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Hoping for Others: Entangled Emotional States of ›Russian Germans‹ and the Multifaceted Aspects of ›Successful‹ Migration

Abstract

In this article I seek to analyze migrants' worlds and explore how hope shapes the trajectories of their lives. My central question is this: What is the role of migration as an enactment of hope for those whose lives change due to the move? While I agree that hope is a crucial driving force for finding or achieving a better future, ›a good life‹, it is necessary to distinguish whose vision of the future that hope is tailored to. The stories I present are those of persons who emigrated from the former USSR to Germany about 30 years ago. Currently, ›Russian Germans‹ (*Russlanddeutsche*) are perceived in Germany as an ›established‹ group compared to those who arrived in Germany mainly after the ›long summer of migration‹ in 2015. The ›establishment‹ of this group in Germany is often seen as a model success story (Klingenberg 2019). But what exactly does success or establishment look like? And for whom (see Elias and Scotson 1993)? Here, I would like to counter the model minority narrative by uncovering the more complicated realities at stake. Based predominantly on biographical interviews, I offer finer reflections on the lives of migrants from the former USSR in Western Europe, on their personal experience of decision-making and its consequences, and their entangled emotional states. Multiple belongings, as well as nostalgia, it transpires play a key role in their stories. Like Pettit and Ruijtenberg (2019), my contribution points to feelings of being stuck ›on the other side‹ in the destination country after migration.

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Keywords

Migration from Soviet Union to Germany, ›Russian Germans‹, hope, entangled emotional states, nostalgia

Hoffen für andere: Verschränkte Gefühlslagen von ›Russlanddeutschen‹ und die vielfältigen Aspekte ›erfolgreicher‹ Migration

Zusammenfassung

In diesem Artikel versuche ich, die Lebenswelten von Migranten zu analysieren und zu untersuchen, wie die Hoffnung den Verlauf ihres Lebens bestimmt. Meine zentrale Frage lautet wie folgt: Welche Rolle spielt die Migration als Ausdruck der Hoffnung für diejenigen, deren Leben sich durch die Migration verändert? Ich stimme zwar zu, dass Hoffnung eine entscheidende Triebkraft ist, um eine bessere Zukunft, ein ›gutes Leben‹, zu finden oder zu erreichen, aber es muss unterschieden werden, auf wessen Vision der Zukunft diese Hoffnung zugeschnitten ist. Die von mir vorgestellten Geschichten stammen von Personen, die vor etwa 30 Jahren aus der ehemaligen UdSSR nach Deutschland ausgewandert sind. Derzeit werden ›Russlanddeutsche‹ in Deutschland als ›etablierte‹ Gruppe wahrgenommen, im Gegensatz zu denjenigen, die vor allem nach dem »langen Sommer der Migration« im Jahr 2015 nach Deutschland gekommen sind. Die »Etablierung« dieser Gruppe in Deutschland wird oft als vorbildliche Erfolgsgeschichte gesehen (Klingenberg 2019). Doch wie genau sieht Erfolg oder Etablierung aus? Und für wen (see Elias und Scotson 1993)? Hier möchte ich dem Narrativ der vorbildlichen Minderheit etwas entgegensetzen, indem ich die komplizierteren Realitäten aufdecke, um die es geht. Auf der Grundlage überwiegend biografischer Interviews biete ich genauere Überlegungen zum Leben von Migranten aus der ehemaligen UdSSR in Westeuropa, zu ihren persönlichen Erfahrungen mit Entscheidungen und deren Folgen sowie zu ihren verschränkten Gefühlslagen. Es stellt sich heraus, dass Mehrfachzugehörigkeiten und Nostalgie eine Schlüsselrolle in ihren Geschichten spielen. Wie Pettit und Ruijtenberg (2019) verweist auch mein Beitrag auf das Gefühl, nach der Migration im Zielland »auf der anderen Seite« festzusitzen.

Schlagwörter

Migration aus der Sowjetunion nach Deutschland, ›Russlanddeutsche‹, Hoffnung, verschränkte Gefühlslagen, Nostalgie

»Some balance must be possible between the world into which we are thrown without asking and the world we imagine we might bring into being by dint of what we say and do.«

(Jackson 1995, p. 123)

Introduction

»When Maria called me to clarify the interview details with her old and sick mother, she was quite nervous. She sighed from time to time and kept apologizing for her broken voice. Greta, her mother, had only been out of the hospital for a few days and neither Maria nor the nurses knew exactly how long she would live. Nonetheless, Maria had a firm commitment from her for me. Greta was determined to talk to me about her life and to do so as quickly as possible. However, it was very important for Maria to talk to me personally beforehand. She wanted to ›get to know‹ me and get an idea of what exactly I wanted from her mother. While speaking, she told me: ›It might be interesting for you to see how she fluctuates. Over these 30 years, she fluctuates. As if two persons live inside her. All those she had contact with in Kazakhstan [Greta is a German from Kazakhstan] are dead and she is very grateful to the German state, as a social welfare state, for her health treatment. [She means that if not for thorough and expensive treatment, Greta would already be dead.] But then when she is emotional, homesick, she gets really angry and says that her life is worth nothing here. That it was a mistake to emigrate.« [Field diary, 19.8.2021, Osnabrück]

