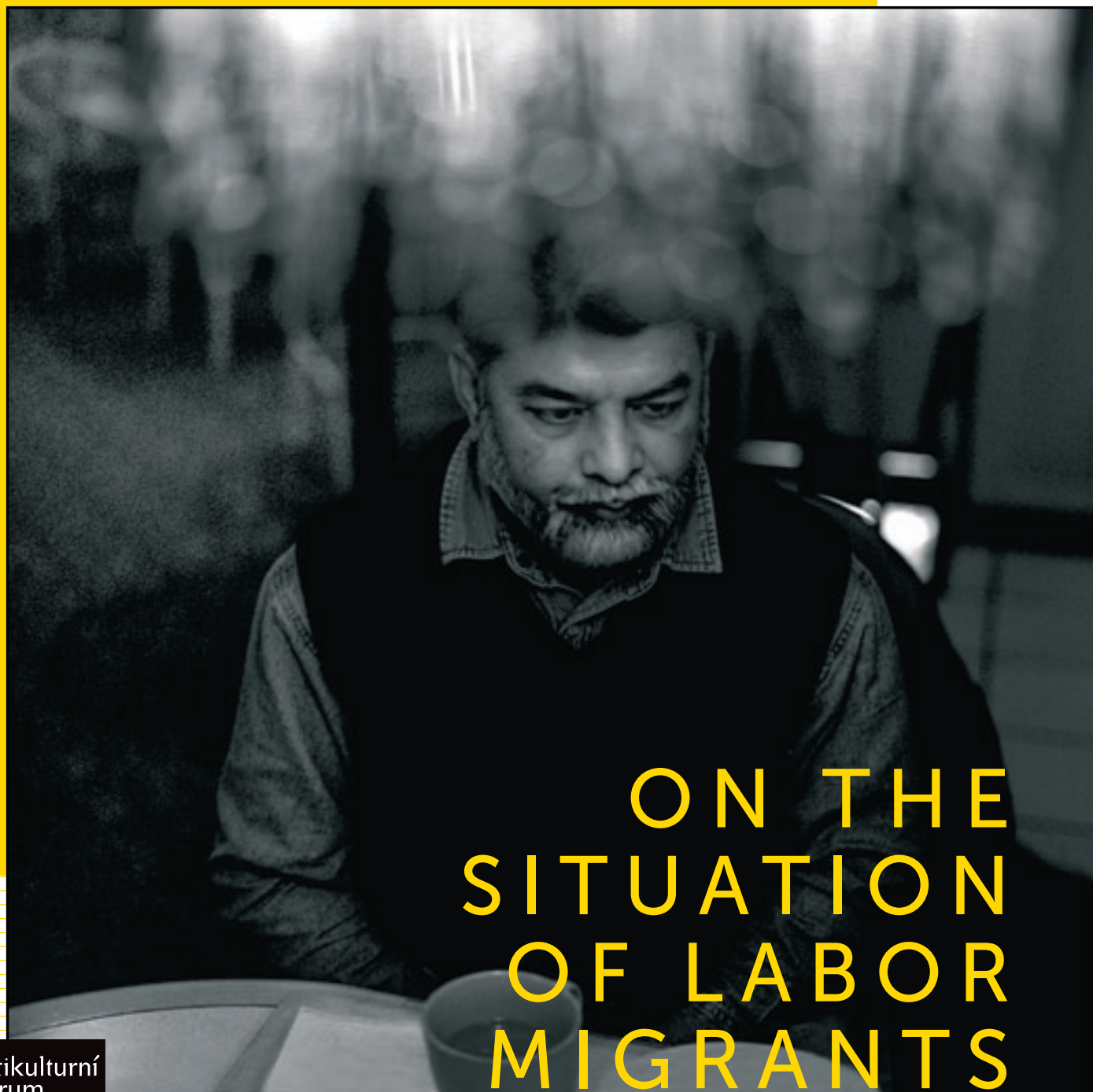
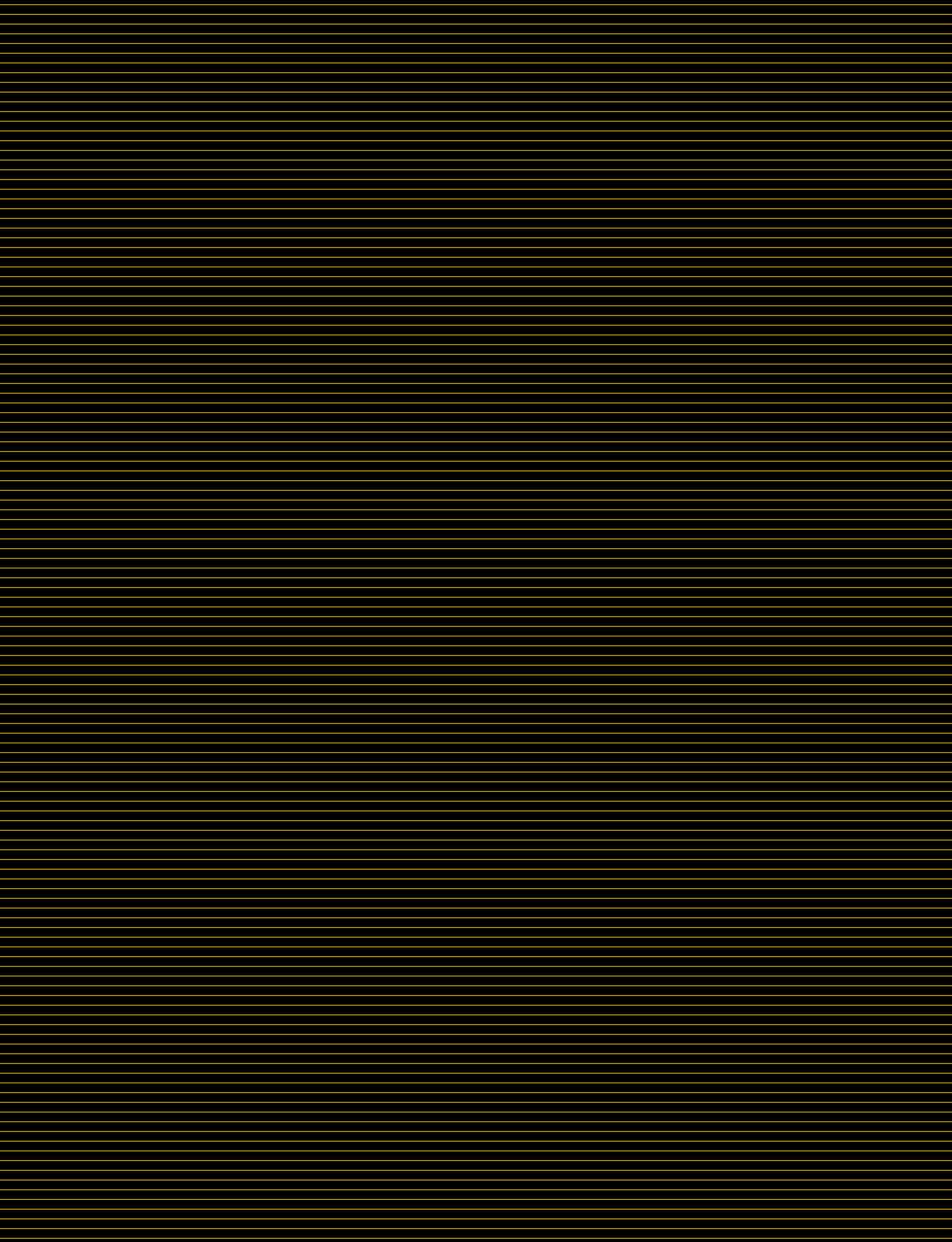


**FLEXI
IN-
SECURITY**



**ON THE
SITUATION
OF LABOR
MIGRANTS
IN TIMES OF
ECONOMIC
CRISIS**





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IN-
SECURITY**

*TEN STORIES AND PHOTO
REPORTAGES ON THE SITUATION
OF LABOR MIGRANTS IN TIMES
OF ECONOMIC CRISIS*

MKC 2011



CREDITS

ISBN 978-80-904808-0-3

This publication is one of the results of the international FLEXI-IN-SECURITY project implemented by the **Multicultural Center Prague** together with the help of following partners organization: **Foundation Nowa Ameryka, Rejs, e.V.**, **The Immigrant institute**, **Centre Bruxellois d'Action Interculturelle**, with the financial assistance of The European Commission.

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Produced by: Multicultural Center Prague (Czech Republic)

Graphic design: jagajankowska.eu

Design of web pages: Jarek Sierpinski

This publication is supported under the European Community Programme for Employment and Social Solidarity – PROGRESS (2007-2013). This programme is managed by the Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities of the European Commission. It was established to financially support the implementation of the objectives of the European Union in the employment and social affairs area, as set out in the Social Agenda, and thereby contribute to the achievement of the Lisbon Strategy goals in these fields. The seven-year programme targets all stakeholders who can help shape the development of appropriate and effective employment and social legislation and policies, across the EU-27, EFTA-EEA and EU candidate and pre-candidate countries. PROGRESS mission is to strengthen the EU contribution in support of Member States' commitment. PROGRESS will be instrumental in:

- providing analysis and policy advice on PROGRESS policy areas;
- monitoring and reporting on the implementation of EU legislation and policies in PROGRESS policy areas;
- promoting policy transfer, learning and support among Member States on EU objectives and priorities; and
- relaying the views of the stakeholders and society at large

The information contained in this publication does not necessarily reflect the position or opinion of the European Commission.

The Multicultural Center Prague

is a non-profit organization interested in issues related to the coexistence of different cultures in the Czech Republic and abroad. Since our founding in 1999, we have been busy working on new educational, cultural and information initiatives. We organize workshops, courses, international seminars, debates, film screenings and book readings for children, students, teachers, librarians and just about everybody else. To learn more about our activities see: www.mkc.cz, www.migraceonline.cz, www.migraceonline.cz/flexiinsecurity

A multicultural society enriches and stimulates but it can also create tensions and misunderstandings. The Multicultural Center Prague aims to help all people understand and explore this reality.

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ABOUT THE PROJECT

Labour migrants were among the first and most severely affected victims of the economic crisis. To those who had arrived only shortly before the factories started to layoff workers, the crisis meant a threat to their very existence. At the same time, in the case of the Czech Republic, this humanitarian disaster created public awareness of the problematic ways in which labour migration has been organized for years. Seeking to contribute to the debate on ways to create better migration regimes that will better secure the labour migrants' human rights and social needs, the **"FLEXI-IN-SECURITY"** project sought to look at the issue of labour migrant

employment from a comparative perspective. How did the crisis affect migrants in other EU member states? And, what policies could be chosen to improve labour migrants' social protection? One of the main project results was the **"FLEXI-IN-SECURITY"** exhibition, which was displayed throughout 2011 in Prague, Brno, Ostrava, Pardubice, Frankfurt / Oder, Dijon, Brussels, Warsaw and Borås (Sweden). It sought to approach the project's topic by focusing on the stories of individual migrants in various migrant communities. This publication contains selected pictures and the full stories from the reports on which the portrayals in the exhibition were based.

1. Flexibility vs. Security

Many economists call for more flexibility on the labour market. Greater flexibility could mean easier procedures for the hiring and firing of people and lower costs for social protection. Economists say that such changes would make it easier, and thus more attractive, to employ people. More jobs could be created. This would result in lower unemployment and stronger economic growth.

However, such demands have another side to them and are politically sensitive. Greater flexibility means at the same time less job security. It means lower social protection, and possibly lower wages. The result is a dilemma that all member states of the European Union face: *How will it be possible to remain globally competitive, while at the same time preserving the European model of the social state?*

Pointing to the positive example of Denmark and other European countries, the European Commission promotes "flexicurity", the combination of flexibility and security as an answer to this dilemma. The Commission defines "flexicurity" as an "integrated approach" that includes four components:

- more flexible and secure contractual arrangements, from the point of view of both employer and worker;
- lifelong learning strategies in order to ensure workers' ongoing capacity to adapt, and increase their employability;
- effective active labour market policies in order to facilitate transitions to new jobs;
- modern social security systems providing adequate income support during transitions.¹

The EU member states declared in their support of the Lisbon Strategy their principal readiness to transform their labour markets in ways that would fit with the concept of "flexicurity". However, in reality, the Union does not have any direct power to demand from its member states any specific reforms of their labour market. In the world of democratic decision-making, there are numerous obstacles for effective labour market reform. Whereas many leftist parties react hesitatingly to attempts to curb any long-established workers' rights and securities, many conservatives oppose massive investments into lifelong learning or more generous unemployment benefits for financial concerns.


It is these difficulties that have led to the different ways in which European countries have addressed the dilemma of flexibility and security in their political practice. A crucial role is played by the work of migrants. Being economically less demanding, less organized, and possibly less interested in long-term securities than their domestic counterparts, the employment of foreigners from poorer countries is a highly attractive solution in situations where domestic workers are scarce or too expensive. In some countries, foreigners' flexibility is supported by the ways in which foreigners are employed, which involve informal practices and employment through agencies that tend to by-pass the regulations of the labour codes and provide, if at all, only a minimal amount of social security. As a consequence, the economy's need for flexible work is satisfied at the cost of those performing their work under precarious conditions of a labour market that is effectively divided between a non-regulated . Not flexicurity, but flexi-insecurity!

2. Flexicurity vs. Flexi-insecurity? - The case of the Czech Republic

As a consequence of EU accession, the Czech Republic turned into a major target country for direct foreign investments. In larger cities and along major traffic arteries vast industrial parks have developed, which provide thousands of new working places. Even though regions with high unemployment and major social problems persist, a significant share of these newly created work places have been filled by labour migrants. It is not an exaggeration to say that the Czech economic miracle of the years between accession to the EU and the onset of the global economic crises would not have been possible without the work of people from poorer Eastern European countries such as Slovakia and the Ukraine and Asian countries such as Vietnam or Mongolia.

The persistence of unemployment in a booming economy, which simultaneously attracts hundreds of thousands of migrants, can be taken as an indicator for the existence of dysfunctionalities on the labour market. Labour market experts explain the paradox of "mismatches" between labour supply and demand.

The building of low-income housing, sponsored by the



state or employers, changes in the social security system that would motivate citizen to invest into their skills, investments in training for the long-term unemployed or the steering of investments into disadvantaged areas – these are just some examples that one could imagine of various kinds of “flexicurity” policies that might help to minimize these mismatches. On a small scale, there have been attempts to enact most of these policies. However, on a larger scale, it seems employers have found it easier to employ less demanding foreigners than to spend time, energy and money in the “cultivation” of the long-term unemployed. The state showed little interest in opposing the wishes of the economic sector. Accordingly, the number of migrants grew at an unprecedented scale and the recruiters began to tap the labour resources of more and more distant places, such as Mongolia or China.

Czech law prohibits discrimination and unequal treatment. Despite this policy, many of the migrants work under worse conditions than the Czech core staff of these companies. One reason for this inequality is the weak position of the migrants, who are often in a position of dependence with their employers. Their residence permit is often directly bound to their specific work place – thus, in the worst scenario, losing this position could lead to the end of their stay in the Czech Republic. Another factor is the role of labour agencies. In many cases migrants are not directly employed by the companies where they perform their work, but “lent” to these companies from agencies. As migration began to develop into a highly profitable business, the number of these companies grew into the thousands. While there are serious agencies that treat their employees decently, a large number have questionable reputations and are criticized for “taxing” their employers with charges for services such as accommodation, interpretation or the management of papers. As a consequence, many migrants work for extremely low wages and will never be able to pay back the money invested in coming to the Czech Republic.

The human costs of these arrangements became fully visible with the beginning of the economic crises, when migrants were the first to lose their jobs. For many migrants, the loss of their job meant also losing the right to remain in the country legally. As many of the most recent migrants did not have even minimal forms of social security or the money (not to mention the desire) for the return trip back to their country of origin, losing their job could mean, in the worst case, ending up homeless on the street. At the same time, returning home was not a viable option, as many families of migrants from Asia are in debt for the huge amounts of money they invested to intermediaries who “organized” the migrants’ work permit and visa.

3. Our project

The FLEXI-IN-SECURITY project was developed in reaction to this crisis. It is a cultural project with a clear political purpose. While being shocked about the human tragedies and worried about the governments’ lack of compassion for the situation of migrants, we welcome that the crisis has at least opened up a much-needed discussion about the way migration is organized. Our project seeks to contribute to this debate by focusing on the experience of migrants in the labour markets of other EU countries.

At the core of the project has been the FLEXI-IN-SECURITY exhibition, which was produced by ten photographers and ten researchers from various countries. Each of the ten stories presented both in this publication and in the exhibition approaches the work and life of migrants from a different perspective in an era of economic crisis. The project’s scope is wide: The report on migrant workers in the Czech industrial city of Pilsen by **Martina Křížková** and **David Kumermann** deals directly with the crisis of the Czech migration regime. As a consequence of the crisis, migrants from the Ukraine, Vietnam, Mongolia and other countries were losing their jobs. As the Czech government decided to tighten its migration policy in order to better protect Czech workers from the consequences of the crisis, even those migrants who stayed and were able to keep their jobs were often faced with the decision to stay illegally in the country. The impact of the crisis is also one of the topics in the work of **Tomáš Janeba** and **Iva Zimová**, which deals with the life of children of Mongolian migrants in the Czech Republic. Focusing on Czech migrant insurance companies’ refusal to cover costs for childbearing and medical costs of newborn kids, this text also provides very specific examples of the scandalous lack of social protection.

The exhibition includes other works that show that the migrant crisis within the greater global crisis is not a universal phenomenon. In their portrayal of the small African community in Prague, **Tomáš Linder** and **Jérémie Jung** show that other groups seem to have been affected by the crisis only marginally. Both in the case of the portraits of recent migrants who are living and working in Brussels, Belgium (by **Massimo Bortolini** and **Claire Allard**) and in the portrayal of Ukrainian migrants in Warsaw, Poland (by **Daiva Terescenko** and **Cyril Horiszny**), it has not been so much the crisis which determines the conditions of a migrant’s employment but rather, the status of their level of integration.

One important difference in regard to status is that between the citizen of so-called third-world countries and that of an EU citizen, who enjoys similar rights to a domestic citizen. However, as shown by **Piotr Szenajch** and **Monika Kmita** in their portrayal of long-distance commuters from the Mazury Region in Poland, the privilege of being an EU citizen does not always protect people from experiencing exploitative work conditions. The same can be said about the ethnic Turkish day labourers from Bulgaria, who struggle to make a living in Munich, Germany (**Lisa Riedner** and **Trixi Eder**). As Germany continues to protect its labour market from workers from new EU member states, Bulgarians are allowed to reside, but not to work, in Germany. A quite different group of Turks is the subject of the project of **Georgiana Catalina Macovei** and **Octavian Bălea**, who documented the visitors of a Turkish mosque in Bochum, Germany.

While most teams chose to portray migrant communities in their places of work, three projects approach the issue from the angle of the places migrants are leaving behind. Aside from the above-mentioned portrayal of migrants from Poland’s rural Mazury district, this approach was followed by **Rica Agnes Castañeda** and **Jay Panelo** (on a village of “Italian” migrants in the Philippines) and **Jan Hanzlík** and **Petr Šilhánek**, who portrayed participants of a programme for volunteer returnees to Georgia.

1/ European Commission (2008): Report of the Mission for Flexicurity.

Welcome to the Grey Kingdom!

| Text: Martina Křížková | Photo: David Kumermann |

They entered a system of ineffective laws, corruption, mafia middlemen and employers, who wanted to make money at all costs. Ukrainians, Mongolians, Vietnamese and Moldavians. During the crisis, they often turned to illegal means, as government offices did not want them taking jobs away from Czechs, who nevertheless did not go to the factories. Others came in their place: Bulgarians, Romanians, Poles and Slovaks.

As far as the eye can see – grey. The low buildings of the factories are grey. The wire fences around them shine bright silver-grey. The same colour can be seen in the asphalt of roads and sidewalks. Even the bus stop, with its three seats and its wind-tattered schedule, is grey. Even the miserable surrounding trees and bushes, which somehow survived the industrial invasion, are tinged with grey. The same goes for the sign on the fence announcing cheap accommodation.

The voice at the end of the phone is grey too. "There are no vacancies," it says and quickly hangs up. It does not matter if the statement refers to work or to rooms because here, in the Grey Kingdom, other rules have long since reigned. A man on his own cannot achieve anything. He needs connections, papers, and to respect the laws, which, in this kingdom, change constantly and are unwritten.

Of course, the bus, which brings you here, is also grey and the bus driver shouts "Take your bags off the seat or get out!" And the forty-year-old Bulgarian is grey too, confusedly clinging to two plastic shopping bags from Tesco, which just a moment ago were snow-white, but because he had to put them on the floor have had the grey begin working on them as well. And the little Vietnamese woman sitting opposite him is grey too, holding her arms close to her as if she were holding a baby, which she could not have, unless she wanted to get sent back home quickly. Because that is not the reason she is here.

Here, life is governed by production, standards and directives. Televisions, sausages, old wagons, air-conditioners, beer. In Pilsen, you can do anything and in Bory all that and even more. And for every ride on the merry-go-round you pay separately. For the greyest of all greys is the smell of money. It is invisible, but omnipresent. Thanks to it the halls are here, the sidewalks, the worker's hostels, the voice on the telephone, the

bus and the foreigners. The whole system is grey. A wheel, which even the crisis cannot stop. Even the scoop of the backhoe, which dug the foundations for the first factories years ago, must have been the same. And somewhere there it began. Or maybe even earlier.

The Past

The first large scale arrival of foreigners in Pilsen began at the beginning of the 1990s. It occurred in the same way as in the rest of the country, but to a lesser degree. Ukrainians and other Russian-speaking peoples from the former Soviet Union aimed to work in supermarkets and department stores as well as construction or cleaning companies. Vietnamese people, who had been previously studying here, took over the open markets and flooded the city with cheap goods, from cigarettes to shoes. Even a few wealthy Russians settled here, along with some Arabs, usually accustomed to Communist times, and a few families escaping the war in former Yugoslavia.

Pilsen is the fourth largest city in the Czech Republic, with almost two hundred thousand people living here. It is famous for not just beer, but industry as well. Even though after the revolution some of the traditional production at Skoda had nearly collapsed, it was still a spot where jobs could be found. Migration continued throughout the nineties; however, it was always in relatively small numbers. The real boom would come at the turn of the millennium.

Around 1998 investment incentives took off, generally in the form of large tax breaks intended to lure foreign investors to the Czech Republic. The government also supported the expansion of new industrial zones, from purchasing land to building the necessary infrastructure, in order for the industrialists to



Martina Hánová, Contact Centre Pilsen.
The racketeering of foreign workers
by the client system is a nightmare
also for her.

have somewhere to set up their facilities. All this was backed up by several myths¹, of which the most convincing cited the reduction of unemployment in less developed areas of the country. This need for a reduction of unemployment was not, however, exactly the case of “developed” Pilzen, a place with relatively low unemployment (from 2000 to the present it has fluctuated between 6% - 7% across the county); even so, Pilzen resolved to set up its own new industrial zones.

On the western edge of the city, near the exit of the D5 motorway into Germany, almost within sight of the prison, a section of land covering 125 hectares was immediately built up. Borská Pole, or Pinewood Fields, as the zone is called, began to attract capital even before it was built; the first investor (Panasonic) arrived already in 1996. The last lot in the zone was sold this year (2010). Within ten years, forty-five companies moved here, employing eleven to thirteen thousand workers (before the financial crisis, it reached sixteen thousand). As well, members of the city council praise the fact that, alone in the whole country, the lots in this industrial zone were sold at a profit. The City of Pilzen made a one-time earning of 50 million CZK (after deducting an investment of 560 million in infrastructure). The dream of employment however, was fulfilled a little differently than expected.

A zone only for foreigners

The majority of those working in the plants are brought in by employment agencies and cover fluctuations in production. Roughly 80% of them are not Czech and none of them come from Pilzen. These people, who mostly do unqualified work, are usually foreigners. The work generally offered here, in Bory, involves hard, monotonous drudgery on assembly lines. And applicants for this work must demonstrate above all exceptional flexibility. They are taken for three months and, if orders are low, they are laid off again for two months. This kind of treatment would never stand up with Czechs, who are protected by labour laws.

The city, which invested half a billion Czech Crowns (CZK) to the construction of a zone where the locals did not want to work, immediately and almost magically began to attract foreign workers. Last year, seventeen thousand of them officially lived in Pilzen. A year earlier, when demand for workers was at its peak, a thousand people a month arrived from EU countries and 200 from the Ukraine, Mongolia, Moldova and Vietnam according to the Office of Employment. Unofficially, however, it is suspected that the numbers can be roughly doubled. Of course, not all of them aimed to work in factories, although most of them experienced them in some way. Today, they work on construction sites, in supermarkets, department stores, and restaurants; they clean hospitals, repair railway cars, and plant trees. Even the cleaning lady at the local Employment Office comes in through a temp agency.

It is possible that the construction of the zone alone did not actually pay off for the city, even when counting the profits from the sale of the land. The webpage regionplzen.cz, mentions that Pilzen has lost money on fees for housing, garbage, public transport, street cleaning and a share of income tax (consequently for life and work of foreigners in Pilzen) up to some millions of Czech Crowns annually, which they must at least partially set aside in the city budget.²

As well, this new industrial quarter prevents any other development in this part of the city. It attracts only strange-looking ugly concrete buildings that provide accommodations for work-

ers and whose neglect only underscores the pointlessness of this district's existence. In this area, it is as if time flows differently. People appear only when they go out during their break to smoke in front of the wire fences or when shifts change. Otherwise, the streets are empty and deserted for hours. Most streets are lacking sidewalks and even the decent public transportation linking Bory to the city centre was cancelled recently. It is a place where transients work in factories or sleep in rented beds. “Pilzen has no other identity than industry; everything is conformed to that,” a Pilzen sociologist Ida Kaiserová explains dryly.

Made-to-order people

In order to understand what exactly is going on in Pilzen and just where all the grey came from and why it is slowly expanding, we must first take a step aside. “The worst was when I first arrived,” says Aleksii*, a former air force pilot from Belarus: “I had to give them my passport and we got paid once a year. We should have got around twelve thousand a month, but the client gave us only three or four months as a kind of deposit and the rest was paid when someone went home. He already had our passports, but this way he was even more sure of us,” he explains.

He says that the situation improved as long as the worker proved trustworthy: they were not ill, they worked, did not complain and did not want to cause any problems. “Then they got their passport back,” he adds and smiles, revealing a gap of missing teeth. Aleksii, whose request for asylum has been refused again, is exactly the same as the majority of foreigners in the city who are dependant on the so-called ‘client system’. It is made up of a particular cooperation, starting back in the mid 1990s.³

Originally catering to Ukrainians and Russian-speaking workers migrating to the Czech Republic, this system later expanded to include all groups of foreigners in the country. At the centre of it stands the client. Not all clients work the same way. Some concentrate on transporting people, others mediate between employers and workers, others assist the foreigners with their legal papers. And still others do everything described above. Usually though, they have under them an employment agency or a co-operative, which they own. They run the agencies directly as if they owned them while managing co-operatives more indirectly. In a co-op, all members are theoretically equal but, of course, the profits are divided in favour of the client or his representative.⁴ From the beginning, clients also served as a form of protection from the Russian-speaking mafia⁵, which focussed primarily on Ukrainian workers, arranging the theft of their savings on their way back home.

Originally, the clients recruited workers from a range of foreigners already living in the Czech Republic, who had long-term residence, knew the language and laws, and understood “how things worked”. Today, there is a large percentage of Czechs among their ranks as well. The need for mediation is given by the environment in which the client operates. It is linked to the work and arranging the necessary documents.

Getting permission to work in the Czech Republic and the accompanying visa requires arranging that someone secure the work for you before you arrive. That is to say, without the paper in your hands saying that you have a job waiting for you, you will not get any visa. So you come to the Czech Republic as a tourist, which many foreigners often do. But tourists do not have permission to work. This dilemma necessitates that a system such as the client system arises. But even without this bureaucratic hurdle, foreigners would have a hard time finding work on their own.



↑ Again, the court refused Aleksii's application for asylum

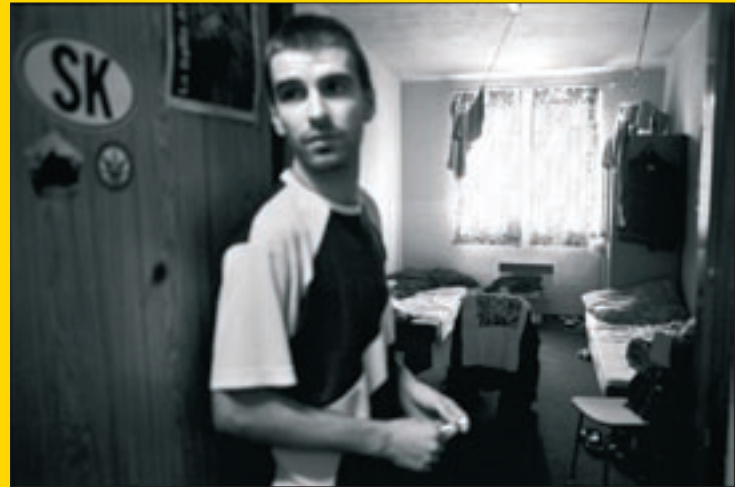


↑ Olena, a university student from Kirovohrad, the Ukraine

↓ Taťána Mandíková, Diecese Caritas Pilsen



↓ A Slovak Panasonic worker in his workers' hostel



The large companies located in Bory (but of course, not only them) also need people to work for them and who they can easily hire and fire as needed. Of course, Czech labour laws do not allow such behaviour. If they had to hire people directly, labour expenses would climb and their reasons for being in the Czech Republic (even considering tax breaks) would disappear. A similar problem is "seasonal" workers on which, for example, Czech construction companies rely. Therefore, the workers are officially employed by an agency and companies only rent people from them.

"The agency provides a ready-made service; you don't have to worry about anything, you just go to work when you need to and disappear when the orders stop coming in. Papers and everything else are taken care of," explains Sinh Hoang (not his real name) employed at one of the companies where his client offers jobs to people from Vietnam. Laws concerning foreigners as well as labour code laws and standards are elegantly sidestepped. Moreover, the possibility that foreigners are able find work on their own without an agency also decreases, as very few are employed directly. The demand for cheap labour was so strong in recent years that until the crisis peaked, nobody (from employers to bureaucrats) cared what it meant for the individual foreigner. Thus, like it or not, they become almost automatically part of the client system, which is, to put it simply, normally not good for

them. As Hoang says: "It doesn't concern you anymore what they do with these people, but we all know that something's wrong."

Bureaucratic symbiosis

That "wrong" is a result of two things: partly due to the business that arose around the transport and mediation of work for foreigners and partly due to the vulnerability of the foreigners to Czech laws. Both are directly connected; namely, that the existence of the system assumes a symbiosis between them and the civil service.

Let us begin with the second of the two. "Czech legislation dealing with the residence of foreigners is very complicated," explains Pavel Čížinský, a lawyer from the organization *Poradny pro Občanství a Občanská a Lidská Práva* (Counsel for Citizenship and Civil and Human Rights). According to him, bringing these standards into reality is not a simple matter. Their basis may not be definite or singular, so to a certain extent it corresponds to the "household" routine of the individual government offices. Firstly, with the immigration police, who are responsible for administrative authorization dealing with residence, a kind of customary law has appeared. In many cases, the police may or may not grant someone permission or variously lay out the requirements, which may or may not be fulfilled. The bureaucrats then decide, according

to their momentary needs, which requirements are necessary.⁶

Two tendencies that pervade the entrance of foreigners to the Czech Republic get mixed up here. Firstly, restrictions given by discussion between the Ministry of the Interior and the immigration police, which cannot be interpreted any other way but: "Foreigners simply should not be here"⁷ and, until recently, the strong resistance from the side of employers as to the transport of cheap labour. Because of this, an expedition to the immigration police or the labour office can turn into an adventure, which results in an unwanted expulsion from the country. "To anyone who doesn't speak Czech well and is not acquainted with the laws, I do not recommend going to any government offices alone," says Čížinský.

