Reconfiguring Gender Roles in Russian-German Imaginary Families

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Abstract

This article deals with the representation of the transnational family in two films (Andreas Dresen's *Die Polizistin* and Bernd Böhlich's *Du bist nicht allein*) and one novel (Alina Bronsky's *Scherbenpark* [*Broken Glass Park*]) that focus on the relationship between portrayals of German and Russian family structures. Each text reflects the reconfiguration of "family" as its components respond to shifting gender roles, ethnic difference, and the effects of migration and immigration on the perception of the family as constituting a basic social unit. The intersection of literature and film around the issue of the changing family reflects contemporary demographic trends as well as anxiety about intimacy, citizenship, and linguistic identity. In these representations, the family assumes attributes of an "imagined community" (Anderson) inhabiting "imaginative geographies" (Said).

Keywords

Aussiedler; citizenship; family; femininity; gender; Germany; immigration; masculinity; poverty; Russia; Andreas Dresen; Bernd Böhlich; Alina Bronsky

The influx of immigrants with German ancestry from the former Soviet Union has contributed to a significant Russian-German population in the Federal Republic of Germany today. This presence is by no means homogeneous, but in terms of cultural representation, the image of a diverse community occupies a realistic realm of everyday life often associated with relatively recent immigration: poverty, unemployment, illegal substances, and violence. The media projection of the Russian immigrant is often corroborated in contemporary film and literature, but, as I contend in this article, more often it mirrors "German" anxieties about the challenges and failures of cosmopolitan identities, or at least identities defined in a post-national Europe. Intricately connected to these anxieties are family fantasies, represented with varying degrees of commitment in film and literature. Ruth Mandel explores "cosmopolitan anxieties" in her superb study of German Turkish culture. She writes of emerging, even merging, subjectivities not as a breaching of cultures: "Rather, it implies a coming to terms with both the consequences of deracination and the refashioning of assumptions about 'our culture.' This has entailed Germany's recognition of the multiple links to Turkey, or, more generally, between Europe and its fantasies of the Orient."[1]

1. Ruth Mandel, *Cosmopolitan Anxieties: Turkish Challenges to Citizenship and Belonging in Germany* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 1.

Mandel's work establishes a model for understanding the effects of immigration on identity and culture in an increasingly post-national Europe. In the case of Russian immigration to the Federal Republic of Germany, the "fantasies" and ethnic identifications are mediated not only by recent East-West-German history, but also by the ostensible ideological and political alliance between the German Democratic Republic and the former Soviet Union. More importantly, the real existing laws governing citizenship accommodate newcomers from Russia in ways that expose other fantasies of national identity. As I argue, the conflict between the notions of "our culture," ethnicized otherness, and portrayals of Russians in Germany inhabits a space in which gender difference constitutes a prominent concern, and the consequences of immigration become legible in the destabilization of the family. Of equal importance, however, is the idea of families as "imagined communities"—and the project of imagining the family across national boundaries.[2] I also rely on Edward Said's elaboration of imaginative geographies from his seminal work *Orientalism*. Said describes their construction as the "universal practice of designating in one's mind a familiar space which is 'ours' and an unfamiliar space beyond 'ours' which is 'theirs'" as a "way of making geographical distinctions that can be entirely arbitrary."[3] The construction of imagined families occurs, in some cases, around the concept of the national, but also increasingly the transnational. For this reason, issues of immigration and citizenship in works about changing families take on new importance. In the works I analyze, the imagined family deterritorializes the space between "ours" and "theirs" precisely through asserting family ties beyond the boundaries of origin. These boundaries are tested on the territory of the contemporary Federal Republic of Germany.

Significant for the representation of Russian-German minority identity is the role historical gender roles play in the construction of the family after the fall of the Berlin Wall. More specifically, the image of motherhood shifts, accommodating itself to new economic, social, and geographic demands. The revision of female roles has repercussions for the "nuclear family," with the male bread-winner at the head of the household, the (working) mother responsible for nurturing, and dependent children expecting care. Issues related to immigration further complicate the relationships among paternity, maternity, and desire. The texts I discuss here capture crucial moments on the arc of changing familial roles. This reconfiguration of the basic social unit in turn aligns with the re-purposing of the family as an economic unit in the Federal Republic, which continues to drive the European Union's economy despite the impact of recent recession. In contrast to the increasingly symbiotic relationship between Germany and Russia at the

2. Deborah Fahy Bryceson and Ulla Vuorela, "Transnational Families in the Twenty-first Century," in *The Transnational Family: New European Frontiers and Global Networks*, ed. Deborah Bryceson and Ulla Vuorela (Oxford: Berg, 2002), 10.

3. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1978), 54.

macro-political and economic level, the cultural representation of subjective relationships between the two demographics is refracted through the lens of socio-economic privation. In reduced, intentionally realistic portrayals of German institutions as they encounter recent Russian immigrants, a power struggle emerges that necessarily mobilizes and destabilizes gender roles. The works I analyze in this article depart significantly from the darkly humorous depictions of minority culture in urban life portrayed, for example, by Wladimir Kaminer.[4] Instead, they represent the process of "German" family dissolution as coterminous with immigration and integration.

The role of income, authority, and love exerts pressure on hegemonic models of masculinity and femininity, both of which are affected by ethnic identity. Robert Connell's notion that all masculinities are "historical" posits as a corollary a concept of historical femininity.[5] In this counter-concept, the history of uniting Germanys and former GDR identity intervenes and varies the shift in gendered identity. To substantiate my claim, I analyze three works in which the presence of Russian-German figures significantly alters the perception and representation of the "German" family.[6] In Andreas Dresen's 2000 film *Die Polizistin*, the director employs a documentary style to craft a feature about a young policewoman and her search for love in unlikely places. The family, despite its fractured state, still provides a model of the primary social constellation. The rules of attraction are compromised by a relationship between a policewoman, who uneasily occupies her position of authority, and a former Russian sailor who, in economically reduced circumstances, neglects his (half German) son and leads a life of petty crime. Bernd Böhlich's *Du bist nicht allein* (2007) explores the effect of a Russian neighbor on an otherwise distressed yet otherwise stable (East) German family. Here the figure of a strong-willed, working mother asserts her equality and even touts her ability to be the breadwinner; precisely this role undermines her identity as a willing object of sexual desire. Finally, in Alina Bronsky's novel *Scherbenpark* (2008; *Broken Glass Park*, 2010), we encounter a protagonist who consciously deliberates on the contingencies of family, the conventions of gender, and the extremes of ethnicity that can dominate identities living in immigration. The headstrong, stubborn, and damaged young woman refuses to enter into a transnational family unit in which she would function as daughter and sexually complicit prey. Instead, she packs her backpack and walks away. Each

4. On Kaminer as an "ethnic writer," see Katharina Gerstenberger, "Writing by Ethnic Minorities in the Age of Globalisation," in *German Literature in the Age of Globalisation*, ed. Stuart Taberner (Birmingham: University of Birmingham Press, 2004), 209–28, esp. 222–26.

