

The Mass Exodus

When CDU leader Helmut Kohl was sworn in as West Germany's new chancellor on October 4, 1982, he resolved to fulfill his party's promise of turning a remigration law into reality. Even though Schmidt and the Social Democrats had begun developing their own version of a remigration law several months before, Kohl's goal was far more extreme. In a secret meeting with British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher just three weeks after taking office, Kohl expressed his desire to "reduce the number of Turks in Germany by 50 percent." Due to the public outrage surrounding racism, however, "he could not say that publicly yet."¹

For both guest workers and Turks in the home country, the change in government proved ominous. Continuing the tradition of likening German chancellors to Hitler, the tabloid *Bulvar* printed a cartoon depicting Kohl with swastikas on his glasses.² The guest workers, wrote *Güneş*, were especially "worried" about Kohl.³ As *Milliyet* columnist Örsan Öymen explained, "Whereas the old government wanted to freeze the number of guest workers, the new government wants to send them home."⁴

¹ British Prime Minister's Office, "Secret: Record of a Conversation Between the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany," October 28, 1982, The National Archives of the UK (TNA), Kew, PREM 19/1036.

² *Bulvar*, October 14, 1982, quoted in German Embassy in Ankara to AA, "Betr.: Ausländerpolitik; hier: MP Ulusu in PK 16.10 und türkische Presse," October 18, 1982, PAAA, B 85/1614.

³ *Güneş*, October 3, 1982, quoted in German Embassy in Ankara to AA, "Betr.: Neue Bundesregierung; hier: türkische Presse zur Lage Türken in Deutschland," October 4, 1982, PAAA, B 85/1614.

⁴ Örsan Öymen, *Milliyet*, October 6, 1982, quoted in German Embassy in Ankara to AA, "Betr.: Ausländerpolitik; hier: türkische Presse," October 7, 1982, PAAA, B 85/1614.

Milliyet further urged the Turkish government to “intervene to protect the rights of guest workers.”⁵ Columnist Rauf Tamer suggested that his fellow citizens initiate a form of “collective resistance”: “If the Turkish workers are forced to leave Germany, we must boycott German goods and stop flying with Lufthansa,” because “money is the only thing that interests [Germans].”⁶

Given such criticism both domestically and abroad, Kohl and his CDU/CSU-FDP coalition knew that getting rid of half of the Turkish migrant population would be no easy feat. In crafting the remigration law, they grappled with a political and ethical dilemma: How, after perpetrating the Holocaust forty years prior, could they kick out the Turks without compromising their post-fascist values of liberalism and democracy? How, amid Germany’s Cold War division, could they skirt the issue of human rights violations while still upholding their international status as an ally of the Free World? How could they defend their domestic claim to being the true heir to pre-1933 German liberalism and the presumptive future leaders of a one-day reunified German nation? And how could they do so in a way that maximized their appearance of generosity and minimized criticism from the Turkish government? Surely, they knew that they could not forcibly deport half of the Turkish migrant population.

Their answer, ultimately codified in the Law for the Promotion of the Voluntary Return of Foreigners (*Rückkehrförderungsgesetz*) of November 28, 1983, was to pay Turks to leave. Under the guise of generosity, the West German government offered unemployed former guest workers a “remigration premium” (*Rückkehrprämie*) of 10,500 DM (approximately 20,000 USD today) to pack their bags, take their spouses and children, and leave the country. But there was a catch: even though taking the money was voluntary, they had to exit West German borders by a strict deadline: September 30, 1984. Tired of waiting for guest workers as they wavered on the difficult question of staying or leaving, West German policymakers wanted to force guest worker families to decide, within just ten months, whether they were willing to permanently abandon their jobs, schools, lives, and residence permits – with no option to return.

⁵ *Milliyet*, October 3, 1982, quoted in German Embassy in Ankara to AA, “Betr.: Neue Bundesregierung; hier: türkische Presse zur Lage Türken in Deutschland.”

⁶ Rauf Tamer, newspaper and date not provided (likely October 6, 1982), quoted in German Embassy in Ankara to AA, “Betr.: Ausländerpolitik; hier: türkische Presse.”

