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Citation for the published paper:

Maja Povrzanović Frykman, "Struggle for Recognition: Bosnian Refugees' Employment Experiences in Sweden" 2012, vol 31, issue 1: pp 54-79

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/rsq/hdr017>

Publisher: **Oxford University Press**, <http://global.oup.com/>

Access to the published version may require subscription.



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**STRUGGLE FOR RECOGNITION:
BOSNIAN REFUGEES' EMPLOYMENT EXPERIENCES IN SWEDEN**

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Published in *Refugee Survey Quarterly* (Oxford University Press) 2012, 31(1), 54-79.
doi:10.1093/rsq/hdr017

This article presents the personal experiences of refugees from Bosnia-Herzegovina related to their employment in Sweden. It is based on 35 interviews conducted in 2009 with asylum claimants and resettled refugees who came to Sweden in the early 1990s, aiming at their own perceptions and subjective assessments of their employment paths. The variety of experiences within each of these two groups suggests that individual employment paths can neither be fully explained by the admission category, nor in terms of the type of education, age, or gender. Although they admit the importance of these factors, the interviewees perceive chance as a decisive issue with regard to their initial access to the labour market, and its strong impact on their further success. They see official channels of professional recognition as far less functional than informal paths leading into the labour market that depend on personal encounters and connections. Against the background of laws and policies, personally experienced employment integration is revealed as a chance-ridden individual process.

Keywords: employment, personal experiences, Bosnian refugees, Sweden

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1. Introduction

An estimated 2.2 million persons from Bosnia-Herzegovina – here called ‘Bosnians’ – were forcibly displaced during the war in the 1990s; 800,000 left for Western Europe (UNHCR, 2006). Recognising the scale of the calamity, the Swedish government decided to devote the entire refugee quota (1,800 people) for the budget year 1992/93 to refugees from former Yugoslavia. For the budget year 1993/94, the refugee quota was extended to 6,000, and 5,500 out of those were reserved for people from former Yugoslavia. Moreover, an *ad hoc* solution that took into consideration the massive plight of one particular group of people was made on 21 June 1993, when 42,000 asylum-seekers from Bosnia-Herzegovina were granted permanent residency (Government Bill 1993/94:51). Among the people concerned, this has been referred to as “Bildt’s quota” (after Carl Bildt, the Swedish Prime Minister in 1991–94). In connection to the war in 1992–1995 Sweden received 60,000 refugees from Bosnia-Herzegovina.¹

This article presents Bosnian refugees’ personal experiences related to employment in Sweden. Although numerous works have been published on Bosnians in Sweden, only a few tell about their own perception of their employment paths. The ambition here is to promote the importance of individual views because they add insights into processes that cannot be fully understood through statistically documented facts and trends.

The following sections explain the method used and the material collected (section 2), and offer a brief overview of former research relevant for this study (section 3). A description follows, of Bosnian refugees’ initial disorientation and struggle for recognition (sections 4 and 5). Self-employment and ethnic contacts are discussed in section 6, and some effects of traumas and psycho-somatic troubles on employment paths are indicated in section 7. While these sections discuss the issues that several research participants took up as important, section 8 presents in detail three personal employment histories revolving around the issue of chance. The concluding section 9 points to the relative importance of employment for Bosnian refugees in Sweden as a basis for their hope and satisfaction.

2. Method and material

This article is based on thirty-five interviews focusing on employment-related experiences, conducted from June to September 2009. Within the project on resettled refugees’ labour market integration in Sweden funded the European Refugee Fund, I was supposed to interview only resettled Bosnian refugees. However, the initial difficulty in finding research participants who were resettled to Sweden from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) camps in third countries, and their divergent individual paths I subsequently heard about, made me question the relevance of constructing a group based on this admission category. The differences between employment-related experiences of the resettled refugees I met appeared as more significant than any systematic difference between Bosnian resettled refugees and asylum-seekers – the group about which I had considerable background knowledge.² I therefore also interviewed Bosnians who sought asylum at the

¹ According to Statistics Sweden’s database STATIV for 2007, one third of some 400,000 individuals who sought asylum in Sweden between 1984 and 2007 originated from the former Yugoslavia. In the budget year

² This background knowledge is provided by a decade of my previous research in Sweden (Povrzanović Frykman, 2001, 2002a, and 2004), informal contacts with refugees from former Yugoslavia as well as by the

Swedish border. The material presented here refers only to those respondents who got their residency permit within four months at most. By that, the potential influence of time between leaving home in Bosnia-Herzegovina and getting the first private address in Sweden is excluded. Namely, the resettled refugees I interviewed spent up to four months in the UNHCR camps in Croatia and Montenegro before arriving to Sweden. Nine interviews were conducted with resettled refugees from Bosnia-Herzegovina, who arrived in 1992 and 1994, and the rest with people who came as asylum-seekers and were encompassed by “the Bildt quota”.³ In this text, the people are differentiated by admission category only where relevant.

The sample was purposive; it included only people who came to Sweden at working age. It was constructed by snowball technique, starting from my existent contacts with refugees from Bosnia-Herzegovina to Sweden (see above footnote 2). However, only one of the participants in this research was an old acquaintance; none of the others I met before. Several interviews also contain information about the employment-related circumstances of the interviewees’ spouses or other family members.

Eight men and seven women who participated in this study had bachelor degrees from universities in former Yugoslavia, three men and one woman had two-year post-gymnasium degrees, five men and nine women completed gymnasium or vocational secondary school, and two women had completed elementary school only. They live in the big town regions of Malmö, Gothenburg and Stockholm, in the university town of Lund, in the regional centres such as Västerås, Borås, Kristianstad and Kalmar, and in the region of Karlskrona/Ronneby.⁴

The explorative in-depth interviews had elements of life-history interviews: the respondents were welcome to take up those issues they found most important and talk about them at length in their native language. I did not encourage general statements, but pursued personal views on their own efforts to establish themselves in the Swedish labour market. The material used here thus consists of narratives that cannot be seen as empirical data documenting external realities but as data documenting people’s perceptions thereof and the related subjective assessments of their own situation (see Liversage, 2005: 36–37).

3. Former research

According to the Statistics Sweden’s database STATIV for 2007, nearly 12 per cent of all refugees came to Sweden as resettled refugees, while 40 per cent received asylum. They make respectively 4 and 36 per cent of all immigrants to Sweden between 1987 and 2007.⁵ Discussing the statistically observable trends of employment integration in Sweden, Pieter

scholarly work of other authors, such as Slavnić 2000 and Gustafson 2004. Information on the social and cultural background of people inhabiting Bosnia-Herzegovina is available in Gustavsson & Svanberg, 1995. For descriptions of the pains of flight and predicaments of loss due to the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina see Alinder & Ralphsson, 2000, Liversage, 2005: 202–205; Povrzanović Frykman, 2002a, and Slavnić, 2000: 45–66. For a powerful self-biographical narrative establishing a continuum of pre-war, exile, and post-exile experience see Bunar, 1998.

³ Seven interviews with Bosnians who came to Sweden as asylum seekers were conducted by my former students at Malmö University, Mia Hadžić and Ivan Gušić.

