Lived Experiences of Slovak and Czech Immigrants to Australia: A Phenomenological Study

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Abstract

After World War II, an estimated five million people were on the move in Czechoslovakia. Between 1954 and 1970, over 16,000 of them immigrated to Australia. This paper is part of a larger research project that provides an in-depth inquiry of the lived experiences of 18 post-World War II emigrants from Czechoslovakia, who are now Australian citizens. Findings reveal emigrants' significant emotional reflections about their life in Czechoslovakia and provide vivid phenomenological accounts of their views about their original country's political and economic context and life within it, as well as challenges related to leaving the country and their lived experiences as displaced persons in foreign countries and Displaced Persons camps.

Keywords

Lived Experiences; Australia Immigration; Czechoslovakia; Phenomenology; Displaced Persons

Introduction

In 1948, Czechoslovakia became *Československá Republika* under the leadership of Klement Gottwald. However, the problematic ideology of the Communist Party, alongside its totalitarian regime, subsequently created an atmosphere of discontent within the population, prompting many to leave the country, hoping to return after their country was freed of communism. Between 1945 and 1947, an estimated five million people were on the move in Czechoslovakia. The following communist coup d'état in 1948 resulted again in a wave of emigration when about 250,000 people left the country. Then, between 1961 and 1970, including the suppression of the 1968 'Prague Spring', another wave of emigration saw 164,500 Czechs and Slovaks flee the country mainly to Austria, Germany, Canada, and Australia. Two more decades of an authoritarian period of 'normalization', resulted in yet another 100,000 people fleeing the country (Horakova 2000).

In 1945, Australia's first Federal immigration portfolio was created, the primary impetus being to implement a large-scale migration program. In 1954 Australia also ratified the United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. It allowed resettling of vulnerable refugees based on response to any humanitarian crisis. Then after the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Soviet Union, Australia resettled around 6,000 persons (Mence, Gangell & Tebb 2017). In exchange for their passage from Europe as Displaced Persons (DP), they were bound by a two-year employment contract with the Australian government. Today they are naturalised Australians working in a variety of occupations (Adelaidia 2019). In 1977 the Australian government developed a specific refugee policy ('Australian Humanitarian Program') tailored to the needs of asylum seekers. In January 1993, under the Keating Government, a comprehensive refugee humanitarian system was set up within the immigration portfolio separate from the general Migration program (Phillips, Klapdor & Simon-Davies 2010).

The primary focus of this paper is to shed light on the lived experiences of Czech and Slovak emigrants after WWII until the split of Czechoslovakia into Czech and Slovak republics in 1993. The paper explores emigrants' experiences before leaving Czechoslovakia, why they left and became displaced in Europe, and why they chose to immigrate to Australia. This process involved enquiring about their life under the communist regime and the subjective experiences that informed their emigration decision.

Theoretical framing

Migration is a complex and dynamic process that 'goes beyond demographic, economic, and spatial considerations' (Leloup 1996, p. 101). It includes adaptation to many changes, all of which have a significant effect on people's lives. For an emigrant, the decision to migrate rests upon numerous variables which inform the subjective experience of seeing, knowing, and *being* throughout the migration process. As such, migration is a boundless field of lived experiences that is worth exploring theoretically, focusing on the entirety of the experiences while also searching for the essence and meaning-making process of the experiences (Moustakas 1994). While the existing literature has given attention to relative challenges of migration and re-settlement (Anderson, Cummings & Gatwiri 2019; Massey et al. 1993; Stark & Wang 2000), less attention has been paid to the emotional aspect of the meaning-making processes that inform migrants' lives and their lived experiences during the migration process. To address this gap, this study utilises interpretive phenomenology, discussed below, to *enter* into the lived world of respective emigrants instead of *just* investigating it.

Given that migration experiences are subjective, the frameworks of phenomenology and interpretivism are particularly useful for this study. Phenomenologically, knowledge is based on the subjectivity of the experience and the meaning allocated to the experience. And because every experience is created through the social, cultural, and political meaning attached to it, similar experiences can invoke different phenomena and meanings. Therefore, all experiences and knowledge cannot be generalized (Guba & Lincoln 1994)

rather, they need to be interpretive. Interpretivist thinking is grounded on the tradition of hermeneutics, that is, the theory of methodological interpretation and social phenomenology. Interpretivism asserts that 'human behaviour unlike that of physical objects, cannot be understood without reference to the meanings and purposes attached by human actors to their activities' (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 106) and therefore seeks to understand the 'meaning' within social phenomena (Schwandt 1994).

Adopting an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) within this study made it possible to centre the participants' lived experience and their knowledge as subjective due to the unique interpretation accorded to each narrative. The usefulness of IPA is based on two essential commitments: 1) 'to give a voice' to participants and 2) 'to make sense of the concerns' of the person taking part in the study (Larkin, Watts & Clifton 2006, p. 102). As such, investigating the 'lived world' and re-examining the often-forgotten past experiences centralises both the person and the story, and excludes the assumption that people's narratives are separate from the person (Kafle 2011; Laverty 2003). IPA therefore, goes beyond the core concepts of the experience, by seeking, understanding, and clarifying the 'essential meanings' of participants' actions. It does so by exploring the *humanness* of being in their world.