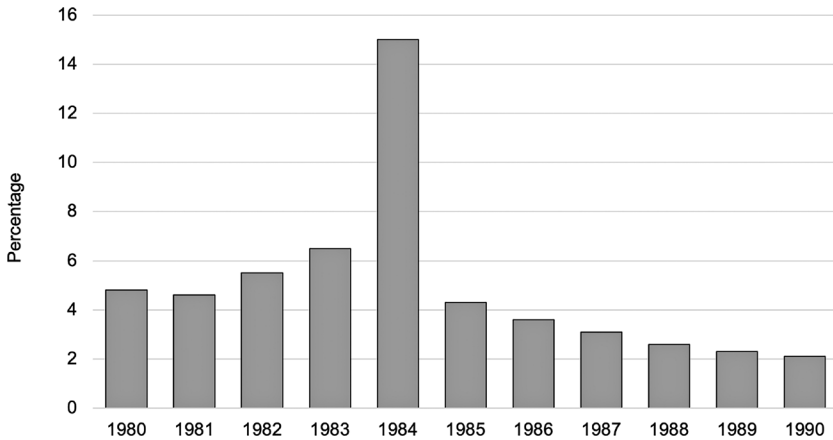


FIGURE 5.1 Annual percentage of West Germany's Turkish migrant population who returned "permanently," 1980–1990.⁷ In 1984, due to the West German government's remigration law, the rate of return migration skyrocketed to 15 percent. It then declined sharply to just over 2 percent throughout the decade's latter half. Created by author.

While the remigration law did not fulfill Kohl's extreme 50 percent goal, it did spark one of the largest mass remigrations in modern European history. Between November 1983 and September 1984, within just ten months, 15 percent of the Turkish migrant population – 250,000 men, women, and children – returned to Turkey (Figure 5.1). For some, the decision to leave was easy. Having been on the fence about returning, the financial incentive was enticing. With the money, they believed they could finally return to their homeland, start their own small businesses, retire comfortably, and no longer face uncertainty. For others, the decision was difficult. Decrying the 10,500 DM as a mere pittance, they criticized the West German government's initial refusal to pay out their social security contributions in full. But they also wanted to escape the racist climate of West Germany, which had only worsened in recent years, and to prevent their children's further "Germanization" by bringing them back to Turkey. With many children having spent time in Turkey only on their vacations, parents' decision to leave sometimes tore families apart.

⁷ Data based on *Statistische Jahrbücher*, as compiled in: Beate Jankowitsch, Thomas Klein, and Stefan Weick, "Die Rückkehr ausländischer Arbeitsmigranten seit Mitte der achtziger Jahre," 93–109, in Richard Alba, Peter Schmidt, and Martina Wasme, eds., *Deutsche und Ausländer: Freunde, Fremde oder Feinde?* (Wiesbaden: Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2000), 96.

Once they returned to Turkey, their dreams often turned into nightmares. Nearly half the guest workers who returned to Turkey with the 1983 remigration law came to regret their decisions, as they encountered parallel difficulties “reintegrating” into their own homeland. For some, the happy homecoming turned sour, as years of seeing their friends, family, and neighbors only on their vacations left them ostracized as “Germanized” and culturally estranged. Others went bankrupt after failed business ventures, having underestimated Turkey’s dire economic situation and hyperinflation. But failure also came at a psychological cost – forcing guest workers and their families to question whether all the years of separation had truly been worth it. The mass exodus became a cautionary tale that discouraged other guest workers from remigrating in later years, leading to a stark decline in return migration throughout the 1980s.

PAYING TURKS TO LEAVE

To solve the “Turkish problem,” the West German government paid them to leave. With the 1983 Law for the Promotion of the Voluntary Return of Foreigners, the federal government offered money directly to unemployed guest workers in the form of a “return premium,” more euphemistically described as “remigration assistance” (*Rückkehrhilfe*): a one-time cash transfer of 10,500 DM, plus an additional 1,500 DM per underage child. To receive the money, the worker’s entire family, including his or her spouse and underage children, would need to exit West German borders. Once a guest worker had taken the money, he or she could return to the country only as a tourist. Even children who had been born in West Germany or had spent most of their lives there would require an entrance visa. Upon their departure, a border official would stamp all family members’ residence permits “invalid,” marking their official severance from a country where many had lived for nearly two decades.

