

International Dialogue on Migration 2014
Intersessional Workshop, 7-8 October
Migration and Families

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Dear Participants, thank you for the invitation! I am honored to have been given the chance to show some of my pictures.

I visited Moldova and IOM's mission there for the first time in the summer of 2007 to cover a story about the trafficking of women for a German Women's magazine. (At that time the western media covered Moldova unfortunately only in the context of trafficking of organs or women.) During the days I spent there, I learned how many parents migrated to make a living abroad and how their children were left behind and forced to grow up without them.

I felt immediately that this situation required PICTURES and as a photographer I started to plan my project.

In the following spring, I went back received some information about the migration trends during an IOM policy seminar on Diaspora and Homeland Development. Then I left to a village and became a witness of the situation on the ground.

Here is what I learned in the village of Cirpesti:

When I entered the classroom of the first graders in the village, I was shocked to see that two thirds of the children raised their arms when the teacher asked „who among you has parents in Italy? “. Some who raised their hands seemed proud and others were self-conscious about it.

It is completely different to read the dry statistics about the number of migrants leaving the country and about the growing volume of remittances from standing in front of 30 six-year old schoolboys and – girls with wool caps in a cold classroom with water dripping from the ceiling and to realize that these kids haven't seen their parents for years because they work as irregular migrants 2000 kilometers away looking after old people and farmhands and that because they are in an irregular state, they cannot freely move back and forth to visit their families and children.

And that is what my project was all about to give faces and voices to the human beings counted in and covered by the many dry statistics about the flow of migrants and remittances:

To understand what it means to grow up without having seen ones mother or ones child for eight years – to understand what it means to live separated from your family somewhere in Italy – to be there illegally and to have no idea when this can or will change – to understand what it means to be 24/7 responsible for elderly persons absorbed by their own family problems and no interest in the sad family stories the caretakers carry with them.

This is the reason why my book is not a „classical” photo reportage, I wanted to focus more on pictures which represent more than what is visible at first sight: a woman on her way to work, a girl washing dishes – pictures transporting and provoking an emotional response and reflections about the human consequences of Fortress Europe or the realization that ones cleaning lady has children and how and where they live!

After almost four weeks with the children and grannies in Moldova, I left to Italy with many mobile numbers in search of their parents.

And so it continued for the next two and a half years – going back and forth between the two parts of a number of separated families. I turned into a messenger between them. A messenger who brought pictures, stories and letters back and forth – a messenger who thanks to my passport was free to travel across all the borders between Moldova and Italy and linking those separated by EU visa and migration laws. Today, I am still in touch with many of these families.

The biggest challenge for me in this project was to shoot pictures of WHAT IS ABSENT. Normally, photography focuses on what is in front of the lens, but my focus was to illustrate what is MISSING – in Moldova the missing parents and in Italy the missing children, the missing home, the missing homeland.

Of course, I was extremely saddened by the stories of each separated family's and touched by the pain endured by the children and the parents. But I only realized how unbearable and inhuman this situation is as I myself became a mother in 2011.

Now that I am a mother myself, it is absolutely impossible to imagine the weight and pressure that one must endure before considering to leave one's child.

And the saddest ASPECT of all is that they all left their children for and in favor of their children - as a sacrifice in favor of a better life of their children now and for their future.

But yes, I do admit that at first sight life seems to function „normally“, it seems normal that at least one person is missing in every single house in the village – as during the times of great wars when mostly men were absent at home. And it seemed so normal that Moldovan walnuts are packed and sent to relatives in Portugal and that for Easter there is Italian panettone instead of traditional Moldovan Easter Cake on the kitchen table.

Everything seemed so normal that I had sometimes serious doubts about my project. „Labour migration is not a new phenomenon – it exists for a long time and may have had similar effects on the families – what is so new about what I am communicating about? “.

But then again a father left with his children sat at a kitchen table in front of me crying and telling me for the first time about his despair that his wife might never come back from Italy as she may marry an Italian. To whom else could he tell his story – if all his neighbours suffered similar torments? – and I understand again fully that the situation is absolutely NOT normal and I need to document it and talk about it.

Both the children and their parents adapt to the situation. Human beings tend to do this – to survive, yet I am sure that we will be left with an entire traumatized generation as they were deprived from the right, the privilege and a normal and natural growing up process with parents – as a family. Instead they grow up with a permanent feeling of loss and with no knowledge of the important and lived bond between children and their parents. Studies have been conducted by IOM in Moldova showing the different negative effects on the children, but studies bring us again away from the faces and the real and personal suffering lived as a consequence of this TYPE of migration.

The first generations of migrants did not plan how long they are going to stay. And more importantly, they could not foresee how they are going to change as a result of adapting to their new lives and that maybe they will won't miss their homes any more – that at a certain point they cannot imagine to go back to their former lives. Regardless of how precarious their living conditions in Italy may be, they have gotten used to water flowing from a faucet rather than carrying it from the well and that a toilet is inside the apartment rather than in the garden.

Despite of the separation from their children – family remains the most important VALUE for Moldovans, and a house for their families is one of the savings aims for them. Even those who are allowed to work legally in Italy come home once a year and continue building their house for

retirement. One family even bought a house and they came back permanently – all others you can see in my pictures may return to Moldova when they retire – at best, but all who were able have brought their children to live with them in Italy.