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A Case Study of Yugoslav Women Migrants in West Germany

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**Through Her Eyes: Gendered Memories of Migration
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supervised by Sara Bernard, PhD (University of Glasgow) ;
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Abstract

This thesis investigates how gender shaped the experiences and memories of labour migration among Yugoslav women in the Federal Republic of Germany between the late 1960s and 1990. While dominant narratives in West Germany have long depicted female “guest workers” as passive dependents within male-dominated migration flows, this study challenges such assumptions by centring women’s own voices. Building on eight in-depth oral history interviews and employing a gendered and intersectional analytical framework, the thesis explores how participants narrate their own migration stories, workplace experiences, family roles, and social positioning between home and host societies.

The findings demonstrate that Yugoslav women migrated for diverse reasons and exercised agency within the constraints of structural inequalities shaped by gender, class, and migrant status. As their life stories show, migration is remembered not as a single, fixed event but as a layered and ongoing process that influenced their identity formation, belonging, and socio-economic positioning well into retirement. Despite the influence and impact of gender in all areas of women's experiences as the analysis shows, there is nevertheless a prevailing invisibility regarding gender (discrimination), at times even on the part of the women themselves.

By uncovering female counter-narratives to dominant memory regimes, this thesis contributes to feminist oral history, memory studies, and migration history. It demonstrates the importance of bottom-up perspectives for understanding how migrant women’s experiences and memories complicate and enrich existing narratives about labour migration to West Germany.

Labour Migration, West Germany, Yugoslavia, Gendered Memory, Oral History

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1 Introduction

Until today, the labour migration of the so-called “guest workers” is mostly imagined as a male phenomenon in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG). This applies both to how the subject was academically researched for a long time and to the (West) German society's perception and memory of labour migration.¹ Two examples that illustrate this gender-specific perception are the arrivals of the "millionth guest worker", Armando Rodrigues de Sá from Portugal, and the "two millionth guest worker", Vera Rimski from Yugoslavia to the FRG. Both arrivals were celebrated as publicly staged anniversaries including a welcoming committee and the distribution of gifts at the train station. Today, however, only de Sá's arrival has a place in the collective memory of the FRG. The motorbike he was given as a welcome gift is part of the permanent exhibition at the *Haus der Geschichte* in Bonn, he is honoured on a memorial plaque on the train station in Cologne-Deutz and there have been academic conferences and projects focusing on his migration story.² In short, he has become the embodiment of post-war labour migration from Southern and South-Eastern Europe to the FRG and remains a symbol of the so-called German economic miracle to this day.³ Rimski, on the other hand, like many other female labour migrants, was largely forgotten.⁴

This story is by no means an isolated case. In general, female labour migrants often remained invisible or were solely perceived as passive dependents of their economically active husbands.⁵ However, these assumptions stood in stark contrast to the reality: by the early 1970s,

¹ See: Bade, Klaus J., ed. 1984. *Auswanderer, Wanderarbeiter, Gastarbeiter: Bevölkerung, Arbeitsmarkt und Wanderung in Deutschland seit der Mitte des 19. Jahrhunderts*. Ostfildern: Scripta Mercaturae Verlag and Herbert, Ulrich. 1986. *Geschichte der Ausländerbeschäftigung in Deutschland, 1880 Bis 1980: Saisonarbeiter, Zwangsarbeiter, Gastarbeiter*. Berlin: J.H.W. Dietz.

² See: Rass, Christoph, and Melanie Ulz. 2018. ‘Armando Rodrigues de Sá revisited: Bildwissenschaftliche und historische Analysen im Dialog’. In *Migration ein Bild geben*, eds. Christoph Rass and Melanie Ulz. Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden, p. 419-445 and Motte, Jan. 2004. *Invitation. Armando Rodrigues de Sá. Der millionste Gastarbeiter, das Moped und die bundesdeutsche Einwanderungsgesellschaft (1964–2004)*, In: *H-Soz-Kult*. Available at: www.hsozkult.de/event/id/event-53722. Last accessed: 25.08.2025.

³ For some media coverage commemorating labour migration (usually on the occasion of anniversaries), using the example of de Sá, see e.g.: Langels, Otto: *Millionster Gastarbeiter vor 50 Jahren. Ein Moped für Armando Rodrigues de Sá*, in: *Deutschlandfunk* (10.09.2014). URL: <https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/millionster-gastarbeiter-vor-50-jahren-ein-moped-fuer-100.html>, last accessed: 24.08.2025. *Express*: *Die bewegende Geschichte von Armando. Vor 60 Jahren kam er in Köln an – als Geschenk gab's ein Moped*, in *Express* (07.09.2024). URL: <https://www.express.de/koeln/vor-60-jahren-kam-er-in-koeln-an-als-geschenk-gab-s-ein-moped-857495>, last accessed: 25.08.2025.

⁴ See: Stokes, Lauren. 2022a. *Fear of the Family: Guest Workers and Family Migration in the Federal Republic of Germany*. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 1. It could be argued that the one millionth migrant worker represents a more spectacular record than the two millionth. Nevertheless, the discrepancy in public perception is significant and symbolises, at least in part, the different perceptions of migrants based on gender.

⁵ See: Mattes, Monika. 2005. ‘Gastarbeiterinnen’ in *Der Bundesrepublik: Anwerbepolitik, Migration und Geschlecht in den 50er bis 70er Jahren*. Frankfurt am Main; New York: Campus, p. 10.

women made up around one third of all labour migrants in the FRG, with Yugoslav women forming the largest group in 1971.⁶ There was also a specific economic logic in their recruitment: As cheap sources of labour, due to their lower employment status, female migrants in particular, were ideal candidates to fill “gaps” in the labour market of a rapidly expanding post-war West German economy. Although the conservative gender norms of the FRG at the time generally discouraged women’s employment, Yugoslav women were regarded as comparatively well-suited for the labour market, due to their prior work experience in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY).⁷ While the FRG signed bilateral agreements with several countries since the mid-1950s, the agreement with the SFRY was the only one with a socialist country. It led to the recruitment of over 500,000 Yugoslav workers into West Germany, making them one of the biggest groups among the recruited labour migrants.⁸

Although historians and social scientists have increasingly turned their attention to women’s migration⁹, much of the literature continues to adopt a top-down lens, focusing primarily on the representation and regulation of migrant women in the host society. While this perspective can provide insights into shifting migration trends, state legislation and its effects as well as the political climate of West German society regarding migration, migrant perspectives themselves remain underrepresented. A bottom-up approach, by contrast, can shed light on the everyday strategies and forms of agency that women developed, the meanings they ascribed to their migration, and the ways in which gender, class, and origin intersected in shaping their experiences. This thesis therefore explores how former Yugoslav women themselves remember their migration to the FRG. The analysis captures migration stories starting with the period of organised labour recruitment from the SFRY in the late 1960s and includes perspectives of women who migrated up until 1990. The choice of this timeframe highlights that, although the formal recruitment period ended in 1973, Yugoslav women continued to migrate for work throughout the 1980s, often through targeted labour recruitment.

⁶ See: Mattes, Monika. 1999. Zum Verhältnis von Migration und Geschlecht. Anwerbung und Beschäftigung von „Gastarbeiterinnen“ in der Bundesrepublik 1960 bis 1973. In *50 Jahre Bundesrepublik, 50 Jahre Einwanderung: Nachkriegsgeschichte als Migrationsgeschichte*, eds. Jan Motte, Rainer Ohliger, and Anne von Oswald. Frankfurt; New York: Campus, p. 294.

⁷ See: Bojadžijev, Manuela. 2008. *Die Windige Internationale: Rassismus und Kämpfe der Migration*. Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot, p. 104 and Novinščak, Karolina. "Auf den Spuren von Brandts Ostpolitik und Titos Sonderweg: deutsch-jugoslawische Migrationsbeziehungen in den 1960er und 1970er Jahren". *Das "Gastarbeiter"-System: Arbeitsmigration und ihre Folgen in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland und Westeuropa*, edited by Jochen Oltmer, Axel Kreienbrink and Carlos Sanz Díaz, Berlin, Boston: Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag, 2012, p. 144.

⁸ See: Shonick, Kaja. 2009. 'Politics, Culture, and Economics: Reassessing the West German Guest Worker Agreement with Yugoslavia'. *Journal of Contemporary History* 44(4): 719.

⁹ See e.g., Mattes 2005; Liakova, Marina. 2011. „Ausländerinnen“, „Migrantinnen“ und „Frauen mit Migrationshintergrund“ in Deutschland: wissenschaftliche Rezeption und mediale Berichterstattung. In *Femina migrans: Frauen in Migrationsprozessen (18.-20. Jahrhundert)*, eds. Edeltraud Aubele and Gabriele Pieri. Sulzbach/Taunus: U. Helmer.

The thesis, however, excludes war-related migration linked to the Yugoslav wars and the country's dissolution in the 1990s, as this type of migration followed a different logic than earlier labour migration. By focusing on personal memories and individual voices, through eight in-depth oral history interviews with former female Yugoslav migrants, the thesis aims to challenge dominant, male-centred narratives of labour migration and strives to uncover how gender shaped both the lived experience and the retrospective meaning-making of migration.

The thesis examines the research question: *How did gender shape the experience of being a labour migrant among Yugoslav women in West Germany?* While existing research has convincingly shown the value of gender-sensitive approaches to studying labour migration and memory, this thesis builds on that foundation by exploring how gendered experiences and memories of Yugoslav female migrants add nuance to, complement, and at times challenge dominant public narratives about labour migration to West Germany. Connecting past and present experiences in the female migrant's life stories, the thesis examines how these women remember their migration today. This leads to two further research questions: *How does the memory of female migrant workers differ from the dominant narrative of labour migration in West Germany and Yugoslavia?* And: *Why can gendered memory serve as a meaningful corrective or complement to dominant memory regimes?* In addressing these secondary questions, the thesis engages with the notion of counter-memories, which are memories that resist or subvert official narratives, while remaining cautious not to essentialise women's perspectives as inherently more authentic or subversive.¹⁰

While the thesis adopts a distinct gender perspective it simultaneously aims to take a holistic view of the life stories of female migrants. As such it recognises gender as a social category that always operates in relation to other categories, such as class, migration status and ethnicity. To address this, the analysis follows an intersectional approach. It understands the complexity of migrant women's gendered experiences within a broader matrix of social power relations. Emerging from the Black Feminism movement¹¹, the concept of intersectionality was first coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989. Crenshaw uses the metaphor of an intersection to illustrate how multiple axes of discrimination (such as race, gender, and class) overlap to produce accumulated forms of marginalisation.¹² In combination with intersectionality, the concept of agency, further deepens our understanding of how individuals navigate and resist

¹⁰ See: Foucault, Michel. 1977. *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, p. 160.

¹¹ See: Combahee River Collective. 1978. *A Black Feminist Statement*. In *This Bridge Called my Back*. Writings by Radical Women of Color, eds. Anzaldúa, Gloria/ Moraga, Cherrie. Berkeley: Third Woman Press.

¹² See: Crenshaw, Kimberlé. 1989. *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex*. *A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine*. *The University of Chicago Legal Forum* 139: 139-167.

such structural power dynamics. According to Emirbayer and Mische, agency refers to the capacity of individuals to act independently instead of portraying them as victims due to the marginalisation(s) they face.¹³ Anthony Giddens further highlights that migrant agency involves recognising that migrants are not only passive subjects of their circumstances but also possess decision-making capacities and degrees of autonomy within the structural power relations they are situated in.¹⁴ Together, these considerations serve as an important framework for examining the memories and experiences of migrant women in the thesis.

Conceptually, this thesis is situated within the interdisciplinary field of memory studies, drawing particularly on feminist contributions that emphasise the importance of situated knowledge and lived experience. Methodologically, oral history serves as both method and source: through the semi-structured interviews with the eight participants, the study engages directly with the subjects' own portrayals, narratives, and especially memories. This approach, combining memory studies with oral history methodology, enables the work to take the bottom-up approach described above. In addition, the interview material was analysed using thematic analysis, following the approach presented by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke.¹⁵ This method enables the identification of recurring patterns across individual accounts while remaining attentive to nuances and contradictions within the dataset.

The text is structured as follows: Chapter 2 reviews the existing literature across relevant languages and academic disciplines. Chapter 3 outlines the conceptual framework centred around memory studies, particularly regarding memory and migration as well as gendered memory. Chapter 4 contextualises the empirical case, offering a historical overview of labour migration to the FRG, Yugoslavia's specific migration regime, and the position of women within these structures. Chapter 5 discusses the research methodology in more detail by introducing and problematising oral history approaches and elaborating on the thematic analysis method, which was applied to analyse the oral history interviews. Chapter 6 presents the empirical findings structured around five thematic areas: (1) migration motivations and background; (2) experiences in the workplace; (3) roles in the home; (4) position in society; and (5) memory and meaning making. Finally, Chapter 6 offers concluding reflections on the significance of gendered perspectives in migration history and memory studies in relation to the data investigated.

¹³ See: Emirbayer, Mustafa, and Ann Mische. 1998. 'What Is Agency?' *American Journal of Sociology* 103(4): 962–1023.

¹⁴ See: Giddens, Anthony. 1984. *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, p. 10.

¹⁵ See: Braun, Virginia, and Victoria Clarke. 2006. 'Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology'. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3(2): 77–101.

2 Literature Review

This thesis draws on scholarship from both the social sciences and historiographic research, focusing on labour migration, gender and migration, and the specific local contexts of West Germany and Yugoslavia. It engages with German-, English-, and Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian-language literature to capture the diverse academic and regional perspectives on Yugoslav women's memories of migration. The literature in these fields developed unevenly across disciplinary and linguistic boundaries, resulting in a web of questions, theories and findings as well as persistent gaps yet to explore by future research. This chapter first outlines the development of the research field, then focuses on contributions that inform the analysis of female migrants' experiences and memories. Finally, it explains how this thesis aims to contribute to existing knowledge.

2.1 Social Science Literature and the Construction of Persistent Narratives

It is crucial to distinguish the varying developments across academic disciplines. German-speaking social scientists began exploring the phenomenon of labour migration to the FRG as early as the 1970s. This led to both the foundation of an emerging field of studies but also solidified assumptions that would impact the perspective on (labour) migration in the years to come.¹⁶ As Turkish labour immigrants formed the biggest groups of all migrants in West Germany, the words "immigrant" and "Turk" were soon understood as synonyms among Germans.¹⁷ This led to an over-simplification of the reality of (labour) migration in ethnic/national terms as well as a lack of research on labour migration from other countries of origin to the FRG. However, there are notable exceptions to this pattern. In the late 1970s, political scientist Othmar Nikola Haberl and sociologist Wilfried Künne produced early German-language studies on Yugoslav labour migration to West Germany.¹⁸ Haberl analysed the evolution of Yugoslavia's migration policy, ending with the post-1973 restrictions, while Künne examined the organisational structures of labour recruitment. Their works remain foundational

¹⁶ See: Liakova 2011, p. 129.

¹⁷ See: Molnar argues that Yugoslavs, Portuguese and Spainards, for instance, were not only underrepresented but also largely forgotten. See: Molnar, Christopher A. (2018): *Memory, Politics, and Yugoslav Migrations to Postwar Germany*, p. 16.

¹⁸ See: Haberl, Othmar Nikola. 1978. *Die Abwanderung von Arbeitskräften aus Jugoslawien. Zur Problematik ihrer Auslandsbeschäftigung und Rückführung*, München; Künne, Wilfried. 1979. *Die Aussenwanderung jugoslawischer Arbeitskräfte. Ein Beitrag zur Analyse internationaler Arbeitskräftewanderungen*, Königsten.

as they provide important insights and statistical data on Yugoslav-West German migration relations.¹⁹

At the same time, early social science research on labour migration was shaped by a deeply rooted male bias. A striking example of how research reinforced gendered and racialised assumptions is the 1977 study commissioned by the West German Family Ministry on non-working migrant wives.²⁰ This is where the first distortion of the actual situation of female labour migration occurs: although the employment rates among migrant women have always been higher than among German women, research has focused more strongly on non-working migrant women, as is clearly evident in the 1977 study.²¹ Moreover, despite including a sample of 100 women migrants from diverse countries of origin (Greece, Italy, Yugoslavia and Turkey), the study framed their challenges through the lens of “Mediterranean norms” and “religiosity”, pathologizing cultural difference rather than recognising systemic inequalities. As historian Lauren Stokes notes, researchers and the state failed to consider that migrant women might face the same structural problems as German women.²² These narratives illustrate how the West German state and academic discourses at the time constructed a narrative of passive, “traditional” female migrants.²³ Such biases, however, are not exclusive to German-speaking literature. Regardless of the specific local context of migration movements, scholars generally assumed that women only migrated as “tied movers”²⁴ accompanying men. It took years of further research to challenge these deeply embedded narratives, first by including women into the picture of migration research at all and then by treating gender as an “useful category of historical analysis”.²⁵ Starting from the early 2000s, social scientists increasingly argued that

¹⁹ Haberl for instance presented statistical data on both the emigration of Yugoslav men and women by Yugoslav republic or province. See Haberl 1979, p. 286. This data is still referred to in many studies such as e.g., Lorber, Verena. 2017. *Angeworben: GastarbeiterInnen in Österreich in den 1960er und 1970er Jahren*. Göttingen: V&R Unipress.

²⁰ See: Brandt, Franz et al, *Situationsanalyse Nichterwerbstätiger Ehefrauen Ausländischer Arbeitnehmer in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland* (Bonn: BMJFG, 1977).

²¹ See: Morokvašić, Mirjana. 1987. *Jugoslawische Frauen: d. Emigration - und danach*. Basel: Stroemfeld/Roter Stern, p. 91-92.

²² See: Stokes, Lauren. 2022b. "Knowledge about the ‘Migrant Woman’ as an Alibi for State Inaction in the Federal Republic of Germany," *Migrant Knowledge*, March 29, 2022, <https://migrantknowledge.org/2022/03/29/the-migrant-woman-as-alibi-for-state-inaction/>. Last accessed: 24.08.2025.

²³ For another example, following this narrative in the early 1980s see Mehrländer, Ursula: *Situation der ausländischen Arbeitnehmer und ihrer Familienangehörigen in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland. Repräsentativuntersuchung '80* (Bonn: Forschungsbericht im Auftrag des Bundesministers für Arbeit und Sozialforschung, 1981

²⁴ See for example: Mincer, Jacob. 1978. *Family Migration Decisions*, Center for Economic Analysis of Human Behavior and Social Institutions, New York, p. 3.

²⁵ Scott, Joan W. 1986. ‘Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis’. *The American Historical Review* 91(5): 1053-1075.

there is not one “typical” migrant and aimed for more critical representation of migrants and migrant women specifically.²⁶

In Yugoslav academic literature, the recruitment and out-migration of workers to West Germany and other European destination countries was also first examined in the 1970s. Like in the German academic discourse, it was the social sciences that first dealt with the topic. Consequently, two research centres, the Centre for Migration Research in Zagreb and the Centre for Sociological Studies in Belgrade, were opened. There, researchers like Ivo Baučić and Živan Tanić dealt extensively with Yugoslav out-migration (as well as return migration).²⁷ In the 1980s, sociologist and Yugoslav emigrant herself, Mirjana Morokvašić started investigating Yugoslav migration. Morokvašić was among the first to address the neglected topic of female migration in the Yugoslav context, and her work remains foundational for its inclusion of women’s own perspectives.²⁸ Melita Švob’s work on migrations of Yugoslav women from 1990 is another important contribution to the field, dealing with their departure, stay abroad and return to Yugoslavia. Based on surveys conducted in Berlin, Švob researched Yugoslav female migrants’ daily life and especially their subjective feelings regarding their stay abroad and potential plans to return.²⁹ In other works she also focused on Yugoslav migrant children and the struggles they faced within the West German school system.³⁰

2.2 Historiographical Literature on Labour Migration

The historical study of (labour) migration in West Germany only emerged as a distinct field of study in the past four decades, making migration history a comparatively young field within German-speaking historiography.³¹ The works of historians Klaus J. Bade (1984) and Ulrich Herbert (1986) are early exceptions, laying the groundwork for a since rapidly expanding field

²⁶ See: Liakova 2011, p. 130.

²⁷ See e.g., Baučić, Ivo. 1972. *The Effects of Emigration from Yugoslavia and the Problems of Returning Emigrant Workers*. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands; Baučić, Ivo. 1985. *Aktualna pitanja jugoslavenskih građana na radu u inozemstvu*. Zagreb: Republički komitet za informiranje; Tanić, Živan. 1979. *Proletarijat izvan domovine*. Beograd: Institut društvenih nauka, Belgrade. However, as Ulf Brunnbauer critically notes, in the beginning such migration research was strongly influenced by Yugoslav political elites, pushing for certain policies or agendas. Soon, however, scholars became very critical of this and increasingly worked independently, straining the relationship between the socialist state and the researchers, see Brunnbauer, Ulf. 2025. *Elusive Development: The Disillusionment of Migration Studies in Socialist Yugoslavia*. In: *Migration and Development* 0(0).

²⁸ See: Morokvašić, Mirjana. 1983. "Women in Migration: Beyond the Reductionist Outlook." Pp. 13- 31 in *One Way Ticket: Migration and Female Labour*, ed. A. Phizacklea. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul; Morokvašić, Mirjana. 1984. "Birds of Passage Are Also Women..." *International Migration Review* 4: 886-907.

²⁹ See: Švob, Melita. 1990. *Migracije jugoslavenskih žena*, in: *Migracijske Teme*, 6 (4): 3-11.

³⁰ See: Švob, Melita/Ivezić, Zdenko. 1989. *Ponašanje i odnos djece prema dopunskoj školi u Berlinu*, in: *Migracijske Teme* 5 (1): 21-26.

³¹ See: Carstensen, Anne Lisa, Sabine Hess, Lisa Riedner, and Helen Schwenken. 2022. *Solidarität - Kooperation - Konflikt: migrantische Organisierung und Gewerkschaften in den 1970/80er Jahren*. Hamburg: VSA: Verlag, p. 18.

of study.³² In 1990 Bade founded the Institute for Migration Research and Intercultural Studies in Osnabrück, a crucial institution, contributing to and broadening migration history research in Germany.³³ In his countless studies on the topic, Bade for instance investigated Germany's dual role as a country of emigration and immigration. Overall, he significantly shaped both academic and public understanding of how migration has influenced German identity, society, and policies.³⁴ Herbert's work is similarly central to the German historiography of migration, particularly through his analysis of foreign labour policy from the Nazi period to the postwar era. By investigating the exploitation of forced workers and the development of migration and integration policies, he highlighted both the continuities in Germany's treatment of migrants and the need to include migration history more centrally within (socio-)historical research in general.³⁵ Nonetheless, as Esch and Poutrous point out, migration in the German context is often still treated as a marginal or specialised field within social history, rather than an integral part.³⁶

The first historiographical monograph dealing exclusively with the topic of Yugoslav labour migration in Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian language was only published in 2012 by Vladimir Ivanović. It examines the migration of Yugoslav workers to West Germany and Austria between 1965 and 1973, combining archival research and interdisciplinary methods. It analyses both state migration policies and the lived experiences of 'guest workers', showing how a system aiming for temporary labour led to permanent settlement and significant transformations of both host and home societies.³⁷ Not only through remittances and return migration, but also by influencing public discourse and cultural perceptions in Yugoslavia and Western Europe.³⁸

More recent historiography on labour migration has expanded in both scope and methodology.³⁹ Some studies now zoom out of the nation-state perspective by focusing on

³² See: Dohse, Knuth: *Ausländische Arbeiter und bürgerlicher Staat. Genese u. Funktion von staatlicher Ausländerpolitik u. Ausländerrecht. Vom Kaiserreich bis zur Bundesrepublik Deutschland.* Königstein 1981; see also Bade 1984 and Herbert 1986.

³³ See: Esch, Michael G./ Poutrous, Patrice G. 2005. *Zeitgeschichte und Migrationsforschung. Eine Einführung.* *Zeithistorische Forschungen/ Studies in Contemporary History* 2, p. 338.

³⁴ See Bade, Klaus J., ed. 1984.

³⁵ See e.g., Herbert 1986; Herbert, Ulrich. 1994. Von der „Arbeitsbummelei“ zum „Bandenkampf“. Opposition und Widerstand der ausländischen Zwangsarbeiter in Deutschland 1939-1945 in: Großbritannien und der deutsche Widerstand 1933-1944, in Klaus-Jürgen Müller and David N. Dilks, eds. Paderborn, p. 245-260.

