnational flexible life. For Kearney these multi-sited life projects are the outcome of a forced spatial separation of the site of the purchase and expenditure of labour from the sites of its reproduction pushed forward by the post-industrial states of the West, so that the locus of production and reproduction lies in two different national spaces. This is mainly achieved by the restrictive migration policies which refuse the right to settlement but do not hinder that its economies heavily rely on “cheap migrant” labour: “The task of effective immigration policy is not to stop the movements but to separate labour from the jural person within it is embodied” (KEARNEY 1991: 58). On the other hand he can show that the countries of the South and East of the globe push as well transnational life projects of sections of their inhabitants as a new development strategy. It seems as if the transnational mobility as one of the few means and resources migrants as Nadja have is turned into a productive factor which is economically appropriated by the sending and receiving countries alike. One can even say it is produced by the different policies which let migrants in but on a precarious basis

without granting them the rights and full possibilities for their social and cultural reproduction. But the biographies of the young migrant women show as well that the political economical appropriation never fully takes over as the actors were able to realize aspirations and desires e.g. enjoying the liberty of consumerism or their independence as young women from their original family which transgress the governing logic.

TRANSMIGRATION AS IDENTITY TRANSFORMATION

This risk minimizing strategy of moving back and forth evading the difficulties and combining the opportunities of each context is filled with uncertainties and risks itself whereby sexual exploitation is the one mostly mentioned in public discourse of women migration. The impression which the recently growing anthropological studies on transmigration (BASH-SCHILLER et al. 1994) also tend to give of free floating people successfully constructing hybrid identities is in this respect rather another form of exotization. As the migrants are localizing themselves under specific and highly precarious conditions there are also these women who do not come to terms with smoothly integrating the two socially, culturally and emotionally different situations. They will eventually decide for one option as many women who either could not stand any longer their humiliating position as domestic workers and went back to Slovakia. Or they could not keep up any longer with the social cultural pressures for female purity of their country of origin and tried to fully settle down at Germany.

But also the women who returned did not go back with the same visions and subject positions as they had left. They transformed themselves during their migration which formerly was aimed to cope with the upheavals of the transformation processes. Most of these women voiced very strongly at the end of their stay a highly gendered discourse of newly found independence and developed self-determination. And here we have another turn in their self-explanations why they left home: in retrospective they suddenly defined these abilities and identity constructions as one of the most important aim of their migration. They unexpectedly described their family-bound living at Slovakia as narrow and critiqued the silent forces of gendered normalization. And they proclaimed newly constructed orientations and non-material life-qualities which reminded me rather of post-modern perspectives. So they rejected to work as hard for material gains as their parents did and rather wished to find a job for self-realization and to set up a life for themselves. They did not overtly question the socially accepted patterns of female biography but claimed to explore the world first – postponing marriage and motherhood. In the described environment of risk and fragmentation the young women were creating new subject-positions and fabricated biographical projects which transgressed the cultural ascribed status-quo. As people have to make sense and act in daily live there are appropriations, tactics and thus new constitutions. What will be the impact of these mobilized women on the transformation processes and the social and cultural landscape of the societies involved? This, I can only assume right now but what I can

outline in my last sentences is the impact of these mobile transformation strategies on the traditional conceptions of “transformation” and “uncertainty” in the late modern age. For one, transformation processes can no longer be studied as isolated national or regional phenomena. The restructuring processes in Western and in Eastern Europe are not only politically and economically related to and dependent on each other as it becomes obvious by the EU-migration policy which stands at the core of the so called EU-accession process (WALLACE–SIDORENKO 1999; ROGERS 2001). The traces and practices of mobility and migration also create a transeuro-pean social and cultural space of interconnections and exchanges (PRIES 1998). This will have unexpected repercussions on the cultural and social fabric of the societies in the West and the East: creating new gendered and racialized divisions of labor, social inequalities and relations as well as new identifications and cultural practices. The case of the au pair migration reveals the double face of these processes between exploitation and new opportunities: As Western European middle-class women can nowadays delegate the domestic work by hiring an Eastern European au pair (LUTZ 2000; YOUNG 1998). But this case shows as well that the transnational space also opens up new opportunities. The au pair women cannot only build upon their economical and knowledge capital gained in the migration later on at home, they also construct new subject-positions and manage to stabilize their biographical projects.

This leads me to my second point: The definition of uncertainty and the cultural construction of risk are highly situated ones as the articulations of the young Slovakian women show. It entails the retrospective perception or projection that the former collective identities were stable and the social world promised security and firm social routines. But as we heard the young women got highly critical about the traditional family-patterns and normalized female biography – two spheres which seem at least to continue under the rapid changes. Especially for women modernity and its socio-political articulation in the Western world – liberal democracy and the welfare-state – meant their highly ambivalent and hierarchical integration by exclusion from certain spheres and subject positions. Also the socialist gender regime implied highly ambivalent cultural and social gender identities and practices. Following the US cultural anthropologist Kathrin Verdery I understand it as a one-sided emancipation project through employment which left the family relations untouched. Thereby most of the domestic labor remained feminized and notions of sexually defined differences still dominated (VERDERY 1996). Nearly all reports on women specific experiences of socialism are describing this ambivalence as double and triple burden leading to total exhaustion of women (KICZKOVÁ–FARKASOVÁ 1993).

I do not want to deny the newly arising tremendous problems caused by the rapid transformation towards a capitalist economy, a democratic system, westernization and related new aspirations and cultural uncertainties (see KOSZTOLÁNYI 2000). But on the level of everyday social practice which for a long time has not restricted itself to the local or national terrain the erosion and fragmentation process also entails dimensions of hybridization and pluralisation which for some people opens up new empowering spaces. It is not surprising that the master narratives find it hard to read these informal, silent and hybrid practices.

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