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Memories of former World War Two forced labourers – an international comparison

by Christoph Thonfeld

Abstract: As most European societies have struggled to find a consensus for working up their World War Two past, former forced labourers often had to endure ensuing societal initiatives to suppress or instrumentalise their memories or to see them tied to overreaching political or ethical imperatives. This article tries to trace the whereabouts of these memories in societal and individual perspectives. First, forced labour in Nazi Germany can be seen as part of a forced migration experience. Second, the memories of Nazi forced labour have often been used to represent the experiences of collaboration and defeat in World War Two in the respective countries. Third, national political and moral economies have shaped the societal status of former forced labourers' memories. These memories have hardly found their proper place in most of the respective national pasts.

Keywords: Forced labour, memories, migration, cultures of remembrance

My research draws on eighty-five biographical interviews with people who were forced labourers in Nazi Germany. The interviews, conducted from 2005 to 2006 in England, France, Germany, Israel, the Czech Republic, and Ukraine are from the stock of the International Forced Labourers Documentation Project (IFLDP) and are either in the original language (German, French or English) or are translations. The research project was carried out between 2004 and 2007 by the Institute for History and Biography of Hagen University and involved thirty-three interview teams. The teams, made up of researchers from universities or civil society initiatives in the different countries, conducted almost 600 interviews in twenty-four European states, Israel, South Africa, and the United States. The project was funded by the German Foundation 'Remembrance, Responsi-

bility and Future' (*Stiftung Erinnerung, Verantwortung und Zukunft*).

My research is still a work in progress that attempts to explore how individual biographical accounts are connected to collective representations of the experiences of forced labourers from these six countries, whether in group memories, in rituals of commemoration, or in scientific research. Each of the countries mentioned has its own specific relation to Nazi forced labour. Great Britain became the main European post-war destination for former forced labourers, and Israel the main destination for Jewish slave labour and concentration camp survivors. Nazi Germany initiated and was responsible for the entire forced labour system; Czech forced labourers in Germany were designated 'Nationals with a Special Status', and, being despised as Slavs had a special position within the racist



hierarchy of German labour. France had to supply more forced labourers than any other country in Western Europe, while Ukrainians made up the largest single national group among the ranks of civilian forced labourers in Nazi Germany, which also included many German nationals. Some non-German forced labourers remained in Germany after the end of the war.

Although forced labour occurred on a very large scale during World War Two, the term was rarely used at the time. The Germans referred to these members of their conscript workforce simply as 'foreign labourers' (*Fremdarbeiter*) or, where German citizens – whether prisoners in concentration camps or prisons – were concerned, forced labour was described as a punitive or educational measure. The Allies mainly used the term 'slave labour', most famously at the 1945/46 Nuremberg International Military Tribunal. Today historians generally agree that forced labour for Nazi Germany during World War Two was basically characterised either by the absence of a labour contract or – had there been one originally – the impossibility of terminating it, and that forced labourers were, compared with ordinary German workers, subject to discriminatory legal measures, and had little or no influence on their day-to-day circumstances at

work or on their living conditions.¹ Although all of the interviewees experienced these restrictions, there is still a considerable range of diversity among them. In this article, I will distinguish between them solely on the basis of how they were conscripted into the German wartime workforce, either as deported civilians (civilian workers), as prisoner of war labourers, or as camp or prison labourers (prisoner labourers), and then explore their specific situations as they are described in the interviews.

The forced labourers' individual accounts will be evaluated against the backdrop of the different national cultures of remembrance to show how the two are intertwined. Given the current discursive dominance of cultures of remembrance, and the pervasive talk of one or more collective memories that function as gatekeepers to the past, it seems to be becoming increasingly difficult to show clearly how individuals deal with their experiences within larger frames of reference. Nevertheless, as far as their ways of coming to terms with the past are concerned, entire societies rarely present themselves as the homogeneous monoliths which researchers usually seem to envisage or, to quote Wulf Kansteiner: 'memory studies presuppose a ... surprising desire for cultural homogeneity, consistency and predictability'.² Just as one

Photo of interviewee Jaromir B in his identity card for Displaced Persons, 1949. Historical photos were provided by the respective interviewees. All pictures taken by Dr Almut Leh for Institute for History and Biography (Hagen University, Germany).

could not expect each interviewee to give a completely consistent version of his/her biography, neither can one rely on larger groups or collectives to provide them with a properly fitting framework for their biographies. It is, rather, the flaws and inconsistencies in autobiographical presentations, and the societal confrontations and struggles for interpretation, that, when seen through the prism of current evaluations, give form to descriptions of past events.

On the other hand, the impact of societal discourses of remembrance and films – which are increasingly used to elucidate experiences that otherwise seem to defy verbal representation – is undeniable. Elements of scientific and/or popular discourses,³ traces of survivors' organisations' efforts at joint remembrance,⁴ and even those within their own families⁵ are frequently encountered in the autobiographical accounts of former forced labourers in Nazi Germany. Therefore, rather than contrasting the individual and the collective dimensions, it would be more instructive to explore their borders and intersections. Cultures of remembrance establish a regime of remembering and forgetting of individual and social experiences at a societal level. In order to outline how this has occurred in the countries being considered here I will categorise them according to a model described by the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur. He identified three types of what he calls a 'misuse of memories'. It seems to be appropriate to operate consciously with the idea of misuse as far as forced labourers' memories are concerned, because for long stretches of the post-war era they were not properly represented within many of the national cultures of remembrance. How various societies have – or have not – dealt with the experience of forced labour in a way that has only very rarely done justice to the people concerned⁶ is, therefore, worthy of close attention.