The aim of this article is to critically reflect on the meaning of the concept of ›migration as hope‹ (Jackson 2007, 2013; Pine 2014; Frederiksen 2014; Kleist and Thorsen 2016; Pettit and Ruijtenberg 2019).¹ Using different ethnographic examples and using ethnography's critically creative potential, I intend to destabilize and complicate the concept of hope (Crapanzano 2003, p. 4; cf. Miyazaki 2006, p. 147; Frederiksen 2014, p. 32; Zigon 2009, p. 254) and study its ›specific formations‹, which develop due to spatiotemporal changes (Kleist and Jansen 2016, p. 7; see also Bryant and Knight 2019).² Specifically, my analysis regards hope in the context of the worlds of those who migrated from the former Soviet Union to Germany. In exploring how the objectives of hope shape and evoke their life trajectories, my central question concerns the role of migration as an enactment of hope for those affected by life changes due to the move. What are the connections between hope as a guide to action,

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2 To explore these formations, Nauja Kleist and Stef Jansen (2016, p. 8) pose questions, such as what do different people hope for? And how does this hope develop (if at all) over time?

the people who hope, and those for whom hope is expressed? Answers to these questions are by no means straightforward as concepts such as hope can have different, sometimes contradictory, connotations.

In addition, decisions for migration are inherently complex and people often experience them as a process of reinterpretation of past happenings, sometimes even as a loss of control over events or the ability to act. The choice made can later be assessed very differently, depending on how one has fared after the migration, as a purely pragmatic decision, a sacrifice, or a mistake. But migrants will not remain indecisive and pensive about whether it was wrong or right to leave, when a certain satisfaction and a harmonious feeling with the new environment has occurred: the feeling that one is exactly where one wanted to be and that the drastic break in one's life that migration constituted was worth it both physically and emotionally. At the very least, migrants hope to end up in an environment where they feel better than before, or where they know others close to them are better off than before. Furthermore, if migrants feel that they have made a sacrifice, then they hope for gratitude and recognition from others: family members will thus dispel any gloomy feelings, and the migrant will make peace with him- or herself.

The research material I present below shows that the emotional states of migrants can be much more complex than the binary categorization of being ›satisfied/dissatisfied,‹ or of the migration having been ›worthwhile‹ or a ›failure.‹ Migration might turn out to be a mistake for oneself but can be viewed as worthwhile by close persons and loved ones, or vice versa.

Therefore, in my argument I plead for moving away from a dominant perspective on motivation, integration and success and to focus instead on the complexity and ambiguity of migrant expectations and aspirations, taking into account the multilayered nature of transformations after the move. My contribution will outline and explain entangled feelings of being stuck ›on the other side‹ in the destination country after migration (see Pettit and Ruijtenberg 2019). By ›being stuck‹ I mean suffering a big emotional blow when the state of affairs (in the case of my interlocutors, mainly of a psychological nature) drastically deteriorates after migration, but the person knows very well there is no longer a realistic way back and life needs to continue like this on account of family members who could benefit from the new living environment and conditions.

The narratives demonstrated in this paper – how exactly the interlocutors tell their stories and what kind of emotions they express in which passage of the narrative – reveal emotional experiences that are still under-researched in migration scholarship (Pettit and Ruijtenberg 2019, p. 12; cf. Jackson 2013). In the foreground are feelings related to having multiple belongings (such as ethnicity, gender, or class) and a strong performance of nostalgia. Hence

another central question: Why do migrants from the former USSR in Germany mourn elements of Soviet life, describing them as good?

The interviewees, who emigrated about 30 years ago, are in a remarkable situation as migrants. On the one hand, they are migrants because they have an observable history of migration behind them.³ On the other hand, and according to citizenship laws in Germany, they belong to the German nation and have full citizenship rights. However, ›belonging‹ is in itself a much-debated condition in this ambivalent situation. They are considered Germans based on their legally defined German ethnic origin, which, however, could be culturally and socially contested (Ipsen-Peitzmeier and Kaiser 2006; Römhild 1998). Nevertheless, the status of belonging gave this group of people a head start and a better chance for a new life in the destination country, compared to other types of migrants. Due to this »legally privileged form of immigration« (Darieva 2006, p. 352), they received citizenship and various forms of support (cf. Strobl 2006, p. 88).

Nowadays, these ›Russian Germans‹ (*Russlanddeutsche*) are perceived in Germany as an ›old‹, ›well-integrated‹ and ›established‹ group, compared to those who arrived in Germany mainly after the »long summer of migration« in 2015.⁴ The ›establishment‹ of this group in Germany is often declared as a model success story (Panagiotidis 2020; Klingenberg 2019). Countering this model minority narrative, I would argue that such generalizing arguments do not help us uncover the more complicated realities of everyday life. On closer examination, we know very little about the contexts at stake. What exactly does ›success‹ or ›establishment‹ look like, and for whom (see Elias and Scotson 1993)?⁵ Whether ›completely‹ or ›insufficiently‹ successful, ›Russian Germans‹ in present-day Germany are still seen as ›incorrectly socialized‹, just like the East Germans who grew up under socialism. They are still

3 Post-Soviet migrants are the largest immigrant group in the Federal Republic of Germany today. Out of almost 3.5 million people, 2.73 million have migrated themselves. The main countries of origin are the Russian Federation, Kazakhstan and Ukraine (Panagiotidis 2021, p. 17).

4 The term has become established in the social sciences. Ethnic Germans from the former USSR are referred to as ›Russian Germans‹. The term is ascriptive. Those belonging to this group refer to themselves as Germans. Moreover, the term is imprecise, as the immigrants come not only from Russia, but also from other parts of the former Soviet Union. For this reason, I place the term in inverted commas.

