

**IDENTITY IN IMMIGRATION:  
SELF-CONCEPTUALIZATION AND MYTH IN THE NARRATIVES OF  
GERMAN IMMIGRANT WOMEN IN VANCOUVER, B. C., 1950-1960**

**by**

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Identity in Immigration: Self-Conceptualization and Myth  
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## ABSTRACT

Based on interviews with ten German women who immigrated to Vancouver between 1951 and 1957, this thesis investigates the narrative construction and historical significance of subjectivity. Oral history was used as a tool of historical inquiry to obtain information about this social group that as single women, domestic workers, immigrants, and Germans has been marginalized in Canadian historiography. The narratives collected, however, tell us not only about events and behavior as such but, more important, about the meanings ascribed to them. In giving meanings to their experiences the women constructed and negotiated their identities as much as the relationships of power in which they were positioned. Examining the *ways* in which the women told about domestic service and marriage illuminated how the women perceived themselves in relation to the world around them. The women initially conceptualized themselves as independent immigrants, but had to adjust this image to the realities of social and economic constraints. The approach to interpreting the women's narratives is drawn from both European oral historiography and North American post-structuralist and feminist theory.

**To my mother, Gisela, and my sister, Michaela**

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## CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	iv
CHAPTER	
1. INTRODUCTION .....	1
2. CONDITIONS, CHOICES, AND DECISIONS IN POSTWAR GERMANY .....	13
3. IMMIGRANT OR MAID? .....	40
4. NEGOTIATING INDEPENDENCE .....	72
5. CONCLUSION .....	101
APPENDIX	
A. SHORT BIOGRAPHIES .....	112
SOURCES CONSULTED .....	118

## INTRODUCTION

Subjectivity historically has been a shaping force in the lives of women and men. By giving meanings to their experiences, people have dealt with their daily struggles and made sense of their own life histories. Through their subjective perception of the past as much as the relationships of power in which they have been positioned, they have negotiated their identities. Exploitation and oppression, alienation and hierarchies have thus not always been understood as such by those who were exploited, oppressed, or alienated. Many of the German immigrant women whom I have interviewed for this thesis did not question that domestic service provided the only means of immigrating into Canada for single women, while male immigrants had more and better enumerated gateways of coming. Nor did the women critique the exploitative character of domestic service or the hierarchical relationship between themselves and their employers. Examining the meanings people ascribe to their experiences may help us make sense of people's perceptions of the past. We can find out about these meanings by analyzing the ways in which people structure their narratives.

This thesis is a story about ten German women who immigrated to Vancouver between 1951 and 1957. It tells about their experiences as single women, immigrants, domestic servants, and Germans. But this thesis is also an assessment of the significance of subjectivity in the shaping of the women's experiences. How did the women make sense of their daily lives as newcomers to a foreign country and as domestic servants in Canadian homes? What hopes and expectations did they bring from Germany and how did they reconcile them with an often conflicting reality?



In one way, then, this thesis is part of the marginal, underdeveloped German-Canadian historiography.<sup>1</sup> Except for a few articles on immigration policies concerning Germans after the Second World War and an article on German women in Ontario mining towns<sup>2</sup>, little has been written on the history of German immigrant women or the transatlantic German immigration after World War Two.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, it is possible to place this case study into a wider, socio-economic context.

During the 1950s, about a quarter of a million Germans came to Canada. They were the largest ethnic group of the 1.7 million, mainly European immigrants. Almost half of all immigrants were women.<sup>4</sup> They often came as "dependents," as wives, children or otherwise sponsored by relatives. Sponsorship was the main gateway for women to immigrate, while men often migrated via government contracts which obliged them to work in the lumber and mining industries or as farm hands. But there was also one route for single women without sponsors: domestic service. Thus, during the 1950s, some 80,000 women immigrated to Canada intending<sup>5</sup> to work as maids. 25,000 of these maids for Canada were German, the largest ethnic group to provide Canadian households with cheap live-in labor.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> German-Canadian historiography can be described as mostly an empiricist hagiography of German male immigrants and an endless "beancounting" of German firsts and bests in Canada's past. It is mainly uncritical and has hardly contributed to the booming immigration historiography of the last two decades. See, for example, Gerhard P. Bassler, *The German Canadian Mosaic Today and Yesterday* (Ottawa: German-Canadian Congress, 1991). However, I believe that the history of Germans in Canada can prove challenging and insightful for Canadian history, if it is not merely done just because Germans have for a long time constituted the largest non-charter group in Canada, as Bassler endlessly repeats; rather, we should try to ask how Germans have negotiated their adaptation to a new, yet similar, culture and society that has given numerous privileges to Germans based on their race and ethnicity.

<sup>2</sup> See Gertrud Jaron Lewis, "The German Woman Immigrant in Northeastern Ontario," *Annals: German-Canadian Studies*, 5 (1983): 143-66.

<sup>3</sup> The most comprehensive bibliography of German-Canadian history is in the *German-Canadian Yearbook. Deutschkanadisches Jahrbuch* (Toronto, Ottawa: Historical Society of Mecklenburg Upper Canada) vol. 12, 1992.

<sup>4</sup> Department of Citizenship and Immigration, Directorate of Technical Services, Statistics Section, Ottawa, *Immigration Statistics 1950-1961*.

<sup>5</sup> How many immigrant women who intended to work as domestic servants actually did enter that occupation cannot be recovered from either the Immigration Statistics nor from the Census Canada.

<sup>6</sup> The next largest group of domestic servants came from Italy (18,000). Numbers of immigrant domestic servants in Marilyn Barber, *Immigrant Domestic Servants in Canada*, Canada's Ethnic Groups, Booklet No. 16 (Ottawa: Canadian Historical Association, 1991), 2.

The German women's decisions to emigrate were influenced by family circumstances and the economic, social and political conditions of postwar Germany.<sup>7</sup> Emigration for them could be described as a strategy to negotiate an individual life-situation that was shaped by family breakdowns and poverty as much as by the restoration of traditional values and the confinement of women to the home in postwar Germany. These women used links to kin already in Canada as well as special immigration programs by the Canadian government as ways of entering Canada.

Moreover, the women were inspired and motivated by the success stories of other immigrants which they heard at their work places or in their families, and which they read in newspapers or adventure stories. They arrived in Vancouver with dreams, hopes, wishes and expectations. These, however, often clashed with the reality of immigrant life: the women had to work in the low-paid, low-status and often isolating occupation of domestic service. And marriage one to three years after their arrival often tied them more definitely to their decision to immigrate as well as to Vancouver than they originally had planned. If as historians we take seriously the significance of subjectivity, we must ask: how did the women reconcile their imagination with the reality of their lives? How did they deal with their alienation?

While questions about subjectivity are important, the answers must be critically informed. In the beginning years of women's and oral history, scholars often tended to take oral testimonies "at face value." They thus participated in the sometimes uncritical and nostalgic memories of the past instead of critiquing them<sup>8</sup>. Nevertheless, they unveiled the powerful potential of a feminist oral history "to shed new light on the lives of . . . women and to inform and correct an androcentric historical record."<sup>9</sup> In the case of this study, oral history was indeed the major avenue to this part of Canadian immigration and

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<sup>7</sup> Unless otherwise stated, Germany here refers to the three western zones until 1949, and to the Federal Republic of Germany from 1949 on.

<sup>8</sup> Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson, "Introduction," in *ibid.* (eds.), *The Myths We Live By* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 1-22; 2.

<sup>9</sup> Susan N. G. Geiger, "Review Essay. Women's Life Histories: Method and Content," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 11, 2 (1986): 334-351; 340.

women's history. While the Canada Census supplied some statistics, and government policies on immigration explained how some of the women immigrated on contracts, these official sources about the women had rigid limits. These limits could be transcended only by talking with some of the German immigrant women in person.

The use of oral history for such purposes has sometimes been criticized by scholars who have questioned the validity and reliability of oral sources and individual life histories. By the late 1970s, oral historians had not only convincingly refuted such claims by showing the relative validity of oral sources, they had powerfully attacked historians' belief in the superiority of written sources, which themselves were often based on oral information.<sup>10</sup> Oral historians such as Paul Thompson have denied historians' traditional view of written sources as the transparent reflections of a factual reality: "Social statistics," he argued,

no more represent absolute facts than newspaper reports, private letters, or published biographies. Like recorded interview material, they all represent, either from individual standpoints or aggregated, the *social perception* of facts; and are all in addition subject to social pressures from the context in which they are obtained. With these forms of evidence, what we receive is *social meaning*, and it is this which must be evaluated.<sup>11</sup>

Oral history's shift from facts to their meanings "does not imply that oral history has no factual interest."<sup>12</sup> As mentioned above, the information about German immigrant women's behavior and life-events obtained through the interviews was an important result.

But as in the last ten to fifteen years both oral history and women's or gender history have engaged in a "field of critical practices"<sup>13</sup> named post-structuralism, the analy-

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<sup>10</sup> See Paul Thompson's chapter 4 "Evidence," in his *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 101-149.

<sup>11</sup> Thompson, *Voice of the Past*, 106.

<sup>12</sup> Alessandro Portelli, "The Peculiarities of Oral History," *History Workshop* 12 (1981), 96-107; 97. Portelli and Luisa Passerini were among the first oral historians to advocate this shift from facts to meanings. See Luisa Passerini, "Work Ideology and Consensus under Italian Fascism," *History Workshop* 8 (Autumn 1979): 82-108. Revised versions of this paper are "Italian Working Class Culture Between the Wars: Consensus to Fascism and Work Ideology," *International Journal of Oral History* 1,1 (February 1980): 4-27; and "Work Ideology and Working Class Attitudes to Fascism," Paul Thompson with Natasha Burchardt (eds.), *Our Common History: The Transformation of Europe* (London: Pluto Press, 1982): 54-78.

<sup>13</sup> "Introduction," in Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott, *Feminists Theorize the Political*, xiii.

sis of oral sources and their meanings or subjectivity has become increasingly complex and refined. Historians have enlarged their "tool kits": while sociology has been the major discipline to be drawn upon, other historians have begun to borrow from psychology and literary studies. Scholars of women's and oral history have often been at the forefront of these theoretical attempts to deconstruct the major frameworks and the most foundational concepts of traditional historical analysis.

Subjectivity has thus been the major concern of oral historians and feminist scholars in the last fifteen years. They have critiqued categories that have commonly been defined as mutually exclusive, such as "objectivity" and "subjectivity." Thus, when confronted with the charge that oral sources are not representative, they point out that

[the] question whether individuals' life histories typify or deviate from the cultural norm . . . assumes we already have knowledge about the culture in general against which individuals can be evaluated. Of course it is precisely this assumption that feminist scholars challenge in noting the failure of traditional social science research to encompass women's experiences and perceptions. Women's life histories provide concrete substantiations for our claims that these cultural generalizations and models of social life are typically androcentric.<sup>14</sup>

In other words, to ask whether the case of ten German immigrant women is typical is misleading. It is based on the assumption that we can deduce from people's externally observable behavior the meanings they ascribe to their actions. What we actually do is interpret their behavior through meanings that have been established in our respective disciplines. We then judge whether people behaved "typically" or "normally," depending on *our* norms (e.g. theoretical models). Patriarchal and capitalist societies have created norms which feminist and Marxist historians have critiqued. But at the same time, Marxist and feminist scholars have created their own norms. Women's and workers' "normal" behavior, they have argued, is expressed in their protest against the patriarchal and capitalist norms. A "working-class consciousness" and a "women's or feminist consciousness" became the new measuring sticks in historical inquiry.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Geiger, "Review Essay," 337.

<sup>15</sup> For a critique of the Marxist norm of "class consciousness" see Luisa Passerini's articles listed in note 12.

As historians, however, we cannot insist that people should inherently be able to critique gender, class, racial or ethnic inequalities. We should not assume that people are born with a certain way of perceiving and understanding reality. Nor should we claim that only certain perceptions are "right" or "true"; instead they are dominant perspectives which are not "truer" to reality than marginalized perspectives, but are the perspectives of more powerful, more legitimated groups.<sup>16</sup> We should thus abstain from labeling some perceptions of reality as "false consciousness" or all perceptions as "unimportant" because they are "subjective" and have therefore no impact on history or society. Otherwise we would mask the impact that dreams and fantasies, anxieties and fears, myths, images and self-concepts have on what women and men do and think, both individually and collectively.

Concepts such as class and gender, race and ethnicity, then, have been useful to give voice to society's marginalized groups. But because scholars insisted that one of these categories is more important, and more essentially determining than the others, the use of the categories has become too rigid to understand the complexities of historical processes. The feminist post-structuralist uprooting and interweaving of these concepts gives us the space that allows us to investigate how identities are shaped and how power relationships are forged.

Feminist post-structuralist scholars such as Joan Scott have reformulated the tools of inquiry historians have been using. While some historians in the liberal tradition have conceived of the individual as an agent with a free will to think and act in rational ways, historians tending to a structural analysis have ignored individual consciousness and subjectivity. None has adequately analyzed the point of interaction between subject and society. Post-structuralists argue that we have to examine the ways in which people come to know about themselves and the world that surrounds them. Knowledge is not transparent. What we know does not directly and simply emanate from what we see. It is rather the

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<sup>16</sup> Kathryn Anderson et al., "Beginning Where We Are: Feminist Methodology in Oral History," *Oral History Review* 15 (Spring 1987), 103-127; 123.

other way around. We perceive certain things, for example human relationships, in ways that are shaped by language and discourses. Post-structuralist scholars are mainly interested in those discourses that construct knowledges about differences between people. Gender, for example, is "knowledge about sexual difference." In Joan Scott's words, gender knowledge is "the understanding produced by cultures and societies of human relationships, in this case of those between men and women." Because this knowledge does not emerge unproblematically from reality, but is constructed around reality, "knowledge is not absolute or true, but always relative."<sup>17</sup>

These knowledges have political implications. They shape the ways in which people perceive themselves and the world around them. These particular perceptions are used to organize society by giving meanings to differences between people. Gender, then, "is the social organization of sexual difference [by] establish[ing] meanings for bodily differences."<sup>18</sup> Knowledges, moreover, are not created in a neutral manner, because they are constructed by certain people and social groups. Historically, the makers of knowledges have been socially dominant people and groups. Thus, in the Western hemisphere it has been mainly white, middle-class men who have constructed knowledge about gender, class and race.<sup>19</sup> In making gender knowledge men have defined women as inferior and different from the male norm. Men used this knowledge to forge and reinforce their domination over women in specific places and times, particularly when the social organizing by gender was endangered.

Categories such as gender, class, and ethnicity have not only served to organize society. They have simultaneously been established as categories of individual identity. In other words, knowledge about gender, class, and ethnicity has shaped the ways in which people understand themselves. The way people understand themselves thus do not emerge

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<sup>17</sup> Joan Wallach Scott, "Introduction," in *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988):1-11; 2.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> For an insightful analysis of this knowledge-production see Catherine Hall, *White, Male and Middle-Class. Explorations in Feminism and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992), particularly chapters 1, 9, and 10.

from a bodily sensation (I am a man, I am a woman) or from material conditions (I am rich, I am poor). Rather, people's perceptions of themselves are shaped by the meanings that dominant parts of society have ascribed to bodily or material differences.

If it is important to know how people come to know about themselves and society, oral history has great potential. Post-structuralist historians have mainly been concerned with how dominant discourses have forged relationships of power. Examining individual subjectivity can illuminate how these dominant discourses are received and dealt with at an individual level. In interviews we can actually ask people what meanings they ascribed to their and others' actions. Asked the right questions, women and men can be given the space to explain what *they* mean, think, and feel about immigration, work, or marriage.<sup>20</sup>

A narrative, then, can be seen as one of the sites where the meanings people ascribe to their experiences react and interact with socially prescribed meanings. In order to analyze this interaction at the level of individual subjectivity, we have to pay attention to "the symbolic categories through which reality is perceived."<sup>21</sup> When we look at the constructions of identity as they are frozen in time on a tape or on paper, it is up to us to make sense of them one more time. There are so many layers and aspects that form an identity, it would be impossible to analyze and write about all of them. Which "symbolic categories" do we need to examine? On one hand, knowledges about gender, class, race and ethnicity have been the major ways of organizing North American society; we therefore have to find out how they work on an individual level.

On the other hand, there are the historically established forms by which people weave stories. We thus have to listen more closely to the ways in which people tell their stories, that is to the structures and forms of their narratives. Narrative forms can, as Hayden White has suggested for narratives of historical philosophy, be that of romance,

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<sup>20</sup> A excellent introduction to interview techniques are Kathryn Anderson et al, "Beginning Where We Are" and Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai (eds.), *Women's Words. The Feminist Practice of Oral History* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), chapters 1-3.

<sup>21</sup> Samuel and Thompson, "Introduction," 1.

comedy, tragedy, or satire.<sup>22</sup> For the interpretation of the German immigrant women's narratives, I found two other narrative forms helpful: self-conceptualization and myth.

My interpretation of the narratives of the ten women I interviewed is based on the premise that "the self is thought of as a narrative or story, rather than a substance or thing."<sup>23</sup> A narrative structure or plot casts the diverse events and actions of a person's life into a meaningful whole. By doing so one constructs one's identity as a coherent and stable self. In my thesis I have looked at this narrative "whole" and called it self-conceptualization. I also examined some of the narrative elements, such as myths, that make it up.

The German women crafted their narratives around their experiences as immigrants. Their sense of self was based on their perceptions of being an immigrant. In and through their narratives the women presented and thus conceptualized themselves mainly as immigrants. This self-conceptualization as immigrant structured the narrative/identity and gave it the unity demanded by the narrative structure of identity. This unity of identity is historically constructed by the question Who am I? The question calls for an answer that presents an identity that is unified and stable, emerging from what the person physically is or does, not from the many meanings that could be ascribed to what the person is or does. The question has always been elusive (I will come to this at the end of this chapter). Let us first look at how people have tried to answer this question, how people have tried to construct a unified identity. They have used narrative forms that fit parts of their lives unproblematically into a unified whole.

Myth is one of these forms that structure narratives. It is a narrative device by which people can insert parts of their lives into their coherent narrative. In other words, myth enables people to embed certain actions or decisions they have made into their identity in a way that does not endanger the stability of their sense of self. We can thus

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<sup>22</sup> Hayden White, *Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).

<sup>23</sup> Donald E. Polkinghorne, "Narrative and Self-Concept," *Journal of Narrative and Life History*, 1, 2&3 (1991): 135-153, 135.



conceive myth as a clue to the ways in which people perceive reality. We can, as Luisa Passerini has argued, see myth as an "expression of alienation"<sup>24</sup> and at the same time as a strategy to deal with this alienation. The German women, then, drew on myths as a means to fit their work as domestic servants and their marriages into their overall conceptualization of themselves as independent and adventurous immigrants. They could rebalance their identities as immigrants.

As narrators in an oral history interview construct their identity through their narratives, they do so at a specific moment in their lives, at a specific place, prompted by a certain person who has confronted them with certain questions. Had I asked different questions, or had I interviewed somebody else, had it been a different place or time, the narratives might have been very different. "In fact," Portelli has claimed, "oral testimony will never be the same twice."<sup>25</sup> Moreover, narrators talk about events and feelings that happened some time - in the case of the German immigrant women about forty years - ago. As Portelli has pointed out, "there may have been changes in personal subjective consciousness as well as in social standing and economic condition, which may induce modifications, affecting at least the judgment of events and the 'colouring' of the story."<sup>26</sup> The task of the oral historians then is to find out if the narrator effectively reflects on her values, feelings, thoughts, or perceptions of four decades ago or if she imposes more recent interpretations on past experiences. None of these are "truer" versions of the past, but as historians we need to be aware of the changes and continuities in people's consciousness and take them into consideration in our own interpretations. Oral historians have usually grappled with the biases inherent in the interview situation and relationship be-

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<sup>24</sup> Luisa Passerini, "Mythbiography in oral history," Samuel and Thompson (eds.), *The Myths We Live By*, 49-60; 50-52.

<sup>25</sup> Portelli, "Peculiarities," 104.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

tween narrator and interviewer by addressing them as problems of memory and recall<sup>27</sup> and - more recently - ethics<sup>28</sup>.

But let me try to link the unfixed nature of oral narratives/identities with the recent work of post-structuralist feminist scholars on identity. Scholars such as Denise Riley have argued that identities are never whole, closed, united and complete. Rather, identities are fragmented and volatile, they are "fluctuating." Sidestepping psychoanalytic debates about women, Riley has looked at the historical construction of "woman" and "women" and suggested these terms/identities are "troublesome":

'women' is historically, discursively constructed, and always relatively to other categories which themselves change; 'women' is a volatile collectivity in which female persons can be very differently positioned, so that the apparent continuity of the subject of 'women' isn't to be relied on; 'women' is both synchronically and diachronically erratic as a collectivity, while for the individual, 'being a woman' is also inconstant, and can't provide an ontological foundation.<sup>29</sup>

If the historically changing social narratives (or discourses) do not allow for a stable identity, it is no wonder then that personal narratives/identities are always fluctuating as well. The identity of immigrant which the German women constructed in their narratives cannot be seen as their only identity. Rather, it is one of many possible narratives. The women might have represented themselves very differently at another place or another time or to another audience. It was partly my request; "Tell me about your *immigration*," and partly the dominant narrative forms, which demand people present themselves as stable and unified, that influenced the women's narratives. At the same time, we should not overestimate the interviewer's impact on the narrator. The following then is a representation that is only one of many possible, nevertheless true, versions of the past. And it

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<sup>27</sup> See Portelli, "Peculiarities," 103-4; Thompson, *Voice of the Past*, 110-124.

<sup>28</sup> Gluck and Patai, *Women's Words*, chapters 7-13; Daphne Patai, "Introduction: Constructing A Self," in *Brazilian Women Speak . Contemporary Life Stories* (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 1988), 1-35, particularly 9-17.

<sup>29</sup> Denise Riley, "Am I That Name?" *Feminism and the Category of "Women" in History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1988; second printing, 1990), 1-2.

is not in spite of but because of the uniqueness of the women's narratives that they are important, because they can provide alternative versions of the past and for the present.

## CHAPTER 2

### CONDITIONS, CHOICES, AND DECISIONS IN POSTWAR GERMANY

#### Women in Postwar Germany

The unconditional surrender of the Third Reich on 8 May 1945, has often been viewed as marking a new beginning, a break with the past, a *Stunde Null* (zero hour) for German society and the chance for women's emancipation. In the last decade, however, historians have begun to point out the economic, social, cultural, and political continuities of postwar Germany and the new Federal Republic. By the early fifties, it would be the continuities - particularly in regard to women - that would outweigh the changes. In the following, then, I will focus on both, the changes and continuities of women's positions in postwar Germany.<sup>1</sup>

#### Surviving the Shortages

Germany was at the center of a Europe that had been devastated; a Europe filled with millions of people who had lost their homes, possessions, and family members. Twelve million ethnic Germans were fleeing or being deported from the former German Eastern Territories<sup>2</sup> to the West of Germany; some eleven million people from twenty nations,

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of the *Restaurationsdebatte* with a focus on the continuities of gender roles, see Doris Schubert, *Frauen in der deutschen Nachkriegszeit, Band 1: Frauenarbeit 1945-1949. Quellen und Materialien* [Women in postwar Germany, vol. 1: Women's work, 1945-1949. Sources and materials] (Düsseldorf: Schwann, 1984), 13-21; for a concise, brief overview of women in German postwar history see Ute Frevert, "Opportunities and Restrictions in The New Republic: 1945-1988," part V in *Women in German History. From Bourgeois Emancipation to Sexual Liberation* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1989), 253-303.

<sup>2</sup> The Eastern Territories now belonged to Poland and Russia; refugees also came from Poland, Czechoslovakia, Rumania, and Hungary.

whom the Nazis had forced to work in the Third Reich's war industries, had become displaced persons.<sup>3</sup>

The allies had divided Germany into four Zones of Occupation, controlled by military governments of the Soviet Union, the United States, Great Britain, and France respectively. Until the early 1950s, the country was characterized by severe shortages of housing, high rates of unemployment, tension between displaced persons, refugees, and the "established" West German society; anxieties between women and their men returning from prisoner-of-war camps; and the beginning and peak of the Cold War.

By the end of the war, about one quarter - in the cities as much as half or more - of all housing had been destroyed. The working classes were particularly hard hit. Their dwellings were usually located in the city-center and therefore bombed more severely than the middle-class residential districts at the fringes of the city. In 1946, fourteen million households had to be accommodated in eight million dwellings, which led to increased tension among people, particularly when West Germans had to share with refugees.<sup>4</sup> Shortages of fuel and food were poignantly felt in the harsh winters following the war.

Ute Frevert has pointed out that "this situation of acute shortage was especially hard on women. Traditionally, after all, it was up to them to keep the family adequately fed and clothed and to maintain a warm, clean and comfortable home."<sup>5</sup> The end of the war had brought no relief for women; they now had to face even more difficulties. With

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<sup>3</sup> Wolfgang Jacobmeyer, "Ortlos am Ende the Grauens: 'Displaced Persons' in der Nachkriegszeit" [Without a place at the end of horror: 'Displaced Persons' in the postwar era], in Klaus J. Bade, ed., *Deutsche im Ausland. Fremde in Deutschland. Migration in Geschichte und Gegenwart* [Germans in foreign countries. Foreigners in Germany. Migration in past and present] (München: C.H. Beck, 1992), 367-73.

For a comprehensive and insightful study of Lithuanian displaced persons and their immigration to Canada after the war see: Milda Danys, *DP. Lithuanian Immigration to Canada After the Second World War*, Studies in Ethnic and Immigration History (Toronto: Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1986).

<sup>4</sup> Between 1944 and 1960/61, 9.5 million people from the former Eastern Territories as well as over 4.5 million people from the Sowjet occupied zone and later German Democratic Republic, fled to western Germany. Throughout the 1950s, they made up about 16.5 percent of the West German population. Kurt Sontheimer, *Die Adenauer-Ära. Grundlegung der Bundesrepublik* [The Adenauer era. Foundation of the Federal Republic], *Deutsche Geschichte der Neuesten Zeit* [German modern history] (München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, Dezember 1991), 72-73.

<sup>5</sup> Frevert, "Opportunities," 257.

3.7 million men killed in the war and 11.7 million being prisoners of war in 1945, women had to fend for themselves and their children.<sup>6</sup>

In order to secure food, fuel, and housing, women lined up in long queues in front of shops, kept their own vegetable gardens, bartered on the black market, and traded with farmers. They had to construct the most primitive shelters from rubble and ruins if they no longer wanted to sleep outside.<sup>7</sup> In order to get ration cards, medical care, or housing they negotiated with Allied and German officials.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, in the early months after defeat, rape was frequent in the Russian and French Zones, while in the Western Zones, where soldiers could pay with cigarettes, chocolate, and bread, "the borderline between rape and prostitution was often a fluid one."<sup>9</sup>

Only slightly better off were people who lived in rural areas, where there was at least more food and shelter than in most cities. Millions of women and children from the cities had been evacuated to the countryside, and millions of refugees were being resettled in rural areas, where they worked for farmers both inside the house and in the fields.<sup>10</sup>

### Working Women

Despite early efforts to establish a socialist economy, capitalism remained firmly entrenched in West Germany's economy. The continuity of capitalism was reinforced by the currency reform on 21 July 1948. People with savings lost almost everything, while owners of means of production were hardly affected.<sup>11</sup> Before the currency reform, money

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 257-58.