The basic concept behind this remigration law was actually developed many years before Kohl assumed the chancellorship. In 1975, the state government of Baden-Württemberg began lobbying for the development of a federal plan to “relieve the labor market” through “a significant reduction of excessive guest worker employment.” The mechanism would be the provision of “return assistance” (*Rückkehrhilfe*) financed by the Federal Labor Office (Bundesanstalt für Arbeit). Proponents within the Baden-Württemberg government lauded the success of a

“spectacular” model case among workers at the Audi factory in the area surrounding Heilbronn and Neckarsulm. Within only fourteen days in May 1975, an offer of 8,000 DM severance paid by the state of Baden-Württemberg had convinced nearly 2,000 guest workers to return to their home country.⁸ “In contrast to many initially skeptical voices,” Baden-Württemberg Minister President Hans Filbinger declared, the program “demonstrated that a large number of guest workers are ready to take advantage of such an offer.” According to the *Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger*, Filbinger’s proposal found a “wide echo” in the public and piqued the interest of other state minister presidents.⁹ But it also drew criticism. The metalworkers’ trade union IG Metall wrote, “For the trade unions, the foreign workers are not a maneuverable mass that can be hired and gotten rid of as one pleases, even under today’s increasingly difficult circumstances.”¹⁰

There was also international precedent for paying foreign workers to leave. France was a frequent point of comparison.¹¹ At the time, France was experiencing an economic downturn similar to that in West Germany, complete with mass layoffs in the iron industry. French statistics in 1977 reported the presence of over 100,000 unemployed foreigners who had registered for unemployment assistance at the Labor Office.¹² While over 10 percent were citizens of countries that enjoyed freedom of movement throughout France (including 8,611 Italians), the remainder came from countries outside the EEC, including Algeria, Morocco, Portugal, Spain, Tunisia, Yugoslavia, and what French media lumped together as “Black Africa.” Hoping to rid itself particularly of non-European, non-white, and non-Christian postcolonial migrants from North and Sub-Saharan Africa, the French government offered unemployed foreign laborers 10,000 Francs (approximately 4,300 DM), as well as an additional 10,000 per unemployed spouse and 5,000 per child. Informational materials distributed in local labor and immigration offices were enticing:

⁸ “Gastarbeiter – ab nach Hause?” *Der Spiegel*, February 23, 1976. See also: “Filbinger: Abfindung soll arbeitslose Ausländer zur Rückkehr in ihre Heimat ermutigen,” *FAZ*, June 5, 1985; “Filbinger regt Rückkehrhilfen für Ausländer an,” *Stuttgarter Zeitung*, June 5, 1975.

⁹ Heinz Murrmann, “Einfach abgeschoben?” *KSA*, February 3, 1976.

¹⁰ Metall Pressedienst, “IG Metall gegen Filbingers Vorschlag über Rückkehrprämien für ausländische Arbeitnehmer,” February 12, 1976, AdsD, IG Metall-Archiv, 5/IGMA45190018.

¹¹ On France’s remigration program, see: Comte, *The History of the European Migration Regime*, 137–40.

¹² “Les immigrés victimes de la crise,” *Le Monde*, June 20, 1977.

“Because you have worked in France, you have the same rights as French workers. But would you not perhaps prefer, if you had the means, to return to your homeland and to settle there again?”¹³ By 1981, however, the French law had proven a failure. Not only had it drawn criticism, but only 87,500 workers had taken the remigration premium, most from Spain and Portugal rather than North and Sub-Saharan Africa.

