

Profiles from Germany - Category 6

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Mr. Alber (aged 55)

Mister Alber was born in Bremen in 1943, amidst the WW II bombing of the city. When the population of the city was „evacuated“, his family left for Saxony to live with relatives from his mother’s side. His father, a trained metalworker who had become a Protestant clergymen, was ousted from church service during the Nazi period, and had to work in the heavy industries, at first in Saxony, then again in Bremen after the war. In the early fifties he was rehabilitated and assigned to the eastern part of Germany, where the family had to move often in the following years due to the father’s changing destinations.

When young mister Alber had completed his training as a carpenter and finished his time in the army, he refused a job that he was offered because he would have had to become a party member. After this incident he returned to the Halle area, had different jobs, met his wife there, married in 1967, and had a son the following year before he finally settled with one GDR-enterprise where he would stay for the next twenty-two years - until a few years after unification. Soon after the fall of the wall it became evident that the small enterprise in the building sector that employed him might not survive in the competitive market, and together with others he was finally laid off in 1993. What followed was a period of insecurity and professional instability, where he „wandered from company to company“, never being offered good and stable employment and had to suffer personally „Wessi“-prejudice against the „Ossi“ he was.¹ After two years, the company that had initially laid him off in 1993 offered to employ him again. He accepted and returned there, despite of the severe grudge he felt. They told him from the start, they didn’t know for how long they could employ him. Two and a half years later, in mid-1995, he had to leave again, under conflictive circumstances that appear somewhat obscure in his account. For more than one year he was unemployed thereafter. Jobs that the employment agencies had offered him were miserably paid, way below the agreed union’s wage, or were otherwise unacceptable to him, for example implying to travel hundreds of kilometers every day. Finally, he was offered his current employment through a federal employment creation program in June this year. The working conditions are good, but the pay is moderate and his contract is for one year only.

¹ At job interviews for example, where he was told. „You Ossies haven’t ever learnt a thing in your life“ and similar offensive statements.

At a difference to many others, Mr. Alber's is one of a few biographies that we have gathered during the project where factual east-west mobility does play a role. Born in the West, his parents were forced to move eastwards during W.W.II, returned afterwards and moved to the east again due to his father's clerical duties. Despite of this, Mr. Alber does not give any significance to this divide in his account, he doesn't even mention it as such.² Rather, he is treating these movements as neutral geographical mobility, devoid of any political or ideological significance, caused by necessity or vocation in the case of his father. It is after German Unification when, without moving and nolens volens Mr. Alber arrived „in the West“ again, that we get explicit and negative references to West-Germany for the first time. This happens in the context of his attempts to look for work - something he experienced, as many East-Germans did, as denigrating, when he was pejoratively labelled an „Easterner“ (Ossi).

It is this aspect of unjustified negative treatment that he receives which can be followed like a Leitmotiv through the account of his and his parent's life. The common element in the different anecdotes and events of this kind that he narrates are unpathetic acts of „civil resistance“, not politically motivated, but rather geared at preserving and affirming a sense of personal decency, which is firmly rooted in a distinctly Protestant identity: He is, as was his father, not accountable in the last instance to any secular authorities, whatever political label they may bear, but to his conscience. And because of his sticking to a clear and simple concept of personal integrity and decency, he had had quite a number of difficulties in his life, professionally and otherwise, and during GDR-times as well as afterwards in the unified Germany. Such seems to be the latent message of his account, to be found in innumerable sequences. But while in the case of his father, the element of civil resistance and the risks involved in it seem plausible and realistic,³ this is much less evident in his own case. His rootedness in a religious universe of a rather sectarian, Protestant kind, was put to evidence clearly however in the course of the interview, as well as his disapproval of the interviewer's lacking familiarity with it, that he had rapidly exposed.

2 For a contrasting account see Mrs. Bellmer-Voss, our main case in category III, where this divide acquired significance as a structuring principle in her biography, and where crossing the east-west border is equalled to changing sides in a moral sense (Sostri's Germany, Nat. Report on Category III: Lone Parents).

