KINSHIP, KNOWLEDGE, AND MIGRATION

Panel Series at the 41st Annual Conference of the German Studies Association in Atlanta, GA, October 5–8, 2017, sponsored by the German Historical Institute Washington (GHI). Conveners: Simone Lässig (GHI) and Swen Steinberg (University of Dresden). Participants: Aileen Friesen (University of Winnipeg), Katharine Gerbner (University of Minnesota), Lisa Gerlach (GHI) Jenna Gibbs (Florida International University), Scott M. Kenworthy (Miami University, Ohio), Simone Laqua-O’Donnell (University of Birmingham), Brittany Lehman (College of Charleston), Paul Peucker (Moravian Church Archives, Bethlehem, PA), David Sabeau (University of California, Los Angeles), Tatjana Schell (North Dakota State University), Matthias Springborn (Georg Eckert Institute for International Textbook Research), Sarah Thomsen Vierra (Willamette University), Machteld Venken (University of Vienna), Stephanie Zloch (Georg Eckert Institute for International Textbook Research), Margarete Zimmermann (University of Jena).

In October 2017, Simone Lässig and Swen Steinberg convened a panel series at the German Studies Association’s annual conference that focused on the roles of family and kinship, including children, in knowledge and migration processes. In her opening remarks, Lässig emphasized that knowledge travels with migrants and is transformed by their experiences in the new homeland. Further, family is a forum for teaching and learning, for sharing, evaluating, and preserving knowledge. Kinship itself entails knowledge—of who is who and how they are connected to other family members. Kinship networks can serve as networks for communicating and processing other kinds of knowledge. They often take on particular importance when individuals and families migrate. Migrants carry knowledge with them; they produce and acquire new knowledge with the experience of migration; and they usually need new knowledge to establish themselves in their new cities, towns, and countries. Family, both immediate and extended, often constitutes a crucial knowledge resource for migrants. The aim of the panel series, Lässig concluded, was to explore the interplay of kinship, knowledge, and migration more closely by examining the experiences of German speakers who left German-speaking Europe and non-German speakers who migrated there.

The first panel focused on the production of knowledge in missionary families in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Simone Laqua-O’Donnell focused on the letters of the Pfleiderer family, especially...
those by Debora Hoch-Pfleiderer (1860–1945), a prominent figure among the five generations of missionary women in the family who served in China and India. Laqua-O’Donnell proposes a conceptualization of knowledge that accounts for the gendered nature of its sources. In the context of missionary education, she advocates seeing knowledge not only in what was taught and learned in a classroom but also in the ordinary activities outside formal educational settings. Not only was letter writing in itself a gendered activity but the knowledge conveyed in letters was gendered. In this case, they afford us valuable insights into the relationship between women and children, the importance of epistolary culture for the missionary enterprise, and the role of letters in the process of family making. Three different types of knowledge stand out for Laqua-O’Donnell: news and other information about family members; conversations with or about children regarding newly acquired skills and other educational matters; and the intentional institutional memory building that the preservation of these letters as a family archive represented.

Jenna M. Gibbs also presented research on family letters, in this case from the “global” Latrobe family, Moravians, in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. She found that Moravian missionary communities played a special role in both the production and transmission of knowledge as their missions constituted a transregional and transnational spiritual kinship network. Within this network, extended biological families also played a critical role, as multiple generations of Moravian families migrated in great numbers, engaging intensively in missionary work and colonization across the globe. Gibbs focuses on reports written by and distributed among family members that mostly addressed the spiritual and practical state of the missions. They detailed the numbers of conversions and baptisms, reported on efforts to expand the missions, and presented interviews with converts or potential converts. Yet the missionaries also embedded knowledge in their letters about the cultural and spiritual practices of others—the enslaved, the indigenous, and Catholics. Informed by the proverbial “imperial eye,” their correspondence nonetheless provides invaluable observations on indigenous hunting, marriage, and child-rearing practices as well as on their cosmological beliefs and associated rituals. Thus, Latrobe family members participated in the circulation, production, interpretation, and transfer of knowledge across transnational networks, not only shaping Moravian spiritual and kinship networks but also contributing to global and secular knowledge.
Katharine Gerbner examined sources from Moravian missionaries, shedding light on the transformation of Christian knowledge by enslaved slave drivers in the Caribbean who had converted. Conversion, she argues, cannot be divorced from demographic and social analysis and is best understood in the context of a dynamic conceptualization of knowledge. Thus, she seeks to address the complexity of conversion as a knowledge transfer within both a Protestant and an Afro-Caribbean context. Two slave drivers, Coffee and Matthew, exemplify how men doing such work felt uneasy about it and sought both reassurance and support from the missionaries. While Coffee convinced his whole family to be baptized, Matthew engaged in theological discussions with the Moravians. The traces both men left in history show how knowledge about Christianity was spread, adapted, contested, and reformed within a particular missionary context.

