

The Biographical Significance of Flight and Exile

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The exploration of sociological aspects of flight and exile as a universal phenomenon is still in its infancy.¹ One can therefore speak in this context of a "problem of the theoretical comprehension of exile."² In Western countries, including Germany, the issues of flight and exile are dominated by discussions relating solely to questions of a legal nature, or to asylum and international law. These discussions are primarily based on a nationalistically oriented migration and refugee policy, aimed at keeping out people seeking refuge in these countries.³

Thus, within the framework of the European Union, authorities have kept refugees from entering the Federal Republic of Germany since 1992 by stepping up deterrents such as compulsory visas, lowering the quotas of asylum-seekers granted asylum, and rejecting a constructive immigration policy.⁴

One of the key mechanisms of this policy of exclusion, particularly toward refugees from what are commonly known as "developing countries," is their separation into various formal categories such as: "economic refugees," or "political refugees." This prevailing classification according to "type of refugee" requires a certain perception of the phenomena of flight and exile, in which the complex structure of the refugee's motives are reduced to the dichotomy of political persecution and economic need. However, the fact that refugees quite clearly have agency in the processes of flight migration and can have differing

motives for their actions has rarely been the subject of political or sociological discourse. Thus, the concept of "flight" is accounted for from the very outset by "external pressures" and serves as a point of departure for determining or legitimating asylum in the host society. As a consequence of this, the concept of "political persecution" undergoes a simplification, in that only refugees persecuted by state authorities are granted the right of asylum. People commonly referred to as economic refugees are not included in the class of "political refugees" and are sent back to their countries of origin on the basis of this. Women, too, who are persecuted on grounds of their gender, are not acknowledged by the authorities as having the right of asylum.⁵

At the same time the restrictive definition of flight as something "forced" also determines the perception of exile as a "process suffered." Thus, the prevailing exile literature continues to draw a comparison between "exile/emigration" on the one hand, and "sickness" (*Krankheit*) on the other.⁶

This perception of exile in host societies is reinforced both explicitly by legal regulations and implicitly by theoretical assumptions. It is assumed that people living in exile will return to their countries of origin at some point in the future when the political circumstances there have altered. The "automatic" conclusion deduced from this is that their stay in the respective country of exile is of a temporary nature, and thus

a condition in which time and space play no role.

This one-sided definition of exile precludes a reflection of the process-like nature of exile in terms of individual and social changes. It ignores the fact that changes in the life of the person living in exile could well give rise to a wish to remain in their country of exile permanently. The case of German exiles who did not return to Germany after the collapse of the Nazi regime serves as a historical example of this phenomenon. That exiles themselves cling to the myth of return is due in part to the fact that the host society always perceives them as foreigners and, in the final analysis, as undesirable people. To conclude, it becomes apparent that the process of exile is usually presented as a "process suffered" as the result of forced flight.

In view of this problem it is necessary to expand the definitions of flight and exile in order to allow the intricate layers of refugees' biographical and collective experiences to come to light.⁷ To this end, I developed a research project, aimed at redefining the concepts of flight and exile from the biographical perspective of refugees, and conducted from 1992 to 1996.⁸ This was carried out by reconstructing the experiences of exile of a specific generation of Iranian women living in Germany.

Flight and the following exile from the point of view of the refugee in her life history always constitute a grave break. The socioculturally oriented biographical method therefore was especially suitable as a research method.

The most important aim of this method consists in gaining a type of knowledge, which goes beyond the life history of an individual person. Sociostructurally oriented biographical research, concentrated on the analysis of the life cycle of cohorts or generations, makes it possible to recognize, beyond individual life histories, processual structures that make possible

the creation of types (*Typenbildung*) of life histories. The creation of types in the sense of an ideal type (*Idealtyp*) can then elicit general statements about "sociostructural knowledge" on the macro level.

By choosing this method, the aim of the empirical analysis consisted in analyzing forms of coping with flight and exile, which are typical for a specific generation, by giving due importance to the factors of female gender and social class.