Interpreting and transcribing the lived world of immigrants characterized within embedded meanings would not be possible without experiencing 'people's behaviour, their gestures, and other embodied expressions in a direct relationship with the phenomenon' (Dahlberg 2006, p. 4). It was paramount not only to hear participants but also to see their emotions, gestures, and embodied expressions that displayed the depth of the phenomenon and its context.

Mertens (2005, p. 12) argues that 'reality is socially constructed.' Employing a constructivist theoretical approach, researchers can conceptualise new understandings within knowledge, integrating with what they already know. Interpretive constructivism pays more attention to meaning and values. Using the interpretive constructivism paradigm 'the human aspect of research activity is realized and interactions between the researcher and the researched world are foregrounded' (Tribe 2001, p. 13).

Constructivism is a theory of knowing (von Glasersfeld 1998). Constructivists do not adhere to the viewpoint that reality is 'discovered', as such reality is constructed by individuals who are a part of the research process. The researcher and the interviewed participant must be working together not independently of each other, to make a sense of the research topic (Guba & Lincoln, 2000), so that each brings their values and interpretations of experiences, creating a unique understanding and interaction. Subsequently, the constructivist must construct the meanings and the 'building blocks must be abstracted from individual experience; and their interpersonal fit' (von Glasersfeld 1998, p. 12). The leading author, is one of *them*, understanding the researched reality. As an interpretivist/constructivist, he could get involved in interviews as a 'passionate participant' and facilitator of 'multi-voice' reconstruction (Guba & Lincoln 1994, p. 115).

Methodology, design, and reflexivity

RESEARCH PROCESS

This paper is a part of a larger qualitative research project named 'Freedom Voices: Slovak and Czech immigration to Australia after WWII', which was approved by the Southern Cross University Human Research Ethics Committee (Approval No. 2020/147). A qualitative approach was employed to study immigrants' experiences and actions '*as lived*' after their relocation to Australia. The tentative questions guiding the broader study included:

- Who is the participant, and what were their family and home like?
- What were their country's political, economic, social aspects, and the life within like?

- Why and how did they leave their country, and choose Australia as their new home?
- What were their experiences as DPs, between the time of leaving their country and arriving in Australia?

To capture and accurately reflect emotional and complex journeys, one-on-one, face-to-face, semi-structured, in-depth interviews between the lead author and participants were used to collect participants' stories. The stories formed the basis for the qualitative thematic analysis.

The interviews were structured to collect information about varied experiences in many aspects of the participants' social and personal lives. Open-ended questions provided insights into the context and the meaning created through these experiences. The emphasis was on a holistic approach focused on open and honest communication. The intention was to guide the participants, not to lead them. Participants were positioned as the experts of their lives, who willingly told their life stories, which is not just a matter of responding to the specific topics of the researcher's interest. The researcher became a student and a learner of these experiences and a vessel through which participants could bring to life the phenomenon of their complex life experiences (Smith 2003).

SAMPLE AND RECRUITMENT

The sample selection has a profound effect on the quality of the research (Coyne 1997). The sample was a purposive sample according to the needs of the study. The selection criteria required a range of rich experiences in the researched phenomena, and the ability to communicate researched experiences reflectively. 29 participants were recruited as willing and suitable participants for the study. For various reasons including the COVID-19 pandemic and the emerging restrictions, only 18 people, five females, and 13 males participated in interviews. That included 15 individuals who came to Australia as adults and three individuals who came to Australia as young children with their parents. The majority of participants were aged between 75 and 79 years old at the time of the interview.

INTERVIEW PROCESS

The interviews were seen as dialogues, whereby the researcher sought to understand the phenomenon under investigation from the interviewee's point of view (Larkin, Watts & Clifton 2006), to theorize the meaning within the experiences. The interview is essentially a conversation with a specific purpose (Kvale 2006) where the trust and rapport between the interviewer and the interviewee are often needed to obtain 'disclosure' of private life personal experiences. However, since the interviewer acquires information to achieve some specific goal, referring to the interview as dialogue may be misleading, and power dynamics can play an important role, greatly influencing the findings.

In this study, interviews were initially planned based on open conversations about migration experiences, but considering that some interviewees preferred a more structured approach to contain the narratives, a semi-structured approach was adopted. Though there was a structure to the interviews, the intention was not to follow a strict questioning format. Instead, interviews were designed to be conversational to allow participants' embedded expressions to come alive in the stories. Many of the participants were openly grateful for the opportunity to tell their stories, reminisce, and share their emotional experiences.

To aid this interview process, a mind map was utilised (Figure 1).