At the conclusion of the panel, David Sabean commented on how the missionary letter writing examples under consideration also served to build and maintain certain milieus as well as reproduce social class. Kinship in these contexts was not determined by “bonds of reciprocity” but instead manifested itself in spiritual communities whose members understood themselves collectively as part of an elite.

The second panel turned to child migrants in twentieth-century Central Europe, seeking to understand them “as learners, producers, and translators of knowledge.” Machteld Venken analyzed language learning in two territories that had once belonged to the German Empire but were now in Poland and Belgium, namely Upper Silesia and Eupen-Malmedy, as a result of the Versailles Treaty. In both territories, language regimes in primary schools lay at the heart of government policy measures, and they provoked intense discussions about power, social relations, family traditions, and the future of the regions. Focusing on the period of new educational laws and pedagogical reforms in both Belgium and Poland between 1932 and 1940, Venken shows how policymakers believed that every child should enjoy an equitable educational experience regardless of social background. The question was how each state went about realizing this ambition and to what extent they succeeded specifically for borderland children.

Next, Matthias Springborn discussed education and knowledge practices among Jews in Displaced Persons (DP) camps and in the newly constituted Jewish communities in Germany from 1945 to 1957. During this period, the camps saw an ultimately ephemeral, yet highly diverse renaissance of Eastern European Jewish culture—in
Germany of all places. Springborn considers not only formal aspects of education but also informal and marginalized forms of knowledge transfer and acquisition. Content defined as “knowledge” was delivered to children by international organizations through text (mostly textbooks) and personnel. Since a lot of the materials and some of the teachers came from Palestine, the ideology of Zionism and the principle of preparing for life in Palestine shaped, in varying degrees, almost all educational activities involving Jewish DP’s. After the DP camps closed, remaining Jewish educational efforts in Germany were long only able to develop to a modest degree due to the low populations of Germany’s renascent Jewish communities.

Brittany Lehman discussed the history of teaching citizenship in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and the social and cultural capital that comes with such knowledge to children of other nationalities over the course of thirty years. Focusing mostly on Greek and Turkish children, Lehman shows how state school books reflected and reified the perceptions of migrant children in the FRG held by the country’s constituent federal states (Länder, which set education policy) and by the foreign nation-states from which the families originated. The increasing number of children with foreign citizenship made the philosophical question of possible futures and best practices for their education a pressing practical concern, sparking public discourse about multiculturalism in the 1980s. At the same time, Lehman makes clear, the federal states refused to acknowledge that Germany was a country of immigration. They did not consider integration or how the othering performed in schools through textbooks and divisions in access to classes and curriculums further separated children.