Likewise, inspiration came from concurrent efforts to pay asylum seekers to leave. In 1979, the West German federal and state governments established the Reintegration and Emigration Program for Asylum Seekers in Germany (REAG).¹⁴ The program, implemented by the Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration, offered asylum seekers 930 DM to permanently leave West Germany and either return to their home country or migrate onward to a third country. By 1982, over 9,000 asylum seekers had taken this premium, costing the government an average of two million DM annually. Although billed as a “humanitarian assistance program” that would “correct” asylum seekers’ “failed expectations,” the REAG program had ulterior motives – namely of saving West Germany money in the long run and solving the asylum question with fewer controversial deportations.¹⁵ Throughout the 1980s, Belgium, Switzerland, and the Netherlands followed West Germany’s lead.¹⁶

But convincing Turkish guest workers to go home was a more complex task. Having earned Deutschmarks in West Germany for up to two decades, and well aware of the disastrous economic situation in their home country, Turks had long deferred their dream of return migration (Figure 5.2). Although government surveys revealed that 75 percent of guest workers had a “latent” desire to return home, the number of Turks who actually did so had decreased by half, from 148,000 in 1975 to 70,000 in 1980.¹⁷ A 1982 survey of Turkish guest workers living in Nuremberg revealed a variety of conditions under which Turkish workers would

¹³ “L’aide au retour: une prime au départ définitif,” *Le Monde*, June 17, 1977.

¹⁴ Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge, “Rückkehr aus Deutschland. Forschungsstudie 2006 im Rahmen des Europäischen Migrationsnetzwerks” (2006), www.bamf.de/SharedDocs/Anlagen/DE/Forschung/Forschungsberichte/fbo4-rueckkehr-emn.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=11, 63.

¹⁵ Deutscher Bundestag, 9. Wahlperiode, May 26, 1982, 6140.

¹⁶ Austin Crane, “Assisted Voluntary Return: Negotiating the Politics of Humanitarianism and Security in Migration Management” (PhD diss.: University of Washington, 2021), 87.

¹⁷ “Bericht der Arbeitsgruppe ‘Rückkehrförderung,’” November 1981, BArch, B 106/117686.

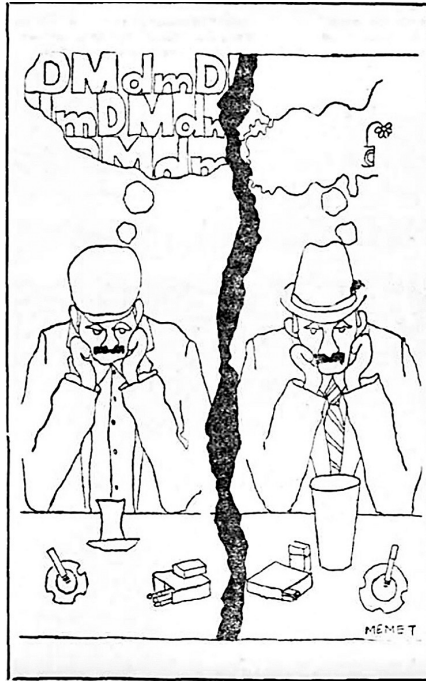


FIGURE 5.2 Cartoon depicting Turkish guest workers' difficult decision regarding remigration, 1979. Should they return to their homeland, or should they remain in West Germany and continue to save Deutschmarks?¹⁸

© Cumhuriyet, used with permission.

return to their home country. These ranged from general improvements in living conditions in Turkey (“when the living standard in Turkey is exactly as it is in Germany”) to specific material concerns (“when I have a car, television, washing machine, record player, video machine, dishwasher, a large refrigerator, electrical kitchen appliances, and money”). Some less commonly listed conditions, though probably offered in jest, were “when war breaks out in the Federal Republic,” “when I win the lottery,” and “when the Germans kick me out.”¹⁹ Another 1982 survey of 312 workers in Saarland and Rhineland-Palatinate revealed that 50

¹⁸ Cartoon by Memet, in “Bizler yurtsız insanlarız; ortada kalmış gurbetçiyiz, Alman ellerinde ücretli zenciler!” *Cumhuriyet*, May 10, 1978.