The mind map was offered to each participant before the interview to be adopted as a road map of what would be contained within the interview. The mind map provided a clear overview to deal with the complexity of the data, facilitating and speeding the research process, and helped to contain both the conversation and the data produced (Herman 2004). It also helped to transcribe both verbal and non-verbal aspects of the interaction, giving a realistic interpretation of all aspects of this interaction. Mind
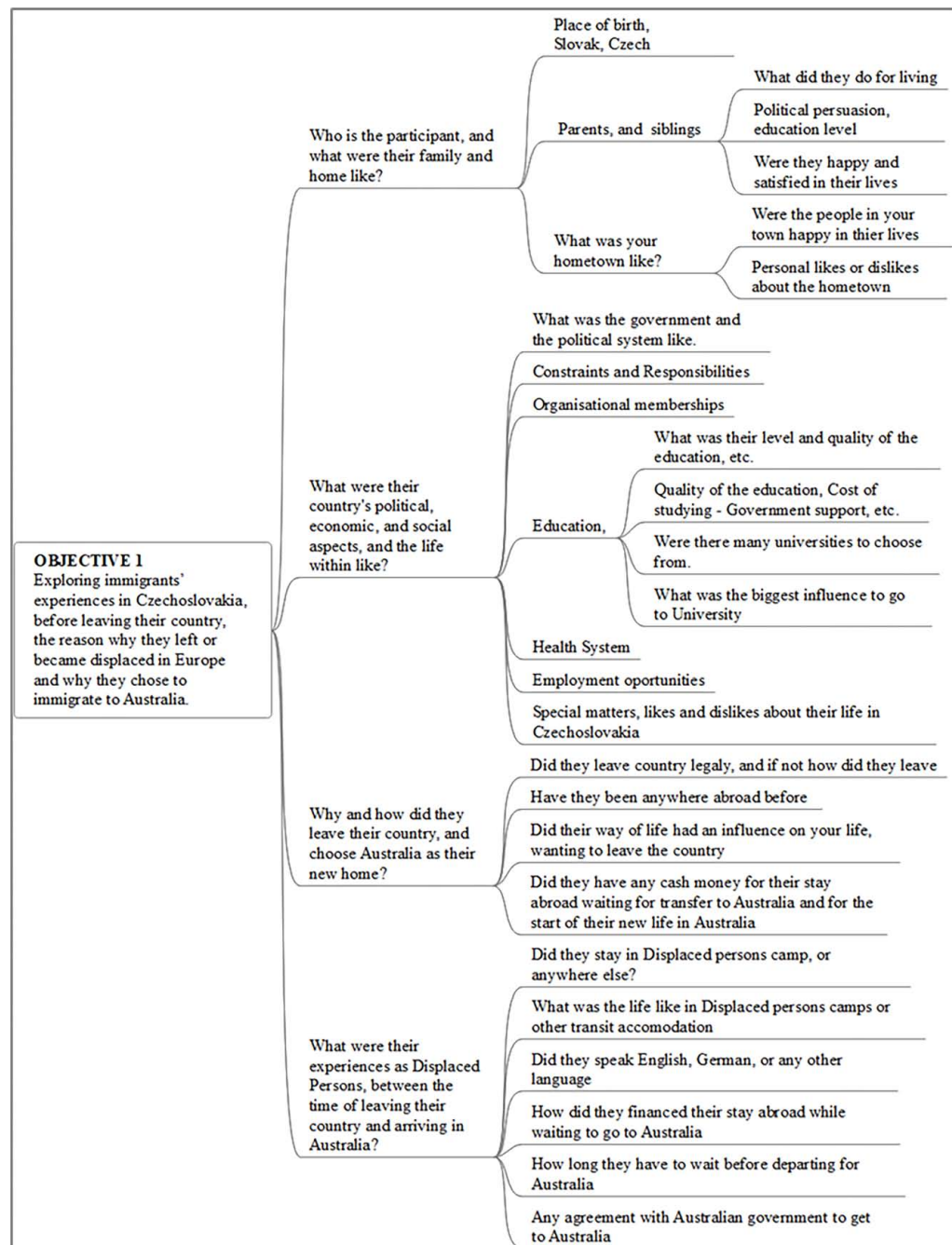
Figure 1.   The Mind map designed for interviews of participants

mapping was also instrumental during the analysis of the collected data as it allowed the researcher to 'bracket' any preconceptions by setting aside any presuppositions, focusing on the analysis of experience, and rendering the studied phenomenon explicit (Gearing 2004),this being an essential requirement in doing phenomenological research (Tattersall, Wats & Vernon 2007).

REFLEXIVITY

The researcher's positioning within research can be affected by the researcher's stance, including personal experiences, beliefs, and presumptions regarding the researched topic. The lead author is a Czechoslovak

emigrant. He immigrated to Australia from Czechoslovakia in 1968. Similar to other immigrants in Europe, he had become a displaced person after escaping Czechoslovakia. As an 'insider' to this experience, he carries embodied knowledge and an understanding of behaviours, values, and nuances of the cultural idiom of the related challenges and processes of immigration. It is possible that as an insider, his position could influence interviews, and therefore, it was essential to employ the self-reflective process of 'bracketing'. His insider status was also considered a 'soft entry' to the conversations with interviewees who considered him 'safe' to share their experiences with, some of which had not been publicly shared before. His familiarity with the experience of emigration from Czechoslovakia made it possible to have nuanced discussions with interviewees about the essential meanings of participants' experiences without fear of judgement or criticism (Lindseth & Norberg 2004).

The other authors of this paper are also emigrants. One is a French and Swiss citizen who emigrated to Australia in 2014, and the other is a Kenyan citizen who emigrated to Australia in 2012. Both are Australian citizens now. The second and third authors acknowledge all qualitative research is contextual, and within this specific context, they remain insider-outsiders. That is, as insiders, they understand the processes of *leaving home*, which includes the emotional suffering of leaving behind people they love, the smells, and rhythms of their home countries. However, as outsiders, they also do not have embodied knowledge of 'escaping' their countries or being persecuted for holding certain political belief systems. They occupy privileged status as migrants, who navigate Australian migranthood with more nuanced ease. While each migration is different, this allowed them to develop a sense of shared experience about the participants' journey, but they relied on the lead author's insights and familiarity with the Czechoslovakian culture and history to more fully interpret the data.