³⁶ See: Esch/ Poutrous 2005, p. 338.

³⁷ See: Ivanović, Vladimir. 2012. *Geburstag pišeš normalno. Jugoslovenski gastarbajteri u SR Nemačkoj i Austriji, 1965 -1973.* Beograd: Institut za Savremenu Istoriju.

³⁸ See: *Ibid.*, p. 297-318.

³⁹ Examples of anthologies that demonstrate this change of perspective within historical migration research for the West German context include: Motte, Jan, Rainer Ohliger, and Anne von Oswald, eds. 1999. *50 Jahre Bundesrepublik, 50 Jahre Einwanderung. Nachkriegsgeschichte als Migrationsgeschichte.* Frankfurt/ New York: Campus and Oltmer, Jochen, Axel Kreienbrink, and Carlos Sanz Díaz, eds. 2012. *Das 'Gastarbeiter'-System:*

transnational elements of labour migration. Marcel Berlinghoff, for instance, explores the 1973 recruitment stop as a European phenomenon, while Brigitte Le Normand's analyses Yugoslav migrants as "citizens without borders", forming imagined communities abroad.⁴⁰ Ulf Brunnbauer and Christopher A. Molnar have made important contributions by analysing the political, social, and cultural dimensions of Yugoslav labour migration, especially in relation to state policy and diaspora engagement.⁴¹ At the same time, more localised studies focus on specific industries and everyday experiences.⁴² Scholars like Manuela Bojadžijev, Simon Goeke, and Jörg Huwer highlight migrant agency and resistance by looking at labour struggles in the 1960s-70s,⁴³ while other studies have increasingly addressed the role of racism in shaping labour migration and everyday experiences of migrants in West Germany.⁴⁴ Finally, a growing number of studies also centre migrant perspectives themselves, often using oral history methods – an approach this thesis adopts as well in order to highlight women's voices and challenge dominant narratives.⁴⁵

In sum, while social science research engaged with labour migration much earlier and strongly influenced public and political discourses, historiographical approaches have only more recently emerged, offering broader historical contextualisation and a growing emphasis on migrant perspectives.

Arbeitsmigration und ihre Folgen in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland und Westeuropa. München: Oldenbourg Verlag.

⁴⁰ See: Berlinghoff, Marcel. 2012. Der europäisierte Anwerbestopp, in: Oltmer, Jochen/ Kreienbrink, Axel/ Sanz Díaz, Carlos (eds.), Das „Gastarbeiter“-System. München, p. 149-164 and Le Normand, Brigitte. 2021. Citizens without Borders: Yugoslavia and Its Migrant Workers in Western Europe. Toronto; Buffalo; London: University of Toronto Press.

⁴¹ See e.g., Brunnbauer, Ulf. 2019. 'Yugoslav Gastarbeiter and the Ambivalence of Socialism: Framing Out-Migration as a Social Critique'. *Journal of Migration History* 5(3): 413-437. Molnar, Christopher A. 2022. 'The Cold War and Return Migration: The West German Response to Yugoslavia's Efforts to Influence Its Workers Abroad'. *European History Quarterly* 52(1): 87-113.

⁴² For instance, Maïke Wöhler, for example, studies Greek women migrants in a typewriter factory in northern Germany, while Helena Kürten examines female metalworkers in North-Rhine-Westphalia and their strike potential. Wöhler, Maïke. 2023. »In Deutschland wartet das Paradies auf uns«: die Olympia Werke und die griechische Arbeitsmigration in Nordwestdeutschland. Bielefeld: transcript; Kürten, Helena. 2017. „Gastarbeiterinnen im wilden Streik“. Zur Wahrnehmung von Arbeit, Migration und Geschlecht im Mediendiskurs der Bundesrepublik am Beispiel der rheinischen und westfälischen Metallindustrie'. In *Themenschwerpunkt: Das Finanz- und Bankwesen in Westfalen vom 18. bis 20. Jahrhundert*, Westfälische Forschungen, ed. Harald Wixforth. Münster: Aschendorff Verlag, p. 499-536.

⁴³ See: Bojadžijev 2008; Goeke, Simon. 2020. 'Wir Sind Alle Fremdarbeiter!' Gewerkschaften, Migrantische Kämpfe und Soziale Bewegungen in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland der 1960er und 1970er Jahre. Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, Brill Deutschland; Huwer, Jörg. 2013. „Gastarbeiter“ im Streik. Die Arbeitsniederlegung bei Ford Köln im August 1973. Köln 2013; Birke, Peter. 2007. Wilde Streiks Im Wirtschaftswunder: Arbeitskämpfe, Gewerkschaften Und Soziale Bewegungen in Der Bundesrepublik Und Dänemark. Frankfurt am Main: Campus.

⁴⁴ See: Bojadžijev 2008; Morgenstern, Christine. 2002. Rassismus: Konturen Einer Ideologie: Einwanderung Im Politischen Diskurs Der Bundesrepublik Deutschland. Hamburg: Argument Verlag.

⁴⁵ For an oral history archive with auto-biographical recordings of migration histories see <https://domid.org/en/collection/av-media/> and also Migration-Audio-Archiv e.V.: <https://migration-audio-archiv.de/erzaehlerinnen/>. Both last accessed: 24.08.2025.

2.3 Core Works and Contribution of the Thesis

Sociologist Mirjana Morokvašić, briefly mentioned above, and her research are one example of scientific work that aligns with this thesis. Morokvašić offers the first comprehensive, empirically grounded analysis of Yugoslav women's migration to Western Europe, with a comparative study on West Germany, France, and Sweden. Through several years of field research in the three countries and multiple interviews with the same participants over time, Morokvašić is the first to address the subject in such detail. She challenges dominant stereotypes and male-centred migration research by emphasising women's agency, the gendered dynamics of labour migration, and the complex interplay between socialist Yugoslavia's ideals of equality and patriarchal social realities. Despite the monograph's publication in 1987, the study remains one of the most central references for understanding the socio-political position of Yugoslav migrant women and is therefore of great importance for this thesis.⁴⁶

Another such example is German historian Monika Mattes, who was the first to deal extensively with women migrants and gender relations on the West German labour market. In her monograph from 2005, she argues that, contrary to public perception, the recruitment of female labour migrants was a central strategy of West German recruitment policy, a fact that had been completely neglected until then.⁴⁷ In her other works, too, she argues that a gender-sensitive approach is necessary, as women's and particularly migrant women's work has always followed different logics and patterns than men's work – a standpoint on which the following contributions as well as this thesis are based on.⁴⁸

Isma Stanić's 2008 master's thesis explores the gendered experiences of Yugoslav migrant nurses working in Libya during the late 1980s and early 1990s, based on in-depth interviews. While the context of the research differs from this thesis' topic, Stanić chose a similar methodological and conceptual angle, focusing on both women's discrimination as well as agency. She argues that while out-migration offered women a degree of autonomy, traditional gender norms were reinforced abroad, leading to new forms of dependency that migrant women individually navigated through strategies of either adaptation or resistance.⁴⁹ As the following analysis will also show, nurses are interesting participants when studying female labour

⁴⁶ See: Morokvašić 1987.

⁴⁷ See: Mattes 2005, p. 9-25.

⁴⁸ See: Mattes, Monika: *Krisenverliererinnen? Frauen, Arbeit und das Ende des Booms*, in: Andresen, Knud/ Bitzegeio, Ursula/ Mittag, Jürgen (Hg.): „Nach dem Strukturbruch?“ *Kontinuität und Wandel von Arbeitsbeziehungen und Arbeitswelt(en) seit den 1970er Jahren*. Bonn 2011, p. 127 and Mattes 1999, p. 285.

⁴⁹ See: Stanić, Isma. 2008. *Rodna Dimenzija Migracije Medicinskih Sestara s Prostora Jugoslavije u Libiju. Između Autonomije i Zavisnosti*. Magistarski rad: Univerzitet u Sarajevu. Centar za Interdisciplinarne Postdiplomske Studije.

migration, as the care sector, unlike for example factory work, is a traditionally female-dominated field of work.

Verena Lorber's 2017 monograph highlights the heterogeneity of so-called 'guest workers' in Austria, challenging the long-dominant image of the passive, male migrant worker and the dependent female follower as his counterpart. By highlighting the overlooked agency and diverse motivations of female labour migrants, particularly from Yugoslavia, she critiques current migration research and shows how gendered ideologies shaped both policies and narratives in Austria. Her emphasis on biographical interviews with both men and women as well as an intersectional analysis contributes to a nuanced, gender-sensitive historiography of labour migration in Europe.⁵⁰

Lauren Stokes' 2022 monograph reveals how the West German state both enabled and feared family migration, treating it as distinct from labour migration despite the reality that labour migrants often arrived as or became family members. Her work shows how gendered and racialized notions of the "foreign family" shaped migration policies and increasingly constructed narratives of migrant families (especially women and children) as threats to the economic and social order.⁵¹

Finally, Thaisa Cäsar's 2024 monograph highlights the often-overlooked stories of female labour migrants in West Germany, particularly in the industrial city of Wolfsburg, from the 1960s to 1990s. Drawing on oral history interviews, the study challenges the dominant narrative of women as passive "tied movers" by emphasising their autonomous migration decisions and the role of gendered networks. Cäsar's approach highlights migrant women's potential for everyday liberation in the local sphere by focusing on the concept of emancipation.⁵²

This literature review demonstrates that migration history has become an increasingly diverse field, with growing attention to both the Yugoslav-West German context and the role of women migrants. The thesis contributes to the field by adopting a clearly defined perspective: it focuses specifically on Yugoslav women migrants, by using oral history interviews to emphasise their long-term reflections and lived experiences. As demonstrated in the introductory section, this is crucial, as their voices have often been marginalised or essentialised in public and academic discourse.

⁵⁰ See: Lorber 2017.

⁵¹ See: Stokes 2022a.

⁵² See: Cäsar, Thaisa. 2024. *Ungesehen. Weibliche Migration in die Bundesrepublik 1960 bis 1990*. Wallstein Verlag.

Although Morokvašić's extensive oral history research on Yugoslav women migrants addresses some of the questions this thesis explores, her findings reflect the realities and perceptions of the migration experience from nearly four decades ago. In contrast, the participants of this thesis are now able to reflect on their entire migration journey – from the decision to leave Yugoslavia to their working lives, changing social networks, retirement and the meaning of migration in retrospect. This allows for the inclusion of previously neglected aspects such as the experience of ageing, post-retirement life, and long-term integration. At the same time, conducting this research today is timely and necessary as most of the interviewees are now elderly and will therefore no longer be available as important sources for migration research in the future. For instance, in preparation of this thesis, two planned interviews had to be cancelled due to health concerns of the participants. Therefore, capturing their memories now is not only relevant but also a means of preserving first-hand accounts that may soon no longer be accessible. While Morokvašić's study and the existing body of literature offer valuable points of comparison, they must be engaged with critically in this thesis. Importantly, at the time when her study investigated Yugoslav women labour migrants abroad, there was no war in Yugoslavia in sight yet. Another aspect that highly impacted migrants' identities and the question of remaining or returning. As a result, contemporary reflections and distant memories cannot be approached in the same way, which is why this thesis draws on memory studies as a central theoretical framework.

3 Conceptual Framework

Looking at the overall evolution of memory studies in the social sciences, one can identify three waves of scholarship.⁵³ The first wave, emerging in the early 20th century, was characterised by foundational contributions by scholars like Maurice Halbwachs, Aby Warburg, and Frederic Bartlett.⁵⁴ These scholars explored for the first time how memory operates within social and cultural frameworks, emphasising collective and societal influences on individual memory processes. Halbwachs particularly revolutionised the field of memory studies, introducing the concept of ‘collective memory’. In his writings, Halbwachs argued against understanding individual memory as an isolated phenomenon, as it is shaped and influenced by collective or social frameworks. According to him, memory is not a personal process but rather deeply embedded in social structures or frames.⁵⁵ The notion of collective memory further influenced a second wave of memory studies that occurred during the late 20th century. This wave was shaped by a cultural turn within the social sciences, shifting the focus from a general understanding of “Memory in Culture” to an emphasis on “Memories of Culture.” Pierre Nora’s 1989 influential work on *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory) symbolised this wave’s methodological broadening, incorporating diverse, context-specific analyses of memory within and across cultures.⁵⁶ Finally, a third wave emerged during a transcultural turn that defined the early 21st century. This new interdisciplinary approach integrated perspectives from sociology, history, ethnology, political science, and philosophy.⁵⁷ Significantly, this wave moved beyond nationally bounded approaches by emphasising the circulation of memories across borders and cultures. This way, it opened new possibilities for analysing memory in globalised and migration-related contexts that are of great importance for this thesis.

Trying to make the rich field of memory studies more tangible, memory scholars offer different scales and typologies for analysing how memory is constructed and transmitted within societies. In her article on “Four Formats of Memory”, Aleida Assmann offers a convincing structural framework for categorising memory based on its scope and function formats. The

⁵³ See: Erll, Astrid. 2011. ‘Travelling Memory’. *Parallax* 17(4): 4-5.

⁵⁴ See: Halbwachs, Maurice. 1950. *Space and the Collective Memory*. Chapter 4 from *The Collective Memory*. URL: <https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/halbwachsspace.pdf>, last accessed: 25.08.2025; Warburg, Aby. 2012. *Atlas of images: Mnemosyne* (M. Warnke, C. Brink, & A. R. Savoy, Eds.; D. Britt, Trans.). Hatje Cantz; Bartlett, Frederic C. 1932. *Remembering: A study in experimental and social psychology*. Cambridge University Press.

⁵⁵ See: Halbwachs 1950.

⁵⁶ See: Nora, Pierre. 1989. ‘Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire’. *Representations* 26: 7-24.

⁵⁷ See: Landsberg, Alison. 2004. *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*. New York, [New York] Chichester: Columbia University Press. Levy, Daniel, and Natan Sznajder. 2006. *The Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age*. Philadelphia, Pa: Temple University Press. Rothberg, Michael. 2009. *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.

four formats she introduces are individual, social, political/ official, and cultural memory.⁵⁸ Individual memory relies on personal, subjective recollections, shaped by lived experiences. It includes both episodic memory (specific events) and semantic memory (general knowledge). Social memory refers to the shared recollections within groups such as families, communities, or generations and is shaped by collective beliefs and values. This type of memory is dynamic as it is passed down and renewed across generations.⁵⁹ Political or official memory, meanwhile, is institutionalised and ideologically driven, often constructed and maintained by state apparatuses. This form of memory is selective as it focuses on national myths and commemorative practices that influence collective identities. Cultural memory, the broadest form, is concerned with preserving a society's collective heritage, particularly through cultural tools such as literature, art, and monuments. These tools allow cultural memory to transcend individual or generational limits, contributing to the long-term preservation of identity and history.⁶⁰ While the thesis mainly deals with individual memory accounts, in the form of oral history interviews, Assmann's typology makes clear that these individual memories can turn into broader social memories in certain group contexts – like the family or migrant communities. Together they will be examined to counter or challenge the official/ cultural memory of labour migration of the (West) German state.

Memory scholars James V. Wertsch and Henry L. Roediger III complement this useful but rather static framework through a more process-oriented approach to memory. They define collective memory as a static collection of shared knowledge, whereas collective remembering is a dynamic process involving the active reinterpretation and contestation of the past.⁶¹ Crucially, they emphasise that individual memory is not isolated but distributed, shaped by cultural and institutional frameworks, such as media, technology, and shared narrative forms. Therefore, memory, both individual and collective, relies heavily on external tools and social contexts. For this reason, any kind of memory is not just a personal cognitive process but rather a socially situated and fluid phenomenon whose meanings can evolve over time.

Since this thesis draws on oral history interviews where women recall experiences from several decades ago, forgetting must be understood as an integral aspect of memory too. Memory scholar Paul Connerton identifies seven distinct types of forgetting, ranging from

⁵⁸ See: Assmann, Aleida. 2008. Four Formats of Memory. From Individual to Collective Constructions of the Past. In Emden, Christian and David Midgley (eds.) *Cultural Memory and Historical Consciousness in the German-Speaking World Since 1500*. Oxford: Peter Lang, p. 22.

⁵⁹ See *ibid.*, p. 24.

⁶⁰ See *ibid.*, p. 31-36.

⁶¹ See Wertsch, James V., and Roediger, Henry L. III. 2008. Collective Memory. *Conceptual Foundations and Theoretical Approaches*. *Memory*, 16(3): 318.

repressive erasure to more ‘natural’ forms like the generational loss of orally transmitted knowledge.⁶² Moreover, Connerton’s concept of structural amnesia describes forgetting that results not from repression or trauma, but from the disruptions caused by modern life, such as migration, or shifting social roles. He argues that when the structures that support certain memories disappear, like stable routines or community ties, such memories fade. He illustrates this with the example of male family lines, which are more often remembered than female ones, as women typically did not pass on their surnames to future generations, leading to the erasure of women’s lineages.⁶³ Assmann, too, identifies seven forms of forgetting and categorises them as neutral, negative or even positive. She demonstrates that people forget for many reasons, ranging from automatic forgetting for simple biological reasons to therapeutic forgetting to leave “the burden of the past behind”.⁶⁴ This perspective challenges the tendency of looking at remembrance as a value in itself and forgetting as a failure. It becomes clear that long-term memories cannot be understood as accurate facts but are always embedded in processes of framing, omission, and sometimes silence – whether due to shame, trauma, or other practical reasons. While these gaps in memory are harder to analyse, what is left unsaid or forgotten can reveal as much about lived experience, cultural norms, and intergenerational shifts as what is explicitly remembered. After all, forgetting is not the opposite of memory but one of its conditions that contributes to shaping our understanding and remembering of the past.

In summary, memory studies investigate how societies interpret and reconstruct their pasts to navigate the present and future. By analysing the processes of remembering and forgetting, scholars can uncover the underlying power dynamics that shape historical narratives, collective identities, and generational knowledge. These considerations matter for this thesis specifically as its main source are oral history interviews, which reflect on memories and experiences of the individual participants; these interviews likewise allow for the extrapolation of common themes within the life stories of Yugoslav women migrants in West Germany.

3.1 Memory in Motion

Having briefly mapped the field of memory studies, some major questions in relation to the thesis’ topic remain unanswered: How do we understand memory of individuals that have moved, migrated, or been exiled from their place of origin? This section highlights how these questions are particularly crucial as classical conceptions of memory studies heavily rely on

⁶² See: Connerton, Paul. 2008. ‘Seven Types of Forgetting’. *Memory Studies* 1(1): 59–71, p. 60-63.

⁶³ See: *Ibid.*, p. 64.

⁶⁴ Assmann, Aleida. 2016. *Formen Des Vergessens*. Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag.

spatiality of memory. Halbwachs, for instance, emphasizes the function of space as a structuring and enduring constant concerning memory and claims: “[W]e can understand how we recapture the past only by understanding how it is, in effect, preserved by our physical surroundings. It is to space – the space we occupy, traverse, have continual access to, or can at any time reconstruct in thought and imagination – that we must turn our attention”.⁶⁵ Astrid Erll, in contrast, suggests stepping away from Halbwachs’ assumption that memory is bound to the frame of a place, a region, a social group, a religious community, or a nation. She argues: “Halbwachs seems undivided: when he writes about the individual, he provides a good model of the transculturality of memory. But when he looks at the production of collective memory in social settings, he appears to imagine a ‘containered’ memory”.⁶⁶ She claims: “Memories do not hold still – on the contrary, they seem to be constituted first of all through movement.”⁶⁷ She then develops the concept of ‘travelling memory’ to describe how cultural memory is shaped through the continuous movement and exchange of people, media, forms, content, and practices. Contrary to the contemporary emphasis on global media cultures and the era of globalisation, Erll notes that the phenomenon of travelling memory has roots extending to ancient times. Memory lives and evolves through its movements, adapting and taking on new meanings in response to changing social, temporal, and spatial contexts.⁶⁸

While traditional (collective) memory concepts focused on the nation-state, they often overlook the concerns of migrants, minorities, and diasporas. Creet’s and Kitzmann’s edition on memory and migration addresses precisely these issues. Its main argument is that migration, rather than location, serves as the core condition of memory.⁶⁹ The authors explore the dynamics of memory across times, places, generations, and media, assuming that movement is the most important catalyst for memory. Some consistent themes Creet identifies in migrated memory are for instance value, melancholy, the absence of origins, the inability to return, and the suspension of memory because of migration. She concludes, while place matters concerning memory, displacement is more likely to produce immobile memories and radical forgetting than a stable location: “Memory is always migrating, generating its own topological demands, never more so than now.”⁷⁰

⁶⁵ Halbwachs 1950, p. 7.

⁶⁶ Erll 2011, p. 10.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ See *ibid.*, 11-12.

⁶⁹ See: Creet, Julia, and Andreas Kitzmann, eds. 2011. *Memory and Migration: Multidisciplinary Approaches to Memory Studies*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, p. 9.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

Similarly, Palmberger and Tošić explore how different patterns of mobility influence memory practices and contribute to new forms of remembering. Their research highlights how mobility can both unsettle and reinforce hegemonic national narratives, serving as a crucial lens for rethinking memory. They focus on the role of memory in transnational social relations, noting that mnemonic images of “home” are particularly pervasive in diasporic contexts, often causing a longing for faraway places.⁷¹ By shifting the focus from static sites of memory to the lived experiences of mobile individuals, the authors build on Creet’s argument that migration catalyses memory and demonstrate how mobility itself creates, carries, and transforms memory across borders.

3.2 Feminist Thought and Memory Studies

When researching migrant women’s memories, feminist memory studies represent another important theoretical foundation within the broader field of memory studies. They challenge the exclusion and marginalisation of women’s experiences in dominant cultural and historical narratives by uncovering and valuing gendered memories. Hirsch and Smith, for instance, argue that gender, much like race, class, and nation, is a critical axis of power that influences memory practices. They highlight how dominant narratives often privilege male, elite, and nationalistic perspectives, marginalising or excluding women’s experiences altogether.⁷² In this context, gendered memory counters these incomplete, official narratives by highlighting the stories of those who are historically excluded. The authors emphasise that such counter-memory projects have the potential to destabilise official national memory and reveal its constructed nature, making visible the lives and contributions of marginalised groups.⁷³ The integration of feminist theory into memory studies thus opens critical frameworks to understand how gendered memory operates as both a site of resistance and an opportunity for rethinking dominant narratives and world views.

Particularly when combined with the concept of intersectionality, feminist memory studies offer a useful theoretical tool for understanding the complex dynamics of gendered memory. In the context of cultural memory, intersectionality reveals how dominant narratives often overshadow or obscure the contributions of those who experience intersecting oppressions. Feminist memory scholar Anna Reading argues that “cultural memory of women

⁷¹ See: Palmberger, Monika, and Jelena Tošić, eds. 2017. *Memories on the Move. Experiencing Mobility, Rethinking the past*. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, p. 2.

⁷² See: Hirsch, Marianne, and Valerie Smith. 2002. ‘Feminism and Cultural Memory: An Introduction’. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28(1): 225.

⁷³ See: *Ibid.*, p. 225-226.

and girls has been lost, distorted and erased”⁷⁴ for centuries due to the dominance of male-centric narratives, with men’s lives and achievements being privileged in literature, history books, national cultures, and public memory. This critical approach aligns with the aim of this thesis: to analyse the simultaneous interactions of gender, class, and nation in the memories of female Yugoslav workers in the FRG. Crucially, such an analysis not only addresses the structural dimensions of exclusion and marginalisation of migrant women but also brings attention to their agency within these (often oppressive) frameworks.

Instead of framing subjects that face multiple forms of oppression or discrimination solely as victims, the concept of agency further deepens our understanding of how such individuals navigate and resist structural power dynamics within memory practices. Hirsch and Smith emphasise “practices of private everyday experience, recognizing that they are as politically revealing in their own way as any event played out in the public arena”.⁷⁵ This view resonates with the idea that personal, often overlooked stories can serve as sites of resistance against hegemonic cultural memory. To name just one example, everyday experiences of women who have worked in the home, taking on tasks such as housework and caregiving, often challenge dominant narratives that glorify male-dominated public achievements. These domestic contributions, when remembered and brought forward, can disrupt the traditional history that prioritises male labour in the workforce and public spheres.