In view of the homogeneity — concerning age, social class and political orientation — of the group aimed at (*Zielgruppe*) theoretical concepts like the concept of generations, developed by Karl Mannheim, and the concept of social networks were used for analyzing the life histories. Both then made it possible to develop a relationship between the specific individual life history and the collective (political) history of these women.

On the other side, the analysis of the experiences of exile of these women started from the thesis that exile does not only constitute the political implication of a passing intermedium phase. It forms a way of life of its own, which also produces its specific ways of behavior and cultural expressions (see the concept of the stranger, developed by Alfred Schütz).⁹

Exile is an important part of the life cycle, which leads through confrontation with new ways of life, experienced in the host countries, to changes in the former life styles of the individuals involved, to a reflexive way of confronting one's own life history. In this process, exile could be seen as a process of transformation that requires the new construction of subjective reality, and through which the preconditions for the development of new biographical concepts (exile biographies) can be created.

In this essay, however, I will present only one selected aspect of my study. Using the personal history of one of the women I interviewed as an example, I

would like to illustrate how the decision to flee in the context of a life story tends to be a multidimensional process and one which cannot be reduced to "political" or "economic" motives.

The Personal History of Robab

Preliminary Remarks

I came into contact with Robab through my association with a counseling center for female Iranian refugees: she was among its clientele and came, like the other interview partners, from a middle-class background. At the time of our interview she was 40 years old. In the mid-1980s, Robab fled from Iran with her husband and three children and has been living in exile in Germany since 1986. Her asylum proceedings took six years. It was only in 1992 that she was recognized as a person persecuted on political grounds.

In presenting her personal history I will only highlight those periods of her life that relate explicitly to the flight process. However, I have analyzed her biography in the context of her life story.

Act 1. Childhood: "I wanted nothing more than to leave"

I remember understanding everything from the age of five on. My father was a teacher and my mother a housewife. My mother had a baby every year. She really wanted a boy. She told me that she got a fever after I was born, because she would rather have had a boy.... Then she called me a child who brings bad luck, because two of her sons born after me died.

From the very beginning of the interview, Robab described her childhood as especially difficult. She is the oldest of five siblings. Her mother's antipathy to her became particularly clear to her when two younger brothers died through accident and illness and her mother made an imaginary link between Robab's existence and the death of her two sons. Robab must have been around five years old when the brothers died and her childhood memories begin with the experience of being rejected by her mother. In the story

that followed too, she describes how she was often rejected and hurt by her mother. She tries to justify her mother's behavior by trying to develop an understanding of her situation then as "a woman with a tragic fate." But she speaks repeatedly of her "problematic" and "distant" relationship to her mother. She characterizes her mother as "superstitious," thus attributing negative qualities to her that she rejects from her present-day standpoint. Robab's relationship to her father is defined by ambivalent feelings:

My father loved me very much, unlike my mother. He always played with me when he was at home. He was an intellectual and an impressive figure in public. But at home he was a domestic tyrant. For example, he used to deceive my mother with other women. She was always unhappy and discontent because of this.

Robab reconstructs the character of her father as a "domestic tyrant" on the one hand, and an "intellectual," worthy of admiration, on the other. However, his influence on her childhood was characterized by the fact that she felt loved by him, in contrast to her mother. Robab's memories of her father, always associated with a happy time, give the impression that she was able to compensate for her mother's rejection with her father's love.

The affection that her father gave her does not last very long, though. When she was nine years old, her father died in an accident. This led to a drastic change in Robab's childhood. Her mother was suddenly forced to "take charge of everything herself" and for a time had to work to earn money. Financial straits forced her to sell her house and live with others as a tenant. In addition, because of the temporary absence of her mother (due to her employment), Robab was forced to take on more tasks and responsibility for the household and look after her younger siblings. She remembers this time:

I was still a child myself, but had to take on the role of an adult. I had to look after my younger brothers and

sisters, help my mother around the house and do my homework for school at the same time.... After my father died, I wanted nothing more than to leave home.

