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Lost and Re-Emerging Knowledge: the Role of Rurality and (Non-)Rurality in Two Sisters' Post-Migrant Narratives of their Parents' Second World War Forced Labour

Angelika Laumer
Geschichts- und Gesellschaftswissenschaftliche Fakultät, Katholische Universität Eichstätt-Ingolstadt, Germany
angelika.laumer@ku.de

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Abstract

This article investigates differences in two half-sisters' (Anita Diestler and Schenja Wrobel) narratives about their (step-)parents' forced migration and subsequent employment as forced labourers, as well as their own experiences as members of a post-migrant generation. The half-sisters were born as *Heimatlose Ausländer* (a specific type of 'stateless foreigner') in Bavarian villages in the late 1950s and early 1960s, respectively. Diestler was still living there when she was interviewed, while Wrobel had moved to a town in Hesse, another West German federal state, when she was eighteen. Diestler's report is an example of a narrative embedded in hermetic rural social structures that are part of her implicit knowledge. By contrast, Wrobel, who had left 'the village', talks for hours about her parents' experiences, especially her mother's life in Ukraine, the characteristics of forced labour on a farm, and her own living conditions as a *Heimatlose Ausländer* in West Germany. The analysis of the interviews leads to the conclusion that explicit knowledge that emerges from autobiographical storytelling is disappearing in 'the village' where the half-sisters grew up, but re-emerging in a different, non-rural, place. Additionally, this article demonstrates that 'the village' is *not* a part of post-migrant society even though both interviewees belong to a post-migrant generation.

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Keywords

Dependency – forced labour – statelessness – rurality – second generation – Nazis

Introduction*

> My naturalisation was a big drama and I am wondering if there are more people who had some kind of problem, whose country of origin was not clarified; because if someone can say "I am from Poland, I am from Belgium, I am from somewhere, anywhere", it is just clear …[1]

Schenja Wrobel says this about her complicated and long naturalisation process in West Germany in the 1980s. Wrobel was born in a Bavarian village in 1963. Wrobel's parents, who met after the war, had been forced to migrate from Poland and Ukraine during the Nazi occupation and work as labourers on Bavarian farms during the Nazi period. After the Second World War, they both stayed in the same region, close to the farms where they had worked. They became Displaced Persons (DPs). This group consisted of people who could not, or did not want to, return to their countries of origin and were not able to settle down in other, usually Western, countries because their health condition was considered insufficient for the International Refugee Organisation's resettlement programme. Until 1949, DPs had been administered by the Allies, but from 1950 onward, those who had remained in West Germany were called *Heimatlose Ausländer* ('stateless/homeless foreigner') and were administered by the German federal government. This is the legal status that Wrobel inherited. Between 1951 and 1953, 106,000–230,000 *Heimatlose Ausländer* lived

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1 Interview with Schenja Wrobel (pseudonym), 8 February 2014 and 9 February 2014, interviewed by Angelika Laumer, audio, four separate interview sections, partly with husband, available in my private archive and Justus-Liebig-Universität Gießen, Germany. https://www.uni-giessen.de/de (last accessed 2 January 2025). All translations by the author. In German: 'Meine Einbürgerung, das war ein großes Drama. Es würd' mich interessieren, gibt's noch mehr Leut', wo irgendwie ein Problem hatten, wo das einfach irgendw … nicht geklärt war oder gibt's genug Leut', wo dann alle nachweisen konnten, woher sie stammen, weil wenn die einen sagen können: "Ich komm' aus Polen, ich komm' aus Belgien, ich komm' aus sonst irgendwoher", dass das einfach immer geklärt war' (Wrobel, Interview 1, Transkript S. 11, TC: 0:40:11). Both names (Schenja Wrobel and Anita Diestler) are pseudonyms. As I do not want to reveal the interviewees' identities, I also do not specify where the interviews took place.

in the Federal Republic of Germany.[2] By the end of 2022, there were still 9,765 *Heimatlose Ausländer*/people with the status 'no residence permit required' living in Germany.[3]

Wrobel's father initially married a German woman and had a baby girl with her, Anita Diestler, Wrobel's half-sister; the German woman then passed away. According to the half-sisters' accounts, Wrobel's father then heard about another former forced labourer, originally from Ukraine. The two got married and Schenja Wrobel was born shortly thereafter. At the age of eighteen, Wrobel moved to a town in Hesse, another German federal state, a few hundred kilometres away from the village she had grown up in. Anita Diestler stayed and lived her entire life in Bavaria, close to the place where she was born.

This article investigates the differences in the sisters' narratives about their (step-) parents' forced labour, as well as their own experiences as forced labourers' descendants, and thus members of a post-migrant generation. But what is a 'post-migrant generation'? The term was developed by Naika Foroutan, Florian Ohnmacht and Erol Yıldız[4] in relation to post-Second World War immigration to Austria and West Germany, but nowadays, Foroutan and Yıldız prefer to use the concept of a 'post-migrant *society*'. According to Foroutan, one key feature of this post-migrant society is that it accepts the reality of constant migration and the fact that numerous individuals have migrant family backgrounds.[5] There are similarities between the descendants

2 Wolfgang Jacobmeyer, *Vom Zwangsarbeiter zum Heimatlosen Ausländer. Die Displaced Persons 1945–1951* (Göttingen 1985), available at https://digi20.digitale-sammlungen.de/de/fs3/object/display/bsb00052483_00001.html (last accessed 13 August 2024); Stanislaus Stepień, *Der alteingesessene Fremde. Ehemalige Zwangsarbeiter in Westdeutschland* (Frankfurt am Main and New York 1989) 225; Michael Pegel, *Fremdarbeiter, Displaced Persons. Heimatlose Ausländer. Konstanten eines Randgruppenschicksals in Deutschland nach 1945* (Münster u.a. 1997) 47.

3 Statistisches Bundesamt, 'Migration und integration', *Ausländische Bevölkerung nach aufenthaltsrechtlichem Status am 31 December 2022*, https://www.destatis.de/DE/Themen/Gesellschaft-Umwelt/Bevoelkerung/Migration-Integration/Tabellen/auslaendische-bevoelkerung-aufenthaltsrechtlicherstatus.html (28 June 2023).