Processing paperwork has thus become another good source of income for the clients. And apparently, also for the bureaucrats. In this context, the word "corruption" has become a matter of routine. The prices are known and vary according to the degree of difficulty in obtaining the individual documents. Processing periods are relatively long and when people arrived in the hundreds, one could also pay to speed things up so that people were not "standing around" and clients suffered no losses. Nevertheless, official institutions are not very successful in their efforts to curb corruption. "Immigration police inspectorates, particularly in the bigger cities, have been under a great deal of pressure from the so-called "clients" and company representatives advising foreigners and assisting them with their papers. Despite intensive efforts of the inspectorates to investigate corruption and eliminate clerks involved in it, the levels of corruption have not been seriously reduced."⁸

Better than drugs

The system has got so lost that individual foreigners are no longer able to get out of it even if they want to: "I speak Czech and I wanted to arrange my papers myself, but it never worked. At the police office nobody wanted to talk to me. When I paid the client, it suddenly happened," says Aleksii. Therefore for clients, their employees are not only a source of income, but also a source of power. It is enough to threaten that they will exert their influence in the offices and the defiant workers take the offered work and whatever accompanying conditions of employment.

The offices do whatever they want and more than they should, explains a Mongolian translator who wishes to remain anonymous: "I convinced him [a worker from Mongolia] to go to the police because his client had had him beaten. In front of our eyes, the police phoned the client to come and pick him up. The next day the worker didn't want to discuss it – he said he'd forgotten everything." Although a number of similar cases could be told⁹, Sinh Hoang says, it is enough to just sit in the immigration police office for a while and watch the undisguised camaraderie between the police and the clients. As soon as the foreigners see it for themselves they believe everything.

Of course, not all clients are the same and not all of them are corrupt. But to resist the age-old temptations – money and power – requires more than just good will. It applies not only to clients, but to practically everyone the foreigners depend on: from the factory personnel to the last office clerk.

"A few years ago, this business with foreigners was more lucrative than business in drugs," says Martina Hánová of the Contact Centre for Foreigners in Pilzen. She seems to know what she is talking about. Three years ago she became the first coordinator for migration at the Pilzen City Hall. She began with

the decision to monitor and record the situation. The fact that she was not able to change anything from her position influenced her decision to start helping the foreigners on her own. So she started the Contact Centre mentioned above.

"Everything must be paid for; the worst off were the Mongolians and Vietnamese," continues Hánová. They paid large sums for the arrangement of papers and jobs in the Czech Republic. For the Vietnamese, the charges hovered around ten to fourteen thousand USD, for Mongolians, it was about a thousand EUR. For both, it meant a lifetime of debt not just for themselves but often also for their relatives and friends. After they arrived, they were faced with more fees for processing more papers and of course for accommodation. It must be noted here that the real costs (i.e. those officially charged by the state) of a Czech visa and residence permit do not exceed 150 Euros. Further fees were charged by the agencies for medical visits and other contact with government offices and mediations for new jobs when production slowed down.

The language barrier also played a big role, as did the lack of knowledge of the environment, which, furthermore, was just as unprepared for their arrival. Before they had time to get oriented, they had to pay the mediator for "services" that they would otherwise have taken care of themselves. Thus, they generated huge amounts for the clients even outside the area of employment arrangements, where the agencies automatically charged some tens of Crowns for every working hour. "In fact they often worked just to be able to survive," explains Hánová. Even so, before the crisis, at least some of them were able to repay their debts at home. The demand for workers was great, so great in fact, that agencies began to "steal" people from each other.

They worked under appalling conditions, sometimes ten to sixteen hours a day, but the demand for labourers was so great that the agencies could not afford to refuse them pay. However, it was common practice for the companies not to make the required contributions for health and social insurance in order to maximize profit. For the foreigner, this could result in the loss of his residence. But as long as necessary, the bureaucrats would "look the other way".

Just the same, today, the agencies usually pay minimum wage officially and agree to pay the rest of the hours worked as "cash on the barrelhead", again, to reduce expenses.

The changing of the guard

"Every day you demonstrate that you are a person, that you can think, feel, read and write," Tamara (not her real name) says in her broken Czech. Her story is similar to hundreds of others. She speaks only on the condition of anonymity and refuses to be photographed. She is afraid even though she does not come from the Ukraine, Vietnam or Mongolia. She is Bulgarian and grew up sixty kilometres from Sofia. It is unlikely that she would have problems with the bureaucrats; Bulgaria is a new member of the EU. For these Europeans, the Czech labour market is always open. Except that even she came to the Czech Republic via an agency.

She works here, trying to earn money for housing, her daughter's education and for medication for her parents, who are taking care of her daughter while she is away. She sees them once every two years. She cannot save enough to go more often. First she worked as a seamstress outside Pilzen. She got 53 CZK per hour when she worked 300 hours per month. When she was finally able to sew car seats for 360 hours, she was promised 60 CZK per hour. "They did not always give it to us," she adds bit-

terly. But as she says, her situation was still better than the situation of Ukrainian women, who got 32 CZK an hour from the agency, irrespective of how long they worked. Two years later, her agency lost the contract with the factory. Instead of sewing carpets, Tamara's client offered her female employees prostitution or to return home at their expense. Two of them actually did go home, when the others were able to scrape up enough money amongst themselves, which was not easy as they had not been paid for their final month. Others tried to find work elsewhere. Tamara knew some people in Pilzen, which, according to her, saved her. She got a job at Panasonic through the Danč Slovak agency.

She says her job at Bory is good. She was not forced as much to do overtime, but it bothered her that she was always laid off when production was shut down. She did not have enough money to just sit at home. Through another agency, she started working at the company Daiho, but conditions quickly deteriorated there too. What is more, the agency did not pay her. She was not taken back at Panasonic, as they had an agreement with the agencies that anyone who goes to a competitive agency could not work there for three months. In the meantime, she also had to change her accommodations because the workers' hostels also have their agreements with the agencies; when someone leaves the agency or loses their job, they must move. For every new job, Tamara had to pay.

She now has a bit of security, as she is with a new agency, Trend Práce, and is aiming for a job at the Daikin plant producing air-conditioners. She is glad; she needs money quickly as her budget is really stretched; 3,500 CZK for a bed in a workers' hostel, 600 for internet and 2,000 for food. The rest (around 200 to 300 Euros) she sends to Bulgaria. When asked what she is actually afraid of, she begins to tell a somewhat confused story of violence and degradation. Mainly though, she is afraid of losing her job again. But at the same time, she is lucky.

"Buses are always arriving with more people from Bulgaria or Romania," says Tatiana Mandíková of the charity organization Caritas in Pilzen. They pay an agency 300 Euros for work. They arrive and the luckier of them actually get work. But many of them do not pass the entry tests, such as those at Panasonic, which test potential employees on mathematics and dexterity and are fairly strict. Then the agency leaves them on the street without a penny.

Furthermore, if, for example, the work is in construction, they give them a minimum amount of money. The rest they deduct for a variety of fees. "I didn't have a contract. I worked for a month; they took money for accommodations, transport, services in the offices, and gave me 500 CZK. It's enough for a week," says one of those affected. Alone they have no chance to get out of it and go home. Furthermore, the non-profit organizations are not supposed to help them because "there are no support programs for citizens of EU countries," explains Mandíková.

The Vietnamese were better

And so the Poles, Slovaks, Bulgarians and Romanians replaced the Ukrainians, Mongolians and Vietnamese on the Pilzen merry-go-round, but not completely. It happened the instant when the crisis came. At that point, the bureaucrats stopped "looking the other way". It really shook the Grey Kingdom up. But only for a moment.

In a café in the centre of Pilzen, it is pleasant to sit in the comfortable couches, surrounded by small tables. The damp-

ened atmosphere together with the aroma of fresh cake and coffee invite you to relax. But still, he is nervous. From time to time he looks at his big, brand name watch, tugs at the sleeves of his jacket and every ten minutes his mobile rings. The owner of the agency Presente is a busy man. His agency provides people to, among others, Panasonic, where they have their own ancillary production. According to his estimate, thousands of people have "flowed" through Presente. Four hostels in Pilzen also belong to him. Before the crisis, he specialized in Vietnamese and Mongolians. "Ukrainians are not our target group; after some time they settle down and find work on their own," he says, explaining the company's business strategy. Even with Vietnamese he used to have high expenses. On paper, his companies brought in perhaps a hundred people, whom he registered at the employment office and for whom he paid an agent in Vietnam, but it often happened that they went somewhere else because some co-op offered them more than he did. This does not happen anymore, but those who are forced to specialise today have their own problems with work ethics: "Vietnamese were better than Bulgarians. They went to work and then home again, and then back to work right away again. They worked hard. Bulgarians though, want to have fun after work, get drunk, not come to work and they want more free time." On top of that, he says, they often have greater financial demands. There is nothing to be done about that, of course. "If I didn't pay them so little, then none of them could go to the shop and buy themselves a large screen LCD television for ten thousand, because it would cost fifty," he explains. He cannot say – even estimate – how many people work for him today.

The change of the workers' countries of origin was necessary. The companies in Bory have limited their production, but operations there never completely stop. The employment office however, stopped giving foreigners in large numbers new work visas and renewing old ones. Unemployed Czechs were supposed to take over in the factories. This did not happen, and therefore, the spots of the fired foreign workers were filled by those who had passports from other European Union countries. They have no difficulties with work permits.

Today, he says, production is increasing again and he needs more people. He would prefer to take Vietnamese again. But he cannot take back those who stayed behind; either they've lost their legal status or they have arranged business licences of their own and so cannot be employed. The Mongolians have gone back home; a few of them have headed westward. Unlike others, he always did everything honestly, but he refuses to be photographed. The interview quickly comes to an end. He pays for everything with a five thousand Crown banknote, and leaves a tip three times bigger than Tamara's hourly wage.

Holidays with Panasonic

"There are jobs to be had but in Pilzen they don't renew visas; you have to go to Brno, sometimes to Prague. Obviously, the prices have gone up. Renewing the residence now unofficially costs twenty five to thirty thousand Crowns. Except that you have to work for a year to be able to pay it off," Aleksii explains what happened after applying an internal directive to tighten up the granting and renewing of work visas for foreigners from so-called "third countries" (i.e., outside the EU). It was issued to all offices by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs in February 2009 (and was officially confirmed a year later).¹⁰

Although these measures were to be implemented with

"sensitivity" and with respect to employment in a given region, the result was absolute. No more work visas were issued in the city. "We tried to make the reduction of visas smooth, partly due to the individual cases of foreigners and partly with respect to the employers. In order to not threaten them with a loss of trained manpower," said Magdalena Čadová from the Pilzen employment office in the spring of this year.¹¹ To fill free jobs, priority was given to Czech citizens or EU nationals. Unemployment of six percent was not enough, however, to push the people of Pilzen to toil on the assembly lines in factories. "Czechs often intentionally botch the entry tests so they don't have to work here," says a personnel director from Panasonic. These spots of "trained manpower" were filled by the next in line.

One of them is Adam from Jelenia Góra in Poland. He has been working at Bory for some years and is employed at the agency Edymax. He has a wife and a one-year-old child in Pilzen. The crisis caught him working as a repairman at Panasonic. After the Ukrainians, Vietnamese and Mongolians left, he went to work on the assembly line. They told him that if he did not like the new work, he could leave. He knew that it would not be better anywhere else, so he stayed. Ten and a half hours a day he tightens a screw securing two wires. He has exactly thirty-two seconds for it. But standards and procedures grow continually stricter. When he does not make these limits, they scream at him: "Where do you think you are, on holiday?!"

Fired people reacted differently. Some of the Ukrainians eventually went back home and many of the Mongolians living in Pilzen took advantage of the government's repatriation programs to return home. The Czech government paid their airfare and gave them initially 500, later 300, Euros to get resettled at home. The number of spaces in the program was, of course, limited, the bureaucracy was complicated (submitting the required form was practically impossible for most people) and, in true grey logic, in order to get accepted into the program, they had to unofficially pay a mediator. The Vietnamese could not return, as they had tied up their money, which they had to borrow in order to get to the Czech Republic at all to work. They, and those who stayed behind, waver on the borderline of legality or are already on the other side of it. In Pilzen, the black labour market has taken on speed.

"This means that the people are more vulnerable than before," points out Martina Hánová. Often these people are not paid or are offered ridiculously low amounts.

Businessmen on the assembly line

The flaking workers' hostel is packed to the brim. Three to four people are living in each small room. For each person, they charge 12,000 a month. There is just enough space for one wardrobe and four beds. And nothing more. "It hurts to see how these people are being treated. Like sheep," observes the unemployed Miroslav from Bánská Bystrica, Slovakia. In Pilzen, he is supported by his brother, who has held onto his job. His lamentation reflects off the unplastered grey walls. The last employer did not pay him. By coincidence, he happened to be at the Presente agency. They owe him two months' work. He has tried to phone the owner, but no one answers the phone. Once he went straight to the agency office. It did not turn out well. "This guy as big as a mountain came out. It seems that if you're going to complain, they beat you," he says and then wanders off into other details of his story; a story so similar to Tamar's that it could have been photocopied. From one agency to another; the work varied, for a

while he was lucky, but then he sprained his ankle and he had to go. He does not want to return to Slovakia, he would apparently not find any work there either. Here, he at least has a chance.

"Everyone complains but nobody goes back; at home it's even worse," he muses to another college graduate, Olga from Kirovohrad in the Ukraine, who is "self-employed" and currently stocks shelves in a grocery store. Unlike others, she was lucky and does not work through an agency.

Many of the foreigners who were fired have become self-employed. Generally, this means that one day they work at some job as an agency employee and the next day they are "self-employed" at the same place. Everything is arranged through the agency, so sometimes they are not even aware of the changes. In practice, they should be paying their own taxes, health insurance and social insurance.

Officially uncertain

The Pilzen offices reacted to Czech circumstances very flexibly. With a laudable attempt to find a solution to the situation, meetings were set up between representatives of city hall, non-profit organizations, immigration police, city and national police, the employment office, social insurance office, health insurance office, and the tax office. The tension between the need to have foreigner in the country and the desire to not have them here is fully evident in these meetings. The individual institutions have begun to communicate with each other and share information. One definite result is, paradoxically, the ability to keep a better eye on foreign workers – much to their disadvantage. Public transport inspectors can check the validity of residence permits for those boarding a tram without a ticket. Similarly, doctors at the hospital are required to report every "illegal" to the bureaucrats. More hidden, but also more important, is the exchange of information between the social insurance office and the immigration police. If newly self-employed foreigners do not start paying their social insurance on time, this information is given to the immigration police and they will "not be renewed" or the police will withdraw their residence permit.¹² Whether foreigners then actually leave or stay to work illegally is not officially ascertained. "Nobody wants to take any personal responsibility for what's happening. For everyone, it's more advantageous to watch from the sidelines, from the companies to the agencies and the offices," says Sinh Hoang.

*Some of the migrants' names and personnel data were changed

1./ Analysis of investment offers in the Czech Republic, Jiří Schwarz et. al., National Economic Faculty of the College of Economics, Prague, 2007

2./ Tinkers in Pilzen: Slovaks at work in the industrial zone, Ida Kaiserová, Kulturní týdeník A2, www.migraceonline.cz

3./ The client system as quasi-feudalism in the Czech Republic, Jan Černík, www.migraceonline.cz

4./ The co-operative began to develop mostly because they are less controllable than employment agencies from the point of view of legal labour relations. Until recently, it was relatively easier to get a work visa for a foreigner in a co-op than in an agency. The chance that the employment office would send someone else to a job rather than someone who had voluntarily become a member of a co-op is minimal versus in agencies. For this reason, more co-ops arose that exist without "clients" and may not be able to secure jobs but do legitimize residence in the country.

5./ The client system as quasi-feudalism in the Czech Republic, Jan Černík, www.migraceonline.cz

6./ Cizinci v mezipatře, Martina Křížková, Nový Prostor n° 332, 30.6.2009

7./ Idem.

8./ Report on the fulfilling of the objectives of State strategy in the fight against corruption from 2008-2009, Ministry of the Interior, Prague 2010

9./ For example: Life and working conditions of foreigners in Pilzen, Antony Holeček, www.migraceonline.cz, 27.12.2009

10./ See press release MPSV of 10.3.2010: MPSV recommends tightening up the issuing and renewing of work visas for foreigners from third countries

11./ In the name of the crisis, Martina Křížková, Nový Prostor, n° 349

12./ In the name of the crisis, Martina Křížková, Nový Prostor, n° 349



↑ Miroslav, Banská Bystrica, employee of a work agency

↓ Pilsen – Borská pole. Here, life is governed by production, standards and shifts.



↓ One of many workers' hostels in Borská pole



Solitude. The way to a brighter future.

| Text: Tomáš Janeba | Pictures: Iva Zímová |

Mongolian migrants in the Czech Republic have come to find a better future for their children. They pay inordinate fees to middlemen for work documents and work endlessly in factories. Their children must take responsibility of their own lives and the domestic duties of their families, which, compounded with the language and cultural barriers, further isolate them from other Czech children. Furthermore, the children of those from non-EU countries must be expensively insured before birth, otherwise their parents risk falling into a lifelong debt for their healthcare.

Within the past decade, the number of foreigners coming to the Czech Republic has dramatically increased. There has been a high demand in the labor market for unskilled workers who will take jobs no longer wanted by Czechs. Among others, some twenty thousand Mongolian labor migrants have come to the Czech Republic from Mongolia between the years 2006 and 2008.

Mongolians are not new to the Czech society; during the communist regime they often came to Czechoslovakia to study or work. From the 1960's until the late 1980's as many as 60,000 Mongolians had studied in Czechoslovakia. With the end of the regime, many Mongolians returned home; however, with the growth of Czech economy, many Mongolians have been coming back again. In 2006, there were 3,500 Mongolians living in the Czech Republic, while in 2008 the number increased to 14,000. However, the numbers are shifting once again. Currently, in the aftermath of the global economic crisis, only several thousand Mongolians have remained in the Czech Republic, according to official statistics.

Mongolians take jobs that no Czechs, not even other migrants, are willing to take. These jobs are the hardest and the worst paid; they involve working mainly in factories producing steel wheels for cars, have extra long shifts, cruel quotas, low wages and bad and unhealthy working conditions. Apparently, Mongolians have a strong enough will to work under these conditions. Unlike many of the other migrants who are more transient, from the very start Mongolians intend to bring their family here and settle down in the Czech Republic. The predominant

reason for their relocation to the Czech Republic is the desire to provide their children with a brighter future and the opportunity to study and live in Europe.

The children of Mongolian migrants

Ever since I was exposed to stories of Mongolian migrants living in the Czech Republic, I have wondered how their children have coped with these life changes. But it is hard to find information on their situation; there is basically no media coverage or government monitoring. True, official statistics on the numbers of Mongolians losing jobs and subsequently their visas due to the economic crisis were quite easily accessible; however, there were no reports or articles in the media about Mongolian children. These are children who live quite difficult lives; children who have been forced to adapt to a foreign country, who have been losing friends due to the exodus of fellow Mongolian migrants, who are often destined to change schools two to three times a year, who often do not see their parents or grandparents for years and who are facing the same uncertainty in life as their parents. Furthermore, they had no say in the crucial decision to emigrate and often do not understand the reasons for the sudden and sometimes tragic changes in their lives.

These are the reasons why I decided to go out searching for the children of Mongolian labor migrants and listen to their experiences. I wanted to hear their stories because they are the unsung heroes of the larger story – and its problems – of labor migration in Europe. In my search, I wanted to find children with



↑ Maralmaa and Odbayar doing their homeworks

different backgrounds so I could get as broad a picture of a migrant child as possible. I have found some children willing to talk to me. After I spent some time with them, I realized that I could also learn very interesting things about them just by listening to what they were not saying. Here is what we have seen, heard, and observed.

Blansko

Blansko is a small town of about 20,000 inhabitants in the eastern part of the Czech Republic. While some 10 years ago most Czechs only knew about the town's existence thanks to its industrial past and some famous caves located nearby, now it is known mainly for its large population of Mongolian labor migrants, who are working in the local factories. In 2008, at the peak of the migration wave to the Czech Republic, some 600 Mongolians lived in Blansko. Although there are some other small towns in the Czech Republic that have relatively big populations of Mongolian labor migrants, only Blansko has been singled out by the media.

It began in 2007, when a group of Czech neo-Nazis organized a demonstration against the presence of Mongolians, who allegedly had been terrorizing the town and had taken the jobs away from the Czechs. Luckily, the demonstration was a complete fiasco; only about 20 neo-Nazis arrived from all over the Czech Republic and none of the local inhabitants actually took part in the demonstration. Nonetheless, the Mongolians were frightened by the actions taken by the neo-Nazis, and not only in

Blansko.

Furthermore, the fact that no local people participated in the demonstration also does not mean that Mongolians were considered very popular in the city. There were still rumors about potentially negative attitudes of "locals" towards the Mongolians. For example, according to the Mongolians, in some pubs in the neighborhoods where Mongolians lived, it was difficult to get a table for a Mongolian, even if the pub was empty; every table was officially "reserved" for the evening. However, when a Czech walked in, there was always a place. And there are other similar examples to this behavior. I was curious how the situation really looks like and how Mongolians live in Blansko; in particular, how Mongolian children are doing in such an environment. So I went to take a look for myself.

A big reunification

In one of the concrete apartment blocks of Blansko there lives a large Mongolian family with four children. Although they are all siblings, each of them has a very different life story. Now, they all live together; but the journey to reunification took the family eight long years.

Adyasuren, a 17 year old young man, attends secondary school. He wants to become an auto mechanic. He also likes to play football. Adyasuren, or Áda as his teammates and friends call him, is a really talented football player; he is definitely one of the best on his team. When he gets emotional during a game he shouts at his teammates with an irresistible accent typical for

Brno and its surroundings. It is hard to say he is a Mongolian. He has integrated in to the community thanks to the sport. He is by all means an integral part of his team. He has lived in Blansko for eleven years already. He was five when his parents left Mongolia and he joined them in the Czech Republic a little more than a year after their arrival.

Adyasuren's younger brother and the youngest of all the children, Khongor is 11 years old. He was born in the Czech Republic. Like his big brother, he also plays football and he is very good at it. He seems to have no problems with his life in the Czech Republic; he has friends at school, he plays on a good football team and likes to talk about his victories. He also has that thick but cute local Moravian accent, but in his case it is no surprise – he was born here after all. When he met his two sisters for the first time, he was already attending elementary school.

Khongor's and Adyasuren's twin sisters, Khaliun and Khulan, were just four years old when their parents left for Europe. In Mongolia, they lived with their grandparents, who took care of them instead of their parents for eight years. It took that long until the family managed to save enough money to obtain visas and tickets for them and the family could completely reunite in 2006.

Khulan and Khaliun are fifteen years old. Their knowledge of Czech is still quite limited compared to their brothers and as a result, they have a more difficult time at school. They still have problems communicating fluently in Czech, but each for different reasons.

Although everybody can see that Khaliun and Khulan are twins by the way they treat each other, they are not identical in appearance. Even their brothers like to make fun of it. But it is not just their appearances that differentiate them. Khulan is handicapped: she is deaf and she cannot speak. To communicate with other people, she uses sign language and also, quite often, her sister Khaliun "translates" for her.

There are a few more differences between the twins. While Khaliun attends 7th grade, Khulan is only in grade four at a special school for children with impaired hearing. Khaliun's school is located in Blansko, but Khulan's school is in Brno, a larger city located some 30 kilometers south of Blansko. Just one way to school takes Khulan an hour and a half. She has to wake up very early in the morning, a when she leaves home her siblings are still asleep.

The first three years of her stay in the Czech Republic she lived in the school's dormitory, but since September 2010, her parents have moved her home. She said she is glad: "In the dormitory I had just one friend, who graduated and left the school to go to secondary school." Her Czech classmates are four years younger than her. After her arrival to the Czech Republic she had to start school from grade one again. Furthermore, as Khulan and Khaliun add: "When we arrived in the Czech Republic we had to learn to speak Czech. But Khulan also had to learn Czech sign language, because Mongolian sign language is different." The girls later admit that Khulan actually never used Mongolian sign language because, back in Mongolia, they developed their own sign language and Khulan did not attend a special school for deaf children. Evidently, it is Khulan, who has had the hardest time adapting and integrating to the new country and its society.

The economic crisis has had two main impacts on the family; one positive and one negative. The positive one is that Khaliun lives at home now instead of the school dormitory. Her parents could not afford to pay for the dormitory, so they decided

she will have to commute to school every day. She does not mind traveling such a long way, she is just happy that she can spend more time with her family and that she is not alone anymore.

There is nothing in the second impact that can be considered good at all. When the crisis started, there was a lack of jobs at the local factory and even the luckier workers, who had not lost their jobs, had to accept the fact that their income somewhat dropped. The children's parents were happy that they both managed to keep their jobs, even though they had to accept new daily norms, so it takes extra effort for them to earn enough money to cover the family's expenses. Before the crisis, they received 3.25 EUR per steering wheel. Now it is only 3 EUR. Previously, the quota to make one steering wheel was 80 minutes, now they have to manage the same job in just 60 minutes. Now they must work harder and faster. So they leave home six times a week early in the morning and come home around 8 PM.

The lives of the children seem to flow quite slowly and without any particular excitement. During the work week they just go to school and then it is their obligation to run the household, as parents work long hours often till the night. On weekends they usually gather with other Mongolian youngsters at nearby a playground. As they say: "We just hang around and talk." And their closer contact with Czech kids is best said in their own resigned words: "No, we do not have any real friends among Czechs."

The lack of close relationships with local Czech kids is not caused solely by their different ethnicity and language barrier, I would say. Possibly, the reason lies in their dramatically different way of life; since Mongolian parents are at work almost all the time, their children have to keep the household running, make meals, do cleaning, shopping – everything by themselves. Their parents work even on Saturdays, so the only time the family can be together and to go "out and about" is on Sunday. By Sunday however, the parents of Mongolian children are exhausted; the only thing they want is to stay at home, to spend the day with their children and to take plenty of rest. So the Mongolian children cannot share the adventures of Czech kids and their families, who on weekends take the opportunity to leave their homes and go out to the countryside by train or by car; they bike, they ski, they swim, they go to cinema, they go to pick mushrooms or go to see their friends and relatives in other cities or villages. Thus, the Mongolian children live parallel lives, which (with the exception of school) never intersect; they simply have other living experiences.

For Czechs, it is very strange, but knowing the circumstances, it is no surprise that the children have not yet visited the famous caves nearby or other famous landmarks. The children have nobody else to accompany them on such trip, no family friends, no aunts, no uncles and above all no grandparents. All these people are back in Mongolia. This distance is especially hard for the twins, for whom their grandparents provided the role of parents for eight long years. Hardly any Czech children have such pessimistic prospects for seeing their own grandparents as they have.

191 years of debt

The family of little Oyun lives in Třebíč, a town located some 120 kilometers southeast of Prague. A baby girl, Oyun was born prematurely in December 2008 when her mother Sarantuya was just six months pregnant. In April, after long months of constant fear for Oyun's life the day finally came when Oyun could be



← Maralmaa skateboarding



↓ Khulan at school



← Gym (Khulan)

checked out from the hospital. But on their way home the parents were carrying more than just a baby. They had also received a bill of more than one million CZK (about 45 thousand EUR) for the hospital treatment of their premature child.

In the Czech Republic, the health insurance of newly born babies of migrant mothers from so called "third" or non-EU countries must be bought well before the baby is born. The insurance policy for an unborn baby does not come cheap – the price is over 2,000 EUR for 12 months, which is the shortest duration one can buy it for. This practice differs very much from the situation of Czech or other EU citizens, whose babies are automatically covered by the mother's health insurance. It is needless to say that for many labor migrant women in the Czech Republic 2,000 EUR is an astronomical sum.

Sarantuya tried to buy the policy after the baby was born; however, because of the high cost of the care for a prematurely born baby, no insurance company was willing to provide it. Sarantuya and her husband tried to deal with the situation, hoping that the hospital might reduce their debt – the amount far exceeded their ability to pay; however, their hopes were in vain. The hospital wanted its money; according to the law, the hospital simply cannot waive such a debt. The desperate situation was sorted out with the help of several NGOs, who gave the family their assistance and negotiated with the hospital for more than a year. In the end, both sides agreed that Sarantuya and her husband will pay back 500 CZK (about 20 EUR) monthly. Moreover, thanks to the assistance of local NGOs, the Czech Republic granted them permanent residency on a humanitarian basis and thus, Oyun's further medical insurance is covered by the state.

The town's social welfare workers helped them find cheap accommodation in the town's welfare housing and the local Caritas organization included them in their system and sometimes offers them help. Furthermore, Sarantuya and her husband both started to attend Czech classes in nearby town of Jihlava.

It seems that everything is right on track for Oyun and her family. Oyun seems to be healthy, despite the high chances of future difficulties caused by her premature birth. For now, Oyun does not realize the troubles her family has had to endure. She takes her first steps in her life and her parents can forget for a moment about the unusually complex and difficult bond Oyun's parents, herself and also her children – possibly even her grandchildren – will have with the Czech Republic.

This problem of insuring foreigners' newborns (and mothers' delivery) is not unique. But a happy end is not very typical for these kinds of stories. In Blansko, for example, there is another Mongolian family living with a similar problem. Their son Temuulen was also born prematurely and thus his parents did not purchase insurance. As in Oyun's case, the medical insurance company refused to insure the baby retrospectively, so when the boy left the hospital, the debt his care had incurred had reached 800 thousand CZK (approx. 32 thousand EUR).

What is different in this case is the informational vacuum the family lives in. Although representatives of two local NGOs providing assistance and counseling and a representative of the Mongolian Embassy in Prague had visited the family after boy's birth, no real help ever came. They desperately need legal advice and services now because it is the only way to solve the burning issue of Temuulen's insurance. Temuulen's parents still cannot find a health insurance company willing to insure him and so they have to pay for every visit to the doctor. "We have to pay in cash for everything: medicine, vaccinations, visits to the doctor. It is so expensive. When he has a fever, I can't afford to go to see

a doctor. I buy him some medicine in the pharmacy," says the baby boy's mother, recalling the first most difficult weeks: "In the beginning, we had nobody to tell us how to take care of Temuulen. We had no grandparents, no family, nobody who could give us advice. We have managed. But while taking care of Temuulen, I kept thinking: Will I be able to keep my job?"

My cello and me – life in splendid solitude

Buyaka lives on the outskirts of Prague. She is 13 years old and she aims at becoming a musician. While still in Mongolia, she was taking lessons on the traditional Mongolian instrument called the Morin Khuur, or the Horse head and she was also training Mongolian national dances.

Her father, Boroldzoi, and her mother, Lchagva, both studied and taught music in Mongolia. Buyaka's father likes to remember an occasion, when, in 2006, he played traditional Mongolian music with a large orchestra of 800 Morin Khuur players who were gathered in Ulaanbaatar from around the country to commemorate 800 years of Mongolia's existence.

In 2007, Buyaka's parents moved to the Czech Republic in order to find a better living conditions and education for their only child. Today they work in a nearby factory, where they also have the typical job for Mongolian labor migrants in the Czech Republic; they sew leather covers on steering wheels for cars. They work long hours to be able to pay for their nice two-bedroom flat and to keep a good living standard for their daughter.

Their salary in the steering wheel factory depends only on the number of steering wheels they make. This was good, or so they thought when they first arrived, because their monthly income would be dependent on their effort. So they were working up to 12 hours a day with the aim to accumulate enough money to bring Buyaka to join them. At that time, Buyaka lived with her grandmother in Mongolia. Her parents worked really hard and so, after a year of their drudgery, she was able to join her family in the Czech Republic.

When she arrived in December 2008, her parents still lived in a worker's hostel with other workers. However, the living conditions there were not very suitable for raising a child. They decided to rent an apartment nearby. Their living conditions improved immediately, but they did so with an increased cost of living. Thus, Buyaka's parents started to work even more.