Finally, building on the works of Kuzma and Pietrzak’s intersectional analysis of memory practices highlights the importance of addressing the plurality of experiences within marginalised groups.⁷⁶ While marginalised perspectives offer insightful counter-narratives, one should not view a group (such as migrant women) as uniform but highlight important differences and contradictions, instead. This way, feminist approaches to memory can destabilise uniform narratives and create space for diverse voices. By integrating these perspectives, feminist memory studies offer a suitable framework for understanding how intersecting identities shape memory practices of female Yugoslav migrants in the FRG.

⁷⁴ Reading, Anna. 2019. ‘The Female Memory Factory: How the Gendered Labour of Memory Creates Mnemonic Capital’. *European Journal of Women’s Studies* 26(3): 2.

⁷⁵ Hirsch/Smith 2002, 226.

⁷⁶ See: Kuźma, Inga B., and Edyta Pietrzak. 2020. ‘Gendering Memory: Intersectional Aspects of the Polish Politics of Memory’. *Przegląd Socjologii Jakościowej* 16 (1): 102-118.

4 Historical Context of the Empirical Case

Migration has always taken on many forms and meanings. Historian Jochen Oltmer defines it as “the long-term relocation of the centre of life of individuals, families, groups or even entire populations”.⁷⁷ Bade describes migration as a *conditio humana*⁷⁸, emphasising its historical normality and crucial role in shaping societies. Depending on the historical and geographical context, migration follows different patterns and logics. From the mid-1950s onward, labour migration became the predominant form of immigration to the Federal Republic of Germany.

Labour migration is a particularly interesting form of migration, as the term refers both to a specific motive as well as a distinct migration process. Its concrete implementation is shaped by both the institutional framework and the economic interests of the participating states.⁷⁹ As Lorber notes, in a sense all migrants inevitably become labour migrants in the long term, as they are required to work in their country of destination.⁸⁰ In this thesis, however, the term is used more narrowly and refers to the European recruitment system and its developments following the recruitment stop in the second half of the 20th century.⁸¹ The European labour recruitment system was made possible by bilateral recruitment agreements between western and northern European countries and predominantly southern and south-eastern European countries, whose labour force was intended to compensate for shortages on the labour market identified in the post-war period. In the West German context, the industrially strong federal states such as Baden-Württemberg and North Rhine-Westphalia were particularly interested in migrant labour, so that the first agreement between the FRG and Italy was signed as early as 1955.⁸² This model was soon extended to the whole of West Germany, so that further recruitment agreements followed throughout the 1960s. First by Spain and Greece (both in 1960), then by Turkey (1961), Morocco (1963), Portugal (1964), Tunisia (1965) and finally Yugoslavia (1968).⁸³ The recruited workers were granted a temporary stay in the Federal

⁷⁷ Oltmer 2010, p. 1.

⁷⁸ See: Bade, Klaus J. 2017. Migration, Flucht, Integration. Kritische Politikbegleitung von der ‘Gastarbeiterfrage’ bis zur ‘Flüchtlingskrise’; Erinnerungen und Beiträge. Second ed. Karlsruhe: von Loeper Literaturverlag. p. 11.

⁷⁹ See: Lorber, p. 36.

⁸⁰ Aida Spahić, for example, argues in her study on women’s Au Pair Migration from Bosnia and Herzegovina to the USA that Au Pair programmes are a form of labour migration that is usually omitted in migration studies due to its temporary nature, see: Spahić, Aida. 2012. Gender Dimension of Migrations. Au Pair Migration from Bosnia and Herzegovina to the United States of America, in: Migration from Bosnia and Herzegovina. University of Sarajevo. Sarajevo 2013, p. 127-136.

⁸¹ See: Lorber, p. 36.

⁸² See: Mattes 1999, p. 287-289.

⁸³ See: Hunn, Karin. 2005. „Nächstes Jahr kehren wir zurück...“ Die Geschichte der türkischen „Gastarbeiter“ in der Bundesrepublik. Göttingen, p. 29-30. The recruitment agreements with Morocco and Tunisia are also rarely considered in the research literature. Despite the existing recruitment agreements, significantly fewer people migrated to the FRG from the two North African countries than from the other countries listed. In the case of

Republic, which was linked to their employment contract. Thus, the so-called German economic miracle that began in the post-war period was mostly based on fast and inexpensive migrant labour. For instance, in the core period of labour recruitment (from 1950 to 1973), West Germany's gross domestic product more than tripled.⁸⁴ Migrants acted as a “reserve army”⁸⁵ in the West German labour market by working in sectors with labour shortages on the one hand and in less capitalised, unattractive or dangerous sectors, most Germans did not want to work in, on the other hand.⁸⁶

In this context, the term ‘guest workers’ has become established not only in contemporary sources, but also in large parts of academic literature. However, the frequent prefix ‘so-called’ or the use of inverted commas already indicate the ambivalence of the term. Therefore, this study aims to use more open formulations to emphasise the heterogeneity of the people and the motives behind their migration decisions. At the same time, some migrants have (re)appropriated the term and use it as a self-designation, for example by describing themselves as *Gastarbeiterkinder*, German for “the children of guest workers.”⁸⁷ For the Yugoslav context, the adjusted spelling *gastarbajter* has become widespread in colloquial language but also in music and literature.⁸⁸ Yet, since this study is dedicated to the visibility and agency of women migrants, there are several reasons why it uses the terms labour migrant, migrant worker or female migrant instead: Firstly, official correspondence at the time referred to the labour migrants as “foreign workers” instead of “guest workers.”⁸⁹ Secondly, the term does not reflect the fact that a considerable proportion of the people recruited at the time still live in the FRG today, have integrated into society and now possess German citizenship. Thirdly, Goeke points out in his study on migrant struggles that the term ‘guest workers’ cements the perception of

Tunisia, it was contractually specified that a maximum of 3,000 Tunisians could work in the Federal Republic. In addition, both countries and Turkey were subject to a special rule that limited employment contracts to a maximum of two years.

⁸⁴ See: Miller, Jennifer. 2023. Her Fight Is Your Fight: “Guest Worker” Labor Activism in the Early 1970s West Germany, in: *International Labor and Working-Class History* 84: 227-233.

⁸⁵ See e.g., Mattes 1999, p. 285; Goeke 2020, p. 61; Bojadžijev 2008, p. 85.

⁸⁶ See Bade 1984, p. 317.

⁸⁷ See the literature platform Daughters and Sons of Gastarbeiters. URL: <http://www.gastarbeiter.de/autorinnen.html>. Last accessed: 24.08.2025.

⁸⁸ See for example this entry in an online dictionary: Rečnikopedija. Art.: “Šta znači reč: Gastarbajter?” URL: https://recnikopedija.com/sta-znaci-rec-gastarbajter/#google_vignette. Last accessed: 24.08.2025.

⁸⁹ See the German-Italian Recruitment Agreement, the content of which was used as a model for other bilateral recruitment agreements: Amtliche Nachrichten der Bundesanstalt für Arbeitsvermittlung und Arbeitslosenversicherung (ANBA), No. 2, 4th year, 25 February 1956. Available online at: <https://italiener.angekommen.com/Dokumente/Abkommen.html>. Last accessed: 24.08.2025.

migrants as an apolitical group.⁹⁰ This study aims to challenge this perception by focusing on the agency of Yugoslav migrant women.

4.1 Labour Migration to the FRG

By 1973, almost 14 million labour migrants from various countries of origin had migrated to the Federal Republic via the recruitment system. Around 11 million of them left the FRG after a while to return to their countries of origin. Both the returnees and the almost 2-3 million people who decided to remain in West Germany had a significant impact on the country.⁹¹ When looking at labour migration in West Germany, certain patterns of employment become apparent. Over a third of the migrant workers were employed in the iron and metal industry. In addition, almost a quarter worked in the manufacturing industry and around a sixth in the construction sector. Opportunities for advancement were generally made more difficult for migrant workers.⁹² The state recruitment policy was maintained until Federal Minister of Labour Walter Arendt announced on 23 November 1973 that the recruitment of migrant workers to the Federal Republic would be terminated from now on.⁹³ The reason given was a drastic decline in economic growth as a result of the preceding oil price crisis and rising unemployment figures.⁹⁴ Herbert, on the other hand, shows that the oil price crisis was not the cause of the recruitment stop, but was rather used as a favourable occasion to reduce the number of migrant workers in the FRG. Instead, he argues that by 1973 politicians were already debating the “social consequences”⁹⁵ and overburdened infrastructures presumably caused by long-term stays of migrants.⁹⁶

While the recruitment agreements significantly shaped the Federal Republic’s demographic and socio-political landscape, the history of labour migration extends beyond the state-led bilateral policies between 1955 and 1973. On the one hand, the migrations resulting from the recruitment agreements led to family reunions, so-called ‘chain migrations’ and more

⁹⁰ See: Goeke 2020, p. 49-51. For further debates on the history of the term see: Rass, Christoph. 2023. ‘Gastarbeiter’ – ‘Guest Worker’. Translating a Keyword in Migration Politics. IMIS Working Paper 17, Institut für Migrationsforschung und Interkulturelle Studien (IMIS) der Universität Osnabrück. Osnabrück: IMIS.

⁹¹ See: Stokes 2022a, p. 101.

⁹² See: Herbert, Ulrich: *Geschichte der Ausländerpolitik in Deutschland. Saisonarbeiter, Zwangsarbeiter, Gastarbeiter, Flüchtlinge.* München 2002, p. 237.

⁹³ See: Berlinghoff 2012, p. 149-152.

⁹⁴ See: Bade 2000, p. 316.

⁹⁵ Herbert 2002, p. 229.

⁹⁶ See: Berlinghoff 2012, p. 153-154. The main topics discussed in this context were the housing market, labour, family reunification and the integration of the so-called second generation into the education and healthcare system, as well as the relationship between migrants and Germans. It became clear that a continuation of the recruitment policy in the future would have required different social, political and legal measures. At the same time, anti-migrant and racist stereotypes were on the rise again in West Germany.

extensive migrant networks. Therefore, 1973 should not be seen as the end of labour migration, but rather as the beginning of the Federal Republic's transformation into a country of immigration.⁹⁷ As Herbert notes, this led to a stable number of migrants in West Germany that even rose from 1979 onwards. As a result of increased family reunification, growing proportions of these migrant communities were women and young people, leading to migrants investing in permanent housing, while sending remittances into their countries of origin.⁹⁸ On the other hand, people also migrated during this period for various other reasons than solely work, ranging from educational migration and political exile to flight and expulsion. For many migrants, the recruitment agreements offered a relatively accessible legal route out of their countries of origin and into the FRG. Similarly, after the 1973 recruitment stop, migrants found other regular or irregular ways to migrate to the FRG and to pursue employment there. Goeke argues that such categories "do not offer any explanation of the migrants' motives but rather reflect the state's need for control [of migration movements]."⁹⁹ Although family migration was more difficult to obtain bureaucratically than entering the country through a recruitment contract before 1973, it was one of the few legal ways for non-EEC citizens such as Yugoslavs or Turks to enter the FRG once the recruitment stop came into force.¹⁰⁰ As a result, existing family and migrant networks expanded and migrants continued to find solutions to work abroad. Stokes argues that the West German Labour Ministry "actively supported family migration in large part because it was hungry for female labor"¹⁰¹ which it sought to recruit in the form of young, 'flexible' migrant women. Accordingly, statistical data shows that after 1973, men were more likely to leave the FRG, while women tended to stay and later brought their husbands to join them.¹⁰²

Having these considerations in mind, this thesis approaches both the timeframe of analysis and the category of 'female labour migrant' with greater flexibility than many previous studies. While the primary recruitment period ended in 1973, this is not treated as a strict endpoint in this study. The years prior to the Yugoslav wars can still be seen as an extension of the Yugoslav labour migration phase, particularly in the case of women. As chapter 4.3 will show, women continued to be recruited specifically for the West German labour market well into the 1980s. For this reason, the thesis includes migration stories up until 1990 but excludes the subsequent war-related migration movements as they followed a different logic than labour

⁹⁷ See: Bade 2000, p. 315.

⁹⁸ See: Herbert 2002, p. 232

⁹⁹ Goeke 2020, p. 17.

¹⁰⁰ See: *Ibid.*, p. 38.

¹⁰¹ Stokes 2022a, p. 23.

¹⁰² See: *Ibid.*, p. 101.

migration. Most of the women interviewed for this study migrated under formal recruitment agreements, but not all. (Female) migrants were never a homogeneous group but differed in origin, age, education, religion, occupation, socio-economic background, gender, and migration motives. By acknowledging these overlaps and variations, the thesis aims to reflect the complex and heterogeneous realities of female Yugoslav migrants.¹⁰³

4.2 Labour Migration from Yugoslavia

The Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was the last country West Germany signed bilateral recruitment agreements with in 1968. By the time, the FRG had already had a history of more than a decade of labour migration and its institutions in place to enable the recruitment of migrant workers. However, the Yugoslav-West German recruitment agreement was still a unique one, as Yugoslavia was the only socialist state with which the FRG signed a bilateral agreement. Until the political climate allowed for formalised migration from Yugoslavia to West Germany, bilateral labour recruitment was preceded by a significant amount of informal migration movement: In the early 1960s, Yugoslav workers already came to West Germany by securing private contracts with companies, often with support from relatives who already lived abroad or by overstaying tourist visas and looking for work on site.¹⁰⁴ Although the bureaucratic process was not institutionalised yet and therefore relatively complicated, the FRG was nevertheless an attractive destination for Yugoslavs due to its higher wages, demand for labour and geographical closeness to Yugoslavia.¹⁰⁵ Between 1961 and 1968, nearly 100,000 Yugoslavs migrated this way. Domestic factors in Yugoslavia, too, contributed to early out-migration. Until the 1960s, the Yugoslav state did not permit its citizens to migrate abroad for economic reasons.¹⁰⁶ However, following Tito's split with Stalin and the Eastern bloc in 1948, the Yugoslav state faced significant economic difficulties and was dependent on financial aid packages from the West, and particularly the US.¹⁰⁷ At the same time, Yugoslavia, despite being a socialist country, struggled with a relatively high level of unemployment that increasingly threatened the social order. This way, out-migration progressively became a double solution to both economic and social challenges.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰³ See: Lorber 2017, p. 18.

¹⁰⁴ See: Shonick 2010, p. 726-727.

¹⁰⁵ See: Ibid., p. 726.

¹⁰⁶ See: Lorber 2017, p. 81.

¹⁰⁷ See: Calic, Marie-Janine. 2010. *Geschichte Jugoslawiens Im 20. Jahrhundert*. München: C.H. Beck, p. 142.

¹⁰⁸ See Le Normand 2021, p. 4; Shonick 2010, p. 726.

The bilateral recruitment agreement itself was made possible due to the reestablishment of diplomatic ties between Yugoslavia and the Federal Republic in the late 1960s.¹⁰⁹ The shift towards an official agreement was driven by both German economic needs and foreign policy considerations, including West German chancellor Willy Brandt's Ostpolitik and the strategic value of Yugoslavia's non-aligned status in the Cold War context.¹¹⁰ At the same time, West German perceptions of Yugoslav migrants started to shift. Initially, officials saw them as a potential security threat. This was due to Cold War tensions and earlier experiences with migration of political émigrés from Yugoslavia. As separatists against Tito's Yugoslavia, approximately 13,000 Croats had previously migrated to the FRG. Among them were many former supporters of the fascist Ustaša regime. Their presence contributed to significant tensions, including violent incidents such as the bombing of Yugoslav trade missions in Bonn in 1962 and the assassination of a Yugoslav consul in Stuttgart in 1966.¹¹¹ Increasingly, however, Yugoslav migrants came to be seen as skilled and adaptable workers. This change in perception helped normalise their presence and ultimately led to the 1968 recruitment agreement. Despite the relatively short period of official labour recruitment (1968-1973), the agreement had a significant impact: Yugoslavia became one of the most important providers of labour force to Western and Northern Europe. In the FRG, Yugoslavs were the second largest group of all labour migrants, after Turkish migrant workers who constituted the largest group by far.¹¹² For Yugoslavia, West Germany was the most important among all European recruiting states. According to statistical data from Baučić, by 1973, over 469,000 Yugoslav labour migrants, that is more than half of all Yugoslav labour migrants in total, had moved to West Germany.¹¹³

Another important factor in the Yugoslav migration context were the regional differences in emigration patterns within the Socialist Federal Republic. In 1971, among those registered as 'temporarily employed abroad,' (*na privremenom radu u inozemstvu*) roughly a third had migrated from the republic of Croatia while another fifth had moved from Bosnia-

¹⁰⁹ See: Molnar, Christopher A. 2018. *Memory, Politics, and Yugoslav Migrations to Postwar Germany*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, p. 10-11.

¹¹⁰ Kaja Shonick argues that the Yugoslav-West German recruitment agreement should not be understood merely in economic terms, but rather as a product of West Germany's shifting political culture in the 1960s and one of the early successes of Brandt's Ostpolitik. See Shonick 2010: 719, 728-729.

¹¹¹ See: Molnar 2019: 140; Le Normand 2011: 4.

¹¹² See: Herbert 2002, p. 226.

¹¹³ See Baučić, Ivo. *Yugoslavia as a country of emigration. Migrations méditerranéennes*. Paris: CIHEAM, 1973 (*Options Méditerranéennes*; n. 22), p. 62. The number of Yugoslav migrants in the FRG far exceeds the numbers in Austria (197,000) and France (54,000) that followed the FRG in taking in most Yugoslav labour migrants. However, Pascal Goeke highlights that these figures, based on Yugoslav sources are on average around 15% lower than the records from the destination countries. As such country-specific studies are based on individual records, a Europe-wide comparison on these records is unfortunately difficult to realise methodologically which is why the Yugoslav data nevertheless remains the most reliable. See also: Goeke 2020, p. 136.

Herzegovina. In the following years, however, these regional trends shifted. Consequently, out-migration from Croatia declined while it quickly increased in the central and south-eastern parts of the federation such as Bosnia, Vojvodina, and Serbia proper.¹¹⁴ These regional trends also reflect a gender-related pattern: Looking at the total number of Yugoslavs employed abroad, women made up 31.4% of Yugoslavs in European recruiting countries, while their share varied considerably by republic and province: they comprised 42.7% of those from Vojvodina, 40.1% from Slovenia, 36.8% from Croatia, 35.7% from Serbia proper, 21.8% from Bosnia-Herzegovina, 19.2% from Montenegro, 18.1% from Macedonia, and only 4.2% from Kosovo.¹¹⁵ Lorber explains the strikingly low proportion of women from Kosovo here by the strongly patriarchal attitudes within the Albanian community at the time.¹¹⁶

Compared to other migrant communities in the FRG, Yugoslav migrants maintained unusually high levels of transnationality. Goeke notes that in the 1970s, only about 23% of Yugoslav families were fully reunited in West Germany, with most children remaining in Yugoslavia, often resulting in high divorce rates.¹¹⁷ While the initial intention for many was to return (over 80% planned remigration early on) by the late 1970s this number had fallen below 30%.¹¹⁸

Finally, migration from Yugoslavia also had a distinct gendered dimension. The FRG specifically sought Yugoslav female labour, especially after Italy refused to "relinquish" its female workforce.¹¹⁹ Notably, Yugoslavia prescribed gender equality in its 1946 constitution and implemented legal frameworks such as access to abortion and support for working mothers.¹²⁰ Yet social practices often lagged behind the propagated state ideology of the emancipated working woman. Patriarchal family structures, particularly the traditional *zadruga*

¹¹⁴ See: Bernard, Sara. 2019. *Deutsch Marks in the Head, Shovel in the Hands and Yugoslavia in the Heart. The Gastarbeiter Return to Yugoslavia (1965-1991)* p. 25-26; Brunnbauer, Ulf. 2009. Labour emigration from the Yugoslav region from the late 19th century until the end of socialism: Continuities and changes. In Ulf Brunnbauer (Ed.), *Transnational societies, transterritorial politics: Migrations in the (post-)Yugoslav region 19th-21st century* (pp. 19–45). Oldenbourg Verlag., p. 28. See also: Baučić, Ivo: *Radnici u inozemstvu prema popisu stanovništva Jugoslavije*, supplement 6, Zagreb 1973 and the map attached to the annex of this thesis.

¹¹⁵ See *Statistički Bilten* 679, Tables 2–3, p. 49; *SGJ-73*, Tables 202–203, p. 352; as quoted in Künne 1979, p. 102.

¹¹⁶ See Lorber, p. 86.

¹¹⁷ See: Goeke, Pascal. 2007. *Transnationale Migrationen: Post-Jugoslawische Biografien in Der Weltgesellschaft*. Bielefeld: Transcript, p. 142

¹¹⁸ See: Seferagić, Dušica. 1977. 'Scientific Work in Yugoslavia on Migrant Returnees and Their Impact on the Mother Country'. *International Migration Review* 11(3): 364.

¹¹⁹ See: See Stokes 2022a, p. 24; Rieker, Yvonne. 2003. *Ein Stück Heimat Findet Man Ja Immer: Die Italienische Einwanderung in Die Bundesrepublik*. Essen: Klartext, p. 103.

¹²⁰ See: The 1946 Yugoslav constitution states: "[w]omen have equal rights with men in all fields of state, economic an social-political life. Women have the right to the same pay as that received by men for the same work, and as workers or employees they enjoy special protection. The state especially protects the interest of mothers and children by the establishment of maternity hospitals, children's homes and day nurseries and by the right of mothers to leave with pay before and after childbirth." URL: https://www.worldstatesmen.org/Yugoslavia_1946.txt, last accessed 23.08.2025.

system persisted, limiting women's status in the family sphere despite their formal rights.¹²¹ While women gained access to education and employment in the socialist state, their participation remained uneven, often due to rural-urban divides. For example, by 1971, Yugoslavia ranked fifth globally for women with university degrees, yet around a quarter of Yugoslav women were still illiterate, particularly if they grew up in rural areas. Women were also disproportionately affected by unemployment, making up nearly 54% of the unemployed in 1976, which in turn led to their increased out-migration.¹²² As such, structural change under socialism improved women's position compared to many capitalist societies at the time. Legal reforms alone, however, did not guarantee full gender equality, which also requires shifting male roles and equal gender relations in the private sphere. Nonetheless, Morokvašić argues that their socialist background empowered Yugoslav women to resist discrimination more actively than female migrant workers from other recruitment countries.¹²³

4.3 (Yugoslav) Women and Migration to the FRG

Although gender was not a consistently statistically recorded category at the time, it can be assumed that the number of migrant women in the FRG increased by factor sixteen between 1960 and 1973. Around a third of all migrant women migrated to the FRG independently during the same period, without being accompanied by a family or husband.¹²⁴ Accordingly, more than half of female migrant workers saw taking up employment as the main reason for their migration. Compared to West German women, their employment rate was almost twice as high.¹²⁵ Consequently, the migrant women did not correspond to the common narrative of the immobile and passive "migrant wife" who came to the FRG solely due to family reunification.¹²⁶ According to the West German Federal Statistical Office, the share of female Yugoslav migrants was well above the one-third estimated for all migrant workers. While in 1974 around 38% of all Yugoslav migrants were women, in 1982 the number had risen to 44%. These figures also illustrate an increase of women and a decrease of men after the official

¹²¹ The *zadruga* refers to a type of community that was typical particularly within South Slav rural areas. It consists of an extended patrilocal household in which property, herds, and income were held in common under the authority of the eldest male. Once a woman married it was expected from her to leave her own and join her husband's *zadruga*. See Morokvašić 1984, p. 45-49.

¹²² See: Morokvašić 1984, p. 34-38.

¹²³ See: Ibid., p. 28-29.

¹²⁴ See: Mattes 1999, p. 303.

¹²⁵ See: Mattes 2005, p. 10.