3 Mr. Alber's father had, according to the interviewee, refused to receive his ordination as a priest in a Nazi uniform - while his superior apparently did wear such an uniform - and had to bear the consequences: he was removed from church service and rehabilitated only in 1952. In the meantime, he had, as mentioned above, been forced to work in the heavy industries.

In the sphere of work the above named Leitmotiv is persistent as well in his account. Beginning with an incident in his very early professional life, when he had to leave a job that he had just taken, because he refused to join the party. And ending with an intensely emotional and suspenseful narration of a confrontation of a west-German and his east-German construction-workers team at a construction site. This episode makes it patently clear how important a part of his identity his professional self is. He sees himself as a good, hard-working and reliable artisan and is deeply hurt, if this identity is doubted without good reason, or acknowledgement is denied, as it happened on several occasions in the newly established labour market in Eastern-Germany. The loss of value and esteem that labour has suffered in the course of the „German Transformation“ is probably even more troublesome for somebody who, like him, had in earlier years been able to effectively threaten an employer with leaving for someplace else if the company refused to accept his conditions (which at the time were to be granted a company owned flat for lease to live with his newly formed family). In perfect consistency with this traditional work-ethos, he states that the only thing he doesn't like at his new job is that the relaxed non-competitive atmosphere does not give him a chance to show what he can really do. It is an offence to his professional self to be working in a „protected“ job and not in a real enterprise. But the experience of long-term unemployment and the alternatives offered made him see this opportunity as his best bet. There can be little doubt that this assessment of his was correct.

Mr. Beeskow (aged 60)

Mr. B. had seen our advertisement in the local newspaper and was eager to talk about his experiences, whenever we wanted. During most of the interview in the garden of the Beeskow family's home in a tiny rural village near Halle, his wife was present. While she hardly ever intervened - apart from suggesting where to begin the narration - she followed her husbands account with clearly visible emotional participation.

His account was an inconspicuous one at first, typically GDR, one may be tempted to think. Born and raised in a small town in Eastern Germany, he got his professional training in a neighbouring village and met his wife at work. They moved to the „Chemical Triangle“, the -Bitterfeld - Halle - Leipzig area where both found work in the chemical industry, Mr. Beeskow working in an electric department. They are still living in the company owned house, that they were assigned then, and where they have educated their four children.

After the German unification, the Beeskow couple was relatively lucky: eventually, they were sent to early retirement independently from each other and he two years earlier than she, but both not immediately, as were many others of their age group, but in the mid-nineties. At the time of the interview they were both waiting to reach regular retirement age, knowing that they would not find another employment.

Many GDR-biographies of individuals belonging to the same age group as Mrs and Mr. Beeskow could be told in roughly the same terms as this short sketch. However, they were all lived through individually, and very different experiences are linked to these biographies.

When Mr. Beeskow who had been telling his story in a calm and lively mood, had in his narration reached the period immediately following the termination of his professional life, he paused to fight tears, without however interrupting his account. His wife, sitting silently beside him, was an exact mirror-image of his mood. Though he and all his colleagues knew it would eventually happen, being all of a sudden excluded from the workforce was a major catastrophe for Mr. B. It signified an exclusion on many different levels of life, in no way restricted only to the sphere of work as such. As both the Beeskows insistently affirmed, the „enterprise“ (Betrieb) was the core of their life. Explicitly they stated, that in GDR-times, the family-sphere was second in significance to work, and many of the events, relations and emotions that are conventionally seen as belonging to the privates sphere were part of „the enterprise“. Only after these GDR-enterprises broke down or changed their character radically - aggressivity, competitiveness among workers, envy and resentment are mentioned ⁴ - the family had gradually acquired more importance, and solidarity was transferred from the enterprise to the family exclusively. This aspect of being excluded from „the enterprise as a family“ seems to be what had hurt Mr. Beeskow the deepest in his experience of unemployment.