Paul Ricoeur: misuse of memories:

During the immediate post-war period most former forced labourers frequently found that they occupied a position where they were seen as personifying experiences which were associated with defeat and/or collaboration; experiences which were, in most European societies, often too controversial to allow a consensual way of coming to terms with them to be found. As a result former forced labourers had to bear the consequences of the ensuing societal initiatives to either suppress their memories, to utilise them, or to bind them to a larger ethical political identity. Suppression was what happened in Ukraine and Czechoslovakia (CSSR), where before 1989 forced labourers' memories were not permitted to play any significant role within the culture of remembrance.

This situation can be identified with that of Ricoeur's 'blocked memory' which refers to a more or less complete suppression of memory. The concept of blocked memory suggests that there are some memories of a nation's or a state's defeat that, for specific reasons, cannot be represented. Forced labourers were thus perceived by the societies of origin as the 'defeated internal enemies', and their past was seen as not being entitled to claim any representational space. Although Ricoeur aimed primarily at describing one way individuals deal with unmanageable memories, I see a striking analogy to the societal level here. The situation in France and Great Britain, at least roughly until 2000, could be termed 'manipulated memory'; according to Ricoeur this implies exploiting some of the memories concerned for remembrance purposes while excluding others from public perception. Here one could say that in France former forced labourers symbolically paid the price for the decade-long repression of the Vichy past – a past with which they have become associated – and that in Britain they paid the price for government's and society's lack of official recognition of prisoner of war forced labour. These groups' pasts can indeed become part of the collective memory, but only at the price of severe distortion of what they actually experienced. Again, roughly until 2000, the situation both in Israel and in Germany meant that forced labourers' memories have been subordinated to the remembrance of the Shoah, either from the points of view of the victims or the perpetrators. These memories could be fairly characterised as 'obligated memory' which, according to Ricoeur, describes an explicitly ethical and political foundation of the culture of remembrance which subsumes certain areas of individual and collective memories under the imperatives of other memories. Here the resurrection of memories of forced labour has been seen as being suspicious: either because it terminates a previously formed consensus of commemoration of World War Two or because it relativises more important imperatives of remembrance. These distinct circumstances can be regarded as the formative background against which former forced labourers had to build their narratives of past experience within their different countries.

Six countries

In terms of clarity of a national collective's conception of history, Ukraine would, at least during the Soviet period, appear to have been an easier case, as the canonical memory was so thoroughly combined with ideological premises that the impression of a uniform Soviet history succeeded in eclipsing other versions of the past.⁷ At the same time though there was a persistent tradition of memory that did not

comply with this uniform view, one that was only transmitted either privately or within the various Ukrainian diasporas abroad. Today, the national paradigm is being revived as the main intellectual framework for current Ukrainian historiography.⁸ National identity is built up from past suffering and is powered by a 'people's memory' based on eyewitness accounts⁹ such as the memoirs of 'eastern workers' (*Ostarbeiter*) and prisoners of war which have been published since the early nineties. Nevertheless, former forced labourers still seem to remain on the fringes of Ukrainian historiography.¹⁰ As well as the clear negative sanctions faced by Ukrainian former forced labourers returning to the Soviet Union, Ukraine was particularly affected by the mutually reinforcing clampdown on national anti-Soviet resistance and the ubiquitous suspicion of collaboration directed against the repatriates. The developing Cold War refreshed or even endorsed the victim status of many repatriates, again citing their 'harmful' contact with the Western enemies as a reason.¹¹ Finally, interestingly enough, although the fall of the Soviet Union has created a certain representational space for the recognition of former forced labourers by society and scholarly research, scientific interest and indemnity payments from Germany have, at least partly, also served to revive reproaches of collaboration and treason raised against them from some quarters of Ukrainian society.¹²

Until 1989, the general conditions for the commemoration of the experience of the 'total assignment' (*Totaleinsatz*), as the forced labour of Czech nationals for Germany during World War Two is known in the Czech Republic, had been similar to those in other countries within the former Soviet bloc, where former forced labourers' memories were largely excluded from the culture of remembrance. However, the immediate reactions of the Czechoslovak state and society between 1945-1990 differed appreciably from the harsh state and social discrimination meted out in the Soviet Union. In the CSSR the state refrained from any systematic retribution against former forced labourers, while societal disapproval was commonly shown – if at all – through social discrimination and ostracism, which also occurred (and was at times even more pronounced) in Western European countries. Subsequently, the rescue of this chapter of Czech history from oblivion has become a matter for public debate, as pointed out by the head of the recently disbanded Federation of Czech Forced Labourers:

When our federation was founded at that time [in 1990, CT], only very few of the younger generations had any idea of our goals, and could only very vaguely remem-

