

Going Home, Staying or Emigrating: Former WWII-Forced Labourers in Ukraine, Great Britain and Germany

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Former WWII-forced labourers have dealt with their experiences in various ways. Migrations before, during and after the war have made a lasting impact. So there are individual and collective ways of dealing with these experiences. In an internationally comparative approach, commonalities and differences of these ways will be analysed within the contexts of the respective societal structures, political systems and of the evolving cultures of commemoration since 1945 in three different countries: (1) Ukraine as it was the origin of one of the biggest single national groups of forced labourers; (2) Germany as it was the country that initiated and orchestrated the Europe-wide system of forced labour, but also coerced some of its own citizens to work; and (3) England as it was the most important immigration country for former forced labourers within Europe, while there were also British Prisoners of War who had to perform forced labour; the relation between individual and collective memories with regard to the specific experiences of the former forced labourers is also taken into consideration. Finally, the understanding of the term “forced labour” that has been developed within historiography is contrasted with the subjective evaluations of the people concerned.

Keywords: forced labour, World War II, memories, cultures of commemoration, international comparison

Life After Forced Labour for Nazi Germany

“I would have rather stayed at home. But what can you do?” (IFLDP interview with Hanna M., Ukraine 2005, p. 40, author’s translation). This is what a former Ukrainian forced labourer replied in 2005 during an interview for the International Forced Labourers Documentation Project—where most of the 84 interview transcripts that the author used for his research originate from—when asked whether she would like to turn back the clock to her youth. While this statement is not representative for the entire group of people under consideration, it still gives us an idea as to how deep an impact the forced stay in Germany has had on many of their lives in the immediate aftermath of the war, but sometimes even long after that.

Returning home was the obvious choice for the great majority of the more than ten million forced labourers who survived their forced employment in Nazi Germany. However, a substantial minority of more than one million persons—especially from Eastern Europe—were not too keen on returning to live in their home countries which had come under either direct Soviet rule, temporary occupation of the Red Army or strong long-term influence of the USSR (Union of Socialist Soviet Republics). Most of them were not looking to stay on in Germany either. But even this option gradually came into consideration for those among them for

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whom the complicated emigration procedures from camps within occupied Germany and Austria did not come to fruition, whose state of health was simply too bad to be considered fit for immigration into a third country or who had started relationships with German nationals. Many of those who refused to return home eventually opted to go abroad to start life anew, with North America and Australia common destinations (Wyman, 1989). In the following, the author is going to argue that, at least as much as the experience of forced labour as such, the subsequent migratory experiences, the individual and collective memories derived from those experiences (Green, 2004) and the treatment the people concerned have received from their home or host countries after 1945 (Thonfeld, 2010b) have eventually determined what impact toiling on Germany's wartime economy has had on the further courses of their lives.

Going Home, Staying on or Emigrating

Ukrainians were the biggest single national group of forced labourers, although back then most of them were considered either Polish or Soviet citizens. The vast majority returned home within a couple of months after the war, but usually only after undergoing thorough screening procedures in Soviet assembly camps where they were either sent home or assigned to serve in the Red Army or in labour battalions. Between 5% and 10% of them were even transferred to penal camps for alleged or actual collaboration with the Germans (Goeken-Haidl, 2006). Germany was the country that initiated and orchestrated the vast system of forced labour across Europe during the World War II (Spoerer, 2001). However, there were also Germans among the huge coerced workforce, usually as concentration camp inmates (Plato, 2010). At the same time, Germany also became a new home for some tens of thousands of former forced labourers who eventually started a new life in the country of former torment (Stepien, 1989). Great Britain was the most important immigration country for former forced labourers within Europe with around 50,000 making the way to the United Kingdom (Thonfeld, 2010a). There was also a significant group of returning British Prisoners of War who had been employed for forced labour during their internment (Longden, 2007). While the Ukrainian returnees formed an ethnically relatively homogenous group, in Great Britain and Germany former forced labourers were right from the start divided between natives and foreign nationals now newly reside in the country. Additionally, in Germany victims could possibly still have frequent encounters with former perpetrators, profiteers and bystanders of wartime forced labour, sometimes even decades after 1945.