Analysis

Because access to migrants' experience during interviews is only partial and complex, the first objective was to interpret and construct an informed description of the events as close as possible to the respective participant's view. The second objective was 'to develop more overtly interpretive analysis' of the described event (Larkin, Watts & Clifton 2006, p. 104). Such analysis allowed interpretation of the participant's claim, to describe what it meant for the participant to express such feelings and concerns in the specific situation. Therefore, any discoveries made had to be based on the relationship 'between the researcher and the subject matter', identifying the researcher as 'an inclusive part of the world they are describing' (Larkin, Watts & Clifton 2006, p. 107).

During analysis, the focus was on two issues namely: 1) the transcription that involved interpretation, and 2) bracketing of researchers' preconceptions, although sometimes the subjective view of the experience played an important part in the understanding and analysing of a phenomenon (Merleau-Ponty, 2013). Using the inductive approach alongside the 6-stage thematic analysis process developed by Braun and Clarke (2012), the authors reviewed the data and identified common themes. They familiarized themselves with the data, by reading and rereading the transcripts of interviews and then generating codes, looking for patterns of meanings, and systematically collating the data according to the objective and questions of the study. Authors then systematically searched for and reviewed the emerging themes and subthemes while naming and collating them. The process proved to be a recursive one with the mind map used in interviews becoming a helpful tool in identifying main themes and sub-themes and any interconnections between themes and subthemes. The reflexivity journal used in interviews also became useful during analysis. Researchers were able to be more specific in how to interpret respective themes, directly relevant to the question, allowing them to go back and rework the themes when needed. The concept of bracketing was adopted before initiating research by using the mind map with broad open-ended questions so as not to influence the collection of data and the analysis process (Chan, Fung & Chien 2013).

Findings and themes

The findings from interviews were thematically coded. The themes underscore the richness of the lived experiences of all participants. Considering the age, gender, background, period, and other attributes between participating interviewees, it was essential to analyse what commonalities or differences emerged from the interviews. The following overview of findings is grouped in commonly recurring themes.

THEME 1: NAVIGATING COMPLEX EMOTIONS OF GRIEF AND LOSS

Familial cohesion contributes to family members' emotional well-being across varying social circumstances. Family experiences are some of 'the most important sources of both well-being and distress' ([Vandeleur et al. 2009](), p. 1205). In this study, participants' affection for family evoked painful memories of the loss of loved ones. A sense of closeness or ruptured family relationships, characterised by grief and loss, was powerfully depicted in every interview. Although most participants were aged between 75 and 79 years old at the time of the interview, participants' first comments in interviews included emotional expressions of strong affection for their parents and families. However, it was not only the verbatim and emotional outpourings but also participants' facial expressions, nuances, and body language that depicted moments of loss, grief, and love concerning family relationships.

Milos, a 71-years-old participant, for example, showed significant emotion when he remembered his mother singing 'their' song with tears rolling down his face during the interview. While describing his love for his mother, Milos closed his eyes, describing how he imagined holding her in his arms and singing softly to her ear a little song about how '*he will come back one day*.' The grief depicted by Milos is a typical universal and inevitable aspect of a highly emotionally distressing human experience ([Lewis, Haviland-Jones & Barrett 2008]()); however, the lack of closure highlighted in the relationship between Milos and his mother remained a powerful depiction of how forced migration can impact families and relationships across a lifetime.

Another participant, Marka, who was only 9 years old when she left the country, expressed the grief by illuminating her home with specially arranged family pictures and flickering candlelight at the corner of her living room. Pointing at the pictures, 'my special mementos' she said. 'I was only four years old hiding scared behind some drums in my parents' factory when the German Gestapo rushed in and took my parents, my grandma, and many workers away. They were taken to Auschwitz. I will never forget it.'

Similarly, Peter was only five years old when he witnessed the murder of his father. Subsequently, Peter's mother became very sick, grief-stricken, and died at only 39 years of age. Peter reflected, 'It was 66 years ago, I was only 14 when she died, but I will never forget it.'

John, another participant, was not even five years old when he also witnessed the murder of his father during the Postoloprty massacre in 1945. Then, four years later, John saw his brother being taken by the police as a political prisoner to Jachymovite uranium mines, which caused the consequent death of his 40 years old grieving mother in 1950. After his brother made his daring escape to West Germany in 1951, John, feeling lost and alone and living with his grandparents, was continuously making plans to escape and be with his brother. In 1968, John escaped from Czechoslovakia and reunited with his brother in Germany, and together they both immigrated to Australia. John recalls, 'I hated communists for killing my father, imprisoning and torturing my brother, and also for being responsible for my mother's death. In Australia, we were free and together with my brother until he died in 2009.'

Discourses of grief and loss constitute certain social rules that suggest that grieving is a 'private matter that should be resolved so individuals can resume their normal lives' ([Clarke 2020](), p. 14). As such, listening to participants' stories recounting their experiences, interlaced with loss and grief, with immense love, was

an experience of great humility (Backhouse & Graham 2013) and it encapsulates how subjective processes of grief and loss are.