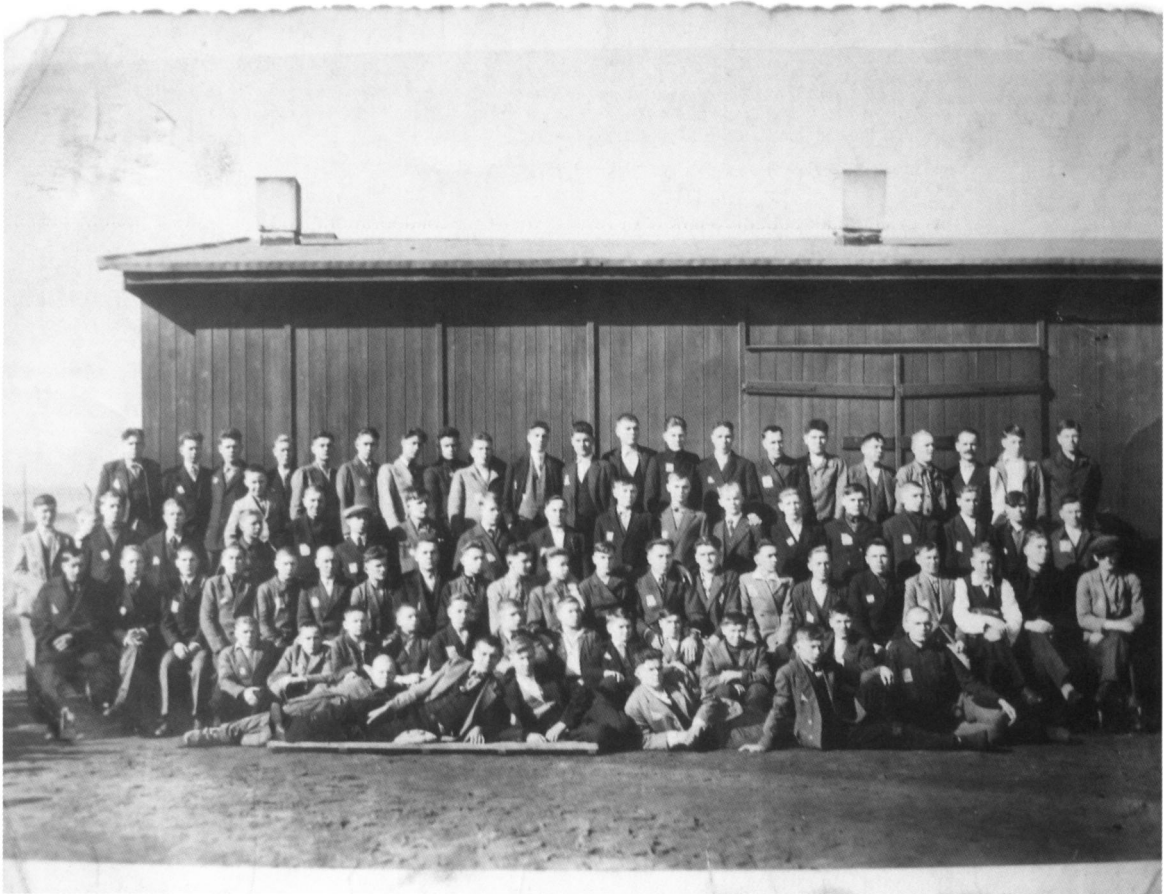
ber that there had been such a thing as forced and slave labour. Since then a lot has changed. [...]. It was another step that our members were frequently invited to schools. As a result today the number of those who know nothing about forced labour during the war is considerably lower.¹³

This struggle to gain representational space results from the blocked memory mentioned earlier, which should be, and can be, overcome in this way. However, it is also remarkable to see the contrast between the organisational efforts made in this respect and the individual accounts given over a decade later in the full knowledge of this space within the Czech culture of remembrance, when interviewees no longer needed to specifically emphasise their suffering in order to be heard.

France is probably the western European country that has seen the most vigorous debates about the status of former forced labourers, both in terms of processing factual history, and in terms of establishing collective memories. Controversy erupted immediately after the war among those personally involved and within society itself about who could claim what kind of victim status. This went hand in hand with competition for societal recognition and the benefits with which this status could be expected to be associated. Initially, the lines of confrontation were between resistance fighters, prisoners of war, and civilian deportees. However, further conflicts soon developed among the deportees as the political deportees distanced themselves from the labour deportees, while the latter subsequently began to expel workers who had – or were alleged to have – volunteered from their ranks. Those who had been forcibly recruited under the *Service du Travail Obligatoire* (STO) found themselves in a particularly difficult position, as they had officially been drafted to serve the German war effort by their own government. In terms of remembrance their situation deteriorated because the status of Nazi victims in general has gradually come to eclipse Gaullism's commemoration of a heroic resistance, making the status of 'deportee' the most highly rated asset within the politics of memory. This resulted in a fierce struggle to define which group could legitimately claim to have been deported. Indeed, it even occupied the country's highest court for some time, finally resulting in the 1992 decision of the Court of Cassation that forbids all labour deportees from designating themselves as deportees. Instead, the former *Service du Travail Obligatoire* forced labourers now refer to themselves at least as 'outcasts'. Within these various fields of tension one can see how strongly memories of forced labour have also been exploited in the politically charged sphere of

**Group picture of
Czech Displaced
Persons in a hospital
in Schwabing
(Munich, Germany),
August 1951.**





Group picture from the forced labour camp Dachelhofen (Schwandorf, Germany) 1944.

interpretations of the past for contemporary goals. This also hints at a certain fluidity within Ricoeur's model, as the now rejected inclusion of *Service du Travail Obligatoire* forced labourers' memories did not occur immediately after the end of the war, but was an outcome of post-war developments that also illustrates the dynamics operating within cultures of remembrance over time.