⁴ In order to keep the research participants anonymous, references to the concrete locations of their life and work have been avoided but in one case, where the specific local context is seminal for the person’s experiences. As their Bosniak, Serbian or Croatian ethnicity is not relevant for the issues discussed here, it is not noted in connection to the quoted statements.

⁵ See Bevelander, 2011, p. 32 (Table 3) for the data on all immigration categories.

Bevelander (2011) mapped the demographic, educational and geographic variation among resettled refugees of various national origins in relation to the admission categories of refugees (individuals who claimed asylum at the Swedish border and subsequently obtained refugee status) and people from family reunification admission category. The early 1990s, when the majority of Bosnians came to Sweden, were the years of recession and increased unemployment. However, the statistics for 2007 show that they are relatively successful in comparison to the refugees from other countries. At the same time, no immigrant group marked by large numbers of resettled refugees reached the employment level of native born Swedish residents aged 20–64, which is 84 per cent for men and 80 per cent for women. While asylum-seekers who subsequently obtained a residency permit had a somewhat slower employment integration process than people from family reunification admission category, the resettled refugees had the slowest start of all. Both refugees and resettled refugees tend to “catch up” to employment levels of family reunion immigrants in the subsequent years, but only after 15–20 years in the country, when their employment rate is close to 70 per cent.⁶

As shown by the statistical data analysed by Bevelander (2011: 42), the younger a person and the higher educated, the higher is the probability of being employed. Ninety-two per cent of Bosnian refugees to Sweden were less than 50 years old; 32 per cent of them were children under 15 (Douglas, 1995: 118). According to the Statistics Sweden’s database STATIV for 2007, some 15 per cent of the resettled, and some 25 per cent of the asylum-seeking Bosnians in Sweden have university education, while 43 and 50 per cent respectively, have secondary education. Those with higher education were first and foremost engineers, followed by economists, teachers and health personnel (Douglas, 1995). The employment figures follow the general trends observed for immigrant educational and vocational status, showing that there is a higher probability of employment with a vocation than with a general education (see Bevelander & Lundh, 2004; Dahlsted & Bevelander, 2010; Rooth, 1999; Rooth & Åslund, 2006).

Focusing on the employment status in 1997 of refugees from Bosnia-Herzegovina who immigrated in 1993–94, Jan Ekberg and Mikael Ohlson (2000a) point to the fact that place mattered a lot. In some municipalities more than 80 per cent were employed, while the figure was less than 10 per cent in others.⁷ All the five municipalities with the highest employment rate were in the region of Småland (Gnosjö–Gislaved) where the economic sector was characterised by small private enterprises. Yet, the absolute number of Bosnians there was only about 1 500. My material depicts individual experiences and cannot suggest any generally valid answers to the questions concerning the importance of the place of settlement in relation to employment. However, some interviewees referred to the situation in Malmö (see above footnote 7), where almost 1,800 Bosnians settled in 1994, in the times of recession, while there were only 100 Bosnian refugees registered in that town a year earlier (Ekberg & Ohlson, 2000b).

While the analysis of statistical data (such as in Bevelander, 2011) shows differences in employment patterns between different admission categories, they do not appear as a meaningful basis for construction of analytical groups when subjective perceptions of employment paths are in focus. Almost 5,500 resettled refugees from Bosnia-Herzegovina have been admitted to Sweden in the years 1994 and 1995, and 6,367 Bosnians were

⁶ For details see Bevelander 2011, p. 35–36 (Figure 3 and Figure 4).

⁷ In 1997, less than 15 per cent of Bosnian men who immigrated in 1993 were employed in Malmö, while more than 61 per cent were employed in Gnosjö–Gislaved. The employment frequency for women was 9,5 versus 40 per cent (Ekberg & Ohlson 2002b: 248).

officially listed as resettled refugees in Sweden in 2007 (STATIV, Statistics Sweden). However, practically none of my interviewees who arrived in Sweden as asylum-seekers knew any country-men who arrived as resettled refugees (except for those whose aged parents were resettled), and the majority were not at all familiar with the notion of resettled refugees.

4. Initial disorientation

As uncertainty about the refugee status could be seen as hampering people's adaptation and planning for the future, I presumed that the resettled refugees were better off than asylum-seekers in that regard. However, several of them disagreed and claimed that asylum-seeking process ensured better prospects for a satisfying life in Sweden. Consider the statement by a female resettled refugee:

My husband's brother and his wife came [as asylum seekers] in June 1993 and got the residency permit a year later. [...] When we arrived in Sweden on 22 July 1994, we met them – they did pretty well. They were young and could speak English; that helped them to understand. Also, they learned some Swedish while in the reception centre. There were services there to help them. [...] As people in the reception centres weren't sure whether they would be allowed to stay, they didn't know what to do. But the very fact that they were in Sweden and could walk around gave them the opportunity to get to know the way of life in Sweden. Many told how they spent their days walking around in the town, so they knew where the shopping centres, museums, banks, and beaches were.

While this woman mentioned the predicament of uncertainty entailed in asylum-seeker status, a male resettled refugee insisted on the benefits of waiting in reception centres. His statement also points to another crucial difference between the people placed in different admission categories, namely the kind of suffering they have been through before coming to Sweden:

Those others, who were waiting for residency permits in reception centres, were of better psycho-physical health and much better informed about everything. They knew all their rights. They prepared for getting an apartment and many did much better than we [the resettled refugees] did. Those others had it much better, from the placement in the municipalities to the buying of furniture and employment. They were more rational. They took care of daily matters while we were in our own world, known only to us. Anyhow, they had it easier because they were in better psycho-physical shape.

Without a thorough understanding of “how things work”, one cannot possibly pose relevant questions, avoid misunderstandings, or investigate potential individualised solutions. Immediately upon arrival to Sweden, most of my research participants were entirely dependent on interpreters; only three of them spoke what they perceived as good English, and only one could speak some Swedish. Also, everyone was deeply worried about the war in the homeland and about the close relatives left behind (as also shown in Alinder & Ralphsson, 2000; Gustafson, 2004; Goldin, 2008). Men often suffered guilt feelings, as described by a wife of a resettled refugee:

For three years he was neither here nor there – he thought of returning [to Bosnia]. He worked [only] as much as he had to. He had a bad conscience for “letting down his people”. You listen to the news day to day... we had family down there.

The fact that this man was resettled might be of crucial importance for understanding his difficulties in adjusting to life in Sweden. Most asylum seekers I met told that once they knew that they would be allowed to (re)organise their lives in Sweden, they became eager to start working and get regular jobs, notwithstanding the obstacles.

According to the standard procedure, once settled in Sweden, Bosnians were transferred to the responsibility of local authorities and included in the municipal refugee introduction programmes. During the first year of residence, they received daily allowances linked to compulsory participation in local introduction programmes (Appelqvist, 2000: 101–102). These programmes included courses in the Swedish language but also working practice that was supposed to speed up the process of social inclusion and help them become economically independent. People from both admission groups had the same treatment in that regard. Most of them stressed the initial disorientation. Statements such as: “we went like the blind, no matter what; everything was in a mist”, “we didn’t know anything”, and “we did as we were told; only later did we understand how things worked” have been uttered by almost all people interviewed.