Within the sample, it has proven insightful to conceptualise the memories of the interviewees along the ways of migration they have taken once the war was over (Lagrou, 2000, p. 191). Their autobiographical accounts have often fulfilled the function to endow with meaning their experiences of immigration, emigration or remigration and vice versa. These have been closely connected to the experience of Nazi forced labour (Chamberlain & Thompson, 1998, p. 12). Frequently migration before, during or after forced labour has led interviewees to establish a different framework to interpret wartime experiences. It has also served to open up another perspective for the biographical evaluation of these experiences. For example, the homecoming is still a very emotionally charged issue for those who did make their way back. Because after former forced labourers had widely been criticised or even despised for their work for the Germans, hardly anywhere a neat return to their pre-war existence was possible. The wartime forced migration had completely reshaped the coordinates of their lives. Against their will they had embarked on a journey to the West and now they were held responsible by their compatriots. Thus, former forced labourers were left with little alternative but to accept this part of

their lives as a biographical predicament and had to rearrange their lives as repatriates with the migration experience as the main frame of reference. In the case of many Ukrainians, this took on the shape of a kind of atonement for what was widely regarded as their individual failure. Or life became a quest for reconciliation with those who had stayed at home. Those people who had stayed behind had at times fared even worse during the war than the former forced labourers, what could lead to hurtful social confrontations as a consequence. Reversely, it is still an issue for the returnees as a kind of counter-factual self-exploration to ponder how different life could have been had they seized one of the opportunities to immigrate to a western country which was offered to almost all of the interviewees at some stage after their liberation (Holleuffer, 2005). That way they can work up diverse experiences of disappointment and being set at a disadvantage they have suffered upon or after their return to the country of origin. On the whole, potential or actual migrations to other countries are frequently mentioned by interviewees to visualise the impact happily used or sadly foregone opportunities in life have had within their biography (IGB interview with Ilse S., Germany 1994, p. 36; WdE interview with S. Z., Germany 1994, p. 4; IFLDP interview with Paul S., France 2006, p. 65).

The author will continue by presenting one person each out of the three national samples under consideration to empirically illustrate the intersections among forced labour, migration and memories. The oral account of Mykola (1925 Soviet Union—today Ukraine) who spent three years in Germany and Austria as a forced labourer is nevertheless dominated by the presence of his post-war incarceration in the Soviet Gulag. In 1947, he was sentenced to 15 years of forced labour in Siberia for stealing food as a Red Army soldier in the severe winter of 1946. During his sojourn in Germany, he had been sentenced to imprisonment in Mauthausen concentration camp for a failed attempt to escape from his forced labour in Vienna. Thus, he came to know first hand the worst possible camp conditions under Soviet and German rule. During the interview, it became clear that he was so deeply dismayed about the ruthless persecution suffered in his home country after his return that it overcast the mistreatment suffered at Mauthausen. However, this is in part also due to the much shorter period of time he spent there. Within his life story various, experiences of persecution overlap each other and are then grouped together as a kind of Odyssey as during his phase of forced labour and internment he—like many others—was frequently transported back and forth between different places and relocated several times. The history of violence in the 20th century is so vast and diverse that many interviewees can recall several fundamentally dangerous or even life-threatening circumstances which they have witnessed or undergone themselves. Thus, their recollections have developed an inherent tendency to compare between various experiences of suffering, sometimes even relativising these experiences altogether. This is also a process that structures collective memories which also serve to store very heterogeneous and disparate experiences, especially those of suffering, which constantly vie with each other for public attention and acknowledgement and are therefore also constantly set into comparative perspective with each other. Furthermore, if suffering was handed down by compatriots it usually weighs heavier for the people concerned, at least within memory. The same can be said for the Germans among World War II forced labourers whose post-war lives were also heavily overshadowed by the fact that their persecution came at the hands of fellow Germans. This resulted in years of silence about their wartime experiences and has repeatedly led them to consider over the years whether or not they should emigrate from Germany (IGB interview with Hans F., Germany 1994, p. 125). The lasting traces which camp internment and persecution have left within Mr. M.'s biography also surface linguistically. During the interview, he repeatedly used terms stemming from the vocabulary of camp guards and then, when