THEME 2: THE BURDEN OF THE SOCIO-POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC CONTEXT

The sense of hardship in participants' lives before emigrating was another recurring emotional subtheme discussed by participants. Participants reflected that after the communists came into power, life as people knew it has changed. For example, in 1948, agriculture was collectivized, creating state-owned cooperatives, which was part of a program to isolate the 'capitalist element' in the country (Rychlík 2014, p. 188). Small farms became unsustainable and could not support families, and this hardship forced many to look for work in Czech industrialized towns, consequently breaking up the family home life. Reflecting on this change, Jano described working with his father and brothers on a small farm as not enough to live on 'I had to go to Ostrava to work in steelworks for the family to survive,' he said.

In addition to the disruption of family livelihood, the political distrust among the people in the communities meant that majority lived in fear. The country's political, economic, and social fabric, as well as rampant corruption and communist authoritarianism, were mentioned by all participants, reflecting on the 'burden' it placed on their daily lives. Participants shared that the anxiety and fear emanating from general distrust among people in the communities was influenced by the fact that more than 100,000 police collaborators were informing police on their fellow citizens. The 'recruitment of informers was very systematic' and all candidates were 'made to sign a written promise to inform' (Celp 1992, p. 24).

A participant, Janka, recalled how her parents always reminded her not to say anything about the regime in public: 'you must not trust anyone, we can all end up in jail', she mimicked their words, during the interview. The anti-communist movement was widespread in big workplaces, but there were severe consequences for any outright resistance. Jano also reflected how scared he felt while working in steelworks, where he saw 'Many of my co-workers [being] taken by police for anti-communist speeches, some never came back, just perished'.

Disregarding the consequences, another participant, Traves, reflected that he believed that open rebellion was the way to '*beat the system*'. He recalled how pervasive the spying system was, remembering how one day he and two friends 'were drinking in a pub having fun and carrying on silly' about how they could 'steal a plane and escape'. Two days later, the police came to his home and took him away. 'I went to jail for three years. Somebody informed the police' he said.

Corruption in Czechoslovakia created a burden and existed at all levels. It had a profound effect on culture and values (Naxera 2018). Participants branded corruption as a generally accepted way of life, common everywhere, including in the education system, employment, health system, and practically all administrative places. Peter was very vocal about the 'bribe culture' and how he could not get to university because of his father's German background. He said, 'it cost a lot of money bribing communist pigs.' Corruption within the education system was also rampant. Lidia reflected:

> The good thing, education was free. Students also earned money, for good marks. However, getting to university was not always easy. You often needed someone influential to get to the university of your choice or bribe the right people.

Graduating from university was not always a guarantee to get a better job, and neither was a 'clean record'. 'Good jobs' were granted and often depended on the content of the individual's file records kept by communists (Celp 1992). Marian reflected how he was never involved in anything anti-communist, and yet after finishing his studies, he was refused the job he was qualified for and was told he had a '*black mark*' on his record without knowing. He later found out that his 'older half-brother, escaped to Canada a few years earlier. I had nothing to do with it, yet communist bastards held it against me'. Many participants also

commented upon the corruption within the health system. Drazen witnessed his wife's father almost die from not getting proper care in the hospital. He reflected: 'There were no doctors' fees or health insurance to pay, but you did not get the proper attention without paying a bribe, and bigger the bribe, meant better attention'.

With these significant cultural and political 'burdens', most participants commented the way to prosper in life was to become active members of the communist party which was often a prerequisite to acquiring a 'good job'. Some participants like Lidia still engaged in a dignified resistance. She reflected: 'I did not study for 16 years to become a decorated communist. I wanted to achieve something in my life not just sitting in a comfortable chair in an expensive office, pushing people around.' Other participants commented that it was not unusual for top jobs to be held by communist party members, often with low-level education. Talking about his experiences when installing some equipment for a business in Prague, a participant Reiner commented, 'The chief of the business was so stupid, he did not even know the difference between AC and DC. But he was chief of the communist party. All he knew was how to swear and push everybody around.'

For some participants, solitude and unhappiness with no prospect of any brighter future made them leave the country. Stella was a teacher in a small town. Her mother had died and her father was an alcoholic who 'always got in trouble with the police.' Stella reflected, 'I just could not see any future for me in the communist regime. I just wanted a better life.' Mirek was only a young child when their family escaped. He gave a lot of credit to his parents, allowing him to get his education in Australia and have a better life than they did. Mirek was reflecting how his father's ambition was suppressed because he did not want to join the communist party. 'We left because father wanted me to do more with my life than he was allowed to do. I am grateful for giving me the opportunity'.

Interviews showed that participants mostly left the country for political, economic, and social reasons. These included economic hardships factors, obstacles to career growth, and the prospect of criminal prosecution for anti-regime propaganda because anti-communist activists were considered enemies of the country (Stefancik & Nemcova 2015, p. 92).

THEME 3: CHALLENGES AND PROMISES RELATED TO LEAVING THE COUNTRY

Anguish and fear for their lives were emotionally depicted as a painful challenge during the 'leaving the country timeline.' Being ordered out of their home in the middle of the night, Heinke mirrored the expulsion of her family from Czechoslovakia by Czech paramilitary to Nazi atrocities during WWII. Very emotional, often pausing for a few seconds, she remembered:

> We had to be out at two o'clock at night and (pause) everything was taken (pause) then in the morning we had to get on the train (emotional pausing for a few seconds) it was a (pause) train for coal (pausing looking up to the ceiling, tears rolling down her face).