Poor initial orientation within the system – the issue taken up by Elsie C. Franzén (1997) in her study of refugee-immigrants’ unemployment – was repeatedly pointed out as a problem by my research participants. When talking about officials in the reception centres, they made a lot of critical comments. A female resettled refugee exclaimed: “I needed a human gesture, and he told me how to use the washing machine!”. Such remarks are a standard element of Bosnian refugees’ narration about their official introduction to Sweden. Many felt humiliated by the stereotype of refugees as uneducated people not used to Western standards of living. As remembered by a university-educated resettled refugee: “They thought they had to teach us how to dispose of the garbage, how to use a VCR [video cassette recorder]!”

As everyone was obliged to attend Swedish for immigrants (SFI) classes, an opinion was formed, in line with the valid official rules, that a “good” level of language competence is a necessary precondition for any kind of inclusion in the Swedish labour market (an issue criticised in Franzén, 1997). The demands made on people with regard to “completing” their ground- and high-school education (i.e. getting it recognized in accordance with the Swedish system) seem to have varied very much between the municipalities. Most university degrees were not fully recognized in Sweden. Instead of going to university in order to gain the university credits demanded for completing their original degrees, several people opted for a vocational education inasmuch as it was paid by the Public Employment Service and did not require a study-loan (CSN) that had to be paid off as soon as a person is employed. It was also much shorter than any university education. Many felt that there is no chance for them to regain their former employment status. Reflecting on the eleven year-period of taking non-qualified jobs in Sweden, a Bosnian building engineer said:

I lost any illusion. I weakened my criteria. I was never ever asked for an interview. I know people who drive taxis in M. and they are building engineers.

The general critique of practice- or project-employment was prominent; indeed, it was seen as inefficient and exploitative:

The project employment does not lead to real employment.

I had practice for six months at a time; they avoided employing me by claiming my Swedish was not good enough.

The critique of the Public Employment Service and its policies was often pronounced in categorical ways:

Every job I found – I knocked on the door myself.

They “follow you” but only in pretence; the conversations last for fifteen minutes. You agree to that, since it is demanded of you. You do as you are told.

Referring to the projects aiming at transnational business relying on the refugees’ contacts with Bosnia-Herzegovina, a resettled refugee told:

They were “fashionable” before, but don’t exist any more. I met at least twenty Bosnians who worked in different projects. But most often like this: a Swede is the project leader, and the Bosnian is employed half-time.

People complained about the courses they had to attend even if they perceived them as loss of time:

Too much money is given for various courses. You spend three months for a course, and don’t get anything from it.

They send you to some courses with no avail – they only produce jobs for themselves.

While the observation about “producing jobs for themselves” may be seen as unjust and motivated by frustration, some other interviewees’ statements may give it credibility:

A month after I got the job through my relative, the Employment Service sent me an official letter about me getting employed! They pretended, for their files, to have found me the job.

I saw, by chance, a newspaper advertisement of the Government’s program for re-qualifying refugees to allow them to work in educational institutions. I took it to the Employment Service; *then* they registered me.

However, several people who were very critical of the officials at the Public Employment Service, expressed their warm gratitude to others – always native Swedes – who helped them in different ways:

The teachers at *Komvux* [Adult Education] took a liking to our people [Bosnians].

I would now sit at home if I didn’t have Ingemar.

We are very grateful to the S. hotel [that gave the couple their first employment]. We had luck with the directors. Magnus and Tina – we always thanked them.

“The Swedes are wonderful!” exclaimed a resettled refugee who also stated, without being asked, that she and her family have it far better in Sweden than they would ever have had it in

Bosnia. She did not refer specifically to employment, but to the overall sense of well-being. Making a general statement about Bosnian refugees in Sweden, she said:

On the one hand, you are really grateful; many people [from Bosnia-Herzegovina] lived [even when on social care] better here than in Yugoslavia. But it was hard not to live from your work.

5. Achieving recognition

Even if the first period depicted above is mainly remembered as a personal struggle in the context of the loss of power and status, some people had a realistic view of their own shortcomings, be it their age or the lack of some relevant competences:

The “minus” of my generation is that I never learned English. Another mishap is my age: forty-five years is the limit for taking CSN [the study loan].

My husband was sorted to *yrkesutbildning* [vocational training] on the basis of a statement that he made. Although he studied electrotechnology too [as the woman talking], he told them [only] that he knew everything about electric installations. Electrotechnology was developing so quickly that we knew we had no chance to work with our degrees; we were out of touch. Anyway, he went to a nine-month course. He learned the vocational terms.

A woman whose university studies in Physics were interrupted by the war, attended a ten-month technical education that was supposed to guarantee her a job in Sweden. However, a “problem” occurred, namely pregnancy:

I got a vocation, but I stayed at home with the baby. Later on I tried to get the job [with that education], but was rejected for the lack of experience.

She subsequently worked for six years in the car industry (montage, lacking, loading trucks), until she lost her job together with two thousand other people. She then underwent yet another reorientation in the job market, and now works as a car-park attendant employed by the town. With considerable pride, she told me that out of one hundred people interested in the six-week education for that position, she was one of the eighteen chosen, and one of the twelve who eventually got the job.

Instead of trying to pick up his university studies interrupted by the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, one forty-year old man received a year and a half of vocational education in carpentry, paid by the Employment Service. Unfortunately, it led to only few weeks of employment, after which he developed an asthmatic condition which prevented him from working in the field he was educated for. The owner did not provide the necessary protection and air-moisteners for people working with formaldehyde, varnish, and sawdust. This man was clearly frustrated by his crushed hopes for “making money the easier way, with a pencil”, and insisted on telling me about health risks connected to some of the many jobs he had later on, e.g., about drug-addicts’ needles in the garbage compartments of the houses he was servicing. He also took the opportunity of telling me at length about his original social background in the situation of the interview:

I came from a provincial town, but we had a first-league football team. My father sang in a choir for thirty years, I started to swim at the age of three and to ski at the age of four, I attended the music school.

In several interviews the issue of recognition equally importantly referred to people's personal qualities, social background, and professional competences. One person took it up also in another sense. Discussing his employment options, a resettled refugee pointed to the fact that his refugee experience was not taken into consideration when it could have made a difference:

I searched for jobs in the parts of the municipality where there are mostly immigrants. Some projects – to be there for any of their needs. I couldn't get in although I had the qualifications. The natives got in, even if they had no clue about what it means to be a refugee.

A woman now working as an assistant nurse observed that, if she made a phone call, the employers always claimed there was no job available. So, she went to an old-age home and said "give me an opportunity, I want an opportunity"! She started the probation period four days later and six months later got a permanent position.