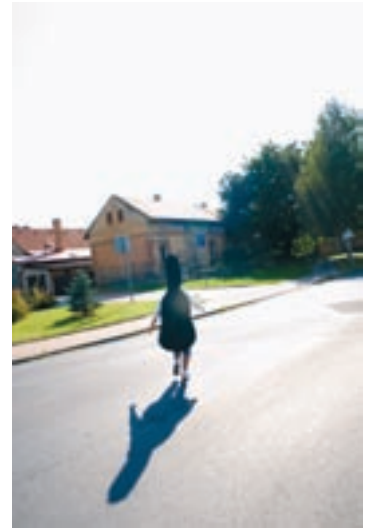
Two months following her arrival, Buyaka was required to attend Czech school. Her parents did not want her to follow the fate of so many migrant children, who, because of the language barrier, have to enter at a lower grade that is not appropriate to their age. She attended Czech language classes to improve her Czech and to make studying at school easier. Buyaka had to put in extra effort to study, but she has persevered. After some time, her parents have started to pay for her to attend lessons at a music school, where she plays cello. Today, she is doing very well in her music classes and at school too and she attends 7th grade, which is adequate to her age.

Boroldzoi and Lchagva are very proud of her: "We both work long shifts to make enough money to support Buyaka. And she helps us a lot. She translates for us and between her music lessons and school she cleans and cooks as well." So they can finally be happy; they live in a nice apartment together with their child in Prague and Buyaka is doing well at school and attends music lessons. But their happiness has one imperfection; Buyaka lives her life quite alone.

Her parents leave home when she is still asleep and they are



↑ Buyaka cleaning up



↑ Buyaka on her way to the music school

still at work when she comes from her elementary school and goes to the music school or Czech language class. They are still gone when she cleans up the apartment and fixes the supper for the whole family. Late in the evening or often early in the night, Buyaka's parents finally arrive at home from work; they eat their supper and, being very tired, they go to the bed. She is left alone and so it goes day after day.

When asked about her friendships, this young Mongolian lady, who is very nice and also very resilient, told me: "I do not have many Czech friends at school. My best friends early on were Mongolians. But when crisis came, almost all of them returned with their parents to Mongolia or left for other countries. I do not know where." But brave Buyaka does not complain about her fate. Unlike most Czech children, she is constantly busy and working on her future.

Home alone in a village

Maralmaa and Odbayar live in a little village some 40 kilometers east of Prague. They are 11 and 9 years old, respectively. The children's parents, Batsaikhan and Gantsetseg Terbish, came to the Czech Republic more than 10 years ago. The first to come was Batsaikhan, their father, and then two years later he was joined by his wife Gantsetseg and their daughter Maralmaa, who was five at the time. Their three-year-old son Otbayar stayed with his grandparents in Mongolia. Otbayar joined the family three years later, when the family's financial situation improved and his parents were able to buy him an airplane ticket to the Czech Republic.

Batsaikhan and Gantsetseg initially worked as many other Mongolians in a steering wheel factory, but this time in the little town of Rumburk. This town, just like Blansko, was also populated by several hundreds of Mongolian labor migrants.

Maralmaa and her parents spent three years in Rumburk and then they moved to Prague, where they worked in the same factory as Buyaka's parents. They even lived in the same dormitory. The two families became friends.

After several years in Prague, the parents decided to move to another place because, as they put it, "Our children were spending too much time with other Mongolian kids and they were not really focused on school." At that time, the Czech economy was at the height of its boom, so the Terbish family felt confident enough to buy a two-bedroom apartment in a block of flats originally built for army officers in the communist era.

The flat they have is in a typical charmless concrete building, but which has been recently remodeled. For Terbish family, this apartment seems to have been the right choice. While for Czechs, such a flat is not considered a desirable standard of living, in Mongolia it would be among the best living conditions to be found. Although the family had to take a loan, it was affordable at the time. After the economic crisis hit in the Czech Republic, both parents had to start working harder to be able to continue paying the loan.

The whole family hardly meets at home for longer than a few hours. As Odbayar says: "Our parents are always at work." And Maralmaa adds: "When mum comes home from work, my dad is leaving for his work. When my dad comes from work, my mum is leaving for her work." This statement is true; the children's parents have to use any opportunity to work, so they work six days a week and up to 12 hours a day. Batsaikhan managed to find a new job in a warehouse on the outskirts of Prague already, but Gantsetseg still works in the steering wheel factory. She is really tired of the hard and long shifts and of breathing the fumes from the glue and other chemicals used in the manufacturing process. Currently, she has already started to look for a new job. The parents also feel bad that they see each other only a few



↑ Temuulen, the son of Mongolian working migrants, in the incubator

hours a day and rarely get a chance to spend a whole day together with their children.

When asked how they like their village, Odbayar replied: "It is OK," but Maralmaa after a while admitted, "In Prague, it was better because we had more friends there." And then she recalled how the family had lived in the beginning in Rumburk. "I liked it there more because there were a lot of children, Mongolian children, and I had many friends there." Odbayar added: "But I like it here as well, we have friends here also." Maralmaa was silent. During our walk around the school and the playground the children greeted several schoolmates along the way; no real friendship was visible. They spent the time outside mainly by themselves. On the other hand, it seemed that both children are well adapted in their new country. Unlike their parents, they even use the Czech versions of their names (i.e. Maya and Oto) when they speak to each other.

I wondered what these children consider as their identity, what country do they consider their homeland, and where they would like to live in the future, in the Czech Republic or in Mongolia? They are too young to answer questions about their identity, but when I asked Odbayar which ice hockey team he cheers for, he said without any hesitation: "Canada or Sweden".

So my impression is that, for the moment, their biggest trouble is the fact that they cannot spend as much time with their parents as most Czech kids do.

First generation

As we have seen, the youngest Mongolian generation is not having a very easy time in the Czech Republic. They have to learn not only a new language, but also how to live alone and with the fact that they are different. Their parents are constantly at work, trying to maintain the most basic, but the most necessary, conditions of life, which is material and financial stability. In the Czech Republic, they are present physically but absent mentally. They do not know anything about the country, often cannot even speak more than the very basics of the language. Essentially, it is their children, who are living as the so-called "first generation". It is they, the prematurely mature children, with living experiences that even many adults do not have, who should explore the new country and find their place in it. Hopefully, they will succeed and will secure grandparents for their kids as well as friends, whom they will be able to see whenever they desire.



↑ Temuulen and his mother at home

Africa under Saint Wenceslas

| Text: Tomáš Lindner | Pictures: Jérémie Jung |

They have come from West Africa mostly as asylum seekers or illegal migrants and work night shifts in the Prague city centre. They talk about their lives that are full of constant uncertainty; uncertainty that has followed them even here to the Czech Republic, where they make a living by enticing – hunting – tourists to night clubs. In this report we try to describe this small, yet growing, community of migrants who spend their nights in Wenceslas Square and of whom few Czechs will have heard about so far.

Danny is a genuine Czech patriot. Back home in the Congo, he likes to wear a cap with the Czech flag sewn onto it, he has numerous bottles of slivovice, Becher and Fernet, as well as records by Czech pop icon Karel Gott. Danny came to Czechoslovakia in the eighties to study at university. He joined his fellow students from the Czech Technical University in November 1989 at Wenceslas Square jingling keys in support of the fall of communism. In the summer of 2010, he got married and the newly wedded couple first danced a Congolese rumba and second a Czech polka. Danny has been working for Czech companies doing business in the Congo and neighbouring countries, and therefore, he has been coming back to Prague regularly.

Danny recalls a change that occurred in 2004. "I noticed that there were a lot of African people in Prague all of a sudden. One night my friends and I fancied a drink and decided to go to a bar on Wenceslas Square and there were Africans all over the place. This was a complete surprise." Wenceslas Square and the neighbouring side streets of the historical centre have been attracting an ever increasing number of Africans at night-time. Their task is to bring tourists and passers-bys to disco clubs, strip-bars, brothels, and sometimes, they offer drugs as well.

But who are these people? Where did they come from and why? How did they get to Prague? Who do they work for? How do they live here and what is their experience with Czech people and Czech authorities? Even Danny cannot provide an answer. "I don't know anything about them; I have never spoken to them." And almost no one in Prague has been in contact with these new African people, either.

Old Africans vs. new Africans

What Danny says suggests there is a divide in the African community in Prague. On the one hand, there are people from Africa who settled down some time ago and have integrated into Czech society. Often, they went to a Czech university, they know the language, and they have more contacts among Czech friends than among other Africans. There are currently about two thousand of them (excluding Egyptians, Tunisians, Moroccans and Algerians), fairly invisible, scattered all over the country. Most of them were offered scholarships which Czechoslovakia as a communist-ruled country provided to students from countries it had a close relationship with – generally, many African countries but especially the Republic of the Congo, Angola, and Ethiopia.

On the other side of this divide, there are "new" Africans in the Czech Republic; mostly young men who came to Prague via a dangerous route, such as being illegal immigrants or asylum seekers, and without any money. They now work night shifts in the city centre, hanging around Wenceslas Square and the neighboring streets. Almost all of them come from West Africa, particularly from Nigeria, Cameroon, the Ivory Coast, Togo, and Senegal. There are no exact statistics as to how many have settled in Prague over the past few years. Some members of the community estimate the number may be several hundred to two thousand.

That is not a huge number, but for many Czech people they have become the epitome of the entire African community. They are used as a negative example by opponents of immigration, illustrating how immigration has damaged the old atmosphere



↑ Michel spends his nights in pubs

of Prague. This is one of the reasons why fully-integrated Africans prefer not to be associated with these new Africans from Wenceslas Square. "The way they stand in the Square each night and no one knows what they do, may hamper the reputation of all black people living in the Czech Republic," says Danny. That is why the two groups are rarely in contact.

How high intellect hampers opportunities

Ibrahima, a Senegalese nuclear physicist living here for three decades, shares the sentiment. Interviewed over a glass of mineral water, Ibrahima, a skillful narrator, surprises me with

rich Czech vocabulary and an admirable knowledge of European history and stories of renowned Czech and Austrian mathematicians. But Ibrahima is at his most interesting when talking about the lifestyle of the upper class in Dakar where he was born. All the members of the elite live in one country and one city, but they live entirely different lives: part of the elite fly to Mecca several times a year and watch Arabic television, which keeps them up-to-date with the local news, while the others prefer to speak French at home and their French television channels keep them better informed about Paris than Senegal.

As for the Africans in the centre of Prague, Ibrahima knows very little. He explains why he is unfamiliar with the newcomers

despite the fact that most of them come from West Africa, the same region as he does. "I try to avoid the Square at night; I always walk quickly and never talk to anyone," he says. "I want to avoid being seen with these people by other Czech people. This could make them think we are friends or do business together. Czechs would not grasp that an informal chat is possible even between complete strangers. This is a common thing in Africa, but not here, Czechs would fail to understand this."

But once Ibrahima did start a conversation with two Africans he met near Charles Bridge who were dressed as sailors and offered boat trips to tourists. "They had no education, spoke no Czech, and still they earned more than me. The thing is, they spoke foreign languages, were friendly to tourists, gave them tips where to go, and were given generous tips for that," he says. Both those Senegalese "sailors" came to Prague hidden in a train from the south of Europe which they had reached by boat. First they would sleep in railway stations, then went to disco clubs and spoke to other Africans who lent them money to start a new life. "I didn't understand how they could succeed when they knew neither the language nor anyone here. They suggested I was prejudiced by my good education, which prevented me from seeing all the opportunities to make good money," says Ibrahima.

Wenceslas Square: recommended by a friend

The Africans from Wenceslas Square seem to be unmentionable even in Hushi, the most popular restaurant among the African community. The bartenders deny that any of the Africans from Wenceslas Square or from Nigeria ever visit the place. Another group of people who prefer to avoid meeting the new Africans is a community of Czechs who have long been doing African dancing and West-African drumming, suggesting the new Africans are rather rough and unpleasant.

Their lack of interest is based on the suspicion that the Africans from the city centre might be involved in the drug trade and in the Nigerian mafia, notorious all over Europe for trafficking drugs and people. The Prague Office of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) shares this suspicion that the Africans from Wenceslas Square might be working for gangs that smuggled them into Europe. The officials told me about migrants who the police found hidden in the tube connecting the airplane with the terminal in Prague Airport. "Migrants from other countries will often talk to us about their journey. Africans prefer to stay silent and only say the basic things," says Vlastimil Vintř of the IOM.

In any case, the officials have growing doubts about the Africans, especially as they compare them to other immigrant nationalities. Mr Vintř questions several points: "Other migrants know exactly what to expect, for instance that they will be working in manufacturing. Africans have no such expectations – so, what is it that they plan to do here? Do they come with no plans whatsoever? That is hard to believe since their journey must have cost them several hundred or thousand dollars. Do they have no contacts here at all? But how could they possibly have gone the entire journey from, say, Nigeria, by themselves? Might there be someone who helps them and, this way, hires potential collaborators?"

"The cabarets are something none of us knew about in advance. There is nothing like that in my country," says Will, who comes from the British part of Cameroon and has been hired to attract tourists to Darling, an erotic cabaret in Ve Smečkách

Street. All the other Africans we approached in Wenceslas Square gave the same answer. "Suddenly, you turn up in Prague, you have no work, and your friends recommend the Square and they tell you how it works. You don't need to arrange anything with anyone in the cabaret; all you do is approach the first passer-by and invite him to the strip bar. When they follow you inside, you are immediately paid your reward. And you start returning to earn more," says Will, talking to us in Lucerna, the legendary café round the corner from the Square. "You see, our lifestyles back home are completely different. Traveling in Cameroon is quite an adventure in and of itself. You cross regions with different tribes whose language you don't understand, but still you need to be able to handle any situation. So we are ready to travel and live anywhere in the world."

The nighttime microcosm of Wenceslas Square

Fresh Nigerian food can now be bought from three cooks on Wenceslas Square during the night. They come with a bag on their backs full of pots with warm spicy risotto with vegetables, fish or beef. They sell it for one hundred Crowns to other West Africans who work their night shifts in the Square. One of the cooks feels there is not enough space for three competitors and is considering changing jobs, which means joining most of his countrymen in chasing potential visitors to night clubs and strip bars.

There are small groups of Africans standing all over the Square. Some of them approach the tourists passing by in a polite way, others are more direct; a phrase like "Do you want pussy?" works particularly well with young British tourists. Different phrases reflect different places of origin and levels of education. "There are people who never went to school as well as university graduates," says John, an architect from Nigeria. On week days, John works for a company organising various seminars. "I only make fifteen thousand, though. This is not enough to pay rent and support my girlfriend and our baby. That's why I make some extra money here on the weekends."

So John only comes on the weekends. Tom, who is also from Nigeria, is an IT undergraduate in Romania and has come to Wenceslas Square for a little summer job. Ila, another Nigerian man, has returned after two years because he lost his job due to the economic crisis. In other words, there are more reasons bringing people to the Square than might appear at first glance. For most of them, however, the Square is their only source of income.

As for the country of origin, the tourist hunters at Wenceslas Square make up a very diverse group. Africans are the most visible due to the colour of their skin, but you can just as well be approached by a young Spanish man, a recent graduate in computer graphics making money for his tour of Eastern Europe. Or a man from France who no longer enjoyed his work as an IT specialist and apparently has fun talking to people in the street; his advice to begin is: "The first thing you must learn is to identify and avoid Czechs. They tend to be unpleasant and will often scold you." One of the hunters for a strip bar is a good-looking Czech girl, who gave up her job as a nurse to make more money in the Square. She says her work in the street taught her English, Spanish, and a little bit of French. And it was in Wenceslas Square that she met her husband from Cuba. Both of them work night shifts for the Darling cabaret.

Even so, most of the hunters come from West Africa. "People from East Africa are shyer and less able to spontaneously



↑ He cannot rest
in pubs,
that is why he
goes to sleep in
the mornings
in churches

↗ Michel likes to
read

→ Michel on
his way to
translate a friend's
documents from
French



approach strangers than we are," says one of the hunters, who was born in Benin and has a permanent job in a Prague employment agency. Most of the people from Wenceslas Square are reported to be Igbo people, a Nigerian Christian ethnic group in the delta of the Niger River. Their home is polluted with oil and they suffer from long-term discrimination from the government on separatist grounds. All the men we approached say there are almost no West African Muslims; this is because they prefer to choose other countries and would find it hard to work for night clubs anyway.

The strong leave, the weak stay

Nevin is one of the few exceptions. Having completed secondary education, he was unable to go to university as he had to support his younger sisters. "My father had been killed in a fight between Christians and Muslims and my mother died from an illness. I didn't want to stay as in my town Christians and Muslims keep fighting," says Nevin, a Nigerian Muslim wearing a light blue T-shirt with United States of America printed on it, waiting for asylum status. Nigerians, however, are rarely granted asylum in the Czech Republic; between 1993 and 2007, only 19 applicants out of 662 were accepted.

"I reached Italy on a boat, my friend knew a boat captain. I didn't have to pay for the trip as I worked on board. In Italy, Prague was recommended to me, so I somehow reached it by train with no visa. I knew no one here. I spent the first several nights in round-the-clock bars. Then I met some other Africans who gave me some tips about the asylum application," Nevin told us in the park outside the Central Railway Station. But neither he nor most of his countrymen can explain how exactly they traveled to Prague and why they decided on the Czech Republic.

It is far from easy to report the stories of the Africans from Wenceslas Square. While the men do like to start conversation, they are far less ready to switch from friendly banter to personal details. And those who don't mind talking for fifteen or thirty minutes in the street, seem unwilling to engage in longer, more structured interviews, let alone to have their photos taken. We later found out that many of the Africans dislike the fact that our research might draw more attention to Wenceslas Square. They fear the local authorities may decide to close down the cabarets and night clubs, causing them to be jobless and forcing them deeper into the underworld of the city.

"I want to send my sisters some money from here, but my earnings have so far been low," says Nevin and gives his account of all the men in the Square: "The Nigerian Government ignores the ordinary masses. It's different from here; you have to support yourself in Nigeria. If you're strong and ready to fight for your freedom, you leave. If you're weak, you stay where you were born and you die there."

Shameful work for two thousand Crowns a night

"In Cameroon I worked in the wood trade. When I saw the huge margins that the European partners added to the price, I decided I wanted to go to Europe and organise the trade from here," says Will who came to Prague four years ago. He reads international news servers on a daily basis and enjoys talking about world events. "What the Czech Republic has in common with Africa is that your country used to be colonised (by the Soviet Union) and it left its mark." He goes on to talk about his

journey. "A friend played for the Sparta football club and recommended Prague to me. I arrived on an ordinary visa and then sought asylum. I quickly found a girlfriend and married her, which entitled me to permanent residence."

In the past, fake marriage through an agent was thought to be the quickest way to be granted permanent residence in the Czech Republic, but this is no longer possible. The African men we approached had not tried "buying a wife" nor knew anyone who had. They agree it is fairly easy to find a Czech wife in discos in the same way as Will did.

The thirty-year old Cameroonee is now working for the Darling cabaret which – like two other strip-bars – has a steady group of visitor hunters. For each tourist the hunter is paid one hundred Crowns, a third of the entrance fee. Will and his fellows each get an equal share in the morning. What is good about such a permanent "contract" is that Will makes money each night. The ticket sellers keep track of how many guests each hunter has brought and pay out the money in the morning. Other strip clubs pay each hunter for each guest, though this means that sometimes hunters make no earnings at all. In general, club owners are said to be fair and there are hardly any arguments over money at the end of the shift.

But can the earnings be so good that they actually discourage you from seeking other work? "You can never be sure you will earn something. There is no holiday. You don't make any savings and you cannot do this type of work when you get older," says Will; others, too, admit they would rather make a living in a less "shameful" way. They point out that the job involves constant uncertainty and there is no guarantee of fixed income.

These people say they are unable to get a decent job in the Czech Republic – especially when they speak no Czech, due to racism on the part of Czech business people (and we were told a lot of authentic stories about that in the Square), due to the economic crisis which robbed some of them of their work, and, last but not least, due to their asylum-seeker status. Another thing they complain about is the system of employment agencies; manual workers from Eastern Europe are exploited, working on construction sites for so little money that it is impossible to have a decent life in Prague. Some of the Africans told us about friends who left Prague for Western Europe, to work as bus drivers in London, for instance.

On Saturday mornings, Will goes to the flea market to buy cheap, second-hand goods he then sends to Africa, profiting from the sale. In a similar way, he buys old cars which he ships to Cameroon where they are sold at a profit. "Europe is different from what our people think before they leave Africa. We all have those dreams and end up in the streets of Prague," says Will. "I tell lies to my friends in Cameroon when I talk to them over the phone about my life in Prague. I don't tell them anything about my night shifts on the Square. I don't want my family to come to Prague and see what I do. I would be ashamed. When I talk to girls in clubs, I pretend I have nothing to do with the Africans from Wenceslas Square. It is a miserable job."

On the drug trail

Will hates to hear about the men from Wenceslas Square being constantly associated with drug sale. "Drugs are sold by a couple of guys who come to the Square for two hours or so each night. You can tell by their faces. But then, drugs are sold all over the place, in discos and clubs. Wenceslas Square is nothing compared to that. And why would you do large-scale sale of drugs on

the Square which is constantly monitored by police. In fact, much more serious crime occurs all over this city," he says, upset about the criminal reputation often attributed to his community.

At the same time, however, Will explains how easily a tourist hunter may turn into a drug dealer. "Each night I am approached and asked for drugs. Do I look like a dealer? So naturally, if you just stand here all winter and earn little, you could try phoning up your contacts who always have some drugs on them, and make some extra money by selling drugs."

Looking into the cocaine trade, the 2009 Annual Report by the National Anti-Drug Central Agency makes an explicit reference to the Nigerian mafia only. "In the Czech Republic, Nigerians usually hire couriers from among other Africans or even Czechs. These people import cocaine from Western Europe in particular (the Netherlands, UK, Spain, France). Couriers import cocaine in cars, coaches and trains, less often on airplanes. This way, couriers normally import about one to three kilograms of cocaine... People involved in the street distribution of cocaine mostly come from Nigeria and other West African countries, most of them can be found in the Prague city centre and night clubs. Citizens of the Czech Republic are also involved in the street sale."

More detailed information is impossible to come by. The Organised Crime Detection Unit of the Czech Police refused an interview, sending an e-mail with general answers, pointing out that disclosing such information would go against the Unit's mission.

Doing research on drug mafias in the Czech Republic, Miroslav Nožina of the Institute of International Relations Prague has been regularly travelling to Africa and Asia. He had direct experience with the local mafia when staying at the University of Kano, Northern Nigeria. "Students who come from the same clan area make up small, internally coherent units of four to five people. They take the same degree programme, share a money pool, exert a collective influence on teachers, making them award good grades. Once they graduate, they often leave the country. One of them will settle down in, say, Bangkok, the others in Prague or New York, and they organize heroin shipment," said Mr Nožina in an interview available on the blog of photographer Günther Bartoš.

In our summer interview, Mr Nožina reflected on the topic again. "I have no idea how many of the people on Wenceslas Square are really involved in the drug sale. Distributors are to be found in the malls and cafés where they pass the drugs on to street sellers. The sellers phone up a distributor any time they are approached by a potential buyer. So this makes it hard to identify who exactly sells drugs."

The Nigerian mafias have been active in the Czech Republic since 1990, having moved here when the frontiers to Western Europe was opened. They found it easy to expand their network and effective practice into a region where the police had had no experience with these gangs. "A lot of young Czech people would work for them as couriers, importing drugs from Thailand, while the Nigerian mafia remained in the background and organised things," says Mr Nožina, also suggesting the mafia used the Czech Republic to try new strategies, which they would then transfer to Western Europe. Mafia bosses and drug distributors have been doing the business for years while street sellers – recent immigrants in desperate financial need – only do it temporarily until they find a better job. So in a year or two, they hand it over to new immigrants.

A Rastafarian in the Eastern Bloc

"Some of the stories they tell you are true, others are not, there is no way of knowing. Some had problems back home and are right to seek asylum, others not. Some have arrived on a visa, others illegally, there are many ways and you don't need any smuggling gangs. But they all came here to improve their lives," says Tony, a forty-year old Nigerian musician who came to Europe twenty years ago and whose music club has recently been closed down for causing too much noise at night.

Unlike other Africans of his age, Tony knows a lot of the people from the Square and their stories. "Some of them enjoy the work, others don't. But they have no alternative as they wouldn't get another job easily. It's not fun spending winter nights in the Square. And I don't like it as it damages the reputation of African people," said Tony as he took a puff from a joint, one of many he had that afternoon. A committed Rastafarian, he considers marijuana to be a sacred flower.

His story is hard to believe, too: Twenty years ago he took a flight from Nigeria to Moscow, and as a travelling musician, he crossed several countries of the former Soviet Union. "Only one person in a hundred spoke English back then, so I was completely lost and I simply had to learn Russian in six months. I was twenty and I once walked all night through a dense forest, crossing the frontier between Belarus and the Ukraine. The only light I had was my cigarette lighter. It was only me and my cigarettes."

Lack of success means no chance to return

Michel Pale was the only one of the Africans willing to have his photo taken. His journey for a better life in Europe has been one of immense adventure. "The rainforest is a mirror in which you can look at yourself and think," Michel, a former student of pharmaceuticals at the University of Hradec Králové, told a Czech weekly three years ago. "There are so many different trees, bushes, plants and flowers. Each unique; no two leaves are identical. If you look closer, you always find a difference, if small, in the shape, size or colour. And everything is in bud, spreads to all sides, intertwines and contributes to incredible chaos, while at the same time many of those things disappear and give way to new life."

This thoughtful man has been an asylum seeker in the Czech Republic since 1999. Homeless at the time we wrote this, Michel is one of the best known faces in the Prague African community. He has better places to spend nights than only round-the-clock bars and he definitely does not feel the need to hide in secret places, frequenting well-known cafés and clubs. But he does not make a living on Wenceslas Square. Instead, he likes to avoid the Square for fear of being involved in one of the frequent police checks. Last January he ended up being escorted in a police car to a detention centre.

The fifty-year old man, who likes to smile and has a lot of interesting things to say, came to study in Czechoslovakia in 1985. He was 28 years old and had been given a scholarship, which was one of the ways the communist government helped those African countries with which it had a close relationship, including the Congo. When he was nearing graduation, the fall of communism in 1989 meant the scholarship programme ended.

At the time, Michel had eighteen more months to finish university. Unlike most other African scholarship receivers, he

came from a poor family of a village teacher and did not have the five thousand dollars to pay for the remaining time in school. And so he went back to the Congo, with no university diploma, and made a living doing different kinds of manual work. His country had just overthrown its dictatorship and become democratic, although the civil war that followed led to the reinstatement of the dictator.

Life was increasingly difficult in the civil war, so Michel – whose uncle worked for the national airlines – bought a cheap air ticket back to Prague where he sought asylum for the first time. That was eleven years ago, and since then, the gifted African with an almost complete university education has been slipping more and more towards the edge of society. All his asylum applications have been rejected, so he has no right to work and has no identity documents and money, moving between the refugee camp, homes of his Prague friends and the street, and facing the bleak prospect of his looming old age.

“The other refugees like me and other people do as well. I like helping the security guards with their crossword puzzles and making the cooks laugh as I sing Czech songs to them,” says Michel when talking about his time in the refugee camp.

Yet Michel avoids the African community, fearing the richer ones might talk him into going back home, which is something he wants to avoid at all costs. “If I had to return, I would kill myself. They would think I was a loser. When I’m in Europe, they think I must be rich. If they knew I am not rich, they would laugh at me and exclude me from their community and treat me like I was worthless. That’s why it’s better to be homeless in Prague.”

Just want to live like you

To sum up, the motivations and goals of the Africans on Wenceslas Square seem to be somewhat contrary to what Czech people and the well-established African community like to think.

There are several things the tourist hunters appear to have in common: they came to Prague on their own, with no assistance from smugglers whom they would have to pay thereby accumulating huge debts. They work on the Square simply because they cannot find any other work or to make some extra money in addition to the poorly paid and insecure work they do elsewhere. Drugs are sold in the Square, although this only concerns a small group of people.

All of these people would appreciate help from the state authorities and NGOs that could run free Czech language courses thereby forcing them to learn. Language courses are common elsewhere in Europe, but not in the Czech Republic. These people do not ask for money, they just want to learn the language to be able to succeed in the local labour market, earn money and integrate into society. They do not want to live in African ghettos, they want to live the same way as Czechs.

“Czech people need to take more interest in these immigrants in the first place. They must understand their needs. This is the only way to prevent huge social problems later on,” says Will, reflecting on immigration in general and about the opportunity that the Czech Republic, unlike its richer counterparts in Western Europe, still has: “The Africans are not going to leave. That’s the way it is. You expel one, and two new ones will arrive. They will always find their way here. They only want a better life and will do anything to achieve that. We would be grateful for the work as without it most of the people would have to make a living illegally,” says the young Cameroonese, suggesting the Czech

Republic can benefit too: “The African community here is quite small, they live alongside the Czechs, not in ghettos. There is still time to support their integration, and that will set an example to other generations of immigrants. If ghettos are allowed to develop, new immigrants will come directly into them, and it will be extremely difficult to get them out. And new generations are sure to come, that cannot be prevented.”

*The migrant names and the country of their origin (with the exception of Michel and Ibrahima) were changed



↑ They are a community, they know each other



↑ These "hunters" work in team



↑ Others work alone

→ Cabaret is opening, the "hunters" are off to work



Migration trap among the Mazury Lakes

| Text: Piotr Szenajch | Photo: Monika Kmita |

'Circular migration' means moving constantly to find work but at the same time never settling in a new place to stay. To be able to support their families, many inhabitants of North-Eastern Poland leave for 3-8 months for Western Europe. They yield to harsh living conditions in jobs below their qualifications and face a constant risk of fraud and abuse prevalent for being in a grey legal area. The labor market at home does not offer them any better conditions.

*"When this little stash shrinks you'd better go again and heal this budget of yours... It melts down. It's good while it's here. When it liquefies you start to think of the next road trip. Not to allow such collapse again. So you don't have to lift up from your knees again." Iwona**

Joanna's odyssey

Her story of migrating for work is a true epic. Joanna tells it over strong Turkish coffee and some cherry liqueur at a kitchen table till 2 a.m. She's 36, a lively delicate brunette. She lives with her husband and two daughters (a twelve and a one year old) on a family farm where her parents used to live and work. Her husband milks and feeds cows every morning but they don't have enough animals or land to make a living from it. The village is called Biedaszki. The name has the root 'bieda' in it, which means 'poverty'. There are only six houses here, made in characteristic red brick and meadow stones at the time when this was still Eastern Prussia. The aged taxi driver who took us here from the nearby Węgorzewo stayed for coffee and a chat too – everyone knows each other here. For most Poles this is no man's land, the end of the world, only 15 km from the border with the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad.

The first time ever was Greece, already in 1996, just after their marriage. "The living conditions are perfect", a work agent from nearby Ełk said. "Three months of beautiful weather, nice camping lodges, everything you need". He then collected an equivalent of a month's salary for his services. Joanna remembers the anxiety on the borders. Poland was still far from the EU back then. They selected her for extra control. The customs officer asked her about the purpose of the voyage: "Tourism, I said, thinking of my suitcase full of tinned food. *Siguro?* he asked. *For sure? Cross your heart it's true!* And I did", she says, looking in my eyes.

They rode for two days and slept in the coach. The driver left them on a beach, in the middle of nowhere. A man came for them in an open truck. But it was the accommodation that really disturbed them.

"A breezeblock shed with no plaster on the walls and multi-storey welded bunks. Showers without curtains. It was cold. Worse than a prison cell. My legs felt soft."

"Look", Joanna's husband suddenly draws a photo album in front of my nose. "A four star hotel in Greece!"

It does look terrible. Joanna looks like a lost teenager in that picture. The group called the agent, told him the deal had been different. They chipped in for a taxi and sent one of them to negotiate in the agent's company's office in Athens. They threatened with court action if he wouldn't find a new workplace with better conditions. Finally they found work collecting oranges and peach in Anifi, not far away. The sleeping quarters were in an old cinema. One of them went there and made sure that the conditions were bearable.

The next morning at 6 a.m. they set off for the fields, again in open trucks. The intermediary talked about heat, but there, there was frost on the leaves. "The peaches were like lumps of ice." They all were in T-shirts. The orange trees had small sharp spikes – they didn't get any work clothes, not even gloves. Soon the locals put up stands with rubber boots, raincoats. But the workers had to pay out of their own pocket. The food was good but scant. They had to buy some more – at prices of the tourist region they lived in.