<sup>7</sup> Angela Delille and Andrea Grohn, *Blick zurück aufs Glück. Frauenleben und Familienpolitik in den 50er Jahren* [Looking back to luck. Women's lives and family politics in the '50s] (Berlin: Elefant Press, 1985), 15.

<sup>8</sup> Robert G. Moeller, "Reconstructing the Family in Reconstruction Germany: Women and Social Policy in the Federal Republic, 1949-1955," *Feminist Studies*, no. 1 (Spring 1989): 137-69; 140-41.

<sup>9</sup> Frevert, "Opportunities," 258.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 262.

<sup>11</sup> For an analysis of the economic continuities in postwar Germany, see Gerd Hardach, "Die Wirtschaftsentwicklung der fünfziger Jahre. Restauration und Wirtschaftswunder" [The economic development of the fifties. Restauration and economic miracle], in Dieter Bänisch, ed. *Die fünfziger Jahre. Beiträge zu Politik und Kultur*. Deutsche Text Bibliothek, ed. Gotthart Wunberg, Bd. 5 [The fifties. Contributions to Politics and Culture. German Text Library, vol. 5] (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1985), 49-60.

was devalued by high inflation. Many women and men therefore resisted the Allies' attempts to recruit them for paid work. Employers had to pay part of the wages in goods. Nevertheless, women increasingly went into traditionally men's work during and right after the war, making up for the shortages of men and taking the rebuilding of Germany into their own hands. Symbolic of this reconstruction were the tens of thousands of so-called *Trümmerfrauen* who cleared away rubble in the destroyed cities of Germany, repaired houses, factories, and roads. Women worked also in the construction trades and heavy industries.<sup>12</sup>

Women's chance of emancipation at work was, however, soon contained by media, political, and scientific discourses about the "temporariness" of an "exceptional" situation and women's "natural" roles. Right after the war, public opinion had favored women working outside the home and a breakdown of traditional gender roles. Women's claims for more autonomy and an equal distribution of power were supported by many. But soon women's new activities in the "public" sphere were "explained" and defined in traditional terms: first of all, women's paid work was seen as an exception necessary only in exceptional times; and secondly, women's "public" work was defined as an extension of their "private" housework, their "natural" wifely and motherly duties. That many women enjoyed their work and saw it not as a matter of "bad fortune" but as their choice and a chance for greater freedom, was largely ignored. In the words of the most prominent sociologist in postwar Germany, Helmut Schelsky, women's emancipation during and after the war was an "emancipation out of necessity."<sup>13</sup> By couching women's work in these terms, the public discourse on women's contributions to the reconstruction of Germany "made women's role in the public sphere almost invisible."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Frevert, "Opportunities," 260-61.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Moeller, "Reconstructing", 147.

<sup>14</sup> For an analysis of the media discourse in postwar Germany about women and the family see: Maria Höhn, "Frau im Haus and Girl im *Spiegel*: Discourse on Women in the Interregnum Period of 1945-1949 and the Question of German Identity," *Central European History* 26, no. 1: 57-90, 89.

Because women's work outside of the home was seen as temporary, women were kept in semi-skilled and unskilled positions.<sup>15</sup> From 1947 onward, authorities and unions reminded women of their "special nature." Women were driven out of their workplaces to make room for the men returning home and for the millions of refugees streaming into Germany.<sup>16</sup> Efforts to make women return to home and hearth increased when after the currency reform in 1948 the rise in unemployment rate began to accelerate, reaching 12.8 percent in March 1950. Targeted particularly were women in "men's jobs", married women, and women without professional education. Especially hard hit were single and unskilled women who depended on their incomes and who could not easily be placed in other jobs. The unemployment rate of women thus increased more than men's.<sup>17</sup> The percentage of women in the general labor force declined from 37.3 percent in 1946 to 31.4 percent in 1950.<sup>18</sup>

With the take-off of the German economy in the early 1950s, however, labor became scarce again. Women were once more recalled to the paid labor force and they came. Between 1950 and 1959, the number of employed women rose from 7.9 million to 9.2 million.<sup>19</sup> By that time, however, the great majority of Germans were already in full retreat to the home<sup>20</sup> and demanded that women be at its center. Women who did not conform were socially branded and economically punished. Thus, throughout the fifties women's unemployment rate remained higher than men's.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Outside of traditional female jobs, women had hardly any chance to get apprenticeships; moreover, women had not nearly the same chances to go on to *Gymnasium* or university as had men. Höhn, "Frau im Haus," 67.

<sup>16</sup> Klaus-Jürgen Ruhl, ed., *Frauen in der Nachkriegszeit. 1945-1963* [Women in the postwar era. 1945-1963] (München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, Juni 1988), 8; Höhn, "Frau im Haus," 63; Frevert, "Opportunities," 261.

<sup>17</sup> Ruhl, *Nachkriegszeit*, 72-73.

<sup>18</sup> Delille, *Blick zurück*, 22.

<sup>19</sup> Between 1952 and 1959, the number of all employed people increased by 30.3 percent; women made up 42.9 percent of that expansion; of all employed people, the percentage of women increased from 30.9 to 33.9. Ruhl, *Nachkriegszeit*, 205.

<sup>20</sup> This "retreat into the smallest social circles" was seen as a "sign of the times" by the media and sociologist. It was captured in the phrase of *Fluchtburg Familie* (i.e. family as a heaven in a heartless world). Cited in Frevert, "Opportunities," 265.

<sup>21</sup> The unemployment rates for refugees were twice as high as the average, so that refugee women were particularly disadvantaged. See Ingrid Langer, "Die Mohrrinnen hatten ihre Schuldigkeit getan. . . Staatlich-



With the mission of restoring German moral and order, the Catholic church, conservative family organizations, and the newly created Ministry of the Family were at the forefront of a campaign against working women, particularly working wives and mothers. Because women in paid employment did not fit the ideal of the housewife/mother, they were perceived as a threat to the family and thus branded a "problem" for society. The conservatives claimed that women took up jobs not out of economic necessity, but because of their "desire for admiration" and their "craving for luxury", and that they would therefore neglect their "natural" duties as housewife and mother.<sup>22</sup>

The media, politicians, and churches stepped up this rhetoric against working women by marking their work outside of the home as a sign of communism, "which granted equality but robbed women of their femininity."<sup>23</sup> Notions of "woman" and "family" thus became crucial in the Cold War between the "Free Western Democracies" and the "Communist East". Maria Höhn has argued that "'woman' became an important symbol around which the image of the new Germany as a modern and democratic consumer nation without class divisions was to be clarified and defined against the 'other' Germany that would take the socialist path." The "image of the 'free' Western woman as mother and wife, consumer-citizen, and thoroughly modernized 'girl' played a crucial role" in "proving" the superiority of the West.<sup>24</sup> Working women, particularly working mothers and wives and women who worked in non-traditional jobs, did not fit this image and were perceived as a threat to the "family," the German state, and the idea of Western democracy.

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moralische Aufrüstung der Familien" [The female Moors have done their duty. . . state-moral rearmament of families], in Dieter Bänsch, ed. *Die fünfziger Jahre. Beiträge zu Politik und Kultur*, Deutsche Text Bibliothek, ed. Gotthart Wunberg, Bd. 5 [The fifties. Contributions to Politics and Culture. German Text Library, vol. 5] (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1985), 108-130; 124.

<sup>22</sup> Ruhl, *Nachkriegszeit*, 205-7.

<sup>23</sup> Höhn, "Frau im Haus," 63. Ingrid Langer described Franz-Josef Würmeling, Minister of Family Affairs, as viewing "women's work as a specific particularity of communist countries." Langer, "Die Mohrinnen," 126.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 59-60.

## Women and Family

Discourses, policies, and practices concerning women's status in the labor force were closely tied to those concerning women's roles in the family. Many families which had been torn apart through war, flight, and deportation re-united during the late 1940s and the 1950s. Family reunions were often troubled. Spouses who had not seen each other for years and who had experienced the war and postwar years very differently had become estranged; their expectations had become incompatible. While men's self-esteem had plummeted after the defeat and often long years in prisoner-of-war camps, many women had learned that they could manage by themselves. They rejected the patriarchal rule of their returning husbands.<sup>25</sup> Divorce rates more than doubled between 1939 and 1948 and then dropped slightly in the following years.<sup>26</sup>

Some millions of women could never expect to marry because so many marriageable men did not come back from the war. Even in 1950, when most men had returned from prisoner-of-war camps, there were 1,400 women for every 1,000 men in the age group twenty-five to thirty-nine. Almost one third of the fifteen million German households were headed by divorced women or widows.<sup>27</sup> Media, sociologists, and politicians perceived these developments as signs of the dissolution of traditional gender roles and the traditional two-parent family.

There were early signs indicating that the majority of German politicians was unwilling to redefine women's status and the nature of the family in the new republic. During the constitutional debates of the Parliamentary Council (of whose sixty-five members four were women), the Social Democrat Elisabeth Selbert fought for the inclusion of the equality of women and men (*Gleichberechtigung*) as a fundamental principle in the Basic Law (*Grundgesetz*) of the Federal Republic. The law granting equality (Article 3)

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<sup>25</sup> Frevert, "Opportunities," 262-63.

<sup>26</sup> Divorce rates were 8.9 per 10,000 inhabitants in 1939, 18.8 in 1948, and 15.7 percent by 1950. Höhn, "Frau im Haus," 77, n. 76.

<sup>27</sup> Moeller, "Reconstructing," 140.

was accepted only after massive public protests by female workers and socialist and middle-class women's organizations.<sup>28</sup>

The implementation of Article 3 proved even more difficult. In theory the law had far-reaching implications for the whole of German society. The Parliamentary Council had mandated that all laws discriminating against women would become invalid on 1 April 1953. However, neither the first government of the new Federal Republic headed by Konrad Adenauer and his conservative Christian Democrats, nor the opposition Social Democratic Party, felt compelled to comply with this deadline. The 1900 civil code (*Bürgerliches Gesetzbuch*), for example, was one piece of legislation that needed to be revised, since it still ensured the patriarchal family as the norm and thus contradicted Article 3. But the civil code was not amended until 1958 and 1959 and even then only partially. The civil code's article legislating that women "contribute as a rule by their running of the household" to the family upkeep remained intact.<sup>29</sup>

Similarly, the demand for "equal pay for equal work" was not enforced until a Federal Labor Court ruling in 1955. Again, the result was diluted: the court suggested that employees be paid according to physical difficulty of their job. "Insofar as women did less arduous work, they could be paid less, without infringement of the law. . . . : in effect, no change in the discriminatory policy towards women."<sup>30</sup> Throughout the 1950s, women earned less than 65 percent of men's wages.<sup>31</sup> The implementation of Article 3, then, was to a large degree dependent on the politics and policies of the government. Franz-Josef Würmeling, Minister of Family Affairs had decided to base his government's legislation and policies on a concept of the family as "the natural origin and source of state order."<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Frevert, "Opportunities," 278-80. Article 3 of the Basic Law states: "Men and women have equal rights." See also Langer, "Die Mohrinnen," 110.

<sup>29</sup> Frevert, "Opportunities," 282.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 279.

<sup>31</sup> Langer, "Die Mohrinnen," 127.

<sup>32</sup> Frevert, "Opportunities," 282.

The family and women, then, had become the center of West German social policies. Discussions about these policies "served as an excellent vehicle for identifying salient conceptions of relations between women and men and the boundaries of women's proper sphere."<sup>33</sup> Through social policies the Adenauer-government could define who constituted a family, and it could prescribe women's responsibilities as wives and mothers. The result was that "laws aimed at protecting the family ultimately protected and preserved much else - patriarchal authority; women's economic dependence on men; the ideological elevation of motherhood; pronatalist sentiments; and the normative conception of the 'family' as an ahistorical social unit transcending class divisions."<sup>34</sup>

Women's status and the future of the family were also major issues in the public and academic discourses of the 1950s. At first, these discourses included discussions about partnership and comradeship as the basis of a fundamentally equal marriage and family. But tradition overshadowed new ideas. The sociologist Helmut Schelsky "identified a noticeable trend towards 'restoring the old familial order and way of life'"<sup>35</sup> in which men were breadwinners and women full-time housewives and mothers. Sociologists like Schelsky, Gerhard Mackenroth, and Ferdinand Oeter resurrected the "complete" family as the norm for German postwar society. Their work was very influential on the political discussions of social policies. Schelsky argued that German society had been socially so uprooted during and after the war that class lines had dissolved. Now the family, not social class, had become the agent of upward mobility. Mackenroth similarly argued that German society was no longer split between rich and poor but between "poor" and "rich in children". Accordingly, larger families should be more supported than smaller families.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Moeller, "Reconstructing," 142.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>35</sup> Quoted in Frevert, "Opportunities," 266.

<sup>36</sup> A summary of the sociologists' main arguments regarding the concept of family is in Moeller, "Reconstructing," 146-51.

In postwar Germany, then, the complete "intact" family was reinforced as the "natural" norm and became a "concrete utopia"<sup>37</sup> on which social policy was based. The millions of women who could not or did not want to marry, and who had to work for their survival, in turn became marginalized by the media and policy-makers. Whether by the Christian Democratic government or the Social Democratic opposition and unions, these women were labeled as "incomplete," "fatherless," or "half" families, as deviants.<sup>38</sup> They decided to ignore that in 1950, 40 percent of the German population lived in such "abnormal" families.<sup>39</sup> Single, widowed, and divorced women were rather seen as a legacy of the war, a "surplus" that would eventually dwindle away<sup>40</sup>, but who for now were "pitiable creatures whose lives would remain ever unfulfilled."<sup>41</sup>

Alternative visions of the family, then, were marginalized or often lacking.<sup>42</sup> This restricted women's possibilities "to imagine structuring their lives in other ways."<sup>43</sup> Women's life "goals" most often included marriage, because there were few other options.<sup>44</sup> To stay single was viewed as "personal weakness"; moreover, most women could not afford to stay single, because of their very low incomes. Women who headed "incomplete" families remained overrepresented among those living below the poverty level.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 161.

<sup>38</sup> Robert Moeller has shown how this construction of "family" shaped social policies in a way that benefited "complete" middle-class families, while female-headed households were even further disadvantaged. Moeller, "Reconstructing."

<sup>39</sup> Höhn, "Frau im Haus," 70.

<sup>40</sup> Moeller, "Reconstructing," 144, 153.

<sup>41</sup> Frevert, "Opportunities," 266.

<sup>42</sup> Robert Moeller has pointed to the lack of critique of the "normal" family by the Left. Many Marxist and socialist intellectuals, e.g. from the Frankfurt School (Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, Erich Fromm) had been driven into exile during the Third Reich. Social Democrats tried to distance themselves from their Marxist background; women's organizations were split along class and confessional lines and focused on the reform of civil code. Moeller, "Reconstructing", 159-60.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 161.

<sup>44</sup> In the mid-1980s, the German sociologists Angela Delille and Andrea Grohn interviewed five German women for their study on women's lives and family policies in the 1950s; all women agreed that they would have married later under less constraining circumstances. Delille, *Blick zurück*, 43.

<sup>45</sup> Moeller, "Reconstructing," 154.

For women, then, it was the continuities that outweighed the changes in postwar Germany. While right after the war there had seemed to be a chance for full emancipation and new social forms, the continuities in German postwar life soon overshadowed the break of 1945. Women's and gender historians have increasingly uncovered the continuities of postwar Germany. Robert G. Moeller has argued:

The Federal Republic was neither Weimar nor the Third Reich, but it did embody certain elements that linked it to its own most recent history. In the language of pronatalism, motherhood, and the sanctity of family relations, and in the state's attempts to shape these private relationships, there were striking continuities across the divide of 1945.<sup>46</sup>

Maria Höhn has summed up the restoration of Germany: "Despite the so-called zero hour of Germany, after defeat in 1945, and despite tremendous contributions of women during and right after the war, German women managed only with great effort to get at least their pre-1933 status restored."<sup>47</sup>

### **Deciding To Leave**

What strategies did women employ to deal with these constrictions? In the context of conditions in postwar Germany, as well as in the context of their own personal and familial circumstances, tens of thousands of German women decided to leave Germany, whether for one or two years or for good. Their motives to emigrate were many. As historians we can not unambiguously deduce these motives from the "objective" conditions in postwar Germany or from women's externally observable actions captured in sources such as government statistics. Oral history provided an important tool of investigation.

Economic reasons have traditionally been fundamental in historians' explanations of the push and pull forces of migration. After the Second World War these were again reasons for emigration, particularly for refugee Germans, who had often lost all of their

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 164.

<sup>47</sup> Höhn, "Frau im Haus," 88.

possessions during their flight or deportation to Western Germany. Anna Grevesmühl was one of the refugees. She was born in 1927 in a small town near Warsaw in Poland, where her parents had their own farm. During the war she had apprenticed with a seamstress. But in January 1945, together with two younger sisters and her mother, Anna Grevesmühl fled from the advancing Russian Red Army. The family was separated and after a four-year odyssey from one refugee camp to the next, Anna Grevesmühl arrived in a small town in Schleswig-Holstein in the Federal Republic of Germany in the summer of 1949, where she re-united with her mother, sisters, and her aunt. Anna Grevesmühl remembered:

[My parents] didn't have anything either. [. . .] And once [my father] told me: "I can't help, I can't give you anything," he was an old man then, "I can't help you, you can see yourself, we don't have anything, lost everything in Poland. Go out." And then my aunt had written: "Ach, why don't you come over here [to Vancouver], you've got nothing to lose." Yes, we just didn't have anything. [. . .] And so they brought be over here [. . .] And I left all my siblings, mother, father, and my sisters, all in Germany, and I went ahead.<sup>48</sup>

For most of the German women I interviewed, however, economic reasons were not urgent. Rather, economic considerations often intersected with other motives. The idea of going overseas to get married, for example, was interwoven with the chance of economic betterment. In fact, for some single women marriage and economic advancement were tightly interlinked. Margot Buchwald was twenty-seven years old when she decided to leave Germany in 1953: "Well, I came to this country to be married and have my own house and my own place, I didn't want to be alone. [. . .] You couldn't find a man in Germany during the war, they were all either dead or wanted from a girl to have everything."<sup>49</sup>

Margot Buchwald's reason for emigrating seems to be straightforward. But the explanation is only simple for the woman who reflects on a decision made forty years ago

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<sup>48</sup> Anna Grevesmühl, interview by author, 5 July 1993, Vancouver, BC, tape recording, in possession of the author.

<sup>49</sup> Margot Buchwald, interview by author, 27 September 1993, Aldergrove, BC, tape recording, in possession of the author.

and in the context of having achieved all of her wishes. For the young woman who made that decision forty years ago, it was probably more complicated. The decision involved risks and hardships: quitting a job as a pastry-cook and leaving her mother, sister, and friends in Germany. When Margot Buchwald decided to emigrate, she did not have the secure knowledge of forty years later. If we look closer and beyond this confidence of the present we might understand what was inspiring Margot Buchwald to take these risks. It is in the same sentences that Margot Buchwald tells us about her image of immigration. To be an immigrant meant to her to finally start her own family and to succeed economically as well as emotionally ("I didn't want to be alone"). For the young woman, immigration promised the fulfillment of her dreams, her fantasies, her wishes.

The trained nurse Heidi Schute remembered that other women, with whom she was on the boat to Canada in 1953, were hoping to find a husband:

I was twenty-nine and the others were a little younger and some quite a bit older. But they were all kind of unattached German girls, because most of them, I think, openly admitted there was no way you find a man in Germany after the war, everybody got killed, the proportion between male and female was so poor, like ten girls were there for one man, so this was one thing if they wanted a family.<sup>50</sup>

The idea of finding a husband, then, was commonly talked about. Margot Buchwald, however, was the only one of the women I talked to who stated this as *one* reason for leaving Germany. The German ambassador's claim "Men. That's why German girls enter Canada,"<sup>51</sup> then, says more about male German politicians' and bureaucrats' perception of German women than about German women's reasons for emigrating. This male view was framed by the notion that women did not work outside the home and could only find fulfillment with a husband at their side and a full-time career as a homemaker and mother.

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<sup>50</sup> Heidi Schute, interviews by author, 30 November and 6 December 1993, Surrey, BC, tape recording, in possession of the author.

<sup>51</sup> Headline of *The Province*, 13 July 1957, p. 11. The German ambassador in Ottawa was Hasso von Etzdorf, who was quoted as saying: "They [German women] see Canada as a land of opportunity. . . . The ratio of men to women is much higher here." Etzdorf also claimed that most of the 26,000 German immigrants to Canada in 1956 were women, while in fact the ratio was below the average.



The reverse notion, that women left Germany so that they would *not* have to depend economically on a man, was probably unthinkable for the male politicians. But not so for some of the female German emigrants. Brigitte Rabe was twenty years old and had just finished an apprenticeship as a seamstress; she arrived in Vancouver with "grand ideas that I would right away be able to do designing and stuff like that."<sup>52</sup> Doris Schulz immigrated to Vancouver with the plan of establishing "my own pottery" at the age of twenty-five.<sup>53</sup> Such ambitions might be called "daydreams", "fantasies", or "utopian plans" and might sound foolish to the detached, rational observer or to the historian who is interested only in the "hard facts" (often expressed in numbers). But they are important clues to people's ways of perceiving reality. These "fantasies" might have pushed the women more than any other reasons to take the risks involved in their endeavor.

In one way or another, the search for adventure, freedom, and independence was mentioned by nine of the ten women. This search might be seen as a reaction to the restoration of traditional values and confinement of women to the home in Germany. Christel Meisinger was twenty years old when she and her eighteen-year-old girl-friend decided to leave. She explained:

There wasn't a whole lot going on in Germany, with work. And our boy-friends had left so we thought we could too and so we went too, did apply too, and emigrated too. [. . .] Boredom at home, call it boredom. You know, just to see what's going on. We figured what the boys can do we can do. Why should we hang around?  
*Did you just follow your boy-friends or would you have left anyways?*

No, we would have left anyways, even if we didn't make it to Vancouver. [. . .] We were only gonna stay for a year and then go back home. [. . .] It was just a few months later when we decided: "Well, why don't we go some place too? See the world." Like I said, we applied for England and for Canada, and Canada - they really must have wanted us bad at that time, because we got the first reply from them.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Brigitte Rabe, interview by author, 14 September 1993, Burnaby, BC, tape recording, in possession of the author.

<sup>53</sup> Doris Schulz, interviews by author, 22 September 1993, Richmond, BC, tape recording, in possession of the author.

<sup>54</sup> Christel Meisinger, interviews by author, 1 December 1993, Burnaby, BC, tape recording, in possession of the author.

It is important to emphasize, here, that Christel Meisinger and her girl-friend, while inspired by them, did not follow their boy-friends. They were not the only ones whose imagination about immigration was informed by the stories they read in books and magazines<sup>55</sup> or heard from friends, relatives, or colleagues. Brigitte Rabe, Margot Buchwald, Johanna Grohsmann<sup>56</sup>, and Anna Grevesmühl read stories of successful immigration in the letters of their sisters, brothers, aunts, uncles, and cousins. Waltraud Schmidt, a highly trained technician at the large electronics company Siemens in Berlin, had heard of the successes of some of her colleagues.<sup>57</sup> And Heidi Schute was probably not the only one who had read the very popular adventure stories about "Cowboys and Indians" by the German author Karl May.

Heidi Schute wanted to see this world Karl May had written about. Except for a secure, but low-paid job as a nurse, nothing was holding her back:

I was always fascinated by travel and wanting to go to foreign countries and I had made an attempt once to emigrate to the States and there were too many restrictions and it was too difficult; and once in my really younger years, under Hitler, I wanted to go to Africa to the colonies, the German colonies they had at the time, but then I wasn't old enough and you had to go to a very strict school. [. . .] I wanted to go and see the world, and that was my first step to do that. I was going to work till I had enough money to buy a car and then pack things up and go and travel to South America, to - I wanted to see the whole world and that was just it. And Canada opened the door for me as a good starting point.

I had also, I had no attachments to Germany anymore, because my so-called *Heimat* wasn't there anymore. The place where I was born in Merseburg was destroyed, I had no parents, my brother had died during the war, there was nobody close I would leave which would make it difficult for me. [. . .] I had no emotional attachments; what would keep me back?

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<sup>55</sup> The 27 June 1950 issue of the popular German magazine *Revue* featured an article "I Emigrate" on Canada as a preferred destination of German emigrants. Canada was described as "more European" than the United States. The article also featured the results of a survey by the survey institute EMNID in the three Western Zones. According to this survey, every fifth German was willing to leave Germany; reasons cited were the high unemployment rate, the flood of refugees, high taxes, and the fear of a war. National Archives of Canada, Immigration Branch, Record Group 76 (RG 76), Central Registry Series, Central Registry files, C-4690, vol. 331, file 682, part 6 "German Immigration 1950-51," copy of the article with English translation by a Canadian Immigration officer.

<sup>56</sup> Johanna Grohsmann, interview by author, 26 November 1993, Vancouver, BC, tape recording, in possession of the author.

<sup>57</sup> Waltraud Schmidt, interview by author, 28 September 1993, Vancouver, BC, tape recording, in possession of the author.

Heidi Schute and many other German women saw their opportunity of finally fulfilling their dreams when in late 1950, Canada opened its doors once again to Germans. In more abstract terms, emigration provided a strategy for these women to negotiate the social, economic, and familial constraints on women in postwar Germany. They carefully weighed the advantages and disadvantages that staying and leaving held for them. Yet at the same time, their decisions were not purely "rational." They were informed by "irrational" daydreams and fantasies, by an image of immigration that was informed by the many stories and myths the women had heard at their workplaces and in their families. Before I turn to these subjectivities in chapters 3 and 4, I will in the following explain Canada's immigration policies that allowed German women to venture out.

### **Hiring On As Maids**

Anna Grevesmühl, Heidi Schute, Brigitte Rabe, and Christel Meisinger were "perfect" migrants for both the German and the Canadian governments. For the German authorities, they belonged to this threatening group of "excess" women with little chance of marriage, who were taking away "men's jobs" and who posed a threat to the restored institution family. Canada, on the other hand, was eager to get women from Northern Europe to work in low-paid jobs such as domestic service and hospital care. German migration to Canada in the 1950s, then, was influenced by ideas on both sides of the Atlantic about who was and who should be a worker as well as who could be a good, desirable worker. Cast into policies, these notions informed the shape and control of the German-Canadian migration.

Between the end of World War Two and 1961, almost 800,000 Germans left the Federal Republic for overseas, some 250,000 of them for Canada. The Germans who came were from very different backgrounds. Among them were *Volksdeutsche* (ethnic Germans) who had been expelled from Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, and

Yugoslavia. There were *Reichsdeutsche* (German nationals) from the former German eastern Territories, which had become parts of Poland and the Soviet Union after the war. There were also German nationals from the Soviet occupied zone of Germany as well as German nationals of the Western zones. In the following, I will not distinguish but use the term German to include all of them.