Some people were lucky enough to be "seen" already while doing the obligatory working practice; language competency proved to be less important than their vocational experiences. One of the success stories I was told about was started with a statement: "I got all the help I needed". The man in question came to Sweden as asylum seeker, and became the chief economist in the place in which he started obligatory practice only a year earlier. His diploma and the complete study plan and program were translated into Swedish at the initiative of a Public Employment Service official who paid 40,000 Swedish crowns for the translation. Instead of demanding that he get the university credits needed for full recognition of his university degree, his director, in collaboration with the Employment Service, arranged that this man could work half-time, and attend courses in the other half, to raise his competence to the degree necessary. This man's capacities and potentials were fully recognized, and the appropriate individual solutions were organised for him, due to the effort of the director who saw his abilities and wanted to employ him.

Recognition and optimal use of their human capital resulted in the gaining of social and economic power for a couple from H., a small place in Southern Sweden. They only had complimentary words about their reception and introduction period, and about the Swedish "godfather family" – the local people who volunteered to help them get to know the place. I met them in the company of their two grandchildren whom they take care of every Saturday while their son and his Swedish wife are on duty in their private business. The husband told me how he felt exposed to the public gaze whenever he walked in the street or went shopping: he was embarrassed for being on social care. However, he got a permanent job after only four months, before completing the obligatory six-month practice-work within the introduction period. The owner of the car-varnishing workshop quickly recognized his twenty-five year-long experience and his "workaholic" disposition. "I work here as I worked in Bosnia – at work and then privately, at home, some fourteen hours a day", he told me with satisfaction. He still works in the same workshop ("even if I never really completed SFI [Swedish for immigrants, the obligatory language programme]!"). He was the first Bosnian refugee to get employed in H.: the municipality sent him a letter of congratulation. He and his wife became "role models" for those Bosnians who hesitated to work when the employment did not bring

much more money than social care allowance. In the beginning, this couple, too, had only 100 Swedish crowns more than when they were on social care. Yet, even then, work made a major difference in their feeling of self-respect. Other Bosnians, this couple told me, soon realised that they were subsequently gaining economic power, allowing them to buy a car and a house, to support their children's education, to travel to Bosnia and finally to rebuild a house there ("without any loan!").

The wife became a cleaner, getting fully employed step by step, making a lot of friends at work and becoming known in the place. After hurting her back, she took premature pension several years ago, but she is overtly proud of "having earned a pension". In Bosnia she was a housewife.

6. Connections and self-employment

When asked to comment on the supposition that Bosnians have more contacts with Swedes in smaller places than in bigger towns, and that those contacts have a positive effect on their possibilities of employment, a male refugee who moved to Stockholm from a small place to which he was resettled said:

Bigger or smaller places are important only with regard to education or job offers. The contact with Swedes is not so important. The Swedes are not eager to "sacrifice" themselves [in order to help immigrants to get jobs].

Yet, according to other people I spoke to, "knowing someone" (among Swedes or co-ethnics) indeed helped people to get jobs.

If you have a "network", it is very easy. "Connections" – [equals] "network"!

I got a job through a connection. It was something that surprised me in the beginning: to get a job through a connection. Here it is maybe one of the most common ways, totally normal.

Many were surprised by the importance of "connections" in Sweden. "Here it is called contact!", one person said, pointing out that it is actually equal to what Bosnians call *veza* – "connection". The surprise came from the fact that the cultural topos of *veza*, familiar to everyone related to the regions of former Yugoslavia – refers to customary nepotism that people believed did not belong in a law-abiding country like Sweden. People react to a clash of discourses. The one accepted in Sweden, on "connections" as a part of social capital and thus as an unproblematic aspect of Swedish modernity, is counterposed to the discourse originating in Yugoslavia, adopted by the Bosnians now living in Sweden. That is a discourse of striving-for-modernity that refers to "connections" as a sign of nepotism and personal links as characteristic of traditional society. They should be replaced by formal merits as the only criteria for social and professional promotion.⁸

When it comes to ethnic contacts, the notion gets complicated in the discussion of such contacts among Bosnian refugees. Depending on context, the expression "our people" may refer only to Bosniaks, Croats or Serbs, but also to all people from former Yugoslavia who

⁸ Similar issues are taken up in Bauder, 2005.

speak “our language” – meaning Bosnian, Croatian or Serbian. The flexibility of these notions reflects and explains the range of ethnic contacts that helped people get a job in Sweden. Several Bosnians mentioned that their Swedish employers were pleased with their work and asked them to bring in more workers through their ethnic contacts. Persons who acted as door-openers (see Carlson, 2007) for several of “our guys” were distinctly proud of their role.

A Bosnian engineer who has had a number of underqualified jobs in Sweden, was forty-two years old when he took a chance to change his original profession and become a teacher. It was a part of the Government’s initiative for refugee employment by means of re-education. However, in the course of studying, he found a job that enabled him, after a halt of eleven years, to proceed with the professional work he was educated for in Bosnia. He enjoys working there also because it is an “ethnic” firm:

The owners are from Vojvodina [the northern region of Serbia]; they also came here in the 1990s. The main owner married a Swedish woman. He now employs thirty people, mainly from former Yugoslavia. The majority came because of the war. Mostly from Bosnia, three from Croatia, even one from Kosovo, then a Dane, a Romanian, some Swedes. The official language is Swedish, but we speak our languages. It is not necessary that everyone speak Swedish. We work in groups; there is always someone who speaks Swedish. Two Swedes work for us – they own a sister-firm; when we have a meeting, we translate for them. [...] We joke at work. It feels nice, familiar. [...] When it comes to politics, there were never any major problems. Everyone found an interest of one’s own. The atmosphere is quite tolerant.⁹

Earlier migrants from former Yugoslavia living in Sweden at the time of the arrival of refugees from Bosnia-Herzegovina did provide some practical help to their own relatives and sometimes to other refugees of their own ethnic affiliation, but the relations were not necessarily good. On the contrary, some of my interviewees mentioned conflicts between “old” (labour migrant) and “new” (refugee) immigrants within the same ethnic group experienced in some ethnic associations. Some claimed that very few labour migrants from former Yugoslavia they knew held positions that would allow them to engage in direct help. While the majority of labour migrants were factory workers, the educational structure of Bosnian refugees was more varied and higher on the average. At numerous occasions, that could be a matter of envy on the side of the labour migrants, and of feelings of superiority on the side of the refugees (see Povrzanović Frykman, 2001). It also implied different aspirations with regard to employment. A resettled refugee explained:

They [“old” immigrants, labour migrants] tried to organise us in associations, to help us politically: there was no mention of employment, since they were not well-established people in Sweden, but simple workers who couldn’t even speak correct Swedish. They couldn’t tell us – it appears as humour nowadays! – what the abbreviation ABB stands for, or Vasa, so of course they couldn’t help us to integrate into Swedish society. A few years later, we were helping them in explaining many unclarities they were struggling with before.

⁹ The statements suggesting the importance of joking with colleagues (presuming the shared language and cultural background) are marginal to the main focus of this article. However, they are recurrent in my material, and obviously an important element of satisfaction with one’s job. In another research context in the late 1990s, I was told by a Bosnian refugee that working in a factory with from former Yugoslavia “helped him remain sane”; he also stressed the importance of joking.