In Great Britain forced labour did not become an issue in the early post-war period, as the country had not been forced to supply any civilian forced labour, and neither the British government nor the public perceived the forcible employment of British prisoners of war in the German war economy as forced labour.¹⁴ The narrowly defined national memory commemorated British military and civilian losses and the victory of democracy.¹⁵ Those former forced labourers who settled in the country in substantial numbers after 1945 were consequently seen as labour migrants. Their wartime past was not allowed to obscure their actual function in the British economy. Dealing with the memories of their wartime experiences was either a personal matter or a matter for their immediate social environment, and did not become a societal issue. Having arrived in the

country, the former forced labourers were now generally referred to as European Volunteer Workers (EVWs), replacing the negatively charged designation of Displaced Persons (DPs). They still encountered varying levels of resentment and rejection from a number of social and political groups in Britain.¹⁶ At the time the British-German agreement for the compensation of Nazi victims was being negotiated. In the mid sixties Jewish former prisoner labourers and former forced labourers – mostly Eastern Europeans – who had settled in Britain were still largely excluded from public discourse and memory. In the late sixties, though, the relatively coherent collective memory of World War Two began to fragment, eventually providing more representational space for the remembrance of at least the Holocaust. There continued to be little public awareness of former civilian forced labourers from Eastern Europe until a heated debate about war criminals entering the United Kingdom as European Volunteer Workers began in the mid-eighties, once again focusing public attention on the entire group.

The initial situation in Germany was completely different from that in Britain, although the results were broadly similar. For a long time, any debate about forced labour

during World War Two was avoided both on societal and political levels. The presence of German victims and of foreign nationals who had, for whatever reason, chosen to stay on in Germany despite having been forced labourers meant that the latter could not avoid encounters with their former active and passive oppressors in the host society. At the same time the majority of Germans sought to ignore or repress their awareness of the former forced labourers. Nazi German exploitation of forced labour was understood as being natural in wartime, while the collective memory – if it retained any memories of former forced labourers – began to focus on the post-war criminality of displaced persons. This was a much more comfortable approach than a confrontation with the injustice that had been inflicted on roughly the same group of people in Germany before 1945. As the Cold War developed, awareness of the majority of victims of Nazism – who lived in Soviet-dominated Eastern Europe – disappeared because they had now reverted to being, once again, communist enemies. It was only in the eighties that some scholars, history workshops, and other civil society initiatives, because of their interest in everyday life during the Nazi era, began to encounter traces and memories of World War Two forced labourers which resulted in a growing public awareness that they should be recognised as victims of the Nazis.¹⁸ Within the context of the most recent compensation procedures there has been a rapid increase of initiatives to research and commemorate Nazi forced labour at local, regional, and national levels, so rapid indeed, that one is tempted to think of overload. Nevertheless, the actual lifetime experiences of former forced labourers since 1945 have remained frequently enough only a footnote to these efforts.

In Israel it is still difficult to raise the subject of forced labour or rather – to apply the term commonly used by contemporary historians to describe the forced labour of concentration camp prisoners – slave labour. Because the suffering of the Jewish communities had not been assigned its place within the predominant Zionist narratives of the establishment of the state of Israel, there was little opportunity during the immediate post-war period for the commemoration of the Shoah and associated camp and forced labour experiences. This began to change in the early sixties, particularly following the trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1961-62. Even today commemoration is still mainly dominated by efforts to preserve the memory of the murdered Jews of Europe, and as a result, the memories of forced labour have not been assigned a place in their own right, but only a space within the broader framework of Shoah remembrance. Here we can see the strong imperatives to remember being emphasised

within Ricoeur's idea of an 'obligated memory' and its consequences. The duty to remember, therefore, does not merely involve emphasising a particular aspect of the past, but usually results in the overshadowing of other aspects. Furthermore slave labour, which offered at best but a small chance of survival, had long been associated with the suspicion of immoral behaviour or collaboration. Another factor is that a substantial number of survivors are affected by feelings of guilt, as they continue to struggle to accept the fact of their own survival while so many of their fellow prisoners were murdered.

Three lines of interpretation

I am going to introduce three approaches to interpret how former forced labourers narrate their memories. However, as the historian Pieter Lagrou has said, 'The experience of displaced workers is only faintly mirrored in contemporary collective memories.'¹⁹ Irrespective of this lack of representational evidence there are a number of ways of understanding how former forced labourers experienced forced labour during the war and how they later came to terms with it. The three approaches which are explained below help in developing firstly a comparative understanding of how individuals tried to integrate their experiences of forced labour for Nazi Germany into their biographies from the point of view of relating the different places where they spent their lives before, during, and after the war. Secondly I will explore which role, if any, their wartime experiences have played within the vast space of conflicting World War Two memories in their countries, and thirdly I will focus on whether, and how, their individual memories have been recognised on a societal level until the present.

The first approach is an attempt to reconsider forced labour for Nazi Germany within the terms of the experience of a forced migration that was then reversed by returning, or transformed either by re-evaluation or through a process of secondary migration.²⁰ While this approach can only inadequately cover the traumatic experiences of prisoner labourers, it seems to go some way to allowing the post-war lives of many former civilian and prisoner of war labourers to be understood. Second, following an argument proposed by Lagrou, the memories of Nazi forced labour can be used to decode the predominant ways in which significance was assigned to certain events of World War Two in different countries – whether they involved the experience of occupation, collaboration, or defeat.²¹ Here it is possible to detect how all the conflicting memories of the manoeuvring and compromises involved in daily life and the opportunities for making slight improvements in it during the Nazi occupation have often been projected onto the deported forced labourers,

and what traces this has left in their memories. At the same time, this goes some way towards explaining why it has proved so difficult to integrate these experiences into the collective memories of victorious nations such as Great Britain. Finally, the way in which the status of former forced labourers within the cultures of remembrance and the social everyday life of the countries and societies in which they now live has been shaped by their respective national culture, political development, and moral norms must be considered.²²