5 The authors analyze relationships between different groups in one particular locality, Winston Prava, conditionally divide them into established and outsiders, and throughout the book describe inclusion and exclusion processes and mechanisms in the interaction. There are ideas, assumptions, and rules that have to be fulfilled and realized to be considered successful or established. However, these assumptions, codes of conduct, or rules of the game are perceived and interpreted differently within groups, as well as changing over time (Elias and Scotson 1993).

perceived as »internal others« (see Kaneff 2022, p. 215; see also in Gallinat 2022).

The emic perspective is also dissimilar. First, not everyone from this group was equally successful, and, secondly, not everyone thought that they were successful. The understanding of ›success‹ or ›failure‹ varied according to both subjective and official perceptions in reception centers, integration offices, institutions, and/or workplaces. Moreover, something similar to ›success‹ and ›establishment‹ should be analyzed from multiple perspectives, by focusing differently on ›established‹ or ›outsider‹ relations (Elias and Scotson 1993).

Hence, I would like to pose the following questions: How do those who migrated judge their decision in retrospect? Was it, in their opinion, the right decision? What and *for whom* were their precise hopes then, and to what extent have they been fulfilled? Do they feel successful? With these questions I distance myself from *etic* (the official, majority or state perspective on ›Russian Germans‹) and focus on *emic* contexts and migrants' individual perceptions.

Reflections on Migration as a Symbol and Enactment of Hope

As mentioned above, a concept like hope can be instilled with varied meanings. Vincent Crapanzano's (2003) approach regards the category of hope as »panoramic,« meaning that it can simultaneously have different connotations. He understands it as a precipitate of interaction or interlocution (Crapanzano 2003, p. 6), where hope has several dimensions and figures in complex ways in these communications. Furthermore, hope is entangled with desires and articulated in, and/or accompanied by, diverse emotions. It is characterized by symbols with multiple meanings that have, in linguistic terms, enormous pragmatic force. They evoke a world, a society, a moral order and a psychic state (Crapanzano 2003, p. 6) Another author who foregrounded the uneasy relationship between emotions, desires, and hopes in relation to migration is Martin Demant Frederiksen (2014). He argues that hope cannot be associated only with positive feelings but may also be fraught with negative ones such as anxiety, discomfort, and disappointment (Frederiksen 2014, p. 32). Hope is mixed with fear, and so hoped-for future projects are also met with ambiguous feelings, within spectrums of hope and fear (Frederiksen 2014, p. 32). Such ambivalent and entangled emotions of hope and fear, positive and negative feelings, influence the decision to migrate and play a central role in the interviews. While I agree that hope is a crucial driving force for finding or achieving a better future, ›a good life‹, it is necessary to distinguish *whose* vision of the future that hope is tailored to.

As a starting point for my own considerations, I take Frances Pine's statement that migration is both a future-oriented and backward-looking process and ›involves movement between different temporalities, spaces and regimes of value‹ (Pine 2014, p. 95). Hope emerges in complex ways in this movement, with migration itself appearing as a symbol and an enactment of hope but simultaneously as a reaction to despair in the present (Pine, 2014, p. 96).

Based on Pine's approach, I will be exploring three specific bundles of arguments that allow us to narrow down the category of ›migration as hope‹.

The first argument is that there is a continuous shifting back and forth between times and spaces of home and elsewhere, and betwixt regimes of values (cf. Pine 2014, p. 100). Migrants often exist contemporaneously in diverse worlds (Glick-Schiller et al. 1992) and in two presents (Pine 2014, p. 100). They sometimes live in conditions that are difficult to bear, but this present is hidden from close persons elsewhere and can serve as a strategy for creating affluence for themselves and their dependents in the future.⁶ To put it another way, migrants *represent* themselves differently to different people and groups. Navigating between different worlds has additional goals. The motive is often to find a purposeful combination of old and new experiences that will be better suited to ›actually lived‹ life.

Secondly, the ›complicating‹ of hope as a category requires a closer look at ordinary elements of ›real‹ life – in other words, to observe hope in the act of living (see Zournazi 2002, p. 18). I agree with Jarett Zigon (2009), that ›hope in its various aspects is necessary for the very activity of living a social life‹ (p. 257).

Thirdly, migration, as a symbol or expression of hope, does not necessarily correspond to one's own decision. By this I mean that it is not planned and carried out (only) for oneself. In other words, the decision to emigrate implies a sacrifice (at least from one's own perspective) and can evoke particular negative feelings, in addition to positive ones. On the one hand, the person is happy to be in a position to help their relatives and loved ones. On the other hand, the restlessness and uncertainty about how and whether everything

6 ›As family and village continue in their absence, the migrant occupies a kind of future position or vague point in the future – the point of their return, of receipt of remittances, of future investments, and of reunification of families. In this future position, the poorly paid earnings are transformed into immense social and monetary value in the village. In the migrant's present, she or he often lives in terrible housing, eats badly, buying only the cheapest food, and works two or more jobs. But in the imagined future, back in the village, they have created from this suffering a new affluence for themselves and their dependents‹ (Pine 2014, p. 100).

will work out creates fears about whether the sacrifice of giving up one's own life for the unknown and starting everything anew will be worthwhile.

Hence, at the center of my analysis is neither the ›endemic‹ migration that emerges as a way of life and major strategy for households or kin groups nor ›crisis‹ migration in response to war, economic collapse or other kinds of trauma (cf. Pine 2014, p. 100). Rather, the focus here is on those individuals who did not consider emigration as desirable for their narrow individual interests yet proceeded with the move anyway. In the narratives I present, migration was undertaken entirely for the sake of others, either parents or children.