5. R. W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 185.

6. On the role of gender in satirical novels about the post-millennial German family, specifically in contrast to the 1968 generation, see Carrie Smith-Prei, "Satirizing the Private as Political: 1968 and Post-Millennial Family Narratives," in *Women in German Yearbook 25: Feminist Studies in German Literature and Culture*, ed. Katharina Gerstenberger and Patricia Anne Simpson (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 76–99.

text contributes to a discussion about the effect of immigration on concepts of motherhood, social institutions, paternity, and family when borders shift with transnational contexts.

According to recent statistics, approximately three million Russian-Germans live in the country, and the politics of citizenship have exacerbated tensions among immigrant groups. Russians of German ancestry are eligible for citizenship, thus bypassing the need to negotiate the process that others, German Turks, for example, must undergo. The sense of propriety on behalf of Russians with distant German descent and the inequities implicit in policy resulted in profound tragedy in 2009.[7] More specifically, like many recent immigrants, members of the Russian minority inhabit a milieu of poverty, joblessness, and crime; and with the right genealogy, they are entitled to German citizenship. The issue of citizenship, as well as a more figurative sense of belonging, ethnic identity and location, and a sense of ownership and investment in the host culture, all continue to focus the attention of a nation attempting to reconcile its history of racism and anti-Semitism with a commitment to a concept of cosmopolitanism and hospitality.

Beyond the headlines and media representation, voices from Russian-German communities are articulating the experience of ethnic identity, poverty, and crime often associated with recent immigrants. In the case of Russian-Germans, several texts evoke a relationship predicated on the past alliance between the former Soviet Union and the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Moreover, the relationship between the two political entities was not one of purported equality implied in the epithet "socialist brother countries," but rather was one of dominance and subordination. This ostensible violation of socialist politics and ideology leaves traces on the development of gender roles in a contemporary context, and these, I contend, reflect and refract historical images of masculinity and femininity, which both are informed by ethnic background. In the two films and novel I analyze, there is a progression from a historically specific to a more ethnically inflected model of gendered identity, so much so that the identification of a figure as "Russian" becomes synonymous with a disruptive and destructive agent of emotional violence inflicted on the family. The films and literature depict a conflict between Russian and German models of male identity within the family, both real and imaginary.

The three different works represent varying ideals of the transnational family; each fails in a different way, though all reconfigure gender roles in a larger social and cultural context. In Dresen's film, the protagonist, a young postal worker who retrains as a police officer, Anne (Gabriela Maria Schmeide) gets involved with a man from Russia (Jegor, played by Jevgeni

7. A Russian-born German man, Alex W., stabbed an Egyptian woman to death outside a Dresden courtroom. The victim, Marwa al-Sherbini, was pregnant at the time. The assailant had insulted her, referring to her as a terrorist at a public playground for wearing the veil. The murder elicited mass protests in Egypt (and elsewhere), and al-Sherbini became known as the "headscarf martyr." "Egypt Mourns 'Headscarf Martyr,'" *BBC News*, July 6, 2009: http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/middle_east/8136500.stm.

Sitochin) by vicariously "mothering" his son, Benny (Paul Grubba). In this film, her desire to preserve some notion of social justice is expressed in her advocacy of a transnational family structure that is collapsing in the face of poverty and banality. This film, which is set in the dodgy Lütten-Klein section of Rostock, avoids specifically political themes, but the politics of immigration encroach on the emotional register of the characters nonetheless. A particular affiliation between the recent past of alleged solidarity between East Germany and the former Soviet Union emerges in the portrayal of an underground economy. These economic relations highlight the tension between the German policewoman and the Russian. By contrast, Böhlich's feature film focuses on the interplay among work, money, and middle-aged disappointment. Again, the futility of German authority—when embodied by a female character—marks the epicenter of events. Katharina Thalbach plays Frau Moll to Alex Prahl's Hans, the unemployed industrial painter who falls in love with Jewgenia (Katerina Medvedeva), recently arrived from Russia. Her presence disrupts the middle-class German family, complete with television set, *Essecke* (breakfast nook), and the symbol of family wholeness, the potted rubber tree. While the film ultimately affirms a belief in the human ability to renew one's life through work and love, any notion of the homogeneous German family is discarded in the process, and the transfer of conventional gender attributes contributes to its collapse.

Finally, I turn to Alina Bronsky's novel in which the narrator, Sascha Neimann, fantasizes about murdering the man who killed her Russian mother along with her German partner; the young protagonist consciously exerts her power by refusing to be a victim of domestic violence or sexual predators. Instead, she establishes an accidental family, only to abandon it. In all these works, conflicting images of ethnic gender roles destabilize the family as a defensible social unit. Gender and ethnic differences erode the persistence of historically "German" concepts and practices of work and family values. As I argue in this article, the presence of Russian influence compounds the challenges already posed by destabilized gender roles.