Marka was very happy after her parents returned from Auschwitz after the war. But her happiness was short-lived. When communists confiscated her family business during the 1948 nationalization, fearing for their lives, the whole family escaped to Italy. Reflecting on how it took a long time for her parents to recover after their suffering in Auschwitz, she said: 'they were terrified by possible repercussions by communists, and the concentration camp memories still very raw, we left everything behind and left.' Reiner, was also only seven years old when his family escaped to Switzerland in 1948, fearing for his father's life. He reflected: 'My father was tortured by communists. They would have killed him. We had to leave.'

However, the family closeness, a love for their country, and the hope the political system would change were described by participants as vital issues that kept many from leaving the country earlier. They 'learned to bear up patiently under the imposed regimes' (Rose 1997, p. 130). As Peter reflected:

> Constantly thinking about communists responsible for the death of my parents my hatred towards the regime was intolerable. I was secretly hoping it will all change one day, but the Russian invasion in 1968 brought in the final blow to my hope. I had enough and left my country decimated by communists.

Mike also believed the communist system couldn't survive forever, hoping it must eventually collapse because power-hungry 'narcissistic idiots' ran it and that was not sustainable. He reflected:

> It was not easy you had to do the best you could. The country was full of narcissistic idiots, with a lot of power often with very little intelligence. I was hoping that sooner or later, people will have to wake up and take a stand against communists and the system will go down.

Travelling abroad was not an easy task. Escaping to non-communist countries required careful planning, ingenuity, and risk-taking. Using her experience from a previous holiday in Yugoslavia, Stela reflected how her friend in Yugoslavia, living close to the Austrian border, helped her: 'He showed me a safe spot to swim across the river to Austria … from there I hitchhiked to West Germany. In Germany, I intentionally married another emigrant to qualify for refugee status.' Drazen, another participant, had family friends in Yugoslavia. He explained how he took his wife and two young children on holiday to Belgrade and how his friends helped them to get across the border by bribing corrupt officials on the border to Austria. He explained, 'My friends took us to the border at night during changing of shift. After we crossed the border, a car was waiting for us to take us to Vienna.'

A participant, Luke, was a Czechoslovakian air force pilot. He commented how having a job he liked was also not enough for him to tolerate the regime. In 1967 he was transferred to Russia to train with the Russian air force. In August 1968, Luke flew his MIG during the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia. However, he was also unhappy with the Russians invading his homeland, and he escaped with his MIG to West Germany. He reflected, 'I went along with the regime because I liked my job, but to attack my homeland was too much to ask of me'.

Some of the daring escapes from Czechoslovakia also included group escapes. In 1969 Milos and his two friends, members of Swazarm[1], organized an excursion bus trip from Prague to Bratislava, Vienna, and Budapest, for members of Swazarm only. There were three busses with over 100 other members on board, but none of them knew that Milos and his friends were using the trip to escape. Describing how everything went smoothly crossing the border in Bratislava, with plenty of beer on board, drinking and pretending to be happy as young members of a political organization singing political songs, Milos reflected:

> In Vienna, my two friends and I parted with the group not knowing what happened to others thereafter. Later, in Australia, I learned that the three busses came back to Czechoslovakia empty with bus drivers only. All of the trip participants used the opportunity to escape.

Physical escape from Czechoslovakia was an 'exceedingly difficult act during most of the Cold war' (Giustino, Plum & Vari 2013, p. 252). Numerous examples of escape often included state-driven activities where official and unofficial interests came together to make the escape successful. The outcome was contingent on the circumstances and ingenuity of the people involved.

THEME 4: PRACTICAL AND EMOTIONAL CONSIDERATIONS OF BEING IN TRANSITION

After WWII, over eleven million people ended in many DP camps around Europe. Thousands of Czechoslovakian emigrants were also among the DPs (Persian 2012). Participants in this study were among

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1   Youth communist paramilitary political organization

them. Recurring themes in participants' reflections on experiences of those days included: Money and Language issues, Joy of freedom, Distancing from communists, and Apprehension.

Czechoslovakian currency had no value abroad, being not convertible for any western currency. Participants described buying Western currencies on the black market before leaving and associated risks during the border inspection, often ending with currency confiscation and prosecution. Marian, who managed to buy only a few German marks before he left, commented, 'luckily there were charities in Vienna that helped us with some cash we needed.' Mike, who also had only a few shillings, commented, 'By speaking good German I was able to get a small job as a cleaner in a hotel that paid me some cash.'

Unlike Marian and Mike, Janka recalled:

> We had quite a lot of German marks with us that we got over-time as tips and bought some in Karlštejn restaurant from customers. That is why we went to Vienna in our friend's taxi, and before we left Czechoslovakia, we hid the money in panels of the taxi. Our friend did the same and left the taxi in Vienna in a car park.

Education in communist Czechoslovakia included a compulsory study of languages. Russian language from grade four and a choice of a second language from grade nine. German was the most popular second choice. The language was an issue only for those who did not speak German. Jano reflected, 'I had to ask other immigrants from Czechoslovakia who spoke German, to help me when I needed.' Lidia spoke German very well. She described that there were communist spies among emigrants collecting personal information. She said: 'people who did not speak German were often revealing personal information to communist spies, and any such information was then used to the detriment of their relatives in Czechoslovakia'.