As widely emphasized in migration research, the decision to leave is most often made in a social, family context (Brettell 2000). Research on remittances and labor migration shows that the hope of improving the life of those left behind is a central driving factor (see Zmiejewski and Mühlfried 2022); Cvajner 2019; Mataradze and Mühlfried 2009). Generally, for both labor and forced migrants, the issue of ›migration as hope‹ already seems to have been widely addressed. What, then, can we say that is new about ›Russian Germans‹? What is different? From the narratives of my interlocutors the expression of agency is missing, and the question here may be whether it is a strategy to frame deep confusion and ›not getting along‹ with such a dense diversification of opportunities, and of social, economic, and political hopes and necessities. Or, instead, is referring to migration in terms of hope for others merely a way to justify one's own passivity? To be sure, the analysis needs to take into account the specifics of the circumstances such as age, gender, and intergenerational position. Is the person young and in good health, or is he or she already close to retirement and in poor health? Is the person migrating as a parent or grandparent or as a child or adolescent? Another strand is gender-specific, as discussed below. What further temporal and social contexts determine the migrants' experiences? We should not forget that these people migrated both before, during, and after the break-up of the USSR, and therefore had experienced ›Soviet life‹ differently. I try to clarify the above-mentioned questions with the help of my ethnographic materials.

The interviewees suffer from entangled emotional states, a mixture of desperation and hope, of optimistic and pessimistic feelings, which torment them. The migrants feel optimism and do recast their hope toward the future, and that is a good feeling. At the same time, however, listening to my interlocutors' narratives I hear that they do not perceive this optimism, nor do they recast hope directly for themselves, and this experience is emotionally very exhausting for them. »Hope drowns the fear« (»*Die Hoffnung ersäuft die Angst*«), states Ernst Bloch in his famous work *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* (*The Principle of Hope*) (1985a [1938–1947], p. 126). But if this is the case, my ques-

tion is: Can hope act to counter despair, when the self's desires, expectations, goals, and potentials are predominantly sidelined, i.e., when the »not-yet-conscious« and »unrealized-unfulfilled« (Bloch 1985a, p. 129 [my translation]) is mainly focused on the lives of others? Or, to put it another way, if »hope is a method« for living, and a kind of social resource for the individual (Miyazaki 2004), what happens when it is activated toward others rather than for oneself? Being optimistic and hoping for others can play an even »crueler« role (Berlant 2011) than being optimistic for oneself, since it does not even consider one's very personal needs and desires or ambitions for expansive transformation. »The change that is gonna come« is not for the affected themselves (cf. Berlant, 2001, p. 2).

The gender aspect plays a significant role in my analysis because here the main protagonists are women. Their stories do very well to reflect the overall picture of employment and gender relations in Germany for this particular group, as demonstrated by Haug and Sauer (2007). According to these authors, many women could not realize their career aspirations due to the gender-specific structure of the labor market in Germany and because of the lack of compatibility between work and family life (Haug and Sauer 2007, p. 37).

Imagining Pasts

I met Greta (85) and Anastasia (66) during my three-month ethnographic fieldwork in Osnabrück in the summer and autumn 2021.⁷ While Anastasia was introduced to me by her neighbor, I ›encountered‹ Greta myself when I enquired at a care service in Schinkel, a district in Osnabrück where I lived during my stay. Both women are ethnic Germans from Central Asia. Their migration stories show certain similarities in terms of their decisions to move – not being willing to leave but then having to do so anyway. Although I have heard more than two such stories, I will focus here on these particular examples since they offer rich and representative material for analysis. Anastasia felt compelled to follow her parents and siblings, whereas Greta did so for her own children, who were already adults at the time. Both women described it as psychologically difficult to get used to their ›new‹ lives after migration and to deal with difficulties resulting from age in a new environ-

7 The research was conducted within the framework of the research group ›Ambivalences of Sovietness. Diaspora nationalities between collective experiences of discrimination and individual normalisation, 1953–2023‹. The data involves participant observation, biographical narrative interviews, as well as informal conversations, family photographs, newspaper clippings, and social media entries. During the field research, 28 interviews were conducted in three languages: German, Russian, and Georgian. The conversations and interviews presented here were conducted mainly in Russian (with German terms mixed in).

ment and in a different familial position. Anastasia had not yet managed »to find a space for the self« as she told me, and finally planned to do so after her retirement. Greta was already over 50 when she came to Germany. She could no longer pursue her own occupation, which she had done until leaving Central Asia, and limited herself to the role of helping other family members. For instance, she supported the family with childcare for as long as her health permitted. In this sense, she had time for herself, but could not find an appropriate space where she could realize herself or find joy. During my visit Greta seemed to be quite exhausted and depressed.

I want to expand on these stories in more detail to better understand the women's reasons and motivations for migration, as well as their attitudes and perceptions of their own life after the move. I argue that the feeling of having acted primarily for ›others‹ at the point of emigration and, having largely held oneself back over time after migration, has had a huge impact on their self-esteem and on their relationships with their surroundings. Although at first glance their migrations seem to be ›successful‹ in a broad sense – both lead peaceful lives in Germany without bloody conflicts, death, existential fears, or economic hardship and with benefits from social security – they still do not feel happy.⁸ The sense of ›being stuck‹ in life acutely came after migration for these women. Such thoughts could explain why both broke down in tears and expressed grief while talking about their own lives before migration.