The German government was interested in "a controlled migration of those workers and their families who were not needed for the reconstruction of the German economy."<sup>58</sup> In 1950, the Federal Government was explicit to the Organization for European Economic Cooperation (OEEC) about who was unnecessary for the country's recovery: "Germany greets every proposal that gives single women and girls suitable work opportunities in European countries."<sup>59</sup> The German government's expectations for overseas migration were very similar. On 30 May 1951, Canada's "German Migration Field Mission" reported to the Department of Citizenship and Immigration in Ottawa that "German authorities don't encourage emigration of young men in industry jobs because of losses during the war; there's less objection to the emigration of women and farmers."<sup>60</sup> German authorities' support for Canada's immigration policy was thus based on the perception that the "surplus" women and refugees from the agricultural East were not desirable workers; rather, they posed "problems" that could be - at least partially - solved by a controlled emigration of these groups from Germany.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Johannes-Dieter Steinert, "Drehscheibe Westdeutschland: Wanderungspolitik im Nachkriegsjahrzehnt" [Turntable West Germany: Migration policies in the first postwar decade], in Bade, *Deutsche im Ausland*, 386-92; 388.

<sup>59</sup> Quoted in Steinert, "Drehscheibe," 388, my translation.

<sup>60</sup> RG 76, C-4690, vol. 31, file 682, part 7, "German Immigration 1951-1952."

<sup>61</sup> I am not aware of any studies that deal specifically with the role of emigration in postwar Germany or that link emigration to any conditions of postwar Germany. Such a study would have to establish the specific policies, how they were informed by different aspects/discourses of German postwar society as well how they were implemented.

Gender, Race, Ethnicity, and Canada's "Preferred" Immigrants<sup>62</sup>

Canada, unlike Germany, was desperate for farmers and domestics, particularly if they were from Northern Europe. Canada initially resented the possibility of massive immigration, fearing a recession. As the economy expanded, shortages on the labor market began to concern employers and officers of the Department of Labour. International and domestic pressures were growing for Canada to help the millions of displaced persons in Europe. The former enemy states had become not only democracies, but also important Allies in the Cold War. In 1947, Liberal Prime Minister, Mackenzie King, explained that Canada was willing to accept as many immigrants "as can advantageously be absorbed in our national economy." Invited to help with Canada's economic postwar recovery were, however, only those who would not make necessary "a fundamental alteration in the character of our population."<sup>63</sup>

Although King's statement was vague, the overall goal was clear: a shift from a "restrictive" policy of the Depression era to an "expansionary" one.<sup>64</sup> The Immigration Act of 1910 (amended in 1927) allowed the Cabinet, without consultation with or permission by Parliament, to implement the new policy by simply passing orders in council. Thus, the Ministry of Mines and Resources and, from 1950, the Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration, gradually began to ease restrictions on immigration. In 1946 and 1947, the categories of kin that could be sponsored by Canadian residents and occupational categories were widened. Starting in 1948, the nationalities admissible to Canada were ex-

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<sup>62</sup> For an analysis of postwar Canadian immigration policy, see: Freda Hawkins, chaps. 2-5 in *Canada and Immigration. Public Policy and Public Concern*, 2d ed. (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1988); Alan G. Green, chap. 2 in *Immigration and the Postwar Canadian Economy* (1976); David C. Corbett, chaps. 2-3 in *Canada's Immigration Policy: A Critique* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1957); for a discussion of immigration policies regarding specifically Germans, see Angelika E. Sauer, "A Matter of Domestic Policy? Canadian Immigration and the Admission of Germans, 1945-50," *Canadian Historical Review* 74, 2 (1993): 226-63; Alvin Finkel, "Canadian Immigration Policy and the Cold War, 1945-1980," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 21, no. 3 (Fall 1986): 53-69; Gerhard P. Bassler, "German Immigration to Canada 1945-1950: Issues and Questions," *Annals: German-Canadian Studies* 6 (Sixth Montreal Symposium, May 1987): 168-79.

<sup>63</sup> Green, *Immigration*, 21.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

tended. Before 1950, Germans were still classified as "enemy aliens" and thus not allowed to enter Canada. With the increasing pressure from German-Canadian organizations, the founding of the Federal Republic, and the deepening Cold War, "German nationals" were removed from the "enemy alien category" in September 1950.<sup>65</sup> This new rule opened the doors to tens of thousands of Germans who had been waiting to leave Germany. Between 1951 and 1957, over 200,000 Germans, almost half of whom were women, immigrated to Canada. After 1958 the numbers of Germans entering Canada declined to an annual average of around five to ten thousand and dropped further in the 1970s.

When the Canadian government lifted its ban on "enemy aliens", Germans once again became "preferred" immigrants. Canadian authorities believed that people from Northern Europe would assimilate to North American society, culture, and "climate" and make less trouble than the "non-preferred" immigrants from South and East Europe or Asia. The traditional racist assumptions that the "whiter" peoples' skin, the better suited they were for Canada, informed immigration policy until the early 1960s.

### **Recruiting Ex-"Enemy Aliens"**

Germans were encouraged to make use of this privilege: the immigration mission in Karlsruhe that had been used for the processing of displaced persons and German refugees since March 1947, now sent out "itinerant immigration teams"<sup>66</sup> to recruit farmers and domestics from among the German population. Their aim was not to trigger an uncontrolled mass migration, but rather carefully to select well-educated and well-trained people.<sup>67</sup> In the early 1950s the Department of Citizenship and Immigration arranged for more shipping, sent additional officers overseas, and stepped up their information cam-

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<sup>65</sup> Canada, Dominion Bureau of Statistics, *Canada Year Book 1952-53* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1953), 163. The restrictions concerning German nationals were removed by order-in-council P.C. 4364 of 14 September 1950. Germans were made "admissible as immigrants on the same basis as other Europeans."

<sup>66</sup> *Canada Year Book 1951*, 140.

<sup>67</sup> Steinert, "Drehscheibe," 386-92.

paign in Germany.<sup>68</sup> Heidi Schute remembered the promotion campaign's gender specificity:

It was a big PR rush from Canada to attract German people, German girls especially, actually I don't remember them mentioning men. It was on the *Litfaßsäule* [advertising pillar], that was where I actually saw it first, big posters and published that Canada would welcome German girls for a new future in a new land and made it very attractive sounded, land of opportunity and you can do almost anything you set your mind to and you were very welcome and you get a lot of financial help. So that's where I read it first and I thought: "Geewiz, that is a good idea." [. . .] Anyway, this was the opportunity where it sounded like you were welcome with open arms.

While Germans generally benefited from dominant Canadian notions of "whiteness" and "Germanness", German women were disadvantaged by prevailing ideas about women, work, femininity, and (in)dependence. During the fifties, the categories of admissible occupations were widened from domestics and farm help, but the added categories were "men's jobs". With this extension, the Canadian immigration policy of "open placement" (which admitted immigrants on the basis of their occupation) became more linked with job opportunities for German men, while women's main gateways remained the increasingly unattractive jobs of maid and nurses' aide. Even a highly trained technician like Waltraud Schmidt was accepted to Canada only as a domestic servant.

German women who had relatives residing in Canada could apply to be sponsored by them and immigrate without any restrictions. The new policy of 14 September 1950 encouraged "thousands of German Canadians to sponsor the immigration of relatives."<sup>69</sup> About a third of all immigrants in the 20 years after 1946 were sponsored<sup>70</sup>. The regulations regarding who could sponsor whom were quite strict, but were implemented in a rather relaxed manner, especially in the 1950s when sponsorship was still seen as "an excellent type of immigration which smoothed the problems of adjustment to North

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<sup>68</sup> *Canada Yearbook* 1952-3, 164

<sup>69</sup> Bassler, *German Canadian Mosaic*, 16.

<sup>70</sup> Half of all sponsored immigrants were from Italy, Portugal, and Greece alone. Hawkins, *Canada and Immigration*, 48. Because German were already a large, established group and had shown their enthusiasm for sponsoring relatives right after the war, the number of sponsored Germans was probably quite high.

American society and produced good citizens." There is, however, no evidence to ascertain how many Germans or how many of the 25,000 German domestics were sponsored.<sup>71</sup>

Both Anna Grevesmühl, who came in 1951, and Johanna Grohsmann, who came in 1957, were sponsored by their aunts, while Brigitte Rabe, who came in 1957, was sponsored by her two brothers. Some German women, who would go into domestic service, came as dependents with their families. Gertraud Müller came with her parents in 1953.<sup>72</sup>

German women, then, had three routes to come to Canada: either as a "dependent" wife or daughter; as a newcomer sponsored by a relative residing in Canada; or as an applicant on basis of skill or trade, in the case of single women mainly as domestics or as nurses' aides. This latter way, the so-called "open placement," was offered by the Canadian government in connection with a loan for the passage fare, a contract that obliged the immigrant to work in a specific occupation for one year, and the possibility to remain in Canada and gain citizenship. Officials liked to call this movement of contract labor under the Assisted Passage Loan Scheme "bulk orders."<sup>73</sup>

#### The Assisted Passage Loan Scheme

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, competition on the European market for migrants had become fierce. Australia attracted prospective immigrants by paying their passage fare.<sup>74</sup> Moreover, by early 1951, the movement of displaced persons, including thousands of re

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<sup>71</sup> Hawkins, *Canada and Immigration*, 47-49.

<sup>72</sup> Gertraud Müller, interview by author, 23 November 1993, Surrey, BC, tape recording, in possession of the author.

<sup>73</sup> Franca Iacovetta, *Such Hardworking People. Italian Immigrants in Postwar Toronto* (Montreal & Kingston, London, Buffalo: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992), 28.

<sup>74</sup> Green, *Immigration*, 26. Even after the adoption of the Assisted Passage Loan Scheme, Canadian Immigration officers in Germany noted that in the face of the "strong" competition with the United Kingdom, Sweden, France, Australia, the United States, and South Africa "our terms are a serious deterrent." RG 76, C-10676, vol. 673, file C83755, letter of 25 September 1951 from J. R. Robillard, Chief, Canadian Government Immigration Mission, Karlsruhe, to Director, Immigration Branch.



cruited maids, was largely over.<sup>75</sup> To be able to compete, Canada adopted the Assisted Passage Loan Scheme (AP Scheme). This scheme was put into effect on 1 February 1951 "for the purpose of assisting immigrants from Europe whose services were urgently required here in Canada and who were unable to finance transportation costs." Immigrants were lent money for ocean transportation and inland rail fare. Within a maximum period of twenty-four months after arrival in Canada this loan had to be repaid.<sup>76</sup> The Canadian government decided on loans rather than prepaid passages, fearing these "would tempt some immigrants to come to Canada, work for a brief period and return to Europe."<sup>77</sup> Between 1 February 1951 and 31 December 1959, a total of 114,559 immigrants arrived in Canada using the AP scheme.<sup>78</sup>

Canada's demand for workers was particularly high for domestic servants. By 1 August 1950, the regulations for a recruitment scheme (succeeding the displaced persons scheme) of domestics from Europe were established. Women between eighteen and thirty-five years of age could apply if they were "unattached," that is single, divorced (not merely separated), or widowed and had no children. They needed to complete medical exams, including lung x-rays. Once selected, they were to sign a contract that required them to work in domestic service for one year, with a promised wage of thirty-five to seventy-five dollars per month (starting at the minimum) and one afternoon off a week. They were directed to a locality in Canada chosen by the National Employment Service.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Danys, *DP*, 128. For the history of Lithuanian displaced persons to Canada see Danys, *DP* and her discussion of contract schemes for domestics.

<sup>76</sup> *Canada Year Book* 1952-53, 164.

<sup>77</sup> Green, *Immigration*, 26.

<sup>78</sup> Canada, Dept. of Citizenship and Immigration, *Report for the Fiscal Year Ended March 31, 1960* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1960); how many of them were Germans or intended to work as domestics cannot be recovered from immigration statistics available to me.

<sup>79</sup> RG 76, C-10676, vol. 673, file C83755, "Policy and instructions re. domestics from Europe," correspondence between the Acting Director, Immigration, the Superintendent, London, and Superintendent, Eastern District, March-July 1950; also Immigration Branch, Headquarter, "Directive No. 43" of 1 August 1950, "Subject: Continuing Movement of Domestics From Western Europe."

After Germans and Italians were taken off the "enemy alien" list, they became the two largest sources for Canada's new domestics for a decade.<sup>80</sup> Eleven days after the restrictions had been lifted, the deputy minister of the Department of Labour, Arthur MacNamara, estimated that between six hundred and one thousand German women could be placed in Canadian households each month during the winter "if we could find some way of paying the transportation."<sup>81</sup> By early 1951, the Cabinet had approved of the Assisted Passage Fare Scheme. In May, MacNamara proposed recruiting five hundred German women as domestic servants: "I believe 500 German nationals as domestics would go over well with housewives."<sup>82</sup>

Of all occupational groups, domestic workers were those most wooed by Labour and Immigration officers. Prospective German domestics did not have to pay any inland rail fare, either in Germany or in Canada, nor did they have to pay the thirty dollars other AP immigrants had to pay as their share of the fare. To pay for the ocean fare, the women would be deducted ten dollars a month from their wages. By late June 1951, Immigration officers in Germany had been informed to recruit five hundred German women as maids.<sup>83</sup> The immigrants were to be selected with the help of the German employment offices.<sup>84</sup> Canadian officers were delighted about the German government's positive attitude. They advised their mission in Karlsruhe: "You need have no great fear to over-sub

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<sup>80</sup> Of the 1,6 million immigrants coming to Canada between 1951 and 1961, 46 percent were women, 83,000 immigrant women intended to work as domestic servants and almost 25,000 of these were German. Thus a tenth of all German immigrants of the 1950s, a fifth of all German women, immigrated to Canada as domestic servants. German women provided the largest pool for domestic servants of any immigrant group between the fiscal year of 1951 and the calendar year of 1957. From 1958 to 1964 they were, after Italian immigrant women, the second largest pool for immigrant domestics. At the peak of German immigration in 1954 alone, 4,651 German women came as domestics. Canada, Dept. of Citizenship and Immigration, *Immigration Statistics* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1950-61).

<sup>81</sup> RG 76, C-10676, vol. 673, file C83755, letter of 25 September 1950, from Arthur MacNamara, Deputy Minister, Dept. of Labour, to Colonel Laval Fortier, Deputy Minister, Dept. of Citizenship and Immigration.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, letter of 15 May 1951, MacNamara to Fortier.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, letter of 6 July 1951, from I. R. Stirling, for Chief, Operations Division, Immigration Branch, to Officer-in-Charge, Canadian Government Immigration Mission, Karlsruhe.

<sup>84</sup> RG 76, C-4690, vol. 31, file 682, part 7, letter of 17 April 1952, from J. R. Robillard, Canadian Government Immigration Mission, Karlsruhe, to Heinz von Trutzschler, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bonn, Germany.

scribe the 500 quota presently allotted," but cautioned that "everything depends of course on the quality of those sent forward in the first batch."<sup>85</sup>

However, not as many women volunteered as had been hoped.<sup>86</sup> On 31 October 1951, suddenly and unexpectedly for the Canadian Immigration officers in Germany, Ottawa suspended the AP scheme for the winter months.<sup>87</sup> This put the Canadian Mission in an awkward situation. German authorities had already invested time, energy, and money in this project and they were not pleased by the sudden cancellation. Hundreds of German women who had applied were put on hold for an indefinite time.<sup>88</sup> There was "a lot of unfavorable publicity" and Immigration officers talked of a "fiasco."<sup>89</sup>

On 7 October 1951, the first three domestics had arrived on the *Fair Sea* in Canada. However, and this was symbolic for the chaotic coordination between the Departments of Labour and Immigration, the AP scheme had been suspended only by the Immigration and not by Labour.<sup>90</sup> Thus, while the order of five hundred domestics had been suspended, prospective immigrant maids were still processed. Doris Schulz, Waltraud Schmidt, and Susanne Unterleitner<sup>91</sup>, for example, were processed and given the AP loan, but they did not appear in the statistics of the Immigration Branch.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> RG 76, C-10676, vol. 673, file C83755, letter of 26 July 1951, from George R. Benoit, Immigration Branch, to Immigration Mission, Karlsruhe.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., letter of 10 August 1951, MacNamara to Fortier: "We had hoped to start a flow of German domestics before this summer but the number coming forward is very small. Would you mind sending instructions to your staff in Germany to give priority to the movement of domestics. I am informed there are hundreds of German women quite suitable for domestic work ready and willing to come forward. Indeed I do know that the United Kingdom Labour Department has a very extensive movement in hand."

<sup>87</sup> *Canada Yearbook* 1952-53, 164.

<sup>88</sup> RG 76, C-10676, vol. 673, file 83755, letter of 19 November 1951, from Bergliot Lie, International Labour Office, Migration Field Mission, Bonn to V. C. Phelan, Director, Canada Branch, I.L.O., Ottawa.

<sup>89</sup> RG 76, C-4690, vol. 31, file 682, part 7, letter of 21 April 1952, from P.W. Bird, Karlsruhe, to C.E.S. Smith, Director, Dept. of Citizenship and Immigration.

<sup>90</sup> RG 76, C-10676, vol. 673, file 83755, letter of 6 March 1952, from Superintendent, London, to Chief, Operational Division.

<sup>91</sup> Susanne Unterleitner, interview by author, 3 December 1993, Delta, BC, tape recording, in possession of the author.

<sup>92</sup> RG 76, C-10676, vol. 673, file 83755, letter of 16 November 1951, from Chief, Operations Division, to Officer-in-Charge, Karlsruhe.

In the one-year period before 2 April 1952, when the AP scheme was reinstated, a total of just over 700 German women intending to work in domestic service had entered Canada.<sup>93</sup> On 28 March 1952 the Department of Citizenship and Immigration approved the program for Germany for 1952, which included now five thousand domestics, nurses, and nurses' aides.<sup>94</sup> This time the orders regarding the temporary suspension of the AP scheme during the winter months were clear:

no visa will be granted to immigrant workers for open placement which would result in the immigrants arriving in Canada between November 1st and March 1st. . . . Domestics, nurses, and nurses' aides are not subject to these restrictions and are permitted to come forward on a year-round basis."<sup>95</sup>

Domestic servants, then, were the kind of workers most needed. In the next decade, over 24,000 German women would come to Canada intending to work in domestic service. According to the plans of the Immigration Department, seven out of eight were to come as "open placements" via the AP scheme, the rest as sponsored immigrants.<sup>96</sup> The actual numbers, however, cannot be recovered from Immigration Statistics.

Most German women embarked from Bremerhaven, many of them on the *Beaverbrae*, often with hundreds of other immigrants and in the early years with hundreds of Canadian soldiers. From Halifax, Quebec City, or Montreal, Immigration officers or officers of the National Employment Service sent the women to their place of employment or to hostels at St-Paul-l'Hermite, Quebec, or Ajax, Ontario. There the women waited for between two days and two weeks for their departure to farther destinations,

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<sup>93</sup> Canada, Dept. of Citizenship and Immigration, *Report of the Department of Citizenship and Immigration for the Fiscal Year Ended March 31, 1950* (Ottawa: King's Printer, 1951), "Immigration to Canada, from Overseas Showing Intended Occupation by Racial Origin for the Fiscal Year ended March 31, 1950."

<sup>94</sup> RG 76, C-4690, vol. 31, file 682, part 7, letter of 28 March 1952, from George R. Benoit, to Officer-in-Charge, Karlsruhe.

<sup>95</sup> RG 76, C-7332, vol. 177, file 59735, part 2, "Departmental Circulars, Unnumbered, 1948-52," letter by G.R. Benoit to all posts abroad and all District Superintendents, 19 September 1952.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, letter of 29 December 1952 by C.E.S. Smith, Director, Dept. of Citizenship and Immigration, to Karlsruhe, regarding "1953 Program-Selection and Direction of Immigrants from Germany and Austria." Smith estimated the number of needed domestics for each region as follows: Atlantic: 234, East: 935, Central: 910, West: 1,461, Pacific: 354. In a letter of 15 January 1953 by George R. Benoit to all posts abroad, Benoit established that of these 4,394 domestics, 500 were to be sponsored.

such as Vancouver. In spring and summer of 1950, the Department of Citizenship and Immigration had decided that prospective domestics would be directed to a locality in Canada, which means women had no control over their destination.<sup>97</sup> It seems that Immigration and Labour officers wanted to keep most of the immigrant domestic servants in Quebec and Ontario. Only those with sufficient funds and "sponsors" (friends or relatives) could go West.<sup>98</sup> It is not clear whether these restrictions were applied consequently: Doris Schulz, Waltraud Schmidt, and Susanne Unterleitner all came in 1951 via the AP scheme and had no problems traveling straight to Vancouver. Christel Meisinger, however, who together with her girl-friend came in August 1952, had to convince Immigration Officers that their boy-friends were waiting for them in Vancouver before they could embark on the train to the Pacific. Heidi Schute and Margot Buchwald, who both came in 1953, could only venture on to the West Coast because they were "sponsored" by friends or relatives. Yet, when Gertraud Müller came in 1956, she had no problem traveling to British Columbia, although she did not know anybody there.<sup>99</sup>

The AP scheme enabled German women who could not otherwise afford the \$140 trip to leave Germany. The scheme also provided safety and security. Heidi Schute explained

I also found, yeah one reason too, was I found there was a safety attached to it. If I would have made this decision all on my own and ventured out to a strange country with not knowing the language well and not being protected, then I may have made a mistake or wouldn't know where to turn to. But it seems such a safe thing: the

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<sup>97</sup> RG 76, C-10676, vol. 673, File C83755, correspondence between Acting Director, Superintendent London and Eastern District Superintendent.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, interdepartmental correspondence July 1950.

<sup>99</sup> From the sources available to me it is impossible for me to establish with any accuracy how many German domestics came to British Columbia. Given the following number, some rough calculations could be done. From 1951 to 1961, 8-9 percent of all German immigrants came to BC (about 25,000); about 5-6 percent of *all* intended domestics immigrated straight to the westernmost province. The number of *German* domestics to BC would thus be between 1250 and 2500 for the period 1951 to 1961.

According to the Vancouver office of the Immigration Branch as well as to the Pacific Regional Advisory Board of the Dept. of Labour, the numbers of immigrants domestics never fulfilled the needs of British Columbia. A "spot check" in the province in May 1951 showed that 400 domestics "could be used" in Vancouver, Victoria, and New Westminster. However, the representative of Pacific District Superintendent of the Immigration Branch, J. Gibson, noted on 11 July 1951 that "almost daily the [BC Immigration] Office is approached by people who have been placed in the east in Quebec or Ontario and make their way out here."

government guaranteed you . . . for one thing, I couldn't have probably afford it, they gave you the money to start; they knew who you were, you couldn't get lost, nothing could have happened to you. That was maybe another reason really too - I saw a good safety feature in that. And if something would happen to me, somebody would - I felt - know about it or take care of it, because I was registered, I was a number, they could follow me up, they could look for me if I didn't pay, for instance, my repay them their what they owed me, so that was that.

The Assisted Passage Loan Scheme in connection with the obligation to work as a domestic servant for one year provided an opportunity for women who wanted to leave Germany, travel, fulfill their dreams of a better future. At the same time, the women were channeled into an occupation that was usually poorly paid and stigmatizing. Some of them arrived in Canada as debtors to the Canadian government. Nevertheless, German women, more than any other European group, used this channel as a strategy to negotiate their life situation. On their journey to Canada, they brought Old World values about women and men, work and skills, Germanness and immigration. But they also brought individual dreams, hopes, expectations, and conceptions of themselves.

**CHAPTER 3**  
**IMMIGRANT OR MAID?**  
**NEGOTIATING IDENTITY IN A CANADIAN HOUSEHOLD**

The single German immigrant women arrived in Vancouver as immigrants, but also as domestic servants. They had come to Canada with a specific *conceptualization of themselves* as adventurous and independent immigrants. But domestic service contradicted this self-conceptualization. By ascribing mainly positive features to domestic service and omitting the occupation's negative aspects, the women, then, constructed the job as an important, integral part of their immigration. In effect, they *mythicized* domestic service. By doing so the women could reconcile the reality of domestic service with their self-conceptualizations as free and adventurous world-travelers. They could identify as immigrants rather than as maids. This enabled them to cope with the conditions of the work as well as to make sense of their experiences as immigrants. The self-conceptualizations and myths were informed by the women's experiences of emigration and domestic service as well as by social discourses about immigration, womanhood, Germanness, work, and age.

In the following, then, I will explore the women's self-conceptualizations as immigrants as well as their myth of domestic service. I will then examine how gender, class, and ethnic values influenced the strategies women employed in their daily struggles over work and identity. But first, I will describe the occupation and some of its most important features.

## Immigrant Domestic Servants in Canada in the Fifties

The [second world] war killed all this servant business, being a maid, and I think it did a lot to finish off the idea that a woman's place and her only place was in the home. . . . The war and working in plants so changed me I became an entirely different person. I wish I'd kept a diary.<sup>1</sup>

This quote by an anonymous woman ends the chapter about women in postwar Canada in *Canadian Women: A History*. As the editors pointed out, this assessment certainly pays tribute to the "positive impact" that the war and its aftermath had "for some Canadian women". However, it represents only one side of the story: while for most white Canadian-born women "this servant business" might well have been a relic of the past, this was not true for *all* women in postwar Canada. There were tens of thousands of women who had to go into domestic service in order to make a living, contribute to the family income, or - as in the case of many immigrant women - to fulfill a one-year contract. Doris Schulz had come to Canada in December 1951 and worked as a maid in a household in the upper-class Vancouver neighborhood of Shaughnessy. She had kept a diary in the fifties and had read it just a few days before she gave me her assessment of the "servant business" and "being a maid":

That [first job] was a shocker. [. . .] I came into a very manual household. It was all done by hand: scrubbing the floors and waxing the floors and polishing the floors, all by hand. [. . .] My first day on the job was the second of January and my first job was to clean out two fire places, with the ashes and all those things. I was given a uniform to wear. Little black thing and little white thing and thank God they didn't have a crown for me. [. . .] Anyway, that was a shock for me. [. . .] It was from the very first day heavy physical work.

Domestic service and live-in maids had not vanished from Canada during or after the war. In fact, the number of domestic servants increased during the fifties.<sup>2</sup> This in-

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<sup>1</sup> In Barry Broadfoot, *Six War Years 1939-1945. Memories of Canadians at Home and Abroad*, 358, quoted in Alison Prentice et al., *Canadian Women: A History* (Toronto et. al: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988), 317.

<sup>2</sup> The number of female domestic servants in 1941 was 148,999. In the 1940s, this number decreased to 88,775 (in 1951); during the war, many women went into better-paid jobs in war industries; after the war, many women stayed in the manufacturing industries or left the paid labor force to establish families of their



crease was tied closely to an expanding middle-class, economic prosperity, and particularly to the large influx of cheap labor - immigrants: during the 1950s, some 80,000 women, almost a third of whom were German, came to Canada intending to work as maids.<sup>3</sup> What were the experiences of these 25,000 German women<sup>4</sup> during their initial months or years as maids and as young, single women in a foreign country?

For immigrant women, domestic service has had both advantages and drawbacks. Evelyn Nakano Glenn has explained these for the case of Japanese American women.

On the one hand, [domestic service] provided a port of entry into the urban labor market; the non-industrial nature of the job, the low level of technology, and the absence of complex organization made it accessible. Its menial status reduced competition from native born white women, who had better job options. It was also a vehicle for acculturation."<sup>5</sup>

Through domestic service, Glenn argued, immigrant women could learn Canadian house-keeping techniques, North American family relations, and some basic English. "For most domestics the job provided their only face to face contact with members of the dominant culture."