"I don't remember how much we got paid," Joanna says. "It was still in drachmas. But I brought nothing home. Maybe some 800 złoty (now 200 euro). And a box of oranges."

The second time was Italy, much later, in 2005. She worked on a tomato farm: collecting, cutting, drying. Again, the trip didn't go well. The agreement with the intermediary had been for three months, but because of crop failure there was work only



↑ Joanna at work (turkey hen farm)

for 40 days, paid in daily wage. The employer said "Thank you – this is all". And then they had to pay for accommodation and gas, not to mention the bus ticket, food for three months brought from Poland, and some 150 euro paid to the agent in advance. Later they learned that the farm owner had already paid that lady for recruitment.

Joanna tells me some more vivid details of this trip: about a young Pole beaten up heavily by some other Polish men on some trivial pretext. Joanna remembers him returning to Poland, battered, with no money, just a teddy bear for his child. She remembers about a man threatened with a gun by associates of their employer (the rumour was, he belonged to the Calabrian mafia). About having to hide the fact of visiting a doctor and getting prescriptions using names of trusted Italians. Their work was illegal – it was before the Italian market had opened up to new EU countries.

Then there was the grand retreat. They rode from Calabria to Rome, not speaking Italian, with luggage and practically no money, stowing away in trains. Joanna, as the most outgoing and communicative, guided the whole group.

"When we saw the right bus station we burst in tears. We're going home! We had to wait for a coach to Warsaw. We slept on benches at the station. A guard came and asked us to leave, because they were closing. They forced us outside a gate. The temperature was below zero, no money for a hotel. We looked at each other – we were like homeless people, under the bridge."

"What were you thinking then?" I ask her.

"I was coming back with nothing. I couldn't call my husband. The connection was breaking off. He thought I was hanging up on purpose. I was crying." She's crying now too. "One big chaos. I didn't know what I would find back home. I was afraid they would take away my child. It was the first time I left her for so long. She started to wet the bed. It was terrible."

When they got on the bus there was great joy. Some men from the group she guided came to her and said: "You see Joanna, it was you who brought us home. From the end of the world. We would have gotten lost and stayed there. We'll never leave home again".

Then Joanna tells me about the trip to Urbino, Italy in 2005 – the first one that paid off.

"In 2005?", I notice. "So the same year as the tomato farm? Why did you go just after such a catastrophe? Was it a tough decision?"

"No." She is silent for a second. "We were in a tough situation. I had to put all eggs in one basket. When I heard there was a chance to go I said I'm going without thinking."

She worked as an all day carer for an 85 year old man. She made friends with his daughter Marliza – an Italian teacher of German, about her age.

Christmas came soon after she had started. "I got a present from Marliza. I was shocked. I had tears in my eyes. In return I baked them potato pancakes and faworki pastry. I wanted to bring some Polish atmosphere to them. They were very warm-hearted." Joanna worked there as a replacement for her Polish friend, who

lived in Urbino permanently, during the time she was visiting her family in Poland. She went two more times, for three and four months. The last time she had planned to bring her daughter with her. Unfortunately the father of Marliza died. Joanna went anyhow and took up cleaning houses. After returning she got pregnant and that was her last voyage until now.

The Great Lakes

"Those who want to work will find work" – everyone repeats that here. But what if there is no work around?

Giżycko and Węgorzewo lie on the stunning Great Masurian Lakes sailing route – a tourist hot spot in North-Eastern Poland. There are thousands of large and smaller lakes, with old forests around them, connected with a network of canals that allow for cruises along tens of kilometres. White elegant sails and the mirror surface of the lakes – that would be a typical postcard view of Masuria.

One can imagine that the chief source of business and employment here is tourism. Yet this lucrative opportunity is also a curse. The tourist season so far up North lasts a short time – from June to September, rarely longer. During the season one can find short-term, low-paid jobs, usually illegal or within 'elastic' forms of employment, mostly forced upon workers by their bosses. Bars, hotels and marinas hire, also the building industry, but only until September. Then the region turns numb, falls asleep. What's the worst problem here? The lack of big industrial employers – everyone will tell you. Then they will add: salaries too low to support a family, unfair employers, scarce buses and trains. A sociologist would add some big words: the 'working poor' phenomenon, employment beneath qualifications, abusing work regulations, inadequate help from public institutions, wasting human capital, exploitation.

"Life is hard in these parts" – that's another frequent phrase appearing in my conversations.

Going around in circles

If you trust statistics, the migration in the region is relatively low in comparison to other parts of today's Poland. But whoever you ask in Giżycko or Węgorzewo has worked abroad or at least knows friends who have; usually both. Some even talk about the 'desolation' of the towns in the area.

The answer is quite simple: migration statistics are based on registration of permanent residence. Here migrants rarely leave for good. Like Joanna, they leave and return again, for 3-8 months, not liquidating their apartments, with a rather clear intention of coming back. They spend money on everyday living rather than invest. Some gradually resign from building a steady career at home. Then they are forced to go again.

Reports call this 'circular migration'. Or, in a more sinister way, 'the migration trap'.

Iwona's self-respect

"Those who want to work will find work" – the one who repeats that most often is Iwona from Giżycko. She's 42 but looks older. Strong, sturdy arms and a stocky figure hint at an acquaintance with physical effort. She is tanned and smiles a lot. She speaks fast, fidgets, can't sit in one place for long. For the last year she has rented a room in the fabulously colourful house of Mrs. Kasia (70) to whom she is now a best friend. Iwona boasts

about her children scoring best grades in their schools in Ireland. She is very open about her recent divorce, after her husband decided to stay in Ireland for good. But it is her hard work that she talks about with the most pride:

"Respect for work, for another man and for oneself", that's what matters to her. "I'm not ashamed of any work; I can sweep streets, clean toilets. Work is work. And it should be respected."

From her these words are like a waving banner.

In the summer Iwona works in the kitchen of a big tourist resort. She cooks, cleans, washes dishes. She works in 16-hour shifts, every second day. She has no employment agreement. Her boss doesn't cover her social security. She's registered as unemployed to have insurance. But she still considers this a 'good deal'. "At least he's solvent", she says. "He pays what he promises. That's not so common here."

Part of the deal is that when summer ends Iwona leaves for warm countries to earn real money.

She learned about a job on a big farm in Spain in a public labour office. She's been there twice already and is preparing for the next trip soon. She also went to Germany to collect apples but she much prefers to talk about sunny Andalusia.

"After work, you know, the ocean! We were seven kilometres away from the beach; we went on foot every day. The beach was beautiful, like a fairy tale. Swimming, sunbathing... I liked massages best – you stand with your back to the waves and it's like having a massage. Like holiday in Spain, I tell you."

But this was after hours. Working on a farm is no easy money.

"Not everyone can last. Here at home it was minus 30, there it was plus 30- 40. You switch your sheepskin to a T-shirt. The worst is the heat. Frankly speaking I thought of resigning the first day; I wasn't sure I will make it."

You get up at 6 a.m. to avoid the sun. 6.5 hours of work, then you are free. It's impossible to work any more. For collecting strawberries you walk with your back bent along the hedges. You can't kneel or crouch. The foreman shouts at you for any reason. You work in teams: more experienced workers have to help the less experienced not to slow down. It's usually the older women who get along best and help others. Like most of what Iwona has done in her life, it's hard physical work.

"It's good while the tents are removed, but try working in the tent, under the foil, that's the worst part. It's 50 degrees centigrade, there are chemicals, you can't breathe." She tells this to her friends in Giżycko, when they mock her saying she's a suntanned millionaire from Spain now.

Iwona thinks that whether your migration is successful or not depends mainly on your own determination:

"To survive you have to show that you want to work, that you make an effort. Your boss has to see that you want this job."

Then she adds: "The young think it's too hard to wash dishes for 16 hours. Maybe this comes from their families: do little, earn a lot. They didn't have such a tough childhood as mine."

Sisyphus

A study made in the region for local labour services in 2009 concluded with a list of migration types. The researchers, in a surge of poetic inspiration called the types with names of mythical heroes:

Odysseus: mature, heads of families, mainly with secondary education, often have a permanent job. Migration not exceeding half a year, usually aimed at earning extra money for a particular purpose. They deal with the risk of losing their per-



↑ Joanna and her greenhouse



← Joanna with her family



↓ Joanna's husband having a rest

manent job. Vulnerable to the migration trap.

Sisyphus: older, basic education, desperate. Their goal: earn to survive. Cheap labour force. Victims of physical and psychological exploitation. They don't know their rights. Unsuccessful voyages.

Prometheus: their main goals are personal development, gaining professional experience, collecting money for investment. Also meeting new people. Rather young. They consciously employ their new assets after coming back.

Icarus: migrants who faced failure. The motivation was development, but it went wrong at some point. The experience

they gained has no value back home. The migration seems to be just a big hole in their lives.

Most of the ones I talked to in Masuria would account as Odysseus-type. But I can't help thinking that they all have much in common with Sisyphus.

Mariola's love

When Mariola was leaving for Germany, at the age of 24, indeed she was 'head of the family'. The sole responsibility for her children was on her after her divorce.

He beat her and her oldest daughter; her high school sweetheart from Dresdenko, a small town running on car imports, near the border with Germany. She ended up in hospital several times before she decided to end it.

The employment agent was her friend. At least he took no money for his service. He recruited her for work in a Turkish Kebab. She worked long hours in the kitchen, practically non-stop, with just a couple of hours for sleep. She was sending the money to her parents and children.

She lived with four Turkish men in a small apartment, with only thin plaster walls and curtains separating the rooms. She says she was afraid all the time.

There were more reasons for this anxiety than just being from a small town, where there never were people with a different skin colour, more than the bad experiences with her husband. At some point her boss started to make unambiguous suggestions.

"I saw girls changing behind the bar from time to time. I suspected what was happening. You go to bed with me, you'll have work, if not, you get the sack. I preferred to escape from there as fast as possible."

So she escaped again. The critical point was when she saw some guns in a closet in her apartment. She asked for an earlier payment and left without a word. Nevertheless, altogether it lasted four years.

It's hard to listen to all this looking at her fragile face surrounded with straight blonde hair. She seems to stare into the distance when she refers to the difficult parts. She's 33 now and lives in Giżycko, a long way from her hometown. All the time she has children hanging around her neck, laughing, doing pranks, trying to join the conversation: her daughter of 14, her son of ten, and of course, especially the youngest daughters aged four and one and a half. When they interrupt, a smile lights up her glum face instantly.

Mariola's move to Masuria has a good story behind it itself. The second and third trips to Germany were short, up to two months: babysitting children, then working as a hotel maid. Yet the second stay was long enough for her to meet Andrzej – and there we have a migrant love story.

"We started chatting each other up the moment we met," Mariola says, smiling. "Colleagues laughed at this. He was my age, a bachelor. Worked on construction sites, wandered the world." She met him at a party crowded with Polish migrant workers. She mentioned her divorce and children as soon as they started talking. He told her that he had been single all his life, which she didn't believe. Much later, when he invited her to his home in Masuria for the first time, she insisted on taking her children with her. He agreed without hesitation, and that meant he passed the test. After she moved to Giżycko he would often joke: "You had to spend every summer at the Baltic. Why haven't you come to the lakes before?"

Now they are married. In the photos taken at the modest civil ceremony Andrzej looks two metres tall (he is), with an angular, serious face and his hair being of the same fair blond colour as his new wife's. Mariola praises Andrzej for knowing just how to get the children interested, for coming up with crazy games, helping them with physics or chemistry. They have two more now. But their life together is still arranged according to the rhythm of foreign journeys in search for work. They met in 2005, but between 2006 and 2008 Mariola worked in Adenau, Germany, in a restaurant, cleaning toilets, cutting salads, boiling pasta and washing dishes, returning home to see her children only on holidays. She met Andrzej occasionally, a few times at

home; usually in Germany, after hours, when he was working somewhere within short driving distance.

The last two years she spent at home, in Giżycko, looking after the children, her own at last. But Andrzej is abroad practically all the time, usually two or three months in a row. The last time he got back was for the First Holy Communion of Dominik, their only son, just for three days. Recently, Andrzej was rebuilding a medieval castle from cut stone in France. Now he builds a hotel on the outskirts of Berlin. They communicate through Skype.

"When he comes back", Mariola says, "he always has tears in his eyes. It's a pain for him that Julka has made her first steps, and daddy is away. Every time I have to explain to him their new gestures and sayings."

"Practically, we have separate lives. Supposedly we are together, but we're always apart. It's a torment."

Basia, the teacher

Those with basic and vocational education 'win' – say the reports on Polish migration. In their hometowns they usually can't expect better jobs than the ones they carry out abroad. This is somewhat true for Mariola and Andrzej or Iwona; though 'victory' is not the word that comes to one's mind. Those with higher education and aspirations 'lose' – they get frustrated with working beneath qualifications, assuming the unrewarding lifestyle of the working class.

Basia, 34, graduated in maths, then finished an academic course qualifying to teach English. She's a maths teacher in a small village near Węgorzewo. She moves quickly around the kitchen, cooking dinner while talking with me. Worried and focused at first glance, Basia's eyes reveal more and more self-confidence as we talk.

"I've graduated from two faculties, and decent ones, not anyone can complete them. The fact that there's no decent job for me in this country that I have to leave – for me this was horror."

Basia is a single mom. Her son, then eight years old, got serious asthma and needed therapy in a private clinic. She took a bank loan. But then the school she taught at decided to cut down her job from full-time to a fraction of 13/18. Why this uncommon number? I failed to ask. This was enough for the bank to quickly withdraw her credit. She had to collect money fast. Her friend was coming home from England for holiday and needed a replacement. Basia had to decide within a month. It wasn't easy, as she had to leave her little son in her friend's care in Węgorzewo. She packed and took a bus.

Cleaning corridors, changing bed linen, and washing dishes – this is all not so uncommon to a teacher running her own house. She only had a problem with waiting. It was hard for her to carry full platters.

"You had to do it all, no talking, because there's a multitude willing to take your place." She worked ten hour shifts, sometimes took overtime, which paid better.

"When they learned that I knew the language they would often ask me to show new guests around." Unfortunately, she also had to do some more waiting. Nowadays, there's a shortage of employees who can engage clients in a witty conversation.

She remembers that she didn't talk much about her education. "When I went there I left Mrs. Mathematician at home. I went there to make money. You had to shut your mouth and do your work".

She recalls one young girl nagging about being a Major and having to wash dishes all day. Everyone laughed at her quietly



↑ Iwona's place



← Iwona and her landlord and best friend Mrs. Kasia

↓ Iwona in the orchard behind her house



→ Iwona's kitchen

and with resignation. Almost everyone from the staff had some academic education.

"When the management finally learnt that I finished studies they clutched their heads with disbelief – that there is no work here for mathematicians".

In the end, she says, the trip gave her a lot of self-confidence. "Knowing your way around, open-mindedness – you learn a lot while travelling. I've always tried to teach children that you get something out of every contact with another person."

Basia was supposed to stay in England for two months, during summer holidays. Finally she ended up staying seven. She managed to negotiate a sick leave in her school due to her son's illness. She was a school teacher playing truant. If they knew where she was she would get in trouble.

Paweł, a success story

For Paweł, travelling for work was above all an adventure. He's one of those who would classify as Prometheus-type. He was born in Przemyśl, a town of 66 thousand in South-Eastern Poland, near the border with Ukraine. The first time he decided to go to work abroad was during a summer break from his economic studies in Cracow.

His wife is an economist too. She's from Giżycko but studied and worked for a few years in Warsaw. Together they escaped big city life and now live in Masuria.

Although only 29 years old, Paweł is already an owner of a prosperous 70-room tourist resort, which he bought for credit after two years of preparing and four business plans.

In two consecutive summers he went to Scotland to work on a farm. He collected cranberries, potatoes, and broccolis. His experiences did not differ much from the ones of Joanna or Iwona. It is the language he uses to talk about them that differs. For him it was a 'journey to the unknown', a 'student adventure', aimed at 'getting to know the world', 'practicing English', and above all 'taking advantage of being young'. Earning money was 'only by the way'.

In 2004 Paweł decided to take a one-year dean's leave, just before finishing studies. He went to London with a group of friends. His first post was a warehouseman's assistant. Soon he was promoted to a deliveryman. Driving a truck, he had an opportunity to learn the streets of London. He became friends with a Pakistani worker, who suggested to Paweł making a cab licence. "Not the black cabs, the mini-cabs. Pakistanis run this whole business." So Paweł bought a car for the money he already saved and transformed it into a minicab. He made a cab licence, registered a one-man business and 'started a new adventure'.

He worked nights, 15-16 hours in a row, sleeping the rest of the time. But his profits rewarded his effort. The investment in the cab returned in two weeks.

His thirst for new experiences was also satisfied:

"London is a big melting pot as they say. Everything good and evil in the world is there. Not many things can surprise me now, especially after working in a cab. From the black market of weaponry, narcotics and prostitution to the club nightlife stars and celebrities. You can see everything in the back of a cab."

He might slightly exaggerate, but he has certainly developed the bored look of a man who's seen a lot.

"The West strengthens your backbone", Paweł claims. "You get resilient to most inconveniences of life. You are left all alone, it's the best school you can get. One sees less problems, expects less from others, and approaches life more realistically."

Then Paweł says some bitter words about living in England as an immigrant:

"I lived there long enough to learn that emigration for good has completely no sense. Seeking one's fortune abroad is ok when you treat it as adventure for a short time, gaining experience, manners, money".

"Why doesn't it have sense?" I ask him.

"When living abroad, you're always a second-rate citizen. Although London is such a multicultural phenomenon, a Pole will always be a Pole. He will never have the same respect as back home."

"Have you ever felt like a second-rate citizen?"

"Everyone over there pats you on the back and says Polish worker... good worker... you are the best. But on the condition that you do junk-work; do what they don't want to do. It's all fine, as long as you don't walk in their way or take their position. The precondition is that your work tool is the shovel..."

"If you have a head on your shoulders, some education and the will to work, your perspectives in Poland are three times better than in the West".

Crisis

When I ask them about 'the crisis', only Paweł – the businessman – knows which one I'm talking about. For the rest, 'crisis' is a permanent state, a metaphor of life.

Background

These are interesting questions: What makes someone successful or not during such trips? What helps you profit from your efforts and control the risk you take? Finally, what makes you feel battered and cheated or enriched and strengthened?

I ask all of them about their family background. Joanna's parents were small-time farmers from rural villages. So are the parents of Andrzej and Basia. Mariola's father works as a janitor at a car dealer's in Dresdenko. Her mother is a cashier in a supermarket. Iwona's mother worked as a forester in the state-owned woods. Her father was a drunkard – that's all she tells me.

Paweł's parents on the other hand have higher education. His mother is a construction-engineer, his father studied agricultural science. In the 1990s they quickly started their own business in trade.

You can surely see a certain pattern here, though nothing is completely simple.

Plans for the future

Iwona can't wait till the next trip to Andalusia, to get back to the ocean and to her tough work at the strawberry patches. She says the life is different there, easier.

Basia is waiting for the next occasion to leave too, probably during the next school holidays. She wants to take his son with her this time.

Paweł is his own man now, as he always wanted, with his future carefully planned according to the rhythm of his loan instalments.

Joanna found a job close to her home village. She works on a turkey farm. Within a few months she got promoted from a regular wage earner to the head of the whole farm. She tells with pride about her fast way up, about negotiating her salary, about her business trip abroad tomorrow morning – this time some-



↑ Mariola and her children

what different. After a long conversation she takes us for a night walk around her farm. She drives at nerve-wrecking speed along dark narrow roads. I'm thinking whether I should remind her that she had a drink. The farm is immense. We see her telling off an employee on a night shift – a muscular giant with a Hells Angels look and a ponytail. She's definite and assertive. She confidently operates high-tech instruments on the farm.

Mariola and Andrzej consider three options:

Firstly, emigrating permanently to Germany, at least for a couple of years.

Secondly, staying in Giżycko. This would be possible only if one of them found a permanent job. That is what they want the most.

The third option is the most radical, but at the same time very probable: moving closer to the German border, just to have a shorter drive, and live like this, between countries, always circulating.

Why do they go?

Iwona:

"You know what? If they actually hired me for this job in the kitchen that I have" – the one with 16 hour shifts – "I would completely quit travelling and work here until retirement. But the way it is now, I just don't have a choice. I have to go."

Joanna:

"I remember the first money I earned in Italy I sent to my husband to buy coal to heat the house."

"The times are turbulent. One has to fight for one's wellbeing; a better tomorrow for oneself and one's family. You have to be responsible."

Although safe from such choice for now, Joanna knows the moment she loses her job she might have to face it again.

Mariola and Andrzej live in a hundred year old tenement house, in a flat with a creaky wooden floor, heated with a tile stove. Yet you can find in it a freshly painted guest room with a plasma TV and tons of cool, colourful toys for the kids. The flat belongs to Andrzej's aunt and they live there thanks to her generosity. Andrzej earns outstandingly for local conditions. It's still not a fortune though for a family with four kids, especially when you're saving money for your own flat. One way or another, as soon as Andrzej quits his European routine they will be flat broke again.

During the summer season he works for a small local construction company, for Mr. Staś. He has 10 employees, but only one is 'registered'. Andrzej works when Mr. Staś calls him on the phone. Sometimes he is needed for one, sometimes for 2-3 days. No obligations on the part of Mr. Staś.

"Having so many children we just can't afford working only once in a while. You can't make any plans. You can't make ends meet. You're not getting any younger and still you don't have anything from your work."

"We just have to", Mariola says. "There's no other option. You have to bear it. Maybe it will pass."

*Some of the migrants' names and personnel datas were changed

In the melting pot – Muslim migrants in post-crisis Bochum

| Text: Georgiana Catalina Macovei | Photo: Octavian Bâlea |

Bochum lies in the heart of the Ruhrgebiet (Ruhr region), Germany's former mining and industrial centre. In the past decades, the area has experienced a profound economic restructuring; however, unemployment continues to be quite high in the area. Ever since the influx of Turkish "guestworkers" in the 1960s, migrants of Muslim faith make up a significant portion of the area's population. What impact did the economic crisis of 2008 have on Bochum's large and diverse Muslim community? Who was affected and what support networks are provided by religious institutions such as Mosque societies?

Bochum and migration – a different approach

There are quite a lot of facts and figures about Bochum and its people. One fact is that Bochum is a city of approximately 380,000 inhabitants in Western Germany, which lies in the heart of the Ruhr region (concentrated around the rivers Ruhr and Rhine), once the largest industrial area in Europe. Going back in time a few decades, Bochum was a city relying mainly on its manufacturing and mining industry. When its last collieries were shut down in the 1970s, Bochum experienced a severe change in the economic sector. The face of the city shifted from industrial to urban. At first this impacted negatively on peoples' lives – many of them lost their jobs. Since then huge efforts have been made to develop other sectors that would decrease the unemployment rate. Today Bochum functions as a small but powerful academic-cultural conglomerate, fueled by its research and service sectors, striving to recover after the economic crisis that hit in 2008. However, the fact is that the unemployment rate still lingers around 13% in the city.

As far as migration is concerned, Bochum has been attracting people a lot ever since the 1960s, when Turkish Gastarbeiter (guest workers) came to work in the coal mines, and continues to be a migrant magnet up to the present. At one time people came to work in mines; however, nowadays it is the higher educational sector (to name the most relevant) that draws them and that represents one of the centers of interest. The Ruhr University of Bochum (Germany's sixth largest University) is swarming with migrant students from all over the world.

Overall, 14.7% of the people currently living in Bochum's 26 districts are migrants or have some sort of migration background. But these are just statistics. While facts and figures may provide an objective and empirical frame to the issue of migra-

tion in Bochum, they cannot truly convey the complexity of the matter. They cannot offer in-depth information about why these people migrated in the first place, about their struggles, their failure or success. This article attempts to find out about some of the people that make up Bochum's melting pot, an attempt to put a name and a story to the numbers.

Bochum and the Islam

Although originating from different countries, more than a third of Bochum's migrants have something in common: they share the same religion, Islam. Coming in the 1960s with the Turkish migrants who settled in Bochum, Islam has been part of the Ruhr region, thus of Bochum, for decades. There are currently around 20 mosques in the city, which host believers who claim that their faith is not merely a religion but a "way of life", as they put it. How does it feel like to be a migrant in Bochum; moreover, a migrant with a Muslim background? Does one really have equal chances in finding a job? Does one encounter prejudice? Did the economic crisis impact their lives in a particular way?

The mosques

Out of the approximately 20 mosques in Bochum I chose to concentrate on two, which have distinct characteristics: The Islamic Community Bochum e.V. is particularly interesting to look at, since, as its slogan puts it, it is a place for "18 nationalities under one single roof" – even though, it is normally just known as the "Turkish mosque". The other mosque is chiefly visited by migrants from Arabic countries, such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Morocco or Lebanon.



A shopping tour with Hazar

The people

According to Muslim beliefs men and women must pray separately from each other. This gender separation should allow people to concentrate better during the prayers and is only exempted during formal ceremonies, such as weddings and funerals. Even Ramadan is celebrated separately in the mosque, and while men used to socialize before the evening prayer, I practically never saw any women in the Turkish mosque. I would occasionally spot one or two of them as the kitchen door opened and closed. Some came every day to prepare the evening meal, which would be served in between evening prayers.

Although the mosque has about 500 members, not all attend prayers regularly. During Ramadan, thirty to forty men, all ages, would gather in the courtyard, eat together and chit-chat over a

cup of hot chai. It was practically impossible to get to know them all, so I sometimes just joined other people's conversations, watched them, or, in the case of the Arabic mosque, participated in one of their seminars. Out of the many encounters, I chose to present the following five.

Tolga

Normally, Tolga would not be one of the first people to meet if your business took you to the "Turkish mosque" down the Diberger Street in the heart of the Bochum city center. He usually does not spend that much time in the mosque but, at the time I met him, he was on vacation. After brief eye contact, I came up to him and he stretched out his hand to introduce himself (quite unnatural, I was later told, since Muslim men are not supposed

to have any physical contact with women they do not know – handshaking included). A short series of questions and answers followed regarding my purpose in visiting the mosque, and then Tolga exclaimed: “Well, let me tell you a bit about u”. He tells me “they” (it’s fairly usual for people I have interviewed to employ the plural form, even when talking about themselves as individuals) take great pride to have been among the first Muslim communities to ever emerge in Bochum, dating back to 1976.

“Oh, by the way, can you believe this place used to be a garage before we took over some two decades ago? Now we have two different rooms for men and women to pray [they must under no circumstances pray together], we have a classroom for our children to be taught, a kitchen, a pantry, actually everything we need”, he continues proudly. Tolga is the IT specialist of “The Islamic community Bochum e.V” and the one handling its internet site. However, this is not what he does for a living. He works for a well-known oil company and readily admits to be satisfied with his way of life and that of his family’s. He kept his job during the economic crisis, but the fear of unemployment was there. Nevertheless, if he compares himself to his non-Muslim colleagues at work he claims: “I didn’t get so stressed out about it, like they did. I just took it one step at a time. Of course I was aware that I could get fired, the threat was there, because the company was planning to move to Hungary, but I thought in case something bad happens, I will try to make the best of it”. His brother-in-law is in a tight spot, however. For the past 25 years he has been employed by a temp agency and has been working for the steel magnate Thyssen Krupp. He worries about his job, says Tolga, dangling in the uncertainty of what tomorrow might bring.

Tolga does not have these problems. His wife, he tells me, is also of Turkish origin, but born and raised in Germany, like Tolga himself. Although young – “around 30” – he provides for her and their two children: “Being the only one working, of course I have a lot more responsibility. But I dare say that my family may have more money left at the end of the month than a family that is provided for by two.” We talk about work, managing money, making ends meet. His wife does not work not because she does not want to or because she cannot find a job, but mainly because they, as Muslims, Tolga claims, think very highly of education. **The wife should stay home to educate children, as he believes that the children’s education is better off when closely supervised by the mother.** However this does not mean that a woman should not help if her family is not well provided for: “Like my mother for example, she has to go to work, because otherwise they would not be able to survive only on my father’s salary.”

Tolga claims to live his life according to Islamic tradition. His religious beliefs help him deal with tough situations. He has to make sure that his family is doing well. However, if he lost his job, he explains, he would not panic because he always tries to see the positive side of things: “One of the main principles of our faith teaches you that in each good thing, situation or happening something negative may be hidden, and each bad occurrence may have a bright side to it”, he says. Tolga considers himself an ordinary case. “Actually, I’m quite boring. One could never write an article about me in the newspaper, our family is too normal. We mind our own business”. But it is exactly because of that, he believes, they have a happy life.

Tolga is quite self-confident, a trait shared by all my interlocutors who were born and raised in Germany. This self-confidence is also reflected in the way he speaks (his arguments are strong and his discourse is well-structured) but also in the way

he looks. I had the feeling everything seemed to match every time we spoke: his big brown eyes were kind and fit the calmness of his speech; his clothes, although casual each time I saw him (since we only talked in the mosque), reflected his inner balance in a way. He is also well aware of the benefits provided by the social system and of his rights as a German citizen. This knowledge may also be responsible for his optimistic outlook on his family’s future. “Should something happen, the state wouldn’t let me perish,” he concludes in a positive manner.

Ousmane

I could not help but notice Ousmane in the Turkish mosque. He has a particular aura around him, he captures attention when he talks, always looking sharp, there is not a stain on his white-collar jacket. Ousmane is African. He readily agreed to an interview with me and we met in a small café downtown Bochum. If you ask him about himself, the first thing he tells you is what he does: “I am a personal fitness and health coach and I am also in the trade business, exporting medicine and food products from Germany to African countries”, he says proudly. His work takes him everywhere on the planet, today New York, tomorrow France. Without a doubt he is a busy man, judging only by the phone calls he receives during our little get-together “Aha, ok, so on the 28th of November from Düsseldorf Airport. And after that I have to be in Lisbon. Ok. But I think it would be quite all right if I make a quick stop in Dubai for three days, that shouldn’t be a problem, I suppose”, he says, hurrying to put an end to the call as soon as possible while still being courteous.

In Bochum, he tells me, he constantly has to deal with prejudice about his religion and skin color: “Some years ago I used to wear my hair in dreadlocks (now a clean shave) and at the main station I was always stopped by the police, and they would always ask me the same question: Do you have anything to smoke? Do you have drugs on you? Just because I am black and I favor a particular hairstyle”. He can provide many examples of this kind, from being turned down for a flat to similar incidents. However, he believes that stereotypical judgment is a two-way street. Before, at the age of 16, he left his native Guinea behind, he admits that his heart was stricken with fear of the unknown, of **what he had learned in school in history class about the Nazis,** whom he associated the German people with. “As a young boy I used to believe that the Germans stick people in the oven and burn them.” But that thought did not stop him from chasing his dream of becoming a professional football player. When he was 16, he got the offer to play for a football club in Germany, and he took it. Nowadays, he insists that people’s mistake is not necessarily having prejudice, but not bothering to see what lies beneath it. If he had not reconsidered his thoughts about Germans he would have never come as far as he has.

Since then, he has come a long way. He looks back at his football days as he was a teenager as a glorious period. He played for several clubs, but by the time he turned 18, his career was practically over, due to several injuries he suffered. He was facing a terrible question: “What am I going to do now?” But he did not ponder much and started an apprenticeship as a carpenter, the same trade his father had done, which did not, however, materialize in a job offer later on. He also came to learn German pretty quickly since he is “a very outgoing and sociable person, and since I was a footballer, girls loved me, so there was always someone I could talk to”, he recollects.

How he came to work in the fitness business was “destiny”,

as he likes to call it. "One time during my apprenticeship, in 2000, I entered this fitness competition. I came in first and the prize was a full financed apprenticeship as a personal trainer". In 2004, he decided to take a risk and become a freelance fitness coach. He started his own company and he now works for himself, supporting his wife Barbara, his son Noah and daughter Marion. His family lives in Vienna, where he met his wife on a business trip. Like Tolga, he believes that his role is to provide for the family. He claims to be old-fashioned in that way, but says he earns more than enough to support his family. He always gets booked, sometimes for three months, other times for more or less, but he is always busy: "Some of my clients got a taste of the economic crisis, but it was but a small loss for them" he adds smiling. As far as work is concerned, he personally did not suffer a negative impact from the crisis.