¹²⁶ See: Hahn, Sylvia. 2008. Migration, Arbeit, Geschlecht. Arbeitsmigration in Mitteleuropa vom 17. bis zum Beginn des 20. Jahrhunderts. Göttingen: V&R unipress, p. 94.

recruitment stop in 1973. In some cities, like West-Berlin, there were equal amounts of Yugoslav women and men.¹²⁷

At the end of the 1950s, the demand for female workers increased on the West German labour market. This was because the labour force participation rate of German women had been declining slightly since 1958 and the West German understanding of gender was still strongly influenced by traditional, conservative thinking. Mattes refers to this as the “breadwinner/housewife model,” which was accepted as a societal norm until the 1960s, not only in the Federal Republic but throughout Western Europe.¹²⁸ Women’s employment, for instance in the form of part-time work, was seen as a family-compatible supplement to male employment. Due to the falling age of marriage, longer periods of education and family obligations, married women and mothers were only available to the labour market for a limited period.¹²⁹ For this reason, the first female migrant workers, several hundred Italian women, were recruited in the FRG between 1956 and 1959. These early gender-specific recruitment efforts by the Federal Republic were initially rather unsuccessful, as the expectations of the migrant women were high: the main aim was to recruit young, single and highly mobile women in order to close the ‘gaps’ in the labour market as efficiently as possible.¹³⁰ In the 1960s, the FRG first recruited Spanish women and then expanded its recruitment to Greek, Turkish and Yugoslav women. In 1971, Yugoslav women temporarily made up the largest group of female migrants in West Germany.¹³¹ This is remarkable as official Yugoslav recruitment had only started in 1968. However, due to the socialist character of the Yugoslav state, female employment was more of a societal normality compared to other countries with recruitment agreements, Yugoslav women had already experienced in their country of origin. This is also reflected in employment data from the Federal Republic. Among migrant women with children, 46% were employed, whereas the percentage for Yugoslav mothers reached 56%. Similarly, while 60.7% of married migrant women whose husbands lived in the FRG were employed, 70% of Yugoslav married women were working.¹³² This clearly shows that the experience Yugoslav migrant women had gained in the labour market at home not only normalised their own employment in the FRG compared to other migrant groups but also made them sought-after workers on the ground.

¹²⁷ See: Morokvašić 1984, p. 92-93.

¹²⁸ See: Mattes, Monika. 2011. Krisenverliererinnen? Frauen, Arbeit und das Ende des Booms, in: Andresen, Knud/ Bitzegeio, Ursula/ Mittag, Jürgen (eds.), „Nach dem Strukturbruch?“ Kontinuität und Wandel von Arbeitsbeziehungen und Arbeitswelt(en) seit den 1970er Jahren. Bonn, p. 128-131.

¹²⁹ See: Mattes 1999, p. 287-289.

¹³⁰ See: Ibid., p. 290.

¹³¹ See: Ibid., p. 293-294.

¹³² Morokvašić 1987, p. 94.

Once arrived in the FRG, migrant women's entry into wage labour brought both exploitation and new opportunities for independence and agency.¹³³ The structural conditions they faced on the West German labour market, however, were challenging. Migrant women were integrated into a labour market that was divided horizontally and vertically by gender. Horizontal refers to the different sectors of the labour market. Vertical refers to the position within the labour hierarchy, which was expressed in terms of lower or higher wages. The position of migrant workers was already predetermined on both levels when they arrived in the FRG, as the labour market was based on rigid structures. On the horizontal level, they were expected to fill shortages in 'typical female sectors' such as the textile and clothing industry, the food industry or the health sector.¹³⁴ On the vertical level, they were employed, like male migrants, as unskilled or semi-skilled labourers, mostly in demanding but poorly paid shift, piecework and assembly line work. However, compared to their male colleagues, gender-based wage reductions of 30 to 40% were common.¹³⁵ Migrant women were also worse off in terms of promotion opportunities. While male migrant workers with a good knowledge of German were sometimes able to advance in their careers, women with similar language proficiency were more rarely able to advance.¹³⁶ This was mainly due to the categorisation into different wage groups in the recruitment agreements.¹³⁷ From the very beginning, the West German Federal Labour Exchange and Unemployment Insurance Office differentiated between "skilled workers," "unskilled workers" and "women." Although the category "woman" had already been criticised as sexist in the 1950s and was abolished in the course of the Anti-Discrimination Act of 1955, the category subsequently introduced with the new name "light wage group" served the same purpose: It was still reserved for women and justified their lower pay.¹³⁸ Politically, nothing was changed until the late 1960s, as (male-dominated) trade unions focused their industrial action on other issues such as the implementation of the 40-hour week or the expansion of holiday entitlements.¹³⁹

When the conservative gender norms of the Federal Republic gradually began to crumble in the last phase of state recruitment policy from 1968 to 1973, this had two consequences for female migrants. On the one hand, German women workers were upgraded as a potentially qualified labour force. On the other hand, this led to a general devaluation of

¹³³ Morokvašić 1987., p. 23.

¹³⁴ See *ibid.*, S. 287-289.

¹³⁵ See e.g., Miller 2013, p. 234; Bojadžijev 2012, p. 162.

¹³⁶ See Goeke 2020, p. 57.

¹³⁷ See *ibid.*, p. 295-296.

¹³⁸ See Miller 2013, p. 233-237.

¹³⁹ See *ibid.*, p. 234.

migrant labour. German women were now to act “explicitly as substitutes”¹⁴⁰ for the increasingly socially problematised migrant workers. After the 1973 recruitment ban, the FRG and other Western European countries restricted labour market access for migrant family members, in many cases women, pushing many into undocumented employment in sectors like domestic work, hospitality, and textiles.¹⁴¹ Legally classified as “dependents,” these women’s residence permits were tied to their husbands’ status, reinforcing their economic and legal vulnerability.¹⁴²

Public perception and media coverage of migrant workers in the FRG during the 1960s and early 1970s reveal clear gendered patterns too. If migrants were at all the subject within media discourse, reporting focused largely on labour and crime. Male “guest workers” were frequently portrayed in a discriminatory and essentialising manner, particularly in tabloid media like *BILD*.¹⁴³ One article, for instance, described them this way: “As workers, they were hard-working; as ‘southerners’, they were impulsive and prone to knife fights, yet simultaneously greedy, passionate lovers who could only survive in the highly industrialised Federal Republic under supervision.”¹⁴⁴ In contrast, female migrants were largely absent from public discourse; when they were mentioned at all, they appeared primarily as helpless victims, stripped of political and social agency. Stokes further highlights that, from the perspective of the West German state, migrant wives were expected to have a “stabilising” effect on their “impulsive” husbands, thereby serving as a tool to prevent political activism and sexual violence.¹⁴⁵ This gendered framing contributed to the marginalisation of migrant women’s experiences and reinforced dominant narratives that problematised male migrants while making female migrants invisible. It also illustrates that discourses surrounding migrant women often had nothing to do with their lived realities, instead reflecting projections and anxieties within West German society and state policy rather than the women themselves.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁰ Mattes 2012, p. 207.

¹⁴¹ See: Morokvašić 1987, p. 25.

¹⁴² See: *Ibid.*, p. 26.

¹⁴³ See: Schönwälder, Karen. 2001. *Einwanderung und ethnische Pluralität. Politische Entscheidungen und öffentliche Debatten in Großbritannien und der Bundesrepublik von den 1950er bis zu den 1970er Jahren*. Essen: Klartext Verlag, p. 186-189.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

¹⁴⁵ See: Stokes 2022a, p. 24.

¹⁴⁶ See: Huth-Hildebrandt, Christine. 2002. *Das Bild von Der Migrantin: Auf Den Spuren Eines Konstrukts*. Frankfurt am Main: Brandes & Apsel.

5 Research Methods

This thesis adopts an interpretivist single-case study research design by focusing on the long-term memory of former Yugoslav women migrants in West Germany. This approach was chosen over a comparative multiple-case study as it allows for in-depth investigation of lived experiences and individual memories of a particular group that are embedded in a specific historical, social and political context. The previous chapter explained in greater detail why the case of women migrants from Yugoslavia is worth exploring (see chapters 4.2 and 4.3). While the study is based on a comparatively small sample and therefore not representative or generalisable, it nevertheless, aims to inform female migrant experiences more broadly. The thesis aims to do so by employing in-depth interviews with eight women from different regions of the former Yugoslavia, whose migrations took place at various times and under different conditions.¹⁴⁷ This intra-case variation, as Landman suggests, allows for comparative analysis across time, space, and level of analysis.¹⁴⁸ Consequently, these internal comparisons offer insights into how regional origin, period of migration, legal status, and individual biography interact with broader structural conditions. Therefore, the choice of a single-case study in this thesis is not just a pragmatic but a deliberate one.

In terms of recruitment of participants, first contacts were established through family and personal networks in Stuttgart, Germany. The sample was then further extended through snowballing, a recruitment strategy where participants identify and help recruit further participants, as well as by reaching out to related organisations and via social networks.¹⁴⁹ The eight interviews this study is based on were conducted between March and May 2025. Five interviews took place in-person in different German cities, two were conducted online via Microsoft Teams for practical reasons and the last one took place in Tuzla, Bosnia and Herzegovina as both the participant and the researcher were in the country at the time. The conversations followed semi-structured interview guidelines and took between 40 and 90 minutes. Instead of following a strict sequence of the set of questions, the order in which the

¹⁴⁷ For an overview of biographical basis information of all interviewees, see Annex, p. 78.

¹⁴⁸ See: Landman, Todd, and Edzia Carvalho. 2017. *Issues and Methods in Comparative Politics: An Introduction*. Fourth edition. London New York, NY: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, p. 90-92.

¹⁴⁹ The researcher used personal connections to find participants, as this can help build trust and make participants feel more comfortable when sharing their stories. To avoid potential bias, the researcher remained mindful of her own assumptions and expanded the participant pool through additional networks and organizations to ensure a diversity of perspectives. While initially planning to include an institutional perspective, the researcher reached out to individuals with public roles and experience working with migrant women, such as social workers, community leaders, and policymakers. By contacting registered associations such as *Arbeiterwohlfahrt* and *Südosteuropa kultur e.V.*, the researcher gained insights into their programmes and approaches and was referred to two women who later participated in the study.

topics were discussed was largely left up to the participants so that they could choose what memories to discuss in detail and associative chains in their speech were not interrupted. Where necessary, follow-up questions were asked on specific topics.¹⁵⁰ All interviews were conducted in German. To enable a detailed analysis, each interview was recorded and then transcribed. Relevant excerpts were then translated into English to incorporate them into the analysis of the thesis. The research project was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the College of Social Sciences at the University of Glasgow, United Kingdom.¹⁵¹ Permission to conduct the research as planned was fully granted by the Ethics Committee in July 2024.¹⁵²

When focusing on Yugoslav women migrants, it is crucial to critically approach both the label ‘Yugoslav’ and the label ‘female migrant’. The Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was a state with a rich diversity of cultures, ethnicities, and religions. Additionally, the breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s further complicates the idea of a single Yugoslav identity. Since the study includes present-day interviews, it is crucial to consider how different Yugoslav identities have evolved over time. Similarly, one cannot speak of the female experience per se as women’s experiences are diverse and intersect with various other factors (such as ethnicity, socio-economic status, age, etc.). On the one hand, these issues were approached by selecting a diverse range of interviewees from different ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds, so that a more holistic picture emerges in the study. On the other hand, the research is based on a critical theoretical framework including intersectional, feminist perspectives and memory studies, questioning traditional gender roles and expectations over time.

5.1 Oral History Methodology

Oral history, with increasing popularity and usage, has been in the centre of critical debate within the academic landscape in the past years. As historians Julia Obertreis and Anke Stephan

¹⁵⁰ See Niethammer, Lutz. 2012. Fragen – Antworten – Fragen. Methodische Erfahrungen und Erwägungen zur Oral History. In: Obertreis, Julia: Oral history. Stuttgart: Steiner, p. 44.

¹⁵¹ For further information on ethical requirements at the University of Glasgow see: <https://www.gla.ac.uk/colleges/socialsciences/students/ethics/informationforapplicants/>. Last accessed: 25.08.2025. See also the confirmation of ethical approval in the annex.

¹⁵² In the study, all participants were over 18 years old, competent to give consent, and not in a dependent relationship with the researcher. Before participation, they were provided with a Plain Language Statement outlining the study's aims and procedures, followed by an Informed Consent form each participant signed. To ensure confidentiality, participants’ names were de-identified and are referred to by pseudonyms in the thesis. All participants were nevertheless informed about potential limits of confidentiality, including the possibility of indirect identification due to the small sample size or specific contextual details. One participant asked for an increased degree of anonymisation, which was carried out as agreed. Research data were stored securely on password-protected devices, accessible only to the researcher. All personal data will be disposed at the end of the research project.

summarise, "Oral history is simultaneously a method, a source type, and an interdisciplinary field of research",¹⁵³ with its use and aims varying significantly across disciplines. While historians often approach oral history as a means to access and analyse subjective memories to learn about the past, disciplines such as sociology or anthropology focus more on social practices, worldviews, and identity constructions in the present. The approach taken in this thesis reflects the goal of integrating women as active agents into migration history and of applying gender as an analytical category. At the same time, the study is interested in the women's reflections on life-long memories and experiences nowadays. Alistair Thomson advocates for a "double-take" approach of oral history that explores both the historical experiences recounted by participants and how those experiences are reframed and remembered in the present.¹⁵⁴ This way, the thesis neither follows an exclusively historiographical nor a strict social science approach to oral history but aims to bridge past and present through life stories accounts.

While oral testimonies have been exchanged for centuries, oral history as a systematic academic method only emerged in the twentieth century, initially in the United States. There, the early focus lay on documenting the experiences of political, cultural, and economic elites.¹⁵⁵ In contrast, oral history in Europe was from the beginning shaped by more bottom-up, socially critical approaches, often connected to left-leaning academic and political movements.¹⁵⁶ For example, the first large-scale oral history project in West Germany, led by Lutz Niethammer in the early 1980s, explored 'Life History and Social Culture in the Ruhr Area 1930–1960'. While focusing on everyday experiences of fascism and its aftermath, the project specifically highlighted working-class perspectives. Niethammer later described oral history as "an approach to the experiences and subjectivity of those who otherwise remain voiceless in history due to a lack of surviving records."¹⁵⁷ Interestingly and although not the focus of the project, Niethammer's study showed significant gender-specific differences in the participants' life

¹⁵³ Julia Obertreis/Anke Stephan, Erinnerung, Identität und „Fakten“. Die Methodik der Oral History und die Erforschung (post)sozialistischer Gesellschaften, in: dies. (eds.), Erinnerungen nach der Wende. Oral History und (post)sozialistische Gesellschaften, Essen 2009, p. 9-36, here p. 9.

¹⁵⁴ See: Thomson, Alistair. 2012. Memory and Remembering in Oral History. ed. Donald A. Ritchie. Oxford University Press, p. 92.

¹⁵⁵ Early research institutions in the US included the Columbia University Oral History Research Office, founded in 1948 by Allan Nevins, and the Berkeley Regional Oral History Office, founded in 1954.

¹⁵⁶ For the UK context see e.g., UK: Thompson, Paul, and Joanna Bornat. 2017. The Voice of the Past: Oral History. Fourth edition. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

¹⁵⁷ Niethammer, Lutz, and Werner Trapp, eds. 1980. Lebenserfahrung Und Kollektives Gedächtnis: D. Praxis d. 'Oral History'. Frankfurt am Main: Syndikat, p. 70.

histories. He emphasises that the biographical data revealed patterns, that we would nowadays frame as clearly gendered.¹⁵⁸

At the same time, critics have questioned the reliability and validity of the data gathered through oral history methodology. Historian Harald Welzer for instance argues that memories and experiences documented through oral history research are “certainly not”¹⁵⁹ historically accurate, objective accounts of events and incidents in the past. Instead, memory should be understood as a dynamic process that modernises history by reinterpreting past events to restructure them according to contemporary needs and meanings.¹⁶⁰ Welzer further describes the interview situation as a non-replicable exchange that is shaped by artificial asymmetrical roles: While the interviewer remains largely neutral and passive, participants are required to actively engage in the conversation.¹⁶¹ The fact that the interviewer is affiliated with the university as an institution could also contribute to this perceived hierarchy between interviewer and interviewee. Besides, when working with transcripts to analyse the interviews, non-verbal aspects such as facial expressions and gestures as well as informal interactions before and after the interview are naturally lost on the paper.¹⁶² These elements of communication, though, can carry significant meaning as well. Yet, oral history scholars hold against these criticisms that such challenges are not unique to oral history. Analyses of written records, archival documents, and even contemporary news sources can equally contain biases, omissions, or distortions.¹⁶³ While this is certainly true, it is also important to recognise that the interview situation itself and the fact that oral historians are creating their own sources introduces an additional layer of complexity. Unlike working with pre-existing source material, the potential for influence and interpretive manipulation is greater, as the interaction between interviewer and interviewee can actively shape the narratives being produced.

It is crucial to acknowledge that this thesis is bound by such limitations. Ideally, multiple sessions per participant, as recommended by Niethammer, would have deepened the findings and increased reliability of the data.¹⁶⁴ However, time constraints and logistical factors

¹⁵⁸ See: Niethammer, Lutz/ Settele, Veronika/ Nolte, Paul. 2017. Oral History in der deutschen Zeitgeschichte, p. 119). He illustrates this observation as follows: Auffällig, „dass Frauen gesagt haben: „Ach, was wollt ihr mich denn fragen? Ich habe doch damit gar nichts zu tun gehabt.“ Aber dann redeten die zwei Stunden lang, während die Männer ungefähr wussten wie lange ein Bewerbungslebenslauf sein darf und nach zehn Minuten aufhörten.“ (p. 123)

¹⁵⁹ Welzer, Harald. 2019. ‘Das Interview Als Artefakt. Zur Kritik Der Zeitzeugenforschung [BIOS 13 (2000), Heft 1, 51-63]’. BIOS – Zeitschrift für Biographieforschung, Oral History und Lebensverlaufsanalysen 32(1–2): 284.

¹⁶⁰ See: Welzer, Harald. 2008. Die Medialität des menschlichen Gedächtnisses, in: Bios 21: 24.

¹⁶¹ See: Welzer 2019, p. 285–286.

¹⁶² See: Ibid., p. 287.

¹⁶³ See: Ritchie, Donald Arthur. 2015. Doing Oral History. Third edition. New York (N.Y.): Oxford University Press., p. 13; Niethammer, 1980, p. 57.

¹⁶⁴ See: Niethammer 1980, p. 47.

restricted the study to single interviews per participant. Furthermore, a twofold linguistic challenge arose in the process of conducting and presenting this study. Firstly, all interviews were carried out in German, a language the participants had acquired through their migration experience but that was not their mother tongue. While all interviewees communicated competently in German, their levels of fluency and confidence varied, a factor that inevitably shaped the depth and nuance of their individual interviews.¹⁶⁵ Secondly, relevant interview extracts were translated from German into English for the purpose of analysis and presentation in this thesis. Both steps result in a loss of meaning and demonstrate the significance of linguistic considerations in research, particularly on migration-related issues, where identity and experience are deeply connected to the use of languages. This reflects a broader ethical concern in oral history methodology, as Bogusia Temple discusses in her article on translating in oral history research. She highlights the responsibility of researchers to critically reflect on how they represent others in languages those individuals did not use to share their stories.¹⁶⁶ Translation is never a neutral, technical step but involves power dynamics, researcher positionality, and interpretative decisions that influence how narratives are constructed and understood.¹⁶⁷ Nevertheless, the translation process enables the sharing of these women's stories with a wider academic audience beyond German-speaking contexts. In line with Temple's argument, engaging with participants across language barriers, even with the inevitable imperfections and ethical dilemmas, is preferable to excluding these voices entirely.¹⁶⁸ To increase the validity of the research, the original German versions of the analysed quotations are included in the footnotes (see Chapter 6). In the translations in the main body of text, priority was given to the content of the statements, so that grammatical irregularities were largely corrected, but remain traceable in the German original quotation in the footnotes.

Finally, this project is situated more narrowly within the tradition of feminist oral history, which emerged in response to the systematic exclusion of women's voices from mainstream historiography. As Anderson et al. observed already in the 1980s, women's perspectives were not absent by coincidence but had been actively trivialised and silenced in societal discourses and historiography.¹⁶⁹ Therefore, the first wave of women's oral history

¹⁶⁵ On average, the participants' knowledge of German was stronger than the researcher's knowledge of Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian, which is why conducting the interviews in German was decided to be the more effective option. Nevertheless, the researcher's language skills were an advantage in several interviews, for example when the participant was looking for a word in German or had formulated part of a sentence in her mother tongue.

¹⁶⁶ See: Temple, Bogusia. 2013. Casting a Wider Net. Reflecting on Translation in Oral History. *Oral History* 41 (2): 101.

¹⁶⁷ See: *Ibid.*, p. 102, 105.

¹⁶⁸ See: *Ibid.*, 2013, p. 108.

¹⁶⁹ See: Anderson, Kathryn, Susan Armitage, Dana Jack, and Judith Wittner. 1987. 'Beginning Where We Are: Feminist Methodology in Oral History'. *The Oral History Review* 15(1): 106.

aimed to "fill the gaps"¹⁷⁰ in historical records, documenting and celebrating women's lives. Over time, the initial enthusiasm gave way to more critical reflection regarding research design and methodology, particularly concerning positionality and power dynamics within interviews, that have previously been largely neglected.¹⁷¹ Looking back, Armitage critically reflects: "When the sheer enthusiasm of discovering women's voices wore off, a number of us began trying to think more seriously about methodological and analytic issues."¹⁷² These considerations are especially relevant for this thesis, which works with oral history interviews with predominantly working-class migrant women. Therefore, questions of representation, voice, and agency are central here and require careful reflexivity about how the researcher's positionality and interpretive frameworks shape both the narratives produced and their analysis.

5.2 Thematic Analysis

To analyse the qualitative data generated through oral history interviews, this thesis applies thematic analysis (TA) following the approach developed by Braun and Clarke.¹⁷³ TA is a widely used method in qualitative research for identifying, organising, and interpreting patterns within data that are then referred to as themes. The goal of TA is not to simply summarise content but to develop a deeper understanding of meanings, experiences, and underlying structures within the narratives the data provides. Braun and Clarke's approach to TA is particularly suitable for this research. As interpretivist, feminist scholars, their methodology is rooted in a critical tradition that aligns with the research's focus on gendered migration experiences and the use of oral history. Since their 2006 article was published, the authors continually updated their work to reflect current discussions within the field.

TA offers several advantages relevant to this research. It provides flexibility in handling complex data sets, accessibility for both researchers and audiences, and allows for "thick description," meaning detailed accounts that can highlight both similarities and differences across participants' experiences.¹⁷⁴ It also leaves room for unexpected insights to emerge, which is especially valuable when working with diverse migration biographies. While the method allows for both inductive and deductive approaches, this thesis employs a deductive approach to TA, as coding and theme development are primarily guided by the research question and

¹⁷⁰Armitage, Susan H. 2012. 1 *The Stages of Women's Oral History*. ed. Donald A. Ritchie. Oxford University Press: 170–85, p. 170.

¹⁷¹ See: *Ibid.*, p. 176.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 173.

¹⁷³ Braun/ Clarke 2006; Braun, Virginia, and Victoria Clarke. 2019. 'Reflecting on Reflexive Thematic Analysis'. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health* 11(4): 589-597.

¹⁷⁴ See: Braun/ Clarke, 2006: 97.

theoretical framework, rather than purely emerging from the data. The aim of this deductive approach is to uncover latent themes, which reflect underlying meanings and structures for the analysis to go beyond the surface of the content.¹⁷⁵ The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase process: First, the researcher familiarised herself with the complete data set, re-reading transcripts multiple times. As a second step, initial codes were generated, following recurring patterns but also contradictions within the data. This step was done as systematically as possible across the entire data set. Thirdly, codes were grouped under preliminary themes that aim to capture broader meanings and overarching-structures within the data. As a fourth step, the coherence of these initial themes was reviewed in relation to the broader research project. In the fifth step, the themes were named and clearly defined. Lastly, the report of the analysis was produced.¹⁷⁶

Given the relatively small sample size, coding was conducted manually rather than through computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software. This choice offers several benefits, including a more nuanced understanding of the material, greater flexibility, and a higher sensitivity to context, researcher positionality, and ethical considerations. Manual coding also enables a more direct engagement with the data, allowing the researcher to remain closely involved in the interpretation of narratives within the data.

¹⁷⁵ See: Braun/ Clarke, 2006, p. 83-85.

¹⁷⁶ See: Ibid., p. 87, Table 1.