4 Naika Foroutan, 'Neue Deutsche, Postmigranten und Bindungs-Identitäten. Wer gehört zum neuen Deutschland?', *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 46–47 (2010) 9–15, available at https://www.bpb.de/shop/zeitschriften/apuz/32367/neue-deutsche-postmigranten-und-bindungs-identitaeten-wer-gehoert-zum-neuen-deutschland/ (20 May 2024); Florian Ohnmacht and Erol Yıldız, 'The postmigrant generation between racial discrimination and new orientation: from hegemony to convivial everyday practice', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 44:16 (2021) 149–169.

5 Naika Foroutan, 'Die postmigrantische Gesellschaft', *Kurzdossier Die Einheit der Verschiedenen: Integration in der postmigrantischen Gesellschaft/Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung*, 20 April 2015, https://www.bpb.de/themen/migration-integration/kurzdossiers/205190/die-postmigrantische-gesellschaft/ (20 May 2024); Erol Yıldız, 'Postmigrantische Gesellschaft: eine andere Art des Sehens', in: Christine Hunner-Kreisel and Jana Wetzel (eds), *Rassismus*

of postwar migrants and the descendants of forced labourers: all of them belong to a generation of people whose parents immigrated (also by force), who were born and raised in Germany or Austria, but often have an 'in-between' transnational identity and who frequently were and are marginalised.

Diestler and Wrobel both belong to this post-migrant *generation*. The leading question for this article is if and how their two post-migrant narratives differ, since Wrobel moved several times, left the rural region where she was born and now lives in a different place with different social structures than her sister. Are there traces that point to features of a post-migrant society in the two or at least one of the interviewees' narratives? This constellation – two sisters, one of whom had further migration experiences – allows me to engage in a special case study by comparing two narratives within one family in two different places. By contrasting the sisters' lives and family stories, it becomes apparent that a certain type of knowledge – stories about forced labour and about forced labourers – is disappearing in the region where they grew up but re-emerging a few hundred kilometres away. For my analysis, I will also refer to other interviews I conducted as part of a larger study that involved fifteen conversations with family members of former forced labourers who had been deployed in Eastern Bavarian villages and towns and lived there after the war. There were five more people I asked to have a conversation who did not want to be interviewed, which means that a quarter of the people I contacted did not participate.[6]

The results of the larger study provide the background knowledge for the small study discussed here, which consists of a close reading of Schenja Wrobel's interview in contrast to her half-sister's account. This case study is based on the assumption that there is a special rural way of passing on everyday knowledge (although city dwellers can, of course have a 'rural communication style' too), and that this might explain the difference in the half-sisters' narratives.

For this purpose, I borrow the concept of 'knowledge' from sociology. According to Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, individuals create objectivations that become part of the social knowledge stock, and individuals then form their knowledge by making use of this stock: '[E]veryday life […]

in der Sozialen Arbeit und Rassismuskritik als Querschnittsaufgabe. Neue Praxis. Zeitschrift für Sozialarbeit, Sozialpädagogik und Sozialpolitik 15 (Lahnstein 2018) 146–153; Anne Ring Petersen, *Postmigration, transculturality and the transversal politics of art* (New York 2023) 31–62.

6 My research methods and study design are described in detail in my doctoral thesis: Angelika Laumer, Am Horizont. Kinder von NS-Zwangsarbeiter_innen und alltägliches Erinnern und Vergessen in der deutschen ländlichen Gesellschaft (Weinheim and Basel 2023) 102–132 Thesis Justus-Liebig-Universität Gießen, DOI:10.3262/978-3-7799-7585-4. However, the thesis does not discuss and analyse the interview with Schenja Wrobel in depth.

occupies a prominent place in the social stock of knowledge'.[7] In Berger and Luckmann's view, everyday knowledge – as opposed to institutionalised knowledge – is 'just there' and self-evident to the individual. It is mainly created by everyday language and face-to-face communication.[8] Similarly, I consider Pierre Bourdieu's *habitus* – patterns of action, perception and thinking[9] – as a means of transporting everyday knowledge. Thus, (everyday) knowledge is stored and passed on casually via *habitus*, gossip and legends.[10]

To develop this argument, I will first introduce concepts that can help us understand how marginalised experiences are being remembered and forgotten in rural society. I will then lay out patterns of passing on knowledge in rural society by providing examples from interviews with the descendants of forced labourers. Finally, I will show the differences between the two accounts and touch on the 'village's' 'immunisation abilities' in the face of (post-migrant) 'sociation' (*Vergesellschaftung*).

Knowledge in the Village: What is a Rural Communication Style?

I am applying the term 'the village' figuratively for 'rurality' and including small towns in this conception. According to my definition of 'rurality', people living in rural areas overemphasise the communal features (as opposed to societal features) of their surroundings. The dichotomy of the terms 'community' and 'society' originates from the work of Ferdinand Tönnies.[11] Although Tönnies developed these as ideal, theoretical concepts, both 'community' and 'society' need to be applied to grasp the communal and societal features of social systems in reality.[12] According to this dichotomy, community members have 'real', face-to-face contact with each other and as a community with an imagined common past, common experiences and common memories. Furthermore, talking about this past connects the members of a community.[13] Thus, a community is rather homogeneous; diversity is neglected. In addition,

7 Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The social construction of reality. A treatise in the sociology of knowledge* (London and New York [1966] 1991) 56.

8 See Berger and Luckmann, *The social construction of reality,* 33–61.

9 Pierre Bourdieu, *Sozialer Sinn. Kritik der theoretischen Vernunft* (Frankfurt am Main [1993] 2018) 101.

10 Laumer, *Am Horizont*, 92–97.

11 Ferdinand Tönnies, *Studien zu Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* (ed. Klaus Lichtblau) (Wiesbaden 2012) 27–70, 213–262.

12 Nele Schneidereit, *Die Dialektik von Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft. Grundbegriffe einer kritischen Sozialphilosophie* (Berlin and Boston 2010) 19.