Stephanie Zloch turned the panel’s focus to the migrant children themselves in the FRG, exploring their role in the production of knowledge in migration and integration processes. Reminding us that knowledge is not just about expert or academic output, Zloch underlines how migration processes provide a way to analyze knowledge strategies and practices in contexts shaped by different kinds of social and cultural capital, rendering non-hegemonic, non-conformist, or subversive knowledge visible and offering a way for us to better understand contemporary societies shaped by immigration. This includes the knowledge specific to children, who have long received little attention in German historiography. Going beyond studying the knowledge that might have been accessible to children in educational media, Zloch examines sources featuring children’s own agency, in
particular, essays submitted by young people for the nation-wide German Federal President’s History Competition. She shows how in the triangular relationship between family knowledge, school knowledge, and the essay writers’ personal production of knowledge, clearly identifiable narratives emerged among the essays informed by family migration experience. At the same time, the narratives often lacked broader historical context. Zloch finds further that the encounter between family knowledge and textbook knowledge occurs indirectly and without critical discussion of the resulting cognitive dissonances. Zloch’s work with products of this encounter points to the multiple and ambivalent ways in which children can act as translators and producers of knowledge in migration and integration processes—not only in society at large but also in their own families.

In her comments at the end of the second panel, Sarah Thomsen Vierra underscored how rare sources that give a voice to the children themselves are. Most of the time we must rely on sources that document what happened to children, not what children did. Yet the panel showed that children had a voice in history, including in the production of knowledge, even if the traces they left are rarer or harder to find.

The final panel of the series centered on ethnic Germans migrating from the Soviet Union before World War II. Aileen Friesen opened with the case of Mennonite refugees to Harbin, China. Between 1928 and 1931, approximately 600 Mennonites crossed the Amur River into China, following a route that proved to have the best track record out of the Soviet Union. In the course of their migration, refugees relied heavily on information obtained and verified through their kinship and ethno-confessional networks. Friesen explores the limits of these family ties regarding trust and accessibility. Before leaving Russia, many families used misinformation to conceal their escape plans, even from each other. Families misled their neighbors, pretending that they were migrating elsewhere inside the Soviet Union. Once in China, many Mennonites found it necessary to temporarily broaden their information base in order to respond to the challenges they encountered in the new country. Although they preferred European sources, the desperateness of their situation encouraged Mennonites to reach across religious, linguistic, and cultural boundaries. Once the situation grew less dire in the USSR, the Mennonites continued to access the resources of local (non-Mennonite) Russian and German communities, but they attributed more value to information provided by members of their own community regarding employment, accommodations, and exit routes out of the country.
Next, Tatjana Schell discussed letters received by German-Russian migrant families in the United States from their relatives in the Lower Volga region of Russia in the first half of the twentieth century. Beginning on the eve of World War I, the family conversation resumed afterward and continued even through the famine. A considerable shift in themes occurred between 1913–14 and the early 1920s, when the letters suddenly contained descriptions of the economic crisis that the letters’ authors, their family, and their community in Russia were going through. Admittedly written from a specific viewpoint, the letters nonetheless provide an exciting and intimate view into one family’s life, albeit without any mention of the political circumstances.

Margarete Zimmermann closed the panel by considering a different kind of knowledge, rumors, a kind of “uncertain knowledge” that traveled by word of mouth and worried authorities. Zimmerman argues that rumors, usually understood in contrast to knowledge, should instead be seen as a specific type of knowledge, not based on facts per se, but influential and suitable for analysis. In the study at hand, Zimmermann explores the origins, protagonists, modus operandi, and distribution channels of rumors about the supposed exodus of Soviet Germans, especially Volga Germans, to Germany. These rumors became widespread and popular enough to convince families to leave their homes and to alarm the People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD). Zimmermann’s research is informed by Marc Bloch’s theory of the rumor and also tries to tie rumors to Talcott Parsons’ “latent pattern maintenance.” The power of the exodus rumor is best explained within the context of informality and decentralization, limiting communication channels to informal personal and kinship networks.

In his comment on this panel, Scott M. Kenworthy made clear how understudied the history of ethnic Germans in the Soviet Union still is. He also observed that the panelists’ findings demonstrated what a powerful tool letter writing had been in community building and to the maintenance of family ties over long distances and across generations.

The exploration of migration and knowledge will continue next year at the GSA conference with a panel series on “The Nexus of Migration, Youth, and Knowledge.”

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