The aspect of social exclusion as exclusion from social networks and isolation was exacerbated by the geographical location of the Beeskow's home, and the cutting down of the public transport infrastructure. As the Beeskow couple does not drive a car - a fairly common thing for people of their age and condition who have lived in the GDR - they depend on public transport or on an occasional lift by their children or neighbours, for all out of home activity. The reduction of the bus-service frequency that connects their village with „downtown“ had the effect of cutting down their social contacts dramatically,

⁴ For an account of personal experiences with this change, see: e.g. Mr. Lahne in Category II (Sostris Germany, Nat. Report on Category II: The Early Retired)

for they simply can not get anywhere now. A heavily negative side-effect of the German transformation, that neither of them had expected.

Additionally, Mr. Beeskow felt completely useless at home after his forced exclusion from work, and didn't manage to overcome the feeling of not being needed any more for a long time. The feeling was enhanced by the mere fact of having lost the established framework of daily routines. It took a prolonged, conscious effort of his, and much support by his wife, to get his day filled with purposeful activity - his caring for the garden, the family home and the children being the cornerstone of these efforts to regain self-esteem and the feeling that he is needed.

Finally, the Beeskow couple had to buy their house shortly after unification. They took a substantial mortgage loan, expecting to be able to pay it back with relative ease on their combined salaries. Now, with both of them living on retirement pensions, the pressure of the loan, combined with the fear of losing their family home, is overwhelming them at times.

The single most important differentiating aspect of Mr. Beeskow's situation is however rooted in the private sphere. One of his sons had died three years ago in an accident at work, as he told us, again fighting tears, when we asked him about his family. He recounted in detail the events surrounding his son's fatal accident and after the interview he showed us a videotape that actually documented the death of his son and heavily incriminated the owner of the car-stunt-show that he had worked for. It turned out that the Beeskow couple was engaged in a law suit they had started to establish the cause of their son's accident.

With this in mind, the current situation of Mr. Beeskow can then be described as marked by two independent private catastrophes: 1) first, he loses his employment; 2) while trying to recover from this, a son of his dies. We think it could be very promising to analyse with more scrutiny in what way Mr. Beeskow experienced these two events, how they affected him and what means he found to deal with them and integrate them into his biography.

While the unexpected loss of a child may seem to be a much more dramatic biographical event than losing ones employment a few years earlier than anticipated, the absolute centrality of work and being part of the enterprise for his life on the one hand, the absence of experiences with unemployment in the ex-GDR territories, and of established interpretive frames and other means of support in such a situation on the other hand are important aspects to bear in mind, when trying to understand the biographical impact of the two catastrophes in Mr. Beeskow's life.

Mr. Kudera, 60 years old

Mr Kudera, born into a working class family in 1938, lost his father in 1944 during W.W.II in Yugoslavia. After the War his mother suffered from tuberculosis and never fully recovered. Mr. Kudera remained the only child in the family and had to struggle himself problems like illness and physical development during his school years under conditions of very scarce supply.

Being part of the so-called „Aufbau-Generation“ (Wierling et.al.: the generation who build up the new state and society of the GDR) Mr Kudera's career developed in a pattern of straight upwards mobility. In 1955, after an apprenticeship in commerce, he applied in a big plant of the GDR chemical industry. After one year he was delegated to the „Academy for workers and peasants“ („Arbeiter- und Bauernfakultät“) in order to get a high school degree (A-level). During these years he started to do sports (athletics and cross running) and trained hard for several and also international competitions. Three years later he was chosen to continue to study management at the university of Magdeburg which he accomplished in 1964. Mr Kudera then started to work in another big plant of the chemical industry being involved mainly in preparing the participation of his compound in the Leipzig fair, counselling and negotiating also with international partners since he had learned English. A change to another compound still in the chemical branch in 1967 turned out to become another step in his upwards career, now being the research assistant of the director.