13 Idem, 15.

community members often refer to their – imagined – 'natural' space. Societal influences are, by contrast, a core feature of modernity. Members of a society do not have face-to-face contact with everyone. In fact, individuals are usually members of several societies, and they interact via technical tools and trade, with their relations often defined by the law and, therefore, contracts. Social positions within a society can change and members can be ex- and included. Modern societies are also defined by migration.[14]

A village, on the other hand, is traditionally the 'community prototype'.[15] However, whoever defines themselves as 'rural' is de facto not only a member of a community, but also of society. Different scholars have rightly stressed that rurality as a concept is not necessarily tied to a certain topography. For example, with their programmatic title '*Die Dorfgrenzen sind nicht die Grenzen des Dorfes*' ('Villages do not end at their margins'),[16] Ernst Langthaler and Reinhard Sieder expressed quite well that rurality does not have a topographical border, and that there are village influences in the city and that societal processes take place in the village.

It is inherently rural to imagine one's surroundings as a 'region'. To put it in another way: there is no such thing as a global rural society (*Weltgesellschaft*) that would connect a Bavarian with, let us say, a Punjabi village in Pakistan.[17]

Farming villages in Europe[18] were seen as a part of the national community and, of course, of the National Socialist 'people's community' (*Volksgemeinschaft*).[19] Even though there were society-like bureaucratic hierarchies, differences and an elaborate division of labour, it was a

14 Thomas Schwietring, *Was ist Gesellschaft? Einführung in soziologische Grundbegriffe* (Konstanz, Stuttgart and München 2018) 19–94.

15 Paul Cloke, 'Conceptualizing rurality', in: Paul Cloke, Terry Marsden and Patrick Mooney (eds), *Handbook of rural studies* (London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi 2006) 18–28, 18–19; Ernst Langthaler and Reinhard Sieder, 'Die Dorfgrenzen sind nicht die Grenzen des Dorfes. Positionen, Probleme und Perspektiven in der Forschung', in: Ernst Langthaler and Reinhard Sieder (eds), *Über die Dörfer. Ländliche Lebenswelten in der Moderne* (Berlin and Wien 2000) 7–30, 7.

16 Langthaler and Sieder, 'Die Dorfgrenzen sind nicht die Grenzen des Dorfes'.

17 See also Laumer, *Am Horizont*, 83–96.

18 This definition of 'rurality' could, in my view, be applied to social systems in many (though not all) African and Asian countries, too. I would note that there is a difference when it comes to rural social systems formed through an active settlement policy such as in the Americas, Australia, some parts of Russia and in part also Israel. This would have to be investigated further in historical and empirical studies. The main point I would like to emphasise is that the notion 'we have always been there, in this specific place' is typical for European rurality and rurality on other continents, but not for rurality created through active settlement movements.

19 Langthaler and Sieder, 'Die Dorfgrenzen sind nicht die Grenzen des Dorfes', 7.

community that was eugenic by definition.[20] In my view, today's 'rurality' entails that people ignore or deny the societal nature of their relations. Stressing community features also implies the overemphasis of kinship and neighbourly connections.[21] Even though all community members do not always know everyone, there is a 'rural' *notion* of 'we know each other', 'I know everything about this family', 'I know how they have always been', etc. This knowledge about neighbours, about this and that family, might be based on gossip,[22] and the knowledge about everybody's 'place' as well as one's own 'place' in the village based on the *habitus*. Those forms of everyday knowledge – gossip and *habitus* – are, in contrast to (auto-)biographical narrations, types of everyday knowledge that are tied to the community and that are passed on through *rural* communication forms. Conversely, biographical narrations that position the self as something that acts and that has agency, not only transport – in Berger and Luckmann's terminology – everyday knowledge, but also highly institutionalised knowledge. A biographical narration usually contains explicit information, such as information about traditions, religious beliefs, professional expertise and their legitimisation, and so forth.

It has been empirically shown that people in villages and small towns trade, migrate and commute; they can be members of a local, regional choir and a transnational media platform simultaneously. Migration has thus always been and is common in rural societies. But when migrants come to the village – as care workers, 'guest workers', refugees, Jewish 'contingent refugees' from post-Soviet countries, etc. – rurality distinguishes between long-established (or known to be long-established) residents and (known-to-be) newcomers. Rurality therefore requires the figure of the 'marginal man',[23] who is 'damned to live in two worlds'.[24] To the marginal man or woman, it is important to pass

20 Klaus Holz and Jan Weyand, 'Arbeit und Nation. Die Ethik nationaler Arbeit und ihre Feinde am Beispiel Hitlers', in: Felix Axster and Nikolas Lelle (eds), *Deutsche Arbeit. Kritische Perspektiven auf ein ideologisches Selbstbild* (Göttingen [2014] 2018) 88–115, 108.

21 Albert Ilien and Utz Jeggle, *Leben auf dem Dorf. Zur Sozialgeschichte des Dorfes und zur Sozialpsychologie seiner Bewohner* (Opladen 1978) 86.

22 Gossip is a communicative form of its own, with specific social functions: see Jörg R. Bergmann [trans. John Bednarz with Eva Kafka Barron], *Discreet indiscretions: the social organization of gossip* (New York [1987] 1993); and Petra Fonteyne, 'Klatsch auf dem Dorf', in: Andreas Kuntz (ed.), *Lokale und biographische Erfahrungen: Studien zur Volkskunde* (Münster 1995) 47–57.

23 I make use of 'marginal man' as a figurative term, therefore I do not gender it.

24 Robert E. Park, 'Cultural conflict and the marginal man', in: Robert E. Park (ed.), *Race and culture. The collected papers of Robert Ezra Park*, vol. 1 (Glencoe [1937] 1950) 372–376.

as an established person, and they have to decide if they will adapt to the rural communication style.[25] For 'the village', however, the figure of the marginal man helps to reinforce so-called 'natural' community features, according to the understanding that 'we have always been there' and 'there are well-known families and farms all around us – except for the newcomers.'

Additionally, rurality means neglecting one's own subjectivity. In the village, it is not primarily the subject who remembers, who is aware of their own biography, a story with plots that centre around the self, rather, it is the community that remembers, and the individual recalls knowledge likewise, first and foremost, as a community member. When individuals in rural society give an account of their experiences, they often do not do so in an introspective, diary-like, biographical form, but rather in a dialogical way, using numerous references to, and quotes from, their social surroundings.[26]

But how is knowledge and its distribution tied to 'the village'? In 'the village', there is a hermetic social and economic structure; its feudal heritage in Europe, despite transformations and the capitalist economy, is still visible today. In order to re-stabilise the rural social system and also to be included and accepted, marginal men and women – or outsiders, as Norbert Elias and John L. Scotson put it – as well as other community members who are presumed to have a lower status (for example, single women) have to accept their lower status. They 'have to understand their – (subordinate) – place.'[27] Understanding one's place in rural society thus constitutes implicit knowledge.