Policing Maternity

The voice-over narrator in Dresen's film muses: "Ich möchte mal wissen, ob es die grosse Liebe wirklich gibt, oder ist alles nur blödes Roulettspiel. Ist es wahnsinniger Zufall, wenn so ein Sonnenstrahl dich trifft" (I'd like to know if there really is such as a thing as a great love, or whether it's all just some idiotic roulette game. Is it a crazy accident if a ray of sunlight happens to find you?).[8] Anne, the newly trained policewoman, is assigned to the small, overburdened force in Rostock Lütten-Klein, the impoverished *Neubauviertel* with somewhere between 80,000 and 90,000 residents, and six or seven police officers. As the director and Laila Stieler, who wrote the screenplay, both comment in the

8. Andreas Dresen, dir., *Die Polizistin* (WDR, 2000), DVD. Translations are modified from English subtitles.

bonus material, they are motivated by a desire to portray bitter reality. In fact, the camera pans across the monotony of the Soviet-era apartment buildings while the female voice wonders about great love, and her chances strike the spectator as unlikely. The film, which was made for television but eventually and somewhat atypically was later released for theaters, references reality, the everyday and its persistent tedium and occasional violence both aesthetically and substantially. That realism includes moving the story from the busy Berlin to the more manageable Rostock, incorporating local actors, issues, and atmosphere into the production, and using frequent improvisation and regional dialect. The residual Russian population figures in this framework: Jegor, formerly a Russian sailor employed at a once robust shipyard, represents not only the love interest in the film. The estranged father of young Benny, and the remaindered immigrant, he is also a German citizen. His fleeting, somewhat reluctant relationship with Anne, combined with her desire for love and a shadowy projection of the "heile Familie," construct a transnational, imaginary family to reconfigure the real-existing, post-socialist social unit that needs constant police intervention in this milieu.

Anne, the protagonist, was inspired in part by the published diary of a real policewoman. Her male colleagues accept her, but remind her at key moments that she needs to develop a thicker skin. Her own story makes her sympathetic: she worked at the post office for five years, but was let go when two offices were consolidated. In an opening interview with her new superior at the precinct that is persistently interrupted by phone calls and demands for his attention, she states: "Dann war ich . . . über" (Then I was left . . . over). On her first patrol with the hardened but endearing partner Mike (Axel Prahl), they are called to break up a domestic disturbance. The alcoholic mother and stepfather fight while Anne speaks to the ten-year-old Benny, who is left in charge of his baby sister and tells about the beer, schnapps, and pills his mother needs for her sickness "an der Seele" (in her soul). This child becomes a key player in Anne's pursuit of happiness and so does his father, Jegor.

She meets him first on the job. The police team catches a nocturnal thief at a supermarket. Anne pursues the fleeing perpetrator, clubs the man, and subdues him. The police assume the man speaks no German, but he insists: "Deutscher Staatsbürger" or German citizen. Anne addresses him in Russian. When her astounded and impressed partner comments on her language skills, she remarks: "Ist irgendwie hängengeblieben" (I remember it somehow). The reference to having learned some Russian identifies the relatively young woman with the East German school system, in which Russian was mandatory. This opening encounter establishes first the legal status of the Russian criminal as a citizen, and also incorporates the historical references to a former historical relationship between East Germany and the Soviet Union. In their next accidental meeting, however, Anne sees him at a club; their eyes meet, she leaves, and he follows her outside. Again, she starts to speak to him in Russian, but he replies in German. Her profession forces an intersection between her national past and her transnational present.

Anne's police partner Mike provides a model for her idea of the perfect life: he is married, has two children, a profession, and someone waiting for him when he returns home. He and Anne share a powerful attraction that they manage to contain until a breaking point precipitated by an intense emotional experience on the job. After the discovery of a corpse in sexually unusual circumstances, the police partners must tell an older couple of their son's death. (Not a suicide; the young man is found dead in the woods where he suffocated in a scuba diver's gear, worn to achieve sexual pleasure through oxygen deprivation during masturbation.) The Siegels, shocked and crushed by news of the death, press for details—they are legitimately puzzled by the wet suit in the woods, given their son's passion for and expertise in diving—and the director cuts away to the police team coping with the emotional intensity of the day by sharing a bottle of whiskey, mulling over what they could have done or said differently. Then, at Anne's behest, they act on their attraction and sleep together at her apartment.

This is her second encounter in the film, and the director describes the contrast between the scenes of failed intimacy. First, Anne intentionally pursues Jegor, buys a washing machine from him, and pretends to have just gotten up when he arrives on time, but she insists he is an hour early. She and he carry the heavy appliance up her stairs, and her hapless seduction leads to sex on the newly delivered washing machine, in the bright light of day. By contrast, Anne and Mike have one-sided sex in darkness; she is disappointed sexually, emotionally, and professionally. The director notes the difference in lighting, an external marker of Anne's ethical assumptions about the sanctioned and illicit relationships.

Mike's family status weighs on them both. Anne is the one who tells their boss that she wants another partner, and the reasons, though unspoken, become obvious. Mike is furious when he finds out, assuming everyone will know soon enough, and he defends himself: "Ich habe Familie" (I have a family). Anne criticizes him for having forgotten that detail the night before. His defense and her ethical barometer read the same: family is to be cherished and protected. While Anne sees some potential for a cobbled together transnational family with Jegor and Benny—however unrealistic and far-fetched—she cannot allow her loneliness and search for great love to overshadow Mike's relationship to the essential and indispensable family unit.

Her relationship with Jegor, which also centers on aligning desire with respectability, forces the issue of cross-national relationships and their potential for success. There is very little evidence of real intimacy in the film, but one shared moment between Jegor and Anne invokes an imaginary family. After their sexual encounter, Anne prepares a fish dinner in her under-furnished apartment. There is no soundtrack to speak of in this film; all sound is diegetic, but in the dinner scene, romantic music plays in the background. Anne makes a playful gesture, flicking a small forkful of food at Jegor as they eat the fish Anne admits she has never prepared before. When she chokes on

a bone, Jegor leaps up, slices a thick piece of bread, and instructs her to eat it with minimal chewing. Anne eventually stops coughing and gasping, and nuzzles in his shoulder. Jegor recounts a memory of Benny, who, when he was five, choked on a fish bone. Jegor uses the word *Knochen* (bone), but pauses to consult the recovering Anne about a vocabulary correction: she supplies *Gräte* (fish bone), and the differences in cultural and ethnic practices rise to the surface along with the further accuracy in the language. Jegor smiles and strokes Anne's hair, recalling his ex-wife's fury at the very idea of giving a child of five fish with bones. He muses that he himself was eating fish without assistance at the age of two. In the comforting embrace, the child Benny is present in the narrative. In fact, it is Jegor's affection for his child that permits Anne's feelings in the first place. When she pursued him at first, it was to admonish him about his duty to the child. "Sie können nicht einfach hierher kommen und Kinder auf die Welt setzen und nicht um sie kümmern" (You can't just come here and have children and not take care of them). He defends himself at that early stage of acquaintance, insisting that he stays for Benny and it is the ex-wife who limits contact.