Robab concludes her childhood memories with the sentence: "After my father died, I wanted nothing more than to leave home." In doing so, she links the death of her father to an unfulfilled and traumatic childhood. For her childhood must be seen in the light of the deep hurt she experienced through the stigma of being "a girl who brings bad luck"; at the same time the early death of her father meant both a drop in her family's social standing and the loss of her most significant adult, who "loved her very much." With the wish "to leave home," Robab developed her first thoughts of flight, which in later years were to develop into a recurring problem-solving strategy.

Act 2. Marriage

After graduating from high school, Robab definitely wanted to study and later have a career, a goal aspired to by many women of her class and generation. She discovered in secondary school that being a modern woman meant becoming independent by having an education and a profession. After all, she did not want to be "only a housewife like her mother."

Even stronger than her desire to enter university is Robab's need to break away from her family:

I had nothing in common with my brothers and sisters and my mother...I withdrew more and more and preferred being alone to doing things with the family... After I graduated from secondary school, my situation worsened. My mother would have liked nothing more than for me to stay home from morning to night and help her with the housework and bring up the children. But I wanted to go far away from home to Tehran to study.

Robab's goal of studying was closely linked to her desire to leave the family. Both prove difficult to achieve. She failed to pass the difficult university entrance examination, so she could not go away. Now

she had "only one chance left," namely, to get married. Her desire to leave the family she did not feel happy in, indicates a strategic "flight into marriage." She remembers the decision she made then:

When I met my husband, he seemed to me to be a nice, intellectual man. A teacher with political commitment, which was something I liked very much... I thought, he's a good man and I can live with him. He gave me the impression then that he had nothing against emancipated women. After all, I didn't want to just look after the home like my mother did, I wanted to continue my education.

In getting married, Robab wanted to separate from her family of origin and at the same time pursue her plans for the future in terms of education and a career. That was why she chose a man who suited her plans. She went against her mother's wishes in marrying this man. Right after the wedding, she and her husband moved to another city — a welcome change for Robab. Her husband found work as a teacher, and Robab a job as a secretary. In her spare time she prepared for the next university entrance examination.

A few months after the wedding, Robab became pregnant. Her husband, who would have liked to have children, wanted her to keep the baby. She was disappointed by her husband's attitude because, in taking this stance, he was going back on his promise to support Robab in her desire for further education. Apparently he now preferred to see her "as a housewife, looking after the home and taking care of the children." But Robab's desire for self-determination clashed with the role of being "only mother and housewife." For not only does she want to be a "modern woman" in keeping with her times, she constantly had the "tragic fate" of her mother at the back of her mind and "did not want to lead a life like that."

Robab began to develop an ambivalent attitude to family life, which she at once perceived as an obstacle to realizing her individual potential, but had previously

chosen as a place of refuge. She wanted to keep her family as well as enjoy social recognition by continuing her education. If she opted for one of the two, the other would become a burden. At the same time, she described her decision to stay with her husband and keep her first child as an unfortunate one and considered getting a divorce:

After one year, I realized that my decision to marry him was a mistake, and I thought about whether I should get a divorce and go to Tehran.

Robab's considerations reflected further thoughts of flight, manifested in a divorce and a change of place. By taking this step, she hoped to have the chance to pursue her own plans independently. But after considerable thought, this idea of flight seemed of little use. A divorce would only cause further problems; as a "divorced woman with a child," she would be rejected by the people around her, who would not tolerate behavior that deviated from the social norm. And besides this, she did not want her child to grow up without a father, as she had. These considerations and fears eventually led Robab to stay with her husband and even allowed him to persuade her that having a second child could relieve her general unhappiness. This proved to be an illusion

I was very unhappy at the time, because with two children, I was even more housebound than before. I didn't want to lose my family, but at the same time I wanted to be socially useful.

Robab's ambivalence derived from the fact that while she did not want to lose her family, she did not see her role at home as socially useful. She belongs to a generation of urban women who want to articulate their self-determination and emancipation primarily through work outside the home. Robab's unfulfilled plans meant that her unhappiness continued.