Through all the ups and downs of his life, Ousmane kept his faith, the most important thing for him. He believes that the mosque can unite the people, and give them a sense of belonging, regardless which country they come from. He feels someone will always have a shoulder for him to lean on in the mosque. He goes on saying with regret that he misses his children and his wife and, although technology has opened new horizons for communication, it can "never replace a hug". He wishes he could be there for his children, like his parents were always there for him. It pains him to admit it, but he knows this is impossible for now: "I have to see how I can manage best. How I can make do with what I've got. I don't want my name to end up scribbled in the social welfare files. I would be so ashamed".

Hazar

When I asked for permission to talk to some of the women who attend the mosque on Diberger Street, I was politely turned down, on the grounds that the women might be shy to my inquiring about their situations. I was also told that women there do not really like to be photographed. Considering this experience, I was quite amazed and excited that I was allowed access to the women's chamber in the Arabic mosque. I had heard it would be different from the Turkish mosque, and as I stood in front of the two story building I began to understand why. "The Islamic Culture Association" looks quite inconspicuous – the building resembles more a block of flats than a mosque. That is where I met Hazar and Soumia.

"Hello, my name is Hazar, it's very nice to meet you", greets a fairly faint voice belonging to a tiny and fragile woman, whose head is covered by a brightly colored hijab. "I have been waiting for you; come in and leave your shoes at the door, please, it's our custom, you see". Entering the women's room in the Arabic mosque situated on the Waterstreet in Bochum (German – Wasserstraße) inspires a feeling of trespassing into a forbidden place or intruding on something that should remain unrevealed. It should not be like that says "sister" Hazar: "We are very open-minded here and we have nothing to hide, no".

Although small of stature and remarkably slender for her 46 years of age, Hazar has been through quite a lot in her life. She was just a teenager as she stood up to her parents because they opposed her early marriage to her husband, Sabbah, and soon after she would have to be left behind, only if for just some months, as her fiancée emigrated to Germany after finishing his medical school studies. She talks evasively about this time and does not say why they did not get married right there in Damascus, she only tells they got married in Germany, soon after

she had followed Sabbah to Europe.

Hazar actually came to Germany hoping she and her husband would go back to Syria one day but things turned out differently. Adjusting to a completely new environment proved to be very difficult in the beginning, not only because of the language barrier, "but also because I was a 15-year-old Muslim wife living in Germany at the end of the 70s. Most people didn't even know why my head was covered by a funny piece of cloth".

Hazar dropped out of school when she came to Bochum and has never gone back since, not because she did not want to, but because she had other engagements. However she does not consider this to disqualify her personality or integrity as a woman: "I am a very ambitious person. I wanted to do something with my life. I may have not continued my studies, but I took courses to be able to speak German and I have learned to educate myself". She even goes a step further in her beliefs: "If I can be quite honest, I may have achieved far more than some people who have finished school".

In spite of the fact that she has never had a regular job in Germany and has never received a paycheck in her life, Hazar has been active within the Arabic Muslim community in Bochum, basically since it was founded: "Back in 1979 this used to be a small gathering of people. In 1985 we based our headquarters in a room at the University and I have been working voluntarily for this community ever since".

Hazar is very enthusiastic when she speaks of her work and of her "girls", whom she tries to assist every Monday evening as part of a seminar that she lectures within the mosque. Some of them she has known since they were little babies. She also teaches Arabic classes and religion to children and these are just some of the activities meant to guide and help the people who attend the mosque and their families. The building that holds the rooms for prayer also hosts seminar rooms and get-together chambers because, as Hazar explains, this is not simply a mosque; to those who come here, it is a place where they forget about their troubles, mingle with the members of the community and socialize. "This is not just a room for us to pray in, on the contrary, this is where our community gathers, so this also has a very important social role in our lives." The mosque is also a students' favorite, since it is just 3 stops away from the University. Many of them meet up on Friday evenings and go to the mosque together.

Hazar emphasizes the crucial role of the mother and the wife for the family. There are no concrete figures that testify to the percentage of unemployed Muslim women in Bochum, but educating the young members of the family has been provided as a solid enough reason for staying at home by all my interlocutors. Bringing up six children proved to be as challenging as any other job for Hazar. On top of that, she manages to deal with other engagements.

However, she admits that juggling with her volunteer work in the mosque and her taking up bureaucratic work in her husband's medical practice means less spare time and more stress: "When I come home from the practice I have to prepare everything really quickly, I have to cook the meals, do this do that, it's very hectic. I used to have more time before I had so many responsibilities", she says. Nevertheless, having a job should not impair a mother's ability to raise her children as well as a housewife can. Being able and willing to take up more responsibility seems to have something to do with the character of a woman, thinks Hazar, not with the spare time she has on her hands. "And after all, if a family can't survive on one salary, then the woman should also work", she continues. This was not her case

because her husband did well for himself with his private practice. Her family did not actually feel any crisis, they only heard about it in the news, so to speak: "We are pretty well-off, people who earn above average like ourselves were maybe not as affected by the crisis as other families have been", she recollects.

In fact, when she thinks about it, she cannot come up with any particular case within the community to illustrate a negative impact of the crisis. Quite the opposite, she goes on "In spite of the economic crisis in Germany, actually at the height of it in 2008, we still managed to raise the sum of money, which was still lacking, to be able to finance the moving of the mosque into these new headquarters. Our will was stronger than any crisis".

Soumia

As I spoke on the phone with Soumia and announced that my previous appointment had been delayed and that I would be running 45 minutes late, I expected her to put off or cancel our meeting. Instead she waited patiently, sipping on a latte and browsing through a magazine in a small café on what might be called a busy square in Wattenscheid, one of Bochum's districts most packed with "Ausländer" (11.4% according to a study released by the city of Bochum in December 2008).

Soumia explains she got this discipline from her many early jobs that she has had since she was 15, experiences which made her grow up faster than kids her age. She continues by boasting, how she was the only one of all her friends to have a bank account back then and how she earned about 200 Euro a month working in a cosmetics shop in the city centre.

Soumia is a vivacious, cheerful 21-year-old girl who does not need to be asked any questions. She tells her story openly, without any constraints or fears, fixing her big brown eyes on me. But something seems to have changed since I met her the day before in Hazar's seminar. "I warned you yesterday you might not recognize me, but it's ok, I remember you", she says, and in that moment I remember why: "I only cover my head when I go to the mosque, you see, on the one hand not to stand out from the crowd, and on the other hand out of respect for my "sisters" and for the men, who are going there to pray, not to stare at women. But in everyday life I choose not to wear it".

The discussion is briefly interrupted by her husband, who shows up at the café and introduces himself politely. Although she was raised quite liberally, being allowed to work so young and to make her own choices, family is still a strong authority in her life and must be obeyed. She was not allowed to marry until she had finished school and turned 18.

"So by the looks of it, you were born and raised in Germany", I ask, alluding to her flawless German and self-confident manner. "Yes, my father came to Germany with a forged visa by the way", she says. "He was in his 20s when he 'emigrated', but soon after everything was ok, he got his papers and has been working with a top company for years. He met my mother here", she continues.

As for her, she attended a regular school, like any other German child. Growing up in a mixed cultural environment influenced Soumia's personality and shaped her character. Many specific "German" traits brushed up easier on her than they would do on a migrant who was not raised in Germany. However, she occasionally got teased in school. Kids would sometimes mock her by calling her names like "black head" or "oil eyes", a local term used in the Ruhrgebiet area to designate any type of "Ausländer". "But other than that, I didn't experience much trou-

ble. I would be the girl who would get along with everybody", she remembers.

After finishing school she decided to pursue an apprenticeship, to learn a trade, in order to be able to get a job later on. She dropped out and decided to get a job as a sales person in a very expensive clothing boutique. Unfortunately, during the crisis small businesses were particularly affected and after only two months of being employed there full-time on a fixed salary, her boss had to dismiss her. The store's incomes dropped dramatically and there was no money left to pay the employees. She has been looking for a job ever since. "The worst mistake I ever made was to drop out of my apprenticeship", she regrets, looking back.

Soumia is the only one of all her other five siblings who is unemployed. She would very much want to work in the medical department, as a nurse maybe, but definitely not in a hospital. Not again. Some time ago she was a trainee for a month, working in the hospital, but working in shifts and doing long hours took their toll on her short married life.

However, she could very well see herself working in a private practice with regular hours. But married life and being a woman on top of that has, like everything in this life, she says "advantages and disadvantages". She thinks many employers are scared off by the fact that she has a ring on her finger: "They think, oh no, if I take her in and grant her the apprenticeship she will be able to work for two years at the most; after that she will get pregnant, be on maternity leave, and I will still have to keep the spot open for her for another year". And what doctor would want to bring such a disaster upon himself? "Not even one", she resumes.

The job hunt can get depressing because most of the times she does not even get an interview call. Most of the time her applications just get ignored. She once spoke on the phone with a doctor, who finally asked her to come in for an interview. But that did not work out either.

Sometimes there is no other way than accepting money from the state. According to the Social forum Bochum, approximately 20% of Bochum's inhabitants receive social welfare. Soumia does not want to be a part of the welfare system anymore, in spite of the pseudo-advantages one might think of at her young age: more sleep, more free time. But having no occupation has a toll on her, as she had been active since she was a teenager. After a while she had the feeling something was missing.

"So what would you do if you had a job and got pregnant? Would you still got to work or would you quit for good, to take care of the children?" I ask, wanting to get her opinion on the gender matter.

"I think it is very important that a mother should stay with the child, at least for the first two or two and a half years, until they are old enough to attend kindergarten", she explains. Six or seven months are just not enough, she feels. Nevertheless she admits that her desire to have something to do, to have a job, even if she is not earning so much would eventually get the best of her. But she does not look down on older women who have chosen to stay with the kids and dedicated their lives to their families. She believes that while the older generations of migrants who settled in Bochum did not have any family here, she can always turn to her parents and siblings for support.

Soumia dreams, makes plans for the future and has high aspirations. How this will change she cannot know for sure. Soumia admits she had to make some compromises after she got married. She had to grow up all of a sudden and face more



↑ Haissam, a proud student



↑ Bochum: Ousmane's second home



↑ Yahya

↓ Getting ready for a seminar at the mosque



↓ Coffee with Ahmad



responsibilities. She cannot act out anymore, because even if she feels like not doing something, she is aware that marriage, like love "is about giving and taking", as she philosophically puts it. "Of course I've changed", she says, "I'm not at my mama's place anymore. If you don't love the person you're with, then it's never going to work out, but if you do, it doesn't hurt to give in", she resumes, alluding to the role of a Muslim wife and mother she might eventually assume one day.

Ahmad

"A lot of corruption in my country, the Mob controls everything ... too much poverty, a lot of diseases, partly conditioned from the extreme heat we experience there ... too much corruption in Pakistan" - these would be the words Ahmad would repeat throughout his jumbled-sentenced discourse, uttered in broken German over a cup of coffee and a piece of cake. He had caught my attention ever since I had met him in the Turkish mosque during Ramadan, but although we had not talked much then, I could feel the sadness in his voice.

His story is by far the most impressive of all. Deprived of all his possessions and stripped of his dignity, he was forced by circumstances to leave his home land and flee to Germany in 1997, due to unsteady political climate in Pakistan. The journey was dangerous, first travelling by train from his native town, Lahore, he was smuggled across the borders with a fake passport, and upon landing in Germany he requested asylum. Having lost his father 18 years ago and being an only child, the only person who still means something to him was left behind: his mother. No sisters or brothers to comfort him before he left. He was all alone.

Whenever his mother is brought up, he lowers his eyes and goes on talking with a sort of put-on smile, the way he usually does when I address a more delicate matter: "Your life is not secure in Pakistan, people live under constant terror. I am very afraid something might happen to my mother. She is 72 already but one of my cousins takes care of her", he adds. He would very much like to have his mother close to him in Germany but "it's not possible" to bring her here, he explains. The only time he visited Pakistan after leaving, was three years ago, and he also saw his mother, which eased his spirits a little bit. But this is something he cannot do that often: "The plane ticket is very expensive, you see, around 700 Euro", a price far too high for someone like him, who lives off social welfare, to be able to afford.

Ahmad had never before set foot outside Pakistan before he started his journey to Germany. When he got there the cultural shock was huge: "I came here all alone. One of the most difficult things for me was to learn the language. I attended some language courses but I never could grasp the grammar", he tells me. In Pakistan, he had always been working after having dropped out of his bachelor studies for financial reasons: "The educational system in Pakistan is like you study ten grades, after that you go to college for two years, and then you can study a bachelor's and master's and so on. But you have to pay for everything yourself. I dropped out of university but I completed my college studies". Ahmad used to be a magistrate or an accountant for twelve years; he worked a lot with numbers, that much is certain: "But it was a dangerous job", always under pressure to do favors for some people's dirty business. He fought as much as he could against this corrupt system, but as the situation became too perilous, he had to leave.

"After three or four years I was granted the right to work in Germany and so I did. Through several temp agencies I managed to get a few jobs, mainly in the production department or in warehouses doing hard work", he tells me. Even before the crisis hit Germany, work was getting scarce in Bochum: "I haven't been working for around three years now. And especially at the moment, it isn't a good time", he adds.

His last job was what in Germany we call a 1-Euro-job, where people in need of a job gather at a particular bureau at 6 o'clock each morning where they sometimes receive assignments for the day, getting paid about 1.30 Euros per hour. "I was mostly separating the parts from electronics. For example, if you destroy a TV set and you take it apart, you have to put the glass in one container, the plastic in another one, and so on", Ahmad explains. Sometimes people make a good impression on the supervisor of the company where they are being sent to, and they get the chance to come again next day. During the economic crisis "I just got fired without reason", recalls Ahmad.

He values work and appreciates its advantages. That he is not able to find work may also be explained by reasons other than the economic crisis: "When I go to the Bureau and stand in line for a job, I get the same question always when it's my turn: "How old are you?", "51", I reply, and they say "I'm sorry but we can only take young people, capable of hard labor. But even if the work I had to do was hard, I would still do it, but they never pick me. Life has ended once you've turned 50, just like in Pakistan", he deplores.

Ahmad glances quickly at his watch again. He is keeping track of the time as he still plans to make the evening prayer, after our meeting. He explains he has a habit of visiting several mosques; he does not pray at just one. Praying seems to be his sole motivation to visit the mosque. As I met him in the Turkish mosque he would sit alone in his chair, although everybody was talking to everybody during the Ramadan celebration. So I dared to inquire about the reason he tends to switch his praying place. "Is this also so you can meet new people?"

"No, not really. In the mosque you pray. You sometimes have some five or ten minutes before the prayer starts, if you come in early, but that doesn't mean that much if you want to make new acquaintances. You can't really discuss serious matters in ten minutes. But I guess you could also call this some sort of a friendship".

Ahmad has a very quiet manner and an extremely low voice; one has to really focus to be able to make something out of what he is saying: "I'm more of a loner, you could say. I don't have that many friends, probably four or five whom I meet with on a regular basis. Sometimes we like to sit here, where we are drinking our coffee right now, because it's cozy and it's not expensive", he reveals about himself.

"And why do you think that it is like that?", I venture to ask.

"Maybe because I am very religious. When I start talking to people they label me as a boring company right away. One friend of mine once told me I go to pray too often and he just left me. He just went away".

Lack of company could also explain Ahmad's poor German, he admits it himself. But he cannot help it if, as he puts it, "people just don't want to start a friendship with me". I ask if he has ever been in love and he lowers his eyes again and says "This is personal...I can't...I...no, I haven't. They probably think I play nice at the beginning, just to fool them, and that after that I will force them to wear a hijab and things like that", he says and gives a signal that I interpret it is meaningless to go on with the subject.



↑ At the Ruhr University in Bochum with Yahya



↑ Haissam playing football

Even if he does not have a job, Ahmad likes to keep busy. He always needs something to do. If he gets bored he starts reading: "This is really what I do all day long, I go here and there, meet my friends if they have the time, go to the mosque and read newspapers", he says. This circle of almost mechanical movements and habits repeats itself everyday with the same precision, but this does not bother Ahmad: "I don't have any wishes, any dreams; not anymore (...) I am happy if I can help people; for example, if a neighbor needs something repaired I do it gladly. This is my only wish".

This is one of the things that is most striking about Ahmad: this acceptance of his fate (which any good Muslim must do, so I have been told repeatedly), this apparent peace of mind that he would not change a thing in the past: "I don't think about Pakistan, it is not important for me. I don't feel that Lahore is home. I feel at home in Germany and I don't think about Pakistan; I only think about my mother. Really".

I cannot avoid asking this question: "How long are you planning to live like this? Do you have any plans? What of the future?", I ask.

"The future is lost anyways. There is no future for me or any other people like me. The future lies in the hand of the young generation. We, people over 50, cannot grab hold of the future anymore. Nobody can do anything for us anymore", he says, lowering his eyes once again, like he usually does when we have reached a sensitive spot.

*

Some of the people I have talked to do not look back with happiness. Rather, people like Ahmad, keep the past locked up in a remote corner of their minds. At the opposite pole are migrants like Hazar and Ousmane, who instantly start to smile when they talk about their "other" life and are slightly nostalgic. Then there are people like Soumia and Tolga, who only inherited their migration background. Regardless of the reasons that drove them to emigrate or of the events that triggered their birth in

Germany, all the people I met would make the same decision again if they had to and have no regrets whatsoever.

There seems to be a feeling of solidarity which holds the people within the Muslim communities in Bochum together. The religious factor makes this bond even stronger and has a comforting effect on the people I talked to. The mosque plays a crucial part for most of them. It is not only considered the House of God and a place of balance and of purity, but it also has a very important social role. It represents the perfect opportunity for interaction, social and cultural exchange. The mosque is also a place of study. Children and teenagers are helped during the integration stage of the migration process and beyond. It provides council, refuge and a shoulder to lean on.

Economically speaking, the migrants I encountered (with minor exceptions) were not negatively affected by the crisis in 2008. If anything, they managed to uphold their financial situation, they did not suffer any losses. Some of them did not understand what I meant by crisis, or claimed they were not personally affected. People that noticed a negative impact seem to link their losing their jobs not to the crisis directly, but to prejudice against migrants. Whether this prejudice is based on race, ethnicity or gender, quite a few of the people I talked to have felt discriminated against at some point in their lives. Most of them encountered prejudice at their work place, in school or in everyday life. Although they are aware this is something they might have to deal with occasionally, some are able to take this quite lightly. This was most evident in Soumia's case, as she tends to blame her current situation (having all her job applications turned down) on the fact that she is a married woman, not on the fact that she has a migration background.

When mentioning their status as migrants during the conversations we had, many of the people, especially those who have been in Bochum or in Germany longer, were quite unsatisfied with their depiction as "migrants". They consider Germany to be their home now and while many of them spend their vacations in their lands of origin, they would never go back for good.

City of Shadows

| Text: Daiva Terescenko | Photo: Cyril Horiszny |

Many of Warsaw's Ukrainian labor workers work illegally, for if they were to work legally they would pay taxes from very low wages, thereby undermining their reasons for coming – to support their families. However, working illegally makes them vulnerable to exploitation, and prevents them from integrating and finding jobs that match their qualifications. Nonetheless, most of the Ukrainian migrant workers only consider Poland for money-making, money which is spent back in Ukraine.

Finally, a sign: "Warszawa: 30 km." Olha*, the woman sitting next to me, changes the SIM card in her cell phone to call her employer, who promised to pick her up at the bus station and take her to her work and residence: "Our bus is late as it took longer for the check at custom. If traffic is Ok than we should be there in less than an hour." Just like most of my fellow travellers, Olha makes the trip from Lviv to Warsaw in order to get to her job. For her and some of the other travellers, leaving Lviv in the evening and arriving in Warsaw in the morning already seems like a normal routine. However, for Halyna, the young girl from a small town in Galicia, it is her first trip. She is grateful to get any information. Maria, who lives in Poland already for about eight years, tells her about her very first labour trip to Warsaw: "I had no idea what to expect, knew nothing about the city. At the station I was met by my employer and they showed me the place where I would work and live."

Tourists prepare themselves with guidebooks, reserve their hotel accommodation in advance, and use the services of tourist information booths, guides and maps to discover the city. In contrast to them, Ukrainian labour migrants rarely have clear ideas about what to expect when departing for Warsaw for the first time. How do they adapt to the life in the city? Are there places they like or places they dislike? Is the city for them a place to live or nothing more than a place to make money? Finding the answers to such questions was the purpose of two field research stays in Warsaw, during which I focused on Ukrainian labour migrants' perception of the city. Aside from following migrants' routes from Western Ukraine to the European Union, during this research it was important to analyse their motivation for migration, their travel organisation, and to explore their urban life in the place of destination.

The most important source of information were the

migrants themselves, as I wanted to uncover their stories about their experiences and challenges in the city. During my two periods of fieldwork I interviewed sixteen Ukrainian migrants. However, it is important to note that not all migrants want to talk about these issues. During the bus trip I met labour migrants who openly talked with me at the dinner table during the bus stop. They shared their contact information and promised to meet; however, they changed their mind later saying that "my experience does not matter" and "an interview will not change anything". Also one woman refused to meet, but she told her story over the telephone, generalising that "All our stories are the same, we work hard, and nobody cares about us". The information from the migrants was complemented with interviews with representatives of organisations that support migrants.

Getting the papers, crossing the border

The bus trip from Lviv to Warsaw costs 234.86 UAH (about 22 EUR) and takes about eleven hours (although it took me even longer than scheduled –almost thirteen hours– because of longer controls at customs at the EU border). However, Ukrainians interested in going to Warsaw must plan much in advance and invest additional resources to organize the necessary papers before starting their trip at Lviv's bus station. Experienced migrants like Olha, who began to work in Warsaw even before Poland had joined the European Union, remember the various policies and regulations that were introduced to control the stream of migrants between the two neighbouring countries. In reaction to requirements by the EU, Poland introduced a visa requirement for citizens of the Ukraine in late 2003. The procedures for crossing the border were further complicated at Poland's accession to the Schengen system in 2007. Since then,



↑ Ivanka spends a lot of time commuting to work

a Polish tourist visa is valid for free movement within the entire Schengen zone. However, this advantage is outbalanced by the fact that visa procedures became more complicated. In addition to this, Ukrainians are required to have not just a visa but also a work permit in order to work legally. The application for this permit has to be filed by the interested employer on behalf of the foreigner. However, in reality, many migrants circumvent these regulations by travelling to Poland on a tourist visa and working without the proper papers.

While the visa regime is perceived as an expensive annoyance, Ukrainian labour migrants know that if you want to come to Poland you can come anyway. Volodymyr, one irregular migrant working in Warsaw, notes: "You can buy an invitation. It costs you 2000-3000 UAH (190-280 EUR) to get into Poland. But it is not certain that you will get a job". He adds: "Neither Poland, nor Ukrainian migrants gain from this system, only the agents, who take the money for the preparation of the documents". Those who have legal arrangements for work and commute to Warsaw also frequently wonder in whose interest such complicated procedures, which are always hard to follow, really are. Lyudmyla, a middle-aged Ukrainian woman complains: "Each time you have to pay for a visa, worry if you will have the visa, and worry what will happen at customs".

At the same time, according to the migrants interviewed, existing regulations do not help them feel secure about their work and their pay. Sasha, who was working at a construction company, gets angry remembering his first journey to Poland

when a recruiting agency, which was organising his journey from Ukraine to Warsaw, initially promised to meet him in Lviv, later in Warsaw, but in the end nobody showed up to help him upon his arrival.

Arriving in the city

Our bus arrives at its final destination called the "Stadium" station next to the former site of "Jarmark Europa". Begun in the early 1990s in and around Warsaw's "10th-Anniversary Stadium", the now-closed Jarmark Europa was, for almost two decades, Europe's largest open market, employing thousands of peddlers from Eastern Europe and Vietnam. Now, the surroundings are rather dark, dirty and feel unsafe. That is why some migrants prefer to leave the bus one stop earlier at Warsaw's main bus station. One feels some relief that the trip is over. However, for the migrants arriving at "Stadium" this is just another beginning. Some of them are met by their employers directly at the platform, while others just begin their journey into the city and try to reach their destinations on their own.

Without very much knowledge of the city and their rights as migrants, newly arrived migrants tend to be in a position of dependence with their work providers. For this reason, the behaviour of the employers at the beginning of the labour relationship is a very important aspect that influences migrants' social and psychological status, their perception of the city and society, and their future integration level in the country in gen-

eral. Obviously, such a dependency invites misuse. However, as demonstrated by the story of Svitlana, a professional nurse, there are also employer-worker relations that are harmonious and not at all characterized by exploitation: "I remember that day like today –Thursday, October 11th, 2001– when I came to Warsaw by invitation. From the beginning I was treated like a family member. I will never forget these words: 'My house-your home. Your children-our children.' And so it was for three years".

Social networks are very important, if not crucial, for labour migrants in the city. Migrants share their problems in finding a place to live, work and important information about their status in Poland with friends and acquaintances: One of the interviewees recalled: "(...) And when we had this Mrs. Emma, who helped us a lot, we knew where we were going, to whom and what work we would do." Another young woman, Ivanka from the Ukraine, who has a university education and lives in Warsaw, stressed the importance of social networks: "My friends knew that I was searching for work and that somebody at Warsaw University was looking to fill a position so I applied and sent in my CV. Before that I had sent out my CVs, but I did not get many replies. So my network of friends helped me. The apartments I rented I also found through my contacts and colleagues".

Another crucial element in Warsaw's immigrant topography is NGOs, which play an important role as mediator of social networks for labour migrants. Obviously, they are most important to those migrants who lack other social contacts in the city. One particular interesting institution is the "Welcome Centre" (Centrum Powitania w Warszawie), which offers help to migrants who seek advice or have problems with housing, workers' rights abuses or legal documents. Opened in 2009 by two women that had come as migrants, the "Welcome Centre" serves as a migrants' guide to the city. Their website explains their mission and states: "As is the case for many immigrants coming to Poland, both these women confronted various difficulties upon their arrival to Warsaw. With their experiences of immigration close to heart, they decided to create a place where immigrants arriving to Poland could find a helping hand. Until now, in Europe's most central capital, a place such as the 'Welcome Centre' did not exist; a place where immigrants could benefit from support in the most basic but simultaneously complicated issues".

Exploring the city

Although labour migrants may stay in the city for a long period, the city can still remain very much obscure to them. The most important determinant for the relationship between migrant and the city is the character of the migrant's work. One of the migrant women with whom I was travelling to Warsaw said that she planned to work in the garment industry and she explained that all women working there live and work in the same building. The only day she has off she uses to sleep or to go shopping. For domestic workers who provide 24-hour care services, the chances of going out in the city are even slimmer. Domestic work and the garment industry is the domain of women; however, men working for construction companies face similar situations. Their housing is often close to the construction site but far away from the city, where they go only to shop, if at all.

Labour migrants who have lived longer in the city and have brought along their children and family members, have a different perspective of the urban spaces. The second generation

becomes their guide and interpreter of the Polish language and also presents a new discourse of the city.

We met with Lyuba on Saturday after she took her nieces from Ukrainian school and we followed them to their apartment. During our short trip by tram the children happily pointed to the buildings of the old town and told us about the history of the city. Lyuba explained to us that when they went out to the city, the children used to show them around and tell the stories they learned in school.

The second generation of immigrants has other perspectives on the city and the urban places. During the time when their busy parents and relatives work, the second generation children and youth easily use the local language and explore the city. Furthermore, they synthesise both the style of local life of the city and their parents' migration experience creating a hybrid experience of their own. Whilst the experiences of the second generation of immigrants need further exploration, my findings suggest new perspectives for immigrants' integration forms in the city.

Visible places

The Palace of Culture, the old town square, the Castle – these are central points on every tourist's visit to the Polish capital. However, the Warsaw of the Ukrainian labour migrant is a quite different city. Dominant points on such a map would not be the famous landmarks or many of the institutions frequented by Warsaw's domestic population, such as theatres or the university. Instead, we would find the bus and train stations, housing places, centres for the issuing of residence and work permits, markets, supermarkets and the Ukrainian church. Following the migrants on their routes linking these places, a different and little-known geography of Warsaw emerges.

However, there is not just one "migrant city" as various migrants stress the importance of different places. Migrants who are employed as domestic workers live and work in the same place. They often travel to the Ukraine fairly frequently and so their social network in Warsaw is small. As a consequence of this, the "city map" of the domestic workers is probably the one with the largest blank spots. Even though these migrants work in the city, they are almost invisible and for them the city remains unseen and undiscovered. The result is self-perpetuating. Migrants need more opportunities to learn the language and gain new social contacts to have better jobs available to them and their current form of life offers very limited chances towards a path of integration.

In other professions, the opportunities of migrants to explore the city are less restricted. Nevertheless, most of my informants seem unable or uninterested in enjoying themselves in the foreign city. They do not have the time to go out to the city and do not want to have additional expenses for travel and other amenities: "People arriving here come to earn money not to live; they send money home and support their children". Even the cultural and social services and programs that are offered free of charge are not in high demand, as few migrants can allow themselves to attend because of their limited time.

The situation seems to change only in the case of those who brought their families, who have come with children and who stay longer. Ivanka, who has been living in Warsaw with her husband for 4 years, told me that she and her husband only discovered Warsaw when they bought bikes and started cycling. Svitlana, whose son followed her to Warsaw and works during



← Liuba in her apartment



→ Sasha lives and works in the suburbs of the city

↓ Sasha and other Ukrainian construction workers at their hostel

↘ At the Ukrainian church, Liuba inspects the ads on the bulletin board



the summer holiday to earn money for his studies, showed me pictures of her son cycling in the parks and places of interest of Warsaw.

My research paints a picture of a rather fragmented community, whose members differ in regard to factors such as profession, duration of stay in Warsaw and, most importantly, whether or not they have brought along family and children. For the majority of Ukrainian migrants, ties to the homeland are probably stronger than ties to their new environment. Nevertheless, we asked: are there places for communication and coming together, creating a community of Ukrainian labour migrants?

Probably the most important place is the Ukrainian church. Here, a large number of labour migrants meet every Sunday: "In the church you can obviously see people coming and going. Earlier there were some empty places to sit. At 9 o'clock Mass just a few people came. Now there are three services at 9, 11, and at 3 o'clock and there is still no room to stand".

Within Warsaw's migrant geography, the Ukrainian church has a much broader function than just as a religious centre. The church is the place where migrants are visible. As a result of increased labour migration, the religious centre began serving broader migrant community needs such as being an informal place for meetings and communication, the sharing of experiences, or providing information about regulations affecting the migrants' legal status.

Migrant Housing

Housing experiences of labour migrants are important for tracing urban practices and strategies. During the research it was important to record personal stories about the migrants' living places in the host countries to trace how migrants find housing and what kind of place they choose before and during the economic crisis. How does the income from their work in Warsaw affect their household conditions back in their home country?

The choices for work are connected with housing possibilities. Working the hardest for the lowest pay, migrants seek to find places where they can both work and live at the same time. This is especially important for temporary migrants and for those who come for the first time. The gender aspect in the housing is also very important; women choosing to work in nursing, babysitting and housekeeping have the possibility of living with the family, while men who work in the construction industry have the possibility of living either in the same large building as other migrants or in organized small houses.

Economical downturn had particular influence on the housing market world wide. However, despite this, some labour migrants had more positive experiences. Because of media attention to the housing market, prices of housing decreased and Lyudmila, who has worked in Poland for a long time and had always had problems finding affordable housing, was able to get the credit to buy an apartment, where she could live with her children: "In 2007, I got permanent residency. Then I didn't need to pay for the permit for work or visa. I understood that I have more possibilities. But my children had to wait one and a half years and I had to prepare something for my children, to find some place to live. I started to think about an apartment when the crisis started. There was a lot of information about the possibilities of getting some credit. In 2008, I started to look for an apartment and thinking about the credit. I found the cheapest

one I could. I bought it in 2009 and have been living there since then. It's relief for me now. Housing is the biggest problem for a migrant".