It is known in the village who the most prestigious persons are: who is the architect, who is the sawmill owner, who runs a big hotel, who has the biggest farm and who are the poorer people, the workers. Even today, oral communication in villages and small towns not only centres on surrounding families but also farms, which, even after the Second World War, relied on manual labourers and maidservants.

It is crucial to understand that the structure of the daily remembering and forgetting of forced labour in Austrian and German villages, relies not on memorial sites or history workshops but on implicit knowledge that is passed on via everyday oral communication. This way of remembering is framed by

25 Everett V. Stonequist, *The marginal man. A study in personality and culture conflict* (New York [1937] 1961) 184–200; Norbert Elias and John L. Scotson, *Etablierte und Außenseiter* (Frankfurt am Main 2017) 166–186, 242–245 First published in 1965 as, *The established and the outsiders. A sociological enquiry into community problems*. References are to the German translation.

26 Luisa Passerini, *Fascism in popular memory. The cultural experience of the Turin working class* (Cambridge 1987) 17.

27 Elias and Scotson, *Etablierte und Außenseiter*, 249.

an implicit knowledge about serfdom (*Leibeigenschaft*). A typical phrase when talking about a former forced labourer would be: 'Well, you know, there was Igor. He was farmer Müller's Ukrainian' ('Da war der Igor, das war der Ukrainer vom Müller-Bauern'). Forced labourers that are being remembered today are attributed to a certain family and their farm. At the same time, explicit knowledge that might be told in biographical narrations in a subjective form, that centres a person with agency – knowledge about the parents' forced labour, their deportation from Poland or Ukraine to Germany, their families in their countries of origin, etc. – cannot be told in the rural public. If it is told at all, it remains in the private sphere.

The Dialectics of in- and Exclusion

In rural societies, socioeconomic structures determine the remembering and forgetting of forced labour and reinforce the marginalisation of certain experiences, as the marginal men 'have to understand their place', which is (also on the economic) margins, if they want to be accepted. In addition, the hegemonic way of everyday remembering and forgetting in West German and Austrian villages does not connect forced labour to National Socialism at all, and connects it only loosely to the Second World War. Various groups of people were agricultural forced labourers: prisoners of war, including those from West European countries, and civilian forced labourers from Belarus, Poland, Ukraine and Russia. About one-third of the civilian forced labourers were women, and most were very young, often teenagers or in their early twenties, sometimes even children.[28] Civilian foreign workers who were deployed in towns and villages in the German Reich either slept on the farm or in small camps in the town inn, monitored by a guard. They were usually not Jewish.[29]

28 Ulrich Herbert, *Arbeit, Volkstum, Weltanschauung. Über Fremde und Deutsche im 20. Jahrhundert*, (Frankfurt am Main 1995) 130.

29 I am aware of one exception when Jews had to work on Austrian farms but their deployment was not related to a concentration camp or a camp in a factory; this was in 1944, when Hungarian Jews were forced labourers in Burgenland, Austria. See Ela Hornung, Ernst Langthaler and Sabine Schweitzer, *Zwangsarbeit in der Landwirtschaft in Niederösterreich und dem nördlichen Burgenland* (München und Wien 2004) 96–104. Occasionally, Jews from Poland, Ukraine or Soviet countries managed to hide their identity and escape or delay their likely death by working as 'typical' agricultural forced labourers in Austria and Germany. For example https://www.weitererzaehlen.at/interviews/sally-dragon (last accessed 17 August 2022); original source: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, The Jeff and Toby Herr Oral History Archive, RG-50.060.0013.

In this case, these former forced labourers and their descendants were marginal men. 'Their place' has its origins in both feudal heritage and the ways in which National Socialist authorities organised the deployment of foreign workers. A dialectic of in- and exclusion of the *Volksgemeinschaft* as well as the rural community, determined these forced labourers' social position in villages and small towns during Nazism. The foreign workers were subject to many Nazi rules and regulations, and local authorities ensured not only their oppression but also their separation from members of the 'people's community'. They had a high risk of being punished, imprisoned in concentration or labour education camps, or being executed for any act of real or perceived disobedience.[30] Forced labourers faced not only a lack or shortage of medical treatment, but also the risk of being sent to a euthanasia facility if they were suspected or accused of having a disease that would be labelled as 'psychological' by the standards of the Nazi regime. In addition, foreign workers' exclusion from the 'people's community' was also reflected in a systematic containment and oppression of their reproductive rights.[31]

Yet, to some extent, Nazis brought forced labourers very much *into* the German 'people's community'. In villages, forced labourers often lived and worked with Germans and Austrians who were members of the *Volksgemeinschaft*, and there were many relations between them, particularly because forced labourers often had to perform the tasks of housemaids or babysitters. Consequently, during the war, forced labourers in German and Austrian villages had to understand their 'place' in order to survive; after the war, they had to understand their 'place' in order to become members of 'the village'.

30 According to Ernst Langthaler and Sabine Schweitzer, there was a conglomerate of around 1,000 decrees to control forced labourers and their relations with members of the 'people's community': Ernst Langthaler and Sabine Schweitzer, 'Das Geschlecht der landwirtschaftlichen Zwangsarbeit – am Beispiel des Reichsgaues Niederdonau 1939–1945', in: Johanna Gehmacher and Gabriella Hauch (eds), *Frauen- und Geschlechtergeschichte des Nationalsozialismus. Fragestellungen, Perspektiven, neue Forschungen* (Innsbruck, Wien and Bozen 2007) 87–113, 104.