A specific kind of “ethnic niche” was enabled by the Swedish school system that includes optional mother-tongue teaching from kindergarten age to the end of high-school. Several refugees “accepted”, as one of them said, positions as mother-tongue teachers of the language called B/K/S (*bosniska/kroatiska/serbiska* – Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian) in Swedish schools (see Povrzanović Frykman, 2002b). Some got jobs in public home care assistance for older people (“there were our women who needed someone who spoke Croatian”). I met a married couple who were employed only in various projects concerning Bosnian refugees or in Bosniak ethnic associations. Those, I was told, are meagrely paid jobs assisted with public money, and are very few in number.

A man who was also engaged in a number of projects concerning refugees and immigrants but who never managed to get a permanent job in his former profession connected to the media, uses his professional capacities for volunteering in an ethnic association. Investing his free time and money, he keeps his professional identity stable. His unstable paid work often does not fully engage his capacities and certainly does not allow him to have his status confirmed by a business card similar to the one he produced for his volunteer work. He, too, used a lot of time at the occasion of the interview to tell about his past professional work and whereabouts in former Yugoslavia.

A man in his forties operates a small family restaurant together with a relative. He complained about the lack of free time: “I had no proper holidays for the last seven years!”. He told me about his many trials, including one starting a private enterprise that would connect Sweden and Bosnia. His unsuccessful attempt was the only example of a transnational firm trying to make use of ethnic contacts that I heard of in the course of this research.

Refugees from Bosnia-Herzegovina do not show a marked propensity to be self-employed in Sweden. One of my interviewees remarked that “it seems that Bosnians are not good merchants”, since “they are few in comparison to the Arabs or Iranians, Turks, and Greeks”. A male refugee explained his reasons against self-employment:

A private firm? You know about our path in Yugoslavia: you got a degree, you were a part of a system [bound to get a job]. I am formed in that way, I am afraid of uncertainty, and I don't know enough about private business. That is a question of generation; younger people are much more ready to take risks.

When a family member who is a successful owner of a firm was mentioned in an interview, the explanation of his success was explained as due to the owner being not only an able person but also a part of a family tradition in the building business in Bosnia. The resettled refugee telling me about this relative (who came as asylum seeker) was proud of his success, but observed, in a mocking-critical way, that “he is a *moderate*” (i.e. conservative, not sharing his own working-class identity). This indicates that self-employment might be a challenge to the visions of togetherness based on ethnic or even on family affiliation.

Another refugee I met worked for seven years in a restaurant owned by his wife's relatives who came to Sweden as labour migrants in 1970s. He was then offered the opportunity of buying the business together with a companion. Both he and his wife work there, together with their seven employees. They radiated pride in their success. They did not complain, but explained to me that “only people who never owned private business could believe that it is

easy money”. They work a lot (some ten hours a day, also on weekends) but they can afford a month of holidays by the Croatian coast every summer.

7. Marked by suffering

A study concerning psychological problems carried out at the Centre for the Advancement of Health (Thulesius & Håkansson, 1999) showed that the posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) rate was twenty-five times higher for Bosnian refugees who arrived in Sweden in 1993 than for the control group of Swedish visitors to health centres.¹⁰

The following statement refers to those resettled refugees who came directly from the infamous prisoner-of-war camps in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Like the man quoted below, many were imprisoned because they were intellectuals in leading positions in their local surroundings.

Human suffering cannot be measured. Everyone believes that his pains are stronger, more pronounced than those of the others. But I know, from the frequent contacts with my cosufferers, that we all had the same or similar symptoms. A sort of feeling like clones... insomnia and despair. Then fear and nightmares. I took *Propavan* [a medicine] for six years in order to be able to sleep for a couple of hours. We didn't look forward to anything and we didn't ask for anything, only for some peace and quiet. How could we think about employment, apartments, rights and duties in such a state of mind? We neither knew anything, nor did anyone inform us about what we could or could not do. I only know that, when meeting one another, we mentioned the same symptoms and talked about the heaps of tablets we were all taking.

However, my material shows that the psychological difficulties caused by war or by the demands of adjustment to the new circumstances in Sweden criss-cross admission categories. This is in line with research that describes the evolution of trauma-related symptoms over three and a half years among Bosnian refugees resettled to the United States (Vojvoda *et al.*, 2008). No correlation was established between PTSD symptom severity and people's age or level of trauma exposure, but it showed that women were more affected than men.

Four of the women I talked to suffered burnout after having worked for a number of years. One was on sick leave in summer 2009, the other was back to work but only for 20 per cent of working hours, and the third changed her job. A stroke, a heart attack, premature retirement, and work-related injuries occurred among my male and female respondents. Several other women told me about periods of extensive crying during the introductory period. One had repeated bouts of vomiting while studying at the Swedish university in order to get an employment she perceived as adequate.

A refugee resettled from a camp in Montenegro in 1992 described the days after she landed safely in Sweden:

I lay without moving for seven days. I couldn't move for pains in my entire body. A cramp and being sorry for many things... Only when you relax for the first time, when

¹⁰ In a study of Bosnian refugees living in Croatia, Mollica *et al.* (1999) show that 40 per cent of respondents reported symptoms of depression and 26 per cent reported symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder.

you stop worrying that someone will come and kill you or your child, when you can sleep – you don't have any wishes, you can't be cheered up by anything.

When interviewed in summer 2009, she was on long-term sick leave after having worked hard and established herself as an assistant nurse.

Another woman related at length how she strived to be the “best in class” when learning Swedish, and how she broke down a couple of times during the introduction period. She was prone to uncontrollable crying at home (“for a month I was continually crying so that I lost a lot of weight and couldn't memorise things”). She was diagnosed as depressed but stayed on sick-leave for only two weeks; she didn't want to lag behind.

I was thirty-six when I came here; I had to prove my capacities from scratch, as a child. I was a *vikarie* [replacement] in kindergartens for four and a half years. [...] I was struggling all the time; I was an example to my children – how I was putting myself under pressure and how I was fighting.

After a number of disappointments over not being able to get permanent employment, she underwent the appropriate education to become a kindergarten teacher. She then got a position she was pleased with. However, she suffered a heart attack in 2007, at work. Burnout and posttraumatic stress disorder were diagnosed. “The doctor was surprised that they did not see it already in the reception centre”; he connected this woman's heart disease to accumulated stress. She was dependent on sleeping pills for a long while and is now sensitive to even minor stress. However, she told me a lot about her baby-grandson whom she meets very often. He is a source of great happiness.

A female resettled refugee talked at length of her husband's doubts and ambivalences over leaving the country instead of fighting. While some resettled refugees were offered psychological counselling upon arrival in Sweden, this couple were not. The accessibility of psychological care seems to have varied very much between the municipalities. However, this woman pointed out that many Bosnians were hesitant about being labelled as “psychological cases”:

We were trying to manage our private crises. Our mental system had to be adapted to this. Men who were in the prisoner-of-war camps, women who were raped. They could get concrete help if they wanted. But many felt uneasy about meeting a psychiatrist, you know.