6 Findings and Analysis

The structure of this analysis was developed by distinguishing three levels of relevant questions, as suggested by Braun and Clarke.¹⁷⁷ First, the overarching research question guiding this thesis asks how gender shaped the remembered experiences of Yugoslav women as labour migrants in West Germany, while recognising that other intersecting categories, such as class and migrant status, are equally relevant.¹⁷⁸ This main question was kept in mind when developing the categories of analysis and the structure of this chapter. A second level of questions concerns the interview questionnaire that guided the generating of the data set. The interviews were designed with open, narrative-style questions, allowing participants to freely reflect on various aspects of their lives, including work, family, and daily routines.¹⁷⁹ On a third level, the analytical questions guiding the coding and interpretation of the data come into play. These questions concern the intersectional factors shaping their experiences and the extent to which they exercised agency. These considerations led to the observation that the migrant women interviewed simultaneously act in several environments, resulting in the following three core analytical themes: (a) migrant women in the workplace, (b) migrant women in the home, and (c) migrant women in society. To situate these themes within the broader chronology of their life stories, two additional sub-chapters frame the analysis: the first one addresses their migration backgrounds and motivations, while the final chapter focuses on memory and meaning-making of their experiences, connecting to the conceptual framework on memory studies and the methodological reflections on oral history. Throughout the analysis, particular attention is given to perceived moments of agency or its absence, analysing how participants described their own capacity to act, make decisions, or overcome barriers in each environment and how they evaluated these outcomes, for instance, as the results of their own efforts, external influences, or fate.

¹⁷⁷ See: Braun/ Clarke, 2006: 85-86.

¹⁷⁸ Especially when focusing on memory and experiences, these classical dimensions of intersectionality are not the only decisive ones. Other factors such as time, space, or religion influence the experience in the same way. These will therefore also be discussed in part in the following chapters, but they play a less central role than the classic categories of intersectionality, especially gender.

¹⁷⁹ Some sample questions from the interview questionnaire are: (1) *Did you work in West Germany? What kind of jobs did you have? Can you describe your experience working in West Germany* (2) *What was your typical day like? Can you tell me about your everyday experiences?* (3) *What was your family life like? How did migration affect your family structures and relationships?* For a more detailed list of questions, see the annex, p. 81.

6.1 Background and Decision to Migrate

This first sub chapter introduces the participants and draws attention to the diverse starting conditions that shaped their migration journeys to West Germany. The eight women differ in age, educational background and socio-economic circumstances. All these factors had a significant impact on both their motivations to migrate and their later experiences in the FRG. In the thesis the participants were anonymised and given the names Amina, Ana, Katarina, Mila, Jelena, Ivana, Vesna, and Petra.

The participants were born between the mid-1930s and the late 1960s. They come from various parts of Yugoslavia: Amina, Ana and Mila grew up in Bosnia-Herzegovina; Katarina and Petra are originally from Croatia; Jelena and Vesna migrated from the autonomous province of Vojvodina, Serbia. Ivana chose not to disclose personal details such as her hometown or date of birth, which are therefore excluded from comparative sections. Six of the women migrated for employment purposes: Mila, Jelena, Vesna and Petra were recruited through official programmes in the main period of Yugoslav labour migration between 1967 and 1973. Amina and Ana took part in special recruitment programmes for Yugoslav nurses shortly before the outbreak of the Yugoslav wars. Ivana migrated irregularly in the 1960s, wanting to leave Yugoslavia behind, whereas Katarina initially entered the FRG on a tourist visa in the 1980s and prolonged her stay in the country through student visas until she eventually acquired German citizenship. Three participants (Amina, Vesna, Petra) migrated independently without their families or established contacts in the FRG. Mila and Ivana migrated together with their husbands, while Jelena joined her husband, who had already found work in Berlin, and Katarina migrated to live with her German partner at the time. Ana benefitted from her family network and moved to the same town as her aunt who had previously migrated to the FRG.

Their educational backgrounds also varied. Jelena had no formal vocational training, whereas five participants (Amina, Ana, Ivana, Katarina, Petra) held university degrees. Ivana and Petra pursued their degrees in West Germany after arrival, while Amina, Ana, and Petra had already completed nursing degrees in Yugoslavia. Katarina had studied Romance Languages in Croatia. Upon arrival, most women had little or no German language knowledge. While several women had previously taken German classes as students in Yugoslavia, only Petra states that she benefitted greatly from this previous knowledge from school. In the FRG, Ana, Katarina and Ivana attended formal language courses to quickly improve their German proficiency. The other five women never attended any language classes but acquired German at work or through their social networks. The different fields of employment reflect the participants' diverse backgrounds. Mila, Jelena, and Vesna were employed as unskilled

labourers in industry, while Katarina, initially pursuing a PhD, took on various jobs in retail and hospitality. Amina, Ana, Ivana, and Petra entered professional roles in healthcare, education, or public service. Besides, Katarina and Ivana later used their bilingual skills to work as interpreters and translators for Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian and German. All participants except for Petra married, and six women (Amina, Ana, Mila, Jelena, Ivana and Vesna) became mothers, raising children in the Federal Republic.

Since this work takes an actor-centred approach, the various backgrounds of the participants are central to the interpretation of the oral history interviews. Despite their shared destination and the fact that all women ultimately took the decision to migrate, their motivations and reasons to do so differed greatly. Amina describes her decision to migrate in 1990 as very spontaneous. As a 21-year-old young woman who had just finished her university degrees in nursing and physio-therapy in Sarajevo, she remembers being eager to ‘explore the world a bit’ (Interview 1, 8’ minute).¹⁸⁰ When she heard that the German labour offices were looking for skilled workers, she attended the recruitment event organised in the city of Dobož, not far from her hometown, with little concrete expectations: ‘Well, I didn’t have any particular need for it, either family-wise or financially, so it was more curiosity, well, on my part’ (Interview 1, 5’ minute).¹⁸¹ She describes how the recruitment event was very well-attended. Unlike many attendees hoping to work near family or friends abroad, Amina had no connections in West Germany yet. Therefore, having no clear destination in mind, she was proactively approached by a hospital representative from Wiesbaden. Then the process moved very quickly. With the help of bilingual documents, Amina signed the employment contract with a hospital on the spot.

Katarina’s decision to migrate in 1988 was spontaneous as well. Growing up in relatively modest circumstances, she initially found a job within Croatia’s booming tourism sector, thanks to her language skills in English and Italian. There, she met her future German partner: ‘So I fell in love with someone who comes from Freiburg and then he was in Croatia a few times and wanted me to come to Germany, which I didn’t really want to do because Germany didn’t have the sea, I come from the sea but that was how it was, like yes, okay, now I’m going there too’ (Interview 3, 5’ minute).¹⁸² After a few months in Freiburg, she decided to prioritise her relationship over her original plan to return to Croatia and to resume her work as a tour guide.

¹⁸⁰ German original: Amina: „*wollte schon bisschen in die weite Welt*“

¹⁸¹ German original: Amina: „*So, also ich hatte auch weder familiär noch finanziell besondere Bedarf dafür; also es war eher Neugier ja so meinerseits.*“

¹⁸² German original: Katarina: „*Also ich habe mich in jemanden verliebt, der aus Freiburg kommt und er war dann ein paar Mal in Kroatien und wollte, dass ich dann auch mal nach Deutschland komme, was ich eigentlich gar nicht so wollte, weil Deutschland hatte kein Meer, ich komme ja Meer und das war so ja, okay, jetzt gehe ich auch hin.*“

Like Amina, Katarina looks back on this time and describes her migration as being characterised by coincidence. There was a window of opportunity for migration and both young women wanted to give it a chance, without planning at the time that they would necessarily remain in West Germany to this day.

In contrast, the experiences of Mila and Vesna, who were both recruited during the peak period of labour migration in the late 1960s and early 1970s, illustrate more economically-driven motives. Mila, who was born into a Croat family in Bosnia and Herzegovina explains her situation as follows: ‘Because I have no opportunity to work, I then left’ (Interview 4, 5’ minute).¹⁸³ Her decision to migrate to Munich was clearly more of an economic necessity than a spontaneous decision. As her family was critical of the communist regime, her access to employment in Yugoslavia was limited. She states: ‘It’s hard to imagine, yes, and they said no work after graduation and of course the parents put pressure on us because they didn’t have anything. Because they weren’t communists either, you had to be a communist to make a living, and we weren’t’ (Interview 4, 10’ minute).¹⁸⁴ Here it becomes clear that the economic reasons for migration were also linked to political ones, as Mila saw herself as structurally disadvantaged in socialist Yugoslavia due to her non-communist family background. This shows how the motivations for labour migration were diverse and often intertwined.

Vesna experienced similar challenges as a young woman in Vojvodina. Her family struggled financially after her father, a veteran who had previously lived and fought in Croatia, was denied a pension in Serbia. She learned about the option of labour migration by chance: ‘I had no idea at all. Back then I wanted to work back home as a seamstress, but I had to ... how could I ... we were poor [...]. The worst thing is when my dad didn’t have a pension, no and then I couldn’t live in Sombor and an older man explained to me about the labour office: ‘You know what, my dear girl, when you are healthy, then they always look for labour force in Germany’” (Interview 7, 5’ minute).¹⁸⁵ Together with a group of young people from her hometown, Sombor, Vesna then migrated to the Ruhr region in North-Rhine-Westphalia, one of the FRG’s most important industrial regions at the time. There she would not pursue her original plan to work as a seamstress but was hired as an unskilled labourer in an automotive supply company.

¹⁸³ German original: Mila: „Da kann ich keine Möglichkeit zu arbeiten, bin ich dann gegangen“

¹⁸⁴ German original: Mila: „Kaum kann man sie gar nicht vorstellen, ja, und da hieß es nach Abschluss keine Arbeit und die Eltern haben natürlich Druck gemacht weil die haben ja nix gehabt. Weil die waren auch keine Kommunisten man müsste Kommunistin sein, um mein Leben zu machen, und wir waren es nicht.“

¹⁸⁵ German original: Vesna: „Hab ich gar keine Idee gehabt. Damals wollte ich arbeiten bei uns wie Schneiderin, aber da muss ich ja, wie kann ich so, wir waren arm [...]. Schlimmste ist, wenn meine Papa hat keine Rente gehabt, ne und dann ich konnte nicht wohnen in Sombor und eine ältere Mann über die Arbeitsamt hatte er erklären weißt du, was meine liebe Mädchen, wann bist du gesund, dann sucht die immer Kraft aus Deutschland.“

These examples show how generational differences, political context, economic challenges, and personal circumstances all shaped individual decisions to migrate. Within similar historical contexts, such factors determined the level of agency or external pressure, the women experienced, from the very beginning. The following subchapters examine how these varying starting conditions later continued to influence the women's work lives, family roles, positions in society, and reflections on their migration experiences in retrospective.

6.2 Migrant Women in the Workplace

In every oral history interview conducted for this thesis, the workplace is one of the central environments in the life of the participant. Here, the migrant women spent large amounts of their time, working, earning money, socialising with colleagues as well as encountering challenges. This subchapter focuses on five aspects in the workplace: labour market segregation by gender and nationality, workplace recognition, the distinct role of nurses, women's agency at work, and the impact of part-time jobs. These themes demonstrate both structural constraints and moments of resistance in the women's working lives.

In 1970, Jelena started working as an unskilled labourer at a small metal factory in Berlin. While the work was demanding, she was glad about the opportunity she and her husband were given. At the same time, she remembers that money was always tight for the family: 'We didn't get that much. Months before I think 300, 300 marks. Yes, we did. Because we get very little, because we come from Serbia [...] Yes. We get less per month' (Interview 5, 9' minute).¹⁸⁶ The quote shows Jelena's awareness of the lower wage she received because she was a migrant, a status she shared with many of her colleagues at the factory and her husband. What Jelena does not mention directly in this quote is that she and her female migrant colleagues not only earned less than the German employees, but also less than their migrant husbands. Her husband, like most male migrant workers, was contractually classified as a skilled worker. In Jelena's case, it was not only her nationality but also her gender that led to lower pay. This logic also applied to other female migrant workers like Mila and Vesna who were employed as unskilled workers too. Therefore, Mila has experienced similar challenges following her recruitment to Munich in 1969, not only regarding the differences in wages but also regarding the recognition of professional qualifications. While originally trained as a chemist in Yugoslavia, she was employed as an unskilled labourer in packaging in a West German food company. She thinks it is a shame that she and many other Yugoslav workers were denied a say in the choice of

¹⁸⁶ German original: Jelena: „*Wir haben nicht so viel gekriegt. Monate davor glaube 300, 300 Marke Ja. habe wir. Weil wir aus Serbien ganz weniger kriegen [...]. Ja. Kriegen wir weniger pro Monat.*“

workplace in the FRG and describes this systematic, discriminatory social stratification as follows: ‘[N]ot just me. I know a lot of people, I have a lot of acquaintances, who worked as engineers and could never get them to work in their profession. They ended up working in laundries or bakeries. Or at [the supermarket chain] *Edeka*. They couldn't stand their ground’ (Interview 4, 47’ minute).¹⁸⁷ While Mila eventually managed to ‘stand her ground’ and break away from the structures of the social stratification through her own efforts, not all migrant workers in West Germany were able to do so. Her statements show that spaces for agency existed and were used to varying degrees in the experiences of migrants. Ivana also identifies this unequal treatment and lack of appreciation, saying that the dealing with migrant workers at the workplace at the time was a ‘first-class disgrace’ (Interview 6, 13’ minute).¹⁸⁸ At the same time, she acknowledges that her experience differs significantly from that of women like Jelena or Mila. When Ivana migrated to a large German city in the 1960s, fresh after graduating from high school, her path led her to university as soon as her German level allowed for it. There, she studied natural sciences and German language and literature. Ivana evaluates the treatment she experienced in the workplace as very different compared to the stories she had heard from the factories. She recalls: ‘I've had positive experiences, I'll tell you, in the academic professions among the Germans, they have a completely different approach, so there you're treated differently straight away’ (Interview 6, 36’ minute).¹⁸⁹ Education was therefore a key factor that significantly influenced the social position of female migrants and their potential for action in the destination country. Together, these accounts demonstrate how migrant status, gender, and class decisively shaped the women’s opportunities in the West German labour market.

Amina, Ana, and Petra, who worked as nurses in West Germany, further complement these observations with their experiences in the hospital. Although their jobs were demanding and fell outside both factory and academic settings described by Ivana, all three recall feeling highly appreciated in their workplaces. Their German colleagues were thankful for the support of the migrant workers, as work was incredibly busy and stress levels were consistently high. However, Amina also points out that this appreciation and sense of inclusion came with responsibility too: ‘I personally felt very sorry about that because I thought, okay, I'm still in a deficit or they're in a deficit because they don't have that much of me. They always reassured me, always along the lines of 'the main thing is that you're there. The main thing is that you're

¹⁸⁷ German original: Mila: „[V]iele also nicht nur ich. Ich kenne sehr viele, hab viele Bekannte, die haben Ingenieur Beruf gemacht, und ich konnte sie nie durchsetzen, in ihrem Beruf zu arbeiten. Die haben dann in Wäscherei gearbeitet oder Bäckerei. Oder bei Edeka. Die konnten sich nicht durchsetzen.“

¹⁸⁸ German original: Ivana: „Sauerei erste Güte“

¹⁸⁹ German original: Ivana: „Da habe ich positive Erfahrung gehabt, ich sage Ihnen bei den akademischen Berufen unter den Deutschen, haben sie einen ganz ganz anderen Zugang, so werden sie sofort anders behandelt.“

helping out' and I also experienced that my colleagues back then, that came from the GDR didn't have it so easy either. They also had to fit into the system. They were almost as worried as I was. Only they could understand the language' (Interview 1, 56' minute).¹⁹⁰ This demonstrates how Amina had initial difficulties in confidently fulfilling her tasks at work for three reasons. Firstly, she had to adapt to a new system that she was unfamiliar with, coming from Yugoslavia, where nursing studies were taught in a much more theoretical manner compared to the FRG. Secondly, while her colleagues from East Germany had similar adjustment difficulties, Amina emphasises that the lack of language skills at the beginning was another major challenge that was unique to migrant workers. She understood her job as a great responsibility, especially when in direct contact with patients, which she sometimes did not feel ready for. Thirdly, her statement shows that she herself did not consider her own work to be sufficient at the beginning and thus subordinated herself to her non-migrant colleagues in her own perception.

Petra, who started working as a nurse in Homburg in 1967, approximately 20 years earlier than Amina, noticed that Yugoslav nurses in general were valued for their work: 'Well, they were happy to have us. And as I said, we were good, we had a very good reputation [...]. [W]e were all from Croatia, exactly. We simply had a good reputation. And we were also good. So I was the first to take over the nursing ward, then Ljiljana took over the private ward and Anđela took over the second ward, where I was before'¹⁹¹ (Interview 8, 42' minute). Statistically speaking, such career opportunities for migrant workers, especially women, were more of a rarity than the rule. In the factory context, for instance, statistical data shows that between 1972 and 1981, only 8% of migrant women advanced from semi-skilled to skilled workers.¹⁹² This makes the comparison to the care and health sector an interesting case study here. While the hospital as such represents a highly hierarchical space, gender differences play a lesser role among nurses in particular, as the work environment is largely female dominated in contrast to other sectors. It is nevertheless remarkable that Petra and her colleagues were given so much

¹⁹⁰ German original: Amina: „Das hat mir persönlich sehr leid getan, weil ich dachte, okay, ich bin trotzdem so im Defizit oder die sind im Defizit, weil sie nicht so viel von mir haben. Die haben mich immer beruhigt, also immer so nach dem Motto Hauptsache, du bist da. Hauptsache, du hilfst was und ich habe auch erlebt, dass die Kollegen genau damals die DDR auch angekommen, die haben es auch nicht so einfach. Die mussten sich auch in dieses System einfügen. Hatten fast genau Sorge wie ich. Nur die konnten die Sprache verstehen.“

¹⁹¹ German original: Petra: „Also die waren froh, dass sie uns hatten. Und wie gesagt, wir waren gut, wir hatten einen sehr guten Ruf [...]. [Wir] waren alle aus Kroatien, genau. Wir hatten einfach einen guten Ruf. Und waren auch gut. Also ich war die erste die Station übernommen, hat dann hat die Ljiljana Privatstation übernommen und hat die Anđela zweite Station, wo ich war, genommen.“ (The names of the colleagues were anonymised and changed in the quote).

¹⁹² See: Morokvašić 1987, p. 94.

responsibility after just a few years of professional experience that they were put in charge of entire wards.

In Ana's case, who like Amina started working as a nurse in the Stuttgart area in the early 1990s, she describes a development regarding the formal recognition she experienced in the workplace. Despite obtaining her degree in Yugoslavia, she was initially not legally permitted to fulfil certain tasks or work better-paid night shifts in the FRG, as she was classified as an auxiliary worker. While different categories were used in the hospital context than in the factory, for example there were no unskilled workers here, a comparison can be drawn with the hierarchy in factory work. Compared to her German colleagues, Ana was employed at a lower status, despite her professional training, which she had completed in Yugoslavia. Dissatisfied with the disadvantages that came with this status as auxiliary worker, she decided to take an exam to obtain full recognition. After a year of preparation and much effort to improve her German, she passed the exam. She remembers: 'and from then on I was a registered nurse here, I was able to be equal, I could also do night shifts, I could do everything like the employees who were trained here. So I was truly equal' (Interview 2, 17' minute).¹⁹³ Her statements make it clear that acquiring this recognition cost Ana a lot of effort. Nevertheless, she now considers this step to have been essential. Not only because of the improved conditions at work that came with it, but above all because she now sees herself less as a disadvantaged foreigner and more as an equal member of society.

The interviews also show that even in sectors with limited advancement opportunities, wage increases or promotions were possible. However, these were often the result of a high degree of self-initiative and persistence on the part of the women. One such example of female agency in the workplace is Mila's story. As noted above, she began her work as a packer at a food company in Munich as an unskilled worker, even though she had previously been trained in the chemical sector. She describes how she and her colleagues were suddenly dismissed by the company: 'I didn't understand anything at some point, we were all unemployed'. During the interview, it becomes clear that this experience was drastic for Mila. Without a home, she and her family suddenly found themselves in a precarious situation. In search of ways to take action, she took a proactive approach. She describes how she used to drive past the Siemens conglomerate every day on her way to the food company and recalls: 'And then I went to Siemens on foot and said I was looking for a job as a chemical technician. I got the job straight

¹⁹³ German original: Ana: „und ab da war ich dann examinierte Krankenschwester hier, konnte dann gleichwertig sein, konnte auch Nachdienste machen, konnte alles so ja, machen wie wie die die Mitarbeiter, die hier Ausbildung gemacht haben. Also war tatsächlich gleichwertig.“

away. I don't know what happened to the other [colleagues]' (Interview 4, 22' minute).¹⁹⁴ She emphasises that one of the lessons she learned in West Germany is how important persistence and stamina are if you want to improve your situation. On other occasions, she fought for increased payments with her bosses: 'I had always said, yes, but the money isn't enough for me, I always got a pay raise when I asked for it' (Interview 4, 24' minute).¹⁹⁵ Looking back, however, she realises that she first had to learn this self-confident manner and that it cost her a lot of energy, especially at the beginning. 'I knew that you can't find a worker like that and my work is worth so much and he knew that too, so I got it and now I don't have a bad pension because I've earned well for the last 20 years. I was able to stand up for myself, but the first 30 [years] were shit, it was really shit. Yes, it was a struggle. I have to say, it wasn't easy' (Interview 4, 58' minute).¹⁹⁶

Ana's story is another example of agency and self-initiative at the workplace. When she was dissatisfied with her role in the neurology ward of the hospital she was working in, due to tensions in the team and little appreciation for her work, she found herself asking: 'Oh, is this it?' Here I am again, I feel as if someone condemned me again or somehow judged me for I don't know what.' In this difficult situation, she understood that she had to take a stand for herself to change something. She remembers this decision as follows: 'So it was a bit worse again because I thought, well, that's not the way it should be, so not working, going home, crying and sitting in the room and crying. No, it's no fun in the long run and I just used the means I had, the language I already knew, and then I pushed through and applied for this transfer [to the psychiatric ward], but really without anyone, I did it myself' (Interview 2, 17' minute).¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁴ German original Mila: „*ich habe nichts verstanden irgendwann, wir waren alle arbeitslos [...]. Und dann bin ich zu Fuß da zu Siemens gegangen und gesagt ich suche in Arbeit, Chemo-Techniker, gleich die Arbeit gekriegt, was die anderen was aus anderen geworden ist, weiß ich nicht.*“

¹⁹⁵ German original Mila: „*ich hatte immer gesagt ja, aber das mir Geld nicht reicht, habe immer Lohnerhöhung gekriegt, als es, als ich es gefragt haben.*“

¹⁹⁶ German original: Mila: „*Wenn man das Geld will muss man wirklich hartnäckig bleiben. Weil ich hab, wusste ich wusste, dass du so eine Arbeiter nicht findet und meine Arbeit ist ja so viel wert und das das war wusste er auch also ich habs ja gekriegt und so hab ich jetzt auch keine schlechte Rente, weil ich hab die letzten 20 Jahren gut verdient. Ich konnte mich durchsetzen, aber die ersten 30 waren scheiße, war echt scheiße. Ja, es war schon Kampf. Muss ich schon sagen, das war nicht einfach.*“

¹⁹⁷ German original: Ana: „*Ja, und dann ging es drum ja, ich will aber wieder dahin zurück zu auf meine alte Station, weil es mir da besser gefallen hat auf der Psychiatrie als auf der Neurologie. Erstens haben sie viel besseres Team gehabt und dann haben sie mich gut aufgenommen, haben mich richtig gut und wohlgefühlt und auf der Neuro war, war es nicht so. Also da war das Team nicht so gut, die waren gespalten, ich habe keinen, ja, nicht so Motivation, nicht so Freude bei der Arbeit, also haben wir dann wieder so ein bisschen schlechter gefühlt da oh, ist es das? Ich bin da schon wieder, ich fühle mich so, als ob ich dann wirklich wieder auf mich jemand verdammt hätte oder irgendwie verurteilt auf weiß nicht was. Also so wieder so ein bisschen schlechtere Phase, weil ich gedacht habe, na, das das ist nicht das das was sein sollte, also nicht arbeiten, nach Hause gehen, heulen und im Zimmer sitzen und weinen, das nein, auf Dauer macht es keinen Spaß und haben halt mit den Mitteln, die ich hatte, die Sprache, die ich schon konnte, habe dann mich durchgesetzt und habe diese Versetzung beantragt, aber wirklich ohne irgendjemand, das habe ich selber so gemacht.*“

Another common factor in most of the oral history interviews were additional jobs on the side. Except for Amina and Mila, all the other six women interviewed said that they had worked part-time at least for some time. Either, as in the case of Ana and Vesna, shortly after they had children and were not yet able to return to full-time employment, or parallel to their main job at the weekends, as in the case of Jelena, who also worked as a cleaner. Katarina, Ivana and Petra, on the other hand, had various part-time jobs to finance their studies and Vesna worked as a carer for elderly people after retiring to increase her pension. Katarina even reports having worked three jobs at the same time: as a language teacher at university, in retail and as a translator for the police and courts. These part-time jobs were necessary as they added to the migrant women's monthly budget, but at the same time they also represented an additional burden.