But domestic service could also become an obstacle: "The same characteristics that made it accessible separated it from the more advantageous occupations and more advanced industries." Barriers created by labor market segmentation hindered immigrant women from locating alternative employers and moving into other occupations. Domestic service then became an "occupational ghetto."<sup>6</sup> Moreover, because housework is isolating

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own. During the fifties the number increased to 120,392 in 1961. These numbers have to be used with caution: The Census Canada for 1941-61 did not have an extra category for live-in domestic servants. Thus, for 1941-51 the category "domestic servant" included "hotel, cafe, and private household worker, not elsewhere classified;" in 1961, this category included "maids and related service workers, not elsewhere classified." Numbers from Barber, *Immigrant Domestic Servants*, 7.

<sup>3</sup> One might suspect that Canadian middle-class women's need for domestic servants was tied also to a renewed focus on female domesticity and women's return to the home. More convincing, however, would be to argue that the increased need for domestic labor was linked to the rise in married women's participation in the labor force. However, only an analysis of, for example, popular or women's magazines might give clues and evidence for either argument.

<sup>4</sup> Numbers are from Barber, *Immigrant Domestic Servants*, 2.

<sup>5</sup> Evelyn Nakano Glenn, *Issei, Nisei, Warbride. Three Generations of Japanese American Women in Domestic Service* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 104.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

and live-in service so demanding, the job restricted immigrants' contact with other members of the new society.

There are two main arguments then: first, domestic service can aid women adjust to the new society and help them find a job (occupational and social upward mobility); secondly, domestic service can trap immigrant women in a job "ghetto" and isolate them from the dominant culture. What were the experiences of the German immigrant women?

All of the women I interviewed worked as live-in maids as their first occupation in Canada. Six of them stayed at one place before moving on to day-work cleaning or another occupation, while four went to live in another household before moving out of live-in service. The lengths of the stays varied from between five weeks to two and one half years with one employer. The average length of work as a live-in domestic was just a bit over ten months.<sup>7</sup>

The new German maids often started working in their new "home" on the same or the next day after they arrived in Vancouver. Those who came to Vancouver as contracted domestics were picked up at the train station by an officer of the local Immigration Office or of the National Employment Service. While many other immigrants would have to wait in the Immigration building (next to the train station at the waterfront) for up to several weeks, the prospective maids would be brought immediately to the local YWCA building. One by one the new employers would come to the Y, inspect the German "girls," and pick their favorite "to take home":

We just waited there for the people to come and pick us up. In the meantime they had arranged for some people who wanted some immigrant girls, you know. And they had arranged for some people to come up. But they didn't have names put to the people. So, [my new employer,] Judge Henderson came first and he asked whoever was in charge, if there was somebody who was a nurse. And since I was a nurse he said: "Well, I think this one can come with me." So, I was the first one going, I don't even know what happened to the other ones. I think some waited there for even a day to be placed somewhere. I was placed immediately.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Only one of the women who had come on a contract worked for a whole year, while the other five changed their occupation after four to eleven months. There seems to have been no relation between the length of stay in domestic service and whether the woman was a sponsored or contract immigrant.

<sup>8</sup> Susanne Unterleitner, interview by author.

While most of the women who came on contracts had made the decision to work as a domestic servant in Germany, there were some who did not quite know what occupation they would work in. Trained nurses had signed a contract to work either as a domestic or as a nurses' aide. Both Heidi Schute and Susanne Unterleitner had been nurses in Germany and found out that they would work in domestic service (and not as a nurses' aide) upon arrival in Vancouver.

German women who were sponsored immigrants were not automatically assigned a job upon arrival and did not know what kind of work they would have in Canada. They had to look for employment on their own. They found positions with the help of the relatives who had sponsored them and who either knew employers directly or who took them to the local office of the National Employment Service. In Vancouver, there were also private organizations, such as the Mennonite Girls' Home that found placements for women.

It was thus rather easy to find a live-in position. The women also had not much trouble quitting the job, particularly those without a binding contract. But contracted domestics seemed to have no problems as well. As Franca Iacovetta has already noted for contracted Italian workers, including domestics, immigrants who left their contract job before finishing it were not prosecuted by Immigration authorities. It seems that the National Employment Service, who was in direct charge of the contract domestics, was happy as long as the money for the loaned fare was repaid, no matter in what occupation this money was earned.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The Dept. of Immigration was nevertheless annoyed by this practice. In a letter to the officer-in-charge at the Canadian Government Immigration Mission, the Chief, Operations Division, Dept. of Immigration complained: "It would seem that a number of German immigrants recently arrived in Canada have forthwith set about shopping for a better job than the one for which they had undertaken to remain in employment for a period of twelve months. This may result in employers gaining an adverse opinion of German migrants not unlike the opinion already held in respect of Italian migrants. Will you please instruct all your visa officers immediately to impress on all migrants coming forward that they must repeat must remain in the employment selected for them. . . . German migrants should also be reminded . . . that they may, for a time, have to accept a class of employment slightly inferior to the degree of technical proficiency attained in their own country. This stems from . . . the necessity of adapting themselves to Canadian methods and technology." RG 76, C-4690, vol. 31, file 682, part 7, letter of July 24 1951, from Chief, Operations Division to Officer-in-Charge, C.G.I.M., Karlsruhe. In another letter, George R. Benoit complained to P.W. Bird that two German immigrant domestic servants had "left for the United States to marry U. S. soldiers." RG 76, C-

The German women secured new jobs with the aid of the National Employment Service, the Vancouver YWCA, the Mennonite Girls' Home, fellow German immigrants, work colleagues, relatives, and even former employers. However, it was hard to move out of domestic service (i.e. including day work). Waltraud Schmidt had been trained as a technician at Siemens during the war. She found it impossible to obtain a similar job in Vancouver:

It was just impossible. [. . .] I went to General Electric and asked them [for a job] and they said "No!", but they gave me a list of companies where I could try. [. . .] I went through about half to three quarter of the list; by that time I was fed up, because everybody said: "No! It's not suited for a woman." [. . .] I mean at that time anything went. "It's not suitable for a woman so we can't hire you," you know. Well, there was no Human Rights, there was no protection for equal opportunity, you know. That was a chauvinistic attitude that existed here. [. . .] I always argued about this: I said: "I don't understand your logic. You say this is not suitable for me as a woman. But," I say, "by the same token, do you think it's suitable for a woman to work in a wood factory and lift these big plywood sheets around? Or lift these big boxes with toilet paper and so." I said: "That you find suitable?" [. . .] I said: "It's not suitable, because somebody has a little bit more brains than maybe you do," I say. "That's probably what it boils down to."

Waltraud Schmidt found there were not too many job options for her as a German immigrant woman. Many women had to stay in domestic service: five of the ten interviewed women went into day work for the greater part of their work careers in Canada; another two worked as helps and nurses' aides in hospitals, mainly doing cleaning. Only two secured low-paid manufacturing jobs. Moreover, many women never again attained a job that - comparing wage, benefits, status, or skill requirements - was as good as the job they had held in Germany. The highly skilled technician Waltraud Schmidt worked on assembly lines for the largest part of her work career; well-educated Gertraud Müller instead of working in x-ray technology worked as a day worker and as a part-time cashier for a large department store; Susanne Unterleitner and Heidi Schute, both registered nurses in Germany, could only get jobs as nurses' aides in Vancouver; Margot Buchwald, trained as cook and pastrycook in Switzerland, took day work and worked in a donut

factory. Thus, while all women found domestic service helpful as an entry into the labor market, for some women it also became a "job ghetto."<sup>10</sup>

Evelyn Nakano Glenn had also pointed out that domestic service helped immigrant women in their adjustment to a foreign culture. In a way that is true. But one can also ask what occupation would not be "a vehicle for acculturation"? Domestic service was in fact no better suited to acculturation than any other occupation available to German immigrant women at that time. As waitresses, cooks, nurses' aides, or factory workers the women might have been in much more contact with Canadians than they were as live-in maids.

Because housework is inherently isolating and live-in service extremely time-demanding, domestic workers were to a large degree prevented from stepping outside the house. In the case of immigrants isolation would compound the feeling of homesickness created by leaving behind family and friends and the insecurity caused by limited ability to communicate with the new society. For the ten women I interviewed, isolation or loneliness on the job was alleviated by the presence of children, whom they had care of, or the presence of employers who wanted the German maids to keep them company. But even with the presence of others, the German maids could experience feelings of isolation and humiliation, when their employers just ignored them and acted as if the maid were "invisible". Gertraud Müller remembers the first household she stayed at:

Anyway, I was not very happy there. She didn't talk to me, he didn't talk to me. The only time Dr. Puschinsky talked to me was Sunday morning when he gave me a lift to church. [. . .] And then he was a nice man. We talked, had nice conversations. But in the house, he could fall over me, he didn't see me. [. . .] The only thing I didn't like that Mr., Dr. Puschinsky never talked to me in the house, because I felt like a person too. Why didn't he say at least "Good Morning!" when he came out of his bedroom and I was running in the corridor doing something and I said: "Good Morning!" and he never answered. [. . .]

I think it was not so much that I was German, just that I was a maid, she [Mrs. Puschinsky] had a maid and she could do with her what she wanted. Actually, she didn't do anything with me, she just ignored me more or less.

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<sup>10</sup> In terms of wage this was different, but arguably only so until the late 1950s when with the arrival of the economic miracle in Germany wages became comparable to those in Canada.

Being ignored by the employer family was certainly no route to speedy acculturation, rather the opposite. Moreover, women disliked the limited amount of free time due to the long and irregular working hours. Thursdays and Sundays were the traditional days off.<sup>11</sup> These days provided the only opportunity for German immigrant domestics to venture beyond the narrow constraints of the household and explore the city and the region, to go to the movies or night school to learn English, or to meet with friends and relatives. Some women were off duty after the dinner dishes were done, so that they could meet with girl-friends, cousins, or sisters who were maids in households close by. Others were asked to baby-sit for most evenings of the week or stand by in case the employers spontaneously decided to leave the house without the children.

The little spare time the women had was often crucial. It was the time when they could speak German with their friends and relatives, talk about their homesickness, and share their emotions with those people that seemed the closest and most familiar to them in the new country. Others would go to the German churches on Sundays or to the German clubs at night. Other places to make new friends or meet future husbands were dance halls, German delicatessen shops, cafes, and restaurants. Some would go to the YWCA on "domestics"-Thursdays to watch movies, get advice, and meet other immigrant women. The "Y" also provided English language courses, help with resumes, advice about problems with work or the culture. In the mornings the immigrant women would meet and go downtown shopping or to Stanley Park.

There were therefore several support networks that were available to the German women. Christel Meisinger had come to Vancouver with her friend Helga:

[In the evenings we would] just visit one another, Helga and me. That's about it. Didn't have too many friends then. All the friends we had were just the few girls we came with. [. . .] It was kind of hard to get the phone numbers or addresses, wherever they were placed. No, I don't think, no, we didn't see each other too much. [. . .] It was just the two of us. We had to stick together, right? Because she would have been lost without me, she more than I would have. I'm a fighter. But I promised her

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<sup>11</sup> The actual amount of time off ranged from the Thursday afternoon off to all day Thursday and all day Sunday.

mom and dad I'll take care of her and I did. She was a bit spoiled too. Not me. No, we stuck it out together. [ . . . ]

While some women were glad they had at least one friend in Vancouver, others were too proud or too embarrassed to admit to their relatives that they were homesick or did not like it. Even though Anna Grevesmühl missed her family back in Germany a lot,

I just never wanted to show that directly - but I did miss them, yes.

*Why did you not want to admit that?*

Didn't quite want to admit that. They asked me then: "How do you like it?" my relatives. "Well, I like it." They were nice, treated me well, my relatives, was no problem. [ . . . ]

*And why didn't you want to show that [you missed your family]?*

I didn't want to, I thought I'm already an adult, 20 years old already, don't want to make a fuss, that I would wail. There were several, I wasn't alone, the others didn't fare any better.

Johanna Grohsmann felt similarly. She believed that she had to make it on her own and not ask anyone for help, particularly not her relatives, because she would be too embarrassed. However, for her this was only true concerning material help. For emotional support and comfort she would turn to her cousins and her German girl-friend. "Oh gosh. Sometimes, oh, sometimes you got so homesick you just had a good cry and that helped too. [ . . . ] You really cried hard and good for a long time and then it was all over [laughs], that was it." She also felt that keeping busy and being young helped her to get over times of loneliness and homesickness. Thus, in the beginning, that is for the time they were domestic servants, the German women clung to those with whom they were most familiar, fellow Germans. Because they had hardly any opportunity to venture out, nor were they forced to as they would have been in other more "public" occupations, it took them longer to meet and feel comfortable around Canadians.

Most German immigrant women had the opportunity to learn English on the job, although a lot of them went to night school to learn the new language. And they did learn how to clean a Canadian middle or upper class home, operate a washing machine or dish washer, and prepare Canadian food. However, they would have learned English on almost

any other job as well; and learning to run a Canadian household was not more of an acculturation or any more helpful than the skills learned in any other occupation. Domestic service, then, did not speed up immigrant women's acculturation to Canadian society and culture. In some cases it was indeed the least suitable occupation for acculturation.

### **Myth and Self-Conceptualization**

Nevertheless, the German immigrant women described their occupation in just such terms of acculturation. I had not noticed this in the beginning of the interviews. I went into the interviews without knowing what to expect and just listened to the women's stories uncritically. Sometimes I told relatives or friends about the conversations with the German women. I tried to explain why the women went into domestic service, even though many did not have a choice. I said: "Being a maid was just the best way to get to know the Canadian way of life." I described domestic service in terms of a bridging occupation. After some time I realized that I described domestic service in this way because that was how the women had described domestic service in the interviews.<sup>12</sup> In their view domestic service was a bridging occupation, a "stepping stone," and for many it was the best one, at that.

How did German women come to the perception that domestic service was an efficient way to slip into Canadian society and culture? Domestic service, working and living in the home of people who were separated from the immigrant by class and ethnicity and who spoke an unfamiliar language, became the primary site where the immigrant women had to re-negotiate their identities. The house and the family confronted the women with new notions of what it meant to be a woman, a German, an immigrant, a worker. These ideas were often very different from and conflicted with those they had

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<sup>12</sup> I was probably particularly prone to this answer because of my experience as an exchange student in high school and the importance living in an American family had. Living in a family seemed to be the best way to integrate into the community. While this is probably true for exchange students, this perspective masked the fact that domestic service is an occupation, not an exchange trip.



brought from Germany. This was also the place where the women for the first time had to make sense of their immigration experience. Expectations, images, hopes and wishes now met reality. Brigitte Rabe was crushed when she had to go into a household:

I had thought about it being different in Canada. I never thought I would have to go in a household. And as I said before, my mom kind of implanted in me that being in a household is degrading and is not good. I wanted to be a dress maker, I wanted to be a designer, I wanted to have a career and that. And you know when you're twenty you have really high hopes for your future and you see yourself already in neon-letters somewhere - and then you go in a household and you work for a pittance.

Johanna Grohsmann remembered:

Well, [laughs] you know, we went through so much, and first we said: "My God, now we're maids", you know. But you get used to that. Then I said: "Oh, I earn good money. And the people were good to me." And that's the way it went, that was mostly that you had a job, because it was not so easy to find jobs too. Oh, ya, it was not easy.

How did the German immigrant women make sense of this experience as a maid? As Johanna Grohsmann, who arrived in Vancouver in 1957 in the middle of the first economic recession in postwar Canada, said, it was hard to find a job and domestic service paid good money. Moreover, those who had come on a contract had no choice. To perceive oneself as having no choice, however, is to cast oneself as victim. Such a view contradicted the women's idea of being an immigrant. After all, *they* had *decided* to leave Germany, to leave their home, family, and friends and often a decent job behind. As emigrants they were agents with a choice; as immigrants they were suddenly victims without a choice. Moreover, being locked in a house and doing denigrated labor contradicted the women's dreams and expectations. As emigrants, they had wanted to have adventure, see the world, travel around, be free, and independent. As immigrants, they were maids, expected to serve twenty-four hours a day and confined to a house most of the time.

## Self-Conceptualization As Immigrant

The women came to understand their experiences as maids by situating them within larger conceptualizations of themselves as immigrants. Two questions then need to be answered: first, what are self-conceptualizations and secondly, how did the women reconcile their experiences as maids with this self-conceptualization?

People try to make sense of themselves and their experiences by conceptualizing where they are in their lives and where they should be. This self-conceptualization is informed by social discourses and myths, dreams, fantasies, and imagination as well as lived experience, decisions one has made, the situations one has been in. It is an "identity-plan," an imagining of one's relation to the world. Thus, when the women had made the decision to emigrate, they had certain hopes and expectations of what their immigration would be like. They had imagined - conceptualized - themselves as immigrants.

The self-conceptualization of "the immigrant" was not a neutral, general concept. It was shaped by individual experiences and social discourses about womanhood, Germanness, immigration, age, and work. Such self-conceptualizations are not static but changing and volatile. The experiences and discourses that shape them change over time and place. The image of the immigrant the German women had in mind was that of the young, free, independent world-traveler. This image was informed by adventure novels, newspaper articles, and myths about male immigrants who had lived exciting, adventurous lives in the goldmines and cities of North America. There were sagas about "America." The women heard success stories from male and female relatives, friends, and colleagues. They could identify with these myths and stories because they were single. Marriage and family were not yet part of their life, neither in reality nor in their minds. Their immigration was their decision and involved personal goals and ambitions. Some married immigrant women following their husbands might have seen their immigration in different terms, often dependent on the goals and ambitions of their husbands.

## The Myth of Domestic Service

The women's self-conceptualization was confronted with the reality of domestic service. How then did the women reconcile the ideal with the real? They did so by ascribing certain meanings to their job. Domestic service was predominantly described in positive, even euphemistic, terms. The women perceived this occupation as a good or even the best way to acculturate.

For Anna Grevesmühl, "the first thing to do" was to learn English and Canadian customs. Waltraud Schmidt agreed: "Well, anyway. I had decided that I would go and work [for] a family for a short while to learn the life in Canada, how they cook, how they do things." Gertraud Müller had wanted to go back into the occupation she learned in Germany but wanted to use domestic service as a way to adapt, even after she had lived in a household for five weeks and had quit.

Well, I was glad I got another job [as a live-in maid], with the Olivers.  
*But did you think about going into a different kind of job?*

Well, I thought of getting back into x-ray, but I wanted to be a little bit more sure of the language. You know that was all very close in the beginning.

Susanne Unterleitner felt similarly:

It was a really really good way to get into the Canadian way of life. They [employers] were very kind, they taught you a lot. There are a lot of things which are very different from what we're used to. So it was really really good.

Johanna Grohsmann was convinced by the advice of her cousin, who had immigrated to Vancouver a few years before and had sponsored her:

And next day my cousin took time off from work and he went with me to the Unemployment Office. So he said: "I'm going to find you good place, with children and the better household, you know, that you can learn the custom." [. . .] [So,] that was an advice from my cousin. Because he said the language. First, I had a few courses, but like I said, your ear has to get used to that, the sound and pronunciation. And I didn't have much English, I just had so much that I could go buy bread and say Thank you and simple things. And then he said: "That's the best thing. And then you learn the custom too. Because you are a woman, you might get married, you

know you have to blend in to the Canadian way of life." And that's the best, for me it was the best way, yea.

*Did you agree with your cousin?*

Yes. Yea I did.

Heidi Schute even felt that domestic service was necessary before trying anything else:

It was the best way, I don't know what I would have done. If I would have qualified to be a nurse right away, I wouldn't have felt good about it, because there was too many other things to learn. And I go into the Y and getting adjusted to that different life style: that was the best setting for me and possibly for most of the other girls too.

The women considered domestic service an "experience," a "first stepping stone" or "as a start" in their lives as immigrants. In their view, domestic service functioned not only as a job to make money, but more importantly, as an efficient, sensible, even "necessary" way to start life as an immigrant. The women considered it a "first stepping stone" that would ease their transition into the new society.

The corollary of this positive, even euphemistic, description was that the women mentioned hardly any downsides of domestic service. If they did, they always tried to explain them with personal faults, either in themselves or their employers. There was, however, hardly any critique of domestic service as an exploitative, stigmatizing occupation. Moreover, the isolation of live-in domestic service had prevented them from investigating other labor markets and had insulated them from the new society and culture they wanted to acculturate to. The German women, however, did not explore or criticize the ways in which domestic service hindered them from fulfilling their ideas of immigration. By describing domestic service in such positive, euphemistic terms the occupation acquired mythical features. It could be seen as a myth that the women had constructed.

While traditionally myths have been discarded by historians as the Other, oral historians have re-evaluated the utility of myth.<sup>13</sup> People create and use myths as a means

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<sup>13</sup> See the essays in Samuelson and Thompson, *Myths. We Live By*

to contextualize past events. This contextualization is achieved by displacing, omitting, and reinterpreting past incidents.<sup>14</sup> Through these multiple displacements and omissions they construct "a discourse that does not require to be demonstrated, counting on self-evidence."<sup>15</sup> The image of domestic service could be seen as such a discourse. Drawing on the work of Roland Barthes, Luisa Passerini conceived myth as "an expression of alienation."<sup>16</sup> Thus, the myth of domestic service would have been a fantasy that allowed German immigrant women to withdraw from and not criticize their real situation, i.e. the exploited, "incarcerated" maid, from which they had become alienated. Hence, myth makes history.<sup>17</sup> The world of the imaginary is relevant, Passerini argued, because without dreams, images, myths, and fantasy people's experiences could not have taken place.

I would not go so far as to argue that the German women went into domestic service *because* of the domestic service myth. But once they had become maids, this myth kept them going, at least for a while. They seized on the myth to both "persist in their alienation" and "sustain their choice of action".<sup>18</sup> The myth then could accommodate an alienating experience, and as such helped some German immigrant women to negotiate or in Passerini's word "rebalance" their identity. The women made sense of their contradictory experiences as immigrant maids by integrating domestic service, with the help of a myth, into their self-conceptualization of immigrant.

Most of the German immigrant women could therefore understand their time in domestic service not as primarily work or a job. They saw it instead as an integral part of their immigration. Thus, the German women did not see themselves as maids but as immigrants, as newcomers to a country who found it important to adapt to the new circum-

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<sup>14</sup> Samuel and Thompson, "Introduction," 5.

<sup>15</sup> Luisa Passerini, "Mythbiography in oral history," in Samuelson and Thompson, *Myths We Live By*, 49-60; 50.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. ; Passerini cited two works by Roland Barthes: *Mythologies* (Paris: Seuil, 1957) and *Le Grain de la voix* (Paris: Seuil, 1981).

<sup>17</sup> Here Passerini draws on Evelyne Patlagean's work: "Storia dell'immaginario," in *La nuova storia* (Milan: Mondadori, 1980), 289-317; French edition: Jacques Le Goff, ed., *La nouvelle histoire* (Paris: CEPL, 1978).

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 50, 53-5.

stances as quickly and well as possible. In this view, domestic service became a strategy to achieve the goal of being a successful immigrant. It was almost the first logical step, and the fact that they had little or no choice was - to a large degree - excised from this view. It also masked the sometimes humiliating, frustrating, alienating aspects of domestic service. In their perspective, domestic service was a bridge to the new society and culture and *they* had *decided* to cross it.

### Gendered Perceptions

That the self-conceptualization of being an immigrant was very much shaped and thus gendered by contemporary dominant discourses about women and their roles in society became very clear in Johanna Grohsmann's story about the advice by her male cousin. For Johanna Grohsmann domestic service would be a "stepping stone" - not one into better occupations, but into the destination of women in the 1950s: marriage and family. Thus, asked what they learned, what they got out of domestic service, what it prepared them for, none of the women mentioned skills (except for having learned English) that they could later use in any job except that of unpaid homemaker.

The discourses on wifehood, motherhood, and domesticity that penetrated the 1950s provided no alternatives for women outside of marriage and family.<sup>19</sup> This renewed focus on women's domesticity also shone through in the narratives of the German immigrant women - at a time when most of them had not even thought about marriage. In

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<sup>19</sup> See Veronica Strong-Boag, "Home Dreams: Women and the Suburban Experiment in Canada, 1945-60," *Canadian Historical Review* 72, 4 (1991): 471-504; Yvonne Mathews-Klein, "How They Saw Us: Images of Women in National Film Board Films of the 1940's and 1950's," *Atlantis. A Women's Studies Journal*, 4, 2 (Spring 1979): 20-33; Gertrude Joch Robinson, "The Media and Social Change: Thirty Years of Magazine Coverage of Women and Work (1950-1977)," *Atlantis. A Women's Studies Journal* 8, 2 (Spring 1983): 87-111; M. Susan Bland, "Henrietta the Homemaker, and 'Rosie the Riveter': Images of Women in Advertising in *Maclean's* Magazine, 1939-1950," *Atlantis. A Women's Studies Journal* 8, 2 (Spring 1983); reprint in Laurel Sefton MacDowell and Ian Radforth, eds., *Canadian Working Class History. Selected Readings* (Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press, 1992), 595-622. For the USA see: Brett Harvey, *The Fifties: A Women's Oral History* (New York: HarperCollings, 1993); Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound. American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988); Wini Breines, *Young, White, and Miserable. Growing Up Female in the Fifties* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992); Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1963; repr., New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., New Dell Edition, 1972); see also my chap. 4.

Johanna Grohsmann's story it was moreover apparent how such ideas were ingrained in women's minds. Asked what the time in domestic service prepared her for, Christel Meisinger responded:

Umm-mmm. Maybe for marriage, with those kids. Having those kids around me. And I was pretty strict with them too. I did it my way, they left it all up to me. If they were bad . . . mind you, to . . . good, I let their parents sleep in on Sundays, when they were home, and I went in one bedroom to the one girl and had all kids and I walked them, and I sang German songs to them, and taught them German songs. No, maybe preparing me for kids. Because I never was for little kids at that age.

Margot Buchwald felt that being a maid had helped her in her domestic skills too:

From then on I kind of liked housework. They were not so fanatic than the Germans. The Germans, you had to bang the carpets around and you had to hang up those Persian carpets and beat them. They're easier here, you do your job and you don't have to drag all this stuff around and when you do your job right, they're happy and satisfied. They're more relaxed here when I came here. It's just a different of working conditions than in Germany.

Thus, dominant discourses about women and domesticity shaped how the German women constructed the meaning of domestic service. Domestic service was perceived as a way to gain knowledge of the new society - but specifically "female" knowledge. This in turn informed and changed the women's self-conceptualization as "immigrant." The women's focus began to shift from adventure and independence to femininity and domesticity. During domestic service, then, the women's perceptions of themselves and the world around them became more "feminized."

### Making Decisions

The myth of domestic service as a "stepping stone" was used to justify being a maid. But it was also employed when assessing a particular household and deciding to quit the household or the occupation as such. Because the women perceived the main function of domestic service as an aid to their transition into Canadian society, they arranged their

decisions and actions within this framework. Like other immigrants who started in the lowest-paid jobs, the German women discarded domestic service once it had fulfilled its function as a "stepping stone." Some women quit despite knowing that they had not fulfilled the contract, that the next job might be in a small, rural town, or that they would get less money. But they justified their quitting in terms that were hinged on the myth of domestic service. Thus, when women found that their employers no longer fulfilled their needs as immigrants (not so much as employees), they quit and either went to another household or changed the occupation as such. Waltraud Schmidt felt that her employer was not giving her enough in return for her work. She expected more than money:

I thought: "If she treats me this way I don't want to have any part with it." I mean, I wasn't fluent in English, she could've helped me with English or something like this. But she was of no help at all.