Another strategy of making use of the crisis is demonstrated by Svitlana, a Ukrainian woman who began to work in Warsaw in order to support her children, who are still in Lviv. After the economic downturn brought a collapse of the Ukrainian real estate market, Svitlana was able to buy an apartment back in the Ukraine.

Flexible, but illegal

Public opinion suggests that immigrants take low skilled jobs from the locals and increase unemployment. However, academic research and economic theory shows that the actual impact of immigration on the employment prospects of domestic workers of low qualification is less significant than many people believe.

In the case of Ukrainians in Poland, it would be misleading to speak of direct competition for jobs. The reason for this is the very low wage level. While unemployed Polish workers would not refuse to do low skilled works per se, the salaries are often too low to support families in Poland. Accordingly, Polish go abroad to do such work and earn better money. However, why are such badly paid jobs still attractive to Ukrainians? To answer this question it is important to consider three facts, which explain which migration strategies make sense for Ukrainians economically.

The first of these facts is the limited movement of Ukrainians. Due to visa regimes and the protection of European labour markets from citizens of so-called third-world countries, unlike their Polish counterparts, Ukrainians cannot simply react to economic incentives by moving to Britain or Ireland. There are obviously popular alternatives to Poland such as Spain, Portugal or Italy, where wages are higher. Yet even in the times of Schengen, the path to each of these countries has its specific challenges. Thanks to its geographical proximity and the similarity of the Polish and Ukrainian languages, Poland seems especially attractive to those who want to go for a shorter amount of time (or alternatively, to leave for a significant amount of time while also remaining in steady contact with their home country).

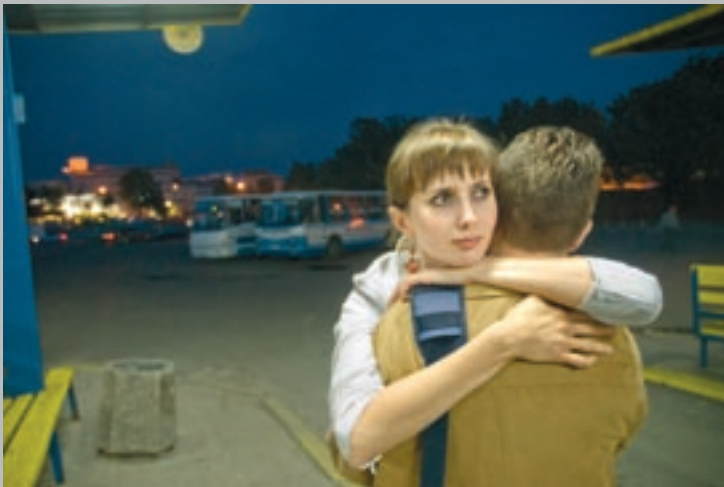
The second, somewhat absurd fact is that Ukrainians are able to offer their work at a lower price due to their illegal status. Larysa, who has been living in Warsaw for more than 8 years, explains: "With a very small salary like 600 PLN (150 EUR) it is very hard to live here. I work illegally, as it would be difficult for me otherwise. Why is it difficult? A lot of people work for minimum wage. Nobody wants to pay taxes for this. Workers get a wage of 1200 PLN (about 300 EUR) – this is the minimum – yet they still need to pay 40% of this in taxes. They have an agreement for rent and in this also pay taxes. People simply do not want to do this. The worst is a part-time position. In that case, it is not worth to work at all, as you are not able to support anyone then."

The third fact is the differences in living costs in Poland and in the Ukraine. Ukrainian migrants make use of this difference when commuting back and forth between their homes and their places of employment.

Labour migrants certainly act rational when adapting their life and migration strategies to the above-mentioned factors. However, the result is a situation that in many cases precludes



→ Ivanka at the job centre



→ At the Warsaw bus station



→ Sasha at the Ukrainian church

better integration. Crucial in this respect is their legal status. It is known that the lack of migrants' civic engagement is explained by their semi-legal status in the host country – the need to stay 'invisible'. And working illegally has its advantages and disadvantages.

Somewhat paradoxically, the irregular status improves the migrants' economical situation and social mobility. As Valeriya, who has been working in Warsaw legally for many years, notes: "The illegal workers who work in Poland, they are more flexible, earn better money, but they have their problems. We have documents, but we get the minimum here. It is not enough for us; we have to work more in order to survive". On the other hand, the irregular status does not allow the migrants to approach the labour market strategically, which is a disadvantage especially for those who live for a longer period of time in the city. Accordingly, some of the interviewed migrants, who had already gained some experience and confidence, spoke of the need to be visible and therefore become legal. Volodymyr, who started his own company in construction services but has no legal papers, is an example of this issue of legality. In view of this serious barrier to his company's future development, he thinks about legalisation and hopes for amnesty for illegal migrants. Larisa, after years of providing house and babysitting services and now wants to open her own company, is in a similar situation: "I would like to start my own company. My idea is to offer "family

celebration" cooking services. Maybe there will be a time when amnesty for illegal Ukrainian workers will be granted. In other countries migrants have it better; they can legalize, start companies, and fulfil themselves based on their skills."

The question of the legal status is important not only from the perspective of the individual migrants, but also from the perspective of the receiving society. The empowerment of migrants makes it easier for them to find work according to their qualifications, easing integration and enhancing their contribution to the local economy. Connected to this issue is the issue of skill recognition. Unfortunately, as demonstrated by Lyuba, who is 40 years old and highly educated, migrants experience problems with skill recognition not only while in Poland but also after returning back to the Ukraine: "I love my work and I want to work in the Ukraine. However, our government has not changed anything during 5 years. During my first year back in the Ukraine I could not find any work. I was asked 'where did you work for 4 years?' I told them that I was working abroad. They said that if I was working abroad, I am not professional anymore. Maybe some bribes were expected. It is difficult for me to hear in my home country that I am not a specialist anymore and that I lost my competencies. Now I am working abroad based on my qualifications. Our company works with the Ukraine."

*Some of the migrants' names and personnel datas were changed

“Let’s show the world how we live and work!” The Struggles of Bulgarian Day-labourers in Munich

| Text: Lisa Riedner | Photo: Trixi Eder |

Many members of Bulgaria’s large Turkish minority took Bulgaria’s accession to the EU in 2007 as a chance to flee discrimination and economic despair. Pembe*, Natka, Hristo and Yasar went to Munich with big hopes. However, the right to move freely in the EU does not automatically entail the possibility of legal employment, as Germany has blocked Bulgarian citizens’ access to its labour markets until 2014. These migrants being in a catch-22 of illegal and abusive work and homelessness struggle with the help of several NGOs for their better future.

One Friday morning in Munich in April 2010, members of the *Initiative für Zivilcourage* and I set up an information desk to brief migrant workers about their rights. The Initiative is an independent, non-state organisation. Those engaged are individuals of various ages and backgrounds, brought together by one naive interest: *to take action to shape life, making it self-determined, worth-living as well as free of exclusion and exploitation for everyone*. I am able to dedicate most of my time to the Initiative, as it is central to my Ph.D.-project in Social Anthropology.

We had located the info desk at a street corner. In the early morning, there were already people hanging around, seemingly waiting for something and I was wondering who they were and what they were waiting for. After our arrival, they had left the side of the street where we were installing our stand and preferred to lean on the walls on the other side of the street instead. Mostly men of various ages, they seemed to avoid any interaction with us. I am not sure how the first contact happened - members of the Initiative might have distributed a flyer to them. My first communication was indirect. A policeman arrived and asked some men standing next to me for their passports, but not me. I asked him why he seemingly asked only darker skinned individuals for their ID. So he asked for mine, too. Waiting as the police checked the IDs, we exchanged some glances and words, “Bulgaria?” - “Bulgaria.” “Deutschland?” - “München, ja”.

In the following hours, they discovered that some of us spoke Turkish, that we wanted to take action against exploitation, and that we were interested in their stories. It turned out they were day-labourers, waiting for employers, mainly from the construction and cleaning sector, and that they were waiting on that street corner every day. They came from Bulgaria, but spoke Turkish as they belong to the country’s large Turkish minority. Their stories gave the impression of a daily life full of struggles.

Accommodation, medical services, work and payment were not easily available to them. Spontaneously, we decided to learn more about their situation.

A place for a meeting was found soon. The theatre “Kammerspiele” had launched their neighbourhood project “Munich Central” in a former supermarket just a few days previously. That same afternoon we met there. In a lively conversation, the question was raised if we should try to raise public awareness for the group’s presence and their issues. Would public attention lead to more repression – or even to their expulsion? Or would it help in giving them a voice to promote their needs and demands, eventually leading to a better life? This dilemma got practical soon: The idea to take part at the traditional Mayday demonstration was proposed. Surprisingly to me, the decision to participate was reached quickly. “Let’s show the world how we live and work!” shouted Hristo, one of the first individuals we had talked to.

I did not know then, that I was going to get to know some of the day-labourers, including Hristo, much better in the following weeks and months. Hristo has a wife and two sons in Bulgaria. Presently, he is not able to send money back home to them and he would go back, if it were not for his court case, which is still running in Munich. He and his nephew, Selahattin, had found a job at a warehouse, when, on their third working day, their employer accidentally mishandled a pallet transporter and Selahattin lost his right forefinger. The employer took him to hospital, however, reported the incident incorrectly, claiming that it had been a private accident while changing tires. Then he sacked them without payment for the three days work. They decided to go to court. According to their lawyer, it will not be easy as they only had an oral contract for the work.

Hristo’s story was additional confirmation that supporting the day-labourer’s presence at the demonstration was the right



→ At the May Day demonstration 2010 in Munich, Natka*, Pembe and their colleagues claimed "We are no worse human beings"

Left out And Exploited

We want respect and more rights – not only on paper!

Since 2007, Bulgaria has been part of the EU. Many of us (more than 300) have come to Munich to work, often with our families and children. Now we are living in terrible conditions – often without housing, food, water, and medical services. However, in Bulgaria we see even less of a future for us.

We are treated like second-class individuals. Everyday, we are confronted with discrimination and resentment!

We do not understand why Bulgaria is an EU-country but we are not treated as free EU-citizens. Police officers control us regularly, often five times a day, although they know us already and that our papers are OK. As EU-citizens we are holding an unlimited residence permit. Our problem is that most of us do not have a work permit!

Theoretically, getting working papers is practically impossible – it is always very difficult. Often, we don't even know our rights and the procedures of claiming them.

We are allowed to work as self-employed. But often, it is too difficult to correctly fill out the required forms. There is no possibility for us to get information about the requirements. The low wages agreed on are often not paid; work accidents are not insured. The status of self-employed is often used to by-pass costs required for employed workers such as social insurance. Good

employers who want to employ us are afraid to do so because we do not have work papers.

But we have to work to earn our and our families' living. So we are forced to accept badly paid and insecure jobs.

Our financial situation is precarious!

Many of us stay with good-willed people from our home or on streets. We cannot find affordable places to stay. In private dormitories they often just don't accept us, also because we are Turkish Bulgarians.

A lot of men and women are standing on the pavement in the neighbourhood south of the railway station and waiting for jobs. Shop owners chase us away, many are hostile towards us. But where shall we go?

We demand:

- Opportunities for further education about our rights, bureaucratic procedures and German classes
 - Unlimited work permits within the EU, easy and fast procedures!
 - In cases of housing and work shortage: access to social services and help with the search for housing
 - We need medical treatment for our invalids, elders and children
 - Respect of fellow citizens and an end to daily police controls
 - A room and meeting place, away from the streets!
-

thing to do. To prepare, we met again at the same theatre a couple of days later. Banners needed to be made, slogans to be discussed, a flyer to be written. About 20 day-labourers joined in. Together, we sat down to gather and discuss the most important facts and demands to tell the public. Members of the Initiative facilitated that discussion and created the flyer, as the day-labourers did not have the experience, education and facilities for such discussion. However, the phrasing in the resulting flyer is very close to their own words and expressions (page 51).

We distributed these flyers at the Mayday demonstration one week later.

May Day Demonstration and Beyond

When we arrived, some hundred people had already gathered in front of the union-building. Various speeches were held targeting the current social cutbacks. The flags of the major German unions were blowing in the wind. One word was omnipresent: The crisis! In relatively prosperous Munich, however, crisis seemed to be something mostly connected with far away places: Greece, the US, Spain...

Yet with the day-labourers a group of people took part in the demonstration whose situation was critical indeed. About 80 men and two women - none of them had been represented here in the last years, together with 15 members of the Initiative, joined in with several banners showing their demands, two drums and the banner above. We were certainly the loudest and - as I do believe - the most sincere group in this annual march for better labour conditions and social justice. Shouting the slogans "We want to work!", "Long live international solidarity" and "We want respect and rights!" we certainly out-cried the mayor of Munich who held a speech at the final rally.

After this first, quite successful and inspiring collaborative action of the day-labourers and the members of the Initiative, more and more activities evolved in the course of the next months. A regular German course was arranged; once a week, student volunteers now teach basic vocabulary according to the day-labourers' demands. Moreover, members of the Initiative accompanied claimants to municipal offices, hospitals, etc. "When the claimants went alone, they were refused right away in most of the cases, when someone accompanied them, they mostly were successful", explained a member of the Initiative. They also met for discussions on topics like housing, discrimination, bureaucracy and went to sit in for their demands at municipal political debates.

Furthermore, collaboration with the union ver.di's new office for (un)documented migrant workers evolved and Hristo and his nephew became the first Bulgarian day-labourer members of ver.di, which is now providing their lawyer. Currently, about 250 Bulgarian citizens of Munich have joined - most of them had taken part in the Mayday demonstration. One of the originators of the new office expressed her opinion on the reasons for exploitation: The transitional arrangement for new EU-countries, which restricts the new EU-citizens' right to work in the EU, aims to combat wage dumping - "but in fact, it achieves the opposite and creates an informal market. About ninety per cent have their wages withheld!" Moreover, lawmakers have laid thorns on the path to a secure employment relationship: Once you have found a job as new EU-citizen in Germany, you and your employer have to fill out complicated forms that are only available in German, hand them in at the employment office and

wait four weeks during which the employment office checks if there are any Germans or EU citizens of the old member states willing to do the job. Alternatively, you can be self-employed - but this is full of snares

The Collaborative Workshops of Photographic Documentation

Following up on the preparation of the Mayday demonstration, my partner Trixi, photographer and psychologist, and I decided that we wanted to develop our interaction with the day-labourers further with our contribution to the FLEXI-IN-SECURITY project. At the demonstration, we had asked Hristo, and three of the most motivated participants - Natka, Pembe and Yasar - if they would like to meet again with us to develop a photographic representation of their issues in a few workshops. Not really knowing what we wanted, as they explained later, the four preliminarily agreed and gave us their cellphone numbers.

We began the project soon after. We met the four in the old supermarket, but moved into a café soon, as it was too busy there. First, the atmosphere was a bit tense, as nobody really knew what would happen or how things would develop. But the ice soon broke and lively discussions about their situation, experiences, aims and ways to show them to a public audience developed. We decided to combine techniques of coaching with participatory photography. Thus, we hoped to be able to support the participants in their struggle to live a life worth living, to learn about the most relevant and pressing issues and to express their aims and messages publicly.

Usually coaching is used as a technique for business people to optimize processes of problem-solving. Obviously, homelessness, discrimination, unemployment and poverty differ from the issues business people are concerned with. It was a challenge to deal with the severity of the problems in this case and with the language barrier. We communicated with the help of a friendly German-Turkish interpreter. The goals of the four were defined very easily: a home, a job, health insurance, living together with their families, living independently, and an end to discrimination. The difficult part was to develop individual strategies for reaching their goals. How can you reach a goal when the steps that lead there are blocked by social deprivation, bureaucracy and discrimination? This asks for strong creativity, confidence and endurance. All of them have been struggling for a living for their whole life - working in factories, travelling far to find jobs, learning how to survive on the streets. How could our collaboration develop further potentialities without falling into paternalism or platitudes?

It turned out that in addition to our conversations about the upcoming issues and collective visits of municipal offices, we were able to make only rather symbolic action that nonetheless showed some results. First, we formulated sentences that would describe the individual's most important messages or aims. Then, we made speech bubbles out of cardboard, black paint and sticks so we could go out on the street to take expressive pictures. This developed into a public performance drawing the attention of many people passing by and local residents.

The four and their messages

"I wanna live an independent life!" ...

...answered Natka to my question concerning what her goals had

→ Pembe at the employment office

→→ Day labourers at the MayDay demonstration



↑ Pembe and Savas at Workshop



↑ Selahattin demonstrates

been when she had moved to Munich. Her home town Pazardjik had nothing to offer her any more, especially after the crisis. In autumn 2009, she and her best friend Pembe decided to follow some of their friends and took the 24-hour bus to Munich. Migration was easier now, as Bulgaria had joined the EU in 2007. "That was a big adventure! We two women sat in the bus and we were so excited!"

Natka's determination and joy about the step of leaving Pazardjik to look for a better life was relieving to hear, as it followed on her account of the hardships of her every day life in Munich. She did not have a place to stay, she was homeless. Her hunt for jobs was mostly unsuccessful. Without a private place to rest or any change to at least buy a coffee and sit down in an establishment, she lived on the streets. When she was not invited to stay at friends' places, she was forced to find someplace to sleep on the street or at the railway station.

Like many of her friends, she spent most of her time in the

neighbourhood close to Munich Central Station. Here, they leaned against walls, chatted and waited for employers to pick them up for a few hours, a day's or a couple of days' work

"I want to work! Why can't I get papers?" ...

...was the slogan Pembe chose for herself. Especially after her accident two months ago, she does not feel able to struggle any more without social safety and health insurance. She had been hit by a car, brought to a hospital and received first aid and a basic examination. But then, she was asked to pay. As she was not able to do so, she was sent away. She still has difficulties breathing and pains in her shoulder, however, the medical services for homeless and undocumented people refused to do more than a superficial examination. For her, employment would mean health insurance. It would mean a room with a comfortable bed to sleep in and the chance to get away from life on the streets. She had already thought herself close; just a few

days before we met, she had met the owner of a small cleaning company who would have employed her if she could start immediately. But she could not; due to the mentioned bureaucratic restrictions, she would have to wait at least four weeks for her work permit – and even then might not have gotten it at all.

However, when I asked her if she was frightened living in Munich under the present conditions, she answered: "Frightened? No, I have never been frightened in Munich! So many friends are here and we support each other." She spends her days with her neighbours from Pazarjik. She is almost inseparable from Natka. They have been friends since their childhood. Along with other names of their beloved ones, they have tattooed each other's names on their arms. Together, they are standing up for their rights. "We were the only women in our group at the demonstration!" she reminded me proudly.

"We live here, they live over there. Their roads are paved, ours are dusty..."

...Yasar told me his message standing on the invisible border between a Bulgarian and a Turkish-Bulgarian neighbourhood in Pazarjik. The chance to take a trip to Bulgaria had come up for me when Yasar had invited me to his home town before he left Munich. Life on the streets had made him ill and his current employer had withheld his wages. I took the invitation and stayed at their house in Pazarjik for a few days. It was an opportunity to learn more about this town, from where Hristo, Natka and Pembe also come, and about the situation of the Turkish minority in Bulgaria.

Pazarjik is a town of 75,000 inhabitants. In the province of Pazarjik, about 6.6 per cent of the population belong to the Turkish minority. After the Roma, Turks appear in statistics as the second biggest national minority. Their marginalization has historical roots. In the Communist era they were subjected to a policy of assimilation. In June 1984, the Zhivkov government adopted a policy that aimed to re-name all Turkish with Slavic names, to ban the wearing of distinctive Turkish clothing, to forbid the use of the Turkish language and to close down mosques. Yasar's official name had been changed to Angel. However, his accounts of communist times were not all bad. "Zhivkov at least built housing for us!" he said, pointing at a concrete skeleton between shabby apartment blocks in a dusty neighbourhood on the outskirts of Pazarjik. "In 1989, they stopped constructions and left this site to rot".

His home is in a settlement of self-built houses right next to the apartment block. He shares the house with his wife, his three sons and their wives. Each couple has a room. Although only the youngest son has a child, it is very cramped already. There is no kitchen, no bathroom – but the four rooms are little jewels, decorated with fine wallpaper, paraphernalia and well-sized TVs. Yasar has paved the stairs to the rooms on the first floor with marble (or something similar) and cast columns in decorative shapes. This speaks of the modest wealth they brought from abroad and Yasar is proud of his craftsmanship. They cook in the yard; there is no shower and no warm water. But at least they have water and electricity. A few hundred meters further, the huts are much less stable and lack even these basic necessities.

During Zhivkov's times, Yasar had a job in a local factory. After 1989, those factories were shut down one after another, the last ones with Bulgaria's introduction into the EU. Yasar does not believe that any effort is made by the state of Bulgaria or the EU to improve the situation of minorities in Bulgaria nowadays.

With the EU, at least, free movement was introduced. Even more workers than before go to earn their families' living in EU countries: Spain, the Netherlands, France, Austria, Germany....

"I am a human being, am I not?" ...

...is Hristo's message to the imagined spectators. He can no longer stand the everyday discrimination that has haunted him his whole lifetime. "In Bulgaria, we are treated as second class citizens. In Munich, it isn't much better". On the streets, he says, he is treated without respect. Policemen ask him to leave no matter where he is. When he asks where he is supposed to go, they slightly wave their hand as if to indicate: "Anywhere, just keep moving." However, it is not only the police that disrespect him. The well-thought-of owner – once called the "mayor of the quarter" by the Turkish newspaper *Hürriyet* – of a hotel on the street where the day-labourers used to wait for jobs, was recently cited by a major German daily as saying "These people are nothing, I call the police, remove them, all are dirty, but the police say you cannot send them away to their home country; Bulgaria is in the EU, unfortunately".

In addition to this daily discrimination, it is almost impossible to find affordable rooms to rent in Munich. Prices are shocking: A dormitory charged 1,200 Euro for a room measuring 16 square meters and shared by five day-labourers. Hristo showed us the place he had slept for several weeks; it was a well at the side of a busy road, with barely a roof overhead. "Document this! Show it to the whole world!" he insisted.

Taking the messages to the street

Pembe, Natka and Hristo – Yasar had left to Pazarjik before we started our photographic work – together with Trixi chose places and situations for their photo shoot with their speech bubbles. Hristo chose the place where he used to sleep. Both Natka and Pembe positioned themselves at the junction where they often waited for work. These activities always had the air of something disreputable and secret about them. Day-labourers would try to hide away and avoid the attention of their fellow citizens, who would often not know why they were hanging around there and would suspect something disrespectful. Local café and shop owners would rail and chase them off. But now, Pembe, Natka and Hristo held the signs "I want to work! Why don't I get papers?"; "I am a human being, am I not?" and "I wanna live an independent life!", accompanied by a photographer. My impression was that this happening startled the hidden communication process between the participants of this everyday scene and brought their issue to public perception. Their self-esteem was raised: "Finally I am treated with respect as human being," said Pembe.

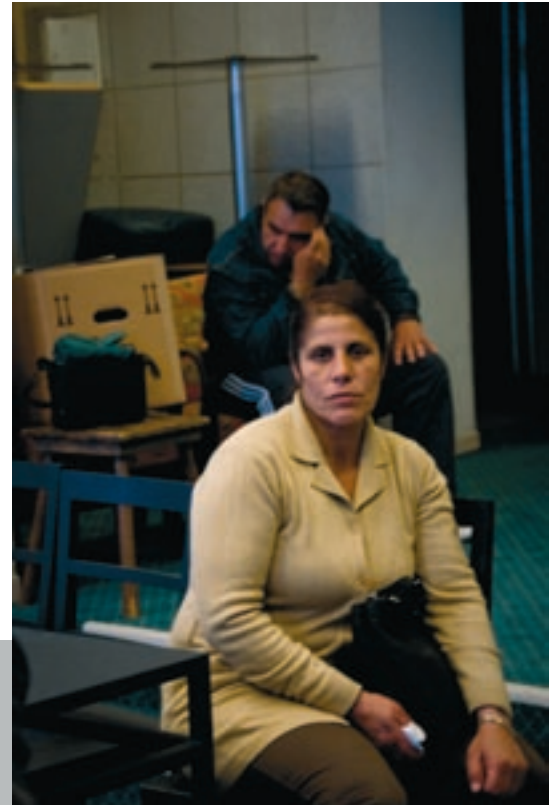
Epilogue

After a member of the Initiative confronted him publicly with his statement and he had a face-to-face conversation with a day-labourer, even the hotel owner respects the day-labourers now. He invited them for fast-breaking during Ramadan and promoted their demands – especially their demand for a room and meeting place. His main interest in doing so might still be to "keep the streets clean". But he positions himself now in collaboration with the day-labourers and less with the police whom he urged to chase all Bulgarians away just some months ago.

*Migrants' nicknames



↑ Bureaucracy is a jungle



→ Natka finds a rest in the "initiative's" open space

↓ Natka: "I came to Munich to live an independent life!"



Alla, Olivier, Pant Liladhar, Orlando – the stories of four migrants in Brussels

| Text: : Massimo Bortolini | Photo: Claire Allard |

Alla, Olivier and Pant Liladhar have lived through the hardships of being unsuccessful asylum seekers who tried to find a path for staying in Belgium legally. Today, all four of them have permanent residency; however, they still vividly remember what it is like to start alone and from nothing in a foreign country. Their personal accounts capture the difficult life of a migrant.

Why them?

The population of Brussels is more diverse and colourful than the population of most other European cities and has been so for several generations already. As such, for the population with an immigrant background, it was often the parents or grandparents who came as migrants. Having already integrated in the previous generations, the migrant background of the second and third generation is not discernable from official statistics and they enjoy the same social and political rights as any other Belgian citizen. Even so, though they do face some specific problems in the labour market.

Whereas the diverse face of Brussels is dominated by the members of older migration waves, the city also continues to attract new migrants, who often start their life in the city without legal status. We chose to tell the stories of four individuals with this more recent immigration status. Alla, Olivier, Pant Liladhar, and Orlando have been in Belgium for quite a time. Today, all of them have legal residency status. Having gone through the experience of being new-comers, who gradually built up their new existence in a new country, we followed these four people to capture the essence of living the life of a migrant. They tell us how migration has changed them, what migration enabled them to do, and what it has destroyed.

We chose people with similar careers from different backgrounds. Three men and one woman. They come from Chad, Nepal, the Ukraine, Cuba respectively, or on a larger scale: Africa, Asia, Europe and Central America. They came alone or with fam-

ily. Some chose the country, some did not. Some knew they were coming, some did not.

What all four have in common is that they had to organize a totally new life; find a home, a job. Furthermore, after more than ten years, they all have chosen to stay and live in Belgium. They hope to continue to do well, despite hard working conditions and the sometimes chaotic conditions of life.

Alla

My name is Alla. I was born in the Ukraine. Our whole family, my husband and me and our two boys, left. We first went to Armenia for five years and then to Belgium. My husband, who is Kurdish-Armenian, made the decision to leave. The children supported the decision and I followed. However, I did not want to leave; I do not like big changes. I was a little afraid, likely due to my family's history. My grandfather was deported by the Soviet regime, as an enemy of the people; it is part of the accursed history of our family.

In the Ukraine, people do not like foreigners. Because of his appearance, they were racist towards my husband; treating him, in their words, as a "dirty black". We left because of the general atmosphere of corruption, especially among the police. First, we lived in Armenia. It was not easy for me because I was different from everyone else. They laughed at me for my appearance and for my culture. My children suffered as well. We lived in Armenia for 5 years. We arrived in Belgium, in Brussels, in 1999 on August, 19th.



↑ Orlando

We went and asked for political asylum. I do not want to talk about that.

We knew about the existence of Belgium from school. But the decision was to go to Europe, not specifically to Belgium. We arrived here with the help of my husband's Kurdish friends. His friend told us: "You will see that we can live freely in Europe, in Belgium". We travelled by train, bus and car. We knew of Belgium, but knew nothing about it. But my husband had friends there.

We arrived just before the regularization of 1999. We missed our chance, trusting the lawyer who handled our application for asylum, who claimed that we had no chance to qualify. When we realised that we could have benefited, it was already too late. It was a shock for all of us.

We arrived with the help of a friend of a family member of my husband, who told us to go to the Foreign Office as a family. We told them our story. We received a document with the dates for our next appointments and received temporary residency, the orange card, for three months. The Centre of Public Welfare (CPAS) provided for us and we found a home quickly, paying the rent with money from the CPAS. A new life was beginning.

The most important thing at that time was to find a school for our children. Being Ukrainians, Kurds, and Armenians, my children have experienced difficult times in the Ukraine and Armenia. However, in Brussels, our two sons quickly realized that something was different; they were treated like other children and as equals. They were told: You are students, nothing more, nothing less. They were suspicious at first, but they saw

that their teachers were sincere. They have fond memories of that period.

Their welcome was excellent, but the level of the teaching was very low. I never saw my kids do any homework. It was completely different than in the Ukraine; there were no textbooks and everything was on photocopied sheets. In the Ukraine, all schools are on an equal level; therefore, we expected that in Brussels it would be the same. Only later did I realize that schools in Brussels can have very different levels. My older son went to the same school for two years, my younger son, for three. It was when we were in contact with an organization for tutoring that we learned it was possible to change schools, which in the Ukraine is not.

At this point we no longer had legal status. A year and a half after our arrival, after our request for asylum, after refusal, an appeal, and a final refusal, we received the order to leave the territory. We had no resources then. We started looking for work because we had no more social support. My French was good as well as my children's; however, my husband, who took courses in Dutch, could not speak French.

I've always been active. I worked as an accountant. After two weeks of staying in Belgium, I enrolled in French classes in two different schools in order to fill my days. My husband was helping some friends in exchange for some food.

Contacts

We had very little contact with people from the Ukraine. I was scared. For example, I used other people's addresses to

receive letters. My husband sometimes called people in Armenia, but at this time there were limited technological possibilities. It was not the way it is today.

I kept the document ordering us to leave the country for three days on me without telling my family. I pretended all was well. But they noticed that I did not look normal. I had to tell them so that the children would not worry. I knew they could go to school until they turned 18, even if they continued to be illegal in the country; that's unthinkable in the Ukraine.

I started looking for little jobs in household assistance to families. In the beginning, these were Kurdish and Turkish families, but I passed the message on to other students and friends. It was hard; for example, once I had to wash a carpet with only slightly diluted bleach after which my hands bled. All that for only €5. Then I started working for Belgian families. The first was a family of doctors. I took care of the household and sometimes the children. During an argument between the couple, I offered my opinion. I was insulted and fired immediately without getting paid for the last days I worked.

My husband worked here and there. Sometimes he was paid. And sometimes, he received an old computer or a radio, which often did not work or not for long... Simple as that. Sometimes the salary negotiated for a certain number of hours did not match the amount of work because the employer would extend the working time without compensation. It was like working for €2 or €3 per hour. But we had no choice if we wanted to eat.

My kids were volunteering and helping distribute meals to the homeless. For them, their situation was not so bad because, in comparison, these people were much worse off than they are. They also got small paint jobs, they helped their father to carry cement bags, etc. They were 15 and 16 years old.

Changing schools was not easy. I remember a manager who asked me in a disdainful manner what strange documents I had. Despite the fact that the opportunity for education was open to everyone, including illegal immigrant children, some schools refuse to enrol our children. In the end, they were enrolled in a technical school. After a year, they changed again. One went to a school specializing in computers. The other one went to a more general school. There he was called a son of an alcoholic, lazy... He was often tired in class, as after school he was worked with his father, but to the teachers it was clearly because of alcohol. They thought that he was just like many people in the East... He wanted to leave; fortunately, we found another school with the help of teachers from the first school.

Control

We have never had problems with the police. The only time I had a problem was when I helped a friend. I had accompanied him to the city hall to serve as an interpreter. The counter lady asked me who I was and to provide my papers. She was very insistent but I managed to talk myself out of the situation. My children were checked in the subway. Without papers, they were taken to the police station. We argued that we had applied for legalization, although the argument could not have stopped them from expelling us.