Forced labourers as forced migrants

Former forced labourers have often been stigmatised because of their migration, and the associated assumption that they left their home countries voluntarily.²³ This stigmatisation soon developed into a frame of reference – one partly forced upon the ex-forced labourers/migrants, and partly actively adopted by them – to make their wartime actions understandable in several of the home countries to which they returned or in the receiving countries they entered after the war. Deportation to Germany had almost always meant an abrupt change in the course of the lives of the people involved,²⁴ although the effects that this forced migration has had on the further course of their lives show subtle but important differences. Those who returned had to re-establish their relationship with their society of origin, while those who stayed on in Germany had to try to achieve a ‘second arrival’ post-war to eclipse the impact of their troubled first arrival in wartime. Those who migrated to third countries had to re-interpret their displacement as the opportunity for a new beginning. The spatial dimensions of experiences and memories serve to dynamise Ricoeur’s categories, which are intended to make the developments that occur within predominantly stable collectives comprehensible. The effects that migrations have on memories may be difficult to locate within these categories, but can show how individual memories probe their limits.

Today, Czechs born between 1920 and 1924 who were conscripted or mobilised by Nazi Germany during wartime symbolically dominate Czech collective memories of forced labour. Officially, some of them attended ten-month training programmes, after which they should have returned to what the Nazis designated as the ‘Reich Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia’ where they were then again forced to work.²⁵ Others were immediately drafted for unlimited periods of forced labour within the Reich. This stands in marked contrast to the departures of Czech workers in 1938 and early 1939, which were, broadly speaking, voluntary and mainly economically motivated. Even at the time these aroused widespread popular

resentment.²⁶ There is today a consensus among Czech interviewees that their own departures were forced. They no longer feel the need to justify their departures, but describe them in an unspectacular, matter-of-fact way.²⁷

Unfortunately... I was not called up by the Labour Office (*Arbeitsamt*) [to work in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, C.T.], but I received a summons from the Prague city government – a German summons – which informed me that I had been drafted for what was called total assignment (*Totaleinsatz*) to the *Reich*.²⁸

This interviewee went on to describe in some detail his amazement at having been recruited by the *Wehrmacht*, more out of interest than in order to claim any special injustice or to highlight personal hardship. This overall attitude underscores the observation that the reversal of the blocked memory that has taken place in the Czech Republic since 1989 has had a relieving effect on how Czech former forced labourers tell their life stories. The sober approach of most Czech interviewees to their wartime experiences also reflects the fact that although they were never officially recognised as Nazi victims, most of them were able to begin respectable professional careers in the post-war CSSR.

Those young French men who were deported to Germany under the *Service du Travail Obligatoire* faced a more difficult situation, both on their departure and their return. Despite their rapid occupational and social re-integration after returning in 1945, French society increasingly refused to recognise these forced labourers as being the victims of either the Nazi or Petain regimes. To some extent, this has continued until today. Their major dilemma, that of having been conscripted by the collaborating government of their own country to work for the wartime enemy (but at the time ally) is reflected in accounts that document their uneasiness about their temporary forced migration to Germany, which they still find difficult to integrate into their biographies, although seldom as emphatically as in the words of this interviewee:

[19]51 I came back here [to his parental home, C.T.] again. If Hitler had not paid for my trip... I would never have left the farm. I never went on a journey again.²⁹

Jewish prisoner labourers frequently experienced liberation as being like a rebirth, and immediately felt the compulsion to get out of the misery of the camp and start life anew elsewhere, leaving everything that had happened to them there behind, or embarking on an anxious quest in search of surviving family members. As this Czech-Jewish survivor puts it:



Interviewee Wasyl B
in his home after his
IFLDP interview
(13 March 2006).

I'd made it. Everything went wonderfully, I would make it home, and my father would take care of me, and my life would be as it had been before. And the surge of energy and the surge of hope overwhelmed everything. I was in the first truck that left Bergen-Belsen.³⁰

However, she, like many others, soon discovered that returning home was hardly realistic, as homes had been destroyed and families murdered. In addition, in large parts of Europe, there was still active anti-Semitism, leading many Jewish survivors to considering emigration to the Jewish settlements in Palestine or, from 1948, to the state of Israel their obvious destination. While some saw the necessary temporary stays in other countries only as stopovers on their way to Palestine/Israel, the opposite also occurred. Some Jewish migrants felt unable to cope with the living conditions in the pioneer and settler society that was taking shape in Israel, a state whose relations with its neighbours' countries were highly fraught. Later they often followed relatives who had already migrated to other countries either before or during the initial stages of the war, or they joined other groups of survivors or other Jewish communities abroad. In the light of the oblig-

ated memory which has become prevalent in Israel since the late fifties one can also interpret these convoluted migrations as quests for memorial spaces where the people concerned could perpetuate their memories outside the larger obligating framework which came to dominate their national collective memory.