Heidi Schute was very articulate about this point as well, weighing the advantages and disadvantages of domestic service:

I didn't have to do any thinking for myself. She would tell me what to do. I wouldn't be able to manage anything, because of this adjusting to a different country and the language. If I was in a position where I had to make decisions or do things more independently, I wouldn't have been able to, I don't think. Here it again, it was the safe surrounding: she did the thinking for me, she told me what to do, and that's what I wanted to do; till I was *fluegge* [fully-fledged], and then it started to bug, then I were thinking: "Well, that's enough of that." But I was happy doing this and that's what I wanted to do. And now I thought I had advanced enough to do in this country what I came for and go back into nursing, in my profession, which I really liked.

While some women felt that they had learned enough about the Canadian ways of cleaning, cooking, and caring for children and wanted to move on, others had different reasons for quitting: bad living conditions, bad relations with the employers, too little pay, the prospects of a better job with regulated hours, more freedom, and possibly more pay. Still others wanted to marry and thus had to get out of the live-in situation. Thus domestic service in their eyes had ceased to serve its function as a "stepping stone" into Canadian society after a while. It rather stood in the way of moving on, of making it as an immi-



grant. It prevented them from getting to know other people, possibly their future husbands. By that time their self-conceptualization as immigrant often had changed too. They had started to settle down, got to know future husbands and had also become more secure of themselves and their abilities.

"Objectively" domestic service was not a "stepping stone" occupation for German immigrant women in postwar Canada. But attending to the women's perceptions helps us understand how they dealt with daily identity conflicts and struggles over power. They renegotiated or rebalanced their identity, by placing their experiences as domestic servants into their self-conceptualizations as successful, independent, free, world-traveling immigrants. They did so by constructing a myth around domestic service that made the experience as a maid fit their self-conceptualization. This then eased the transition into the Canadian society and culture. This was the "stepping stone" into the New World.

### **The Relationship Between Employer and Domestic Worker**

The German women might have seen themselves as immigrants rather than as maids. Nevertheless, they were confronted with a situation in which they were perceived and treated as a domestic servant by the employer family and in which the spatial setting of the house and the household made it clear that they were there to serve other people. Even though the German women might not have seen themselves as maids, domestic service had specific meanings for them. Some women found it degrading and disliked it, while others found the situation satisfying to a varying degree. They had to negotiate these meanings with those their employers ascribed. Sometimes the meanings would be incompatible, at other times they would be similar and overlapping - or at least seem so on the surface. It was in the relationship with the employers - not exclusively but mainly with the woman employer - that a large part of this negotiating took place in daily struggles over hours, wages, or living conditions.

## Conditions

The duties of domestic servants were not clearly outlined anywhere. There were no contracts (the only contract being the one entered into with the Canadian government in the case of unsponsored immigrants). The main tasks of the live-in maids were cleaning house, doing the laundry including ironing, preparation and serving of food, and taking care of children. Each of the women would not necessarily do all of these tasks. Where there were no children, maids obviously did not have to be nannies at the same time. Also, the women would not necessarily have to do all the work: sometimes the housewife would help or take over certain tasks, such as cooking. At other times, there were other domestic workers employed on a daily basis, such as nannies or day workers, who would do the heavier work, such as cleaning the windows or scrubbing the floors. Thus, it would depend on the employer how much and what kind of work German maids had to do.

Domestic service did not fall under Minimum wage legislation. However, in the contracts with the Department of Labour, the wages for domestics had been fixed at a minimum of thirty-five dollars per month and could go up to seventy-five dollars for more experienced domestics. The Department of Labour "expected" employers to pay the going rates of the area, even when they exceeded the figures put forth by the department. However, this was only an "expectation", not a request or demand. The wages of the women I talked to varied between forty and seventy-five dollars a month, and thus stayed within the boundaries set by the department (only one woman earned more - one hundred dollars a month). Most German women, however, did not come close to the average rates for maids, which in 1961 for the Vancouver Metropolitan Area were just under eighty-nine dollars per month.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, from their wages were deducted at least ten dollars a month for repayment of the loan by the government, so that Susanne Unterleitner, for example, ended up with thirty dollars a month.

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<sup>20</sup> The annual income for "maids" in 1961 was for Canada: 858 dollars; for British Columbia: 993 dollars; and for Vancouver Metropolitan Area: 1,065 dollars. *Census 1961*

The most striking and unique feature of domestic work was probably the long and irregular working hours. There were no laws setting a limit as to how many hours a week a woman was required to work. It was therefore not unusual for a maid to work from dawn till late after dusk, ten, twelve hours a day or even longer. They would be the first to get up at six or seven o'clock in the morning to prepare breakfast for the employer family and they would be last to go to bed at eight or ten o'clock at night, after all the dinner dishes had been washed, children cared for, employers attended to, or having waited for the departure of late night guests. Of course, women would not be working constantly; however, they were often under constant supervision and they were expected to be there and on call twenty-four hours a day. Afternoon breaks that were granted in the contracts by the Department of Labour were often not given or there was just no time to take them. There was thus not much time that the women could actually count on for themselves.

There was also no legislation concerning the living conditions and the amount of free time to which domestic servants were entitled. Again, much depended on the employer. The houses in the 1950s were usually not extremely large, so that most domestics would be accommodated in a room in the basement or in the attic. The room would be furnished with older furniture and, if they were lucky, the new maids would find a radio or even a television set in their new room. But this was not always the case. When Margot Buchwald came to her first place, she was not too pleased:

And then . . . they had so many mice in that house. It was in a nice area, but the people were just dirty. And they thought if they get a girl from overseas she'll clean up. [. . .] She [the employer] got beat up from her husband and hear screams all the times, before they went to work. [. . .] They fought like rats, but I didn't understand what they were fighting about, I had to look after those four kids. I was alone all day with them. [. . .] And I had to sleep with those kids too. They had this one big room. And the boards from that room were so far apart, then these mice would come up and jump around. And it was . . . I was frightened.

If so many essential features of domestic service were so dependent on the employer family, it was no wonder that the relationship with the employer became crucial. The German women often tried to influence and gain control of these arrangements in or-

der to shape and redirect them in a way that suited them best. They did so not only to make their lives more bearable materially, but also to reassure themselves of the values and dreams they had brought from Germany.

### The employers

Who were the German women "confronted" with in their daily struggles over working conditions and values? It would go beyond the scope of this study to analyze the employers in any detail. I did not undertake any interviews with employers since this is predominantly a study of immigrant women and not of domestic service. Nevertheless, a few words can be said. In my case study, the employers were all white, either of British descent or European Jews. They were at least upper middle-class with homes in the most wealthy neighborhoods of Vancouver, such as Shaughnessy, Kerrisdale, or West Vancouver. Some of them were established upper class while others belonged to the newly rich and expanding middle class of the fifties. Even though live-in service was on the decline and day work was replacing it, they would all be able to afford at least one live-in maid, and some could afford extra help, such as that of a nanny, gardener, or a day worker for heavy labor such as cleaning windows or scrubbing floors.

In her study of female Lithuanian displaced persons who had come to Canada on domestic service contracts between 1947 and 1951, Milda Danys has described the employers as people pursuing "the British myth of a retinue of disciplined, docile and devoted servants," for the notion "to have servants was to be genteel" was still well and alive in Canada. The employers were often people "who were not even wealthy" and who, had it not been for the federal government's "bulk" shipments of young women from the camps and ruins of Europe, could not have afforded a maid. Danys concluded that the Canadian women of the middle class "were hiring not so much a servant as a fantasy."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Milda Danys, *DP. Lithuanian Immigration to Canada After the Second World War* (Toronto: Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1986), 151. While Danys's assessment may be correct, it seems to be based exclusively on the stories she was told by the Lithuanian women. However, oral narratives demand

While this might be far fetched, it points to the notion that employers have in the past indeed hired servants not only out of necessity, but also as a way to enhance their own status. Thus, in the interaction between maid and employer different ideas about what it means to be a maid/servant/employee clash and are negotiated.

### The worker-employer relationship

The relationship between the domestic worker and her employer is one of the most crucial features of domestic service.<sup>22</sup> I see this relationship as the site where immigrant women most directly were confronted with the new society and country and hence forced to re-negotiate their identities. Such a negotiation was played out in the daily struggles over the control of work, hours, wages, free time, status, and function. This assumes that the relationship is hierarchical, but that the employer does not possess all power. Understanding

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the same methodological caution as other sources and can in this case not exclusively be relied upon. Instead, all time periods in Canadian history need studies such as Phyllis Palmer's *Domesticity and Dirt*. Here the assessments of the employers' motives for hiring domestics are based on a rich multitude of sources ranging from letters to government reports and reform groups' surveys; or as with or Judith Rollins's *Between Women. Domestics and Their Employers* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1985) the assessment is based on interviews with both employers and employees. Even these works have been criticized for depicting the female employer as a homogeneous group and glossed over the differences for example between middle class and upper class women.

<sup>22</sup> David M. Katzman, *Seven Days A Week. Women and Domestic Service in Industrializing America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), ix. Katzman's is one of the first studies on domestic service; he pointed to the significance and centrality of the relationship between the employer and the domestic worker. This relationship has - at least in the Western world for the last two centuries - commonly been constituted of two women: the "maid" and the "mistress." Katzman argued that "the highly personalized relationship between the two was one characteristic that most clearly defined household labor." Following studies on the subject often focused on that relationship and its relation to the structure of housework or to larger social relationships of gender, class, and race. And even though the relationship has been hierarchical, with the employer dominating the maid, the servant has always found strategies to deal with and possibly change this relationship. See also: Rollins, *Between Women* for a discussion of the relationship between Black domestic workers and white female employers in 1980s USA; Rollins not only interviewed both employers and domestic workers, but worked as a domestic herself as part of her field research; see also Glenn, *Issei*.

Mary Romero has recently put forward a Marxist analysis of the relationship. In her sociological study of Chicana household workers in the states bordering on Mexico, she argued that by focusing on the economic aspects of domestic service, it could be used as a "window into the relationship of housework to the economy per se." Conflicts between employer and employee then are instances of class struggle. I find her view convincing for her case study, that is Chicana women who do day work in the 1980s South Western United States and who have an interest in actively changing the structure of the housework. However, because the most important tool in this struggle - the separation of home and workplace - is lacking in the case of live-in work, I do not find Romero's concept useful for my study. Mary Romero, *Maid in the U.S.A., Perspectives on Gender*, ed. Myra Marx Ferree, Virginia Sapiro, Kay Deaux (New York, London: Routledge, 1992).

employers as "sisters" or "friends," for example, was one of the strategies by which maids attempted to gain control. Ascribing certain meanings to employers, to the relationship, or to the work can then be seen as strategies used to negotiate the conditions of work and life in domestic service. Such ascriptions can also be seen as aids in women's attempts to make sense of and give meaning to their experiences as domestic workers, Germans, women, and immigrants.

### **Being part of the family?**

Domestic work in its live-in version has historically been one of the most exploitative occupations. On the other hand, it is not only work that needs to be done but for some women the only job they can secure.<sup>23</sup> How did the German women adjust to this exploitative situation in a way that allowed them to maintain a stable identity? We can find a clue to the answer if we pay attention to how the women themselves perceived domestic service, particularly the relationship with their employers.

For some German women the relationship was often very personal and somewhat intimate. They described their place in the household as "part of the family" or a "family member" and their employers as "like a sister," "like a mother," "like a father," or "like my aunt". The tendency to think in such familial terms was often reciprocal. Employers would confide in their new found "friends," "sisters," or "children." Indeed, such a familial relationship usually originated with the employers. In the case of live-in domestic service, this tendency to familiarity moreover was fostered by the fact that there is no distinction between one's own household and the workplace. The areas of paid and unpaid labor, and of home and workplace, overlap widely.

The exploitative potential of such a perspective has been shown in the studies on Latin-American live-in maids. Grace Esther Young has argued that in the case of domes-

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<sup>23</sup> This is different for day work. Romero, Rollins, and Glenn said that some women choose day work over other low-paid jobs, because it allows them to schedule their days in a more flexible way, because they felt they had more freedom in a house where they did their work on their own without an employer's supervision, or because they felt too loyal to a certain employer to quit.

tic servants in Lima, Peru, "the idiom of the family as inclusive, just, and as 'natural' age-based division of labor and power, serves to structure a relationship of inequality - indeed exploitation . . ." <sup>24</sup> While this was - at least in a diluted form - also true for postwar Canada, German maids could use such a perspective to their advantage as well.

Christel Meisinger, for example, described the relationship to her female employer as quite intimate: "I discussed things with her I never talked to my mother about. [. . .] women things. We were just like girl friends." However, her view was not uni-dimensional. The description of the employer shifted from context to context. Thus, Christel Meisinger was quite aware that she was being exploited by her "girl friend": the employer added the duty of starching shirts. Christel Meisinger took over this extra duty without protest. One day, however, she accidentally starched them too much, so that the husband could not wear them and got into a fight with his wife. Christel Meisinger recounted the story with a smile on her face:

From there on the Chinese laundry guy came and picked them up every week and did them and delivered them. See, that was just one extra thing she thought she could save money on, by letting Christel do the shirt, too. Because I think they went to the laundry before. And then once I moved in and I was so perfect in everything, she figured I could do this too.

These two views of the employer - "girl-friend/sister" and "exploiter" - were not mutually exclusive, nor did they just merely co-exist. They intersected at important points. Thus, because of their friendship Christel did not perceive this extra work load as an act of exploitation. When asked, she vehemently denied that her employers had ever taking advantage of her, even though she had related that story in the preceding sentences.

Could we see this as a typical and striking example of "false consciousness" and the success with which dominant ideology and technology (i.e. pretending to be friends with your maid) work? I would argue in a different direction: To be on good terms with the employer, to be even like sisters, girl-friends, or part of the family, had advantages for

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<sup>24</sup> Grace Esther Young, "The Myth of Being 'Like a Daughter,'" *Latin American Perspectives*, Issue 54, Vol. 14 No. 3 (Summer 1987): 365-380, 365.

the German maids. It allowed Christel to achieve more control over her work as well as the relationship to the whole of the employer family. The employers might be less inclined to exploit her. And even if they did exploit her, the woman might not perceive it as such, which would make the idea as well as the reality of being a maid more comfortable and bearable.

Luisa Passerini has pointed to the impact of myth on people's behavior and feelings. Thus, even the image that one was well treated, however little this was grounded in "fact" or "reality," had an impact on how the women would act, think, and feel. To describe the relationship in such a way might boil down to the saying: "To make the best out of the situation." Simple as it is, such a view has advantages. By looking at *how* these women make the best out of their situation, we might understand how they negotiated power with their employers as well as how they constructed their identity.

This was an unequal relationship. However, if we look at the different and shifting meanings this relationship had for both the maid and the employer, we will understand that it was not a constant, stable relationship in which only the employer had power. Rather, control over the relationship and its consequences (kind of work, length of work, personal well feeling, etc.) were constantly negotiated between both parties involved. Power was thus dispersed, however unequally, between both and was constantly re-negotiated by giving the relationship new meanings. Christel Meisinger described the work she did in domestic service in terms of having assumed control, having taken over the complete household:

Like I said, I was part of the household, I did everything. They left that year almost the bringing up of the three kids up to me. [. . .] The children were very well behaved. Matter of fact, I learned them German songs and walked with them in the afternoon. I did the house. She was scared to get up sometimes because I was such a perfect housekeeper: First I was afraid of you know, and they had a red - that was the style at that time - a dark red carpet in the living room, a plush, and in the dining room was a green one, and plush and every footstep you make it shows up. Well that bothered me. They walked across that room and I was behind with the broom, oh. I tell you, sometimes she didn't get, Mrs. Wilson sometimes didn't get up till eleven o'clock, she didn't know what to do with her herself, because I did everything. They had a gardener; she did play around with the flowers out there. I told her



to go shopping, you know. [. . .]And then the next thing she said: "Well, Mr. Wilson is taking me on a trip," if I think I could handle the house for a month with the kids. Of course they knew, otherwise they wouldn't have gone.

Christel Meisinger was aware that her employers liked her and were dependent on her. In many of the stories she told about her employers, it seems as if it was her who gave the commands: "I told her to go shopping" or: "I said Mrs. Wilson to write me a note for the bus driver". Such a conceptualization of oneself and the world surrounding one might at first seem trivial. But the ability to construct an identity framework that could mask or even compensate an alienating experience can be of great significance. On it might hinge the decision to stay in Vancouver. After all, by the late 1950s every fourth immigrant was re-migrating home or to the United States.<sup>25</sup> The successful integration of an initial, frustrating experience into an ambitious self-conceptualization shaped the decisions the women made for their future lives.

### **Gender, class, ethnicity in the rebalancing of identity**

The women who got along well with their employers often did extra work for them. This was not done out of affection for the employer, but for self-gratification. They took pleasure in doing something that was not part of the regular duties, because they were then acknowledged by their employers. This gave them a sense of achievement as an immigrant in the new society. At the same time it reassured them of some the values and skills they had brought over from Germany. Johanna Grohsmann often did extra cleaning, explaining it with the high standards of cleanliness that she had brought from Germany:

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<sup>25</sup> Because Canada does not keep records of people leaving the country, there are no exact numbers of re-migrants. Anthony Richmond in his study on postwar immigrants in Canada estimated that "not more than 23 per cent of all post-war immigrants had left Canada by the time of the 1961 census." Anthony Richmond, *Post-War Immigrants In Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967; reprint, 1970) 229; Freda Hawkins has different figures, but also for a different (longer) time-period: "It is generally believed that, of the three million and more immigrants admitted to Canada since the Second World War, approximately one million have returned whence they came or moved on, mainly to the United States." Hawkins, *Canada and Immigration*, 38.

And then I done a few things I didn't have to do, but uh . . . like . . . the windows in the kitchen [laughs] and the windows in the dining room, until the window cleaner came. And then the nanny said: "Well, you don't have to do that." But I said: "They're dirty." [laughs] And the kitchen floor. The lady [day worker] came three times [a week], like I said. Then she was elderly, but she was very good to me. And then I done in the kitchen some cleaning that I didn't have to do. And then I polished the shoes of the kids which the nanny did only do once in a while and Mr. McLean [her employer] liked that very much [laughs] *because we were used to that from home*, you know. The kids went to school, the shoes had to be polished and things like that. And his shoes. They had always . . . Mrs. McLean had her own walk-in closet and he had his own, had a row of shoes, you know. But the points and everything was cuffed [dirty] and was not clean. Once in the spring she said: "Oh, we should start clean." Because I was always cleaning the kitchen cabinets, that I couldn't see that was dirty, you know. Or, not really dirty, but not the way it was. And then she noticed already, I couldn't sit around and do nothing. So, she said: "Oh, yeah, once in a while we should, this spring, do the cupboards, our shoes and all that." So they were out, going away for quite a few days at the time. So I started out and polished all their shoes. Boy they were: "Now, is this the Johanna do this." Yeah, I did that!

Johanna Grohsmann's extra labor was not only motivated by the meanings she ascribed to her ethnic background, but also by the prevailing social discourses about women and domesticity of the fifties. Since marriage and family were ascribed as the only fulfilling life goals to women, they necessarily had to take pride in their domestic capabilities. Johanna Grohsmann thus did not feel exploited by her employers, inspite of an income of seventy dollars per month for a seventy-five-hour, six-day week:

I liked cooking, I enjoyed it, because I wanted to learn, especially the customs and the meals they made and the way they made it. Because, I thought, one of these days I'm going to be a housekeeper, a mother maybe and have children, and all those things are very important. That I worked to just earn the money and get the work done: no. If I would have done that, I would never done anything besides what was not actually my job.

*So you were actually preparing for something different?*

Yes, and it was in me, I liked to have things clean and nice and liked to see - especially in cooking - the way things turn out and the way they taste.

*Why do you think that is in you?*

I don't know. It's given to me, I guess. It's most women are that way, I think. We only had a fair last week and this Christmas baking. You always want to do just as good as the next and you're happy when things turn out okay. I don't know, I'm not - what would I say? - a technical person. Some are very good in technical things, you know. Not me. . . .

Thus, prevalent ideas about what it meant to be German and a woman informed Johanna Grohsmann's conceptualization of herself as an immigrant.

Another influence was the meaning that work had for immigrants. Work, hard work, stood at the center of their self-conceptualization. To work meant more than just to earn money or even become wealthy. Only people who worked were respected. In the eyes of the female immigrants this was true not only for men but just as much for women. Such a work ethic gave the women a feeling of independence and strength. Johanna Grohsmann felt very strongly that she should be able to make it on her own without any help from her relatives:

I didn't want to kind of depend on them - no way, never did.

*Why not?*

I was my own person, why should I? For begging and so, never no, no. I probably would have gone sooner to strangers, people who I knew but not relatives. I didn't want . . . the embarrassment . . . that I couldn't do on my own. I was from very young on my own. I never was very day unemployed, nor did I collect one day unemployment.

*Why do you think you sort of feel that way?*

Well, I think God gave me brain, health, so. . .

*Was that something sort of typical for your family?*

Yeah that was instilled to us and I still think this way today.

*Was that something very typical for women at that time?*

I would say Yes. Not all of them. You could find the odd one who was, you know, "Why not? Why can't I get somewhere without working hard?" This was too, but very few.

*What kind of women were those?*

Well, I should say, "Dear Ladies" or something like that. They took advantage of somebody else's sweat or things, I don't know. No, that was never. And from back home. That was instilled to us: For what we want to have or get, we have to work for it.

*Did you find that all immigrants were like that?*

Most. Hard working. [. . .] Gosh. Most are very rich, I must say. Very rich, comparing to what we came with, very rich. Some of course, if health or marriage failures and then the people who just don't have the courage, or what should I say, they stayed behind. But not very many. Not what I know, anyway.

*Was that the same for like the Italians, and . . .*

Oh they're hardworking, too. Very hard working people, I must say.

Thus, as immigrants the German women felt sometimes superior to those women who did not work - which were incidentally their employers. When describing their employers, the German maids displayed less respect for the "mistress" than for the "master." Male employers were almost always described as "very nice" people who were "down to earth," while their wives were perceived as "stuck up." Whereas the men had worked for

what they wanted, their wives "took advantage of somebody else's [i.e. their husband's and maid's] sweat."

The employer was the person who could make the immigrant woman most painfully aware of her disillusioning and vulnerable situation. Describing the employer in negative terms helped the German women to defend their feeling of self-worth, to keep their identity steady. They did so by drawing on values they had brought from home: their ideas of what it meant to be German or their class background. Gertraud Müller had grown up on a large estate in East Prussia, with a large staff of servants around her. She called her first employer in Vancouver "the Queen of Sheba. So, she really treated me like a servant." To stabilize her self-esteem, Gertraud Müller identified her employer as culturally less sophisticated than herself:

She was definitely not a very intelligent person, I don't think so. [. . .] And I bet he [the husband] knew that I wasn't really made for that job. I think he knew. Even though I never said anything, I never complained, I just did what was asked of me. She didn't seem to be interested. I have an amber necklace and she just saw me wearing it on a Sunday, I had it on, and I asked her if she knows what it is, because I didn't really know the word *Bernstein* in English. And I asked her and she said: "Yeah, it's plastic." And I said: "No, it's not plastic." And so then I looked it up in the dictionary and I said: "It's amber." So, she was not the brightest and not the nicest person either, I think.

*Why do you think did they hire you?*

Because she was a dentist's wife, she was somebody. That is my impression that I got right from the beginning. Her husband made money and she never had this type of life before. I don't know what she was before she was married. Now she had two little children and that's why I call her the Queen the Sheba. She acted, tried to act like that: "Who am I and who are you? You are down there somewhere."

Gertraud Müller emphasized the difference between her female employer and herself. Feelings of inferiority and humiliation had arisen from the work conditions of domestic service. At the same time, the conflict between the reality of being a maid and the women's self-conceptualization as immigrants resulted in frustration and alienation. The women compensated this alienating experience by drawing on, preserving, and cementing ethnic, class, or gender values that had been brought from Germany.

## Adjusting

Whether they felt as "part of the family" or "treated like a servant," the German immigrant women who worked as maids in Canadian households found themselves surrounded by contradictions. The ideal of immigrant life had to be adjusted to the real life of domestic service; the notion that good immigrants assimilate quickly was contradicted by Old World values that the women drew on to stabilize their identity. While myths might enable one to avoid speaking of the contradictions one lives in, the more conscious self-conceptualization of the immigrant allowed such articulation. Some of the women therefore acknowledged that their situation conflicted with their expectations. They tried to reconcile this conflict by attempting to integrate the real situation into their expectations. Having to adapt to the situation - which might mean giving up or at least compromising one's expectations - was constructed as part of the experience of immigration. Doris Schulz, who found the household she worked in "lacking in friendliness" and her employer "not friendly," also acknowledged her role and felt that she would have to "overcome" her expectations. Johanna Grohsmann similarly felt that she would "have to get used to" the idea of being a maid. And Anna Grevesmühl who also had "expected more than what I saw," asked rhetorically "But it worked. Where do you not adapt?"

Drawing on cultural values brought from home, conceptualizing oneself as an adventurous, free, and independent immigrant, and constructing a myth around domestic service as a "stepping stone" into the New World were ways by which German immigrant women could reconcile their personal ambitions with the social realities they faced. Despite the limited options and the constraints the women confronted both inside and outside their home/workplace, they nonetheless thought of themselves as active persons with choices and decisions to make. Adjusting to their new situation, then, did not necessarily mean the complete "assimilation" Canadian society expected of them, but a successful conceptualization with which to position themselves in the New World.

The women's situations changed once they quit the live-in position and yet again when they decided to marry. While three of the women married right after they had quit their job as a live-in maid, seven worked in other low-paid jobs before marriage. The women I interviewed married on average two years after their arrival in Vancouver, some after less than one year, some after three to four years. If they had not decided to stay in Canada before, this was usually the event that cemented the decision to leave Germany behind for good. How the German women experienced their time between live-in service and marriage and how they experienced marriage are the themes that I will discuss in the following chapter.

