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## Wings of Migration: Looking for a Rainbow

Hana Andronikova

Panel: Age of Migration, Diaspora, Exile (II)

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**Hana Andronikova**

**Wings of Migration: Looking for a Rainbow**

Migration is a catalyst for change and development,  
and in a world that is changing at a lightning pace,  
not harnessing the power of migration is shortsighted.

- Brunson McKinley, International Organization for Migration

Migration is an intriguing topic. Some animals travel enormous distances with startling precision. They travel at night, in the daytime, in the skies, in the depths of the sea, using the stars, the sun or the Earth's magnetic field for guidance, in order to find territory that is best for the survival of their species, places that provide them with food, water and shelter, and space for their breeding. Animals that have learned to move to optimal environments are the ones who have survived.

Humans are only one of many migratory species.

The word migration has a different ring to an ornithologist than to a human rights activist, or to a programmer who would imagine data or system migration, or an astronomer to whom a planetary migration would inevitably come first to mind.

Human migration is as old as the mankind, we just keep inventing new terms to describe its various aspects: illegal migration, trafficking, migrant smuggling.

Migration is imbedded in our cells, it is our birthright.

*Cell migration is a central process in the development and maintenance of multi-cellular organisms. Tissue formation during embryonic development, wound healing and immune responses all require the orchestrated movement of cells in a particular direction to a specific location.*

I'm sure you know what I'm saying.

Here I'm going to talk about my grandmother. She is 99 years old and is a living proof of one amazing paradox. You don't have to migrate to live in different countries. She has lived in seven different states, yet she has never moved.

Born in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, she saw its bitter end while celebrating the birth of Czechoslovakia, the First Republic. After Hitler rolled over the country only twenty years later, my grandmother found herself in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, Slovaks having their own state. With the end of the World War Two, Czechoslovakia became Czechoslovakia again, the so-called Third Republic. In 1960 the victory of socialism was officially declared and the country got another name: Czechoslovak Socialist Republic. The Velvet Revolution ended the long haul of the communist rule and my grandmother had to change her documents again, this time to the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic. The happy marriage lasted three years only, till our civilized Velvet Divorce, when she finally became a citizen of the Czech Republic.

This phenomenon could be described as the regime migration.

There is one more thing about my grandmother and migration: her favorite film, the *Winged Migration*. She loves documentaries and films about nature, and when we talk, we talk of bees and butterflies, of songbirds flying north to breed, autumn passages, flyways spanning over continents, routes following mountain ranges and coastlines, crossing large bodies of water, marshes, wind drawing patterns over the land. We talk of fish traveling between fresh water and the sea, eel larvae drifting on the open ocean, sometimes for months or years, before moving thousands of kilometers back to their home streams.

The advantages of new territories offset the high stress, energetic costs, and other risks of the migration. This is true of humans, too.

But why is my grandmother so intrigued by the winged migration? Perhaps it's because she lived most of her adult life behind the Iron Curtain and the only way she could travel was with birds, as a shadow of their wings, each morning waking up with tired limbs after the long night's journey.

Our country, right in the heart of Europe, saw whole processions of migratory species: regimes, kings and dictators, armies and traders crossing it back and forth in short succession. Over the centuries, we learned that the best way to cope with our position was to bow our heads and make cryptic jokes behind the backs of the oppressors, no matter from which side they came. Bitter laughter. Culture and art became a retreat, a way of revolt, a path to greater freedom. Nowadays, we have immigrants coming to our land and we call it a new phenomenon. It's not really true. We just paused for forty years, when the regime didn't let anyone in, anyone out.

Today I would like to talk about the migration of stories, the old new phenomenon of people immigrating to the Czech Republic. Refugees flee from Chechnya, Sudan, Burma, filling the camps, making our authorities dizzy. Five of them tell their stories in a play that I have been working on, a project of Archa Theatre in Prague. Let me introduce my friends.

This is Khuppi from Burma, showing us his wedding photograph, telling us of his wife, remembering her slender hands, her quiet, and how he had to leave her, running for his life, when she was nine months pregnant. Khuppi tells us of the time he arrived in Prague, of three years of waiting. He tells us how he feels. Not dead, not alive. Stuck in between the wires of laws and mountains of papers, reduced to a number, scrutinized by blind justice, put on hold, his life a chain of waiting rooms and letters. In between the lines he tells us of the speed with which we pass judgment on someone like him, on our new neighbors, those weird people from dangerous parts of the world. He shows us how we avoid his eyes, how we ask questions without wanting to hear any answer, how he's tired of telling his story again and again, a parody on Kafka's Trial. Khuppi keeps running, the belt of the treadmill under his feet, moving faster and faster, but the landscape remains the same. A waiting room. He smiles at his own story, noting that all Burmese refugees were awarded asylum without any difficulty, except for him. There are things he doesn't

talk about. He wouldn't talk about his three year old daughter that he's never seen. I wouldn't ask.

I do enquire though, at different places, the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. I ask questions and hear the other side of the story. But that's not important here. Some great news arrived in Iowa only two weeks ago: Khuppi got asylum. How wonderful. The next act of his drama, the escapade of getting his wife and child out of Burma to the Czech Republic, has begun. But for now, let's just celebrate.

There is one more friend of mine I want you to meet. Gugar, an Armenian from Georgia. A musician and hairdresser. A true artist. He plays the piano and accordion on stage. He will sing for you and for his family, once brutally attacked because of their religion. Five years ago they fled to the Czech Republic, for years they waited and waited, moving from one refugee camp to another. Now he can sing, the permanent-resident-song, settled in Prague with his wife and three children, working as a hairdresser in a Russian beauty salon. You can ask him if he misses anything. His face breaks into a smile, a blush of hope and vanity. I miss my carrier pigeons. I would love to bring them here. That would solve all my problems.

His flock of pigeons is stuck in Armenia with Gugar's mother-in-law. She has to trim their wings regularly, otherwise they would fly back home, to the place they were born, to Georgia. They don't know that their master lives in another land. And maybe they don't care. That's the trouble with pigeons. They always return home, to their native dovecote. Gugar knows. And he knows what he needs to do. With his new home, he needs to get a new flock of birds, leaving his old ones behind. Gugar smiles. Not ready yet.

My grandmother loves this story. People vary. So do birds and bees, she says. Pigeons return home, all the time, no matter what. On the other hand, some species of locusts and dragonflies migrate in one direction, do not return, and only the next generation may migrate in the opposite direction. Salmon hatch in freshwater streams, go down to the sea and live there for years, then return to the same streams, where they were born, and die shortly after. They return home to die. Hundreds of people living in exile do the same, they come back to the place of their birth to rest, their last wish to be buried in their motherland. For some reason it matters to them.

My grandmother knows a lot about people and animals. She also knows about the way they die. Birds, for some reason, are still on the top of her list. She tells me a secret no one knows. In her past life she was a nightingale. That's why she can sing so well.

My grandmother believes that it is in a bird's nature to know when they are to die. When their time comes, they rise up, fly over a rainbow and disintegrate in the upper air.

This obviously flies in the face of the laws of gravity. But I wouldn't argue with my grandmother. Her only wish now is to fly over a rainbow and die like those birds. I hope she will. But that's her poetic self speaking. When her more pragmatic side emerges, she taps her stick on the ground on

which she stands and nods her head. I want my bones to be buried right here, in this land – no matter what any fool decides to call it!

At her age, no one can take her for a ride.