The thin-skinned Anne intervenes with the intention of repairing relationships among the repeat offenders, the substance abusers, the incensed drug addicts, and comforting the downcast. However, with Benny and Jegor, her interventions assume an extremely personal nature and she inserts herself into an imaginary family constellation that will never be realized. She does not react to Jegor's disapproval of the coddling of male children in a milieu that differs from his own process of masculinization and socialization, as symbolized in the fish bone story in which Anne is aligned with the child.

These unacknowledged differences prevent any lasting connection. As events unfold, Jegor reveals an emotion approximating contempt toward Anne. She may be a police officer; she subdued and arrested him, only to fall in love with him—as Benny's father and as a candidate for her assistance. As Laila Stieler notes in her commentary, the character Anne is a woman who has boundless love to give, and that is not something everyone can stand. When Jegor progresses from petty theft to armed robbery, ostensibly to help pay for Benny's class trip to Denmark, Anne and her new partner Albert arrive on the scene of the criminals' escape. Albert has cuffed Jegor to a pole, and Anne pursues but fails to apprehend his accomplice. Albert makes a clearly dismissive reference to her ability, presumably because of her gender: "Ja, klar," and she mimics him in disgust and disappointment, only to realize her lover is one of the perpetrators. When Albert leaves them to give chase, Anne unlocks the handcuffs, insisting that she could help somehow, but Jegor takes her weapon, kidnaps her, and forces her to drive him to the highway in the police van. She continues to offer help, puzzled by his refusal. Pushed past the point of caring, Jegor declares: "Ich liebe dich nicht. Ich liebe keine Frau, die dauernd für mich was machen will. Ich brauche das nicht. Ich werde aggressiv" (I don't love you. I don't love any woman who always wants to be doing something for me. I don't need it. I get aggressive). Anne confuses her

professional identity with a personal, parenting role. When Jegor ejects her from the van and drives off, and Albert picks her up, he asks, baffled, why on earth she set the culprit free. She can only answer: "Er hat mir leid getan" (I felt sorry for him).

Anne identifies with the "clients," the alcoholics, the thieves, the victims and perpetrators of domestic abuse, and rejects her own identification with the extended arm of impersonal laws. Though she concedes on several occasions that she indeed needs a thicker skin, she seems positively incapable of designing one. In the final scene, Benny is back at the precinct. He had run away when his father failed to meet him on the playground before his birthday party. It is clear; no one in his unemployed family can muster up the 250 D-Mark for the class trip. Anne steps in yet again as the mothering social worker, and suggests that she take him to the beach during the trip. Benny asks in astonishment whether she could really make that happen: "Klar, ich bin die Polizei" (Of course, I'm the police).

Both Dresen and Stieler stress the relationship between the film, the documentary style, and their desire to portray reality. The screenplay, based in part on the novel of a policewoman and her milieu, *Meine Nachtgestalten* (My Night Figures), by Annagret Held, underwent fourteen versions, relocated from Berlin to Rostock, and crossed just about every television producers' desk before it found support at WDR for the 20.15 slot, directly following the evening news. Dresen mentions the "bitter reality" of the milieu, noting, for example, that the Vietnamese Imbiss where they shot two scenes had its window smashed in regularly, and the film captures a passing glimpse of a skinhead horde on patrol. They discuss the real attack on a home for asylum seekers in Lichterhagen, which forced Vietnamese to take refuge on the roof. There were no injuries, but the incident, familiar from the headlines, left deep scars on the collective psyche of the nation. The filmmaker reveals that he wanted to end the film with a similar attack on the Imbiss, but closed instead with the more hopeful image of Anne, in uniform, crossing the police station parking lot with Benny at her side. There is little mention of the Russian minority, though the Russian sailor provides a "reales Vorbild" (real model) of the late 1990s in Rostock. Dresen and Stieler speak about the presence of Russian men, scavenging in garbage in search of items to sell at home in Russia. They speculate about the character Jegor, who set out to sea and ended up in a 60-square-meter apartment. It is curious in some ways that they do not comment on the function of paternity that motivates his decision to stay, or his German citizenship, thematized prominently in the film. They do, however, remark on the desire of even the lowest inhabitants of the socio-economic ladder to attain and preserve some notion of a "heile Familie" (intact family). Though it remains unarticulated in the screenplay, Anne, as I have argued and I hope demonstrated, aspires to some notion of a transnational family and reconciles a contiguous relationship between her role as police officer and her role as surrogate mother to Benny. In her version of the world,

the fatherless family provides a metaphor and a model for a plural society in the process of personal and political healing.

Security and Family Assets

The Russian father figure in *Die Polizistin* reinforces preconceived associations between Russian men: a thick skin, and a life of crime. By contrast, the image of Russian femininity in the next film I analyze functions as a benign, even redemptive installment in the cultural and national imaginary. Her presence forces questions about (East) German masculinity. In *Du bist nicht allein*, issues of unemployment, loss of socio-economic status, and limited horizons fracture relationships that already begin to shift when (East) German and Russian family units become neighbors. The film foregrounds the specific differences in gender roles from the outset, along with the forced adaptation to a market economy and—in stark contrast to the former GDR's right to work policy—a challenging and humiliating job market. The few moments of promise in the film originate in the contiguous relationship between Jewgenia, recently arrived from Russia with her father and a truculent daughter, and Hans Moll, the remaindered breadwinner and head of household who must yield to his circumstances and defer to his wife's employment.[9] Several crucial moments in this work lend insight into the ethnic specificity of family: the assumption of a diminished East German past in which men and women alike viewed work as an expression of political and communal identity as much as an economic necessity; the traces of Russia as a noble liberator in East German memory; and the identification between recent immigrants and the specific experience of East Germans during the short-lived yet powerful euphoria inspired by breaching the Berlin Wall.