**CHAPTER 4**  
**NEGOTIATING INDEPENDENCE:**  
**WOMEN, WORK, AND MARRIAGE IN THE FIFTIES**

Single German immigrant women in postwar Canada were independent women in a society and culture that was concerned about women who sought sexual, domestic, and economic independence. The boundaries of traditional gender roles had shifted with women's increasing employment in the paid labor force during the Great Depression and the Second World War. When the war was over, many Canadians wanted to contain women's newly won independence in the home. Dominant discourses focused on the "naturally" or "biologically" "different but complementary" roles of men and women and some Canadians retreated to their nuclear families and cemented traditional gender roles in their suburban homes. On the other hand, many German immigrant women were enjoying their independent explorations of a foreign country and culture.<sup>1</sup>

The women's self-conceptualization as independent immigrant had, as shown in the last chapter, been compromised by the conditions of domestic service. Once the women had freed themselves from these constraints, they could not only live out their independence, but ground their identity more firmly in the lived experience of independence. Independence became a more stable frame of reference for the construction of their identities. Being an immigrant and drawing on stereotypical, that is culturally acceptable, images of immigrants helped to justify and legitimize their behavior to themselves as much as to people around them. This self-conceptualization as independent immigrant

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<sup>1</sup> Theresa Healey pointed out to me that not all and possibly not even the majority of Canadians followed the dominant discourses on gender. Further oral histories of the fifties might reveal that depending on class, race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation, many Canadians did not participate in the retreat to the family and might have even resisted the dominant discourses.

would be threatened again by exploitative bosses and by the decision to marry. In this chapter, then, I will examine how the single German immigrant women negotiated their identities around the intersecting themes of independence, work, and marriage by drawing on meanings of immigration, gender, class, and ethnicity. How as single women did they perceive themselves and the world around them? How did they deal with marriage and what strategies did they develop to ensure their autonomy in their marriage?

### **Independence, Work, and Identity: Can "Unmarried" Women Be Happy?**

While a few of the German immigrant women I interviewed married upon leaving domestic service, most of the women did not yet have "home dreams," nor were they "homeward bound;" and though they were white and young, they did not feel "miserable" - like some of their white middle-class sisters in suburbia<sup>2</sup> - but "happy," "free," and "independent." In fact, when talking about this short time "on their own," "independence," "freedom," and "happiness" were keywords in the women's narratives. These feelings of happiness and independence seem to contradict the fact that as female immigrants the German women were exploited in low-paid and low-status jobs; they also belie the dominant ideology of the fifties that claimed women could not find fulfillment outside of home, wifehood, and motherhood.

### Women and Cold War Containment

Single women in postwar Canada lived in paradoxical times. Canada in the 1950s was changing from an industrial to a post-industrial society in which primary and secondary industries declined while the service and clerical sectors were expanding.<sup>3</sup> This expansion of so-called pink-collar jobs gave women increasing employment opportunities (albeit not

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<sup>2</sup> For literature on women's experiences in suburban Cold-War Canada and USA see footnote 146 in chap. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Prentice, *Canadian Women*, 291, 423.



careers). Young women of the middle-class would either go on to college or into white-collar jobs such as stenography and other office work, while working-class women would seek employment in the expanding sectors of service and manufacturing industry. The majority of women's jobs were located at the bottom end of wages and status hierarchies. At the same time, Canadians' desire to return to a warm, comfortable, and secure home after a long Depression and an exhausting war was great. Many young women decided to stay home as full-time housewives and mothers. Women's participation in the labor force increased nevertheless from 24 to 30 percent between 1951 and 1961: women who had worked in the war industries decided to stay in the work force and an increasing number of wives without or with older children began to work outside the home.<sup>4</sup>

In the fifties, women's employment opportunities were increasing. At the same time, however, messages by the media and medical experts as well as government policies worked against this development. The postwar suburbanization, moreover, was an obstacle for women who wanted or needed to work outside of their homes. Government and media united in an effort to make Canadian society return to traditional gender roles and to send women back to their primary sphere of activity - the home. In 1944, family allowances were introduced;<sup>5</sup> after the war, the federal government canceled the wartime incentives to attract women into the work force; in 1946, it abandoned its support for the few day nurseries established during the war and it stopped a special income tax concession for husbands with working wives in 1947.<sup>6</sup> In advertisements, the image of the woman as the homemaker, wife, and mother became even more dominant than it had been before the war.<sup>7</sup> Stable families and full-time mothers were seen as the best bulwark against communism; social scientists and psychologists declared that "women's most basic satisfactions came through service to others in the domestic sphere;"<sup>8</sup> and with the

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 311-313, 422.

<sup>5</sup> Bland, "Henrietta the Homemaker," 597.

<sup>6</sup> Prentice, *Canadian Women*, 305.

<sup>7</sup> Bland, "Images," 618.

<sup>8</sup> Strong-Boag, "Home Dreams," 478.

increasing suburbanization the spatial segregation of Canadian society along the lines of gender, class, race, and ethnicity was reinforced.<sup>9</sup>

The focus of the discourses on women as wives and mothers went hand in hand with a new sense that, in postwar Canada, it became increasingly unacceptable for a woman to be single.<sup>10</sup> Women were expected to marry young and were then "allowed" to work until they became mothers. Women's work outside the home was seen as respectable only if the work was for the benefit of their family and their country but not "themselves". In fact, anything women did or thought was supposed to be for and within the nuclear family. To be a single woman, on the other hand, meant to be "unmarried," which was defined as outside the normal in the fifties.

In the media, for instance, the theme of "catching a man" as the main goal of a single woman was paramount in the advertisements directed towards single women in the 1940s and 1950s.<sup>11</sup> Being single either meant that the unmarried woman was not yet fortunate enough to have obtained a husband and thereby her full and true identity; or it meant that she had actually chosen not to marry so far, which cast her as a deviant, abnormal woman.<sup>12</sup> In the dominant ideology of the fifties, healthy, young women longed to get married. An interest in independence and an uninterest in marriage is what set many of the single German immigrant women in postwar Canada apart from the dominant discourses and the behavior of many Canadian women.

### Independence At Work

When leaving domestic service the ten German women I talked with were between twenty and thirty years old; seven of them were between twenty-eight and thirty. Seven

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<sup>9</sup> See Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Prentice, *Canadian Women*, 308.

<sup>11</sup> Bland, "Images", 612.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 618.

women lived on their own for a while<sup>13</sup> after they had left the "family"-setting of domestic service and before establishing their own family. These women had moved into their own apartments, some with a friend or two. They had jobs that were earning them enough to get by and even pay off debts or send money to friends and relatives in Germany.

As we have seen in chapter three, German immigrant women moved out of live-in domestic service with ease, even before their contracts were over. Finding another job was not too hard, particularly in the early 1950s, before the Diefenbaker recession hit the country;<sup>14</sup> but finding a job that was better than the one they had had in Germany or one that they considered a "dream job" proved impossible. As female immigrants with only little knowledge of English and few or no marketable skills, the German women could secure merely the lowest-paid, lowest-status jobs. All of the women mentioned that most of their co-workers were other immigrants, while their bosses were usually white Canadian-born men or women. The conditions under which they worked were often harsh and exploitative. Work conditions were sometimes even hazardous, as Heidi Schute remembered about her job as a nurses' aide in a hospital for First Nations' people in Northern British Columbia:

The nurses did the medication and the treatment and we would help the patients bathe and make their beds and I think it was really, really funny actually, because it was supposed to be isolation and we should protect ourselves from TB [tuberculosis] and not among them to spread it, so we had to wear little paper masks, and I learned later that those masks are only good for maybe two or three hours, but we wore them all shift. We got one mask.

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<sup>13</sup> The average time span of German women's leaving domestic service to marriage was 16.4 months with a dispersion of 14.6.

<sup>14</sup> In the mid-1950s, the Canadian economy experienced a "major downturn" and unemployment began to grow. After the defeat of the Liberals in the 1957 federal election, the economy "slumped even further, a result of declining world trade and restrictive and inept economic policies of the Conservatives [under Diefenbaker]." Between 1957 and 1963, Canada was in a recession. Allan Moscovitch and Glenn Drover, "Social Expenditures and the Welfare State: The Canadian Experience in Historical Perspective," in Moscovitch and Drover(eds.), *The "Benevolent" State. The Growth of Welfare in Canada* (Toronto: Garamond Press, 1987), 13-43; 29-30.

Even friendship with the employer or working for a fellow German did not prevent women from exploitative conditions. In fact, a few women recounted their work for German employers in Vancouver as the most exploitative.

Nevertheless, while conditions might have been bad and the pay low, the German immigrant women felt very good about the work and about themselves. They now actually could live their immigrant dreams, at least to some extent. They felt "free", "independent," and "happy". Thus, what is striking in Doris Schulz's account of her work in the restaurant of a German couple whom she had befriended during her trip to Vancouver, is not so much the harsh conditions, but how she felt about it:

I was peeling potatoes and washing dishes. And that was very nice. Except for the fact that the washing dishes was done in two great big tubs of galvanized metal, there was no dishwasher in those days, remember? So, I ended up having hardly any fingernails, because it was so rough; no skin on my fingers. So that was a difficulty, but otherwise life was wonderfully fine.

Asked how she felt about her job, Doris Schulz elaborated: "Fine, very liberating, I felt. It didn't matter to me what I did as long as I was free. It didn't matter at all, as long as I was free to be an employee and have certain hours and then be free." And again, in light of having to work six days a week:

Oh, [I worked] about eight hours I think that was. But in those days people were working still half day on Saturday, so we still had a six-day working week, so we had one day off, Sunday. I was happy. [. . .] It didn't bother me, I remember it as something that didn't bother me at all. Because I was totally free in my mind. So, in a way, I discovered that you can live in your mind. Independent of your outer circumstances, you can live in your mind.

Although in one way the job might have been hard and frustrating, it became a source of empowerment from another perspective. The jobs looked more attractive than the live-in domestic service positions the women had held just before and they thus felt "liberated". Moreover, for the German women, these jobs were still part of their adventure of immigration. Even when they could not get their "dream job" they would still see their employment as a means to gain independence and freedom. Waltraud Schmidt, the tech-

nician, was twenty-nine years old when she left domestic service and had to work on an assembly line cutting and sewing suitcases. Asked how she felt about that work, she said:

Well, I tell, it was still adventure. I thought, well, it's another thing I see now, I get to find my way around and have to see how I can get myself up. [. . .] Oh yah, it was an improvement [over domestic service] of independence, independence. I did my job and it was fine what I did and I went home in the evening and I could do whatever I want to do. I could take lessons, I could do anything that I wanted to.

Independence is a keyword in the narratives of the German women. It was one of the main frames of reference for the women's identities. And yet, in the fifties, woman and independence were seen as mutually exclusive concepts, which, if confounded, would result in delinquency, disease, or public disruption. In order to legitimize their independence, the women framed their independent status within the concept of the independent immigrant. Thus, while they were not allowed to be independent as women, they could be independent as immigrants. The jobs therefore were seen as an adventure, part of the *immigrant's* (not the woman's) experience and career. While to a certain degree the women transgressed gender boundaries, they also masked this transgression by drawing on the image of the independent immigrant and thus legitimized their transgression.

This masking was most apparent in the women's struggle to retain their independence where it was threatened. Margot Buchwald told about her work as a cook in a private hospital in West Vancouver, run by an Austrian man who didn't want her to cook so well for the old people ("because it was too expensive"), and how she disagreed with him:

We [she and four other German women working at that place] talked to each other about it, it's not right the way he treated us and he didn't like the idea, but he had to do his own work for a while. Because I said to him: "You're not more in Germany where you get treated like a Nazi. We're in Canada, we're freer." And that was another thing why I came, I wanted to be freer. The freedom you had here was, compared to Germany, was different: you could say what you want, you could think what you want - in Germany you couldn't do that. During the war.  
*What exactly do you mean by "being treated like a Nazi"?*

Well, he would just dictate you around, just like they were dictated around during the war.<sup>15</sup> You know, you do what you're told.

Margot Buchwald's independence - the area of autonomy and resistance she had carved out in her job by cooking meals that were better than the boss wanted to afford; her sense that people should be treated in a certain way by their superiors - was threatened. Her response to this threat was informed by her status as an immigrant and a German as much as it was by her gender.

Before examining her response, let's first look at three alternative responses Margot Buchwald theoretically could have chosen. The first response could have been "humanist": she could have argued that nobody has the right to treat a fellow human being in such a deplorable way. Secondly, she might have understood her employer's behavior from a "feminist" point of view, as an act of male chauvinism, arguing that men and women are equal. Thirdly, Margot Buchwald might have seen her boss from a "Marxist" point of view, as a capitalist trying to exploit her; her response might have then been phrased more in the terms of class struggle. However, none of these last two alternative responses would have been backed by a majority of society in the fifties, particularly when coming from an immigrant who might have been termed a "troublemaker" or from a woman, who might have been defined as "abnormal." Thus, these responses were not feasible, particularly not for an immigrant woman. The "humanist" approach might have been more accepted, but less powerful than her actual response, in which Margot Buchwald draws on her Germanness as much as on her status as an immigrant. On the one hand side, she invokes the "common" past experiences in the Third Reich. On the other hand, she identifies with the good, democratic Canadian host-society ("*we're* in Canada, *we're* freer") and depicts her boss as the "troublemaker", the German-speaking immigrant who still has not learned ("*You're* not more in Germany"). By constructing de-

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<sup>15</sup> Margot Buchwald's confusion over the term "Nazi" (describing a Nazi as the victim of the Third Reich) is evidently more than a grammatical error. An investigation of how German immigrants have dealt with their Third Reich experiences during and after their immigration seems to me an important study, but is beyond the scope of this thesis.

fiance in such terms, Canadian society could do nothing else than side with Margot Buchwald and deplore her dictatorial boss. However, as powerful as this argument might be in convincing herself and her audience of her struggle for independence, the structural constraints on immigrant women in postwar Canada are obvious too: at that time, there was no one - no union, no politician, no human rights activist - who listened and helped her change the work conditions. Margot Buchwald's (and her four German immigrant women friends') only possible action was to quit and enjoy knowing that "he didn't like the idea, but he had to do his own work for a while."

Gertraud Müller remembered her work in a bakery run by a German man:

That's when I swore: "I'll never work for a German person anymore." Because they didn't have a very good connection with their employees. For one thing, he said I am on a six weeks trial basis - I forgot how much I made there - that's his policy, and then I get a raise. So, okay, the six weeks were up and I still got the same, seven weeks were up I still got the same. When I dared to ask when I'll get my raise and he said: "Well, business is not that good at the moment, I can't afford it." And that's, I think, in the eighth week, I quit. [. . .] He was a good baker, his cakes were delicious, but as a boss? I grew up with: "what you promise, that promise you keep;" my father was, and my mother, were both very firm believers of this way of living: to be punctual at all times, we were Prussians, right? [laughs] I mean, it was never said, I learned all these things later, when we lived in West Germany. There are all these bad things that the Prussians do. Strict and honest and straight-forward.

Like Margot Buchwald, Gertraud Müller phrased her resistance to her employer's infringement of her - in this case mainly financial - independence in terms of her ethnicity and immigrant status. While Margot Buchwald had accused her employer of being "too German," Gertraud Müller complained that her employer was not "German enough." He did not behave according to her "Prussian" standards. She invoked ethnic values that she thought were superior to her employer's values and that at the same time would appeal to the North American values of "fair play." And again, Gertraud Müller's only means of struggle was to quit the job. Her only satisfaction was that her employer was somehow inferior to her since he was incapable of living up to her "high" "Prussian" standards. Moreover, this construction of her predicament justified in socially acceptable terms why

she did not submit to her employer's practices, as immigrants and women were expected to in postwar Canada.

These two stories also point to the importance of subjectivity in history and historiography. People ascribe certain meanings to their actions. We cannot deduce the meanings from externally observable behavior. We cannot argue "the women quit work, thus they consented to capitalist authority, thus they had no class consciousness." Oral history, however, gives us the opportunity to ask people how they understand their actions. It allows us to investigate the question Luisa Passerini has posed for a history of subjectivity and consciousness: "how and how far can constraint be exerted in the sphere of subjectivity?" The stories by Margot Buchwald and Gertraud Müller showed that they did not consent, yet they were limited in their actions. Thus, because subjectivity and consciousness "are never neutral, but part of the struggle," they informed the women's daily negotiations of power. By listening to the meanings the German women ascribed to their decisions, we could uncover how they dealt with the constraints imposed on their quest for freedom and independence. At the same time we could see how they partially accepted and thus reinforced the power relations that had denied them their freedom and independence. It is, therefore, important to point to the potential dissent inherent the women's consent to authority.<sup>16</sup>

### Transcending Gender Boundaries

The work-place was not the only site through which women could define themselves as independent. Heidi Schute was thirty years old when she left domestic service and started to live on her own in Vancouver. She was neither married nor thought about being married yet; but despite the cultural messages that told her to worry about and concentrate on "catching a man," she found fulfillment in her job as a nurses' aide as much as in her

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<sup>16</sup> Passerini, "Working Class Ideology and Working Class Attitudes to Fascism," 58, 75.



friendships and the atmosphere of camaraderie or communal life that she found in the spaces of immigrants and working-class people:

Yeah, I had that room there and I had some personal belongings. [. . .] And I was quite happy, I was very happy to be on my own. [. . .] And I moved around a couple of times. I started off living with that German girl, Marianne, she was a physio[therapist], and I don't know, I can't remember how I ran into her, but she helped me find my first little room, it was in walking distance of the hospital . . . [. . .] Older people lived in there, younger people lived in there. [. . .] And I spent a lot of time with her, because she had a nice apartment there in the same building and I was just on top there, where they rented those rooms out. And we did things together and I got to get to know some more people. [. . .] And I had to start thinking for myself: where do you buy groceries cheap? [. . .] There were all those little corner stores which had everything you needed. And that was walking distance. And that's what I did. [. . .] And for our days off, when we ever had them together, we went to Stanley Park most of the time in the summer, and it was great, it was a good life.

Instead of marrying, the German women wanted to learn in their professions and enjoy the communal experience outside of marriage. Brigitte Rabe had quit domestic service and worked in a factory for a few days before being fired. She then found a job sewing for a dress-maker and although it did not live up to her dreams, she recounted that period in her life as enthusiastically as had Doris Schulz:

And my brother bought a house, so we all moved in with my brother. . . . I went to several places, I went to the unemployment office, everybody got jobs from the unemployment office. [. . .] And then I got a job as a dress maker and I was very happy about that, very happy. And, you know, I had my forty hours, I had evenings free, I made lots of friends and went to dances.

*Was that job actually what you had expected when you came to Canada?*

No, still not, I was dreaming . . . Like I say, when you finish your apprenticeship you figure you know everything, when in fact you're just starting to learn, and I was having grand ideas that I would right away be able to do designing and stuff like that - well, it wasn't like that. I did the sewing, not the fitting, not the designing, not the cutting, I just did some of the sewing, lots of alterations they had to do, too. But I was satisfied with it because at the time it was a good learning experience for me and I learned a lot from the other people there that were all older, most of them were older, and it was quite nice, that was quite nice.

*I would imagine you had more leisure time then than when you worked in domestic service?*

Oh yah, that was the year where I really enjoyed myself. I worked overtime maybe once in a while, but I had my weekends free, and we did everything. There was a girl living with my brother - he was renting out - so one girl moved in that was about my age, and the two of us had a ball: we would go swimming and we would go whatever we could do. Really, we enjoyed it, it was a very good.

When listening to the women talk about their lives as single immigrant women, it seems almost as if they did not live in that straight, crisp-clean decade of the 1950s, but in a bohemian European city of the 1920s. Despite their work in menial, low-paid jobs, they enjoyed life. This halo of happiness might be explained with people's tendency to nostalgia. However, this halo might be expected to hover over the women's stories about their marriages rather than their experiences as singles. But for some of the women, who were already in their mid- to late twenties by then, marriage was "still" not a subject that occupied their minds. They were following their dreams of establishing their "own pottery" or becoming "a famous dress maker", of regaining status as a registered nurse or as a skilled technician.

Women's "normal urge towards marriage, and home, and family life,"<sup>17</sup> their drive to "find a man," which both politicians and medical experts ascribed to and prescribed for single women, was lacking in many of the young, single immigrant women. They rather planned their careers, or met with their friends, often other European immigrants, in European cafés on Robson Street and "talked philosophy"; or they would, together with friends, get an old car or rent some bikes and explore the beaches, parks, and mountains nearby; they even went to Northern British Columbia to work in hospitals with First Nations' people. They explored spaces that were defined as "unfeminine" or "unsuitable for women;" they transcended boundaries that were restricting their experiences and identities. Heidi Schute and her friend Irmtraud Ahrendt<sup>18</sup> decided to change jobs after half a year. Heidi Schute recounts:

After we worked in the Vancouver General for a while we both thought we would like to get to know a little bit more of Canada, and see what it's like to work among "the Indians" and we enquired and found out that the Department of Immigration

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<sup>17</sup> Canada, Advisory Committee on Reconstruction, *Post-War Problems of Women: Final Report of the Sub-Committee* (1944), cited in: Annalee Götz, "Family Matters. The Canadian Family and the State in the Postwar Period," in *left history* 1, no. 2 (Fall 1993): 9-49; 15.

<sup>18</sup> Heidi Schute and Irmtraud Ahrendt had planned to emigrate together, but Irmtraud Ahrendt became sick shortly before departure and had to cancel. She followed her friend Heidi Schute about six months later, arriving in Vancouver in the early summer of 1954, worked for Heidi Schute's former employer for a short time until her friend had secured her a job in Vancouver General Hospital.

and Indian Affairs, they had an office downtown in Vancouver, and one day we went there and asked what were the opportunities to work among the Indians and what is there, we are from Germany, and they right away told us - I wonder if there were many choices or not - they said there would be in Millobay hospital nine miles north of Prince Rupert, there would be openings and we could, if we were serious about it, we could apply and we did. Because, you see, that hospital has a lot of turnover, you know, people just for reasons, they stay there just for a little while, for experience, for adventure, nobody wanted to make that a life time position up there, that wasn't meant that way. So we applied, and the money was lot better, and they would help us to get up, they paid the transportation. [. . .] So that's when we went up there. And it was good, it was a good time, that was a good move, we learned a lot. Yeah, that was a very interesting Canadian experience, I thought.

Although Heidi Schute mentioned that the pay there was better than in Vancouver, financial considerations were not paramount. She saw her work as a learning experience, a way to expand her horizon, almost like a college for immigrant working-class women. Brigitte Rabe had also enjoyed her work as a seamstress because "it was a good learning experience for me and I learned a lot." While the jobs must have seemed harsh, menial and boring to some, they were not so for German immigrant women. Of course, the work was hard and exploitative, but the women perceived their work from a different angle. Exploring new ways of doing and thinking was an important part of the "experience". Heidi Schute's urge to transcend the boundaries of common, dominant knowledge, her quest for "truth," is rather reminiscent of the openness of popular movements that were to come fifteen or twenty years later:

And the people with me: I met lots of other German girls, the doctors, physios, teachers, [. . .] we all stayed there, we all had our quarters there, all live-in, nobody got out of this "compound", I would almost call it. The barracks where we were in. And they were interesting people. The Russian doctor, I remember, and other Europeans who were just kind of waiting to get their license in Canada to practice medicine. And some nurses, who had already seen half the world and came from Australia and this was just one part they still wanted to experience, the Canadian North and the Indians. And it was neat. Lots of input from all kinds of people.  
*Why was it so attractive to work with Natives?*

What made it attractive? Curiosity. [. . .] In my youth I read Karl May and the Indians as the braves and with their to us strange culture, with their certain way of living, and I just wanted to see for myself what they are like. I find that they were so neglected on themselves, or so dirty, and always lived under such poor conditions, we knew that when they came in and there was always that history where they lived on a reserve and that wasn't the way I thought Indians were. I just pictured them as I read in Karl May, in tents and actually quite clean and brave and all this kind of thing and healthy. But there is already what the white man had done to

them, there was already that damage done. They were introduced to alcohol, which they didn't have before; they were introduced to TB, which they didn't have before; they had measles which they had and diseases they died of while there was no . . . so I feel . . . and their way of living was destroyed through the white man's influence and they knew that deep down and that was why they resented us. Also, as we got to know them on a personal basis, they were friendly with us, but underneath there was - skin-deep, there was this friendliness - deep down in there was that white man superiority which they resented. And that was very obvious and sometimes that could flare out. So, it was just to get to know the truth or just to get to know the Natives, that's why I went there. And I did learn a lot. [. . .] So, it gave us new insight into Canada, it was fascinating, it was nice, I wasn't bored. We read books, listened to music, we had a good life and lots of food.

While for some people, particularly the suburban middle-class, the fifties might have been a parochial, narrow-minded and tranquilized time, for the immigrant women it was a decade of excitement and adventure, full of surprises, newness and openness; a time to learn and transcend old boundaries; a time of becoming personally aware of what was going on around them. Life as a single immigrant woman seemed carefree. The women felt free and independent, secure of the decisions they had made, happy and content with their lives. The idea that marriage might change all that was not yet in their minds. Brigitte Rabe was actually surprised about Canadian society's focus on marriage. She remembered going to dances in Vancouver clubs:

I made lots of friends and went to dances, which I realized much later: a decent girl did not go on a dance on her own [laughs] and we always would go, two girls or three girls. But it was just that the custom was to go in couples and, you know, you just didn't go by yourself as a woman. Which was, you know, to us, completely foreign, because in Berlin as young girls, that's what we did: we went with a group of girls. You know, here it was couples, couples. But that I found very very odd.

One reason why German immigrant women so effectively could ignore and contest the web of gender meanings that covered Canadian society and landscape was their individual, subjective status as immigrants. German women were in a space now that was new to them and partially unmapped. They had brought with them a web of gender meanings that had been woven into the German landscape. But it did not easily fit the space of Canada. Thus, Brigitte Rabe compared the German meanings of social dance and partnership with those she found in Canada. She evoked the stereotype of the European

metropolis being morally more relaxed than the North American city with its values of Puritanism, moral reform, and prohibition. Moreover, she kept to the German values and thus evaded and openly (albeit unconsciously at first: "which I realized much later") contested the "Man-Trap Set"<sup>19</sup> she finds in Canada. Part of this "Man-Trap Set" was the feminine beauty craze of the 1950s that hailed blonde hair and thin bodies<sup>20</sup> as *the* ways to catch a man. Heidi Schute told two stories in her narrative that show how she resisted this beauty craze by drawing on German values, but this time on traditional values that were rooted in the morals of rural Eastern Germany. She depicted the use of make-up, particularly for younger and elder women as somewhat decadent and thus unfeminine. When talking to her German girl-friends at the YWCA, they agreed that

you had to as a person think differently about your appearance. Now, here I remember, everyone of us was a little upset how the Canadians would use make-up: RED lipsticks, lots of make-up. And it was also the trend of this time; now the make-up is much more subdued and more to your body, you bring out the natural thing. But at that time it was more: older people would just be as smartly dressed or made-up, just like the younger ones. While we were used from Germany: when you are a certain age, you wear dark color - see that doesn't apply anymore now, but it surely was strongly ingrained in us. You know: you would just wear black and dark blue and browns and here it was all so different, and ear-rings and stuff like that.

Later in her narrative, when telling about her experiences in the hospital for First Nations' people in Northern British Columbia, Heidi Schute recalled that she was "upset" that

the younger [Native] women, they got make-up kits. [. . .] They were most of the time they applied make-up, maybe that was something new for them, maybe they did not do that on the reserve, they were always those lipsticks and most of the time they would spend looking after their faces.

Here, Heidi Schute implied not only that make-up is in a way decadent, but also that white society corrupted First Nations' people in this way. Thus, by drawing on traditional Old World morals, she contested the beauty-craze of the "decadent" North-American fifties.

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<sup>19</sup> Quote in "an advertisement for a child's dress, sizes 3-6x, in the *New York Times* in the fall of 1960," cited in Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 12.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 12-13.