Act 3. The Revolution

Only at the end of the 1970s, as the resistance against the Shah's regime stepped up, did Robab be-

gin to feel good as a result of the active role she played in the revolution. Here she experienced the mass involvement of many women, something she still speaks of today with pride:

We women were always right in the middle of things. None of the women stayed at home. You could say this revolution could not have succeeded without women's participation. There were women who threw themselves in front of the Shah's army tanks and weren't afraid of being shot.

It was only through the revolution that the possibility of being socially active became real for Robab. She tried to communicate this with the metaphor "none of the women stayed at home." She took part in numerous demonstrations against the Shah's regime. Together with her husband, she got actively involved with opposition groups fighting against the Shah's regime. She supported these groups by distributing their flyers and passing messages between them.

In Robab's reconstruction of the revolution, personal impressions merge with general social events to form an overall picture of these turbulent years. Thus, for instance, common political interests improved Robab's relationship with both her family of origin and her husband. He now supported Robab so she could train to become a qualified health consultant. Robab beams as she speaks of this time:

This year (1979) was the most beautiful year of my life. I was a witness of the revolution. I hoped that after the collapse of the Shah's regime everything would improve... I wanted to take part in building up the country.

Robab expected that the victory of the revolution would give her a better chance for combining her maternal role with an active role in society.

After the revolution she completed her training, found work as a health consultant, and took it upon herself to improve health care for children. She organized a "council" at her workplace with a number of her female colleagues, which put pressure on the respon-

sible government body to improve health care in schools. Parallel to this, she completed an additional training course in the field of health care, allowing her to become active in school health care herself.

The revolution of 1979 is clearly the most important event in Robab's biography, and has had a great impact on her life. She not only saw her ideals of freedom and equality become reality, but finally enjoyed long-sought-after social recognition for her wholehearted commitment. The tasks she took on in this period tended to be self-determined rather than prescribed by others. It would appear that during this time she achieved the social freedom she aspired to for a short while.

Act 4. After the Revolution

After the revolution the fanatic mullahs wanted to put women back in the home. We were attacked on the street and anywhere else if we weren't wearing a head scarf....An atmosphere of fear and terror developed quickly.

Robab felt threatened by the growing religious fanaticism that followed the revolution and feared most of all that she would lose her job as a health consultant and be "put back in the home." For her, as for many others, the head scarf symbolized a whole range of acts of discrimination against women, which as time went on were given legal backing. In addition, the beginning of the Iran/Iraq war and the rise in political repression against opposition groups had a negative impact on Robab's living conditions. Over the course of 1982, she was forced to restrict her political activities as well as to give up her profession and withdraw into family life. A period of perplexity and discontent followed. It is understandable that, after several lively years defined by a great number of social activities, Robab perceived her return to a "passive role at home," as she puts it, as unbearable, and looked for a way out.

Act 5. Flight into the Resistance

The war had begun and we were all very unhappy. Something had to be done or we were lost...that's when I decided to join the fight.

When one of Robab's sisters, a member of an underground organization fighting against the Islamic government, asked her to join them in the struggle, Robab decided to become politically active again. While she could not go into the underground with her children, she declared herself willing to act as a liaison person for the organization.

Robab worked for this organization until the mid-1980s. But the new Islamic government eventually consolidated its monopoly of power, making opposition activities in Iran almost impossible. The opposition groups were liquidated one after the other and their male and female activists arrested. Robab's political activities could not be kept secret for long. When some of her political friends were arrested, she became afraid that she, too, could be arrested. Shortly afterwards she discovered that the secret police were after her and that her life was in serious danger.

The hopeful years of the revolution, in which Robab believed she had found her way, were over. She had to find a way out of her difficult situation. Eventually she decided to flee from Iran, explaining her reasons as follows:

I didn't want to live underground or die a martyr in prison.... I was also very worried about my children. I had to save them, because they had no future and might even die in the war. This is what made me decide to flee....I also thought that I could be more effective in my political activities abroad than in Iran, because the regime had destroyed all of the opposition groups there.