When asked whether she regularly found time to relax at the weekend, Jelena replied: 'That's difficult. Maybe go for a walk. Maybe not, I don't know, I have to clean the stairs at the weekend, no time [...] I have to work, yes' (Interview 5, 16' minute).¹⁹⁸ What is striking here is that many women report that their husbands did not have a part-time job outside of their regular job's working hours or at the weekend. Additionally, many of the women's part-time jobs described in the interviews can be assigned to the labour sector traditionally associated with women. Jelena's report and Vesna's story are suitable examples of this. Vesna remembers her job as a carer for elderly people as follows: 'I did everything. Yes, yes, I cooked, cleaned with the women, went for walks or in the car, I put grandma in a car, for example, we went for coffee with grandpa, I cooked for grandpa, other grandpas too, that was great' (Interview 7, 43' minute).¹⁹⁹ What is apparent here is that financial and care responsibilities were clearly linked in these secondary jobs for many of the women. This additional work was often not perceived as 'real' work, but rather mentioned in passing in the interviews, while it clearly led to further stress for the women's daily lives. These stories also demonstrate how part-time and care work added pressure, blurring the line between paid and unpaid labour. All in all, the workplace environment was shaped by inequality but also by resilience. While migrant women faced limited recognition and structural barriers, they found ways to assert themselves: through additional qualifications, persistence, or strategic choices.

¹⁹⁸ German original: Jelena: „Das ist schwer: Vielleicht spazieren. Vielleicht weniger, keine Ahnung, muss Treppe putzen Wochenende, keine Zeit [...]. Muss Arbeit, ja.“

¹⁹⁹ German original: Vesna: „Da hab ich alles gemacht. Ja, ja gekocht, geputzt mit dem Frauen gehen, spazieren oder in Auto ich setze die Oma zum Beispiel ein Auto, wir gehen Kaffee trinken mit Opa auch so hab ich gekocht für Opa, andere Opa auch das war super“

6.3 Migrant Women in the Home

The environment of the home refers to the experiences and memories of the women in concrete terms, for example regarding housing conditions in the Federal Republic or the performance of care and housework. On the other hand, this environment also includes the close relationships that take place at home in a broader sense. These are primarily the relationships with husband and children that demonstrate how migrant women organised their partnerships and the upbringing of children (if the woman was married and a mother). At the same time, this also concerns the connection and commitment to the parental home in Yugoslavia and the support often provided to the wider family network by the migrant women.

Most of the women remember their parental homes as very positive environments to grow up in, despite the sometimes-difficult economic circumstances they experienced. All the women state that they did not feel personally discriminated against as women in their parental homes. Nevertheless, each of them assesses the gender norms they grew up with quite differently. Katarina describes the gender relations she experienced at home as ‘wonderful’ and explains: ‘So, in my surroundings, in my family or in our town, women were not worth less than men. I mean it was socialism’ (Interview 3, 4’ minute).²⁰⁰ Then she adds a little more critically to that statement: ‘the woman was valued, yes, so in the official [state policies] and obviously, there was also violence against women and so on in the private sphere like today, but that has now I think ... that does not depend on a constitution, yes, or how the state works, but how people are, yes?’ (Interview 3, 4’ minute).²⁰¹ Petra, too, highlights that she grew up in a particularly ‘emancipated corner’ within Yugoslavia and at the same time acknowledges that ‘patriarchy was everywhere’ (Interview 8, 17’ minute).²⁰² The women recognised the significance of Yugoslavia’s legal framework on gender equality, particularly when considered in its historical context. While legislation formally protected women as workers, mothers, and wives, their personal accounts highlight the gap between law and practice, showing that formal equality did not necessarily translate into genuine equality in everyday life.²⁰³

Other participants look at gender norms from less of a structural level but instead share anecdotal stories from their family homes that equally represent such early experiences with

²⁰⁰ German original: Katarina: „wunderbar Also, es gab in meiner Umgebung, in meiner Familie oder in unsere Stadt waren die Frauen nicht weniger wert als die Männer. Es war ja auch Sozialismus.“

²⁰¹ German original: Katarina: „die Frau war geschätzt, ja, also in diesen offiziellen und so klar, es gab im privaten wie heute auch Gewalt gegen Frauen und so, also aber das hat jetzt das ich glaube, das hängt nicht von von einem Verfassung ab, ja, oder wie der Staat funktioniert, sondern wie die Menschen sind, ja?“

²⁰² German original: Petra: „eine sehr emanzipierte Ecke muss man sagen [...] natürlich hatten wir das Patriarchat, das war ja überall“

²⁰³ See Bonfiglioli, Chiara. 2014. ‘Women’s Political and Social Activism in the Early Cold War Era: The Case of Yugoslavia’. *Aspasia* 8(1): 2-3; Morokvašić 1987, p. 39.

gender relations while growing up. Amina, for example, reports that her upbringing in the 1960s was already very different compared to what women from her parents' generation experienced. Her mother, for example, was always a housewife and, when the children were old enough, she was immediately responsible for caring for her own parents and her parents-in-law. Already at a young age, Amina was certain: 'I definitely didn't want this role model of a woman [for myself]' (Interview 1, 76' minute).²⁰⁴ The women were aware of gender relations and often associated this with their upbringing in Yugoslavia, albeit for different reasons. It also shows how generational differences come into play here as Amina had a greater degree of freedom to choose how to shape her own life compared to her mother – this is also reflected in her framing her own migration decision as an adventure she wanted to experience rather than a structurally forced decision.

Other accounts reveal yet another dimension of growing up in Yugoslavia. Ana, also born in the 1960s, reports that she was brought up quite strictly at home and even as a young adult her parents imposed firm rules on her. She remembers 'growing up as a woman down there, you were sheltered, protected' (Interview 2, 30' minute).²⁰⁵ Here, she notices a stark contrast compared to her experiences in West Germany and explains that this protection at the same time meant experiencing "less freedom" (Interview 2, 31' minute) as a woman at home in Yugoslavia. Something she, however, assesses as quite positively: 'but I never thought it was a disadvantage and in retrospect I would have wished for something like that for my children, because yes, I didn't miss out on anything anyway' (Interview 2, 31' minute).²⁰⁶ Ivana shares this opinion. Although it was very important to her as a young woman to leave Yugoslavia behind, she is grateful that she was brought up in the socialist system because: 'we learnt to cook, knit, crochet, keep a household book and so on as part of our high school diploma. And we were also taught certain values there. I'm proud of that and I'm still grateful today that we were moulded to be so fit for life [...]. And then you know with this emancipation. How far people have gone here in Germany. I condemn that in the strongest possible terms, because I believe that what I have achieved, I have also achieved as a woman. Do you understand? Yes. And I have never experienced the feeling that people tried to put obstacles in my way because I am a woman. I've never experienced that' (Interview 6, 66' minute).²⁰⁷ Rather than rejecting

²⁰⁴ German original: Amina: „Also diese Rollenbild von Frau wollte ich auf keinen Fall.“

²⁰⁵ German original: Ana: „als Frau unten aufzuwachsen war man behütet, äh beschützt. Also mir ist auch nie irgendwas schlecht vielleicht das passiert so, weil ich Frau war.“

²⁰⁶ German original: Ana: „aber ich fand es nie vom Nachteil und ich fand es im Nachhinein hätte ich mir für meine Kinder auch sowas zum Teil gewünscht, weil ja, also trotzdem habe ich nichts verpasst.“

²⁰⁷ German original: Ivana: „dass wir im Rahmen der der Abitur Ausbildung, diese auch Hauswirtschaftsschule gemacht haben, kochen gelernt, stricken, häkeln und und Haushaltsbuch zu führen und so weiter. Und da wurden uns auch bestimmte Werte da vermittelt. Darauf bin ich stolz und heute noch dankbar, dass man uns so

the gendered upbringing in Yugoslavia, both Ana and Ivana reframe it as a form of protection and life preparation, especially when contrasted with what they perceived as too-far-reaching individualism or a lack of values in West Germany. Contrasting the women's statements, it becomes clear that the perception of one's own memories and experiences, especially in the case of gender roles, is also influenced by other factors such as personal and political attitudes. While the participants discuss similar topics and contexts, they come to different conclusions about what growing up in the SFRY means to them in retrospect and how they perceive gender relations in the FRG in the past and present.

In practical terms, living in the West German dormitories for migrant workers on average meant a slight improvement in their living conditions, despite the shortcomings that were typical for this sort of accommodation. Amina describes her shared accommodation that was part of the first hospital she worked in in Wiesbaden in 1990 like as 'shoebox-like' but nevertheless concludes 'I was on my own, so it was okay' (Interview 1, 26' minute).²⁰⁸ This attitude is also discussed in earlier works: Amina's statement reflects that abroad, migrant women often moved into their own home for the first time, which meant experiencing a new level of independence compared to living in their parents' house.²⁰⁹ Many participants shared similar experiences, especially those who migrated alone and lived abroad independently. Others joined their husbands after arriving in the FRG. While initial housing often meant shared dormitories, living conditions generally improved over time, especially once they started families.

For Mila, buying her own flat in the early 1980s was a particularly important step that gave her a sense of security, as she had previously had the difficult experience of having her flat terminated by her landlord. She reflects on this as follows: 'We lived in Pasing and got kicked out of our flat in January. So we were homeless, which was tough. Then the woman came, and we still didn't know the laws. I mean, we had been living in a house, and then I sent [my two children] back to my parents' place [in Yugoslavia], to a shed. That was in January, and it was a disaster. Hey, it was bad, and that was actually the reason why I got this job where I earned a lot of money, bought a flat so that no one could kick me out. It was a bit psychological. So I thought to myself: Now I live here, now no one can kick me out. I don't have a landlord'

lebenstüchtig geformt hat [...] Und dann auch wissen Sie mit diese Emanzipation. So, wie weit man hier gegangen ist in Deutschland. Das verurteile ich auch das schärfste, weil ich der Meinung bin, das was ich erreicht habe, habe ich auch als Frau erreicht. Verstehen Sie? Ja. Und ich habe nie das Gefühl erlebt, dass man versucht hatte, mir da Steine zu legen, weil ich eine Frau bin. Das habe ich nie erlebt.“

²⁰⁸ German original: Amina: „*kleine Schuhkartonzimmerchen [...] ich war alleine, dann war es okay.*“

²⁰⁹ Morokvašić makes the same argument in her comparative study, see Morokvašić 1987, p. 100-101.

(Interview 4, 36' minute).²¹⁰ Mila explains how, as a migrant who was not yet familiar with German tenancy law, she felt powerless in this situation. As a mother, she was forced to make a difficult compromise. Without a sufficiently large flat, she could not provide for her children in Munich, so they had to return to her hometown in Yugoslavia to be taken care of by a neighbour temporarily. This shows that Mila faced a major intersectional challenge due to her double role as a migrant worker and mother in view of her sudden homelessness. She had to make decisions as quickly as possible to reorganise her family in such a way that employment and childcare were secured while she looked for a new flat. As a result, it was particularly important to her not to be dependent on landlords again in the future. Buying a flat thus became an important safeguard for her.

Marriage, too, offered women a certain degree of security and community or was deliberately used as a strategy to better cope with the challenges of everyday life abroad. Ivana, for example, explains that she would not have been able to cope with the double burden of working and studying full-time at university without the constant support of her husband. Ivana and her husband were not only able to adapt their income and other tasks such as housework to their current needs, but Ivana also considers the mental support provided by their partnership to have been very important in retrospect.²¹¹ In contrast, Mila and Vesna's statements show a different pattern. Both women clearly stated that they entered their marriages primarily as a measure to provide protection and security. When talking to them about it, their statements also reveal some regret. Mila and her husband got married right before she left Bosnia for the FRG. She recalls this step as a strategic but also somewhat forced decision in view of a lack of alternatives as her family was not supportive of the idea of her migrating: 'And then I secretly made a passport. And I didn't dare to go alone. I married my husband, and I thought I was very naive, young and naive and I have to say my current opinion, that was stupid of me, but I didn't dare to go alone' (Interview 4, 12' minute).²¹² Here it becomes clear that migrating to West Germany, especially as a single young woman, posed a great challenge for Mila. Under pressure to earn her own money and escape the difficult conditions at home in Yugoslavia, a partnership

²¹⁰ German original: Mila: „*wir in Pasing gewohnt und wir haben im Januar eine Wohnungskündigung gekriegt. Wir waren also obdachlos, das war schwer. Da kam die Frau, wir haben die Gesetze immer noch nicht gekannt. Ich mein wir hatten in einem Haus gewohnt, ja und dann habe ich die beiden dann wieder zu meinen Eltern geschickt, in einen Schuppen. Ein Jahr im Januar war das, das war eine Katastrophe. Ey, das war schlimm und das war eigentlich der Grund, dass ich, wo ich diese Arbeit, wo ich viel Geld verdient hab, Wohnung kaufen, dass mich keiner rausschmeißen kann, das war bissl psychisch bedingt. So da hab ich mir gedacht: Jetzt wohn ich hier, jetzt kann mich keiner rausschmeißen. Ich hab keinen Vermieter.*“

²¹¹ See Interview 6 (Ivana) 42' minute.

²¹² German original: Mila: „*Und da hieß es ich bin heimlich Pass gemacht. Und ich hab mich nicht getraut, alleine zu gehen. Ich hab den mein Mann geheiratet und das ich meinte Ich war sehr naiv, jung und naiv und ich muss sagen meine jetzige Meinung, das war blöd von mir, aber ich habs ich hab mir nicht getraut.*“

seemed like the right solution for her at the time. However, the quote also shows that she regards the decision to marry differently today.

Vesna was recruited as a young woman too but unlike Mila, she migrated to West Germany on her own. After a short time, she met her future-husband there. He had also migrated alone from Yugoslavia to the Ruhr region as a young man to work in one of the many factories in the area. Vesna describes her first encounter and her thoughts at the time as follows: ‘and then he saw me, but I didn't pay any attention, I wasn't interested, because I was scared. Back then I was alone, an inexperienced woman, a girl and so on, and he comes, I stand like this, I say goodbye, he comes and kisses me on the forehead, I said: ‘Excuse me, what's going on?’ I didn't want to, but he was ... he was as stubborn as one who absolutely wanted, yes, I had no other choice, I thought better with a man than alone.’²¹³ Today, she explains that this decision, which gave her a certain degree of security at the time, also created a kind of dependency on her husband, which she now takes a critical look at. For example, the relationship meant that both spouses paid their salaries into a joint account that was managed as a family. Vesna expresses this in a humorous way that nevertheless illustrates that she reflected much on her decision at the time: ‘Yes, yes, the salary had to go into one account. That was a mistake, but today I regret it [laughs]. Honestly. That was a mistake, but it was like that back then [...]. If I were born again, not the same man, not the same account. [laughs] I'm joking’ (Interview 7, 35’ minute).²¹⁴ Vesna’s husband passed away at a relatively young age, he was only 49 years old. From then on, Vesna’s life changed significantly: on the one hand she raised her children as a single mother and had to take on all responsibilities around earning money and family life on her own. On the other hand, and despite the even greater responsibility that now rested on her, these changed living conditions also enabled her to make independent decisions regarding her budget and the upbringing of her children.

Several interviewed women later facilitated the migration of family members from the (former) Yugoslavia, thereby continuing to expand their transnational networks far beyond the official end of labour recruitment to the FRG. At the same time, this challenges the common assumption that primarily male migrants supported family networks (for example through remittances), showing instead that women played an active and independent role themselves.

²¹³ German original: Vesna: „und dann er hat mich gesehen, aber hab ich gar nicht drauf geachtet, interessiert mich nicht, ne weil ich hab Angst gehabt. Damals war ich alleine, unerfahrene Frau, ne Mädchen und so weiter und er kommt, ich stehe so ich sag tschüss, er kommt und küsst mich grad auf die Stirn ich hab gesagt Hallo, was ist denn los? Ich wollte nicht, aber er war ... er war stur wie eine, die wollte unbedingt, ja, ich hab keine andere Wahl, ich hab gedacht besser mit einem Mann als alleine.“

²¹⁴ German original: Vesna: „Doch, doch, der Lohn muss auf ein Konto. Das war Fehler aber jetzt beureuen [lacht]. Ehrlich. Das war Fehler aber damals war es so. Würde ich nochmal neu geboren, nicht gleiche Mann, nicht gleiche Konto. [lacht] Ich mache Spaß.“

The Yugoslav wars during the 90s were certainly a catalyst that made such support necessary. In Amina's case, for instance, large parts of her Bosnian family obtained refugee status in Germany. After initially taking in her boyfriend, who later became her husband, her sister with her family, as well as her parents, also came to Stuttgart to stay with her as the war progressed. For her, as the closest contact in the FRG, this meant taking on many organisational tasks and a great degree of responsibility. She reports that taking on this role was out of question for her as she felt 'morally or also physically obliged to be there for them and that actually sealed our fate a bit' (Interview 1, 71' minute).²¹⁵ As Amina explains, this development had long-term consequences for her future planning. As both the circumstances in Bosnia-Herzegovina had changed so drastically and her family members who fled to Germany in the 1990s decided to settle permanently, return migration suddenly was no longer an option for Amina. In Ana's case, family migration did not stop when the war ended. She took in her brother and his family only a few years ago. Like Amina she describes the responsibilities that came with their migration as follows: 'And I took him in here, he came to Frankfurt. Mmm. I picked him up from Frankfurt. I found him a job and helped him move and then he started a family here and now I have him here with three small children' (Interview 2, 42' minute).²¹⁶

In contrast, for the older generation, these responsibilities were first and foremost financial ones as remittances were a common way of providing financial support to families and friends in Yugoslavia.²¹⁷ According to Mila this obligation felt both challenging and rewarding. She states: 'Yes, as I said, I just worked, slept and worked to earn something – helping my parents was my first goal. Just helping my parents, my mother, buying things and the washing machine because she was old and ill, that kind of felt good, I was able to help' (Interview 4, 15' minute).²¹⁸ The experiences of the women who were interviewed not only contradict the common narrative of the "migrant woman following her husband", but even turn the narrative of family reunification on its head, as in their experiences it was the men who "followed" the

²¹⁵ German original: Amina: „moral oder auch physisch dazu verpflichtet überhaupt für sie da zu stehen und das hat ja dann tatsächlich unsere Schicksal so bisschen besiegelt.“

²¹⁶ German original: Ana: „Dann habe ich ja einen Bruder, also einen jüngeren Bruder, da habe ich weniger Kontakt und irgendwann mal jetzt so die letzte Jahre, wo angefangen haben wieder die Kroaten auszuwandern, da ist mein Bruder mitgekommen. Und den habe ich hier aufgefangen, der kam nach Frankfurt. Mhm. Den habe ich von Frankfurt abgeholt. Ich habe ich ihm Arbeit gefunden und habe den umziehen lassen und der hat sie dann hier Familie gegründet und jetzt habe ich den hier mit drei kleinen Kindern.“

²¹⁷ See here: Le Normand, Brigitte (2021): Citizens Without Borders. Yugoslavia and its Migrant Workers in Western Europe, p. 5 and Bernard, Sara: Deutsch Marks in the Head, Shovel in the Hands and Yugoslavia in the Heart. The Gastarbeiter Return to Yugoslavia (1965-1991), p. 4.

²¹⁸ German original: Mila: „Ja wie gesagt, nur gearbeitet, geschlafen und gearbeitet, um was zu verdienen? Eltern geholfen ich hab dann gleich mein erstes Ziel war. Nur die Eltern helfen, aber meine Mutter, Sachen gekauft und Waschmaschine dass die weil, die war schon auch alt und krank, das hat mir irgendwie aufgebaut, ich konnte helfen.“

women.²¹⁹ Overall, these narratives reveal that women were not passive followers in family migration but rather initiators and coordinators of complex transnational responsibilities and care work.

Finally, in most of the interviews, the participants express that formative memories, but also substantial challenges are connected to motherhood and parenting. One recurring theme among the interviewees is the tension between economic necessity to perform paid work and the desire to care for and raise their children personally. According to Morokvašić more than half of all Yugoslav women abroad initially left their children in Yugoslavia, often in the care of their own mothers or other relatives.²²⁰ The interviews reveal how this produced shifts in collective care arrangements in the home country while simultaneously creating difficult personal dilemmas for Yugoslav mothers. The migrant women knew that their time in the FRG would be largely devoted to their work and left little opportunity for childcare. At the same time, when many of the women became mothers, they felt that return migration to the SFRY was still a realistic option. As a result, integrating their children into the Yugoslav school system became a priority for many families. Jelena, for instance, describes how her children first stayed in Vojvodina and were cared for by her mother, until eventually the family decided they should join her and her husband in Berlin. Yet, she recalls the difficulties of reconciling paid work with childcare once the children were in Germany: ‘Yes, it's a bit difficult when the children go to school and I don't have that much time. And then the children come home and stay at home on their own and when I come home the child is at home, yes. And everything alone, to learn everything alone, such good children, yes, nothing has happened, I had luck that not anything happened. (Interview 5, 13' minute).²²¹ Her statement expresses a mix of relief as nothing bad happened to her children as well as some guilt about having had to leave her children unsupervised due to work obligations in the first place. At the same time, she felt having her children around her as an improvement compared to them being raised back in Yugoslavia by her mother.²²²

Vesna, too, reflects on this struggle with a strong sense of regret. At the time, her husband insisted that their children should remain with her mother-in-law in Serbia, but she now questions that decision: ‘Unfortunately, it's not good, what we did back then. I still regret it

²¹⁹ See e.g., Heberle, Rudolf. 1972. Zur Typologie der Wanderungen, in: Köllmann, Wolfgang/Peter Marschalck (eds.), *Bevölkerungsgeschichte*, Köln, p. 69-75. Lorber argues that this narrative of coercion, victimhood and multiple oppression of migrant wives persisted in research and society. See Lorber 2017, p. 40.

²²⁰ See: Morokvašić 1987, p 108.

²²¹ German original: Jelena „Ja, bisschen so schwer ist wenn immer so geht äh Arbeit Kinder geht zum Schule und habe nicht so viel Zeit. Ja. Und dann kommen nach Hause Kinder bleibt alleine zu Hause und wenn ich komme so was das Kind das ist zu Hause, ja. Und alles alleine lernen, alles alleine, so so gute Kinder ja, nicht was passieren habe Glück, dass nicht was passieren.“

²²² Ibid.

today. Because the children come to me in a completely different way, because grandma always tells different stories. They were small children and then everything is in my head, I didn't have a good relationship back then, unfortunately, I can cry today, but I couldn't go back' (Interview 7, 28' minute).²²³ This demonstrates that Vesna's decision to let the children grow up in Yugoslavia under other guardians meant that her own children were closer to their grandmother than herself, that she missed out on their developmental years and that thinking about this still pains her today. Although she knows that she cannot change her decision today, the experience without her children has convinced her to organise her child-rearing differently from then on. Ten years later, when Vesna was pregnant with her third child, she knew with certainty that she did not want him to grow up in Yugoslavia. At the same time, she was determined to bring her two daughters to the FRG and have them by her side. Although the family initially faced concerns, especially about her daughters' lack of German language skills, she prevailed over her husband's objections. Looking back, she is grateful that she was able to reunite the family, even if only at a later stage.

Simultaneously, some of the participants reflect critically on the limited support structures and inflexible leave policies that existed for migrant workers in West Germany at the time. When comparing them with today's more generous maternity leave options and family support systems, they are convinced that such measures would have taken some of the burden off them and many other migrant women. With better state support services, she believes, it would have been far easier to reconcile work and motherhood during those difficult years.²²⁴ Instead, navigating motherhood under difficult conditions left lasting emotional consequences regarding the relationship with their children. As a result, while raising children fundamentally changes the life of every woman and gender inequalities are often nevertheless established in many partnerships, the participants' stories show that the category of 'migrant' presented additional obstacles.