German language spoken in Austria often had another unwelcome effect on emigrants from Czechoslovakia. Describing the processing stage in Traiskirchen, questioning, fingerprinting, as well as the presence of security guards with guns, Milos compared the situation to the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia during WWII, commenting: 'From the beginning, it was frightening in Traiskirchen. There were soldiers with guns and … they spoke very harshly in German … it brought in memories of the war.'

Most participants commented that to get away from communists as far as possible was the primary reason for choosing Australia as their new home. Janka reflected: 'We were not choosing much … My husband said we will go to Australia because Austria is too close and Russians will come there too.' Having a choice between Canada, the USA, South Africa, Australia or stay in Austria, Marian compared South Africa's racist regime to the communist regime, saying 'Australia is a warm and free country, it would be an advantage to start in a warm place far away from communists.' James was also appeased by the distance from the communist regime, freedom, and a warm climate and reflected: 'I was not prepared to stay in Austria with communists being just on the other side of the Danube. Being far away in free and warm Australia, I was prepared to sleep under a bridge in the worst-case.'

Although participants depicted several issues, about why they did not like to stay in DP camps, these were overshadowed by the happiness of leaving the communist regime behind and looking forward to freedom elsewhere. Janka, described how she happily tolerated conditions in the place she was transferred to after being processed as a refugee. She said that having only one toilet for 400 people and terrible food was challenging, but 'we were happy to put up with it knowing it will be only for a short time and we will be free far away from communists.'

However, as the time of departure to Australia was getting closer, the happiness of looking forward to freedom was often affected by apprehension. Participants started questioning if they were doing the right thing. James recalled:

> Yes, it was very exciting once being granted refugee status and the time of flying to Australia was set. But I often wondered if I was doing the right thing leaving Czechoslovakia, it was my home, and I knew that my family would be victimized for my escape.

For many participants, it was the first time in their lives that they travelled overseas. Emotions associated with lack of money, language issues, and living conditions were overshadowed by the promise of freedom. However, all participants echoed the extremely emotional issue about leaving their families behind, knowing they may never see them again.

Discussion

This paper presented some personal insights into the migration process from various perspectives of participants. Firstly, it was essential to reflect on the process of this research and how the insider positionality of the first author was navigated within the analysis. Adopting an interpretive constructivist paradigm from an insider position based on the tradition of hermeneutics aimed towards a greater understanding of participants. The choice of the interpretive constructivist methodology was 'vital to the credibility' of the research (Reiners 2012, p. 3). Being aware of the relationship between the researcher and the topic under investigation can shape the inquiry, it was important to place participants' stories in the foreground and the researchers' knowledge and experiences into the background. As Patton (2002, p. 64) suggests, 'self-awareness [of] political, cultural consciousness and ownership of one's perspective' was paramount in this study. To manage the possibility of additive assumptions of 'what stories were told', the researchers were mindful that the 'wording of questions shapes how participants respond to them' (Bowleg 2008, p. 314). Hence, relaxing the structure of interviews, by giving participants the mind map, as described earlier, offered participants freedom of broader expression without the researcher 'soliciting' stories. With less structured questions, participants shaped the interviews themselves, volunteering the richness of their personal experiences and their meanings attributed to them. The depth and richness of the narratives shared, both verbally and through gestures and embodied expressions, was 'understood' by the first author's knowledge of what certain symbols, gestures, and body languages represent in Slovak cultures. This constructivist approach allowed for the elucidation of the *invisibility* of participants' complex embedded meanings coded within emotionally charged experiences during analysis. (Ratner 2002, p. 3).

This research revealed a diversity of concerns and distinct challenges and how the participants navigated them. Although participants had different family backgrounds and reasons for relocation, common concerns emerged. The complexity of migration and its implications on emigrants' lives is difficult to tease out. It is an emotional process that affects everything that matters to people and is never 'quite over' even when the desired destination has been reached successfully (Demireva & Quassoli 2019). Therefore, the analysis of migration dynamics needs to consider emigrants' decisions made before emigration and allow 'how these change with time and affect each other' (Leloup 1996, p. 101). Lee (1966, p. 49) in his theoretical analysis of migration summarises 'the decision to migrate and the process of migration' into four categories. These are: 1) Factors associated with the area of origin, 2) factors associated with the area of destination, 3) intervening obstacles, and 4) personal factors.

In this study, these four factors were evidenced through participants' narratives. For example, there were many 'push factors' that motivated participants to leave Czechoslovakia. The majority repeatedly commented that before the communists came to power, life in Czechoslovakia was hard, but people were set in their lives and dealt with problems collectively as families. Participants asserted the communist regime changed their way of life, destroyed lives, and broke families. Markham (2019, p. 21) argues, the introduction of United Agricultural Cooperatives (UAC) for collectivisation of agriculture, proved to be a 'source of dissatisfaction among people after February 1948'. The resulting systemic infrastructural change in Czechoslovakia 'mobilized real tension between individuals' (Just 2012, p. 709).