In my opinion, this quote illustrates that Robab's decision to flee was rationally thought out. She perceived flight as a chance both to stay alive and continue her resistance work abroad. And by fleeing, she wanted to save her children from the suffering of war

and give them a better future.

Act 6. The Flight Process

Robab fled Iran with her family, aided by her political friends who organized the flight for her. The flight took days and was bound up with traumatic memories for her and her family. Apart from the fear of being arrested by government army soldiers, she feared especially for the lives of her children. During this period she became increasingly weaker from the mental and physical strain and finally fell seriously ill. After arriving in the first host country, Robab hoped she would be able to flee to a Western country aided by her political friends, as she and her family would not be granted asylum in this country, and lived in constant fear of being deported to Iran. Besides, she wanted to go to a country where she could live with her children in peace. She did not want to live in a country where political and social conditions were similar to those in Iran. This hope was not fulfilled initially, as the political organization Robab and her husband belonged to offered them no help here. In fact the reverse was true: the organization urged them to join the armed struggle against the Iranian government from this neighboring country. They were urged to send their children into a camp set up by the organization for this purpose. But Robab opposed this. Under no circumstances did she want to accept the demands of this organization, as she could no longer sanction their political strategy.

By refusing to go along with the plans of her political friends, Robab lost her last external support. She had to organize the escape route herself, with no help from her husband, who had become very passive and mentally ill. She describes this period as the "worst phase" of her life. She felt abandoned by her husband and her political friends. Besides these worries, she had to care very intensively for her children as the strain of the flight had also caused them to fall ill.

After several months, by which time she nearly ran out of strength, they finally managed to flee with the help of an organization which smuggled them into Germany. For Robab, it was entirely a coincidence that she ended up in Germany. In her situation she was not in a position to choose her country of exile.

Biographical Analysis: Flight as an Acting Pattern

Robab's flight to Germany was defined by external pressures like political persecution, the war and the unbearable living conditions in Iran, particularly for women such as herself. At the same time, the reconstruction of her personal history reveals numerous repetitions of acts of flight and thoughts of flight, always linked with the hope of creating a space for herself where she could enjoy social freedom. In her biography it is not "pressure" to flee that proves to be the biggest obstacle, but pressure to stay, or rather pressure to conform to undesired living conditions.

Robab's wish to create a self-determined space for herself during different stages of her biography is also a reflection of the collective orientation of the generation of modern Iranian women, who grew up in the 1970s.¹⁰ So her individual history of flight has to be situated in the context of the societal, cultural and political changes in Iran before and after the revolution of 1979. Robab's hope of gaining social recognition through revolutionary political activity is on one side the result of her individual coping strategies, but must also be seen in the light of the massive participation of modern middle-class women in the Anti-Shah movement.

Robab's decision to go abroad arose through the concrete threat of political persecution. The reconstruction of the steps she took to flee from Iran and the flight process show clearly how flight can signify both futility and opportunity. For Robab, the decision to flee abroad is not determined solely by her political persecution. She had already tried flight as a means

of realizing her life goals before this. Her decision to flee is the result of rational reflection, as she did not want "to live in the underground or in prison," and neither did she want to die "a martyr." She could not identify with either of these alternatives. At the same time, in fleeing abroad she wanted to try again to achieve social freedom for herself. She also wanted to ensure a better future for her children. This is how she managed successfully to organize the flight to Germany without the support of her husband or her political friends, an act which demanded great courage and a willingness to take risks. Robab's history of flight can be taken as an example that flight can be an individual life pattern. While it occurs through the pressure of external forces, this does not constitute a refugee's motive for fleeing: her motive is resistance against the prevailing balance of power which she is subjected to through these very pressures. Thus flight can be seen as a meaningful course of action taken with the aim of saving oneself and at the same time creating new social freedom for oneself. In other words, flight does not only imply futility, but also opportunity and latitude. Robab had to go away. But in fleeing, she sought to find new biographical positions at the same time.