31 Bernhild Vögel, *„Entbindungsheim für Ostarbeiterinnen". Braunschweig, Broitzemer Straße 200* (Hamburg 1999); Uta George, 'Polnische und sowjetische Zwangsarbeitende als Opfer der NS- „Euthanasie"-Verbrechen. Das Beispiel Hadamar', in: Andreas Frewer and Günther Siedbürger (eds), *Medizin und Zwangsarbeit im Nationalsozialismus. Einsatz und Behandlung von ‚Ausländern' im Gesundheitswesen* (Frankfurt am Main 2004) 389–406; Gabriele Czarnowski, 'Die Eigenart des jetzt zu behandelnden Materials". „Erbkranke" und „Ostarbeiterinnen" im Fadenkreuz nationalsozialistischer Politik und gynäkologischer Forschung', in: Gehmacher and Hauch (eds), *Frauen- und Geschlechtergeschichte des Nationalsozialismus*, 186–203.

Forced Labourers' Descendants in the Village and their Remembering and Forgetting of Forced Labour

There is a hegemonic way of remembering among forced labour profiteers in German and Austrian rural society. As explained in the previous section, *if* individual forced labourers are remembered, they are usually allocated to a certain farm or a certain family. According to profiteers, forced labourers who stayed in the neighbourhood after the war are 'like everyone else', but there is an implicit, simultaneous knowledge that these families are at the margins, sometimes labelled as being 'weird' and 'withdrawn'. Certain bodies of knowledge such as traditions, languages or religions that these marginal men and women – the (forced) migrants – might have brought from their countries of origin, and which could also be considered implicit knowledge, are not mentioned in public at all and were almost completely absent in my research.

The dialectics of ex- and inclusion constitute the overall context when forced labourers' descendants who live in German and Austrian rural society or were raised there, close to the places where their parents had been forced labourers, talk about their own and their families' stories. They usually chat about their parents' heritage in an ambivalent way: when they speak about their Ukrainian and Polish parents, the parents only become living characters once they enter the Bavarian community's horizon; in their children's accounts, they hardly have a history or a life in their places of origin. At the same time, most interview partners also stress that they belong to the village like anyone else, that they are just as Bavarian as anyone else: hard-working and better off than their parents were. If there are any, living Polish and Ukrainian relatives are usually seen as a burden.[32] Overall, the experiences of their parents' forced labour under Nazism are hardly ever told in detail (some of the interviewees 'remain behind the garden fence', as it is said in the village), and particularly not in public.

Absent Knowledge in 'the Village': Anita Diestler's Account

In many ways, Anita Diestler's style of telling her own and her family's story is typical of forced labourers' descendants in German (or Austrian) rural

32 The interviews were conducted in 2014. There was no mention of current politics, for example of Russia's annexation of Crimea, in the interviews. It might be interesting to interview these participants again and analyse whether the interviewees' evaluations of their parents' Ukrainian origins have changed since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the accompanying media coverage.

society: it is embedded in the village's social structure. She has been living her entire life near the village where she grew up, a place close to the farms where her stepmother had worked, and about 100 kilometres away from the Bavarian farm where her father toiled as a forced labourer during the Second World War.

Diestler's narrative highlights that she left at a young age and virtually grew out of her family and its heritage and grew into being German. She rejects anything 'that is Polish'. According to her interpretation, being Polish entails being abusive and 'not wanting to work', as her father was chronically ill. Diestler is eager to stress how well she fits into German society, as local authorities helped her with her naturalisation when she was eighteen. There is one theme in her account that I heard only once. She describes severe conflicts in the family, and she recalls her father as being abusive:

> He could wear you out psychologically. When you came home from school, he would stand there waiting […] – he would sit at the table, [and] watch you eating. [He'd] direct every move: how you hold your spoon and how you sit. […] Then he would turn off the radio when you were listening, as it was, 'I am paying for electricity, it is none of your business'. […] Or when I did my hair, I used hairspray, and he would come inside, take the hairspray can from me and throw it out in the garden. […] Always, this guarding and harassing – and doing it all the time. I was so angry then. This was when I left. They wanted to place me in a home because I took a cane from the oven – I was so angry because he bullied me again that I raised the cane. […] He didn't beat me, nothing, but he was shocked of course, and then he left and they immediately called the … well … child protective services and the story started – when I left for good.[33]

33 Interview with Anita Diestler, (pseudonym), 22 May 2010, interviewed by Angelika Laumer, transcript pp.7–8, private archive. In German: 'Die Konflikte. […] So psychisch hat di der fertigmachen können. Der hat dir, wenn du von der Schule heimgekommen bist, der ist da gstandn und hat schon gewartet, bis d kommst, dann ist er schon am Tisch gwesen, hat dir zugschaut beim Essen und dir jeden Handgriff gsagt, wie du deinen Löffel nimmst oder wie's dich hinsetzen sollst. […] Dann hat er dir den Radio ausgschaltet, sozusagen, "ich zahl den Strom, der geht di gar nix an" […] Oder wenn i mi g'frisiert hab als Mädl scho und hab dann mit den kurzen Haaren, hab dann mit Haarspray schon a bissl was gmacht, dann is er zu dir rein, hat dir die Haarspraydose genommen, hat dir das in Garten rausgschmissen. […] Immer das dabei stehn und immer das drangsaliern und immer da macha, dann war ichs so grantig, das war dann, wo ich dann weg bin. Da wollten sie mich ins Heim setzen, weil ich da tatsächlich vom Ofen so ne Stange genommen hab vor lauterm Ärger, weil er so da wieder mich tyrannisiert hat, dass ich aufzogen hab. […] Der hat mich nicht gschlagn, gar nix, bloß der war natürlich geschockt, und dann ist er losgegangen und dann ham s' sofort 's Ding, Jugendamt angerufen und von da an ist die Geschichte losgegangen, da wo ich dann weg bin'.

She does not give many details when talking about her stepmother, who originally comes from Ukraine. However, in contrast to most other forced labourers' descendants who grew up in the surrounding villages and towns, Diestler attributes a past to her stepmother *before* she arrived in Bavaria. In fact, Diestler and her half-sister Schenja Wrobel are the only ones in the larger study who elaborate on their parents' biographies in their countries of origin before they entered the village's horizon. However, Diestler does not provide an accurate historical and political context, and it does not become clear if her stepmother's family lived in Belarus or Ukraine, and whether this family was a victim of Stalinist oppression, Nazi oppression or both. All in all, it would not be possible to reconstruct her stepmother's biography as a former forced labourer from Ukraine from Diestler's narrative. Instead, her stepmother is depicted as a figure in the general chaos of war in Eastern Europe.