6.4 Migrant Women in Society

In this sub-chapter, the societal environment of migrant women refers, on the one hand, to how state structures, such as bureaucracy, residence status, language barriers, or state policies, shaped their position in West German society. On the other hand, it addresses their social

²²³ German original: Vesna: „*leider ist nicht so ist nicht gut was haben wir damals gemacht? Ich bereue mich bis heute. Weil Kinder ist ganz anderes, kommen zu mir; weil die Oma spricht immer andere Geschichten. Da war kleine Kinder und dann steht alles im Kopf; hab ich nicht gute Beziehung gehabt damals leider ist so ich kann heute weinen, aber ich konnte nicht mehr zurück*“

²²⁴ See e.g., Interview 4 (Mila) 35' minute; Interview 6 (Ivana) 17' minute.

networks beyond home and work, for instance by analysing friendships with Germans and ties to the (ex-)Yugoslav community abroad.

For many of the female migrants, the early years in the FRG were marked by isolation. Long working hours and language barriers left little time or energy for building friendships outside their immediate circles. Sharing a common native language and experiencing similar struggles living in West Germany, the (ex-)Yugoslav community was for many migrants of central importance, especially immediately after their arrival to the FRG. Some women describe deep social connections that emerged within shared Yugoslav living arrangements, where people came together, cooked, and supported one another like extended families. Amina recalls this, thinking about communal life in the dormitory near the hospital: ‘One [Yugoslav friend] had a room upstairs, the other on the left, like in a student dorm. There, we cooked together or one of us cooked and invited two, three over [...]. That was a social habit, not so much with Germans, as we didn’t have time to socialise that much’ (Interview 1, 67’ minute).²²⁵ Like many other interviewees, in her statement she expresses initial difficulties to build friendships with Germans. Yet these migrant communities were not free of tension or hierarchy either. Gender roles often remained rigid, and the same patriarchal dynamics women had left behind at home persisted in some community spaces. Vesna, for instance, was grateful for the opportunities her local Yugoslav club offered. There, Yugoslav migrants could come together and relax after work as many events were organised. At the same time, she strongly criticizes the power dynamics she and other Yugoslav women encountered in such community spaces: ‘Back then [in the Yugoslav clubs], there were only the men were bosses, all the men were bosses [...]. That was bad, that was bad, the men wanted to boss us around, the women had no say. But it was really difficult with our men. Back then, hard-working women were all with children, with work in the firm and with money and so on, but the men were machos but thank God that’s no longer the case today. The women were always fighting’ (Interview 7, 24’ minute).²²⁶ In this statement, Vesna also addresses the multiple, coexisting duties of migrant women, which were either invisible to or taken for granted by men. It also shows that even familiar community spaces abroad were perceived and made use of differently by migrant men and women.

²²⁵ German original: Amina: „Eine hat Zimmer oben, die andere links, also so wie im Studentenheim quasi. Da haben wir zusammen gekocht oder eine hat gekocht dann zwei drei eingeladen [...]. Das war also sozial so angewöhnt, weniger jetzt mit Deutschen, da wir überhaupt keine Zeit hatten so große Kontakte zu knüpfen.“

²²⁶ German original: Vesna: „Wir war damals [in den jugoslawischen Klubs] nur die Männer war Chef, alle Männer waren Chef [...]. Das war schlecht, das war schlimm, die die Männer man ey, da wollte wollte kommandiert, die Frau hat keine Mitsprache. Aber da war wirklich schwer mit unseren Männern. Fleißige Frau war damals alle, mit Kinder mit Arbeit in Firma und mit Geld und so aber die Männer Macho, aber Gott sei dank heute ist nicht mehr. Die Frauen kämpfen immer.“

Over time, and despite initial barriers, many migrant women managed to build friendships beyond migrant communities. Some described close ties with German friends and colleagues who offered emotional support and company in difficult times. ‘Despite all the heaviness that weighed on us, she created this relaxed atmosphere’ (Interview 1, 42’ minute),²²⁷ Amina said of a German colleague who invited both German and migrant workers to her home for dinner parties to cope with the labour-intensive hospital work. This generosity came as a surprise to Amina, who initially had not expected the Germans to be so hospitable, a personality trait she until then had more associated with ‘our Balkan mentality’ (Interview 1, 42’ minute).²²⁸ Other interviewees too explained that these newly formed relationships were not only convenient but often based on shared values and mutual respect. Katarina, too, emphasises that she built many friendships with Germans. She recalls: ‘I was in the position of having a boyfriend who was German, and I didn’t form friendships with other people out of necessity, as many do, because if they don’t speak the language or something. But because I got on with the people, yes, just like I did back then in Croatia, which is why most of my friends, not all of them, yes, have similar attitudes to life or similar values’ (Interview 3, 21’ minute).²²⁹

However, some participants also remember tensions and prejudices that surrounded such intercultural friendships or romantic relationships. Vesna, who was quoted earlier complaining about Yugoslav men’s ignorant behaviour in the Yugoslav clubs, had similarly negative experiences with German men. ‘Yes, the German men wanted to grab all our women. Fresh meat. But ours were, oh, naughty too. Oh my God, why, that’s how it was. It’s not nice, not nice, but what can you do?’ (Interview 7, 25’ minute), she recalls.²³⁰ Vesna’s statement here also reveals a certain hopelessness, because regardless of the social spaces in which migrant women participated, sexism and gendered power relations seem to have played a role regardless.

Language and language learning were further recurring themes in the interviews. In the early years after migrating, the inability to participate in everyday conversations or jokes left

²²⁷ German original: Amina: „Natürlich kannte man bosnische oder unsere Balkan Mentalität, aber dass das im Deutschen auch so stattfindet. Das hat mich überrascht, aber total positiv überrascht und ich weiß immer noch im Kopf diese eine Abend, die sie uns ja bei sich zu Hause eingeladen hatte und wir saßen bei ihr im Wohnzimmer und haben dann nur trotz aller Widrigkeiten, die wir hatten im Geschäft und diese Schwere, die auf uns gelastet hatte, hat sie für diese entspannte Atmosphäre gesorgt.“

²²⁸ Ibid.

²²⁹ German original: Katarina: “ich war ja in der Position, dass ich einen Freund hatte, der Deutscher war und die anderen Freundschaften, mit den anderen Menschen habe ich nicht gebildet aus Not, wie viele es machen, weil wenn die keine Sprache können oder so, sondern äh weil ich mich mit den Menschen verstanden habe, ja so wie ich es auch damals in Kroatien gemacht habe, deshalb ist es auch so, dass die meisten von meiner Freunde nicht alle, ja, ähnliche Einstellungen zum Leben haben Ja oder ähnliche Werte, ja.“

²³⁰ German original: Vesna: Ja, die deutsche Männer wollte alle unsere Frauen schnappen. Frische Fleisch. Na aber unsere waren, ach, frech auch. Ach mein Gott, wieso, so war das aber. Ist nicht schön, nicht nett aber was soll man machen?

some women feeling excluded and ashamed. ‘When the people in the team laughed, I couldn’t laugh with them [...]. I felt very, very bad,’ (Interview 2, 12’ minute)²³¹ Ana said, describing a loneliness caused by a lack of language skills. Jelena also expresses this frustration: ‘If you don’t speak German, it’s all over’ (Interview 5, 9’ minute).²³² But for others and over time, language learning became a gateway to confidence and societal inclusion. Katarina who had studied languages before and later worked as an interpreter in West Germany highlights: ‘It opens doors that I didn’t know existed [...], through this whole process of learning the language you’ve learnt a lot about the mentality of people’ (Interview 3, 34’ minute).²³³ During the eight interviews, it became clear that the participants had experienced what Katarina describes here to varying degrees in West Germany. Depending on when they migrated, their social environment and family situation, and their role at work, the women acquired different levels of comfort and proficiency in the German language. Overall, the women experienced the German language both as a barrier and, later, as a useful resource at the workplace and especially to take part in society. Looking back, they conclude that one of the most important factors for their own integration and general satisfaction in everyday life in West Germany is language proficiency.

Alongside these social dynamics, the participants also spoke about the institutional frameworks they encountered in the FRG and how they shaped their lives. Bureaucratic obstacles, shifting residence statuses, and the absence of meaningful state support were common themes in the conversations. Some of the participants express a strong feeling of being treated unfairly by the German state. Mila noticed a discriminatory attitude early on and has bitter memories of her arrival at the train station. She recalls: ‘not just me, but millions of people, these Italians, Spaniards, Greeks, we all came by train like beggars, with a plastic bag and they bunkered us in a bunker like criminals at the main railway station. And all we really wanted to do was work and live. Why did they do that?’ (Interview 4, 44’ minute).²³⁴ Similarly, Vesna looks back at the medical examination during the recruitment process as a dehumanizing experience, describing how migrants were reduced to mere physical functionality: ‘They wanted to examine everyone like soldiers: blood tests, if I was pregnant, I couldn’t come,

²³¹ German original: Ana: „*ich konnte nicht mitlachen [...], da habe ich mich schon sehr sehr schlecht gefühlt*“

²³² German original: Jelena: „*Wenn du keine deutsche Sprache, aber trotzdem alles vorbei.*“

²³³ German original: Katarina: „*Es öffnen sich die Türe, die ich nicht wusste, dass es gibt, ja [...] durch dieses ganzen Prozess des Lernens der Sprache viel über Mentalität in Menschen gelernt*“

²³⁴ German original: Mila: „*Ist schwierig zu sagen, weil es ist ganz schwierig weißt du weil man war gezwungen man hat von zu Hause geflüchtet in eine fremde Welt da in Deutschland ist schon schwieriges Land, ich finde sehr schwierig und die Menschen in Deutschland. [...] Ich seh es als Schicksal nicht nur ich, sondern Millionen Menschen diese Italiener, Spanier Griechen wie kamen alle mit dem Zug wie Bettler, mit der Plastiktüte und die haben uns am Hauptbahnhof in so einen Bunker gebunkert wie Verbrecher. Und wir wollten eigentlich nur arbeiten und leben. Warum haben sie das gemacht?*“

anyone without teeth couldn't come. Who doesn't have glasses?' (Interview 7, 6' minute).²³⁵ These reports make it clear that the participants felt unfairly treated by the state recruitment process from the onset.²³⁶

Navigating the bureaucratic system once arrived in West Germany posed further challenges for many of the interviewees, especially in relation to fundamental issues like their residence status. For most of them, legal residency was directly tied to their employment contracts, leaving them with limited freedom to make personal or professional decisions.²³⁷ Amina, for instance, recalls how she had unknowingly risked her right to stay in the FRG by attempting to resign from her job at the hospital. She was not aware that her five-year employment contract was tied to her visa when she submitted her resignation. Learning about this from her supervisor came to a huge shock to her as she was not intending on returning to Yugoslavia soon. At the same time, she considers herself very lucky as her superior who was more familiar with the legal situation intervened and helped her accomplish that 'this conditional work visa does not expire, but rather that it is transferred from one location to another' (Interview 1, 49' minute).²³⁸ Other participants had entered the country with a different legal status. For instance, Katarina initially entered on a tourist visa and faced the dilemma of whether to return home or find legal ways to extend her stay. Marriage was one possible path to permanent residency, but as she did not want to marry her German partner at the time for legal reasons, she sought other alternatives and decided to enrol in a PhD program to obtain a student visa. However, even this solution came with restrictions and uncertainty. Katarina remembers: 'At that time, the laws were such that you had to sign when you finished your doctoral studies, and the next day you had to leave and return to your country' (Interview 3, 10' minute).²³⁹ After she was offered a position at the university as a language teacher, her residence status changed again. She decided to give up her doctoral studies as she was now entitled to a work visa. A few years later she was finally granted permanent residency by obtaining German citizenship.

²³⁵ German original: Vesna: „*Da wollte ganz Untersuchung wie Soldaten: Blutabnahme, wenn ich schwanger konnte nicht, wer hat keine Zähne konnte nicht kommen. Wer hat keine Brille?*“

²³⁶ These selection procedures are for instance depicted in Krsto Papić's 1972 short documentary film "Specijalni vlakovi" (Zagreb film). In the film, Papić follows Yugoslav labour migrants from the recruitment examination into the trains taking them to West Germany, that were specifically organised to enable labour recruitment. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=28ib09cV100>. Last accessed 19.08.2025.

²³⁷ For more information on residency and citizenship legislation see: Stokes 2022a, p. 219-224.

²³⁸ German original: Amina: „*dass die quasi diese bedingte arbeitbedingte Visum auch nicht erlischt, sondern dass sie nach aus von einem Ort in der andere übergehen.*“

²³⁹ German original: Katarina: „*in der Zeit waren die Gesetze so, dass man unterschreiben musste, wenn man fertig ist mit dem Promotionsstudium am nächsten Tag muss man abreisen zurück ins Land.*“

Even after decades of residence in West Germany, the participants report in several places on the continuity of unfair treatment by the state. Ivana explains: ‘As far as the authorities or institutions [...] are concerned, as a foreigner you always have the burden of proving yourself’ (Interview 6, 39’ minute).²⁴⁰ She deeply regrets that such institutional challenges have persisted for generations, which has had a particularly negative impact on the lives of the children of (Yugoslav) migrant workers in Germany. Today, she still feels this unequal treatment. Both from her personal experience and because she observes that third- and fourth-generation children of migrant workers are still treated as ‘second-class citizens’ (Interview 6, 33’ minute)²⁴¹ in the FRG. Not even through obtaining German citizenship former migrants are guaranteed social acceptance, she explains, as exclusion is still felt by her and many former labour migrants long after their migration.

This institutional precarity the participants experienced does not end with retirement either. Mila explains that low pensions are a structural problem among former labour migrants: ‘Because we foreigners earned significantly less, and that adds up, that pension point. We earned half as much as the others, so of course our pensions will be half as much’ (Interview 4, 57’ minute).²⁴² This systematic inequality specifically affects (former) migrant women since their wages were even lower compared to their male counterparts. Vesna, who continued to work even after retiring, describes this decision as a financial necessity, because her pension ‘was really not enough. For rent, for the car, for the television, for the telephone, for my son. It was really difficult’ (Interview 7, 44’ minute).²⁴³ After her husband died at an early age, Vesna is only entitled to part of his pension. In addition, portions were deducted from her own pension because she temporarily paused paid labour to raise her children. In Katarina’s case, despite decades of full-time work, and balancing multiple jobs at once, the pension she is entitled to is simply too low to cover all costs of life in the FRG. Living in the relatively expensive city of Freiburg, she explains, a pension of just over a thousand euros is not enough to live on with dignity: ‘I think I’ll be forced to either work until I drop dead or go back, because I can’t survive here financially on my pension. That’s so depressing,’ (Interview 3, 30’ minute)²⁴⁴ she said,

²⁴⁰ German original: Ivana: „Und aber was jetzt so die Behörden betrifft oder Institutionen [...], dann ist man als Ausländer immer in der Beweispflicht.“

²⁴¹ German original: Ivana: „Leute zweite Klasse“

²⁴² German original: Mila: „Weil wir Ausländer wesentlich weniger verdient haben und das summiert sich halt, dieser, dieser Rentenpunkt. Doppelt so wenig verdient wie die anderen, klar, die Rente wird es ja auch doppelt so wenig.“

²⁴³ German original: Vesna: „war wirklich zu wenig. Für Miete, für Auto, für Fernseher, für Telefon, für mein Sohn. Da war wirklich schwer.“

²⁴⁴ German original: Katarina: „Ich glaube, ich werde gezwungen, wenn ich die andere Möglichkeit nicht finde Entweder bis ich tot umfalle zu arbeiten oder halt zurückzugehen, ja, weil ich hier mit der Rente finanziell nicht überleben kann. Und das ist so deprimierend“

frustrated by having performed hard labour throughout her life but never being fully rewarded in exchange. Like Vesna, Katarina's situation further complicates as she is living on her own. Their stories show how in addition to the overall lower pension entitlements for migrants, for women without a partner or spouse to share the financial burden, the later years of life are marked by renewed vulnerability and economic uncertainty.

Together, these accounts highlight the multiple tensions Yugoslav migrant women experienced in the societal environment: Tensions between connection and marginalisation, familiarity and foreignness, and recognition and rejection. Yet they also make visible the resilience with which these women navigated the conditions of their everyday lives, through the relationships and networks they built or the strategies they developed and adapted, even when the West German state and society at times remained ambivalent about their presence. Another striking factor that becomes apparent in the oral history interviews is that many of the participants report experiences of discriminatory treatment in passing, often without clearly identifying what happened to them as discrimination. Morokvašić notices a similar tendency in her study. She argues that although Yugoslav migrants were less frequently subjected to overt racism or personal attacks than other immigrant groups, they still faced systemic discrimination as foreigners. In response, many adapted by making themselves as invisible and conforming as possible to avoid conflict.²⁴⁵ A desire to conform to society as much as possible is also evident in the stories of the participants. Mila, for instance, says at one point: 'Well, I avoided any kind of conflict' (Interview 4, 25' minute).²⁴⁶ While Vesna explains: 'I haven't done anything bad, no one has ever done anything bad to me, and I've lived a good and content life so far' (Interview 7, 18' minute).²⁴⁷

Nevertheless, for Yugoslav women in particular, their new status as foreigners emerged as the most immediate source of discrimination, while other sources of oppression such as class and gender were often internalized and perceived as natural.²⁴⁸ This perception becomes apparent in many of the women's accounts. For example, when Ivana says: 'I have never felt that anyone tried to put obstacles in my way because I am a woman' (Interview 6, 67' minute).²⁴⁹ Another potential reason why gender discrimination was often ignored or even denied in the interviews compared to migrant status is that "being a foreigner" in Germany was something

²⁴⁵ See: Morokvašić 1987, p. 112.

²⁴⁶ German original: Mila: „Also ich bin jedem Konflikt aus dem Weg gegangen.“

²⁴⁷ German original: Vesna: „Hab ich gar nichts gemacht schlechtes, hat mir auch nie jemand getan schlechtes ich lebe bis jetzt so gut und zufrieden.“

²⁴⁸ See: Morokvašić 1987, p. 113.

²⁴⁹ German original: Ivana: „ich habe nie das Gefühl erlebt, dass man versucht hatte, mir da Steine zu legen, weil ich eine Frau bin.“

that migrant women shared with their husbands or other male migrants. Thus, being a migrant offered a possibility for identification, through which similar experiences could be shared and discussed, while focusing on being a woman would have meant further differentiation and separation from such universal migrant experiences.

6.5 Memory and Meaning Making of the Migration Experience

This final section of the analysis serves to reflect on the long-term perspective of the participants' experiences and memories. What conclusions do they draw today regarding their decision to migrate? How do they evaluate their experiences in retrospect? How do they themselves describe their complex, transnational identities and relationships with Germany and the (successor) state of Yugoslavia they grew up in? The subchapter aims to show that although their memories cannot be understood as objective historical facts (see chapter 5), they nevertheless reveal important insights into the experiences and memories of these migrant women from a contemporary perspective.

For many participants, the decision to migrate appears, in hindsight, as both a defining and an irreversible one. Amina today remembers this feeling as follows: 'I am now leaving my entire history behind and entering a new world, never to return' (Interview 1, 87' minute).²⁵⁰ To remember this moment she nowadays carries a photograph with her that was taken as part of her recruitment documentation. This picture carries a lot of meaning and emotional value for her as she describes it as 'my sanctuary, this little photo, it is now my first photograph there and I know this scarf that I was wearing, this hairstyle, everything, I still see myself as I did back then and this photo reflects me as an immigrant [...] this young face' (Interview 1, 87' minute).²⁵¹

In reflecting on their migration experiences, many interviewees situate their personal stories within a broader collective context, often emphasizing shared experiences with other Yugoslav migrant workers in West Germany. Phrases such as 'I was not the only one,' 'not just me,' or 'us foreigners' (e.g., Interview 4, 20' minute; Interview 7, 30' minute; Interview 6, 52' minute) recur throughout the interviews, suggesting a strong awareness of belonging to a wider community of migrants who faced similar challenges and circumstances. At the same time, some interviewees strongly emphasize on the singularity of their own experience, contrasting

²⁵⁰ German original: Amina: „*Ich hinterlasse jetzt meine ganze Geschichte und gehe in neues Welt und kann nie wieder zurückkommen.*“

²⁵¹ German original: Amina: „*meine Heiligtum, diese eine kleine Foto, das ist jetzt meine erste Fotografie dort und ich kenne diese Schal, dass ich anhatte, diese Frisur, alles, ich sehe mich immer noch, wie damals und diese Foto widerspiegelt mich als Einwanderer [...], dieses junge Gesicht.*“

it from the “typical” story of labour migration to the FRG. Katarina, for instance, explicitly distances herself from generalizations as she remarks: ‘I am not the typical migrant, you know’ (Interview 3, 40’ minute).²⁵² Amina similarly highlights the uniqueness of her very positive experience as she states: ‘because this migration pathway, which I had followed [...] I’ve never come across it again, and anyone I tell it to can hardly believe it,’ (Interview 1, 21’ minute).²⁵³ This tension between collective and individual memory runs through many of the narratives. It illustrates the value of oral history in capturing both the diversity within the group and the broader socio-historical patterns of women’s labour migration. Through personal storytelling, the women assert their individuality while also contributing to a shared memory of specifically female Yugoslav migration.

Another theme most participants discussed in their interviews was the question of return migration to (ex-)Yugoslavia. What seemed as the initial plan for many and at least a plausible option for other women migrants, gradually became unrealistic as the political situation in Yugoslavia shifted in the 1990s. Mila explains her thoughts at the time this way: ‘and so we thought, war is coming [...]. So now emigrating is out of the question, we’re staying in Germany; it was politics, the political decision’ (Interview 4, 61’ minute).²⁵⁴ Vesna shares this feeling explaining that once the wars started, ‘that decision was no longer an option. And then, with my children already here, I thought, let’s stay’ (Interview 7, 38’ minute).²⁵⁵ Some participants still feel emotional pain when they think of what became of their towns, families, or friendships in the former Yugoslavia, especially since the wars. ‘It hurts me to see what my city has turned into,’ Ana says, thinking about ethnic divisions that now define the region she grew up in. Due to these drastic political developments as well as the fact that a large majority of the population emigrated as well, she is certain: ‘I couldn’t live there anymore, never’ (Interview 2, 46’ minute).²⁵⁶ Mila too is convinced that remaining in the FRG until today ‘was actually the best decision of my life’ as ‘a lot of people went back [...] and they regretted it’ (Interview 4, 62’ minute).²⁵⁷ In contrast, Petra’s view on return migration is less pessimistic even nowadays, she states: ‘For me, it was always open. Because I was at home in both

²⁵² German original: Katarina: „*ich bin nicht die typische Migrantin, weißt du*“

²⁵³ German original: Amina: „*weil diese Migrationsweg, den ich geführt hatte [...] ist mir noch nie wieder begegnet oder sonst was in der Art und Weise jeden, den ich das erzähle, kann das gar nicht glauben*“

²⁵⁴ German original: Mila: „*und da haben wir überlegt also es kommt Krieg [...]. Ja so jetzt mit auswandern ist vorbei. Wir bleiben in Deutschland, das war die Politik, die politische Entscheidung.*“

²⁵⁵ German original: Vesna: „*Da gab diese Entscheidung eigentlich gar nicht mehr. Und dann, da war schon meine Kinder hier, hab ich gedacht, wir bleiben*“

²⁵⁶ German original: Ana: „*das tut mir weh, wenn ich das sehe, wie wie wie aus was aus meiner Stadt geworden ist [...]. Ich könnte da nicht mehr leben. Niemals.*“

²⁵⁷ German original: Mila: „*das war eigentlich die beste Entscheidung meines Lebens [...]. Viele sind zurück [...] und die haben es bereut.*“

countries, like a lot of people. I thought, I don't know where I want to live yet' (Interview 8, 30' minute).²⁵⁸

Overall, most participants evaluated their migration experience in positive terms, though not without ambivalence. Amina, when highlighting the uniqueness of her journey, referred to it as 'perfect,' even 'ideal,' and stressed that such a path would be unimaginable today, given the wars and changing migration regimes (Interview 1, 20' minute). She believes this even more strongly after seeing what forced migration with refugee status looked like in her own family later on, and how different it was from her own experience. When Amina describes her migration story, luck is a recurring theme used to make sense of her memories. She puts it this way: 'either I really have always been accompanied by ten angels, but I have been very fortunate or had very good company. Migration can also be different. It does not always have to be terrible' (Interview 1, 50' minute).²⁵⁹ Ana, too assesses her overall experience as 'very positive and very good' (Interview 2, 48' minute) and emphasizes her personal growth: 'I have developed so well and I have been able to apply all the resources I brought with me to my advantage' (Interview 2, 48' minute).²⁶⁰ Several participants framed their migration as a meaningful journey and today feel gratitude and pride looking back at their memories.