The director integrates references to an admittedly dated, socialist valuation of human labor in oblique but significant ways. The film opens in an *Arbeitsamt*, with Frau Moll defensive about her age, eager for work, and submissive to the official who comments on her *Jahrgang* (1956), her use of the term *Fleischerei* (butcher shop; "knacker"), with its East German connotations, over the preferred

9. The literature on the decline of the male breadwinner in Europe focuses on important socio-economic trends, but does not generally consider the specific effects of this diminished status in post-socialist economies. See Rosemary Crompton, *Employment and the Family: The Reconfiguration of Work and Family Life in Contemporary Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 8. See also Laura den Dulk and Anneke van Doorne-Huiskes, "Social Policy in Europe: Its Impact on Families and Work," in *Women, Men, Work and Family in Europe*, ed. Rosemary Crompton, Suzan Lewis, and Clare Lyonette (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 35–57, esp. 37. On trends in Central and Eastern Europe, see Hana Hašková, "Fertility Decline, the Postponement of Childbearing and the Increase in Childlessness in Central and Eastern Europe: A Gender Equity Approach," in *Women, Men, Work and Family in Europe*, ed. Rosemary Crompton, Suzan Lewis, and Clare Lyonette (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 76–85, esp. 80–82. Her conclusions about gender equity and strategic postponement in the Czech Republic could explain some demographic trends in the former GDR as well.

Metzgerei (butcher), and her lack of formal training in a profession.[10] As he describes a position that requires diligence and modest English skills, she affirms, in Berlin dialect, "Bin ick…bin ick," with a wink to her son, who is seated next to her to provide moral support, but his presence demonstrates the integration of work into the entire family structure. The employment officer, however, casually negates the fundamental idea that work not only provides wages, but also shapes identity. He muses, as much to himself as to Frau Moll and Sven, her son, "Wie kommen wir in die Rente?" (How are we going to get you to retirement age?). For him, finding Frau Moll a job fulfills no larger purpose: there is no teleology beyond bridging the gap until she reaches retirement age. The audience, aware of Frau Moll's stage in life, cannot help hearing the meaning and dignity sucked from this question. In the post-socialist context of Berlin, gender and work are reconfigured in such a way that the full-employment policy of the former Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands (SED) seems in retrospect to have lifted certain burdens from gender roles by de-emphasizing the identity between the male breadwinner and the female domestic. In the new economy, the new Germany, work reverts to alienated labor.

The importance of employment informs the emotional life of the family, but also leads to its downfall. In the *Plattenbau* apartment with a balcony, she shares with her husband glossy brochures advertising work for painters in Holland. In the absence of gainful employment, Hans occupies himself with landscape painting, transforming the small balcony into a makeshift studio. In one telling gesture, he kneels before his masterpiece, but is annoyed by the dripping from wet laundry hanging above him. Hans pauses to squeeze the excess water from the garments, including his wife's very functional lingerie. His own feelings about unemployment express themselves in self-deprecating humor. In one scene, he agrees, after some prodding, to accompany Sven to the pool. At the entrance, the woman at the window asks about discounts, to which he unblinkingly replies: "Behinderter Student, zur Zeit arbeitslos" (disabled student, currently unemployed). Her lack of appreciation for his joke pries him from his grim humor, and he adds the truth: "Nee, nur arbeitslos" (no, just unemployed). In this seemingly ancillary exchange, he identifies himself by his lack of work, and succumbs to a social stereotype: he needs assistance, both public and private.

The appearance of Jewgenia and her family provide initial distraction, even irritation, but Hans quickly overcomes his initial annoyance at having to help her out with the heavy lifting when she first moves in next door. Instead, he seems charmed by her vulnerability, and attracted to her and her way of life. At his wife's bidding, he drives the new neighbor to a furniture store in Lichtenberg, only to find it closed. He agrees to return the next day: they test the comfort of a living room set. Jewgenia needs a washing machine,

10. Bernd Böhlich, dir., *Du bist nicht allein* (RBB, WDR, and SWD, 2007). Subtitles Babelfisch Translations. English: Thomas Cooper. Translations are based on the subtitles with my modifications.

but cannot afford one. Without hesitation, he offers to buy it for her, "zur Begrüssung" (as a welcome gift). Hans hits the nearest ATM for the needed 200 Euros. He justifies this gesture of generosity with an allusion to the money East Germans received when they came West after the fall of the Wall. Everyone received *Begrüssungsgeld* (welcome money) in the sum of 100 D-Mark. From the first, he associates her experience of immigration to Germany with his own loss (and gain) of nation. From this point on, he reveals his affection in small gestures of assistance that lead to larger infractions and betrayals.

It is important to trace the cues that portray Hans's deepening affection for his neighbor. In addition to being vulnerable, she embodies a quietly noble commitment to forging a new life in Berlin. In a series of encounters with neighbors, potential employers, and various forms of authority, Jewgenia demonstrates joy in the quotidian, regardless of the challenges. While driving an old English truck, she hums a folk song. In another scene, the newly self-important security guard, Frau Moll, drags her new Russian neighbor's daughter home after she catches the girl begging in the street with a sign claiming she is a Russian orphan. After the incident, Jewgenia weeps discreetly on her adjacent balcony. Hans hears her and tries to comfort her. She manages to thank him for the balcony mural he completed, complimenting him on its beauty: "Es ist wunderschön. Es sieht aus wie zu Hause" (It is beautiful. It looks like home). In response, he mumbles, "So hab ick mir das vorgestellt" (I tried to imagine how it is). Hans's relationship to Jewgenia mobilizes his imagination. His desire to imagine her homeland's beauty transforms his painting as work into art. The newly achieved combination of skill and imagined beauty is more than work; instead it is part of a process of seduction and affection, expressed here as a positive predisposition toward Jewgenia's Russian heritage. He associates her identity with beauty of a physical and spiritual nature—and he longs to participate in that beauty by proximity, by his contiguous relationship to a German-speaking Russian neighbor.