Re-emerging Knowledge after Migration: Schenja Wrobel's Account

Having left 'the village', Schenja Wrobel has since been living in a more urban place. In our preliminary talk, she mentions that she had a psychological illness which led to a stay in a rehabilitation clinic, which resulted in her working in a workshop for disabled people (*Behindertenwerkstatt*). At the time of the interview, she had a regular job as a cleaner. Wrobel is the only one of the interview partners of the entire study I talked to who no longer lives in the place she grew up, nor has a house there that she takes care of.

Most of the former forced labourers' family members I interviewed do not – or at least hesitate to – explain that their parents were deported by force to Germany and Austria. They also do not usually describe in detail their parents' work or relations with farmers and German colleagues (maids and servants). But Wrobel's parents, especially her mother, passed on their story to her, and now Wrobel tells it to me, someone she might have heard of (as I was born in the same region as her) but had never met before the interview. In contrast to other interviewees, she wants her story to be published. She starts the interview with a long, detailed description of her mother's forced labour and deportation to Germany:

> [My mother] knows that she came here, well, that she was basically carried off. But I found something in her papers here – a recruitment paper – that makes one think that she came along voluntarily. But that's not true.

> She didn't just come along, she was picked up by the police or military, whatever they called it at the time, and she had to go with them.[34]

Wrobel repeats the involuntary and violent circumstances of her mother's arrival in Germany throughout the interview, and she also asks me several times if I know more 'deported' (*zwangsverschleppt*) people.[35] Wrobel also describes in detail how her mother's mobility was limited as a forced labourer:

> What she always said was that she had hardly any opportunities for leisure time. The farmers didn't like when they wanted to go out. Regardless, if they were out, they had to wear this sign – it said 'OST',[36] that's how it was somehow. It was an armband; they always had to wear it. If they didn't wear it and met the police, they had to pay a mark. This was an incredible amount of [money] back then [...].
> My mother once caused a misunderstanding. She didn't know how to say [something] [....] She asked the farmer if she could go to a comrade (*Kamerad*) and then he immediately said 'no' and she said 'but, well ...'. She realised that [the farmer] was just surprised and that he misunderstood and then she said, 'Well, *this kind* of comrade'. She had long hair and showed her braids. He understood that she was talking about a girlfriend and then she was allowed to go out once in a while, [and] so she encountered compatriots. She then realised that there were actually a few of them in the surrounding farms. She kept in touch with two of them after the war, Maria and Oksana.[37]

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34 In German: 'Sie weiß es, dass sie hergekommen ist, also dass sie quasi [...] abgeholt wurde. Ich hab' aber hier in den Unterlagen aber was gefunden, und das ist ein Anwerbeschein, da nimmt ma ja an, dass sie freiwillig ... mitgegangen wär', aber das stimmt nicht, also sie ist nicht mitgegangen, sondern sie wurde quasi von Polizei oder Militär wie man das damals bezeichnen wollt' abgeholt und musste da mit' (Wrobel, Interview 1, min. 00:08:30–32).

35 Wrobel, Interview 1, min. 00:38:45.

36 It means 'East' and was a patch forced labourers from Belarus, Ukraine and Russia had to wear during National Socialism.

37 In German: 'Was sie mir sonst immer erzählt hat, das war das, dass sie also kaum Möglichkeiten haben gehabt für Freizeitgestaltung, dass die Bauern das auch nicht gerne gesehen haben, wenn sie irgendwie nach draußen wollten, und dass sie sich eigentlich immer, egal, wenn sie sich im Freien bewegt haben, dann mussten sie so ein Zeichen tragen, das hieß "OST", das müsst, das war irgendwie so. Das war eine Ärmelbinde, das mussten sie immer tragen, wenn sie das nicht getragen haben, und haben dort, sind dort der Polizei begegnet, dann mussten sie eine Mark bezahlen. Das war unheimlich viel für die Zeiten damals. [...] Meine Mutter hat mal ein Missverständnis ausgelöst, sie wusst' nicht, wie sie das sagen sollte, sie hat das eben von einer anderen gehört, dass die sich treffen würden und hat gemeint, sie wollt dort auch hingehen und hat „nein", und n

Additionally, Wrobel refutes the trope that the farmers were nice and generous towards 'their' forced labourers, a theme that is frequently repeated not only in my other interviews but also in academic studies about forced labour,[38] and that was hardly ever challenged by other former forced labourer's descendants I interviewed. Wrobel notes that her father did not sit at the table with the farmer's family for lunch and dinner, but got 'substandard (*minderwertig*) food in a tin bowl'. He also ate fodder beets that were meant for cattle and stole potatoes that were boiling in a cauldron for the animals and ate them unpeeled.[39] This description is semantically closer to forced labour in camps than it is to a narrative I was often told elsewhere during my field research: 'Back then people were poor and my [Polish] father had to labour at a farm in Mühlbach, but as he is so hard-working he was accepted and everyone liked him'.[40]

Like Diestler, Wrobel describes her mother's origins in Ukraine, but she does so in more detail than her half-sister. After I asked her if her mother had experienced hunger in Ukraine, she narrated an anecdote as if she had experienced it herself: when Wrobel's mother was a little girl, she once went to visit friends with her own mother. The mother – Wrobel's grandmother – went into the friends' house while the girl – Wrobel's mother – was waiting outside. The mother stayed inside for a long time. At some point, the girl started screaming and sobbing until everyone came outside. The girl was afraid that

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hat sie gemeint "Ja, aber …". Sie hat dann schon gemerkt, dass der einfach erstaunt war und dass er das falsch verstanden, und dann hat sie gmeitn "Ja, also so nen Kamerad". Sie hat lange Haare gehabt und hat die Zöpfe gezeigt, und dann hat ers also verstanden, dass sie gmeint hat, ne Freundin, und dann durft sie dann doch auch mal fortgehen und hat so quasi den Kontakt eben auch zu anderen Landsleuten aufgebaut und hat dann festgestellt, dass es doch einige gab, wo dann in der Umgebung waren und mit zweien hat sie also immer nen Kontakt gehabt. Das war einmal eine Maria und einmal 'ne Oksana'.