The vast majority of former forced labourers who eventually chose to stay on in Germany initially did so because they refused to return to home countries which had come under communist rule. They were denied entry to third countries because they suffered from bad health and some had developed relationships with German partners. Some among them still report at least ambivalently, or even positively, on their wartime experiences despite their forcible employment.³¹ Taken together, this makes it easier to understand why a significant number finally settled there. There are even some who say that they preferred being in Germany during the war under more or less tolerable circumstances with sufficient food in contrast to life at home, which was miserable, especially under the conditions of occupation.³² Nevertheless, for almost all, the process of social adaptation they had to go through was a very intricate one that sometimes still resonates in today's narratives as interviewees emphasise their lack of regrets:



I mean, well, frankly and honestly speaking, I would be lying if I were to say that I had a bad time during the war and that I regretted having stayed on here. Not at all. I do not regret it. Because, if I did, I would have acted differently even then. So I would not be here today. I do not regret it because I have not had any reason to regret it, although some experiences were not so pleasant, however, in spite of everything, I have no regrets.³³

As far as immigrant former forced labourers who today live in Great Britain are concerned, their migration was also often unintentionally successful. The immediate purpose had been to get out of Germany and it occurred to them only later that they had, indeed, made a good choice:

I didn't want to remain in Germany because in those days this was, in Germany still was chaos. [...] yes, and er, as that Berlin crisis developed and this big friction, I thought to myself, well, the best thing to do is go to England.³⁴

Ultimately, the new immigrants found the British environment very accommodating and

all of the interviewees were able to find work and formed families. They still remember forced labour as a hardship but it has partly been reframed to function as one element in a very protracted process that eventually resulted in a new and better life. Those former prisoner of war and forced or prisoner labourers who finally migrated to third countries generally fall outside the categories of memories formulated by Ricoeur as they are socially, culturally, and politically separated from their countries of origin, and therefore no longer revolve around the same centres of gravity, but have formed separate entities of remembrance as far as their memories of World War Two are concerned.

Among those former forced labourers who returned to their countries of origin, the rejection of the opportunity of migration to a Western country immediately after liberation continues to be seen as a missed chance and is an issue even today. We thus see among repatriates that migration influences their memories, although here it is only an imagined migration. It still gives the biography a distinct tilt, as it serves to sum up all the frustration and disappointment that life after World War Two meant for many of them. As one Ukrainian interviewee puts it:

Interviewee Jerzy C and the author after the IFLDP interview (London, 15 March 2006).

I was together with another girl, she lives in Pechersk. She is a little older than me. We were captured at the same time. However, I went to Austria; she went to Germany, to a farmer. (...). It was heavy work, but she was never hungry. [Short break] However, she could hardly read or write. If I had been her, I would have stayed there. She was liberated by the Americans, and we by our courageous fighters.³⁵

The story of their acquaintance is portrayed as a series of delimitations, culminating in liberation one by the Americans and the other by Soviet forces. After that, the entire further course of life – the troubles of which appear to have been determined by the advance of the Red Army – unfolds in her presentation, underscored with a mourning derived from hindsight.

Experiences of collaboration and defeat

For those who were deported from France for forced labour, the situation was doubly complicated. They were officially drafted by their own government, and quite a number among them preferred to go into hiding (*refractaires*) or even to join the resistance (*maquis*). In their interviews today most of those who followed orders still show a feeling of guilt for quietly accepting their labour recruitment. They seem to be constantly defending themselves against actual or imagined accusations of not fighting for their country, helping the enemy war effort unlike the many French prisoners of war or those deported by the Nazis for political or racist reasons:

... they picked me up, yes, that was, despite everything else, a sign.... They were friends of my age who were resistance fighters. They were older than me, a little, but after all, they were resistance fighters. No, but my integration was conducted quite well, but there were some who criticised us because we went to Germany to work; but that was so easy to say, and, in 1943, it was more difficult...; if it had been possible for me not to have gone, I wouldn't have.³⁶

There was random discrimination against former forced labourers on a social level and, in most countries, it also had a gender-specific dimension, as reported by this Czech woman:

For the girls who had been in the Reich [...] it was as if they had a symbol branded on their foreheads. They were considered to be inferior. Even when they had behaved impeccably [...] That's what humiliated me most.³⁷

This description is rather typical for the way women came to terms with the forced labour

experience more than being specifically representative for Czechoslovak post-war society.

What is special for the Czechs though is that instead of being discriminated against the majority of former forced labourers were forgotten victims during the communist era. Czech former forced labourers today are primarily concerned with preserving their memories of their wartime experiences. Knowing that this has already been accomplished on a societal level, they hardly regard it any longer as an urgent political, social or legal issue.

Ukrainians in particular seem to have regarded both the Nazi Germans and the Soviets as occupying powers. They often judged the Germans more positively if only because of the relatively short duration of the German occupation and its considerably greater chronological distance from the present. At the same time the forced labour experience is integrated into the longer historical trajectory of individual suffering under dictatorial regimes and ultimately into that of Ukraine as a suffering nation. Among those who had to go through the Soviet Gulag system the deep-seated disappointment at having had to suffer at the hands of compatriots is still noticeable; as one former prisoner said:

It was not easy anywhere. These were, so to say, compatriots, our people. And you always excuse your own people. Or not? There, they were foreigners, but here, they were our own. It was not painful when foreigners beat you, but when it's your own people, then it is...³⁸

In Ukraine, the decades of suffering experienced by former forced labourers is not so generally accepted and established within the culture of remembrance of the majority society. In contrast with the Czech interviewees, Ukrainian interviewees who have to overcome the former 'blocked memory', it is still a more pressing and emotionally present matter.