At the same time, not all experiences were equally rosy. Mila admits that her life had been 'very difficult' and 'totally shit' (Interview 4, 5' minute; 51' minute) at times and says she often regretted migrating. She reflects: 'but for the children, it was better that we stayed there. Initially, I just wanted to earn some money and then go back' (Interview 4, 5' minute).²⁶¹ Today she looks back at her migration experience and thinks of it as her personal fate, something she is unable to change in retrospective. 'Now it's my destiny' she says laughing and adds 'Looking back, I might have done things differently, but unfortunately I won't be able to do that anymore, that ship has sailed' (Interview 4, 44' minute).²⁶² Vesna also considers her experiences related to migration as fateful. Although she encountered some difficult challenges as a migrant in the FRG, she says today: 'Honestly, though, I'm satisfied and never regret anything. Let's put it this

²⁵⁸ German original: Petra: „Bei mir war das alles immer offen. Weil ich in beiden Ländern zu Hause war, wie sehr viele. Ich dachte, ich weiß jetzt noch nicht, wo ich leben möchte.“

²⁵⁹ German original: Amina: „entweder bin ich wirklich mit zehn Engel unterwegs immer gewesen, aber ich hatte das da auch wirklich ja auch sehr viel Glück oder sehr viel gute Begleitung. Also die Migration kann auch anderes machen. Die muss nicht immer ganz schlimm sein.“

²⁶⁰ German original: Ana: „ich habe mich so gut entwickelt und ich habe mich ich habe alle Ressourcen, die mitgebracht habe irgendwie für mich anwenden können.“

²⁶¹ German original: Mila: „aber für die Kinder ist eher besser, dass wir da geblieben sind. Eigentlich wollte ich nur was verdienen und wieder zurück.“

²⁶² German original: Mila: „Ich hätte es vielleicht, wenn ich jetzt zurückdenke, anders gemacht, aber ich werds leider nicht mehr können, der Zug ist abgefahren.“

way, this is my experience, everyone has their own destiny and their own experiences' (Interview 7, 46' minute).²⁶³

Even when recalling hardship in the past, many frame their present in terms of gratitude and fulfilment. Both Mila and Vesna point to their grandchildren as a source of joy and explain that the expansion of their family networks in the FRG is something that 'made life worthwhile' (Interview 4, 51' minute). Other voices are less comfortable to limit their overall migration experience to such a brief assessment. Jelena, who is today 91 years old, is visibly overwhelmed by the sheer scope of her life story and simply replies: 'I don't know what to answer. I don't remember everything. I forgot everything again, it was too much' (Interview 5, 22' minute).²⁶⁴ Her statement shows once again that memories are complex, and forgetting is just as much a part of them as remembering. Therefore, such notions must be taken into account and considered critically when conducting oral history research.²⁶⁵ Overall, these reflections show that migration is not remembered as a single or fixed event, but as a layered experience, with each of the women attaching her own meaning to it. The various narratives also make it clear that the women either explain their own migration experience in terms of external circumstances, such as 'luck' or 'fate', or see it as their own achievement. Regardless of how they formulated their assessments of their migration experiences, their remaining statements about their lives at work, at home and in society in West Germany clearly showed that agency and taking initiative have always played a role that should not be overlooked here. This tension between the participants' self-understanding and the researcher's analytical interpretation is central here: it demonstrates that migrant agency cannot be understood simply as either individual autonomy or structural determination, but rather emerges in the interplay between personal strategies, social constraints, and the specific context.

Finally, the women's narratives often reveal an ambivalent understanding of their own identity and belonging as it was shaped and further complicated by factors such as their migration, their ties to several networks as well as countries, and the rupture of Yugoslavia's dissolution. Often, their identities cannot be reduced to a singular national frame. Instead, many describe them as in between spaces, marked by fluidity or contradiction. Katarina thinks of this in a positive way when she says: 'Whether I'm going to Freiburg, I say I'm going home, or when I come back [to Croatia], I say I'm going home' (Interview 3, 29' minute).²⁶⁶ Her life belongs

²⁶³ German original: Vesna: „Ehrlich aber bin ich zufrieden, bereue mich nie. Ich sag, so meine Erfahrung, jeder hat eigene Schicksal, eine eigene Erfahrung.“

²⁶⁴ Original: Jelena: „Keine Ahnung. Šta da odgovorim [...]. Ne sjećam se svega. Wieder alles vergessen, zu viel“

²⁶⁵ See: Assmann, Aleida. 2016. Formen des Vergessens. Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag; Welzer 2008, p. 19.

²⁶⁶ German original: Katarina: „Und egal, ob ich nach Freiburg fahre, sage ich, ich gehe heim oder wenn ich zurückkomme [nach Kroatien], sage ich, ich gehe heim“

to both countries and she associates each place with a specific period of her life: ‘I feel as if the first part of my life belongs to Croatia, and the second part to Germany’ (Interview 3, 11’ minute).²⁶⁷ Other participants refuse to choose between belonging here or there. Ivana, for instance, explains: ‘I am a cosmopolitan in the true sense of the word’ (Interview 6, 72’ minute).²⁶⁸ It was important to her to pass this attitude on to her daughter, who was born in West Germany but was nevertheless to maintain a connection to the former Yugoslavia through both her parents. The couple encouraged their daughter to always remember her roots and told her: ‘Your fatherland is Germany, your motherland is Yugoslavia. [...] Your mother tongue is German, your father tongue is Serbo-Croatian’ (Interview 6, 42’ minute).²⁶⁹ Looking back, Ivana explains that holding onto both was a conscious act of resistance against assimilation, and against erasure of the family’s history and heritage. This is even more remarkable as she herself explains that in a way she feels ‘complete alienation’ towards the former Yugoslavia and has, since migrating to the FRG, ‘spent a total of six weeks’ there (Interview 6, 62’ minute).²⁷⁰

For some interviewees, national identity remains a source of tension or even rejection: ‘I did not take German citizenship because I’m not a real German, and I don’t want to be’ (Interview 4, 42’ minute)²⁷¹ says Mila, despite spending decades in Germany and raising her children and grandchildren there. Instead, she proudly describes her family as truly international: ‘My daughter married a Frenchman. My son married a German woman. Now I have many grandchildren, we are international’ (Interview 4, 44’ minute).²⁷² Others acknowledge a layered and somewhat shifting sense of self. Vesna, for instance, reflects: ‘I can’t be German because I don’t have a German passport, I wasn’t born here, I’m from the former Yugoslavia. But slowly I’m becoming German, my neighbour told me: ‘[Vesna], you’re the same, you’re like a German’ (Interview 7, 48’ minute).²⁷³ Petra, although having a German passport, refuses to identify herself based on national categories. In her case, belonging is not defined by citizenship but by moral responsibility. She says: ‘I never said I was German. I have German citizenship, and I feel responsible for what happens in Germany because that’s where

²⁶⁷ German original: Katarina: „*Ich fühle mich eigentlich als ob mein erster Teil meines Lebens gehört zu Kroatien, zweites Teil meines Lebens zu Deutschland*“

²⁶⁸ German original: Ivana: „*ich bin Kosmopolitin in dem Sinne des Wortes*“

²⁶⁹ German original: Ivana: „*Dein Vaterland ist Deutschland, dein Mutterland ist Jugoslawien [...]. Also deine Muttersprache ist Deutsch, deine Vatersprache ist Serbo-Kroatisch.*“

²⁷⁰ German original: Ivana: „*,, eine totale Entfremdung [...] insgesamt sechs Wochen gewesen*“

²⁷¹ German original: Mila: „*Ich hab kein deutscher Staatsbürgerschaft angenommen, weil ich bin, ich bin keine echte Deutsche und ich will es ja gar nicht.*“

²⁷² German original: Mila: „*Meine Tochter hat einen Franzosen geheiratet. Mein Sohn hat eine Deutsche geheiratet. Jetzt habe ich viele Enkelkinder. Äh, also wir sind international.*“

²⁷³ German original: Vesna: „*Ich, ich kann das nicht Deutsch sein, weil ich hab keine deutsche Passaport, ich bin nicht hier geboren, ich bin immer aus alte damalige Jugoslawien ne, aber langsam komm ich auch wie Deutsche das sagte mir meine Nachbarin, [Vesna] du bist gleich, du bist wie Deutsch.*“

I live. And I must put in my two cents, which is what I do' (Interview 8, 75' minute).²⁷⁴ All in all, the experience of never fully belonging and feeling somewhere in-between runs through most of these stories, with the women sometimes framing it as a positive, sometimes as more challenging factor. Yugoslav migrant women live between two worlds, home and host societies, and navigate forms of loyalty, memory, and meaning that are always in motion.²⁷⁵ In the Yugoslav context, this is especially evident, with war, displacement, and fractured belonging acting as powerful catalysts for memory production, as Creet and Kitzmann note.²⁷⁶

The memories of these women are not passive reflections of the past but acts of agency in themselves. As Erll's concept of travelling memory suggests, such memories are dynamic and mobile as they are shaped by the women's transnational experiences and continually renegotiated in new temporal and spatial contexts. Their narratives not only recall events but make sense of their lives shaped by labour, migration, and marginality. By sharing their stories, the women actively position themselves in relation to dominant public memories, challenging simplistic portrayals of labour migration. Crucially, they not only highlight structural injustices but also reveal their own strategies of navigating, adapting to, and resisting them. Feminist memory studies highlight that these women's accounts are not only gendered but intersectional counter-memories, which articulate how race, class, nationality, and gender shaped their migration experiences, and how they made meaning out of them.²⁷⁷ Their memories serve as a form of situated knowledge that demonstrates the complexity of migrant women's lives.

²⁷⁴ German original: Petra: „*Ich hab nie gesagt, ich bin eine Deutsche. Ich hab eine deutsche Staatsbürgerschaft und ich fühle mich auch mitverantwortlich für das, was in Deutschland passiert, weil da lebe ich Ja. Und da muss ich meinen Senf dazugeben und das mache ich auch.*“

²⁷⁵ See: Faßmann, Heinz. 2003. Transnationale Mobilität: Konzeption und Fallbeispiel. SWS-Rundschau, 43(4): 435: Lorber, p. 34.

²⁷⁶ See: Creet/ Kitzmann, 2011, p. 9.

²⁷⁷ See: Hirsch/Smith 2002, Kuzma/ Pietrzak 2021.

7 Conclusion

This thesis explored how gender shaped the experience of being a labour migrant among Yugoslav women in West Germany and how these women remember their migration today. By combining oral history interviews with a gendered and intersectional analytical lens, the study has highlighted both continuities and complexities in migrant women's lived experiences and memories. While previous research and dominant narratives in both West Germany and Yugoslavia often portrayed female "guest workers" primarily as dependents following their husbands or as passive participants in broader migration flows, the findings of this study challenge these assumptions. Among the eight women interviewed, five migrated independently, without being accompanied by husbands or other family members. This alone marks a significant departure from the common perception of Yugoslav women migrants and illustrates that women's migration experiences were neither uniform nor less independent than men's by nature.

Within the FRG's centrally organised labour migration regime of the 1960s and 70s, the decision to migrate was nevertheless a highly individual and diverse process that was shaped by a wide range of personal motivations and structural conditions. While many participants came from economically modest backgrounds and often grew up in larger families, their reasons for leaving Yugoslavia varied greatly: the pursuit of better earning opportunities, dissatisfaction with limited prospects at home, the wish for adventure, romantic relationships, and, in some cases, the desire to escape restrictive community expectations. These findings demonstrate that Yugoslav women migrants should not be understood as a homogeneous group but rather as actors embedded in different social, economic, and cultural contexts. While the study captures a range of such diverse perspectives, it is, at the same time, important to acknowledge its limits. The perspectives presented here represent only a small segment of a much larger and more diverse migrant population. One must assume that many voices and particularly those of the most marginalized women, remain absent as their stories are less likely to be documented or accessible through oral history interviews. This absence highlights the structural silences within migration research and memory production, where experiences at the margins remain the most difficult to capture.

From the outset, the thesis is based on the premise that a gender perspective is a fruitful approach for studying labour migration. The analysis shows why this is the case. A recurring observation throughout the interviews was that participants often did not explicitly identify gender-based discrimination as a central theme in their migration experience when asked

directly. Instead, they tended to highlight other sources of disadvantage, such as their status as migrant workers or foreigners, more clearly. However, a closer analysis revealed that gender permeated almost every aspect of their memories and experiences as it shaped opportunities, challenges, and expectations within the three environments explored in this study: the workplace, the household, and broader society.

Several explanations help to explain this apparent invisibility of gender. First, gender intersects with other categories such as nationality, class, and migrant status, making it difficult for women to isolate discrimination based solely on their gender. Second, patriarchal norms often make women's roles and contributions less visible, producing expectations regarding care work and responsibilities towards others that women themselves often internalise. Third, Yugoslav women migrants were largely invisible in West German public discourse and research at the time, which seems to have shaped their own perception of their stories' relevance. This notion became apparent at the end of the interview with Ana, when she remarked: 'I've been in Germany for 30 years now, and no one has ever asked me such questions' (Interview 2, 50' minute).²⁷⁸ Finally, the Yugoslav socialist context adds another layer in understanding this silence regarding gender. Having grown up in a system that officially promoted gender equality, many participants were socialized to perceive discrimination as incompatible with their upbringing, even when their lived realities suggested otherwise. Despite these invisibilities, the findings demonstrate that understanding migrant women's experiences requires a gendered lens. After all, the analysis proves how gender influenced the participants' access to work and employment, their roles within families and communities, and the ways they navigated life in West German society.

The analysis has further shown that women's agency was exercised within structural constraints but remained a significant factor across all narratives. Different starting positions shaped migration experiences, yet in every life story there were moments of self-initiative and decision-making. Various factors have influenced the scope of possibilities for agency among different women. One of the main findings is that the time of migration mattered for the women's experiences and memories. Women who migrated in the late 1960s and early 1970s often faced more limited opportunities and gendered expectations, whereas those arriving in the late 1980s and early 1990s reported somewhat more autonomy and opportunities, reflecting broader socio-economic and political changes over time. Similarly crucial, the women's educational background and language skills proved decisive for shaping opportunities and

²⁷⁸ German original: Ana: "*Jetzt bin ich schon 30 Jahre in Deutschland und noch nie hat mich jemand solche Fragen gefragt.*"

degrees of agency. Women with higher education or German proficiency often accessed better jobs, negotiated bureaucracy more effectively, and developed stronger social networks. It must also be noted that employment was deeply gendered. Many women worked in care-related sectors like cleaning, caretaking, or part-time domestic work. These stood in stark contrast to migrant men's employment patterns. As the analysis has shown, nurses formed a notable exception. Working in a female-dominated profession, they reported fewer instances of gender-based discrimination and a stronger sense of being "needed," amid high workloads and stress. Moreover, childbirth marked a turning point in women's lives as it influenced employment decisions, financial independence, and social integration. As the interviews have shown, the strategies the migrant women chose to tackle such challenges differed widely – from outsourcing childcare to Yugoslavia, to balancing single motherhood, to remaining child-free. Conducting these oral histories now, looking back at the participants' life stories also reveals how gendered inequalities extended beyond active working years into retirement. Some of the participants nowadays find themselves (again) in a precarious position, either having to perform part-time employment in retirement, taking on care responsibilities, or facing financial challenges due to low pensions. Together, these findings demonstrate that gender shaped not only women's immediate migration experiences but also their long-term socio-economic positioning and identity formation.

By centring the voices of Yugoslav women migrants, this study offers counter-narratives to dominant memory regimes in both West Germany and Yugoslavia. Official discourses often framed female labour migrants as passive, family-bound dependents or solely reduced their presence to statistical footnotes. In contrast, the women interviewed described agency, resilience, and persistence: from forming transnational networks to independently improving their professional or housing situation and transforming their mother tongue into a profession. At the same time, the memories revealed ambivalence and complexity. Together, their accounts show how migration is neither remembered as a single event nor as a uniform experience but rather as a layered, ongoing process. Participants reflected on feelings of belonging, identity, and home in ways that oppose simplistic categorizations of integration or alienation, revealing identities situated "in-between" Yugoslavia and West Germany. While their memories cannot be equated with historical facts, they nevertheless offer an important corrective within migration history and deserve to be heard.

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Appendix

Overview Interviewees:

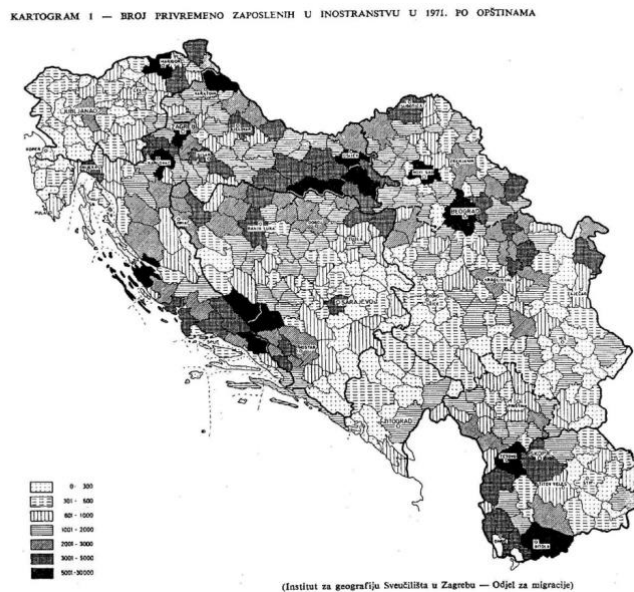
	Pseudonym	Birth	Birthplace	Education/ Occupation prior to Migration	Migration	Destination	Occupation after migration
P1	Amina	1968	BiH, (Bosanski) Šamac	Medical Faculty: Nursing + Physiotherapy	1990, Recruited	Wiesbaden → Stuttgart	Nurse
P2	Ana	1969	BiH, Bugojno	Medical Faculty: Nursing	1991, Recruitment arranged by aunt in FRG	Göppingen (near Stuttgart)	Nurse
P3	Katarina	1961	Croatia, Ploče	University: Italian and English Language	1988, Love/ Partner, initially tourist visa	Freiburg	Waitress, Teacher, Film projects, Translator, Retail Saleswoman
P4	Mila	1950	BiH, Jajce	Graduated Technical School: Certified Technician	1969, Recruited	Munich	Unskilled worker (packaging, food processing company) → Chemist (lab)
P5	Jelena	1934	Vojvodina, Ruma	Primary School Education	1970, Recruited (Husband first migrated)	Berlin	Unskilled worker (metal company)
P6	Ivana	1940s	Prefers to stay anonymous	Graduated Gymnasium	1963, Irregular migration	Prefers to stay anonymous	Teacher, Translator
P7	Vesna	1950	Vojvodina, Sombor	Trained seamstress	1973, Recruited	Velbert (near Wuppertal)	Unskilled worker (car industry supplier)
P8	Petra	1948	Croatia, Gorski kotar	Medical Faculty: Nursing	1967, Recruited (Agreement for nurses before off. recruitment period)	Homburg an der Saar → Berlin	Nurse → Social worker (Honorary work)

Additional material:

Timeline of the bilateral recruitment agreements with the FRG:



Map of Yugoslav external migrant workers according to their numbers in local communities in 1971:



Source: Baučić, Ivo: Radnici u inozemstvu prema popisu stanovništva Jugoslavije, supplement 6, Zagreb 1973.

Emigration according to gender from the Yugoslav Provinces and Republics (1971):

Republik/Provinz	Abwanderung von Frauen in %	Abwanderung von Männern in %
Slowenien	40,1	59,9
Kroatien	36,8	63,2
Bosnien-Herzegowina	21,8	78,2
Montenegro	19,3	80,7
Mazedonien	18,1	81,9
Serbien	34,1	65,9
Kosovo	4,7	95,3
Vojvodina	42,7	57,3

Tabelle 4: Abwanderung nach Geschlechtern aus den Republiken/Provinzen 1971.²⁰⁷

²⁰⁷ Quelle: Haberl (1978, 286).

Source: Here: Lorber, Verena. 2017. Angeworben: GastarbeiterInnen in Österreich in den 1960er und 1970er Jahren. Göttingen: V&R Unipress, p. 85.

Original source: Haberl, Othmar Nikola. 1978. Die Abwanderung von Arbeitskräften aus Jugoslawien. Zur Problematik ihrer Auslandsbeschäftigung und Rückführung, München, p. 286.

Confirmation of Ethical Approval (University of Glasgow)



University
of Glasgow

Ethics Committee for Non-Clinical Research Involving Human Subjects

College of Social
Sciences

Notification of Ethics Application Outcome – UG and PGT Student Applications

Application Details

Undergraduate Student Research Ethics Application Postgraduate Student Research Ethics Application

Application Number: PGT/SPS/2024/187/IMCEERES

Applicant's Name: Lara Maren Husar

Project Title: Through Her Eyes: Gendered Memories of Migration – A Case Study of Yugoslav Women Migrants in West Germany

Application Status: Fully Approved

Date of Review: 02/07/2024

Start Date of Approval 02/07/2024 End Date of Approval 31/12/2025

NB: Only if the applicant has been given approval can they proceed with their data collection with effect from the date of approval.

Recommendations (where changes are required)

Where changes are required by reviewers all applicants must respond in the relevant boxes to the recommendations of the Committee and provide this as the Resubmission Document to explain the changes you have made to the application as well as amending the documents. **Changes to the application form or supporting documents should be highlighted either in block highlight or in red coloured text to assist the reviewers.**

All resubmitted application documents should then be provided.

Approval Subject to Amendments means that the applicant can proceed with data collection with effect from the date of approval, but amendments must be fulfilled.

Amendments Subject to SEF should be submitted to ethics administrator.

If your application is rejected a new application must be submitted to the ethics administrator. Where recommendations are provided, they should be responded to and this document provided as part of the new application. A new reference number will be generated.

REVIEWER MAJOR RECOMMENDATIONS	APPLICANT RESPONSE
REVIEWER MINOR RECOMMENDATIONS	APPLICANT RESPONSE
ADDITIONAL REVIEWER COMMENTS	APPLICANT RESPONSE
Thank you for your careful considerations. This has been fully approved.	

Interviews – Sample Questions and Themes

These **themes** and *questions* aim to explore the interviewees' gendered experiences, memories, and perspectives on migration:

'Ice breaker' to start the conversation and make the interviewee feel comfortable:

"How are you feeling today?"; "Can you tell me your name and your age?"

1. Identity and Background

- *Can you tell me about your background and upbringing in Yugoslavia before migrating to West Germany?*
- *How did you perceive your identity as a Yugoslav woman prior to migration?*

2. Motivations and Decision to Migrate

- *What factors influenced your decision to migrate to West Germany for work?*
- *How did your family and community react to your decision to migrate?*

3. Employment and Work Experience

- *Did you work in West Germany? What kind of jobs did you have? Can you describe your experiences working in West Germany?*
- *How did your typical day look like? Can you tell me about your everyday experiences?*
- *How were (migrant/ Yugoslav) women perceived in the workplace compared to men?*

4. Gendered Experiences

- *Did you face any specific challenges or discrimination as a female migrant worker? Do you think you being a woman defined your life as a migrant worker in West Germany? In what ways? Was it different for men? Why?*

5. Family and Social Network

- *How did your family life look like? How did migration impact your family dynamics and relationships?*
- *What was your social life like in West Germany? Did you interact with other migrant communities?*

6. Cultural and Social Life

- *How did you navigate cultural differences and language barriers in your new environment?*
- *How did you spend your free time? Did you have any hobbies? Where did you go to and what did you do for holidays?*
- *Did you participate in any cultural or community activities to maintain connections to your Yugoslav heritage?*

7. Memories and Reflections

- *What are some of your strongest memories or moments from your time in West Germany?*
- *Looking back, how do you evaluate your migration experience?*

8. Impact of Migration on Identity

- *How did migration shape your sense of identity as a woman, a migrant, and a Yugoslav?*
- *Have your perspectives on migration and gender roles changed over time?*

9. Personal Insights

- *Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences or reflections?*