She could do so, because as an immigrant woman she occupied a very specific place in Canadian society. While Canadian social workers, for example, who hailed the modern North American suburban nuclear family and its values as the ideal, might have seen Heidi Schute as "traditional" or "backward" and needy of "assimilation" and "Canadianization,"<sup>21</sup> Heidi Schute's perspectives was in fact the opposite - or actually the same, but reversed. She saw parts of Canadian society needing reform and "upgrading" to German or European standards.

Having already torn holes into the German web of gender meanings by deciding to independently leave their country, homes, and families, when in Canada, the German women could more easily transcend the boundaries that had been carved into the Canadian landscape of gender relations. By doing so, they not only could make sense of their lives, but would eventually also change Canadian society and its meanings of gender. Although the dominant narratives of the fifties told about women as "happy homemakers, winsome wives, and magnanimous mothers,"<sup>22</sup> the German immigrant women told the opposite story. We can see their stories as "counter-narratives"<sup>23</sup> that tell about women who saw themselves as explorers and adventurers of forbidden spaces and mask their trespassing by invoking images of immigrants. Their stories show that "unmarried" women could indeed be happy and fulfilled women and that some women struggled against the corsets of domesticity in the nineteen fifties. The German women did not stop contesting and re-crafting Canadian gender meanings once they had met their husbands and married. Indeed, the issue of marriage was one of the most intriguing and surprising parts of the women's narratives.

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<sup>21</sup> For attitudes of social workers toward immigrants in postwar Toronto, see Franca Iacovetta, "Making 'New Canadians': Social Workers, Women, and the Reshaping of Immigrant Families," in Franca Iacovetta and Mariana Valverde (eds.), *Gender Conflicts. New Essays in Women's History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 261-303.

<sup>22</sup> Prentice, *Canadian Women*, 307.

<sup>23</sup> See Personal Narratives Group (eds.), *Interpreting Women's Lives. Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), 7-8, 11, and the essays in that essay collection by Mary Jo Maynes, "Gender and Narrative Form in French and German Working-Class Autobiographies," 103-117; and Luisa Passerini, "Women's Personal Narratives: Myths, Experiences, and Emotions," 189-97.

### "And Then I Got Married": Continuities, Breaks, and "Fate"

The phrases "and then I got married" or "and then I met my husband" were recurrent in all of the narratives of the German immigrant women. In their narratives, the women used these phrases as a device to introduce both the continuities and breaks in their lives. When they married, some things continued while others did not. What is remarkable about these inconspicuous phrases, then, is that they convey in a powerful way the ambiguities and contradictions of marriage for these women. In one sense, the phrase could be read as symbolizing a major transition in the German immigrant women's lives: "And THEN I married . . . and everything changed!" Margot Buchwald remembered: "And then we got married and that was the end of that." For some women, marriage meant that they would stay in Canada for good. Brigitte Rabe recounted: "I wanted to stay for a couple of years and then go home again. But I met my husband. . . ." Marriage as a major change in a woman's life was also what society thought of marriage. Married women were supposed to become full-time homemakers, subservient wives, and devoted mothers.

In another way, the phrases pay tribute to the continuities in the women's lives after marriage. Marriage was not seen as a major break, but one of the things that sort of happen to you: "And\_then I worked, and\_then I met my husband and married, and\_then I had my first child, and\_then . . . ." For Margot Buchwald marriage was an event as important to mention as obtaining citizenship: "And then I met my husband and then I got my citizen papers in the same year." When recounting her job career, Brigitte Rabe mentioned her marriage as if it was just one more job: "And then I got the job there right away and had no problem with that. [. . .] And then I got married. And a friend of mine [. . .] started on her own [. . .] and asked me to come and work with her." For Susanne Unterleitner, marriage did not even mean separating from her girl-friend: "And we [my husband and I] met and I lived together with a German nurse until we got married. And she even moved when I got married with us in the first apartment." Not being excited

about marriage, staying in the labor force as a wife and sometimes as a mother, even living with a husband and a girl-friend in the same apartment, was behavior that went against the grain of Canadian postwar consensus on women's appropriate roles. Thus, while the German women appeared to conform to Canadian cultural norms by marrying, a closer look reveals the discontent, fissures, and conflicts in women's decisions to marry.

If there was a conflict between marriage and identity, what, for example, became of the women's independence, which had been such a prevalent aspect of their identities as single immigrant women? In the following discussion I will show how independence as a symbol and as lived experience became again the site on which the women tried to reconcile their identity with another major change - or possibly crisis - in their lives: marriage. The women's stories about their marriages show how the women adapted and saved their independence - both on a factual as well as symbolic level - despite, through, and throughout their marriage.

The phrases "And then I married/met my husband" point to the contradiction of the ideal and the reality of marriage in the 1950s. Whatever the women did shortly before their marriage, it was mostly not thinking about getting married. And yet, the discursive return to domesticity could not be evaded and marriage was inevitable. Women (and men) were told incessantly by the media, government, experts on psychology and marriage as well as by their family, friends, and colleagues that wifehood and motherhood completed and fulfilled women. The main boundaries were set. Crossing them could result in social ostracization and financial ruin, at least for women. Thus, in postwar Canada, more women and men married and married at an earlier age.<sup>24</sup> The peer and social pressures exerted on women to marry are evident in Brigitte Rabe's story:

So, that was my idea: I wanted to stay [in Canada] for a couple of years. And then go home again. But I met my husband and my mother was very much: "Oh yah, if

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<sup>24</sup> The rate of married women (men) in Canada increased from 58.0 % (56.1 %) in 1941 to 64.5 % (63.9 %) in 1951 and to 66.8 % (66.4 %) in 1961; after that the rates dropped slightly. The number of single women and men dropped by ten percentage points between 1941 and 1961. The average age of brides at first marriage declined from 25.4 years in 1941 to 22 years in 1961. Prentice, *Canadian Women*, 412, 311.



he is a nice guy, marry him." Because she was maybe worried that something might happen to her or whatever. I don't know what it really was, she encouraged me rather to get married, I didn't really want to get married. I was . . . I felt I was too young. I was twenty-two. For now that is very young. And then people did get married young.[. . .] Oh, I felt I was much too immature. Not really that immature, I was never immature in a sense that I didn't know what I wanted. It's just I had never done anything, you know with the family situation was so bad, I had an apprenticeship and that was all my life.

*You said you didn't have a boy-friend before you met your husband. . .*

I hated men, I thought they were not worth anything.

*But you also said you went often out to dance with your. . .*

. . .oh, yah, I enjoyed dancing, I still enjoy dancing, but I mean in relationships I just didn't want relationships. I was the wrong age for my father to leave [he divorced her mother when Brigitte Rabe was sixteen years old], because in Germany you didn't start at twelve, you started at about sixteen, seventeen [laughs], you know, at least at my time. I just didn't. . .- yeah I went to dances, but that was it. I had a girl-friend and we went to together and we came home together and that suited us very well. And then I met my husband and he was a very nice guy and he wanted to get married.

*Did you feel like pushed into that?*

Yes, almost. Because there were so many circumstances: my brother and sister-in-law were not getting along so well, and there was no money and there was no job, it was like coming from the frying pan into the fire, really. But, I mean, I wasn't that pushed, because I knew I made my decision, it wasn't against my will to marry. I wasn't forced to, but, uh, uh, I felt I wasn't ready, not really that he pushed me, but I just felt I wasn't quite ready. I should've had a little time to myself, because I always felt I have never ever had a time where I don't work. Up to this time it sometimes it just bothers me.

*Did you ever regret that decision to marry that early?*

Yes, oh yah, oh yah. And have the kids so early. I really thought I should've had two, three years to do something for myself. It was very hard when we got married. When we had no money, nothing. He was here for a year and a half, I was here for about a year. I mean, it. . .was very hard. Very very hard. And then on top of it, my mom was on social assistance and I sent her money home and stuff like that - it was hard, was damn hard.

Women in the 1950s were neither completely forced to marry nor were their decisions reflecting a "free will." Rather, women's decisions to marry were shaped by social discourses about women, marriage, being single, pre-marital sex, and "illegitimate" children. Thus politicians, experts, the media, but also friends and relatives ascribed very specific meanings to marriage by glorifying wifhood and motherhood. At the same time they condemned alternative lifestyles by punishing women for being single, having pre-marital sex, and becoming pregnant outside of marriage.

These meanings, however, were often not shared and sometimes even were contested by German immigrant women. None of the women talked about their marriage as

enthusiastically as they had about the immediate period before, when they had lived on their own. None of the women mentioned either the words "happy" or "love" when talking about their husbands and their supposedly happiest days in their lives. While society at large hailed marriage as the greatest part of a woman's life, the German women approached marriage cautiously and reluctantly. Nevertheless, the German women somehow had to make sense of their marriage. They had to reconcile their sense of independence with their decision to marry. What strategies did they employ to do so?

### Fate

Most striking is a sense of confusion that prevailed as the women tried to explain why they married. It seems as if some of the women were almost taken by surprise. Susanne Unterleitner was 29 years old when she married:

And then I met my husband. Which I didn't even like, I had so many other friends, but . . . it's kind of a funny story how you get married sometimes. Persistence. And we had a rough time the first couple of years. Because we bought a house in Vancouver and that didn't work out very well, it was all old. And we had the children right away. But I was ? enough to have children or not, so four children in a row. [. . .]

I met my husband through a nurse who worked in the General Hospital, a German one, and her brother gave me a ride home and more rides home, even though I didn't want the rides, because I lived ten blocks away I wanted to walk. But he gave a ride. And that went on. I had other friends and that was the last person in my life I wanted, but you know, there could be a persistent person, which you are marrying against your better judgment and that's what I did.

*Why did you marry him.*

[sighs] Cause I couldn't get rid of him. The day before I got married I talked to my girl-friend and I said: "You know, if I had any brains, I would pack my stuff and run as fast as I can." [. . .]

*Did you feel pushed into the marriage?*

No. I don't know why, I really don't know. [. . .]

*Did you ever have any boy-friends before him here in Canada.*

Oh, yah. Nice ones [laughs]. [. . .] One was Austrian and I had a long standing boy-friend still from Germany who came here every so often. But I thought that was not the way of life I wanted. [. . .] At that time . . . it is hard to describe . . . I didn't even want to get married. I don't regret it, because I got children which absolutely think I have been the best mother possible, which I doubt, but that's beside the point, and I love my children. [. . .] But I don't think I actually wanted to get married. [. . .]

Susanne Unterleitner was trapped in a conflict between her personal wishes and social prescriptions for single women. This conflict left her speechless - she could not explain why she had married, even thirty-eight years after that decision. But at the same time her words poignantly expressed the social constraints that led her to that decision. Her words also point to a strategy she used to live with this decision.

"And then I met my husband" is a narrative device that not only points to the continuities and transitions in women's lives; it is also a "key phrase" that

aim[s] to define a type of relation between the self and the social sphere, that is, the community (which contributed to the formation of the self), and, more broadly, the society as a whole. The key phrase, then, expresses the harmony, the indifference, the ambiguity, the conflict, and so on, existing between self and society.<sup>25</sup>

What kind of relation between self and society does the key phrase "And then I married" show?

Some of the women tried to explain their decision to marry by insinuating "fate". "And then I married" was an event that took place for no apparent reason; it was a decision that did not lay in the women's hands. Even though Susanne Unterleitner did not want to get married, it somehow happened anyway for no obvious reason. She seemed to have had no say or will in this matter. Even though she talked to her girl-friend about her feelings, she did not follow them without saying why. Brigitte Rabe recounted how she met her husband:

[We met] at a dance. I didn't want to go that evening, my girl-friend forced me to go. And then he's French and she spoke French, so there were these two French guys and she said: "Oh, ya, now I can practice my French and let's go." Well, it was sort of . . . you met a guy or a couple of guys and they asked us to go for some Chinese food, and she wanted to go and I didn't want to go. Well, finally I gave in and we had our Chinese food, there was some dancing on the juke box. There was a place in Davie Street that was a dance hall, where all the Europeans and lots of Canadian young people, but mainly European young people went there, it was a little bit like we were used to. Of course, no drinking or anything like that. But for us we didn't think anything of it. And then we went to this place - and I mean this sounds very, very strange, but it is true: they brought us home, they had a car -

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<sup>25</sup> Marie-Françoise Chanfrault-Duchet, "Narrative Structures, Social Models, and Symbolic Representation in the Life Story," in Gluck and Patai, *Women's Words*, 77-92, 79.

which was amazing at that time: people didn't have cars, especially the young immigrants - and he wrote on the chop sticks, he wrote the address and the phone number and he said: "I'm going to see this house quite a lot." And he did. So. And then we, well we went out for about six, seven months and we got married.

Although Brigitte Rabe always liked to go dancing, on that particular evening she did not want to go dancing and only for some unknown reason did she "finally give in." Later on - "very very strange, but it is true" - her prospective husband rightfully predicted that he would see her house "quite a lot" and soon afterwards they married. Brigitte Rabe told the story of meeting her husband almost like a mystery story. At the same time, there are some conspicuous omissions in this account. Brigitte Rabe did not tell about the moment they saw each other for the first time or the moment they fell in love. Nor did she explain why she wanted to marry that particular man or what she liked about him.

Why did the women invoke "fate" as a reason for their marriage? Several answers might be possible and I have come up with two. First, "fate" is a narrative form, similar to myth, that can explain events that are not explainable. In this case, the women might not have been able to explain their decision to marry, because up to the point of the interview they might never have asked themselves Why did I MARRY? They very likely had asked themselves Why did I marry HIM? or Why did I marry THEN? But despite society's focus on marriage in the fifties, the fundamental question of why one should marry was hardly ever discussed. There was a social consensus that men and women just marry and there needs to be no explanation. There were thus no socially constructed, that is readily available, answers when I asked the women Why did you MARRY? "Fate," however, provided an accessible and suitable narrative form in which to cast an answer without an "explanation."

Secondly, as historians we cannot use "fate" as an explanatory category *per se*. But can we understand it as a signpost in the women's narratives that points to a certain fissure, crisis, or struggle in their lives? What did the women actually do when they conjured up "fate"? They depicted themselves as people dependent on a decision that was su-

per-natural or otherwise not their own. Thus, the women were not in a situation to make an independent decision. What then would have happened had the women been "able" to make an independent decisions, not been influenced by "fate"? Would they have not married? Why, on the other hand, do they not explore the social and cultural constraints that might have shaped their decisions to marry? Their "fate-stories" indicate a struggle in their negotiation of their identities and independence. It seems that by invoking fate they are suggesting that social pressures (by the media, family, peer, etc.) won against their better judgment and urge for independence. Marriage, to some of the women, was intervening in their lives in ways they resisted. By embedding this defeat in the super-natural concept of "fate" the women could "explain" their marriage to themselves without facing the defeat or the actual factors that shaped their decisions. At the same time the women expressed their resistance to and struggle with that decision to marry.

#### Convenience

While none of the women probably resisted marriage as such, they did contest certain meanings of marriage. In the fifties, marriage was seen as the only possible way to women's personal fulfillment, the only legitimate means of sexual satisfaction and motherhood. Did the German immigrant women ascribe to these definitions that cast the purpose of marriage for women and the role of women in marriage in narrowly sexual terms?

Waltraud Schmidt and Heidi Schute both met their husbands through advertisements in the newspaper. Heidi Schute and her friend Irmtraud Ahrendt had gone to work with First Nations' patients in a hospital in Northern British Columbia. The "compound," as Heidi Schute described the fenced-in and isolated hospital, could at times be boring. They therefore applied to hospitals in other provinces, where they could have worked as registered nurses. They also placed advertisements in a paper looking for pen pals and potential acquaintances. Both of the women got jobs in Ontario. But while Irmtraud Ahrendt left British Columbia, Heidi Schute had already met one of the men who had written her

back and decided to marry. Although she "didn't fall in love" with her prospective husband, she engaged in a "marriage of convenience" at the age of thirty. When trying to explain why she married, Heidi Schute, like other women, put forward her husband's reasons or reasons that only indirectly had to do with the man she was about to marry:

After we met and thought we approved of each other, so-to-speak, we kind of had fun together, and he was a bachelor and he was thirty-six and I was twenty-nine [*sic*]. We thought: "Well, maybe it will work." And he had this house here and he was looking for somebody, he didn't want to live alone in a house; so we decided: "Let's get married." And that's what we did. And I quit my job there and then [. . .] we got married very quietly and I got used to married life in Canada.

*Why did you pick him out of the whole batch of letters you got?*

He wrote very nice letters, his grammar wasn't that good [laughs]. But mine wasn't either, English. But he wrote open letters, nice letters, and actually I liked the attraction of working for the airline, cause I knew, he told me right away, I could go to Germany any time, free passes, which was true, and I was still adventurous and traveling that just clicked with me, that was just something I wanted to do. [. . .] Yeah, all my travels, that was one reason. And then I liked Harvey's family. Their religion, I couldn't quite go into, they're Pentecostal. But I had a very good relationship with his parents. Actually, his mother warned me: "Don't you marry him, you might regret it." Because they kind of knew, he could have a temper, he was a little . . . yeah, he did his own thing without asking people very much. [. . .] So, that part I feel good about. But otherwise.

Waltraud Schmidt was twenty-nine years old when she married. She had been engaged once in Germany, but lost her finance during the war and was determined never to marry, "because I don't want to be a widow." Nevertheless, she decided to marry the man she had met through his newspaper advertisement:

And then he was all by himself and asked me if I was going to marry him. Well, you are there, you're all by yourself, so you think: "Well, why not?" Build up a future. He had dreamt about, he wanted to go up north and build up there a resort, maybe a wilderness resort or so, which sounded to me very attractive. I thought: "Well, that sounds like a good idea." Now, that he died that young, that threw everything into turmoil.

The young couple would never fulfill the husband's dream of building a resort, because he died after four years of marriage.

When explaining why they married, Heidi Schute and Waltraud Schmidt did not conjure up fate. But the context of their placing or answering ads reveals that they were

neither actively searching for a husband. Heidi Schute wanted to get to know some more people, feeling isolated in the hospital. Waltraud Schmidt felt reluctant about marriage in the first place because of having lost a fiancée in the war.

The women nevertheless decided to marry. Why did they do so if they were not very happy or excited about marriage or the men they were to marry? One reason some women offered was that of "convenience," thus giving marriage the meaning of a "business partnership." Asked whether her marriage was easy from the beginning, Doris Schulz, who married at the age of twenty-five, replied:

No, no. Yes and no. [. . .] It's never easy, because . . . well, I think the majority was easy, because two people put together their efforts, their energy and their money together, and in that way you have like a company, you form a company and you form this partnership. And you both are working from an equal basis of cooperation. And when you have this total sense of relying on the other and trusting the other, there is just no problem. So, there was no difficulty.

None of the women mentioned any romantic reasons for marrying. Christel Meisinger was twenty-two years old at the time of her marriage: "[We married] because we were four [she and her girl-friend and their two German boy-friends] strangers here and we needed one another. So one relied on the other. " Anna Grevesmühl and Margot Buchwald also did not want to be alone. Asked whether there were also financial reasons for marriage, Anna Grevesmühl agreed and compared marriage to staying single:

Yes, I didn't want to stay alone. I wanted to have a partner and I didn't want to . . . a lot of them stayed alone, they achieved nothing. I found that out. Or men, who stayed old bachelors, had to die lonely. And women too, some stayed who didn't marry. They live by themselves, I don't know where they . . . I don't have contact with her anymore. Most married, all within a few years, all Germans were married.

Pragmatic and economic motives to marry seem to be sensible responses to the question Why did you marry? But framing the decision to marry in such terms points also to the gap between women's quest for independence and their decision to marry. How did they reconcile this conflict over independence?

## Pragmatic and Symbolic Strategies

Women had much reason to approach marriage cautiously and pragmatically. While the media ignored or whitewashed the darker side of marriage in the fifties - physical, sexual, emotional and psychological abuse by the spouse, women's economic dependence on the breadwinner-husband-father, their isolation from any formal and many informal support networks in the suburbs - the women knew why they were reluctant about marriage. From female relatives and friends - the women heard about the dark sides of marriage. Johanna Grohsmann, although embracing the notion of marriage, was leery nevertheless. Asked how she felt about her marriage at the age of twenty-eight, she said:

Well, it was . . . if you get closer to it, then you start really to think. That's a commitment. "Is it going to work out or is it not?" As far - he was very quiet and well . . . so he still is [laughs], he's a good man, I don't . . . But at that time, yes , it's a big big commitment and you have to think it over real hard. One thing I said to myself: "If somebody tries to beat up on me - no, I don't take that. Either I'm going to throw back or I out, quiet and out and I'm gone. Mistreating and beating," I said, " is not for me. If somebody should start that with me then it's finished and over." To tell you the truth it was still in the church when he said: "Until death us part. - Bis der Tod uns scheidet." I thought: "God. That is one great responsibility. But I won't let him beat me." [laughs]. And I didn't have to take it, not yet, I hope everything stays okay [laughs].

*Why were you concerned especially about that?*

Because, oh, you hear quite a few, like my cousin in Germany, at that time, everything was going rosy and this and that and then it started, beatings and all that. I said: "No, I'm not going to take that." And we never expected that from that man. See? That was first hand in our family. I didn't see it, but I was told, she told me that herself, so. And then they divorced.

Although it seems as if the women were half pushed or that they drifted into marriage, they were devising some extraordinary strategies that would allow them to get out of marriage more easily in case they did not like it. Brigitte Rabe was twenty-two when she married and she did not feel comfortable about it. She felt deprived of the just won independence and freedom which she enjoyed so much. She explained the strategy that would make her feel better and more secure about the decision to marry:

And then we took off, we went to the States, and got married. And the reason why I didn't want to get married [in Canada], again this is a very strange custom, it was a



law: if you were married here and she wanted a divorce, you had to be caught to be with another man or another woman officially by a detective or something, because I knew somebody that went through it. And that's the only way they gave you a divorce. And since I felt I wasn't going to go through anything like that if I ever wanted to leave this guy, because I thought: "Oh, I probably will leave him anyway," because I had a bad attitude toward marriage with my parents being like that. And in the States you could just after so and so many years, you would get a divorce. And that was the reason why I didn't want to get married in Canada. So one Saturday, two weeks before we got married, he asked me if I wanted to marry him; I said: "Yes, okay." So we just got ourselves together, got a few days holidays and we started driving and we stopped in Salem, Oregon, 'cause that was as far as we got that night and got married the next day.

*Was that your idea?*

Both of us, no, we both just like that.

*I mean to get not married here?*

Yeah, that was my idea. Oh yea.

*Did he know why you wanted to . . .*

Oh yea, he did, he did.

*And what did he say?*

He is an easy going guy, he said: "If that's what you want, fine."

*Why did your husband want to get married?*

He wanted to get married, because he said when he was young he made up his mind he was going to get married at twenty-five. And he was twenty-five. And he wanted to get married. I don't know why.

*Must have been probably more than that, I would imagine?*

[Laughs] I don't know, maybe he liked me. But no, he wanted to get married, yea, he wanted to get married. He doesn't admit it now that he really asked me after two, three weeks, to marry him, but . . . . We went there, we got married, and we came home as a married couple. I got a ticket on the way home. Almost a ticket, because I had a learner's license and I must have been going to fast and a cop stopped us. [. . .]

By securing the possibility of divorce, Brigitte Rabe retained her independence in a practical as well as symbolic sense. She could feel independent by having married in the United States and thus having evaded strict Canadian divorce laws.

The symbolic retention of independence was even more predominant for Doris Schulz. She was twenty-five years old when she married a Dutch immigrant. She had met him when she had just got her first car - "A little Morris Minor Convertible I bought. It just gave me such a sense of independence." Still pursuing her dream of obtaining her own pottery, she had just been able to convince a well-known British Columbia potter to hire her on a part-time basis: "I had just become independent, for the first time in my life, I had a place of my own." Asked if the marriage was not going against her plans to stay independent, Doris Schulz replied:

That's right, yes. And I changed my mind about five times. I wasn't wanting to be married in a way. On the other hand, I felt a very close relationship with Jack. So it was a difficult decision for me, because I had just become independent. And we did start our marriage plan by my saying: "Okay." - in those days we had fifty-cent-pieces, I said "every fifty-cent-piece that comes my way goes into a pot, which I keep for a divorce. I want to have the trap door open." That was the idea. And I could speak with Jack about it. It didn't make him feel insecure in any way. So it was a very nice thought, in a way. Because I always needed to have a . . . I was at that time twenty-eight and I didn't . . . I thought it was good to be independent. At the same time, it was also good to be in the company of this particular person. So it was difficult.

*Did you feel ready for that?*

Yes, yes, yes. It was just another one of those adventures. I had a very adventurous life, so it was just: what else is new? so-to-speak. And also, I did not have the feeling that I was binding myself for life. I didn't. I didn't look upon that, I thought it was: "If I want to stay with this man it was a necessary evil to be married." Sort of. It was not even a necessary evil, it was a nice companionship. And Jack was thirty-six at the time, I was twenty-eight. So at the time, it isn't . . . My passionate loves, they had happened in Germany [laughs], so that was . . . But you know, this one it lasted. We are now married thirty-eight years and we are doing fine. [. . .]

*Were there any troubles in the first few years?*

No, no. They were just by my own having to get used to the idea that my husband wasn't saying the things I expected him to say and all that kind of stuff. [. . .] But so it is: one has to get used to the other person's personality. Anyway.

Keeping the trap door open and viewing marriage as "just another one of those adventures" - these were approaches women took at marriage. For Doris Schulz this was achieved through a strategy that probably had more symbolic than practical significance. In a way, the pot with fifty-cent-coins symbolized the independence she had gained through her immigration to Canada and that she wanted to save into her marriage. Viewing marriage as "just another adventure" cast marriage as a decision that was in accordance with Doris Schulz's pre-marital life. It allowed her to mask the conflict marriage had posed to her identity.

In the nineteen fifties, women did not have much choice: marriage and the nuclear family life were the only socially accepted and economically sustainable ways of life. What is remarkable is how critical of marriage the women were at a time when it was uncritically hailed as the salvation of not only each individual citizen but of the whole nation. By being critical, skeptical, cautious, and pragmatic, German immigrant women could secure the independence they had gained in the years before their marriage into

their marriage. They had to transform it and adapt it to the new circumstances, they had to perhaps rely more heavily on symbols and myths (such as the myth of "fate"), but independence remained a major frame of reference for the negotiations of their identities.

The German immigrant women had left domestic service with the hope of pursuing their dreams about successful immigration even more than they could as maids in Canadian households. Adventure, freedom, and independence were still important references for their identities. The women found these in their work, living on their own, and meeting with friends and relatives. Work and leisure became means of learning and exploring and thus satisfaction. By drawing on meanings of immigration and Germanness the women transcended boundaries set by dominant discourses about gender. They used these meanings also to defy threats to their sense of independence.

A major conflict arose when the women were confronted with the decision to marry. Not marrying could have severe social and economic repercussions for the women who lived in a society that defined unmarried women as unsatisfied and even abnormal. Marrying on the other hand was not necessarily a "necessary evil," but promised economic and emotional security through a "nice companionship." Nevertheless, marriage conflicted with some of the women's sense of independence. By re-shaping the meanings of independence and marriage, however, they once again could reconcile their dreams and expectations with the constraints of social reality. Marriage was viewed as "fate," as a partnership of "convenience," or as "just another one of those adventures." Independence was retained through pragmatic and symbolic solutions, such as marriage in the United States or collecting fifty-cent-coins; or the meaning of independence was shifted from personal fulfillment to material security and success. In the course of shifting meanings, independence was adapted and altered according to the social realities the women were confronted with. But independence remained a constant, yet volatile, frame of reference for the women's identities.