8. A matter of chance

Against the background of laws and policies concerning refugees in general (see Franzén 1997), chance looms large. From my interviewees' point of view, chance, or “luck”, appears as a decisive issue with regard to their initial access to labour market. A man who came to Sweden as resettled refugee was radical in his statement about chance:

I know a man who did fine because he met the right guy, by chance, who did something for him. The state didn't do anything; people were accepted, but the responsibility was moved down to the municipalities. And then you depended on whether the official was in a good mood, if he was educated, how much he could or could not understand.

Talking about the chance is intertwined with stories of “finding oneself in the right place at the right time” and thus “being seen”. A striking example was offered by a married couple who had the same educational degree and the same former working experience, yet ended up with very different starting options provided for them through official channels.

From the institutional point of view, both my husband and I had the same possibilities. But we got very different places to do practice at. Neither of us spoke a good Swedish by then – it was, like, you say ‘yes, yes’ and smile when people around you laugh – but my husband felt very good at his practice. He started to work extra when they needed him, made friends with the colleagues. I, instead, every day after coming home from work, I was crying.

This woman was crying because of ill treatment by her immediate boss. After the boss ignored the many phone-calls from the kindergarten about her one-year old daughter being ill, this woman refused to continue doing practice there. Her situation changed when her husband managed to get her practice in the same hotel in which he worked. The hotel director is praised by both as a very nice man, kind to all employees, understanding and encouraging with regard to their struggle with the Swedish language. Indeed, he appears to be a person most important for their subsequent well-being based on early recognition and the opportunities they both successfully used. It is obvious from the interview that this director “saw” the couple and treated them accordingly. He was also able to avoid a possible “error in the system”; he did not give up on the idea of giving a permanent job to my female interviewee after a number of unsuccessful attempts to contact the responsible person at the local Employment Service.

Another refugee told me about having done the obligatory six-month work practice and then being offered a permanent job in the same restaurant; the boss was very pleased with him since he had a lot of experience in that type of work in Bosnia. However, his story has a distressing turn: according to the rules, as the job offer was a consequence of work-practice that was a part of the official introduction, it was not addressed to the Bosnian man directly but via his contact at the Employment Service office. The official forgot about it and never informed the person in question! Since there was no answer, the employer took someone else; many months later, when meeting him by chance, he reproached the Bosnian man for never responding; it was truly shocking, he said. *Post festum*, nothing could be done with regard to that particular job opportunity. “If it wasn’t for that man...” Chance here has a clearly opposite meaning to the one mentioned above.

A female refugee told me about her working experiences in Sweden from her arrival in January 1993, when she was thirty-three years old, to the moment of our conversation in July 2009. Unlike the Public Employment Service official who was her regular contact in the institutionally guided path towards employment, his temporary replacement “saw her” and helped her find a job she is very much pleased with. “You know what they say – you either *see* the person right away, in the first few minutes, or you don’t.” She now works for a small private firm where she deals with customers and handles administrative tasks. Even if it took four and a half years to come true, hers is a story of an individualised approach to a job-seeking refugee-immigrant, of an Employment Service official successfully fulfilling his task, and an open-minded Swedish firm owner who also saw her as an intelligent and diligent person and understood that her computer-illiteracy would soon be overcome. On the other hand, this is also a story of a refugee who despised the idea of being on social care and did

not shy away from any job she could get – before cleaning fish she cleaned offices, worked in a kitchen providing food for schools and old age homes, and drove a taxi. “I just wanted to work.” Talking to me one and a half decades after her arrival in Sweden, she dwelled upon the notion of chance when describing her work-related experience.

Here follow the stories of three resettled refugees – two men (born 1960 and 1952) and a woman (born 1961), who arrived in Sweden as resettled refugees in 1992 and 1994 respectively. They are all Bosniaks with university degrees, but the differences between their employment paths in Sweden are striking. Their different psychological condition and the fact that they were resettled in places with different labour market situations is of importance, but their actual employment was dependent on a number of factors clustered in unique ways, marked by chance.

8.1. Structure supporting agency

The first story concerns the very first eleven Bosnian families that were resettled in Sweden in mid November 1992, presented in the book based on an investigation started by the psychologists in 1993 and devoted to family as a salutogene factor (Alinder & Ralphsson 2000). I got in touch with several people from that group. Since the moment they were met at Arlanda airport – by TV cameras, social workers, and a psychologist – their introduction to Sweden was unsurpassed for its ideal-typical perfection. This is how the resettled refugee reception system works at its best, with no interference in the form of big numbers of refugees, tired teachers who do not care enough, or insufficient practice places. The officials working with these first resettled refugees were devoted and did much more than was demanded by rule.

This was the most important – that reception. There was a female Refugee Case Officer, who influenced us very much. The first time is the most important for integration – are you received as a person or as a number? An older lady from Istria [a region in Croatia] worked there and helped us with everything. She was half Italian, half Croatian. [...] We got heaps of money, two social allowances in advance, money for clothing, everything for the baby. 70,000 crowns in the hand, so you ask yourself: how did I deserve this? We could choose an apartment; we got a three-room apartment. Our *flyktinghandläggare* [Refugee Case Officer] made a van available for us, and set an agreement with IKEA [a furniture shop] that they open two hours before standard opening hours so that we could choose our furniture in peace and quiet.

The man quoted above, as all other interviewees from that group, was overwhelmed by the warm reception, appreciated all the help he got, and tried to do his best in whatever was expected of them. He praised the reception official (a Finnish woman lovingly mentioned by name and surname) who “worked much more than necessary”, “behaved like family”. Importantly, the members of those first eleven resettled families were not obliged to attend the standard 700 hours of Swedish for immigrants (SFI); some could pass the exam after three months.

SFI was organised in the local school. We had a lot of small children, so it was done in the way that allowed the parents to take shifts. Six months later, the children were all in kindergarten, and the adults could attend SFI in V. [a nearby larger town]. There was a big difference between the Bosnians and the refugees from Iraq and Iran. They didn’t care, while we were almost competing with one another – who is going to be better?

This competition occurred among the Bosnians in the same class. It is crucial to understand that these people knew one another very well (“since we were born”). Besides, the fact that they had small children and that the closest family members were not parted by war was crucial. They stressed that they managed to cope with their traumas because several of these families were settled together. Theirs, indeed, is an example of resettlement not only of eleven families, but of a closely knit and well-functioning group of friends, relatives, neighbours, and acquaintances.

The place they live in has 5,500 inhabitants, so they were able to meet on a daily basis. As it is very close to a larger town, all the refugees from that group found jobs. The man (born 1960) quoted here used to be an economist working as the chief of the sales department in a factory.

After SFI I could not accept a job in industry. If you want to be an economist, you have to do SAS, high-school Swedish A and B, English (I had French at school!). So, I got an official copy of my diploma [from Bosnia-Herzegovina], and *Högskoleverket* [Swedish National Agency for Higher Education] recognized 150 university credits that I could complete with some courses at an economy program in V. [a nearby larger town]. I searched for a job and worked as an interpreter in the refugee reception centre. In 2000 I applied for a position in a European project on the development of the economy in the municipality. Many people applied, but I got the job. First for three years, but thanks to good work, it was prolonged for one year. The local firms asked for project prolongation until 2007. I was assessing and planning infrastructure in the municipality, helping new firms by providing them with information, e.g., about the available premises. It was financed by the EU but then the municipality started a job centre. That is where I work now, giving people advice on how to find jobs.