talking about his correspondence with the Austrian “Future Fund” in the early 2000s concerning his eligibility for compensation, he used the remarkable formulation: “And I immediately sent everything to Graz, to the Gestapo. And from there came the money...” (IFLDP interview with Mykola M., Ukraine 2006, p. 42f, author’s translation). On the one hand, these terminological transfers to the present indicate how interviewees distance themselves from the past by using words which are clearly not their own and at the same time clearly marked as belonging to a bygone era. On the other hand, within the narrations of the people concerned this vocabulary also indicates a lack of distance to the past because it provides more immediate access to the corresponding experiences and emotional impressions as former forced labourers own later wordings and interpretations could possibly do. Basically all these documents individual processes of working up experiences of violence. That shows once more how urgently necessary it is to integrate the memories of former forced labourers into the currently highly diversified cultures of remembrance which have developed across Europe but so far have failed to comprehensively include this particular group of victims.

Those former forced labourers who have stayed on in Germany have rather actively broken with their pre-war existence, however, it came at the price of biographical attenuation or suppression of the forced labour experiences to satisfy the adaptation requirements and identification needs of their new social surroundings. In this, they have taken a route very similar to how former forced labourers who went to Great Britain have dealt with their past. All of them should—in the view of their respective host societies—become “human beings without a past” (Wagner, 1997, pp. 78ff). Accordingly, they have conceptualised their immigration rather as a new beginning that could possibly do without referring back to their wartime past. Instead they have silently started to reevaluate their deportation and subsequent loss of home as a necessary prerequisite to be able to help those who have stayed behind in the post-war era. From then on, the former forced labourers who were resettled in the West came more and more into the position to support their relatives from abroad. These coherencies are hardly ever emphasised in the narrations, but are nevertheless clearly audible in the accounts of former forced labourers like the German-Ukrainian Nadja S. (1926 Poland—today Ukraine—lives in Germany):

However, by and large... Many people say, you shouldn’t regret that you were taken away. (...) Had I not been taken away, then until today my family simply would not have had anything good in this world. I set all of them on their feet. (...) even the furniture and the carpets and all that is all from me, so if I had also been so poor (...) you just did, what you could. (IFLDP interview with Nadja S., Germany 2005, p. 30f, author’s translation)

To remain in Germany can also be seen as a sign of former forced labourers’ readiness to reconcile with German society. But for long periods of time, German society was not so strongly interested in reconciliation, in order not to be confronted with its own guilt. On the contrary, persistent racial prejudice among the German majority society overcast former forced labourers’ lives for a long time after the war (IFLDP interview with Nadja S., Germany 2005, protocol; IFLDP interview with Josef B., Germany 2005, protocol). Also from this perspective, they were well-advised to seek a rather inconspicuous new beginning in the country of former torment without looking back too much.

The two interviews¹ with Jerzy, today George H. (1925 Poland—today Ukraine—lives in England) show a common feature of many interviews with former forced labourers from the former Soviet domain who have immigrated to western countries. Among them, comparisons of the Nazi and Stalinist dictatorships are very

¹ The first interview was conducted within the framework of the British Library—National Sound Archive’s “Millennium memory project” in 1996, the second one was conducted two years later in 1998 by the Imperial War Museum.