Despite similarities of gender, origin, ethnic background, and family history, there are also differences caused by age disparities. Anastasia came to Germany at the age of 37, while Greta was already over 50. Their lives took different paths due to job opportunities and their self-realization as independent people. Anastasia's hope to achieve something for herself was not yet completely gone during the time of my visits, while Greta's narration felt like she was ›gathering strength‹ one last time to trust me and my readers with her own story. Apart from that, hardly anything had any meaning to her.

Why Still ›Clinging‹ to the Past? Anastasia

When I rang Anastasia's doorbell and she opened the door, she looked indecisive. I wondered for a moment whether she was going to let me in, but then she opened the door completely and invited me inside. She apologized for not having managed to clean up for the ›guest‹ and offered me something to

⁸ All the conditions listed here became the fate of millions of people in the former Soviet space.

drink. We sat down on the sofa in the living room. The patio door was open, and I could see Anastasia's small vegetable patch. I inspected the room with a quick glance. In the cabinet were old photos (as it turned out later, of her deceased parents). On the wall hung a large map of the world and on the table lay piles of dried basil leaves. The smell was just wonderful. There was a bicycle without wheels by the patio door with tools on the floor beside it. Anastasia had been working before I arrived. At the back of the armchair stood a decorative tree on which hung a sign with the text ›for four weeks I don't have to do anything!‹; I realized later during our conversation, that Anastasia had only very recently retired. Now she plans to live her own life the way she would like to by listening to herself and her own wishes and needs.

I pointed to the sign on the tree with a smile and she smiled back. Of course she will do some things, she said, because she can't do without it. She feels like she has worked all her life, but now she does not owe anyone anything. Now she is free.

As I already mentioned, Anastasia was 37 [born in 1955] when she arrived in Germany with her husband and two-and-a-half-year-old son. She could not stand a life without her family, without her parents and siblings, who were already in Germany at that time. Despite getting permission to leave three times, she simply could not bring herself to do so, but over time the feelings of guilt toward her parents became stronger and stronger.

›They [parents] get older. When you're younger, you have more optimism. But the older you get, you don't have much excuse. When something happens [to old parents], where are you? You can't just be there. I arrived and for the first few years I just cried. [When she talks about it, she starts to cry.] I cried so hard that my mother told me to go back. It was just all good for me in Kazakhstan«.

Anastasia hardly speaks about her now-deceased husband. She mentions him only fleetingly while talking about how she has to do many things on her own. For this reason, I cannot say how the husband felt about the decision at the time. What is clear is that he supported his wife and left the country with her.

Anastasia had a difficult start in Germany. When she arrived, the *Kabel Metall* factory in Osnabrück had just closed. She had hoped to find work there as she had finished a vocational training program (*профессиональное училище. Техникум*) in Kazakhstan and had experience working with metals. Instead, Anastasia was offered a job in a bakery where she had to be out of the house by half past three in the morning. As a result, she was faced with the depressing dilemma of either having to leave her toddler somewhere or be unemployed.

»We didn't know that from home [USSR]. Even if you moved, you could get a job. Jobs were all over the place. I was so desperate and ready for anything. After a while, I could only find hard physical work [in Germany]. I was mixing concrete, hauling pavers, building parking lots. I was fed up. Every year I was unemployed for a certain period of time. Then I found work at the cemetery as a gardener's helper and that's where I stayed until I retired.«

In these passages we find a number of reasons why Anastasia is still so attached to her life before migration. During my visits she was hardly able to tell me anything positive about her life after migration. It simply became worse than before, and this situation lasted for a very long time. She could not practice her profession, she was supposed to work very hard, she felt remorse toward her young son, and her relationships with her siblings did not survive emotional clashes. »I really can't give up everything for them« was the short summary of this story. What Anastasia means by this is that she has already sacrificed herself for her siblings and parents and emigrated unwillingly. However, she no longer agrees to live according to her siblings' wishes, for instance, by moving closer to them. I could hear from her story that, after entering the country, she was quite careful to comply with the family's wishes regarding where to move to, making it more comfortable for their aging parents. Again, the husband and his points of view in all these stories remain unclear, as she avoids talking about the deceased.

Anastasia's story gives us the opportunity to complicate the picture of a migrant's emotional states. Her ›depressive‹ mood is perhaps not primarily a result of migration per se but of developments within her family afterwards. She rather laments with bitter feelings her decision to migrate in ›hoping for others,‹ having realized that everything did not turn out so well.

Although her sister lives in Osnabrück, they hardly have a relationship. She was not even willing to contact her for me, which she was very happy to do for a neighbor. Her brother lives in Bavaria and geographical distance does not make the situation any easier. Her parents and husband are now deceased and only her son lives in Osnabrück. Anastasia's life basically consisted of work and sleep, and she describes her normal working day at the beginning as follows.

»When I went to work in the morning, my three-year-old son was still asleep. I put all the clothes in piles. He got dressed alone and went downstairs to the second floor where my parents lived. They had the door open so that the little boy could go in and crawl into bed with them. That's how I worked.«

Anastasia found her life in Kazakhstan orderly. She had a husband, a healthy son, a job, a small flat, good neighbors, and friends. She didn't have much,

but enough.⁹ In Germany, she had to start over. The future was unpredictable and she felt burdened by unemployment. When she did get a job, it was very exhausting so that she had hardly any time for leisure and was emotionally depressed. Dealing with her own struggles in everyday life in Germany was different and was much more complicated. She had to deal with bureaucracy's »impersonal force field« such as protocols, indecipherable documents, abstract rules, and official forms of validation (cf. Jackson, 2007, p. 115).