During the revolution in the Ukraine, I thought that we could return. I thought that with the difficulties we were experiencing in Brussels it could be better. But I also thought about the freedom we have in Belgium; going out, even later, without risking anything. It's very significant.

Uncertainty

How do we live with the uncertainty? We thought that the asylum request would take between 1 to 3 years. We thought that we would manage, that we would end up having papers. But the years passed, the difficulties increased, the obstacles multiplied because of the lack of documentation. I continued to volunteer as an interpreter. I saw this as a way to accumulate experience and knowledge. Our children were sometimes discouraged by this uncertainty and the potential difficulties. They were afraid of being expelled. To cope with this uncertainty it was important to have things to do during the days.

Interpreting

After a year, I understood French well enough. I was talking with my neighbours. When I was sick, I went to see a doctor. She was very empathetic. She told me that I spoke well. This gave me confidence. We stayed in touch. One day she asked me to help patients from Russia and the Ukraine. Then, a person I knew from the French courses asked me to help her in contacting a social service. The social worker advised me to do social work as an interpreter. He advised me to go to "Bruxelles Accueil". I worked as a volunteer interpreter and translator. They gave me a lot of medical documents to translate. I continued to improve my French. I continued to do cleaning work and attending French classes. Through contacts with Medecins du Monde, I was asked to volunteer.

It was via "Bruxelles Accueil" that I got in contact with CIRÉ (Initiative and Coordination for and with Refugees and Immigrants). They were getting too many requests and so I started to work for CIRÉ. I wanted to study: maybe to be a caregiver, a social auxiliary, or something similar. But it was not possible without any documentation. It was also not possible for our children, as it is virtually impossible for an undocumented person to graduate after turning 18. I was really discouraged.

A psychologist I worked with advised me to do training in intercultural mediation. I registered, although I had no papers. I did various training courses, including one at Petit-Château, a centre for asylum seekers. The following year, I did one at CIRÉ. What a great opportunity! After the training, I asked if there were any job opportunities, but ones that did not require papers... New discouragement followed. That was in 2008... The various contacts I had made it possible to obtain letters of support to add to our dossier of legalization. It had been a very long time. My husband continued working in construction, my eldest son in both construction and catering; however, both were working in the black market. I longed for my previous status of accountant and team leader, the status of volunteer did not satisfy me.

And at the end...

On February 2, 2010, we received the announcement of our regularization. The wait had lasted 6 years. It was hard. The next step will be to obtain Belgian citizenship. I do not know if we will return to the Ukraine one day. The children have bad memories of it; they do not see themselves returning there.

I am happy to work officially. Now we have the opportunity to travel, but we need the time off work... My husband is looking for work. He is registered as unemployed, but he is 53 years old... I do not know if he will find something... official.

With the papers, our situation is stable. Our work as well.



↑ Alla



→ Pant Liladhar



Most importantly, when we get up in the morning we don't worry about how to get food onto the table that night. But now we feel tired; tired of all obstacles and past difficulties. It was like an unbridled horse racing and jumping over and away from obstacles. And then one day with the papers, the barriers were gone and no one knew how to react... it will take time to get used to it...

Olivier

My name is Olivier Ndilmbaye Ndilede. Ndilmbaye means in the shadow of the King. Ndilede means their shadows. I'm the son of Madeleine and Paul Wala. My name means the place where people go to hide. I was born in Mondou, south of Chad.

I arrived in Belgium July 22, 2000. Back home, I was a militant for human rights with various associations. We intervened in the country's political life. As a result, some friends and I were the target of secret services. During a protest march, we lost a friend, Brahim Selguey. My life changed. I continued to be politically active, but I spent my time between my home and those of my friends. I felt threatened. A friend, who lived in Belgium, requested for a certificate of accommodation in Belgium on my behalf. I left my country. I flew to France and immediately came to Belgium. I did not know Belgium. I arrived thanks to my friend.

I always wanted to be open and honest. At the Immigration Office, I submitted all the documents proving my activities, the difficulties I encountered and how I had arrived in Belgium. I was assigned to a reception centre at Saint-Trond (Flanders). After seven months and after a second interview, they told me that I had not come to Belgium on the terms of the Geneva Convention and that the certificate of accommodation and the brief passage via France made my application invalid. If I had lied, as others do, I would have had a positive response... But I wanted to be honest... I appealed but after three months I received an order to leave the country. So I had to find another way to stay. Fortunately, I met people who helped and hosted me at the beginning.

After two weeks, I came to Brussels. Initially, I stayed at the South Station. Afterwards, I contacted people that some residents at the centre of Saint-Trond had suggested to me. And then my life as illegal resident began. You spend a night in one place, then in another, and in yet another. You look for work. You find work here and there; one day yes, one day no, or for a few hours. You take it. You work for wages of sometimes €20 for a day but you take it, to contribute to the expenses of those who host you. First, I washed dishes, after that I worked in garbage removal... You take what is offered, you are always available.

That lasted two years. I was tired of the instability. I had another plan. A man gave me his papers and I worked at Opel Antwerp using his identity. He had had the same situation as me before and so he helped me. I worked cleaning the floors from 11PM to 8AM. I left half of my wages to the man who gave me his papers. I also rented an apartment in Antwerp with his papers. Suddenly, I was a normal man like all those who worked at Opel and who had papers... I had an employment contract, but it was not in my name, it was not me... I stayed one year. I was scared, like many undocumented people; afraid of being arrested and deported and I asked myself, is this really worth it? But fortunately, I was never controlled by the police. Every weekend, I went to Brussels, where I had my social network. Antwerp was only a place to work. Eventually, the man whose identity I was using demanded more money, knowing that I could not protest,

so I went back to Brussels.

In Brussels, I reconnected with the people who had hosted me on my arrival. I wanted to go back to school, but without papers it was not possible. In the subway, I saw an advertisement for training in the social sector. I introduced myself and I was admitted, despite my situation. I was training two evenings a week. The rest of the time, I continued to work when I was offered a job, such as the distribution of daily newspapers in the mailboxes. I did everything imaginable to earn money, but honestly.

At this point, I wanted to go home. I thought that it would be better to suffer at home. But my father did not agree. He told me even if you suffer, at least you're alive. So I stayed. He told me one day everything would be alright for me, it gave me courage.

I contacted the advisors of the mayor, many of my friends, teachers, trainers, etc. asking to support my demand. They all helped me. Despite this support, it was always difficult. I thought there must be other ways. The wait was getting really long. Why should I suffer unnecessarily?

In 2006, I got married. I obtained a residency permit. There were the usual controls when there are mixed marriages of this type, but they saw that we remained together, that friends were visiting us. At one point the controls stopped. At that time, I was married, I was training and I worked when I was offered a job.

In 2006, I applied to a competition organized by the African Union. I was selected and offered a five-year contract in Geneva. So I left. I had a salary and diplomatic status so things were better. But I continued my political activism. My contract was discontinued after that. Chad funds the African Union so it was difficult to accept that someone working there would criticize them. I was back in Belgium in October 2007. Who knows if I'll go back one day?

Despite these setbacks, I continued my political activities. I contributed to my website, Chad Hope, on human rights in Chad. There were a few of us who contributed. We were often the target of viruses that ruined our work. I received warnings. I have never been directly threatened, but I know inquiries were made about me. In 2006, my father died. I returned to Chad incognito via Nigeria. I stayed locked up for a week. I went out only for the burial. I knew it was not safe to be there. But I had to go; if I had not, I would have been angry at myself my whole life.

Since then, things have changed in Chad. The beginnings of democracy are at work. The president has realized that many things have to be done. It made me change my point of view. I buried the hatchet. The government finally contacted me, via the Secretary General of the party. We set up a party office of which I am the representative in Belgium. The elections will be held in December. With the help of others, I'm contacting Belgian compatriots to raise awareness of the elections. Today, I could go to Chad without any problems, I think.

Back in Belgium, I could live on the savings made during my time in Geneva. In 2008, I got divorced. I worked at Flight Care, cleaning airplanes between flights. I did not like the work. I was going to work upset. I was seriously considering that I would not stay in Belgium. After the year spent working in Geneva and coming back to this situation again... Belgium does not give opportunities for people to channel their talents. It's a shame. Besides, we are also subject to discrimination. I say this with a heavy heart, but I experienced it several times. There is always a way to be discrete or polite about the rejection, but the result is the same; you are black and you cannot have the contract. So I decided to train in Human Resources Management thinking that it would be easier to find a job. I hope it will be enough.

So I decided to stay. I tell myself that I was not able to make myself understood or that I was simply not understood. There are rules and if you do not follow these rules, case closed. I told myself that I had to go into the same straitjacket that everyone else had to. I always wanted to study Law, but at my age it is too late... However, I did take the Master's program in Law for three years, in the evenings. I have a new companion. So, I have found some stability, but I'm still looking for work. If anyone who reads this is interested, they can contact me.

I would like to conclude by speaking about Belgium. Belgium thinks that its policy towards immigrants is flexible. I say that in its approach it lacks humanity towards foreigners, particularly asylum seekers. I feel that Belgium accepts people who lie, who say what Belgium wants to hear. I came here to tell the truth. Nobody listens to me. I was rejected. They let me suffer. They have ruined my life. When I arrived, my dream was to go to university and study. Belgium disabled me. She abused me psychologically. But hey, I do not cry over my fate. I'm not one who gives up.

Pant Liladhar

I arrived in Belgium in 2001. In Nepal, there was a conflict between the government and the people. The King of Nepal reigned as a despot. Due to my political activities in opposition to this regime, I had trouble with the authorities. That's why I left Nepal.

I was teacher of mathematics while also being actively involved in politics. I had no plans or preparations should something go wrong. When I was made aware of my dangerous situation, I decided to go quickly. I travelled to India. Very simply, there are no real border controls between the two countries. I stayed two months in India. I knew some people there who helped me.

After two months I left India for Europe. I arrived via a smuggler, who advised me where to go. I was not familiar with Belgium ahead of time. Belgium was a chance for me to get away. Only upon arrival, I was I told I was in Belgium. I did not speak French, just a little bit of English.

Débrouille

When you have a problem, you seek a solution. The first night in Brussels, I did not sleep. I arrived at night and waited near the Immigration Office. In the morning when I entered, there were many people like me, coming to seek asylum. I felt good because I told myself that if there were so many people, it meant there was a greater possibility of being helped.

I was interviewed that day with an interpreter present. They told me to go to the centre for asylum seekers at Boisseigneur Isaac. They gave me enough to buy a train ticket, but it was very difficult to communicate. I immediately realized I should learn to speak the language, otherwise things would not be easy, I would get nothing done, and I would not be able to say anything. At the centre, there were French classes twice a week. I decided to teach myself independently as well; I was very motivated. I spent the money I received from the Centre of Public Welfare (CPAS), about 2,000 BF (€50), to buy dictionaries, which helped me to learn French.

I stayed seven months at the centre. I received a positive response on the admissibility of my request and received a residency permit for three months, the so-called orange card, which

gave access to a C permit (work). Once I received these documents, I came to Brussels. I knew some Nepalese people living in Brussels, so I came to visit them and find housing. I found a home in Anderlecht. With the money provided by CPAS I could pay the rent.

I started working part-time in a restaurant that served French cuisine. My temporary license was extended. Then, after 14 months, I received a negative response concerning my request for asylum. They wanted me to provide evidence of what I claimed... but I had lived in the countryside, there was no electricity there, so there is no information on the internet (they find evidence only through the internet). In addition, there is a department of the Office des Etrangers (Alien Office), which surveys the countries of origin of applicants, but they met only with officials of these countries, who, of course, do not give negative information. In 2004, Amnesty International denounced the report on Nepal and issued another, which reported a more accurate picture of the situation.

Despite receiving a negative response to my request, my boss wanted me to continue my job, with or without papers; he claimed to not be concerned because I was the right person for the job. So I continued to work; my status was officially declared, but I did not have papers. Work helped improve my French and I kept getting better. I attended courses at Convivial, an association, where I started volunteering because I found that the association was doing good work. I handled the inventory of office supplies. I did not know any names of the supplies (pencils, pens, paper, etc.), but I learned through this work.

In 2004, the State Council warned me that my request had been denied. The CPAS thus ceased helping me. I discussed my situation with the Office for Public Welfare. They continued to give me financial aid because I had a social volunteer activity. Besides that, I continued to work in the restaurant.

Social implication

It continued like that until 2007. That's when I started to be much more active in the movement helping undocumented migrants. Actually, I had been active since 2004 but from 2007, I can really talk about fighting for our cause. I coordinated the community of undocumented Nepalese people in this movement.

I started the fight following the discovery of the history of immigration in Belgium and the struggles for similar causes in other communities to get more rights, including the hunger strike. Our efforts have led to legislative changes. This is the starting point of my commitment because I saw that one could achieve something by mobilizing and bringing the issue to public awareness.

I went several times to the Office of the Minister of Interior to address the situation in Nepal and inform them about the situation of Nepalese people in Belgium. Belgium sells weapons to the Nepalese government... We lobbied against this. Our association of Nepalese in Belgium brings together many of the Nepalese in Belgium. Furthermore, our cause had the support and help of many Belgian people as well.

Family

It has been a long time since I have had any contact with my family. I'm alone for nine years now, without family, without seeing them. This experience has marked my life. Of course, we

sometimes talked on the phone, but initially it was complicated; there were not the facilities there are nowadays. My wife and my two children were alone for 9 years. It's unimaginable. Here, after a week away from home, people tell each other: "Come back !". But for us, for asylum seekers, this is life... We must wait. I cannot go back after 4, 5 years here alone. My family is still waiting. If there were no problems in Nepal and I returned, I would start a new life from scratch, I lost everything... But it is not possible. That's why I want to stay here. We are victims. We did not choose to leave, we had to. When you are lost and have found a path, it's hard to go back. So, I thought about it and decided that my life is here. It's also the reason for my struggle. Now I am regularized.

Involvement II

Last year there was a hunger strike in Ixelles, which lasted 87 days. I was the intermediary between the hunger strikers and the government during the negotiations. After 87 days, we got the orange card, a temporary permit, on the condition that we would find work. This was the result of the negotiation. I found a full time job in a shop and got a B license, with a residency permit for one year. Based on the circumstances of 2009, I have been regularized for 1 month now (August 2010). This is another important step in my life.

Daily life

I felt welcomed in Belgium; ok, not by everybody, but overall yes. There are many different backgrounds and cultures, it is not always simple. I think some foreigners want to remain as they are. Not me. I think the Belgians have a big heart. I felt respected. I do respect them. The greatest difficulties I have had was with the administration. The administrative procedures are complicated, not simple to tease out and understand.

Nepal is very important to me. I want people to know about it. It is a mosaic of cultures and languages. In Belgium, it is important to gather all these components and show the Belgians how it works in Nepal. And we want to learn the culture of Belgium. There are 40 associations of Nepal in Belgium. The association where I am active tries to coordinate these different associations. Nepal's problems are political; they are not related to ethnic differences.

Future

I would love to continue my work for social integration. I will never forget the issues faced by undocumented people, but I think my next cause should be integration, especially with the Association of Nepalese in Belgium. And besides that, I continue to work for a living.

For a month now, my situation has been quite different. Last year, thanks to my residency permit of one year, I went to see my family. I will return in October 2010. After 10 years, I have been forgotten and am unknown to the authorities. And the situation has changed too, I probably do not risk as much. I introduced a request for family reunification. My son, age 23, is in Australia at university. My daughter, age 25, is in India and has completed her university studies. My wife is left alone... What has she gone through in order to survive? I do not want to think about that...

One day I will write my story... I filled notebooks with what happened to me since I came to Belgium. If I sum up my life, I would say: I had something, I lost something and I have not found

something... We will see shortly... When my wife arrives, it will be a new life. It's time to continue and finish writing this story.

Orlando

My name is Orlando Rodriguez, but as evidence of my integration in Belgium, I added 'van de', so I became Orlando van de Rogriguez. I was born in Havana, more than fifty years ago.

My life there? That of a young man who lives in an embargoed country under economic siege for years. I'm basically someone positive and optimistic. I learned to push the rules and limits, nothing really serious, but you quickly fall into illegality under these conditions. Yet, if you can manage well, the police is more complicit than enemy. My father was a bodyguard of Che Guevara. They had an eye on me, but I was pretty free anyway. I had one foot in a different world.

My life was filled with parties. It was nightlife, dancing, partying, women and music. The music, always music. I organized things in a way to manage living well. I sold products that are not easy to get; for example, cigars. Obviously, as I said, they keep watch on you; they see that you have economic resources, even though you do not work much. So, they come to see you, they suggest you just share a little and they will leave you in peace. I've never been afraid. I have never gave in, never surrendered, but at the end it's tiring.

At some point, Cuba opened to tourism. Business was better. And then there were the women. Some have made it a way of life. They charmed tourists and used their financial resources. I never participated in it. Of course, frequenting bars and pubs at night, I met women, but I never wanted to live like that. The women, that was for fun, not to make life better. It was not always easy, but I liked that life. But, over time, like many Cubans, I wanted to leave the island. I knew that I would leave someday. I knew my life would continue elsewhere.

I met a woman. We fell in love. She was Dutch, she lived in Belgium. We organized my departure. When it happened, I had the feeling that it was all okay and that it was what had to happen. Inside, I knew I would leave Cuba one day. We got married. We lived together. Unfortunately, my wife died fairly soon after. How dramatic! She died on my birthday... Each year it is a special day. I have been in Belgium for fifteen years and this event marks my life. Her family and I stayed very close. I was adopted in a way. They helped me a lot, but I want to support myself. I know that if someday I need them they will be there.

I never wanted to have the typical life of migrants. I knew Cubans here and in Paris, some of whom I knew from Havana, but I did not get involved in the community life here in Belgium, finding it falsely friendly. It is a resource, nothing more. Similarly, I would not go into the networks of small jobs. Obviously, I had a residency permit, but that does not necessarily mean that your situation is better; when you are newly arrived in a country, when you do not know the language, when you do not know the country, you have the same difficulties as everyone else. So I thought that if I had to suffer, I might as well be doing what I loved: sculpture.

I spent a lot of time collecting items for my sculptures. Meanwhile, I had acquired a van, I recovered metal, which I sold, and at the same time, I gathered what I used to sculpt. Sculpture is my passion. And music too. I entered quickly into the world of music. I met people who introduced me to a community of roadies. For over ten years I have travelled the road with artists and



↑ Olivier



→ Orlando

going to festivals. It's a pretty small world. We know almost everyone. I have very good friends. I love this work. So, yes, sometimes there are quieter moments; in the winter, for example.

I think that I was born under a lucky star. I believe that I make things happen. I live in Flanders. I did not want to depend on anyone. In my initial contacts with local authorities, I realized that I should learn Dutch if I wanted to get out and be accepted. I took courses. I approached people. I was the only black man in that community; people stared at me of course, but it did not last, when they saw that I wanted to be friends with them, people welcomed me and they ended up not seeing me, I'm part of the landscape now.

One day, in my travels I saw an abandoned farm. I entered the yard and I told myself that I'd like to live in a place like this. Time passed. I was working. I carved. I exhibited some of my works with other artists. I met a man very interested in my work. We met again. He wanted to help me, but he did not know how. I told him I was looking for a home. He offered me a building he owned but that was not occupied. When I saw that it was the farm I had seen a few months earlier, I could not believe it. Since then I live there. He rents me the house for a nominal amount and I maintain it. My life is made up of these little nudges of fate.

But I need to push it to make it go. I could have chosen a life where I received public assistance, and I know that some have no other choice, but I did not want to. I wanted to keep control of my life, to make choices, and not wait for a decision that never happens.

Belgium is an incredible and wonderful country. Of course, there are idiots, as there are everywhere, but it is a country where you have lots of possibilities, where generally people leave you in peace, and it's up to you to prove your value. I wanted to leave Cuba. I did not know how it would happen but I knew it would happen one day. I wanted to see what life was like elsewhere. It happened. No doubt that what we do, what we do not do, what we choose, and what we put in place sometimes, without us realizing it, ends up happening. But hey, I know I got lucky and that not everyone does.

Today, I want my mother to come visit me. We talk often via telephone and internet. This is also why I work a lot on renovating the house, to fix it up and welcome her into it. It's been a long time since we saw each other last. It's time now.

(Orlando's mother died a few weeks later. They will never meet again)

La dolce vita? A visit to an “Italian village” in the Philippines

| Text: Rica Agnes Castañeda | Pictures: Jay Panelo |

The people know Mabini Batangas as “Little Italy”. The village has become a symbol for the way migration has transformed Philippine society and culture. For generations, ‘makapag abroad’ (being able to go abroad) has been the essence of the Filipino dream. Consequently, migration has become central to much of the Filipino culture. Our main question was self-evident: What were the consequences of the economic crises on this culture and mainly for the economy of the Philippines?

“We Filipinos see property ownership as a major achievement. It marks you as a successful person. The bigger, the better of course”, explains Susan, who has been working in Rome, Italy, for more than ten years and has just returned to her village of Pulang Anahaw in Batangas, a province in Southern Luzon. The people in the neighbouring villages know Mabini Batangas as “Little Italy” because of the big and colourful houses, each perched on a hill along a narrow road only fit for one-way traffic. Susan takes me up the hill to a wider and paved street, which goes to a Catholic chapel. She shows me a stone marker, which informs the reader, in elaborate words, that this road was build as a collaborative effort from the village women working in Italy.

Recently this village has gained national attention, thanks to media coverage, and has become a symbol for the way migration has transformed Philippine society and culture. For generations, ‘makapag abroad’ (being able to go abroad) has been the essence of the Filipino dream. Encouraged by the state, which depends financially on the stream of money from the Diaspora, many young people prepare themselves systematically for a career abroad. In a background interview conducted prior to my visit of Mabini Batangas, Ms. Maybelle Gorospe, Director of Planning at the Philippine Overseas Employment Agency (POEA) describes the consequences in this way: “Migration has become a part of our culture; a culture of migration.”

What are the characteristics of this culture and what is the driving force that has led to its emergence? Is it the lure of the unknown? Or is migration driven by hard facts and stories of hardship and frustration at home?

Written and researched in a time of global economic anxiety,

another question was self-evident. What consequences did the economic crisis and the resulting decrease of the demand for migrant labour have for the migration-based economy of the Philippines? How did the crisis affect the culture of migration? Is the global economic recession at all directly linked to this big picture and what has been the ‘coping’ mechanisms and processes of both the migrants and the state?

The good life is imported - Migration Culture as Social Phenomenon

Philippine migration has a long history. When reviewing this history’s historical depth, one has to keep in mind that Filipinos have been travelling comprehensively already in times before the state was conceived. The ‘national heroes’ of the country with the likes of Dr. Jose Rizal, Gregorio del Pilar, Graciano Lopez Jaena have gone to Europe to gain experiences that their country has not been able to offer under Spanish colonial rule. Although Philippine textbooks would give emphasis on these great men ‘educating’ themselves perhaps to romanticize their greatness, nevertheless they had to earn a living through their ‘day-jobs’ as copy writers, news editors, doctors, freelance writers in order to keep up with life overseas. There was even a long running anecdote of ‘Enrique’ — the native, whom the Spaniards brought with them in their initial discovery of the islands, being identified as the ‘first Filipino to travel across the globe’. He was never heard of, afterwards. Thus, this anecdote would end: ‘he migrated to Spain’.

Mass migration began as early as the early 1900s, particu-



Advertisement — for children the best only. In reality however many Filipino children are left with their grandparents while their parents work abroad.

larly to the United States. Since 1898 till World War II, as an American colony, the Philippine Republic exported labourers first to pineapple plantations in Hawaii and California and later also to processing plants in Washington and Alaska. Philippine post-war history can be, from the point of view of migration, divided in several phases. The 1960s were a period of deployment of professional workers, who went mostly to Northern America and some European countries, while the exporting of contract workers (OCWs, or Overseas Contract Workers) began a decade later under then-Marcos government's newly-established Labour Export Policy (LEP). Popular destinations for this type of employment include the Middle East for Filipino men to work in the construction industry, and affluent Asian countries for Filipina women, who work mostly as domestic workers or entertainers.

The presence of a large Diaspora, limited opportunities at home and the active support of migration by the state, turned migration into something increasingly popular. In a 2003 nationwide survey conducted among primary school students from 10 to 12 years of age, 47% of the respondents expressed their wishes to work abroad someday. In 2004, an average of 2,500 Filipinos left the country daily for overseas employment, a figure that only covers deployed personnel and not counting a huge number of the population who enter their country of destination as tourists, some of whom may be lucky in securing a work visa after a few weeks or months, and others who resort to overstaying their visas.

It is possible to distinguish three types of migrants in Philippine context: the permanent migrants, who usually migrate because of family reunification; the temporary labour migrants,

whose main purpose can be tied to economic motives; and the irregular migrants, who are either undocumented (in terms of conflicting purpose upon entry) or illegal. Present statistics indicate that there are more or less eight million Filipinos working temporarily or living permanently abroad. That is 8.5% of this year's projected population of 94.01 million.

Migration's impact on the culture and mentality of the Philippines, where "overseas connections" have turned into a status symbol, is evident in everyday life. A good illustration for this provides the local film production, as there has to be an 'overseas factor' in all films – either directly or indirectly. It seems to have become something like a social norm or even the measuring rod for success whether someone is able to demonstrate that he knows - or is related to - a 'Balikbayan' (a permanent migrant-returnee) or an OCW (Overseas Contract Worker). The list of indicators for migration's impact on Philippine culture is of course much longer: There are, for example, television programmes that make money out of milking this 'overseas' connection. Another example are household products and commercial brands that have been tailored to cater to these emerging needs of a new second-class household: migrant workers and their families.

Economics

Arguably the single most important constituent of the culture of migration is the stream of money from abroad. In Mabini Batangas, our Italian village, this money has not only enabled the construction of large houses, but also changed social structures and norms. At the kitchen table of Lola Myra, an old lady who

lives on the paved road close to the chapel, the enormous costs of the recent fiesta are still a hot topic in the daily conversations: "We spent more or less 2 millions of pesos (35,000 Euros), on that fiesta. We had two bands, and several local artists. There were a lot of people and some of the Balikbayans (returnees) were here". I ask how such high costs were shouldered by the village. The people at the table are quick to reply: "It was from the associations. We heard there's this big association of residents from this barangay in Rome and then there were also individual contributions from the returnees".

In the Philippines, permanent migrants outnumber labour migrants by a few thousands. However, it is the latter that contribute most (together with irregular migrants) to the national economy, contributing a significant amount to gross national product (GNP) through remittances. Filipino migrant workers rank one of the highest in the world in terms of returns and remittances and it is no secret that thanks to this financial return, the national economy has been kept afloat over the years (13% of Gross Domestic Product), contributing higher than Foreign Direct Investment.

In economic theory, remittances were long seen as a mere by-product of the migration process. The work of Odon Stark and other economists in the 1980s and 1990s led to a change of perspective. While the individual migrant may still be seen as the main agent in the migration discourse, these newer works stress the presence and influence of households or larger societal units. Performance or behaviour of individual migrants in the absorbing labor market, Stark explains, may be largely accounted for, not just by their skill levels and endowments, but also by the preferences and constraints of their families who stayed behind. These shifts in the theoretical discourse seem particularly well justified in case of the family-centric Filipino culture. The importance of migrants' concern for those left behind - parents, children and the wider family - is mirrored in many of my interviews with returning migrants, in which I here often hear statements like: "Isn't this why we're doing this - for our children?"

Questions on the motivation for migration were brought up in a discussion with some caretakers (grandmothers, aunts) of the 'left-behind' children, whom I met in another village of Batangas: "That's why I was telling the children to study well, so that they'll be like their mother!" says an elderly woman who has been taking care of her grandchildren for six years, ever since her daughter left for Greece to work in a hotel: "My other child, she finished a course of medical technology, she's intelligent. That's why I tell her other siblings to study well", says Marie of her daughter who is working as a caregiver in Rome, Italy. This form of 'underemployment' is common for university graduates such as Marie's daughter. Positioning her daughter as an educated, smart woman in both formal and informal interaction with others, what may seem to be pity and frustration at first may turn out to be pride and the ability to face reality.

Back in Mabini, the topic of the discussion in Lola Myra's house had switched to the pluses and minuses of migration. The old lady beams with pride when I ask her about her children. They are all living overseas with their respective families—two in Italy and the other in the United States: "I didn't want to go with them because I'm scared to ride on airplanes", offered Lola Myra when I asked her whether she's been to any of those countries." It turns out that also the other family members in the house have their own 'immigrant connections'. One of the people in the room is Nina, a young lady who is a distant relative of the family. Like her parents, she intends to go through the same path after

finishing her studies. "The problem with those who are left behind is that they become very dependent. They are only waiting for the next scheduled remittance. They are very lazy". Our conversation is interrupted by a young man, who enters the room with the information: "Today's exchange rate is 58 pesos!" "Here you see!" the girl makes her point jokingly: "That's the only thing they know—waiting for the exchange rates!"

Supporting Networks and Institutions

At another corner of the village is a makeshift shelter fronting a small grocer. Here the villagers sit and talk about each other's lives and how their day went. Quietly listening to their discussion of the elders is Mira. I ask her whether she is also from Rome. She replies no, as she has been working at a factory in Sardinia for five years. She just came back to Mabini for a month-long vacation: "Life is harder now in Italy, especially as the European economy is struggling," she contributes to the discussion. Single and in her 30's, she is at the beginning quite reserved in talking about how her route as a migrant. "It's easier now, for anyone who intends to work in Italy. There are more connections now in terms of recruitment. And costs are relatively cheaper. It used to be that, prior to departure, you had no idea how high the costs were. People were commonly victimized by illegal recruiters. Now, it's usually people whom you know, those who went there earlier, that recruit people from our village". Mira then narrates how, for her first overseas stint, her family had to shell out half a million pesos (8800 Euros) in order for her to leave for Italy. "We were in debt for more than a year. But I'm luckier perhaps. Our neighbour's first foray into working overseas was a disaster. The family was tricked by this ex-seminarian who ran an illegal recruitment agency. It's a good thing he left the church. All her money lost! They weren't able to get him; they even filed a police report".

While migration remains a risky and unpredictable business that requires the luck of the individual and mercy by the receiving state, the existence of networks somewhat alleviates the risks and unpredictability. Mira owes much to the fact that migrant networks are stronger and more advanced now, thanks to technologies like sms-messaging and the internet. Ready information that passes through these media, it seems, create transparency and real time updates in the recruitment process. "Now, you only need to spend around Php 100,000 (1,750 Euros, compared to Mira's 8,800 Euro placement fee, five years ago), as you can be recruited directly through direct contacts in Italy. The routes became more varied so these agencies have more competition." It is also through these migrant networks that a sizeable percentage of remittances are being funneled to the beneficiaries, bypassing the formal means of sending money to the Philippines. Informal forms of remittance are especially prevalent in Italy with migrants seeing economic sense in sending money through a colleague who is leaving for the Philippines soon: "The remittance centers charges are high. So instead of giving this money to remittance centers, we can give the same amount or less to whoever is coming home soon. Then our families will get our padala (remittance) in Euro."

As demonstrated by the example of Mira, most migrants from villages like Mabini Batangas depend on the support of various networks to master their way to places in Italy and other developed countries. Mira's story, like the stories of many other migrants and their family members I was able to interview, highlighted the important role of the family as figures in the process.



↑ Jeepney. This minibus is the most popular means of public transportation in the Philippines. Jeepneys were originally made from US military jeeps.

↑↑ "Education not for sale" (in Manila)

↑↑ "Little Italy", Migrant Women's Monument
↑ "Little Italy"

Negotiations, such as offering support by a family member to the migrant and the cultural trait 'utang na loob' (indebtedness), play part in framing the interdependent relationship that fuels the process.

However, it is not only informal networks that help potential migrants find a job abroad but also Philippine state institutions. Stahl (1986) describes the Philippine structural institutions in international mobility as significantly developed within the region. Having the tradition of involvement in international labor migration and currently sending workers to more than a hundred of countries, it has a highly sophisticated framework in regulating and supervising these movements. The Philippine Overseas Economic Administration (POEA) acts as a regulatory framework of support for pre-departing contractual labour migrants, while the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) looks into reintegration and repatriation – more in anticipation of migrant return. Both agencies are attached agencies of the Department of Labour of Employment (DOLE) and are limited to membership. The Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) on the other hand, aside from issuing the main travel document (passports) and legitimizing certification, performs diplomatic functions, being the main government agency in a migrant's country of destination. While the earlier agencies are mainly for labour migrants, this state entity deals with all citizens of the state, permanent residents and irregular migrant workers. Through the trade bureau of the embassy, prospective sectors are also identified.