This man is an example of “super-integration” typical for successful immigrants I met in the course of my research (see above footnote 3). He is not only a member of several Bosnian associations and the local Rotary club, but also an active politician.

8.2. *Social care trap*

The woman born in 1961, quoted below, was resettled together with her family after some four months spent in a refugee camp in Croatia in 1994. They were offered a move to Malmö because they had a relative there who came as an asylum-seeker a year earlier – despite the fact that they were among the 1,800 Bosnians who settled in Malmö at the same time. As so many people arrived at the same time, the queues were long for all the kinds of services they were entitled to.

We were isolated from normal life for three years [...]. Even a functioning traffic light [in Sweden] looked strange to us who used to live in civilisation once upon a time. People [officials in Sweden] expected us to know everything, or maybe the personnel had too much to do. [...] You got a “premium” if you could meet your social worker; I was on social allowance for five years, and I met my social worker only once.

She talked to the social worker on the phone, after she could speak some Swedish – a stressful experience, since she prepared herself meticulously for posing questions, but often

did not understand the answers. The regular venue for learning Swedish did not help her very much.

I waited for six months to start SFI [Swedish for immigrants] in R. [an immigrant-dense neighbourhood]; *yrkesorientering* [vocational orientation] was also done there. Luckily, the teachers there were better than the ones at SFI. There was a forty-year old teacher from Croatia there, and as the group consisted of Bosnians and Kosovo Albanians, we spoke our language more than Swedish.

Unlike the resettled man quoted above, she perceives her first years in Sweden as filled with restrictions and obstacles, leaving her with little possibility of choice.

I studied electrotechnology in Bosnia, but I got a job there in a sewing firm. When I told them this at the Employment Service office, they placed me in a certain way, and I had the feeling that they said: don't you even dream of working in first-class positions here! [...] They told me: if you get a job in five years, you have succeeded! I registered at the Public Employment Service. I had to register in R. [an immigrant-dense neighbourhood]. It was all unclear to me – what it means, how it functions. I went to *Komvux* [Adult Education] for four semesters [ground- and high-school level]. I didn't have to pay anything. [...] I then continued at *Komvux* full time, in order to have the complete social allowance. I *wanted* to go there in order to master the language. There was no job anyway, only cleaning in private houses; that I did “black”. People with trades [vocation] could find jobs, but only if they had some connection. When I completed the education at *Komvux* I was tired. There was no job via Employment Service.

In line with the prediction mentioned above, she got her first job five years upon her arrival to Sweden. In the meantime, she was occasionally working “black”; she mentioned it to me in a matter-of-fact manner, as that was the only possibility for her to make some money needed for a family of four that would stretch the social care allowance. In line with the central importance of chance and significant individual encounters taken up by a number of other interviewees, the incentive for her present regular employment came from a private person she met by chance.

I got a job in August 1999. After five years! [...] I got a practice in a school, after three years of courses, as a teacher – I also started to clean ‘black’, for two, three months. I came to a woman in L. [a rich neighbourhood]. Her children went to the international school, and she said she could recommend me there. I met the vice-director and she told me I could come the next day, to teach mathematics. [...] I stayed there for ten months, till the end of the school year. In the meantime, they needed someone for *fritids* [afterschool activities]; I was there for some two years. I made an effort to get into the educational field, and people wanted to help. It was an international school; the accent was not a problem! It was also a smaller school; people cared for one another. [...] I worked with children six to twelve years old. The children are spontaneous, honest, and amiable. They helped me to cope with my crises with their simplicity and energy, rewarding me with hugs. That brought my energy and self-confidence back. I eventually got a job, first for ten months, then for one year, then for one more year, and only after that a permanent position. It was a great thing they gave me a chance.

8.3. Torture, unemployment, depression

The third resettled refugee quoted here, born in 1952, came to Sweden in late 1992, and was reunited with his family a month later. He was a journalist in his Bosnian home-town, tortured in a prisoner-of-war camp. Immediately upon arrival in Sweden, this man was met by a psychologist, but that occurred only once. It remained unclear to me how he eventually got in touch with the psychologist who diagnosed both posttraumatic stress disorder and depression.

His resettlement to Sweden was a matter of pure chance, and of bad luck, since his competence in German would probably have helped him in a German speaking country.

I came to T. [in Bosnia] after the second prisoner-of-war exchange [in 1992]. [...] I was lost, in no shape, psychologically destroyed. I was registered in the camp as being under UNHCR's protection, but once I was out, they didn't have to take care of me. I came to K. [in Croatia] on my own. I registered with UNHCR there and was asked where I would prefer to go. I asked for Switzerland, as I knew German and had an uncle living there, but they told me the Swiss quota of 150 prisoners-of-war and their families was filled. There were people there who arrived in K. five days before me, and they filled that quota. [...] America was a possibility, but I was afraid of America, I was afraid of that distance; if something bad happened, one could return [to Bosnia]. So Sweden was the only country left.

In his case, the initial feeling of total disorientation mentioned by most interviewees was combined with his difficult state of mind and the frustration over the apartment his family got at their disposal.

The language was a puzzle, the uncertainty total. When I think about it today, everything is in a mist. I was neither ready nor able to think. It was like some invisible force was guiding me. We came to a small place [...]. We got an old flat in a house with social cases, while some other people got nice flats. Was it by chance or not – I can't discuss that.

After completing the obligatory course in Swedish, his wife got a job quicker than he did. Indeed, it was her contacts that eventually helped him to start working. At the age of forty-six, he chose a steady pay rather than a new professional start at the university.

I didn't go for my profession, just for a job. I didn't hesitate to do anything but cleaning. Through my wife's repeated pleas, in 1998 I got a month of employment in the factory in which she worked since 1995. [...] For the next fourteen months I was ironing jackets produced in Riga. But when after fourteen months the workers in Riga were dismissed, there was no job for me either. I wasn't sorry in the least. [...] Learning Swedish at the working place? With such a job, when you work "on accord", with a norm, there is no talking. And when we did sit together during pauses, I could not understand the language they spoke. After completing Swedish high school education at *Komvux* [Adult Education], I was accepted into the program in journalism at G. university. But at the same time I got that job, so I was in a dilemma. If I worked, I got 8,000 crowns a month. If I studied, I got 3,200 crowns of education support.

His further employment was, again, dependent on an informal contact. However, it remained short and unsatisfying.

When I asked for an AMU [*arbetsmarknadsutbildning*, Employment Training] course, I was told that this was reserved for the natives. I then went to *Komvux* again, just to do something somewhere. Again to the Employment Service office, month after month, year after year. Then, thanks to an official there who knew me from a course in which he was teaching, I got six months of paid work checking some documents in a firm's archives. I received 18,000 [Swedish crowns] a month there. The boss was nice, she was of Finnish origin and has had a project in Bosnia during the war, she felt sympathy towards the Bosnians. But after that I was back to my starting position at the Employment Service. Practice here, practice there – just that they push you out of home, or out of the street. Just to “massage” one with some stupidities. It all affects one's health, when you see what is happening. They “sold” several projects and stupidities, so that someone [among the officials] could get some hours of employment. Contents that are beyond reason, for example “how to engage in *friskvård* [keep-fit measures]”, “how to write a CV and a job application”, “how EU is organised”. But when you search for job, there is nothing.