»One had to relearn where which office was. There was a lot of paperwork. In Kazakhstan, there was only one household book. At most you had to read the electricity meter. Here [in Germany] you need to make a note for every fart. You really do need a note even for a fart, because of CO₂. There you had one notebook for the house; here you need three folders. [She shows with her hand that you need stacks of paper here.] It was a new country [Germany]. You didn't know which door to open.«

Anastasia's disappointment was multidimensional. She suffered losses on a personal as well as a professional level. Contacts from Kazakhstan had been broken off and contacts with loved ones weakened over time because the daily routine was stressful. The knowledge she brought with her was not recognized and although she thought she knew German, she still had to take a language course.

»I should not have to do the course, but I had to. That was the rule. I made jokes with the teacher. I always used words that weren't there in the books for their courses. I didn't need that.«

Her working life (job search, unemployment) was also no consolation to her since it felt very limiting and stressful. Anastasia found the fact that she was no longer in work quite shocking and talked repeatedly about »being unemployed.«

»This attitude, you're just not needed anymore. That is disconcerting. You, your head, your hand is simply no longer needed. This was unimaginable in the USSR. You worked as long as you could. Here, here you are simply no longer needed.«

Anastasia's narrative explains well why she still clings to the past. She is looking for self-esteem and strength. She compares life there and here and looks for explanations for what has happened. She feeds on positive memories from the past to make reality after migration more bearable. Now she has finally reached the point where she can have time only for herself. Everyone she felt guilty or had commitments toward is ›gone‹. Her parents and husband are dead, her siblings are distant and her son is grown up. But Anasta-

⁹ Another interlocutor in her 50s told me something quite similar: »In Kazakhstan, we were doing super well economically. There we had more, our own home, car. We were more mobile and independent. We lost all that here [in Germany].«

sia does not live with dreams. Life has taught her otherwise. She finally tries to perceive and grasp her present reality. Anastasia now wants to enjoy her retirement, grow different types of tomatoes and roses, set up decorative installations for the garden and house and »be free for four weeks«.

At this point, one could also mention that she talks about herself in a contradictory way. On the one hand, she is unhappy that she is not working. On the other hand, she found her jobs exhausting and overwhelming. The key to understanding this apparent contradiction lies in the fact that her work after migration did not correspond to her desires and competences before migration. Slaving hard physically for years and never getting to do the job she was trained for turned out to be emotionally tough.

When I leave, she gives me vegetables from her own garden and dried basil in a bag. She hopes her story will be helpful for my work.

»Trapped in her own soul prison« or How it Feels to Stop Fighting for »joyful hope«¹⁰: Greta

I visited Greta with some trepidation. I was very worried whether my questions would upset a woman in such poor health. After the interview, which lasted about an hour and a half, we spent another hour in the kitchen with tea and cake, where we were joined by her daughter. Quite some time after my visit, I received a phone call from Maria, Greta's daughter; and I can very well remember my anxiety, my stressful palpitations, as to whether my conversation had harmed Greta. But Maria was very cheerful and thanked me with the following words: »You have unconsciously brought about something positive. Mom feels empowered and is glad that you were interested in her story«.¹¹

Greta was born in Kazakhstan in 1936 as the eldest of three sisters, brought up by their mother, who was a single parent. They only spoke Russian at home because their mother thought they would get along better without German. She told me that she no longer had to endure the suffering and discrimination that her parents' generation had to go through during the »Stalinist era«.¹² It was the 1950s and she had many friends, she went to university, and she went to work.

¹⁰ I adopted the term from Mary Zournazi (2002).

¹¹ Maria was therefore very fond of me. We talked on the phone a few times, and, in the end, I visited her in Belm (a town near Osnabrück) to hear her story and to visit the town with her.

¹² What is meant here is the terrible living conditions of ethnic Germans in the Soviet Union during the Second World War and afterwards, the deportations, and internment in camps.

Greta got married and worked as an accountant, and life went along according to its own course. The couple went to work, returned from work, and took care of the kids, who did well at school. Everything was fine, and in 1989 their daughter emigrated to Germany. Greta initially refused to leave, but a year later she and her husband took the decision to follow their daughter. Her son was also already in Germany at the time.

Greta: »I was one of those who didn't want to leave at all. But then I left anyway.«

Nino: »What was your argument? Did you not want to leave your homeland?«

Greta: »I regret that to this day. Nostalgia has remained with me until today. I arrived here, looked at the situation and I did not like it. And even though it was so hard at the beginning with learning, studying, etc., etc., we were freer there [in Kazakhstan].«

Nino: »That is interesting. Can you explain it to me better?«

Greta: »[...] I always say, how I lived my life there, before migration, there will never be such a life again. We could travel to Russia, travel to Georgia. I traveled to the sea. I had my Georgians. I could arrive any time and spend the night with them. On holiday, so to speak [...] and in general, I had a lot of good mates at work too.«

At this point I would like to comment on Greta's statement that she had more freedom in Soviet Kazakhstan than in contemporary Germany. She was not the only one who said something like that during my fieldwork and, to be honest, I was a bit surprised. The statement of being freer during the Soviet than in the post-Soviet period is not alien to me. My interlocutors for another research project in Azerbaijan and Georgia very often said the same, that they could move more freely and that the social and economic life was better. Compared to the poverty, hard life, and political instability that followed the breakup of the USSR, such statements were more comprehensible to me than ones regarding rich Western countries like Germany, equipped with social security benefits and good living conditions. My Osnabrück interlocutors explained this comparison referring to the fact that even though geographically there are more ›free horizons‹ for them in Germany and life is good enough not to fear for one's existence, there is still a lack of social opportunity. Travel is much more expensive than it was in the USSR, so they cannot afford it anymore.