When British former prisoner of war labourers suffering from long-term health damage following their captivity and forced labour stated that their condition was a result of their wartime labour deployment, they found that officials and society in general simply rejected their claims. Therefore, they increasingly perceived themselves in the same way as soldiers who were captured in the debacle of May 1940, after the fall of Tobruk, or other British defeats. This continues to undermine their attempts to achieve proper victim status. They see their wartime experiences as an unresolved complex of issues but do not see any prospect of a satisfactory solution, concluding laconically, 'We are a continuing embarrassment to successive governments.'³⁹

To obtain recognition and compensation those prisoner of war labourers whose deployment contravened the stipulations of the 1929 Geneva Conventions have had to fight a continuous uphill battle. Within the predominant British self-perception of being on the winning side there is hardly any space for memories of suffering and defeat and consequently their memories must be distorted if they are to be integrated into the British culture of remembrance which has no place for acknowledging that British citizens had to endure the humiliation of performing forced labour for Nazi Germany.

In Israel, when they arrived, former prisoner labourers were identified with the failure and subsequent annihilation of Jewish communities in Europe. They were regarded as a negative heritage that Israeli society nevertheless still needed as a background against which it could establish its own contrasting identity:

We were not well received. They said: 'You went like lambs to the slaughter. How could you go just like that?' They were used to a different kind of reality where you can take up a weapon, where you can defend yourself...⁴⁰

On the other hand those Jewish former prisoner labourers who joined the army on their arrival in Israel immediately found access to the Zionist identity. Though their wartime past has continued to keep them apart from their social environment, it is mostly articulated either in private conversation or is integrated into lectures at schools or in commemoration activities.

Germans who had been prisoner labourers, even more than the foreigners who stayed on in Germany, were perceived as personifying the unprecedented destruction and decay Nazism meant for Germans and their country after 1945. These were hardly widely acknowledged or subjects of public discourse until the late sixties and so the surviving victims of Nazism found it advisable to keep a low profile to avoid rejection because they stirred up memories of an unsettled past. As a new series of trials of Nazi criminals in German courts began in the mid-sixties and with them a wider public recognition of Nazi criminality, former forced labourers living in Germany experienced relief in their daily lives and also saw them as a means of improving the general level of historical understanding, 'We not only need the trials to convict the guilty, but we also need them to reappraise history.'⁴¹

By identifying the perpetrators as perpetrators, representational space was also opened up for the perception of the victims as victims. However, the dominant commemorative imper-

atives behind these societal, judicial, and political efforts were directed at preventing a repetition of Nazism in terms of the war and the liquidation of the Jews. In comparison with these major crimes forced labour continued to be considered as only a minor misdemeanour.

Former forced labourers as members of post-war societies

The marked silence of French labour deportees makes a remarkable contrast with the widespread narratives of World War One veterans which also provided the predominant background of remembrance for World War Two experiences in France:

... my upbringing was shaped by the war. My father was a war veteran [long silence]. I never got to know any uncles [very long silence].⁴²

When contrasted with the memory of large-scale death in the trenches of 1914-18, forced labour under circumstances that were somehow bearable seemed to pale into insignificance. Not only because of their compromising contribution to the German war effort but also because of the heavy burden imposed by the commemorative role model of World War One veterans, forced labourers especially former *Service du Travail Obligatoire* labourers, even today find it hard to assign a proper position in their biographies to their wartime memories.

In Israel's collective memory the relation between labour and death continues to shape the status of forced labour. Here the two are more deeply interwoven than in the experience of any other nation. Perhaps only with the exception of the period of the initial stages of Jewish forced labour within Germany in 1938-39,⁴³ for Jews labour and death went hand in hand. Seen in hindsight it could be said that forced labour offered a chance of survival for some. Nevertheless, given the strong presence of the dead in the Jewish collective memories, the predominant impression, even for survivors, is still one of work as a way of death that continues to haunt their lives with the passing of the years:

And I heard that, uh, those who somehow survive the torture of the labour battalions, the slave battalions, they wind up, many wind up in Auschwitz. Some of them survived, ran away, different ways. But nobody fared well, you know.⁴⁴

At times, harsh confrontations between various groups of Nazi victims have developed in the early post-war years. The different degree in suffering became contentious.⁴⁵ In most cases this has resulted in divisions between various



Interviewee Jozef R
at the memorial site
of former Gestapo
camp Reichenau
(Austria).

organisations representing different groups of victims which have deeply hurt the people involved, especially those who experienced personal disregard or unjustifiable disadvantages meted out by changing political systems like East Germany and the Ukraine.⁴⁶ It is still rather unusual for interviewees themselves to dwell on the topic in a way that shows at least some understanding for other groups of victims in their society, as this Ukrainian does:

It is the same with the Bandera people [Ukrainian partisans fighting against Polish or Russian occupation CT], nobody wants to accept that they had fought too, or that they should share equal status with other front-line soldiers. And those who had been in Siberia and are still alive, they wonder why the Germans give us money.⁴⁷

This is probably an even greater issue in Eastern Europe as material benefits make a greater difference there especially for those former forced labourers who suffer from bad health and who are in need of continuous medication or health care. However, the rivalry for benefits also puts strains on the internal dynamics of cultures of remembrance which evolve over time in so far as they have to integrate a multitude of diverse and highly contradictory experiences. These become even more obvious and pronounced when the entire structure of the culture of remembrance is transformed as was the case in Ukraine after 1991.