## CONCLUSION

This thesis has been an exploration of subjectivity as it emerged from the narrative constructions of identity and as it informed the lives of the ten German women who had come to Vancouver in the fifties.

In Reconstruction Germany, single women used emigration as a strategy to negotiate the meanings society had prescribed for them. Inspired by the stories about immigration and "America" the women began to imagine themselves as immigrants. Immigration seemed to promise adventure and travel, freedom and independence from the economic, social, cultural, and familial constraints in which they were positioned. Canada's opening of the borders to former "enemy-aliens" in 1950, and particularly the recruitment of domestic workers, provided young, single German women with a gateway to their dreams. But the women's expectations and hopes were shattered by the confines of their work and living conditions as domestic servants. In order to reconcile their self-conceptualization as immigrant with the reality of domestic service, the women constructed domestic service as an important, sometimes even essential, "stepping stone" on the way to successful settlement in Vancouver. By omitting the negative, oppressive features of this occupation, and refusing a critique of their work, the women had constructed a myth around domestic service. This myth of domestic service as "a stepping stone" allowed them to reconcile the ideal with the real and thus to rebalance their identity as immigrants. It also enabled them to negotiate the daily struggle for power in the relationships with their employers.

Freed from the pressures of domestic service, most women went on to work in low-paid, low-status jobs until they married. They enjoyed this time on their own, feeling

"happy," "independent," and "free." Marriage, however, was almost inevitable in a society that prescribed it as the only sanctioned life style. While most of the women did not resent marriage, they ascribed meanings to it that differed substantially from dominant meanings of marriage. Those who most suffered from their loss of independence described marriage as fate, something not of their doing and outside of their realm of agency. Others viewed marriage as a form of "business partnership," thus integrating it into their conceptualized careers as immigrants. While society prescribed marriage as the best choice for women and the happiest time in their life, the German women viewed marriage as something that happened to them, as, in Doris Schulz's words, "a necessary evil" they had to live with.

But are the women's narrative constructions of their immigrant identities the only possible, the only "true" representations of their pasts? And is my interpretation the only possible, the only "true" representation of the women's pasts? Because oral history is a collective making of history by both the narrator and the interviewer/writer, these two questions are interrelated. In my introduction I had argued that as historians we cannot claim to uncover a past reality "*wie es eigentlich gewesen*"<sup>1</sup> ("as it actually was"). There is not one Truth that can be discovered through rigid, scientific objectivity. Rather, narratives "will never be the same twice" and identities are "fluctuating" in historical time and space. Thus, the women's narratives and my own interpretation of them are truths.<sup>2</sup> My answers to the two questions will not provide closure for this thesis, but rather will point to the probably unresolvable but nevertheless illuminating complexities of narrative and identity.

Narratives do not speak for themselves and we therefore cannot take them at face value. Rather, in order to understand the plurality of truths embedded in each narrative we need to interpret them; that is we need to place them into the contexts in which they were constructed and pay attention to the subjectivities that inform them. I have tried to do this

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<sup>1</sup> Leopold Ranke, "Vorrede zu den 'Geschichten der romanischen und germanischen Völker von 1494 bis 1535,'" (1824), quoted in Wolfgang Hardtwig, ed., *Über das Studium der Geschichte* [On the study of history] (München: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, Juni 1990), 45.

<sup>2</sup> Personal Narratives Group, "Truths" in *Interpreting Women's Lives*, 261.

in chapters 2 to 4. However, such a contextualization can never be complete and is always biased by the interviewer's questions and perceptions. There are other biases that are brought to the interview by both the narrator and the interviewer. One such "bias" is memory and how it works. Thus, by taking into account of what we know about memory, I will try to re-evaluate the women's narratives in this chapter. There are also biases that I as the interviewer and interpreter brought to this oral history. My interpretation is as much a personal narrative as are the women's; thus, my interpretation needs to be interpreted as well.

Let me start with the women's narratives and the problematic of memory. When people talk about their lives, they "lie sometimes, forget a lot, exaggerate, become confused, and get things wrong."<sup>3</sup> This can be both intentional and unintentional. One element that shapes a people's narrative representations of themselves is memory. Memory is a historical process, and it is constantly in flux. Since we cannot remember everything we perceive, we select what we want to remember and for how long and discard what we will forget. Moreover, memory can be *changed* by what we come to know later; it can be altered by intervening events, observations, social discourses, and changed attitudes.<sup>4</sup> People might, for example, inflate some relationships in importance while devaluing others. As Thompson and Samuel noted:

Chance meetings turn into epic encounters which have become momentous in the light of later years. As in a dream, whole sequences of events may be telescoped into a single moment, or conversely the exceptional translated into the habitual. . . . Like myth, memory requires a radical simplification of its subject matter. All recollections are told from a standpoint in the present. In telling, they need to make sense of the past. That demands a selecting, ordering, and simplifying, a construction of coherent narrative whose logic works to draw the life story towards the fable.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> See Elizabeth F. Loftus, *Eyewitness Testimony* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England: Harvard University Press, 1979).

<sup>5</sup> Samuel and Thompson, "Introduction", 7.

Memory can change during the retention phase, that is the time between acquisition of information about an event and the retrieval of the memory about the event;<sup>6</sup> we therefore need to ask about the narratives I have interpreted in this thesis, *When* did the women construct their narratives of independence in work and marriage? Were their memories of how they perceived domestic service, work, and marriage made at the time of the "events" or retrospectively during the retention stage in order to live with their decisions?

In Chapter 3 I had said that German immigrant women perceived domestic service as a "stepping stone" occupation. More precisely: that was the way they *described* it to me - forty years after they had actually worked as a maid and in the context of the interview. Thus, when the women told me about domestic service in the terms of a "stepping stone," is that how they perceived it when they were actually a maid, that is forty years ago? Or did they acquire this mythic perception later, some time after that experience, thus burying the perception of the time the "events" took place? Did the women maybe just use the myth of domestic service at the time of the interview, as a way to structure their narrative, to make sense of their life now, to the narrator herself as well as to her audience?

For example, using a bell at the dinner table to call a maid might be considered practical or humiliating. The employers might get a sense of importance out of humiliating the European maid, while the maid might not even think about this in such terms, but rather, as Heidi Schute did, see such an arrangement as practical:

I would eat in the kitchen. And here again, maybe for some people it might: "Oh, just a maid." And they had a bell to ring me when they wanted me. But I felt good; that's just me. I was so pleased to be in the kitchen and not being in there with them all the time and listen to things I don't understand and I would be, I could imagine, tense and worried about it. So I was glad she gave me all this freedom to be a maid in the kitchen and the bell would ring. Now, when I think about it after: My household we had a maid too. And we were middle class in Germany. We could afford a maid. And she ate in the kitchen too. But now I found: Oh, my roles are

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<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Loftus has identified a three stage process in the operation of memory: "During the first stage - acquisition - an event is perceived and information about it is initially stored in memory. In the second stage - retention - the information is resident in memory. In the final stage - retrieval - memory is searched and pertinent information is retrieved and communicated." Loftus, *Eyewitness Testimony*, xii.

reversed, I am that maid now and I'm serving somebody else. But it didn't bother me. [. . .] It often made me smile, not angry, but that I thought: "Oh well. Here I am thankful to be the maid and could be called with the bell." [laughs]. But anyway, that was one little thought that sometimes cropped up on me.<sup>7</sup>

Did Heidi Schute feel this way about being called in by a bell when she was sitting in the kitchen all by herself? Or did she come to feel this way only later on? There is no answer that is either right or wrong or that can provide us with a solution. However, the question presses us to look at further aspects (e.g. memory) that shape the narrative constructions of identity. Exploring how memory works might give us clues to the complexity of narrative and identity.

Elizabeth Loftus has shown that people's memories can be changed. Not only can we forget past attitudes and feelings about an event, but new attitudes can suppress or delete the initial ones.<sup>8</sup> Thus, Heidi Schute might have felt humiliated by being called with a bell at the time this happened. But later on she might have come to feel differently about it. She might have remembered that her parents themselves had a maid or that she herself would later employ a domestic worker. This new perception, then, might have made it easier to live with such an experience and Heidi Schute came to believe that this later perception was her actual perception at the time. We cannot, however, say which version is true and which is false. We can only interpret what we might feel or think is logical or sensible.

In my introduction I had argued that we can only find out about people's perceptions of past events. These further questions about memory, however, even shake this assertion. We can in fact not claim that we can uncover *past* perceptions of the past. All we can record are people's *present* representations and reflections of themselves and a past reality. Nevertheless, these questions of memory are important, because they alert us to potential alternative interpretations of the past.

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<sup>7</sup> Heidi Schute, interview by author.

<sup>8</sup> Loftus, *Eyewitness Testimony*, chap. 4, 52-87.



In chapter 4 I argued that the women experienced their work between domestic service and marriage as "liberating," and that it gave them the opportunity to ground their identities more firmly in the lived experience of independence. Marriage threatened this sense of independence and the women described their decision to marry in terms that opposed dominant "romantic" notions of marriage. But were the women's narratives of fated or convenience marriage constructed at the moment of the interview, or at the moment of their marriage, or at some point in-between? Maybe they saw marriage at that time as a way to get out of their low-paid, low-status jobs and to secure more financial and emotional security? Was such an interpretation of marriage as a relief, however, too difficult to live with, so difficult in fact that they (consciously or unconsciously) bent their perceptions in a direction that would be advantageous for their purposes? Again, I would argue, that the answer is not a simple "Yes" or "No" or "True" or "False." Such questions, however, press us not only to explore alternative interpretations but also to discover the biases in (oral) historiography.

An exploration into the many possible meanings of the past can be confusing, but it can alert us to the complexity of historical processes, to the volatility of identity and the historicity of the concepts (such as gender, ethnicity, immigrant or marital status) that inform the construction of identity. Thus, it is not only possible but also desirable to acknowledge that the past can be interpreted and represented in diverse ways.

We also need to place the narratives in the context of the interview in order to reveal and understand the biases introduced by the interviewer and the interview situation. I went into the interviews with one main question: "Tell me about your life from your decision to emigrate until you felt you had settled in Canada or until you married." The women's narrative answers were not life-stories. Rather I asked them to tell me about a rather short (about five years) time in their life that lay back about forty years. Nevertheless, just as in any full life-story, their stories needed to be coherent, and I as the interviewer had much to do with providing this coherency. One of the main ways I

informed their narratives was by introducing them to my research project as such: I was interested in the experiences of German immigrant women in the 1950s. This, so to speak, set the stage. I had not come to talk to them about other parts or aspects of their lives that might have been just as or even more important to them, for example their volunteer work in community organizations or churches, or their life before or after the 1950s. In other words, by telling them I wanted to know about their *immigrant* experiences, I provided them with a narrative form within which they could couch their stories. The women were in a way guided to tell me only those stories they remembered and found worth telling in such a way that would make sense to me, that is within the context or narrative of their immigration experience.

The questions the interviewer provides therefore introduce a very strong bias that we cannot avoid but need to take into consideration. The interviewers will always have to explain their projects and themselves, giving information that cannot be neutral. Even the short and simple question: "Please, tell me your life history," is biased: both life and history are commonly understood in terms of chronology and closure. While some narrators will start their story with their birth, others will at least try to draw a complete picture by some other means.

On the other hand, we should not overestimate the impact the interviewer has on the narrator's story. The women's narratives were, after all, grounded in lived experiences and their memories of them. People are capable of reflection. They can think back in their lives and often remember how they felt about important events in their lives, such as immigration, work, and marriage. Moreover, immigration was an important part of the German women's lives in the fifties. My loosely structured interview approach and my open-ended questions thus gave them space to tell the stories they found important and omit those they did not want to talk about. Moreover, they were the ones who gave meanings to their experiences.

Another bias that is not only inherent in the interview process but also in interpretation is that of gender. Can I as a man actually understand women's words? And if I can, is my understanding different from that of a female interpreter? Scholars have argued that "gender relations are an important dynamic shaping the interview process which can significantly influence the sorts of data obtained."<sup>9</sup> These gender dynamics influence not only the settings in which women communicate with men, but also relations among women and men. However, there is very little empirical data on *how* gender influences oral history.

In my own research I could only speculate on how gender relations informed the interviews. That gender played a role became obvious to me when I had short articles published in British Columbia newspapers. The journalist writing about my research in the *Vancouver Sun* mistook me for and wrote about me as a female student.<sup>10</sup> A German woman who had read the article called me to offer her help. However, when she found out I was a male student, she was surprised and said she had expected to talk to a woman. I had the impression that the woman had really wanted to talk about her experiences. She seemed disappointed and almost upset and told me she would call again, which she never did. This incident alerted me to the methodological problems of gender relations in oral history research as well as to its ethical issues. While we cannot negate the biases we introduce to the interview and to the narrator, our awareness of the biases can make us more sensible to their dynamics in both the methods and ethics involved. Gender bias points once more to the impossibility of the one True Master-Narrative and to the importance of allowing for plurality in our approaches to and interpretations of history.

There were other gaps to be bridged. Both the narrators and I lived in Germany until our adolescence. But these were very different Germanys, separated by time and often place. At the same time, our (at least partially) shared ethnicity might have been an

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<sup>9</sup> Andrew Herod, "Gender Issues in the Use of Interviewing as a Research Method," *Professional Geographer* 45, 3 (August 1993): 305-317.

<sup>10</sup> "Untold Stories," *Vancouver Sun*, 26 May 1993.

obstacle for me in asking questions for which the answers seemed obvious to the "insider." Age and immigrant status were other factors shaping the interview. Many of the women asked me how long I had lived in Canada. My answer "For about a year" was greeted with a smile or friendly laughter and the reply "Oh, that short? Well, you have lots to learn then." While what my hosts said was plainly true in that, yes, I still had a lot to learn, that was not what they actually intended to convey. Rather, they established a hierarchy in which the young newcomer ("greenhorn") had come to a wise elder to inquire about her experience. By doing so, the women constructed a frame within which I had to ask and behave, while at the same time they established an authority for themselves. The women reinforced this framework during the interview when noting that I was too young to know the Germany they had grown up in or that I had not been in Canada long enough to know what going on, particularly in government politics. I did not contest this hierarchy, but rather accepted it as a way to gain additional information. Thus, I would preface a few questions with the note "I do not know, I was not there at the time, can you tell me . . ." <sup>11</sup>

We can then understand the relationship between the interviewer and the narrator as one that introduces methodological bias, but also as one of power. It is a site on which two or more people negotiate the meanings of the interview situation as much as the meanings of the narrator's life. Gender, culture, age, class, immigrant status, race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation are not only methodological biases but also politics that inform the relationship. If we become more aware of these politics, we will not only be able to use them to gain more information, but also we can attempt to create a relationship that is more equal. Thus, being aware of forms of communication that are often perceived as male (aggressive, assertive, paternalistic, interruptive, domineering) <sup>12</sup> helped me to try

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<sup>11</sup> I am sure I did this rather subconsciously at the time of the interviews, since I became aware of these politics only later.

<sup>12</sup> Herod, "Gender Issues," 308.

to avoid them. At the same time, I used my age and immigrant status as a means to balance the relationship.

While many of these biases can be negotiated between interviewer and narrator during the interview, many other biases are outside the realm of the interviewer or narrator. The conventions of the discipline of history and of the form of writing that is accepted by academe, for example, forced me to present my own narrative in a coherent and intelligible - and therefore particular, given - way. Coherence demands selection of issues to be discussed and points to be made. It requires generalizations where in lived reality there are none. It demands a narrative of lives that themselves are not lived as narratives but at the same time can only be expressed through narrative.<sup>13</sup>

How then do we deal with these biases? As I have argued above, exploring biases can illuminate alternative interpretations of the past. Moreover, biases press us to examine historical processes from different angles and thus to understand these processes and their complexities more completely. Thirdly, a critique of oral sources has allowed for a powerful critique of written sources. Written sources have traditionally been defined as more reliable and objective and therefore superior to oral sources. This is a hierarchical dichotomy that has been established as a means to suppress the voices and experiences of already marginalized social groups. And it is a false dichotomy. Many written sources (e.g. Census, police records, minutes, newspaper articles) are based on oral testimony.<sup>14</sup> All are shaped by the perceptions, biases, and memory of the recorder. By deconstructing this dichotomy of Written/oral we at the same time deconstruct further the dichotomy of History/myth and Objective/subjective which are based on the first dichotomy. Exploring oral history and its biases carries us to a critique of traditional concepts and conceptions of history.

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<sup>13</sup> See Hayden White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," and "The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory," in *The Content of the Form. Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 1-25 and 26-57.

<sup>14</sup> See Thompson, *Voice of the Past*, 101-135.

Thus, if we tried to find the one and only "True" account of a person's life, we would have to argue that there is a way to neutrality and objectivity. Such forms of how we know the world have been constructed and established as powerful narratives that have dominated the way Western societies have developed. Examples are the ideas of rationality and history.<sup>15</sup> These apparently neutral and objective notions are subjective epistemological concepts themselves, myths that we have lived by for a long time.

By revealing the subjectivity of such "objective" constructs, oral historians and feminist theorists have begun to powerfully deconstruct them. Ostensibly rational and objective accounts of the past are only one version of reality and not even the best or most desirable, because they have participated in constructing the experiences of certain groups, usually white, middle-class men, as the norm. By doing so, historians and other scholars who have uncritically embraced the Enlightenment project have participated in the politics of defining some people as deviant and thus of marginalizing and oppressing them.<sup>16</sup>

There are, then, many truths that we can uncover or rather: construct. This thesis, then, is but one true version of the past lives of the German immigrant women, shaped by both my and the women's understanding of history as well as by my and their politics.

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<sup>15</sup> See Elizabeth Tonkin, "History and the myth of realism," in Samuel and Thompson, *Myths We Live By*, 25-35.

<sup>16</sup> See Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, "Introduction."

**APPENDIX A**  
**SHORT BIOGRAPHIES OF NARRATORS**

This thesis has many sources. One was a number in Canadian immigration statistics for the 1950s: each year, thousands of German women coming to Canada claimed domestic service as their "intended occupation." This was by far the largest occupational group in the whole German immigrant cohort. I therefore decided to talk with some of these German women who on their own had come to Vancouver between 1950 and 1959. I contacted some fifty women during the early summer and early fall of 1993 through notices in British Columbia newspapers as well as through visits to two German-Canadian churches in Vancouver. By gathering information in initial phonecalls or letters, I was able to distinguish thirteen women who fit my description. Three of these women declined later on. Outside of the final ten narrators, I interviewed four more women who did not fit my description but who gave me helpful information about the German community in Vancouver and life as a domestic servant in other parts of the Canada, respectively.

All of the interviews (except for that with Anna Grevesmühl) were conducted in English, although at times some women used German words or phrases or told whole stories in German. The names of the narrators, of all of the people they tell about, and of small home towns have been changed and the exact birthdates omitted to secure anonymity. I did not use any off-record information except for that supplied while filling out the questionnaires. In the consent form they signed I also assured that they could withdraw their participation within four months of the last interview. Copies of the consent forms as well as of the tapes and transcripts of the interviews will be deposited at an archive in Canada.

**Doris Schulz** was born in the village of Alt Reichenau in Silesia (Poland) in 1926 as the third of seven children. Her mother was a homemaker, her father a teacher and musician. Doris Schulz went to public school until eighth grade, after which she apprenticed and worked as a potter. She had lost her mother in 1946, the same year that her family was deported from Silesia to East Germany. By 1950, she had rejoined with her older siblings in West Germany, but her younger siblings stayed with the father in East Germany. Being the only one of her family to emigrate, she arrived in Vancouver in December 1951 via the Assisted Passage Fare Scheme (one-year-contract). Doris Schulz worked as a domestic servant for two months. She then moved to Squamish where she worked in a restaurant (kitchen-help, dishwasher, waitress) for two months and as a domestic servant for one half year. She then worked and lived in an hospital, where she was trained as a nurse's aid. She married a Dutch man in 1955. (Richmond, British Columbia, 22 September, 1993; interview conducted in the kitchen of Doris Schulz's quite large, suburban home, while her husband sat in the living room listening in on the conversation.)<sup>1</sup>

**Brigitte Rabe** was born in Berlin in 1937 as the fourth of five children. Her mother worked at home; her father, a lathe operator, could only find temporary employment. After ten years of public school and training as a dress maker, Brigitte Rabe worked in her trade for one year when she decided to leave Germany. Sponsored by her two older brothers, who had emigrated earlier, she immigrated to Vancouver in 1957. She worked as a domestic servant for a sick, bed-ridden woman and her family for four months. Afterwards, she worked in a small sewing shop for one half year and then in a sewing shop a friend of hers had opened for another year. She married a French immigrant in 1959.(Burnaby, British Columbia, 14 September, 1993; interview took place in the kitchen of Brigitte Rabe's medium-sized suburban home; her husband arrived after the interview was over.)

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<sup>1</sup> Date(s), place and setting of the interview.



**Christel Meisinger** was born in rural Silesia in 1931 as the only child of a working-class couple. At the age of three she left with her family to the city of Kassel in western Germany where her father worked as a laborer on the construction of highways. After finishing grade nine in public school, she sewed in a factory for three years and for a tailor for one year; she then worked in a dry-cleaning factory for three years. Leaving behind her parents, she immigrated via the Assisted Passage Fare Scheme (one-year-contract) together with her girl-friend in August 1952 and worked as a domestic servant in Vancouver for one year. She married her boy-friend, whom she had known in Germany and who had immigrated one half year before her, in June 1953. After her first child was born, she worked as a cleaning woman and later as a cashier at large department stores. (Burnaby, British Columbia, 1 December, 1993; the interview took place in the kitchen of Christel Meisinger's middle-sized suburban home while her husband was mostly in the basement or outside.)

**Gertraud Müller** was born in East Prussia in 1925 and grew up on a large estate. At the end of the war, the family lost their land and possessions and fled to western Germany. After her "Abitur" (high school diploma that allows entry into university) in Germany, Gertraud Müller apprenticed as a carpenter, then as an x-ray nurse. She emigrated together with her parents and four siblings via a farm family scheme to Vancouver in June 1953. Because of back problems she left the harvest work shortly after arrival. With the help of the Mennonite Girls' Home, she secured work as a domestic servant in two households for nine months altogether. She married a German businessman in 1954; they moved to Squamish where she worked as a waitress and chambermaid. After her first child was born she worked on and off in households for several years. (Surrey, British Columbia, 23 November 1993; the interview was conducted in the dining room of Gertraud Müller's large apartment in a well-off townhouse complex.)

**Anna Grevesmühl** was born in the village of Arciechow near Warsaw, Poland in 1927 as the oldest of three daughters. Her parents were both farmers. After eight years of school - interrupted by the mandatory farm service year, war and flight to western Germany - she worked as a domestic servant and cleaning woman on farms, in households, and in hospitals in Poland and Germany. Leaving behind her parents and two younger sisters, Anna Grevesmühl immigrated to Vancouver in January 1951, being sponsored by an aunt. She worked as a domestic servant for two families for three and one half months and for two and one half years respectively. She married a Polish-born German in 1953 and left the paid labor force in order to run their home as a boarding house. (Vancouver, British Columbia, 5 July 1993; interview took place in the dining room of her large Vancouver Eastside house.)

**Heidi Schute** was born in the eastern German town of Merseburg in 1924. Her parents owned a small soap-factory, her older brother was going to university. After eight years of public school, Heidi went to a home-economics school for one year and afterwards began the mandatory service year on a farm. During the war, Heidi was trained as a nurses' aide and worked in several hospitals. In 1948, she fled from East to West Germany, where she continued to work as a nurses' aide. Having lost both of her parents and her brother during and right after the war, she immigrated via the Assisted Passage Fare Scheme (one-year-contract) to Vancouver by herself in late August/early September of 1953. There she worked as a domestic servant for four months and then in hospitals for one and one half years. She married a Canadian man in 1955 and left the paid work force for several years. (Surrey, British Columbia, 30 November, 6 December 1993; the interviews were conducted in the dining room of Heidi Schute's medium-sized suburban home; her husband was in his room beyond hearing distance.)

**Margot Buchwald** was born in the western German city of Baden-Baden in 1926 as the third of four children. Her mother worked at home and her father worked as a stuccoer. Having completed grade nine, Margot Buchwald learned home economics in a private vocational school. After the war, she was trained as a cook in Switzerland. Being sponsored by her younger brother and one older sister, she immigrated to Vancouver in November 1953, where she worked as a domestic servant in two places for three and eight months respectively. Afterwards she worked as a cook in a surveying camp in the B.C. interior for two months, and returned to Vancouver to work in a bakery for six months. She married a Canadian steam engineer in 1956. (Aldergrove, British Columbia, 27 September 1993; the interview took place in the dining/living room of Margot Buchwald's medium-sized farm house in the presence of her husband and her son.)

**Susanne Unterleitner** was born in East Prussia in 1923 as the oldest of seven children. Her parents were both farmers, her father also the mayor of the village of Süßenthal. After grade eight, Susanne Unterleitner was trained as a nurse during and after the war. She became pregnant while escaping to West Germany and had a son in 1945, whom she left in Hamburg with her family when she emigrated by herself to Vancouver in 1951. She immigrated via the Assisted Passage Loan Scheme (one-year-contract as a nurse) and worked as a domestic servant for ten months for a Supreme Court Judge of B.C. She then went back into nursing and married a German man in 1955. (Delta, British Columbia, 3 December 1993; the interview took place in the kitchen of Susanne Unterleitner's medium-sized suburban home; for parts of the interview her friend/boarder was present.)

**Waltraud Schmidt** was born as the older of two daughters in the western German city of Kassel in 1923. Her mother worked at home, while her father worked for the city's hydro company. Having finished public school, Waltraud Schmidt went to a women's vocational school before the war. After six months of mandatory service, she was trained as a tech-

nologist at Siemens in Berlin. As the first one of her family, she immigrated to Vancouver in November 1951, together with several other technologists of the team she had worked with in Germany. As a woman, she was unable to find employment as a technologist in Canada and thus had to work as a domestic servant for five months, then in factories (assembly-line) for over a year. She married a Rumanic-German man in 1953, who died of cancer only three years later. She returned to work in an electronics factory, supported by her sister and her mother who had immigrated by then and took care of her sick son. (Vancouver, British Columbia, 28 September, 1993; the interview took place in a sort of entrance lobby in Waltraud Schmidt's medium-sized city house.)

**Johanna Grohsmann** was born as the second of four children in the East Prussian (Polish) village of Alexandria in 1929. Her parents were both farmers. Johanna Grohsmann's school education was interrupted by the war and the mandatory farm service year, from where she fled to western Germany at the end of the war. Traveling all over western Germany, she worked on farms both inside and outside of the house, and later at the assembly line and in the office of a metal factory. She immigrated to Canada in September 1957, sponsored by her cousins and their families. She worked as a domestic servant for over half a year, then in the kitchen of a restaurant. In 1958 she married a man whom she had met in Germany and who had emigrated in 1952. (Vancouver, British Columbia, 26 November 1993; the interview was conducted in the dining room of Johanna Grohsmann's large Vancouver Eastside home; we had lunch with her husband.)

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