common and at the same time thoroughly based upon a classical understanding of totalitarianism. He eventually summed this up in the statement: “There’s absolutely no difference between the Red tyranny and the Brown block”. This can also be met within the cultures of commemoration in Germany and the former Soviet Union where the respective dictatorial pasts are frequently weighed up against each other. However, Mister H. also used this background to explain how he developed specific skills to survive adversities like being uprooted, deprived of rights and oppressed which have served him well in his post-war existence. This kind of positive revaluation of wartime persecution does not occur too often among former forced labourers, but there are the odd few in almost every national sample as it seems to require very strong and self-reliant personalities to go about their experiences in this way. During interviews with former forced labourers also their necessity to reassure their own identities several times during the courses of their lives becomes apparent. Mister H. displayed a profound understanding and repeated need of (re)identification, probably also because he described his personal allegiances towards his home and host countries as highly contradictory. Despite his double bonds to the country of origin and the host country—“I feel equally loyal to Poland and to Britain”—he still put an important restriction on his relationship to Poland: “There is nothing to go back for —Maybe I am a coward. —I fear the confrontation” (BL—NSA interview with George (Jerzy) H., England 1998, cassette 1. For a long time, former forced labourers had perceived their emigration as only provisional until eventually a return would become possible. Thus, they were often pretty upset once they came to realise the processes of alienation towards home they had gone through over the decades before they were able to return home as visitors for the first time after the war. Another interesting aspect of the processes of building up an understanding of oneself is that Mister H. still used his Polish first name Jerzy during the first interview, while during the second one he had already adopted the more English sounding George (IWM-SA interview with Jerzy (George) H., England 1996, reel 1). In the second interview, where he spoke more generally in descriptive manner and less about his own immediate experiences, he also pointed out how language strongly affects a feeling of belonging and how much it helps to essentially bring about social acceptance. While he already showed an accomplished use of the English language during his interviews, a lot of others, in Great Britain and Germany alike, were clearly still struggling with regard to their command of the host country’s language. This also seems to reflect different degrees of settling down and being integrated into the majority society of the receiving country². On the whole, it can be stated that forced labour is not at the core of the interview about Mister H.’s wartime experiences like in most of the life stories of former forced labourers who immigrated to western countries. However, in his case forced labour comprised three years of hardship as an unskilled agricultural worker so should definitely have had a deep personal impact on him. Nevertheless, when he talked about the occupation of Eastern Poland and three times losing his home (twice—and the second time finally—to the Soviets, once in between to the Germans) as well as about his troubles to start life anew after 1945 his account became much more vivid and intense. So the way former forced labourers endow with meaning their experiences does not necessarily comply with researchers expectations as to what they themselves would regard as being relevant.

Individual and Collective Memories

The collective memories of World War II prevailing in today’s Ukraine, England and Germany have left

² The long-term correlation between language acquisition and wartime persecution will be the topic of the author’s next research project.

their visible marks within the biographies of the interviewees. Thus, it is also possible to trace how cultures of remembrance develop over time and in interdependence with space. In Ukraine, the current culture of remembrance is still emerging from decades of Soviet dominance where World War II was basically remembered as the Great Patriotic War, heroically fought by the Red Army. Forced labourers were largely stigmatised as traitors, while Ukrainian nationalism was simply denounced as anti-Soviet. This has changed over the last twenty years, especially pinpointing the Ukrainian nation and suffering of Ukrainians as mainstays of collective memories (Grinchenko, 2008). Ukrainian interviewees have on the whole strongly connected the memories of their war and post-war experiences in their narrations, as they were heavily confronted with their wartime experiences as markers of their identities after 1945 and for many of them some form of discrimination persisted well beyond the end of the war, too (IFLDP interview with Andrij B., Ukraine, 2005, p. 32f; IFLDP interview with Alexandra Go., Ukraine, 2005, p. 14f; IFLDP interview with Mykola M., Ukraine, 2006, pp. 17f-38f). Besides, the specific historical conflict situations of Ukraine with its border clashes with Poland and its struggles for independence against the Soviet Union became very prominent in the accounts of interviewees from Western Ukraine what would have been unthinkable topics before 1991. At the same time, they are in general the ones among all former forced labourers who dwell most extensively on their wartime experiences and their long-term consequences.