38 To give one example of this trope: 'inter-ethnical work relations helped to trivialise and overcome current prejudices', which, 'above all in rural areas [could be] observed. There were French, Polish and occasionally also Russian prisoners of war and workers working on farms. They worked together, ate together in the field and in the house. It was not rare that farmers, infringing state regulations, sat at the kitchen table with alien workers. With their peasants, the French and Polish alien workers often attended the Catholic service, [and] actually were accepted as human beings': Albrecht Lehmann, *Reden über Erfahrung. Kulturwissenschaftliche Bewusstseinsanalyse des Erzählens* (Berlin 2007) 124–125 [section translated by Andreas Förster and Lindsay Marcks]; see also Angelika Laumer, 'Getting rural. A plea for critical research in the rural area', in: Fédéric Bonnesoeur et al. (eds), *Occupation, annihilation, forced labour. Papers from the 20th workshop on the history and memory of National Socialist concentration camps* (Berlin 2017) 213–234.

39 Wrobel, Interview 1, min. 00:54:00.

40 Laumer, *Am Horizont,* 245.

the friends whom they had been visiting would kill and eat her mother, and that is why she had cried. 'There was so little to eat, so things like that happened; no cats and no dogs were around anymore because one had to eat what was found and tales were told that people just disappeared', Wrobel concludes.[41] This is very likely a story about the *Holodomor* – the great Ukrainian Famine in the early 1930s – experienced by a girl who later became a forced labourer in Germany and passed the story on to her daughter. It is an oral story – a legend – and thus an example of everyday knowledge that re-emerged in a town in Hesse.

Both conversations are interesting because they constitute two different accounts within one family. Both interviewees also frame their accounts with a family- or, more precisely, a kinship semantic, and compare themselves to one another. To some extent, the interviews are even structured by a narration of competition between the two. Diestler's naturalisation at the age of eighteen was described as smooth, while Wrobel's naturalisation took, according to her, more than ten years, with many obstacles and with police coming to her home threatening to deport her to her 'country of origin'; although it was not certain what the family's country of origin actually was, as their father's place of birth was unknown. Several attempts by the entire family to become German citizens had failed. Naturalisation became especially important for Wrobel when her first child was born. She thought that if her parents could not make it, 'I have to do it on my own' (German: '*Dann muss ich es alleine packen*').[42]

Diestler's birth mother was German, which might have made the process of gaining German citizenship with the authorities in the local administration smoother. But, as Wrobel notes, her Ukrainian birth mother also fulfilled all the necessary criteria: she lived 'according to German customs and habits' ('*Sitten und Gebräuche*'), demonstrated 'moral conduct' ('*ordentlicher Lebenswandel*') and never committed a crime.[43] However, their common birth father was illiterate and could therefore not write in German. According to Wrobel, he had a learning disability; according to Diestler, he was just lazy and did not want to work. Wrobel considers her father's – including his physical – disabilities to be a consequence of exploitative work and an accident he had while labouring on a farm. She also mentions that he was scared of doctors and medical examinations, but never elaborated on that any further.[44] She distances herself from her half-sister, who she says liked fashion and new haircuts, resented that her family was too poor to afford these things and therefore accused her father of being a malingerer.

41 Wrobel, Interview 3, min. 00:37:26.
42 Wrobel, Interview 3, min. 00:26:00.
43 Wrobel, Interview 3, min. 00:41:03.
44 Wrobel, Interview 1, min. 1:00:37.

Diestler's account about their father is also framed by the 'kinship' and the family-theme, for example when she describes her father's tantrums, his taciturnity and his abuse towards her. But it is a kinship, and along with it, a heritage that she left behind.

Conversely, Wrobel mentions a network of former forced labourers in her parents' neighbourhood, a network she relates to, and talks about her mother's decision to keep working on a farm after the war, as she did not want to stay in the camp to which she was assigned and where – according to Wrobel – she had to wait for her repatriation.[45] Wrobel also says that neighbours (she does not say that they were former forced labourers, and I assume they were German-born) took care of her mother when she was old, and Diestler sometimes looked after her mother's friend, a former forced labourer. However, Wrobel also states very clearly that there was no systematic compensation from the farmers her parents had worked for. She mentions that Oksana, her mother's friend, had worked for a porcelain shop owner who had a 'big house' and

> [...] let her live in that house because Oksana should have beautiful sunset years. [...] She had two big rooms, a living room, a nice sleeping room and she could join the family any time. They cooked for her, she didn't have to do her laundry, nothing.[46]

During my field trips, I once asked a former forced labourer's daughter, who still lived in the small town where she had been born, whether she had photographs of her parents. She was hesitant to speak and I hoped that the pictures could spark a conversation. We looked at photos that clearly depicted her parents in Poland in, probably, the 1970s. The clothes her parents were wearing in the pictures pointed to Western 1970s fashion. The photographs were in colour, with Polish lettering in the background. Looking at the pictures, the interviewee was surprised and could not say why and when her parents had been there at a time when hardly anyone from a Bavarian town would go to socialist Poland on vacation. When she also found letters written in Polish, sent from Canada to her parents in the late 1940s – obviously written by former fellow forced labourers – she gave them to me, saying 'shred them' (*'Zerreissen Sie sie'*). She told me I could look at them (and I kept them) but that they should not be published.[47]

45 Wrobel, Interview 1, min. 00:38:45.
46 Wrobel, Interview 1, min. 00:25:15.
47 Laumer, *Am Horizont*, 260.

My encounters with Schenja Wrobel were completely different. She keeps a private archive with photographs (and knows who is in the photos and when they were taken) and documents from her mother, including her mother's *Arbeitsbuch* ('Employment Record Book' documenting forced labour under Nazism) and her naturalisation documents. The documents also show her mother's Ukrainian name, which had been Germanised in everyday conversations because no one in Bavaria would have been able or bothered to pronounce the Ukrainian name.