The ethnic connections did not prove efficient for him either.

When I stopped working in December 1999 I tried to get a job with my original profession. [...] I hoped to get a job there [in a setting in which he could work in his own language] after someone's retirement, but then they cut down the program, so there was no need for new people. After that – again some practices. I couldn't manage any more. I was afraid of getting a heart attack. I felt anxiety. I am on sick-leave now. I don't expect anything. I don't hope for anything. It is life from day to day. I just try to stay on my feet and stay more or less normal.

Fifty-seven years old at the time of interviewing, this man gave up any hope of being able to work and earn money.

If someone asked me today if I would have come to Sweden, the answer would be negative. The fact that I was a resettled refugee had no bearing. I was pushed into a matrix, a quick river; swim if you can keep yourself up. If not, you are going to sink. [...] To be left to someone else making decisions for you – it is like a refined torture. After all that [suffering as the prisoner-of-war], here you meet ignorance or unwillingness, so another suffering is coming. [...] You have no one to tell, no one to complain to. When you cannot bear it any more – fall. When I look back – I am here for seventeen years – what did I get, what did I achieve? What could I offer from my working engagement? The period in which I could offer something, do something, is over. I have only my sixteen years of working life in Bosnia.

9. Conclusion: hope and satisfaction

My concluding considerations draw on a number of insights gained in the course of fieldwork and refer also to the material that had to be omitted due to limited space. They point to the relative importance of employment for Bosnian refugees in Sweden as a basis for their hope and satisfaction.

Intertwined with the perceived power over planning for and improving one's own situation is the issue of hope – the “raw disposition to embrace life as it unfolds, [...], the ability to cope with what is beyond one's control and a belief in the possibility of a minimum sense of agency despite all” (Hage 2003: 24–25). As “the perceived capacity to exercise some mastery over life” (*ibid.*), it is opposed to helplessness and is a crucial element of the complex process called integration of refugees. It is significantly conditioned by people's health. While physical hurts and chronic illnesses affected the people I met in different, but never totally destructive ways, psychological difficulties proved to jeopardize the potential for any kind of hope.

The loss of hope expressed in the narrative above stands out as an extreme example. However, many Bosnians lost the hope of ever gaining employment similar to the one they had in their homeland; those I met with university degrees in law, psychology and the humanities were especially hardly hit. Many of them acted accordingly, minimizing their ambitions as well as their active attempts to improve their job-related situation in Sweden. Several people interviewed for this study experienced downward mobility. In order to get a paid job, a female lawyer agreed to be re-educated as a cook, and ended up working (as an administrator, but also as a cook) in a kitchen providing food for schools and old-age homes. A Bosnian engineer tried to start a private firm, but lost it due to the IT-crisis several years ago and has been driving a taxi ever since. Another refugee, who used to work as an economist in a big Bosnian firm, became a bus driver in Sweden.¹¹

It is, however, important not to single out such information, but to look at people in the context of their families. Not only are these people's children bound to get university education, but the occupations of their spouses may offer a balance in self-perceived status. The lawyer's husband is a well-paid engineer, the taxi driver's wife is a medical doctor and the bus driver's wife is a nurse. The taxi driver is pleased, since he can now organise his time around his hobby – mountaineering. The bus driver enjoys the fact that he has a lot of time for reading books during his working days.¹²

An engineer who worked as a factory director for twenty years in his home-town in Bosnia, got a job in a slaughterhouse in Sweden, together with his wife who used to be a secretary. However, his interest and recognition connected to his hobby of raising pedigreed sport pigeons, remained intact. He travelled to China twice in the past few years; he acts as a referee in international competitions in Europe, he is regularly published in pigeon-raisers' journals in Croatia, Hungary, and Bosnia and he has also authored two books.

The employment-related downward mobility has only a relative significance, since social relations between Bosnian refugees rely in the first place on their original education and status. While educational and employment success in Sweden is a source of pride and indeed highly estimated by all research participants, people's habitus – defining who they “really” are – is perceived as unaffected by downward mobility (see also Povrzanović Frykman, 2004).

Many research participants – resettled and asylum refugees alike, with different levels of education and sorts of work – radiated satisfaction with their current way of life and

¹¹ For data on loss of occupational status among ex-Yugoslav refugees in Australia, see Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2006.

¹² The changes of gendered status within their families, and the power related to income would be interesting to investigate but are beyond the scope of this article.

expressed pride for their work accomplishments. They talked about investments in apartments both in Sweden and in Bosnia or Croatia (see Povrzanović Frykman forthcoming), about affording travel to Bosnia as well as to different tourist destinations. They confirmed the general picture of Bosnians' well-accomplished integration provided by the economists (Carlson, 2007). But I observed that their perception of well-being coming out of the feeling of meaningfulness and purposefulness did not depend only, or primarily, on labour market integration.

Individual satisfaction defies any list of objective elements that could be systematically compared. The meaning of satisfaction is highly contextual, and the present employment achievements in Sweden are not necessarily its most relevant context. When telling about how they are doing, many interviewees actually talked about their children's perceived prosperity in Sweden. One could say that especially those who experienced downward mobility make up for it, or "catch up" with their former status, through their children's "appropriate" achievements in Sweden. When it comes to plans regarding the children's education, hope, even confidence, is remarkable. For example, a sixteen-year old daughter, who started high school just a few weeks before we met, was introduced to me by her mother as "a future veterinarian".

Just as the woman on sick leave, who talked at length about her grandson, many other people stressed that the most important issue for them is the well-being of their families, and the fact that they live close to their adult children and extended family members. This is in line with the research done by psychologists (Alinder & Ralphsson 2000; Goldin 2008), who indicate that family-life is a prioritized context in which stability and happiness is found and social life unfolds at its most intense. It is thus important that family and friends live in the same place, just as most of them did in Bosnia. My material, as well as former research (see above footnote 2), shows that close friends are found primarily among co-ethnics, yet not any co-ethnics, but rather people with whom my respondents shared experiences of everyday life before exile or with whom they went through the critical resettlement or asylum seeking period. Exile experiences are shared neither with relatives who stayed behind in Bosnia, nor with co-ethnics (including family members) who came to Sweden as labour migrants some decades earlier. Socialising with exile friends seems to be one of the most cherished elements of everyday life.

Stories about joking with friends, grandchildren, holidays, or family in Bosnia are not central to an article focusing on refugees' employment integration in Sweden. But they are a considerable part of the material gathered by an ethnographer who wants to know what matters to people and how they perceive their own situation. As much as it is true that many issues subsumed in the notion of integration cannot be turned into quantitative data, it is important to situate the employment-related experiences in a more extensive understanding of specific histories of individual lives. This article shows how individual views add insights into processes that cannot be fully understood through statistically documented facts and trends. Importantly, they also bear witness to a vast diversity of experiences.

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