Of course, interlocutors merge different dimensions of place and time. It is less about the difference between the Soviet Union and Germany than about the difference between a ›socialist‹ and a ›capitalist‹ order. Even if they had not migrated, they would probably deploy the same narrative for the good old days. Traveling across the former Soviet republics is equally difficult today for people who never migrated.

After arriving in Germany, Greta tried to keep busy. She took a language course and then an advanced course, but she did not find a job. She was also

unable to build close relationships with locals, where she said she found intolerance to be both palpable and very painful:

»With ours here [When I ask her who these ›ours‹ are, she says they are Germans from the former USSR] it is like that. As there in the USSR, here too there were insults toward us. That the locals pay taxes and we live on it. That always offended me a lot. What did we get out of it? There [in the Soviet Union] you were a fascist, and here who? Ivan the Russian [term taken as an insult for ethnic Russians]?«¹³

Greta's best relationship in her neighborhood is with a younger refugee family from Syria. The young Syrian woman feels very emotionally attached to her and even calls her »Mum«. For a few years, Greta tried to attend events organized by the Russian German Organization *Landsmannschaft der Deutschen aus Russland* in Osnabrück but found no comfort or meaning there either.

Greta stresses that she had always avoided being a burden to her children, choosing to fight through everything herself. She said that she was »cow and ox« at the same time, meaning that her (by now deceased) husband was no big help. Greta has suffered from chronic health problems since 2011 and is now seriously ill.

During the interview, Greta kept emphasizing that she cannot even compare life before and after migration, that there would be nothing even worth reporting after migration. Because her demotivation and inertia were so palpable to me, I asked her if she could tell me at least something that she liked here, in Germany. Greta responded: »It is like a prison here with all kinds of comforts. [In the USSR] there was movement. Everything was turning around. I turned around. And here, there is nothing here.«

Greta's perception is subjective and likely affected by her age. Her life in the USSR was the life of a young energetic woman, whereas she arrived in Germany at a much more mature stage of her life. The chances for the new start were simply not very good.

In the end, Greta summed up her life in Germany as follows:

»What can I say, I lived the good life before the '90s [before migration and during the Soviet times]. There's everything you could want here [in Germany]. Everything completely [om u do], but none of this pleases me [...]. No one presses us here but also no one is interested in us. [...] Life passes so. What do I have here? It's just that the children like it, thank God, and that's their life here. And we will reach the end quietly.«

13 Anastasia also mentioned to me the perceived/assumed difference between ›real‹ Germans and ›arrived‹ ones. »We will never be Germans. They will never recognize us« (Мы никогда не будем немцами. Они никогда не признают нас).

At this point I would like to describe the reasons and motives that led Greta to put aside her own needs and sacrifice herself for the hopes of others, while referring to the interview with her daughter as explanatory material.

In her interview with me, Maria (Greta's daughter) also admitted that she had taken the step of leaving for Germany because of her family, children, husband, and parents-in-law. At that time (1989), her own grandmother and parents had said to her that she could not tear the family apart. So it was with mixed feelings that she landed in Germany. After a few days, however, a feeling of security and freedom took hold of her, a sense that one can live one's life as one desired. Through the unification of Germany and the flow of information, Maria learned about »another life,« »another regime,« which she had never been aware of before. She had simply not thought about it until then. She was content with her life in Kazakhstan where she had friends, work, and family. She was healthy and they had a roof over their heads. She grew up in her own house in a working-class settlement where they had a garden and their own housekeeping arrangements. They had animals, including poultry, basically everything one needs to live, and Maria considers both life (before and after migration) good. They only lacked luxury goods. The difference would be the feeling of security and freedom in Germany. Maria was trained as a nurse after migration and still works as one. She has her own beautiful house in Belm. She owns a car and feels successful. Through her job, she integrated well, developing good contacts with local people. Her path to finding work was easy and she feels accepted in Germany.

Greta is also aware of the success of her own offspring and thanks God that they are doing well in Germany. Furthermore, it is not that she does not see the benefits she receives from the German state, or that she is ungrateful. As we see from Maria's statement at the very beginning, Greta gratefully acknowledges that she is being taken care of. However, she has lost the feeling of joy at what is happening to her personally. In other words, she is happy and content as a mother. Her dreams as a parent have come true. Her children are established and have a better life than they would have had in Central Asia. But the picture changes when it comes to herself as a person.

The way Greta talks about her life after migration, the way she assesses her being in Germany, shows how deeply the feeling of being alienated from reality permeates her perception. Her story could serve as a glaring example of existence in a specific temporal condition of creeping inertial sensibility, where the individual no longer finds joy nor recognizes hope in daily ways (Zournazi 2002, p. 19). This is a condition in which not only the future, but reality itself, is running out of control, and this fact is not even noticed. There is no attempt to change anything; »the meaninglessness of the meaningless«

is accepted (cf. Frederiksen 2017, p. 12). Greta's horizon¹⁴ of a meaningful life has been receding since migration and she no longer sees importance in the fact that »there is always something more yet to come, a side yet to see, an aspect, quality, action, or interaction yet to experience« (Desjarlais and Throop 2011, p. 90).

Similar to Anastasia, Greta tries to draw some positive feelings, such as being proud of her achievements, from the past. However, the inertia and »stuckness« are far more advanced with her and were already there upon her arrival in Germany. She has no strength to change anything or to invest her life experiences before migration into building her own future afterwards. Greta is not able to »live sanely«, which means living acceptably in the social world that is already there and in which one already finds oneself (cf. Zigon 2009, p. 259).