Participants also described the pre-eminence of the communist party, secret police informers, stress, and fear as major factors for their emigration. Czechoslovakia was known for the surveillance of the population by secret agents, with the mission to identify citizens whose political convictions conflicted with the official stance of the communist party. Similar to what Mrvová (2019) argued participants in this study described how challenging it was to live with the fear that at any moment's notice, for disagreement with the regime, the communist government could harm or take them as political prisoners. The relentless surveillance had stressful consequences on people's psyches (Stan 2011).

Secret police infiltrated almost every institution, and meticulous records were maintained by the Ministry of Interior (Cepl 1992). Besides the tens of thousands of agents, an estimated 140,000 people were secret police informers (Pehe 1991, p. 8). This issue resonated with participants to this study, who experienced their country turning into a police state, with many people becoming secret informers, spying on their friends, relatives, co-workers, and neighbours, despite the general hatred towards communists (Stan 2011). Furthermore, the widespread corruption in all aspects of life was also pointed out by participants as being intolerable. This study shows that communist authoritarianism promoted a culture of corruption where 'entire population[s] had been socialized into norms and expectations that made corruption part of their way of life' (Sandholtz & Taagepera, 2005, p. 127). Participants in this study depicted their reasons for emigration as being intrinsically intertwined with the respective political order of the nation-state. Participants described the 'undemocratic character of the political regime' as one of the many 'push factors' for emigration (Stefancik & Nemcova 2015, p. 90).

Some personal factors also had a significant effect on a participant's decision to emigrate. Although the communist regime's ongoing injustice was perceived by participants as an act of violence, resulting in profound dissatisfaction and hatred of the regime, to take the opportunity to escape involved complex decision-making that was personal, in nature. Despite the attraction of moving, many participants also spoke of the 'dilemma of relocation'. The decision to emigrate would mean that participants would be separated from members of their family, community, and culture. The decision to escape therefore could have a detrimental effect on their relationships but also affect the escapee's relatives left behind as it was considered a criminal offence to escape and the remaining relatives were persecuted (Drbohlav 1994). Most participants reflected that despite embracing the choice to leave Czechoslovakia, leaving their family members behind was an emotionally excruciating experience. However, as participants depicted, while there are stages in life where positive factors at the origin are overwhelmingly important and limit emigration, sometimes such bonds can become 'slackened with some catastrophic suddenness' (Lee 1966, p. 51).

People have significant attachments to their countries of origin where they spent the formative year of their childhood, which can lead to overstated hope and 'overvaluation of positive elements in the environment and an undervaluation of negative elements' (Lee 1966, p. 51). Hoping the communist regime would collapse, participants delayed their escape even though they identified strong reasons to leave. Snyder (2002, p. 269) describes hope as a 'personal rainbow in the mind', and a 'way of thinking, with feelings playing an important, contributory role' to people's decision-making processes (Snyder 2002, p. 249). However, Russia's invasion during the Prague Spring of 1968, was referred to by participants as the 'final blow' and 'too much to ask', consequently affecting participants' sense of hope and hence became the final push factor to leave.

Another factor informing the emigration experiences of participants was the destination. Australia was considered an attractive destination by participants because it was 'far away from the communist regime'. Many reflected that emigrating to European countries was not 'far enough.' Australia, therefore, represented numerous 'pull factors' such as political freedom, better economic conditions, a better education system, and an opportunity to 'start over.' However, numerous obstacles can be experienced during this process of relocation. Individuals' perceptions of the pull and push forces influence actual migration. As Lee (1966, p. 51) argues, the effect of intervening obstacles depends upon the impediments with which the migrant

is being burdened and the 'balance in favour of the move must be enough to overcome the natural inertia which exists'. Participants' stories were filled with comments such as: 'I will never forget it as long as I live' or "I will always remember it' demonstrating the persisting grief and deep emotions held across decades of time post emigration. Although many decades have passed since participants left their homes, the majority did not recover from their loss. Price (2010) argues that this form of grief is a complex emotion and should be thought of as 'an emotional process, which passes through several distinct phases' from the initial phase of shock followed by searching, despair, ending with recovery when the person has adapted to the loss (Price 2010, p. 30).

Conclusion

While this study corroborates the current body of scholarly literature, it adds new depth to the understanding of the emigration from communist Czechoslovakia, subjective to the deep emotional experiences dominated by individual participants' personal feelings, opinions, and partialities. Through the use of IPA, a focus was maintained on each participant individually, but it also allowed for the individual findings to be balanced as commonalities, considering what was shared', across all participants (Reid, Flowers & Larkin 2005, p. 20). IPA allowed for the lived experiences to be understood through the shared meanings that participants reflected upon. Using a specially designed mind map during interviews, allowed for an open uninterrupted, and authentic exchange of information in a form of conversation allowing participants to express their feelings and profound emotions. And, because sorrow restricts articulation (Erdemir et al. 2018), to capture and understand participants' lived experiences, it was important to make the space safe enough to *hear* both the verbal and the non-verbal aspects of the narratives.

This study helps to better comprehend the emigration process, more specifically the impact the emigration has on the lives of emigrants. It highlighted the diversity of concerns of the emigration, reflecting on participants' different life circumstances and risk perception re-affirming the complexity of the emigration. While it is easy for each of us to view the emigration process through the lenses of the perceived impact on the immigrants' destination country, this research helps researchers and practitioners to make sense of the impact on immigrants themselves, from both personal and professional perspectives and take away some different lessons concerning the gravity of the process.

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