Security, both personal and economic, surfaces in the film both as a constitutive element of self-definition and as a stifling yet nonetheless necessary aspect of family life, no less significant than the breakfast nook and the fichus. Frau Moll's role as a security guard lends renewed importance and purpose to her identity, but she is equally devastated when the facility she is guarding with such dedication and consequence turns out to be empty. This disappointment is shattering. Similarly, Jewgenia's rejection of Hans's affection leads to his downfall. The title of the film echoes emptily throughout the relationships among characters.

"Du bist nicht allein" is used as the marketing strategy—you are not alone anymore, you are one of a team, etc.—for Frau Moll's new work as a security guard. She learns that her personality is her capital, and her vigilance makes her part of a community—of security guards. "Sie sind nicht allein" (You—in a formal way—are not alone, but also They are not alone.) is the phrase that resonates, however ironically, with the more intimate theme song, a

1960s ballad reluctantly performed by Roy Black, and sung by Hans at his neighbor's house-warming party next door. His touching, somewhat awkward performance of this sentimental love song endears him to the Russian guests who understand very little about him. He leaves Sven at home, brings the family rubber tree as a gift, and tries his best to feel comfortable among the other, mostly Russian-speaking guests. The song exposes his vulnerability, and this emotion gains him acceptance in the round of drinking and laughing immigrants. His reaction, after the percolating of deep emotion and a hope for renewal, exacerbates the resentment he feels toward his working wife and nearly all aspects of their shared existence, including her nickname for him: *Bärchen*, sweetheart, literally "little bear."

In stark contrast, Jewgenia represents a world of real and imagined beauty, from Hans's painting of her *Heimat* to the woman herself. In a moment at the gas station, Jewgenia is distracted by Hans's courting, and she accidentally runs over a man in a cell phone costume, there to advertise. This development precipitates the downfall of the family. Frau Moll comes home to find her husband banging on the neighbor's door, sobbing and loudly proclaiming his love. After work, Frau Moll pays the new neighbor a visit. She has previously noticed the missing fichus in her own home, and registers its new location next door. She compliments Jewgenia on the new highlights: "Die sehen gut aus, die Strähnchen. Sie sehen überhaupt gut aus" (Your highlights look nice. All of you looks nice). This scene sets up a complicated moment: Jewgenia highlights Frau Moll's hair, and makes reference to the accident. The phone rings, and both women assume it is the police. Frau Moll answers to clear up the situation, but it is her husband, calling to say good-bye to Jewgenia. He is on the platform, waiting for the train to depart, and does not recognize his wife's voice when she answers the phone. Hans describes his emotions, his belief that no one like her would come into his life again, and assures her of his love. Frau Moll assures him of her love, knowing he cannot recognize her voice. He hangs up and jumps on the train to Holland.

In this exquisitely crafted scene, the car accident and love story become one. Katharina Thalbach's performance emphasizes the truth and depth of ambivalence in her character. Jewgenia, assuming the police have called, asks what's the matter. She says nothing, swallows her sobs, and refers to the "Unfall" (an accident), and adds a legal explanation: "Eindeutig, also nicht vorsätzlich" (not premeditated). Jewgenia does not understand, and here the idioms of the legal and the intimate coincide: "Nicht mit Absicht" (not on purpose). Frau Moll is referring to her husband's alienated affection; Jewgenia is limited in her understanding of the situation and the language. Hans in fact heads for Holland, and Frau Moll learns to swim—a skill she had never before mastered—as a gesture that speaks of risk and personal growth; both characters declare good wishes for the other in voiceovers, both participate in rituals of renewal, both utter forgiving and encouraging words to their absent partners, but the upbeat end may strike the audience as contrived.

One aspect of Jewgenia's life includes belonging to a community of alienated Russian-immigrant consciousness. Similarly, Jegor's Russian identity is crucial in that it is historically accurate and realistically convincing in the post-GDR context. In both films, ethnic identity seems at first glance to be contingent. However, the implication of a shared political history, now lost, and a lingering solidarity in the relationship between Hans and Jewgenia both sharpen the focus not on a specific ethnic affiliation but rather on the fragile nature of the German family that cannot bear the weight of working women with any sense of ascending femininity. In these two portrayals, masculinity is defined by paternity, work, and desire. In the case of the dedicated but flawed father in *Die Polizistin*, ethnic identity also shapes character: Jegor repudiates any connection to the Russian mafia, but escalates his life of crime from misdemeanor to felonious—ostensibly in order to provide for his son. While he claims paternity as partial motivation, it turns out he just wants money to survive, and in the ethical context of the film, family and children trump individual needs. Jegor turns out to be another Russian criminal. His desertion of family, of his son Benny, constitutes the worst crime of all, at least in Anne's eyes. Her German assumptions about family and decency prevail, though she is able to "maternalize" the role of the police officer. Jewgenia, on the other hand, provides a model of ethnic femininity and beauty, also a positive image of Russian maternity, and a plucky desire for self-sufficiency—she is partner-less upon immigration—and she asks for and accepts help without the expectation of romantic involvement. Her social life immediately exceeds the loneliness and isolation of the nuclear family. Even in immigration, she quickly forges bonds to a community whereas the Molls seem to have no one but themselves for company. And that is not enough. It is the relationship to Jewgenia that re-purposes Hans's masculinity, but also drives him away from the family circle. The Russian presence in both films, for all their differences and nuances, ultimately disrupts any notion of family stability.