"We work in a way that the embassy will write a recommendation for the country they are in as a possible market for Filipino workers. Then we (POEA) will have to look at the country situation ourselves", explains Ms Gorospe, Director of the Planning Branch of POEA. "There was one time that we were asked to look into this situation somewhere because it was recommended by the embassy in that place. We went and didn't find the place conducive enough for our labour migrants. While we have a corrupt government, theirs was worse. We didn't push through with the recommendation." I inform her that there has been development on the recommendation and that there are currently Filipinas in that particularly country, who work as domestic workers. Ms Gorospe answers with a shrug of her shoulders. "That's the problem. We can only act on our institutional mandate. If a migrant decides to go on his or her accord, then there's nothing we can do about it".

The receiving state on the other hand is at the other end of the process and serves as the finalizing agent, deciding on whether an individual satisfies the state requirement for entry. From what I have gathered in my interviews in Mabini Batangas and other places in the Philippines, this merits a different process altogether and is more emotionally charged than the initial decision-making. A matter of luck, as others may describe it. The embassy of Spain and the Netherlands, for example, will entertain any form of transaction only on an appointment basis. And in order for an appointment to be scheduled, one has to call a toll number that charges Php 36-40 (more or less 0.50 cents Euro) per

minute. The call initially is forwarded to a trunkline and the waiting time to be connected is very long. The relative success of getting connected (reaching a real person on the line and being able to book the appointment) on the first try is also slim. "I have spent five thousand pesos (85-90 Euros) worth of mobile phone calls already and still have no appointment", says Corazon, a Filipino-Hispanic, who was frustrated already, "appointments have to be scheduled a month in advance, or, as schedules are already full, even a month earlier." Another woman, Lisa, is close to tears: "I simply asked for a favour from my cousin, to call for an appointment. Through him I got information on the date and the time and what I needed I bring with me. I was not given any reference number. My God, why can't they be a bit considerate? I am scheduled to leave next week, now they have to reschedule everything."

Times of Crisis

Places like Mabini Batangas are the very beginning of the global supply lines that deliver flexible and cheap workers from regions with limited economic opportunities to places of affluence and economic growth. Like in thousands of other villages across the globe, migration might be for the people of Mabini Batangas the only realistic choice if they want to secure some share of the global economic wealth for themselves and their families. Obviously, it is a choice that comes with a price, as it brings about hardships such as the long-term separation of families or the insecure life as an undocumented migrant. Such negative aspects notwithstanding, the massive use of this choice has transformed both the society of the village and, on a larger scale, the Philippines. However, in view of the current global economic turmoil, one question is evident. How vulnerable is this strategy in a period characterized by a globally shrinking demand for labour?

Luckily, the Philippine's domestic economy was hit less hard by the economic crisis than other countries in Europe, the United States and other, wealthier Asian countries. Whilst economic growth was unimpressive already before the beginning of the recession, the statistics show no significant change after the crisis began. Yet how did the crisis affect those Filipinos who are working abroad? One indirect indicator for the economic crisis' impact is results of recent surveys, which show that migration is seen by the Filipinos as a much less attractive choice. In 2006, 30% of Filipinos expressed their desire to migrate. This number has gone down to 20% in 2008. In the second half of 2010, not more than 9% of the population expresses such a desire. . With no clear signs of rapid global recovery, it seems unlikely that the world economies will take in more foreign workers any time soon. However, the picture becomes more complex if we look at the crisis' impact on various social groups and professions. While the crisis severely limited the chances for professionals, the impact is hardly felt in the field of domestic work and care. Here, demand has never gone down and supply never runs out. Domestic work and care being among the most typical professions of Mabini Batangas' "Italian" workers, the crisis is not really the big topic of the villagers' daily conversation.

However, the crisis did not, of course, spare everyone. Some Filipinos were unable to depart on trips they had been planning for a long time, others even had to return earlier. Ms Gorospe provides the example of a company that was recruiting nurses and caregivers for the UK: "The agency we subcontracted was able to fulfil the order. There they were, more or less a hundred health-

care professionals bound for the UK. Some of them had had to quit their jobs, some had to sell their properties. Then comes the bad news, they can't go. And now they have to wait. Imagine the frustration and the agony. They gave up almost everything. What's left for them, then?" Ms Gorospe also recalls the situation of thousands of Filipinos who feared losing their jobs due to the downsizing of the electronics manufacturing industry: "A few of them were sent home, but that was just single cases. Most of them are back in Taiwan, with different employers."

A particular problem is the anomaly of overproduction of educational institutions, which specialized on the needs of foreign economies. One example for this is the nursing profession: "Imagine every year, how many nurses graduate. Not all of them get jobs right away. Some may even be unemployed for two years or so," says Professor Glenda Vargas, Dean of the College of Nursing at the University of Santo Tomas in Manila: "The nursing education became a milking cow for some educational institutions who just wanted to exploit this lucrative market." Vargas was referring to former specialized institutions that later on ventured into accommodating courses entirely different from their specialty, such as the nursing health sciences, as well as rampant fly-by-night nursing schools. "We, as part of the practitioners and institutions in the field, had to step in. The quality of the profession is at stake."

A chance conversation with a cab driver frames this perspective more directly. Bong, in his late 40's and a family man of four children, just recently decided to operate and drive his own cab. He opens up about his youngest daughter's current period of disappointment, as she has been unemployed for two years: "At first we thought, with that nursing degree she will never have difficulty in finding a job. Apparently, this country produces so many nurses and it's not that everyone in the industry is retiring soon" he laughs at the idea. "Her elder sisters all finished with degrees which we thought earlier, had not much of a use. But both of them are doing well. How will we know, I am just a cab driver (he mentions later on that he used to work as an automotive mechanic for twenty years), and their mother is just selling goods. We had no idea this would happen when we decided to let her enter nursing school. She's even a board passer". When I asked him about working overseas, "We thought about that only recently. I told her that perhaps her luck can be found in a different country".

At the end of my visit, Susan shows me around her house, which features five bedrooms, a large living area, and a porch in a landscaped garden. She looks pleased and proud of her accomplishment. Indeed, it was a nice house that she invested highly in. Adorning the wall are pictures of her parents, her siblings and herself when they were younger, her nephews and nieces. A picture of her younger years in Rome shows her looking very fashionable, clad in black, sitting on a stool in her room. "My bella days", laughs the single 40-year old. Her father passed away before her house was built, so it is her mother who lives alone in this big house of hers. I quickly ask her who is staying with her mother now, to which she smiles: "me". "So, you have returned for good, then", I ask. To this Susan laughs as if I was joking: "I wouldn't have money after a month, so I have to go back and earn again. I only rest for a month and then go back to Rome. I will work as long as I can. That's how I afford a big house. And a one-month vacation".

→ Praying to get a chance to live and work abroad?



↓ Thousands of Filipinos leave the country day by day to work overseas



- 1.\ <http://www.migrationinformation.org/USFocus/display.cfm?ID=364>
- 2.\ Statistical information gathered from the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA), 2004.
- 3.\ Filipinos normally call this state of overstaying as 'TNT', or 'tago nang tago' (hiding all the time).
- 4.\ Commission of Filipinos Overseas <http://www.cfo.gov.ph/pdf/statistics/Stock%202008.pdf>
- 5.\ Local films that have revolved around the idea of working and living overseas has figured prominently in cinemas since the early 2000. Films like 'Dubai', 'Milan', 'Caregiver' and 'In my Life' and others have been successful with audiences.
- 6.\ There is for example a local channel which airs a lunchtime programme where most of the studio audiences placed in front are either foreigners and overseas returnees, where personalized greetings can be 'bought' through waving dollar bills to attract the show's host.
- 7.\ Stahl, Charles W. International Labor Migration: A Study of the ASEAN Countries. New York : Center for Migration Studies, 1986. p. 4
- 8.\ <http://pulseasia.com.ph/pulseasia/story.asp?id=573>
- 9.\ http://pulseasia.com.ph/resources/documents/Relevant%20tables_UB1007.pdf

Georgians and their country on the way

There is hope, but no chance (contemporary Georgian proverb)

| Text: Jan Hanzlík, Petr Šilhánek | Pictures: Petr Šilhánek |

In Georgia, a transforming country cut off from international trade, the world economic crisis, augmented by the war in Ossetia, hit very hard. Georgians cannot get work at home, the doors are closed to them in Russia and there is only a ghost of a chance of getting a visa for the EU. Desperate people do desperate things – many Georgians set out for the West to find work without visas and work permits. And even though some of their stories ended up with happy endings, their future is insecure.

It went like this: it is dusk, a young woman is sitting behind a cash register looking forward to going home; maybe she is thinking about how to spend the evening and where to go to find the cheapest food at the market. There is no one in the shop anymore, it is almost time to close up. But then the door flies open again and two men with hoods covering their heads and knives in their hands burst in. In that moment she would have given them everything but luckily they just settle for the money in the cash register. After they leave, the salesgirl collapses to the floor and cries in shock.

The two robbers were caught a week later – with no money somewhere on the other side of Georgia. But the girl did not care anymore. At that moment, only one thing mattered to her. To get out of there. To Europe. Supposedly in Europe everything is easier. Work is plentiful and there are no robberies in broad daylight. She must get away. And start over again.

Natalia Tzereteli (29 years old) wanted to be a journalist since she was a child. "When I was young, I already used to sit in front of the mirror and speak into it with a brush in my hand instead of a microphone," says the petite, pretty girl and as she recollects this memory she laughs sincerely. She is careful not to get too animated because the size of her room in a former maternity hospital in the Sololaki quarter does not allow for such excessive gestures. A bed, a table, a chair, a wardrobe, a television, and three people fill the rest of the space within these four walls.

"I never let it go. I graduated from journalism and started to work at a newspaper, but it was an opposition paper and as president Saakashvili's national party took power in 2004, it gradually lost influence and money and finally went bankrupt. And I lost my job."

To have no work is a common problem for many people in Georgia. Even if they have work, it is not what they were educated for and they can potentially be working in a profession that is not at all adequate to their education. Finding any kind of job other than badly paid manual labour is practically impossible without contacts or bribing someone and even this is scarce. This is the reality faced by young idealists such as Irakli Shatakesvili, who received a top-notch education in Germany and, despite the financial crisis, also obtained an excellent offer of employment. He turned it down due to a sense of responsibility to his homeland. He came to believe that, with the education and experience that he had acquired abroad, he should go and help his fellow countrymen. Irakli, when speaking of his decision, adds: "Running away is no solution. The time away allows one to realize what is wrong at home. But then one should return and try to do something about it. When the opportunity comes up, one has to try."

Like many others of his kind, this idealistic graduate of a western university would be extremely happy to find any kind of job even remotely connected to his field of study. Whereas in EU countries there is always a demand for lawyers, in Georgia jobs just simply do not exist. The public sector is unable to create them and the private sector is small and more or less saturated. Irakli does have the advantage, though, that he is young. In contrast, sixty-year-old Volodya does not have this advantage. For thirty years he played the trumpet at the Tbilisi Opera and now he wanders around restaurants and night clubs with a digital camera and printer giving drunkards a memento of their evening out for five Lara (just over 2 USD). And Zaza, a translator of German, English and Russian, is around fifty and lives with his mother, trying to make a living by collecting empty bottles. None of them can expect a government pension of more than 100 Lara



↑ The work market on Kutaisi Street. Jobless men offer their labour and tools through rain or shine

(about 50 USD) per month. And no amount of scrimping can make that last a month, not even in Georgia. There are many just like them. No one can be choosy about their job, there are just too few.

In the refugee camp

Natalia was not choosy either and she gladly took the job of salesgirl in a grocery store. Monotonous work, thirteen-hour shifts, low wages, but at least it was a job. And everything was fine. Until that early evening, when two hooded men robbed her store.

"That was the last straw. I just couldn't imagine getting behind that cash register again. But at the same time, I knew I couldn't find another decent job in Georgia. So I decided, after spending ten years in Tbilisi, to try my luck in Europe."

Natalia has a friend in Italy who promised to help her find a job. She planned to stay for a year or two – three if possible – and then come back with enough money for a flat and everything else. In the end though, because of the similarity between the Polish language and Russian, which she spoke perfectly, she went to Poland in April 2009. Poland, as she had heard, also accepts refugees, which suited her, as she had no money for a work visa. She was desperate and decided to take the risk. It soon showed to have not been the luckiest decision. From the airport, she went straight to a refugee camp in Rodzin Podlaski, applied

for asylum and waited. "Our camp was near a missile base at the village of Bezwola. I'm not sure but there must have been something in the air or water, everybody just slept all the time, including me. I slept or cried for the first couple of weeks. There was actually nothing else to do."

Natalia received an allowance of seventy zloty a month, so once she got used to the place, she started looking for work. Finally, a local family in Rodzin hired her as a nanny and a housemaid but she was working illegally and had no prospects for the future. And the chances of her refugee status changing to legal residence were minimal.

"I knew for sure that I would not be granted asylum and that sooner or later they'd send me back to Georgia. So I decided to take a risk once again and I bought a bus ticket to Italy." She packed, took the last of her money and got on the bus. Everything was fine until they reached the Czech-Austrian border. The Czech border guards stopped her and led her straight to a prison cell.

"I spent a day in a prison cell at the Czech border. The next day they brought me an interpreter and took me to a Czech refugee camp near the Austrian border for questioning. Of course I told them the truth; I had nothing to lose. I spent three weeks in the Czech camp and then they sat me in a police vehicle and returned me back to Poland."

Natalia paid a fine of eighty Euros with the last of her money for illegally crossing the border. When she got back to Poland,

she could theoretically apply for asylum again and wait but she already realized there was no point.

"In the meantime, my mother fell ill; she called to say that she didn't feel well. I also found out that the IOM helps refugees return home and even start their own business or finish their education. So I figured coming back was better than staying in the Polish refugee camp."

Coming home with IOM

From the perspective of the governments of countries receiving refugees, people like Natalia are a source of frustration and unpleasantness. In western countries, public pressure is pushing politicians to take a hardline stance on illegal immigrants. Of course, a "hardline" approach has its own drawbacks; deportation is fairly costly and those involved in the process are often heavily criticised – and this criticism is not coming just from human rights groups. This twofold pressure could explain why many countries have decided to support voluntary repatriation programs where returnees receive funds not only for transportation but also financial support to make a new start in their home country. In many cases, these programs are connected to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), an intergovernmental organisation of 127 member states. Often, it is the only organisation offering assistance to refugees and returnees, as Natalia can attest to: "There was no other contact information on the walls at the refugee camp, just the local office of the IOM".

Thanks to the IOM, which is concerned among other things with the fight against human trafficking and with helping refugees in foreign countries, many stories of illegal refugees from Georgia have at least partially happy endings. Since the financial crisis began, the Georgian IOM office has been increasingly busier. According to current statistics, since 2003, the Georgian office of the IOM has facilitated the return of 1,158 people. Although in the better financial times of 2007 and 2008 it was 97 and 98 people respectively, 2009 saw the return of no less than 374 people and by October of 2010, a further 361 had returned. During these years, 105 people returned home from the Czech Republic (funded by the Czech government), 49 from Belgium (funded by the Belgian government), and 370 from Poland (funded by the European Return Fund). The funds available for reintegration in the home country differ from country to country and year to year, but the base amount can range from anywhere between tens to thousands Euros. In 2003, the Czech government, for example, gave every person 75 Euros, but by 2009 it had gone up to 1,500 Euros. And just for interest's sake, between 1998 and 2010, 94,793 Georgians applied for asylum in other countries around the world.

Getting poor by working

Natalia, like many others, approached the Polish office of the IOM and, after 8 months in Poland, she returned home with their financial assistance in December 2009. In addition, the IOM paid for her computer lessons and contributed funds for a new laptop and desk. Thanks to this help, she finally found a job.

"Just before the municipal elections in May, I found out that the opposition Conservative Party was looking for a girl with a computer, so I applied, helped them with their election campaign

and then they hired me."

And so Natalia Tzereteli is finally working again. At the Tbilisi Conservative office, she is in charge of media relations, organises press conferences and prepares the party's public statements. She is as close to her original profession as she could be but she has not won yet. With an average monthly salary of seventy dollars (US) a month, she cannot even afford to rent a flat on her own. Moreover, the situation of the Opposition in Georgia is not exactly rosy and the state can do whatever it pleases. But Natalia is definitely not planning another illegal trip to Europe. "In Poland, I used to just sit and cry", she recalls with bitterness. "If I found a job with a salary of at least 500 dollars, I wouldn't go anywhere because my family is here. But nothing has changed here. And there's no point in sitting here and doing nothing, so if I don't find a decent job and I have a chance to go to Europe, I'll try. But only legally! And that's impossible now, because I was deported, so they said I can't go to Poland or the Czech Republic for three years. So I have to wait..."

Without the tight embrace of mother Russia

Georgia is one of the so-called "post-Soviet" countries, which suffered a downturn in its standard of living after the break-up of the USSR. The Georgian Soviet Republic served, together with Moldova, as the "vineyard" for the Communist Bloc. A large percentage of the politician, sportsmen and other elite came from Georgia and the whole country made good use of its ties with Moscow. Today, however, everything is different. After years of political chaos, the economy is in a catastrophic state; its famous vineyards are drying out, the capacity of its roads has reached their limit, blackouts are frequent and it is dependent on imports of everything except nuts, grapes and, in the East Bloc, the popular mineral water Borjomi. Relations with Moscow, who used to be the primary consumer of Georgia's produce, have plummeted well below freezing. They paid for their independence with an economic collapse and the war against Russia in Ossetia led to a complete Russian embargo on all Georgian goods. During that time, links between Tbilisi and Moscow were closed, as was the border. The situation has improved ever so slightly; air traffic has resumed, although sporadic and irregular, and one crossing point has been reopened. But stable relations are still a long way off. Russia has cut off parts of Georgian territory (Ossetia and Abkhazia) on the pretext of protecting minorities, and further, supports separatist factions within Georgia with the aim of destabilizing the country. As a result, over the past twenty years, hundreds of thousands of Georgians have become refugees (after the war in Abkhazia in 1992-1993, the number of refugees amounted to about 36,000 people). In the ruins of this poor, barely functioning country, with an over-saturated labour market, these internal refugees desperately seek new work and a new home. With protectionism, cronyism and corruption running rampant together with the saturated labour market, these unfortunates, driven from their homes, towns and villages, have no option but to hope for a miracle.

The development of the economic situation of Georgia can be described by clearly concrete numbers: in 2008, a more stabilized political situation had encouraged a wave of foreign investment, leading to an increase in the Georgian economy of 8.6% per annum, but the war with Russia in August 2008 put an immediate and abrupt end to that growth. The economic slump rap-



↑ The boards soften nicely in the steam.

↓ Natalia. Just like ten thousands of other Georgians, she too was driven to desperate measures by the lack of any sort of work in Georgia – she left for Europe without a visa.



↑↑ It is impossible to survive from retirement pension without additional earnings

↑ Georgian men take-off to cross the mountains to find work in neighbouring countries

→ After returning from his illegal path for work in the EU, Zurab and his friends opened a workshop for making chairs.

idly worsened with the arrival of the financial crisis, which made itself apparent in its negative effect on not just the volume of production but also in shipped goods. The collapse was greater than local economists had predicted. The GDP fell by 4%, unemployment jumped to 16.5% and at the beginning of 2009, 24% of the population found themselves below the poverty line (although some sources put that figure at 40-50%). This figure continues to rise. One way out would simply be to link the country to European structures (which Russia persistently interprets as a direct attack on itself and the only definite support Georgia receives is from the USA, which is obviously quite far away), and markets (however, endowment policies of European markets deprive Georgia of any financial competitiveness). At the moment, Georgia is standing at a crossroad of dead-ends.

Zurab from Telavi

The road to Kakhetia is flanked by hundreds of hectares of melon fields. An old woman or old man sit at each field and wait, the fruits of their harvest piled high before them for sale. There are dozens of them and how they are able to make a living this way is one of the many mysteries of Georgia's seemingly autarchic economy. Anyone who stops by the road and buys a melon pays on average the equivalent of twenty cents US per kilogram.

But in fact, Kakhetia is not a country of melons but wine. An overwhelming majority of Georgian wine production comes from here and it is impossible to imagine Georgia and its inhabitants without it.

Though indispensable, Kakhetia is not a rich province. Former government owned wineries look run-down and decayed, the local roads are just as bad as in the rest of the country, and the journey from Tbilisi to the regional centre of Telavi, a distance of just over 100 km, takes three hours. But if the weather is good, you will be rewarded with a breathtaking view of the Caucasus and by legendary hospitality, which we were alerted to already in Tbilisi by the locals, who said: "Are you going to Kakhetia? You won't be back today then."

Our destination in Telavi is the house of Zurab Jashiashvili. Thirty-two year old Zurab was born here, his wife has a private dental practice, his son dances like Michael Jackson and his daughter speaks excellent English even though she has just barely started to go to school. His family is terrific but he has lost his job. For years he worked as a border guard between Georgia and Dagestan. But once a friend of his told him about Switzerland, a country with mountains similar to the Caucasus, where wine is also made and, above all, where good work is rewarded with good pay. Without a second thought, Zurab packed his knapsack and set off.

"I bought an airline ticket to the Ukraine and continued from there on foot. Every time I came to a border, I went to an internet café and used Google Maps to find the best place to cross. I only had my knapsack and maps downloaded from the internet with me. I slept in ditches and within ten days I reached Romania. From there I alternated between travelling by train or by foot until I got to the Swiss border. I went to the police there and they sent me to a refugee camp." Once inside the gates of the camp, he understood that travelling without visas was a big mistake. "But at that time, we just didn't have the money for a visa. I didn't think about it; I just took off. I had no money for transportation, so I went on foot from the Ukraine. All the time I kept hoping I'd

find work in Switzerland. Everybody said that life is good in Europe."

But disillusionment came quickly. Switzerland is not a country that welcomes immigrants with open arms and when they offered to transfer Zurab to Belgium, he did not hesitate. "In Belgium, they put me back into a camp again, but still, it was good there. I had a room, food, everything was fine. I even got a card from the Red Cross, something like a refugee passport, so I could travel all over Europe. Nobody bothered me too much and it wasn't a problem at all to ask the cops the right direction. I learned a little French and otherwise I used my hands and legs to communicate." But with an allowance of sixty Euros per month, Zurab had no choice but to try to find a job again. But it was futile. "I thought that life could be better in the EU than here, which may be true, but there's nothing at all for illegal immigrants. I have a wife and children here, so there was no point staying there without a job. Why should I stay in Belgium with my family waiting for me here? So I decided to come back."

A friend at the camp told him about the IOM, and then everything just fell into place. And their assistance did not end with the airline ticket. "I used to work as a carpenter; I had my own workshop at home but I couldn't afford to repair the roof, so the first heavy rains destroyed everything. But people from the IOM helped me out. They came to look at our house, paid for a new roof over the workshop as well as new equipment and materials, and they even gave me some money towards a new car. Without their help, nothing would have happened."

Zurab shows us around the yard behind his house. Apart from the chickens running around and a pig chained up, there is also a new roof, a workbench under it with some simple tools, and a steam chest. Zurab's father Vacho and his friend and neighbour Volodya are just taking a softened board from the steam. They fix it in a vice and bend it. When it dries out, they will take it out of the vice and the board will become the base for a new chair. It is Zurab's and his father's new occupation. "It's up to us now. When we've made enough chairs, we'll try selling them at the market. The competition is strong but our chairs are pretty good. I think we're going to make it."

The Illegal activities of Konstantin Bagiriadze

Konstantin (35 years old) orders a cappuccino. He takes a sip and grimaces. "Nobody here makes as good a coffee as they do in Germany." He must know; he lived there for ten years.

Konstantin studied cybernetics and programming but he knew he would never be able to find a job in this field in Georgia. So even before he graduated, he had decided to go to Germany. He scraped up some money, got himself accepted into the university at Stuttgart, obtained a student visa, bought an airline ticket and, in the year 2000, he headed off into a new world.

"I went to classes and worked part time for the first five years. You know, if you want to eat, you have to earn some money. And I also didn't want to live on campus, so I rented a flat. Eventually I was working more than studying. I did not finish my studies but with my valid student visa I stayed in Germany legally for five years."

Finally after five years his visa expired, but Konstantin did not want to return. He had fallen in love with a Georgian girl who was also studying in Germany. So he stayed in Stuttgart.

"I worked illegally almost everywhere. I tried to find work in my own field, but it was impossible, so mostly I worked in



↑ Zaza. A translator of three world languages makes money on the side by collecting bottles.

construction. It's a strange system; you may have work for a month and then the next month you don't. I met many immigrants in the same position. A lot of Georgians, Africans and Czechs as well. I have a lot of German friends too and I'm still in touch with some of them."

In the meantime, his girlfriend became his wife. "We talked a local orthodox priest into marrying us and he did. Unofficially, but he did it. It was very important for us." After five years of legal residence, Konstantin spent another five years in Germany illegally. He had no chance to get any jobs other than illegal ones. "I just used the service of one company that offered illegal work. They charged 22 Euros per hour for arranging the work, and out of that, I got 9 Euros per hour as a wage. I had no papers and I even lost my passport, so if the cops stopped me, I would have been in big trouble. For the first month I was nervous and afraid, but later I got used to it and travelled around Europe with ease. I visited Switzerland and I've seen all of Germany, but I didn't hide and I wasn't afraid of the police or any authorities." The last years in Germany were some of the best in his life. He got a stable, albeit illegal, job as in construction, he had lots of money, and his wife became pregnant.

"But suddenly the financial crisis came, the layoffs began and after three years I lost my job and I couldn't find a new one. On top of that, my son Alexander was born. Fortunately, my wife still had a student visa, so our papers were OK and she could give birth to our son at a proper hospital. Otherwise it would have been a big problem."

But the money quickly ran out; the child needed a doctor and

insurance and his father's documents were no longer valid... Suddenly everything became much more complicated.

"So I bought airline tickets to Georgia, but I didn't have a passport, so I went to the embassy in Berlin. I told them everything truthfully. They took my fingerprints and questioned me but then they gave me a temporary passport and that same evening my family and I boarded a plane for Tbilisi."

They came back to Georgia in May of 2010. "When I went to Germany ten years ago, I felt it was the only opportunity to leave Georgia and experience a different way of life. Georgia was at war at that time, Shevardnadze had messed everything up, the streets weren't safe, there was no work to be found, so what can you do in such a country? In fact, when I left as a student I already knew that, rather than study, I would try to live in Germany."

The Georgia he returned to is a much more pleasant country than it was ten years ago. The streets are safe, goods and services available. But one problem still lingers: there are no jobs.

"I did not bring any money back to Georgia but I did bring a sense of perspective and knowledge of the German language but there is no demand for translators. I'm still looking for a job; we are renovating our apartment, my wife lives with her parents in a village, so it's not easy at all. But we have to take it as it comes. And would I go back? Sure, I'd love to, but I'd have to have a job arranged first, and I don't even know if they'd let me in. I have a family now, which makes it more difficult. But never mind, there's no time to choose or wait for what's going to happen. We have to try for ourselves."

ABOUT THE RESEARCHERS & PHOTOGRAPHERS

Claire Allard (*1967) studied at "Le 75", a school of photography in Brussels. She has always been devoted to studying reports about the world of hard work, especially on working conditions in factories and construction sites. She has helped organize exhibitions of young artists and promote their works. As a former dancer, she continues to work on photographic research concerning the body in movement and in portraits.

Octavian Bălea (*1984) was born in Bucharest. He graduated from the Nicolae Grigorescu Fine Arts University, Bucharest and then studied at the Bauhaus University, Weimar, Germany. After moving to Finland, he worked as a product designer for Nokia. Now, he has his own shop and gallery in Helsinki and is working on a book about Finnish Romanticism. His work has been exhibited in Romania, Poland, Finland, Germany, and elsewhere.

Massimo Bortolini (*1961) is a project manager at Centre

Bruxellois d'Action Inter-culturelle (CBAI). He has been working there since 1986 on topics concerning issues of migration.

Rica Agnes Castañeda (*1982) was born in Manila, Philippines. She studied and contributed to research projects with the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, National University of Singapore and the Institute of Policy Studies in Singapore for seven years. She is currently in a PhD program in Migration and Social Cohesion (MISOCO) at the Universiteit van Amsterdam, under the Erasmus Mundus Scholarship.

Trixi Eder (*1985) was born in Munich. She studied economy and psychology in university. Ever since she was 14 she has been interested in photography and film and has participated in many exhibitions and publications. She won an award at the Regensburger Kurzfilmwoche 2008 with her film BEN und HANNA and made a documentary on oil pollution in Ecuador.

Jan Hanzlík (*1976) is a historian, journalist, and photographer. He studied modern history at Charles University and, together with Petr Šilhánek, founded the correspondent agency Papa e Mama. Currently, he has been working as the editor-in-chief of the review "Memory and History" published by The Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes.

Cyril Horiszny (*1977) is a French photojournalist. He studied history at Sorbonne, where he became interested in Eastern Europe, particularly the Ukraine, the homeland of his grandparents. He is attracted by the diverse and complex post-Soviet space, by the clash of the past and the hard transition of these young states. He pays special attention to social and ethnic topics through urban and rural life. www.kyrylo.com

Tomáš Janeba (*1973) studied Territorial Studies at the Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University and where is he is currently working on his PhD. Up until 2010 he worked

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Jérémie Jung (*1980) is a web and graphic designer from France. He graduated in Fine Arts and Multimedia. He collaborates with NGOs in the field of non-formal education, which led him to the desire to try to make pictures in a way in which everybody would get the chance to learn about strange topics from them. To this end, he currently studies photojournalism in Paris.

Monika Kmita (*1984) Monika graduated from philosophy and photography at the European Academy of Photography, Warsaw. She has participated in many group exhibitions and publications with other artists, such as an alternative guidebook through Warsaw called "Do it in Warsaw", 2nd edition. Her photos were published in

ABOUT THE RESEARCHERS & PHOTOGRAPHERS

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Tomáš Lindner (*1981) works for the Czech weekly

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Georgiana Catalina Macovei graduated from the University of Foreign Languages in Bucharest, specializing in English and German language, literature and cultural studies. After completing her final year of studies in Bochum, Germany, as part of a scholarship granted by the Erasmus/Sokrates Foundation, she remained in Bochum and started her Master studies, majoring in Media Studies/Journalism and English. Being a migrant herself, she has long developed a particular interest in the phenomenon of migration and the rights of migrants.

Jay Panelo (*1974) has been a professional architect for

fourteen years. He is an arts enthusiast who prefers analog photography as a form of medium for the visual arts, even in this age of digital photography.

Lisa Riedner (*1984) is a PhD student in Social Anthropology at the University of Manchester. Currently, she is doing a research concerning the struggles of workers from Bulgaria in Munich who have problematic legal status. Her project is also an experiment on combining political activism and social research. She is part of the "Network for Critical Migration Studies" (Netzwerk kritische Migrations - und Grenzregimeforschung/kritnet).

Petr Šilhánek (*1973) is a photographer. His core interest is photography as a means of social documentation. He has been working among IDP's in Sri Lanka and in Georgia, with minorities in Czech Republic and with homeless people in Georgia or Ukraine. He photo-documented projects of Caritas Czech Republic in Afghanistan, Indonesia etc. He has a gallery

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Piotr Szenajch (*1983) graduated in sociology from Warsaw University and now studies at the Graduate School for Social Research at the Polish Academy of Science.

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Iva Zimová, (*1956) was born in Czechoslovakia, from where she immigrated to Canada in 1982. In Canada, she studied at the Dawson Institute of Photography and Concordia University, Montréal. She focuses on people: Czech minorities in Romania, native people of northern Québec, Ukrainians in their everyday life, Canadian workers etc. She collaborates with the Czech NGO People in Need. For more: www.ivazimova.com



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