In Great Britain, the culture of remembrance has also rotated for decades around the memories of victory, albeit a lot more inclusive than in the Soviet case. Nevertheless, even with a shift of paradigms since the late 1960s, forced labour of British Prisoners of War as well as Eastern European civilians remained a blind spot. Instead, British former POWs, still frequently adopt the main traits of the national culture of remembrance in that their narrations also prominently dwell upon their attempts to escape from German camps which has become a dominant feature within formerly captured British soldiers' memories ever since the war was over (Allen, 2007, p. 11). Likewise, they mention work mostly in connection with attempted or accomplished sabotage and on the whole do not see themselves as forced labourers nor do they remember their work as forced labour in the strict sense of the term. However, some of them who were put to work in mines or went through the Auschwitz satellite camp system during their internment, hold distinctly different views on this. But they, along with former forced labourers from Eastern Europe who came to Britain as immigrants in the late 1940s, remain on the fringes of collective memories.

The Germans among former forced labourers have frequently found themselves in a similar position of being overlooked in the post-war era; therefore, have sought to get access to public recognition in Germany through other means. Thus, they usually do not refer to themselves as forced labourers, but rather identify themselves with those aspects of their past existence which formed the basis of their persecution and/or internment during World War II. For example, a politically persecuted person or an army deserter had come to be recognised in (West) Germany as a Nazi victim already during the 1980s and 1990s respectively, much earlier than was the case for forced labourers. Those interviewees who have lived in East Germany after 1945 mostly expose the various forms of political interference they have suffered during their attempts at rehabilitation and compensation in the post-war era GDR. The immigrant former forced labourers in both, Germany and England, largely drop out of the discourses of their respective national cultures of remembrance because they are principally more focused on their status as migrants and embed their memories into this self-perception and their sense of social belonging to peer groups of fellow immigrants from their home country. The experience of forced labour is thereby even more

distinctly biographically subordinated than in other interviews.

Understanding Forced Labour

Former inmate labourers—those who were coerced to work as inmates of concentration camps, penal camps and the like—also commonly refuse to be addressed as forced labourers. They regard the term as belittling the fate they have suffered as one Jewish former inmate labourer who today resides in France pointed out already at the beginning of his interview: “And so I have the feeling that I do not talk merely as a forced labourer, because the most important issue for me was life in the concentration and extermination camps” (IFLDP interview with Paul S., France, 2006, p. 2, author’s translation). Reversely, former civilian forced labourers do, indeed, see their wartime experiences represented by this term. They actively connect it to their share of public recognition which they have achieved at long last. However belated and small it might have been, for some it has spelt an end to decades of ostracisation, defaming and denial (IFLDP interview with Rene S., Czech Republic, 2005, p. 27). What is more, it is also beyond doubt that there are former forced labourers who describe forced labour with hindsight by all means soberly as a comparatively bearable constellation to survive the war. However, this is at the same time at the root of the manifold accusations which were directed against them once they had returned to their societies of origin because of allegedly “benefiting from collaboration” (IFLDP interview with Boleslav W., Czech Republic, 2005, p. 34). Therefore, taking up this stance shows former forced labourers’ growing confidence in dealing with their experiences as they feel they do not have to hide controversial viewpoints for fear of retribution any longer. This is still more complex in the case of inmate labourers. For them, the alternative to forced labour was in many cases immediate death; often it was even more hideous in that both were simply two sides of the same coin. Inmate labourers could be lucky, though, to be assigned specific tasks they were good at or they happened to work for somebody who appreciated their individual performance which could potentially open up a chance of survival for them (Bejarano/Boasson, 2010, p. 348). This is verbalised during interviews especially when their forced labour required the use of their prior knowledge or somehow could arouse their professional interest, like this German former inmate labourer relates: “Maybe I was technically a little gifted. Before long I was allowed to install machinery, to fit in the drills and grind the drills, like I said, all this I also did then, yes” (IGB interview with Ilse S., Germany 1994, p. 4, author’s translation). Regardless which aspect of forced labour is emphasised more in the individual narration—the salvaging or the destructive character—the bottom line would always be that under German dominance during the war work as a basic form of existence was ubiquitous and almost inescapable as described by this Welsh former POW labourer: “The only way to live was to work” (BL-NSA interview with Alfred L., Wales 1998, MP3). This became even more acute the lower one ranked within the Nazi racial hierarchy which went hand in hand with increasing danger of life and a decreasing probability of survival. On the other hand, with growing distance in time and space towards the actual events, there has developed a certain tendency within the narrations of, e.g., British former POW labourers to downplay their forced labour experiences which are subsumed under the experience of camp internment and their status as apprehended combatants (BL-NSA interview with Alfred L., Wales, 1998, MP3).