Leaving Behind the Broken Glass

The broken glass park that provides the title for the story of a young woman alone in the world also symbolizes the fate of the contemporary transnational family in Germany. In this work, which has received wide critical acclaim, we meet Sascha Naimann, the daughter of an absent and distant Russian father and a murdered, vibrant, bohemian mother, who inhabits the marginalized Russian-German ghetto on the outskirts of a large city, presumably Frankfurt am Main. The scene shifts, then, from the residual East German apartment blocks of *Du bist nicht allein* to the former West, but the setting is the same: a low-income housing project (the Emerald) that functions as magnet for the dispossessed. Sascha's plan is twofold: to write a book about her mother, and to murder the man who killed her, Vadim, a stepfather with violent and abusive tendencies. We learn that he and his wife have two other children, Sascha's younger half-siblings toward whom she feels protective. Indirectly, the female protagonist, who excels in her studies, plays chess like a champ,

cares for her younger sister and brother, cultivates the ability to absent herself from threatening situations, most of which involve dominant males. Sascha speaks from the margins to the mainstream and declares without apology: "I hate men."[11] This proclamation is motivated by the pattern of violence and victimization Sascha knows and rejects. The author, who was born in Yekaterinburg, Russia, in 1978 and lives in Frankfurt, repudiates any autobiographical associations (Alina Bronsky is a pseudonym), but gives us insight into a world in which language, identity, and family all must negotiate international boundaries. We learn that Vadim's distant cousin comes to watch over the orphaned children; she enters into a relationship with a Russian compatriot despised by Sascha, who moves out in protest. Sascha seeks and finds refuge, but she eventually considers and rejects a series of possible family constellations as unbearable. In contemporary German fiction, she represents a shift from some of the desultory protagonists who have populated recent works, into a figure who refuses to become a victim like her educated and artistically inclined mother. This novel depicts an apparently intact family, two parents and three children, and in some ways insists on the most conventional constellation for the family unit. As newcomers in Germany, family life falls apart with the most acute representations of domestic violence. This family image is countered by the partnership between Sascha's mother and a German man, but also by the representation of a professional couple and their sick son, which, however prosperous, fails to attain fulfillment or enjoy stability. Bronsky's narrator functions as a point of intersection among these three models, and rejects them all.

The 17-year-old narrator introduces herself as Sascha, short for both Alexander and Alexandra, a resident of Germany for seven years and fluent in German "ten times better than all the other Russian Germans put together" (13). She refers to her mother as "too sentimental" (14), in contrast to her own logical nature, and alternately upbraids her in imagined conversations and asks for forgiveness: "Why did you marry that asshole? Why did he get to come with you to Germany? Why in the hell did you let him into the apartment that night?" (21). The narrator shares the aspects of her mother's pedigree that led to her downfall: art history student and artist, cosmopolitan, credentialed, and refined. Her mother's German boyfriend, Harry, also a victim in the double murder, appears as a slightly bumbling but benign model of manhood. Sascha recalls her first visit to Harry's studio apartment: "He was exactly as my mother had described. A little difficult to be around at first because he was so unsure of himself. But as he gained confidence, he was kind and thoughtful" (30). Yet even the prematurely hardened Sascha finds him endearing, because he breaks the stereotype she carries of German men, and proves to be the opposite of the Russian man she despises: "So meek, so helpless. Never thinking of himself. Broke but still generous. . . . My mother's great love" (32).

11. Alina Bronsky, *Broken Glass Park*, trans. Tim Mohr (New York: Europa, 2010), 18. Hereafter cited in text.

In other words, Harry, who studied literature, never finished his degree, and had difficulty keeping a job, provided the exact opposite model of masculinity from the crude and self-important, not to mention abusive, Russian Vadim who murdered him. He menaces, beats, lashes out, and blames everyone for his problems but himself. Sascha runs through a list of Vadim's prejudices, many of which are directed at the German host culture, but his venom seems "democratically" distributed. Women seem to be the real evil: all women in general, his wife in particular.

Sascha encounters Volker Trebur, the City Section Editor of a Frankfurt newspaper, after she reads an article about the imprisoned and now remorseful Vadim. Its sympathetic portrayal sends her into a rage, and she tracks down the writer, an intern, and the editor who has already taken action against the piece. Though she dismisses any statements of understanding, she does take his card when he offers help at any time, and when things get unbearable at home in the Emerald, she calls him to test the sincerity of his offer to help, and asks for a place to stay. Uneasy in the house, she meets Felix, her host's sixteen-year-old son, eventually sleeps with the young man but develops an intense affection for his father. In her core, Sascha becomes the ethical barometer that measures the relative success of families, accidental and otherwise.

When Felix points out his mother on the news from Berlin, Sascha asks for confirmation that the parents are split up. She marvels that he chose to stay with his father; Felix did not like his mother's new boyfriend, nor did he want to move. Sascha never had this option. After a health emergency that lands Felix in the hospital due to a chronic condition with sporadic crises, Sascha and Volker are alone at his home. She acts on her attraction, but stops when things get scary. At this point, she feels the unwanted emotion of pity for the older man whose wife left and whose son must cope with frail health:

> Who could possible leave someone like that, I think. Someone with graying hair, someone good-looking and sophisticated and funny. How can you just abandon your child, especially when he's so sick? A red-haired kid with freckles and a white scar beneath his T-shirt. (126)

In the scheme of family configurations, Volker is the ideal father, exemplifying an intelligent and warm version of professional paternity. Sascha's search for an adult relationship constitutes a search for a father figure, albeit after the fact.

Volker becomes the name she speaks when she learns fear. Her status, orphaned by the double murder, accords her a certain exemption, but the peripheral presence of a rich German man in her life offer more source of provocation than protection on the turf known as Broken Glass Park. A teenager, Peter, heads up the local gang of Russians; they leave Sascha alone for the most part, but she cannot seem to help herself when it comes to provoking them verbally. They catch her alone outside and Peter and two other guys from the Emerald harass her. Even though she shares their knowledge that she has no chance against them of defending herself, she brandishes an empty bottle. When Peter expresses surprise that she does not want to have sex with him, and confesses that there is something about her he likes,

she lashes out: "'I only sleep with guys who can read,' I sneer. It's like I'm possessed. 'Which means you're out, dear Peter. I'm afraid welfare checks and broken German just don't get me off'" (152). But the bottle refuses to break when she hits him and flies from her hand. Her scream saves her from rape. Sascha screams Volker's name, and why it has such a prohibitive effect on her assailants remains ambiguous. He plays the role of a rich German sugar daddy in some ways, but the vehemence of her fear also wards off Peter and the other two. After the attack, she calls him and speculates: "Maybe they thought someone was coming. They tried to cover my mouth. I bit that hand so hard it bled" (153). Some combination of her German protector and her own unbridled defense saves her. Given this attack and her response, the reader can wonder what motivates her to seek out these guys as allies. The reasons involve ethnic and immigrant identity trumping gender difference.