This career nevertheless got stuck up from the mid-1970ies when Mr Kudera's mother in law applied for a passport in order to go to the FRG and managed to move there in 1978. Mr Kudera refused the request to cut every contact with her. Now having „relatives in the West“ he was no longer allowed to join international fairs and to go abroad. He then worked „in the second row“ as he said in the interview. After a visit of his mother in law in 1980 he was even downgraded to another department where he had been working until 1989.

After 1990 Mr Kudera's career developed in a very typical pattern of the transforming society in Eastern Germany. In 1991 his plant closed down. He got a training as insurance agent, but stopped doing the job after one and a half year. As he said, he could not stand being forced to sell people something they are not convinced of needing it. Then he worked as taxi driver in the small enterprise of his son for another one and a half year. There he stopped because the son couldn't pay him any longer. One year of retraining followed ending in unemployment which lasted one year. After that year Mr Kudera got a time limited job for one year (ABM) which he is still doing now. His task is to write a

sports history of Halle from the 19th century until today. His contract probably will not be prolonged because Mr Kudera is approaching the age of 60 years. After having passed this margin he has to enter early retirement.

The self presentation of Mr Kudera is clearly structured around his working life, just mentioning the difficult family conditions in his childhood, but stressing the conflict with the move of his mother in law and later on a conflict even with his son whom he had to force to withdraw his application for a passport in order not to lose his job completely. Thus, an ambivalent presentation of his life in the system of the GDR occurs: he presents his whole career as only possible within this system and his support. Mr Kudera tried to become a member of the party in 1956 after he entered the „Academy for Workers and Peasants“, but was refused at that time and managed only later on to get in. At the other hand he pointed out his distance from the system by stressing his loyalty with his family which asked for sacrifices in his career. It is not clear yet, whether this aspect is due to Mr Kudera's present strategy of self-presentation which tries to disconnect him from the GDR system while remaining loyal at the same time. He represents the type of the „good worker“ which is loyal towards every system who ensures him employment, a good living standard and even upward mobility (Lüdtke: „Der gute Arbeiter“).

The presentation of the time after 1998 is not dominant concerning the extension of the text referring to this period, but on an emotional level it is clearly the topic where the energy is focused on, expressing mainly bitterness and disillusionment. Mr Kudera tries to balance his bitterness about the loss in his life and the disillusionment in the new system by concentrating on his hobbies and sports activities. This could have even been his life long strategy to balance losses and deficits by working hard on his body in a very disciplined way. In 1992 he started with regular training again and managed to participate in international competitions of cross running (Cross-Lauf). His present job as „sports historian“ makes him feel to do something useful. He does not feel ready for early retirement.

Mr. Sawatko, 42 years old

Mr Sawatko, born in 1956, belongs to the generation of the children of the „Aufbau-Generation“. They have never experienced another system but the materially and politically stabilising period of the GDR during their formative years.

Even if the parents of Mr Sawatko had already moved upwards - his father had become a teacher with a high function in the educational system (responsible for the distribution of teachers to different schools) - and even if his older sister had followed him by becoming a teacher too, Mr Sawatko decided for a very practical job as electrician. His wish to become a decorator (Dekorateur) was not supported by his family because this was regarded as a job „for girls“. Being a sensitive boy with a slightly androgynous physical appearance Mr Sawatko probably gave up his original wish in order to establish his male identity by choosing a rather male dominated profession. In 1975 he finished his training as electrician and started to specialise in electronics and communication techniques during his 3 years period in the army. In this period he was part of the border troops (Grenztruppen) which indicates - as the long period of voluntary inscription with the army does - his loyalty towards the system which was probably based in his family and especially in the position of his father.

From 1978 to 1995 Mr Sawatko had been working constantly as communication technician in a big plant of the chemical branch. The dismissal when the plant was closed down seemed to have become a turning point in Mr Sawatko's life, changing a steady and regular every day life based on continuity into a disquiet move from one job to the other with interruptions of more or less long periods of unemployment. After a short employment of 2 months Mr S. was again dismissed, then inscribed to a computer training for one year which again ended in unemployment in 1997. Since then Mr S. stayed at home.