Wrobel also visited her mother's family in socialist Ukraine when she was a teenager in the 1970s. She has vivid memories of this journey, although she also recounts how estranged she sometimes felt witnessing what she described as poverty. Years after this visit to Ukraine, her mother confessed to her that they had travelled there because she had plans to settle down in Ukraine again and wanted to prepare for the family's migration. But Wrobel's mother ultimately decided not to go through with that plan because she was aghast by the low standard of living, says Wrobel.[48]

Concluding Remarks: on Narrative Autobiographical Freedom after Having Left the Village

When comparing the interviews of the half-sisters Anita Diestler and Schenja Wrobel to one another and to other interviews with forced labourers' descendants in 'the village', it became apparent that Wrobel, who had readily accepted an appointment for an interview, spoke freely, without much hesitation and without any ambiguity in her narrative. She makes use of her narrative freedom and creativity and tells anecdotes with plots that position herself or her mother as subjects who act, rarely referring to her immediate surroundings in a dialogical style, the style that is common in 'the village'. She had left her former rural surroundings, moved several times in Hesse and can decide on her own if she wants to publicly share that she is the 'daughter of the Ukrainian and the peculiar Pole'. She is a post-migrant, an internal migrant. The hope for a post-migrant society where the fact of migration is just accepted appears clearly in her narrations. Wrobel applies an oral, narrative form: the autobiographical account, which, according to Berger and Luckmann, is more institutionalised than everyday knowledge and the *habitus* usually passed on

48 Wrobel, Interview 3, min. 00:30:00.

in 'the village'. Biographical narration has its roots in the rather subjective, bourgeois, non-rural form of writing a journal.[49] Wrobel applies this subjective form by narrating detailed plots with subjects that feel, experience and act. As a result, she allows explicit knowledge that used to be absent – knowledge about a forced labourer's past in her country of origin, the nature of relations between farmers and foreign workers, the *Holodomor* and so on – to re-emerge.

Many other interview partners –including not only profiteers' descendants and profiteers (many of whom had been members of the *Bund Deutscher Mädel, Hitlerjugend, Sturmabteilung*, the *Wehrmacht* or community figures under Nazism) but also forced labourers' descendants – demonstrated a lot of ambivalence when accepting, refusing or postponing appointments for interviews. Wrobel's openness and accounts are an exception. She is one of only two interview partners whose parents had both been former forced labourers. All the other descendants of forced labourers I had interviewed for the overarching study had a German mother. The one other interviewee whose parents were both former forced labourers was also very clear about the injustice, discrimination and deprivation her parents, and she, had to endure, but she would not let me record her story and would only casually speak with me at her garden fence. She still lives next to the farm where her Ukrainian mother had been forced to work during the war and is known in the village for being 'weird' and 'withdrawn'.

Wrobel's way of storytelling indicates that her migration within Germany, her leaving her village, made it possible to talk about the biographical knowledge that her parents, especially her mother, had passed on to her. She speaks as a member of a *post-migrant* society, not of a rural community. Wrobel even *wants* her mother's experience to be published and wants to know about other families who have a similar story. This is in stark contrast to the effects of rurality, which not only hinders the subjective telling of one's own or one's family story in general, but also makes it nearly impossible to narrate the stories of marginal men and women and of experiences of migration and post-migration, in particular. Diestler, whose account shows more rural features, distances herself from anything that is 'Polish' and, along with that, her father.

Knowledge about former forced labourers in West Germany/the Federal Republic of Germany and *Heimatlose Ausländer* is in many respects lost knowledge, not only in the village but also on a macro-level; there is very little

49 Peter Alheit and Bettina Dausien, '"Biographie" in den Sozialwissenschaften. Anmerkungen zu historischen und aktuellen Problemen einer Forschungsperspektive', in: Bernhard Fetz (ed.), *Die Biographie – zur Grundlegung ihrer Theorie* (Berlin 2009) 285–315.

research in academic history and public history on *Heimatlose Ausländer*.[50] This lack of research mirrors the ambivalence of many former forced labourers' descendants living in rural societies, who are hesitant to raise the issue and prefer to keep their families' stories private or distance themselves from their Polish or Ukrainian family members. This leads to the disappearance of vivid stories about forced labour and forced labourers in oral communication. By contrast, Wrobel renders the knowledge about her parents' experiences as forced labourers into a family story that re-emerges a few hundred kilometres away from her place of birth.

What does this mean for the concept of rural society? It is evident that Schenja Wrobel and other family members of former forced labourers could be, and are, to some extent, agents for social influence in the village. Wrobel does not live there anymore but still has relations with her half-sister. However, the village's social knowledge stock is hermetic in its structure: forced labourers' families either speak and behave like 'anyone else' and 'know their place' or they remain 'behind the garden fence'. Moreover, the village's response to sociation (*Vergesellschaftung*) is to adapt some of these social influences (for example, using contemporary communication technology and creating and consuming content creators' narratives) to shield – or 'immunise' – itself against others. People in the village use the internet and social media where they can easily and quickly find out about forced labour in Germany, even in their own region. Yet, the village tends to immunise itself against forms of knowledge that question asymmetric social relations between profiteers (of forced labour) and former forced labourers' descendants. This immunisation is characterised by the village not engaging in subjective storytelling and thereby suppressing knowledge that could otherwise emerge. The 'village' thus reinforces the notion of a community and denies that it exists in a post-migrant society. For further research it might be worthwhile to focus on rural-urban migration and the question as to how knowledge stock changes after people have left 'the village'.

50 There are a few more publications that touch upon the topic, but there are many desiderata regarding the social history of *Heimatlose Ausländer*. See, for example, Julia Lalande, 'Building a home abroad' – a comparative study of Ukrainian migration, immigration policy and diaspora formation in Canada and Germany after the Second World War (Hamburg 2006) Thesis The University of Hamburg, available at https://ediss.sub.uni-hamburg.de/handle/ediss/1696 (13 April 2023). The most well-known publication is not scientific, but literary: Natascha Wodin, *Sie kam aus Mariupol* (Reinbek 2017); see also Libuše Hannah Vepřek, *Ludwigsfeld: (Un-)gleichzeitigkeiten eines Münchner Viertels. Vom Kampf um Anerkennung und Deutungshoheit über einen städtischen Raum* (München 2019). Linda Ennen-Lange is currently working on a doctoral thesis on *Heimatlose Ausländer* at the University of Osnabrück. For further information, see https://www.imis.uni-osnabrueck.de/forschung/1_migrationsregime/displaced_persons.html (last accessed 2025).