The representatives of German masculinity include another Volker, a member of the NPD who assumes Sascha is German and tries to date her. Sascha intentionally baits young Volker, who intriguingly shares the name of Felix's father. In her attempt to hold feelings of loneliness and rejection at bay, she seduces this substitute Volker, but he wants to talk and get to know her. His favorite topic, cars, leads quickly into a tirade against foreign elements in German society. Sascha eggs him on with references to "foreign crap" (175), and Volker segues into politics when the fluent young narrator prompts him with a question about identity and community: "Who—we?" (176). Volker responds by showing his ideological cards: "We Germans, of course. Me and you. We're losing everything—our economy, our language, our genes" (176). He directs his hatred more toward the Chinese and Turks, but Sascha steers him back onto her territory, suggesting the Russians are worse than the Chinese. "The Russians? Nah. They used to be bad. But you can forget about them nowadays. They drink themselves to death. They're degenerates" (176). In the conscious entrapment, Sascha reveals much about the clichés associated with the media image of post-Soviet Russia in a litany of negative attributes: "Bad food, bad weather, social injustice. The old dictatorship replaced by a new one. Arbitrariness and violence" (177). Volker's final words on the subject of her unannounced heritage inspire her alliance with Peter and company. Volker insists he is not worried about Russians: "It won't take long for them to kill each other off. Anybody left will be in the slammer. And when we take power, we'll seal the border tight" (177). His unwitting description of her family's fate ends this topic. They have sex, but it makes her feel worse. She leads him on rollerblades to Broken Glass Park, introduces him as a German Nazi, and muses, while Peter is forcing him to drink a medicalized beverage, "legal speed" known as sailor's tea. The combination of vodka and brown liquid, as Peter notes, is costly. Sascha observes with admiration: "Then he pours the liquid in Volker's mouth, though the bulk of it sloshes down the sides of his face, causing Peter to issue a stream of comments, 'I'll fuck your mother' being the most friendly of them. I listen with my mouth agape. It sounds almost poetic. If only I could curse as fluidly as that" (182). In the previous scene with her Russian peers, German was the

language of attraction, and she gave them demerits for their broken language. Now that she has encountered a nationalist who would see her for the ethnic stereotype she represents to him, she indulges in drug use, bonds with Peter, communicates silently with him, and feels at home. Her admiration extends to his fluent, poetic cursing.

At that point, she begins to unravel. When she identifies more closely with her ethnic ties over the gender ones, she loses control. She gets in a roller-blading accident, then discovers with destabilizing disappointment that Vadim has killed himself, depriving her of the right to murder him. That pushes her over the edge. A nosy neighbor tells her to leave, round up her nasty clan and leave all the men and boys alone. Driven to the edge, Sascha stands outside hurling rocks at the windows of the housing complex known ridiculously as the Emerald. The inhabitants strike back: someone hits her, sending her to the hospital with a head injury. The crisis leads to a resolution that rejects both real and imaginary families.

The images of gendered identity in the novel all disappoint: her beautiful, artistically inclined, and fatally generous mother only managed to fall for people like Vadim, her assassin, and Harry, a kind, gentle, albeit bumbling German man. Sascha shares her mother's joy in this unlikely relationship after the brutality of Vadim. After her stepfather commits double murder, Maria (the cousin) crosses borders to take custody of the children, but remains trapped in the Russian community because she fails to learn the language. She hooks up with a fellow Russian, much to Sascha's disgust. Still, at the end, Maria anchors the family, but it is the news of Vadim's suicide that pushes Sascha past the point of no return. The failure of all models of masculinity and maternity, both German and Russian, drive her away. It must be noted that for Sascha, her mother's desire for love was expressed as part of her maternal role. Femininity in this case includes maternal devotion. Sascha ultimately rejects all available family models. In the end, Volker and Felix return from vacation, hear of Sascha's hospitalization after the incident described above and come to the Emerald. In a scene that would fulfill the fantasy of an accidental family, we encounter only disappointment and failure of family. While the others all enjoy blueberry *Torte*, Sascha escapes: "I throw my backpack over my shoulder, turn my baseball cap backwards, and head out into the sun" (221). While it would be overdetermined to equate the shattered glass that is strewn all over this novel with the family, there is compelling evidence that the shards, both figuratively and literally, inform Sascha's identity within larger social structures. At every critical juncture, glass breaking—or not, as in the case of her defensive offense with the predatory Peter—and shattering windows reflect the disarticulation of her role as daughter, sister, and surrogate mother to her siblings, Felix, and surrogate wife to Volker.

Conclusions

The three works, each in its own way, demonstrate the destabilizing effects of the Russian-German characters on the German family. Though I have

described this process as a "decline"—taking the two films and the novel as examples—the necessarily negative connotations of downfall mask a more redemptive trend. The decline of the male breadwinner, stagnant birth rates, and economic and existential discontent associated with globalization generate the loss of ego, stability, and national identity conflated with prosperity and pride in a flourishing currency. In both films and in the novel, the female characters experience a transition to individualism associated with post-national, post-communist societies in which pro-population policies have been withdrawn. Dresen's police woman effectively humanizes a German institution, the police, not known for providing comfort and social support, by overemphasizing the maternal potential of her position intervening in the lives of Russian immigrants and citizens. In that film, ethnic identity is specific to GDR history, and from there, individuals build motivated relationships beyond historical and geographic contingencies. Böhlich's Frau Moll emerges, through work, from her husband's crisis, and by extension, the family crisis, into a newly found sense of individuality as a middle-aged working mother. Her neighbor, the Russian single mother and recent immigrant, exemplifies the self-reliance and beauty needed to survive, if not assimilate. Finally, Sascha considers and rejects multiple models of family identity and rejects them all, but she recasts the role of the young foreign female in contemporary German fiction; she consciously seeks integration into a society that she must first create by taking leave from the real existing and imagined Russian-German family unit.

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