With regard to the individual biographies, it becomes obvious that among all persons who performed forced labour only those civilians who were deported to Germany for no other reason than to extort their manpower, without having fought against the occupying forces as partisans or the like or having been alleged to

have done so, explicitly perceive themselves as “forced labourers”. In all other constellations, where people were initially deported for other reasons and only later in the course of their internment or as a further method of punishment coerced to work, Nazi victims do apply other more dominant patterns of identification as biographical markers and carriers of a personal self-understanding. Thus, they usually downgrade the rank of the wartime labour experience, no matter how torturing, degrading, tedious, or in rare cases even somehow interesting—or even eventually life-saving—it might have been. Throughout the 20th century, work was considered such an integral part of human existence that outside of concentration camps it was possibly still experienced then—and has been remembered until today—as somehow an element of a kind of normality by most people concerned. Thus, it seems rather unsuitable even for those who had to perform forced labour during the war to use it as a means to scandalise or illustrate their persecution.

Conclusions

On the whole, the experience of forced labour is put through a highly idiosyncratic evaluation by the interviewees during the process of remembering. Within this process, it becomes clear if and to what extent this experience has been special or unique for the concerned individuals in relation to what happened in their lives before and after. Social memories provide the frames within which these experiences are eventually articulated. However, these frames of reference are far from determining the concomitant personal estimations and communicative preferences and from dictating how these experiences will be integrated into a person’s biography as part of the overall view of oneself. Trying to balance the evidence from the interview materials, one could say that biographical memories of Nazi forced labour take up a specific set of functions for the people concerned when it comes to narrative constructions of their identities. However, only in the case of Ukrainian former forced labourers do they play a distinctly dominant role in this respect. On the one hand, that loss of significance in most other cases seems to be mostly due to the extended periods of more or less enforced latency as these memories were quarantined by most societies after the war. On the other hand, a lot of former forced labourers, especially those who resettled abroad, today live a life that—in economical terms—bears little or no resemblance to their wartime status. Thus, in their present lives, there are no obvious reasons to draw on these experiences for everyday needs and perceptions. Biographical reference to experiences of Nazi forced labour is made merely as a negative backdrop when it comes to explaining the manifold difficulties that arose in re-establishing a livelihood immediately after 1945 or when former forced labourers elaborate on how demanding they found it to recreate a sense of normality in their private lives, their social surrounding and in the society at large (IWM-SA interview with George (Jerzy) H., England 1996, Cassette 2, Side B; IFLDP interview with Anita L., England 2006, p. 63; IFLDP interview with Yehuda B., Israel 2005, p. 8). Thus, over the decades, memories of forced labour have become somewhat displaced memories, i.e., memories that have not yet been ascribed a proper place of their own within the various national cultures of remembrance. This impression of displacement is also reflected in the individual accounts of the people concerned; in particular, they seem to have been able to increase their own personal distance to their former status as a forced labourer in as much as they have been able to create spatial distance to their country of origin and/or social distance between their former status of enforced employment for Germany during the World War II and their post-war occupational careers.

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