His self-presentation is marked by his experience of unemployment, and more precisely, by his experience of dismissal in 1995 which he describes as a nightmare. Mr Sawatko vividly accounts how days of complete sleeplessness followed with heavy fear attacks concerning the future. He was not prepared for this situation, since he had hoped that - as an communication technician - he would still be needed in his or another plant. His family life is only mentioned concerning his family of origin and in the context when Mr S. is talking about his unemployment mentioning relief not to be married and having children for whom he would be responsible in this situation.

Even if of relatively young age Mr S. represents the type of a steady GDR- life, well established in the old system and at first glance managing to keep position in the new one. But when being dismissed from a secure experienced and imagined place (which included far more than just a work-life, but also friendship and comradeship - „Kamaraderie“) this type turns out not to be prepared at all for bigger biographical changes. This might also be due to the fact that Mr S. never changed his local context, living in the same area of the new periphery in Halle, where he grew up from the age of 6. At least it is manifested in the

fact that he refused the offer for appointments abroad (e.g. in Saudi Arabia) even if he suffered severely from the situation of being unemployed, experiencing the loss of social contact, of daily time structures and biographical prospects - as described in the study of Jahoda et.al. - so intensely, that I was seriously concerned about him after the interview. Attempts to stay in touch - also for to arrange a second interview - first failed, and only three weeks later it was possible to be relieved after hearing that Mr. S. had found a new promising job. Then he did not need to have a second session of interview.

Mr Reder, 48 years old

Mr Reder had a typical GDR upward career of someone coming from the working class. He got an apprenticeship as locksmith (like his father in the 1920ies) in 1965 and learned this craft until 1968. He then worked for some years until he got problems with his back. His enterprise offered him retraining in a three years evening course as merchant in industrial material. He continued studying economics in an evening school (Fachschule für Ökonomie) for five years parallel to his work days. After graduating in economy and planning he got a job in an enterprise which produced the uniforms for the army, the special troops at the border, and the firemen. There he had been the leader of a work group („Gruppenleiter“) and the proxy chief of the department (stellvertretender Abteilungsleiter).

The time after 1989 is characterised by many attempts to enter in a new job but is structured more or less by the experience of unemployment. In 1990 the enterprise Mr R. had been working for closed down and Mr Reder was unemployed for the first time. He took temporary jobs in different branches and enterprises but none of them led to a continuous employment. In contrast, whenever one job ended Mr R. became unemployed and depended again and again on unemployment benefit. Over the last 8 years he had changed the job four times (the longest time he was at one place was one year), and got a professional training for 15 months paid for by the employment office. The rest of the time he was unemployed. The longest period lasted 18 months where he had gotten only the lowest rate of unemployment benefit for 7 months. This was a period when both of his two children were still living at home. Mr Reder's wife experienced the same structure of precarious jobs and increasing unemployment, and if she got a job while Mr R. was unemployed and vice versa, the second stage of unemployment benefit could even heavily decrease.

We met Mr Reder at the Bauhof in April this year where he just had got a limited contract until December for working in the project of counselling unemployed. He is strongly

hoping that the contract can be prolonged as to renew his warranty on unemployment benefit. His time perspective of planning his life has shortened to periods of 12 months. Mr Reder presents his story with a bitter undertone, stating that his generation has been betrayed. He feels devaluated also retrospectively and rejected in his wish and ability to work. A very rigid work moral is remarkable in his case: „I do not experience parts of my work as unpleasant, you have to fulfil your duties and if you do not like them you have to quit“. At the same time he expresses the view, that he „has not invented work“, that he could also live without working, if he would have enough money to have a „good life“. Thus, in his case the strong work-centredness as it is typical for the GDR is connected with „earning money for living a „good life“. Therefore, in his case the main source of humiliation stems from the fact of heavy money restrictions, which do not allow „a normal life“ as he puts it. Being asked what a „normal life“ contains he elaborated on the impossibility to spend holidays in Germany because it is too expensive, to go out in the evenings with friends and to go to the theatre more than once a year.