Some Czech respondents refer to neighbours or acquaintances who were able to buy their way out of labour recruitment or shirk conscription because of their connections to local bureaucrats. To integrate the forced labour experience on a biographical level, they mostly emphasise

the sacrifice it meant to them, as they themselves have had to do without due recognition for their wartime misery for the greater part of their lives. However, they do not present it any longer as an account that must be settled:

Out of the village four had been selected, so four had been assigned. [...] Now it turned out that only I went off; as for the others, they could be released from service without any problems. [...] So I went all by myself and even so father still made efforts in various ways to use any acquaintances, to bribe them. [...] So I said: 'Not like that, then I'd rather go and somehow I'll still survive it....'⁴⁸

Initially, most of the returning prisoner labourers were rather confused and disappointed that the world around them did not seem to show any real interest in their suffering.⁴⁹ Despite the different circumstances in, for example, Britain or Germany there was little difference in this respect. So even where cultures of remembrance do differ in their way of including, or rather excluding, the experience of forced labour, how it is perceived by the people directly concerned may still be very similar. People were usually preoccupied with remembering their own experience on the home front or, if returning soldiers, their war experiences. Any acknowledgement of other people's sufferings would almost inevitably have raised the question of the degree of personal responsibility, or even guilt in the case of Germans, they bore for the deportees' sufferings. In the course of time this lack of interest resulted in withdrawal by former forced labourers who were themselves fully occupied with social readjustment. As a Jewish former prisoner labourer now living in Great Britain says:

Yes, and then the magic moment passed. Then we realised that nobody wants to know, so let's get on with something else, (...). And it really took the fifty years of (...) commemoration, and then suddenly the taboo had gone. You can ask questions now. (...). And then I really couldn't imagine myself telling anybody about concentration camps in 1960. Yes, I have also realised, if somebody says, 'Oh, you've been in a concentration camp, tell me about it'. Where do you start?⁵⁰

For those former forced labourers who stayed on in Germany it was much more the racist undercurrent of their social environment that would hang like a cloud over at least the initial years of their new life in Germany. That this has changed over the years marks the transition on a local level of a blocked memory to an obligated memory. And although the former forced labourers who remained in Germany after the war at some point stopped thinking about returning to their native countries most of them have retained a critical interest in them. They have also kept up a supportive attitude towards their families and relatives, attributing this to the greater economic strength of Germany and its greater affluence:

So I can't complain about Germany. Am glad that I am here. Really, certainly. Well, because I have also saved my family.⁵¹

So a successful outcome of a forced migration may actually help former forced labourers to acknowledge positive results arising from deportation, although they are usually presented as justifying not having returned home and sharing their families' fates in the country of origin.

Conclusion

Difficult as it is to summarise the experiences of former World War Two forced labourers, they share at least some distinct characteristics. The greatest need to speak about the experience of forced labour in Germany was found among Ukrainians. Though prevented and delayed by an adverse culture of remembrance many have at last emerged and spoken out after sixty years. One reason is because this part of their lives continued to be important after the war and we can see a culture of remembrance in transition with well over forty years of still-lingering blocked memory.

Most Czech respondents, for their part, showed a pragmatic coming-to-terms with the past. For them the prolonged period of enforced silence until 1989 combined with fifteen years of effort to set the record straight has led to a matter-of-fact approach towards their World

War Two experiences which are very much seen in the context of their post-war lives.

In France because remembrance of forced labour for Nazi Germany continues to be politicised it would appear to be an issue that still has strong emotional repercussions in the present as interviewees showed that their conduct, whether justifiable or not, continues to trouble their conscience. Here manipulated memory is probably still most palpable as former *Service du Travail Obligatoire* labourers' memories are indeed acknowledged in some manner, but to point out collaboration rather than suffering.

In Britain, there is a clear difference between British nationals' and post-war immigrants' memories of forced labour. The latter have kept a very low profile when it came to their past and if they dealt with it at all, then either only within the family or among friends from their home countries. British former prisoner of war labourers see their internment in Germany as the governing element when presenting their life stories, where labour, no matter how demanding or even destructive it may have been, continues to be seen as a subordinate phenomenon. This subordination is not just because of a lack of recognition of their forced labour but also because the former prisoners of war see themselves primarily as having been captured members of the armed forces. This difference in perception of different groups of former forced labourers reinforces the finding that not only are the memories of certain experiences treated in different ways, but also that it is the position of the different groups within specific countries, societies and cultures of remembrance that are important. Here the spatial dimension, introduced through migration, again comes into the equation.

In Germany forced labourers, whether nationals or foreigners, tried to attract as little attention as possible during the post-war period. It was only after several decades that they began to raise public complaints about the fact that perpetrators and bystanders had often been able to continue their lives after World War Two as if nothing had happened, while their own worlds had been broken into pieces.

As for former slave labourers in Israel, with the continuing prevalence until the present day of the Shoah as the basic script of Israel's culture of remembrance, the fact that the status of Jewish forced labourers remains marginalised and ambivalent is commonly mirrored in interviews with survivors.

The ultimate task, though, for the majority of former forced labourers, wherever they chose to live after the war, has remained a continuous struggle to regain some feeling of normality in their private lives, their social environment, and society at large. This struggle has included

attempts to claim a place within their respective countries' cultures of remembrance where they faced different regimes of remembrance and forgetting. These regimes, however, have not been static entities but have evolved over time

and also include experiences of migration. In the process they have become highly diversified spatio-temporal landscapes of memory with comparatively little space for the memories of former forced labourers.

NOTES

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Thonfeld, 13 March 2006 (England), p 35 and 50.

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