The reconstruction of her experiences of flight reveals an image that does not correspond to the way the category "refugee" is determined by legal discourse as mentioned above, nor to the narrow definition of "persecution on political grounds." According to the logic of asylum law, Robab is supposed to be a passive victim of state violence and not a person having agency, who takes her fate into her own hands. Robab described this dilemma herself impressively:

It was stupid that I wrote in my application for asylum that, besides being persecuted on political grounds, I also wanted to save my children from the Iran-Iraq war. This led to the authorities not believing my political reasons for fleeing, so that I had to fight for my recognition

for six years....

Robab saw her flight as motivated action, as resistance to the social and political circumstances in Iran and had indicated this honestly in her application for asylum in Germany. But she was punished for precisely this, and had to wait for the recognition of her asylum for six years. The long waiting period turned her hopes of creating new freedom for herself in exile into hopelessness and depression. This strongly influenced her perception of exile. Her experiences of flight and exile show that the situation refugees flee from cannot be made solely responsible for their living conditions: also responsible are the conditions prevalent in the host societies, in which the interpretation of flight as agency and the perception of exile as an opportunity have not yet found their place.

Notes

¹ Traditional exile studies in Germany had tended to focus on German exiles in the 1930s and their situation in the country providing asylum. Exile as a universal phenomenon has only recently become the subject of debate, as part of refugee studies. This development comes at a time when refugee movements on a global scale have taken on ever-increasing dimensions and Germany has become a place of refuge for people from the so-called "developing countries." These refugees leave their countries of origin as a result of a variety of problems, including political, religious, or ethnic persecution, economic or environmental crises and disasters, war and civil war, famine, etc. The concept of exile or exile studies has undergone a transformation by becoming part of recent refugee studies.

² Theo Stammen, "Exil und Emigration. Versuch einer Theoriebildung," in *Abschiedlich leben*, Olden, 1991, pp. 30-57.

³ What emerges from Article 116 of the German constitution, for example, is that "true" membership of the German Community is based on the principle of descent, i.e. on "bloodright." This means that immigrants and their children who have been living in the Federal Republic of Germany for decades, for example, are not German citizens. This contrasts with the situation that descendants of German refugees from former Eastern bloc countries, who have likewise been living there for decades, are still considered German citizens.

⁴ Dieter, Fuchs et al. "Wir und die Anderen. Ethnozentrismus in den 12 Ländern der europäischen Gemeinschaft," in *Kölner Zeitschrift*

für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie, 45 (1993), pp. 238-253.

⁵ The recognition of reasons for flight specific to women as a basis for being granted asylum has been debated in Germany since the mid-1980s. Numerous refugee and human rights organizations have brought this issue to the fore and formulated it as a political demand. For details of the theoretical arguments surrounding this issue, see Margit Gottstein, *Die rechtliche und soziale Situation von Flüchtlingsfrauen vor dem Hintergrund frauenspezifischer Flucht- und Verfolgungssituation*, Bonn, 1986.

⁶ Cf. Stammen, p. 30, and elsewhere.

⁷ The biographical method makes it possible to reconstruct both the individual course of a person's life, in other words his/her biography, but also his or her social conditions. Cf. M. Kohli and G. Robert, *Biographie und soziale Wirklichkeit*, Stuttgart, 1984.

⁸ The results of this research project were published under the title: Tahereh Agha, *Lebensentwürfe im Exil. Biographische Verarbeitung der Fluchtmigration iranischer Frauen in Deutschland*, Campus, Frankfurt/New York, 1997.

⁹ Alfred Schütz, "Der Fremde," in *Gesammelte Aufsätze*, Band II. Den Haag, S., 1977, pp. 53-69.

¹⁰ During the childhood and youth of this specific generation unit Iranian society was experiencing a rapid process of socio-economic and cultural modernization. Therefore the socialization of women like Robab was influenced by such indicators of modernity as the process of secularization and the development of subjectivity. See Tahereh Agha, *Lebensentwürfe im Exil*.