Why Lament for the ›Soviet Good Life‹?

The more I look into the question of why migrants such as Anastasia and Greta, who have come from the USSR to Germany, mourn the ›good‹ Soviet life, the more I end up thinking about understandings of the meaning of life as a human being. In this regard, there are contradictions between the socialist and capitalist worlds that still prevail. The citizens of the Soviet Union grew up with »the grand narrative of progress« (Tompson 2013), and held ideas and ideals of building a better future for humanity together. As a goal, a »person-rich, highly polyphonic solidarity« should be formed (Bloch 1985b, p. 1137: »*personenreiche, höchst vielstimmige Solidarität*«).

On closer examination, we see that this ›progress narrative‹ harmonizes with the attitude of hoping for others. Moreover, although history shows that the reality of Soviet life was far from these ideals, socialization had a formative effect on the lives of individuals. When my interlocutors tried to explain to me what exactly was different about human life in the USSR and in Germany, they often pointed to the dichotomy of ›we‹ versus ›me‹, whereby in the (Soviet) past people's thoughts revolved mainly around the collective good, whereas in contemporary Germany they focus on their individual good. It is disconcerting and painful to feel this change in others' actions and to have to practice it oneself – not only in the present, but also realizing that future actions, desires, and hopes are subject to this new principle of life. Thus, hope becomes »atomized, de-socialized, and privatized [...]. The

¹⁴ According to C. Jason Throop (2016), »The phenomenological notion of horizon highlights the existential fact that humans are necessarily embodied, finite, and positioned beings who are never able to exhaust their experience of the world in which they are emplaced« (p. 38).

dreams of a better world are dreams of a better world for oneself or one's family. It is not just socialism which appears to have died but the very concept of the social itself« (Tompson 2013, p. 5). In the real (capitalistic and neoliberal) world, where surviving through the day has become the dictum of society, common hopes have little place. In general, as I already mentioned in my introduction, in present-day Germany, any way of thinking that has something to do with socialist thinking, be it among former East German citizens or among migrants from the former Soviet Union who were socialized in a socialist and thus ›wrong‹ way, is considered negative and backward per se (see Kaneff 2022, p. 214).

People have made sacrifices for the good of others and it hurts that their choice was not even adequately understood. Their knowledge was ignored and their potential wasted. Because reality seems so cold-blooded and cruel, but also nihilistic, one looks back to the past, where these people believe they had at least one place for themselves. Where they were noticed and accepted, where their ›heads and arms‹ were needed and appreciated, and where their life was ›good‹. This was the place that had nourished and shaped them; this was irrevocably the place that defined who they really were (cf. Jackson 2007, p. 128).

Concluding Thoughts

In this paper I asked about the role of hope in migrants' decision to emigrate, thereby deconstructing the concept of hope itself. I took ›migration as hope‹ (Pine 2014) as the subject of my analysis and argued that, although hope serves as a crucial driving force for finding or achieving a better life, it is necessary to distinguish toward whose vision of the future that hope is adjusted. Furthermore, I argued that migration as a symbol or enactment of hope may well not be about ›one's own‹ life or future and, as such, not planned and carried out for oneself.

I attempted to capture the transformation processes through time and space in the life course of the affected. The results of my endeavor are, in a sense, retrospective reflections of migrants evaluating their lives before and after migration. In doing so, their entangled emotions and the ambiguous notions are recorded as to whether the change caused by migration was worth it. For my analysis I focused on biographical narratives of ›Russian Germans‹, who in contemporary Germany are perceived as ›well-integrated‹ and ›established‹. The ›establishment‹ of this group here is often declared as a model and success story. However, a novelty of my analysis is to complicate the picture of ›successful migration‹/›successful integration‹ in Germany. In my opinion, we still lack the information required for understanding ›suc-

cess« or ›failure« in terms of migrants' own perceptions and those of others. With my contribution, I have begun to fill this gap.

I plead for moving away from a dominant perspective on motivation, integration and success and to focus instead on overlooked aspects such as the diversity and complexity of post-migration emotional experiences. The assessments of what happened and what was achieved in life after migration are very complex and often trigger strong nostalgia for the ›good« (in this case, Soviet) past. The decision to emigrate implies sacrifice and can evoke particular negative feelings in those affected, in addition to positive ones. When analyzing the materials, I asked whether the feeling of sacrifice was not at the same time a kind of justification for ›exit« (deep confusion and restraint) from everyday problems.

My materials have shown that after migration my interlocutors have not tried to ›withdraw« from the problems of family members. Both Anastasia and Greta attended courses and acted so that they would not be a burden to the family. Greta supported the family for as long as she could. Anastasia worked hard physically and adapted her life to the wishes of her family (especially her parents).

Focusing on emotional experiences, I pointed to the condition of ›being stuck« after migration and to receding horizons of hope in persons' lives and explained their reasons for practicing nostalgia with their ›different«, more ›common good-oriented human lives« in the USSR. My interlocutors were disappointed with and hurt by the ›cold calculation« of the capitalist way of thinking in an environment that was new to them. They were emotionally depressed by the fact that neither their knowledge nor their abilities were adequately perceived and valued. They, as personalities, had simply become partially useless and thus dehumanized. But I have also pointed to the entangled states we can observe when hope enters people's lives as a ›social resource« for existence, yet in the interest of others rather than for themselves, leading them to follow a sometimes very long path they did not happily choose.

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