¹⁹ Safa A. Bostancı, *Zum Leben und zu den Rückkehr- bzw. Verbleibeabsichten der türkischen Gastarbeiter in Nürnberg. Eine empirische Regionaluntersuchung* (Berlin: Express Edition, 1982), 67–68.

percent feared that they would not be able to find a job in Turkey, would not be able to work independently in Turkey, and would earn less in Turkey than in Germany.²⁰

Given that guest workers' reasons for staying were primarily economic, policymakers knew that the meager 930 DM they were offering to asylum seekers would not fit the bill. After much calculation, they settled on offering unemployed guest workers 10,500 DM plus 1,500 DM per underage child. This number corresponded to the government benefits that a typical guest worker received during seven months without a job, including unemployment pay, health insurance, social security contributions, and child allowances.²¹ Despite the upfront cost, West German policymakers anticipated far more substantial long-term savings. For every unemployed guest worker who left, the government anticipated saving up to 10,000 DM per year in social welfare spending – even after paying out the one-time 10,500 DM premium.²² As one Foreign Office memorandum concluded optimistically, “These measures are already cost-neutral in the mid-term (3–4 years) and then – because of the decline in entitlements – even yield saving effects.”²³ Critics, however, were skeptical of the cost savings. SPD politician Rudolf Dreßler condemned the draft law as “nonsense,” arguing that it constituted “nothing more than hidden state debt” and would “throw money out the window.”²⁴

The government also carefully deliberated which guest worker nationalities would be eligible for the remigration premium. Although the primary interest was in reducing the Turkish population, policymakers knew that they would endure both domestic and international scorn – certainly from the Turkish government – if the law singled out Turkish citizens. In an October 1982 memorandum issued two weeks after Kohl became chancellor, tellingly titled “Turkey Policy,” one bureaucrat

²⁰ Manfred Werth, et al., *Rückkehr- und Verbleibabsichten türkischer Arbeitnehmer. Analyse der Rückkehrbereitschaft und des Wanderungsverhaltens sowie des Sparverhaltens und der Anlagepläne türkischer Arbeitnehmer im Raum Rheinland-Pfalz/Saarland* (Saarbrücken: Isoplan, 1983), 62.

²¹ “Begründung,” May 10, 1983, BArch, B 106/177694.

²² Calculated based on statistics in: “Bericht der Arbeitsgruppe ‘Rückkehrförderung,’” 1982, BArch, B 106/117686; BMA to Mitglieder der Arbeitsgruppe “Rückkehrförderung,” “Betr.: Rückkehrförderung ausländischer Arbeitnehmer und ihrer Familienangehörigen,” May 18, 1982, Tabelle 1, BArch, B 106/117694.

²³ Kroneck, “Betr.: Türkeipolitik; hier: Aspekt Rückkehrförderung,” October 19, 1982, PAAA, B 85/1604.

²⁴ Information der Sozialdemokratischen Bundestagsfraktion, “Gesetzentwurf der Bundesregierung zur Rückkehrförderung für ausländische Arbeitnehmer Unsinn,” September 28, 1983, BArch, B 106/117965.

warned against portraying the law as “exclusively oriented toward the Turkish workers ... although we are internally conceptualizing this policy with regard to this group.”²⁵ But they also wanted to avoid making the category too broad since they feared that guest workers from Italy and Greece, who, as citizens of EEC member states, enjoyed freedom of mobility, might abuse the law by taking the 10,500 DM, exiting West German borders briefly, and quickly returning.²⁶ Ultimately, they offered the premium only to unemployed guest workers from non-EEC countries who were not married to a West German citizen. Besides Turkey, the eligible countries were Spain, Portugal, Yugoslavia, Morocco, Tunisia, and South Korea.²⁷

German policymakers debated several other provisions. One was the “return option” (*Wiederkehroption*) – the question of whether guest workers who took the 10,500 DM premium would be allowed to return to West Germany. When first conceptualizing the law in the summer of 1982, the Social Democratic government proposed allowing guest workers to return to West Germany within six months of their departure. This option aimed to assuage guest workers’ concerns about their home countries’ unstable economic situations: “As long as a foreign worker cannot be sure that he can actually invest his capital in his homeland or that there is actually a job for him there, then he will not be willing to leave the FRG forever.”²⁸ To avoid exploitation, the premium would only be paid out if a guest worker stayed in Turkey beyond the six months. But the version of the law passed under Kohl’s government nixed the return option. To ensure that guest workers and their family members would leave the country permanently, West German border officials would stamp their residence permits “invalid.” The Interior Senator of West Berlin proposed an even harsher measure, not included in the final version of the law, which

²⁵ Kroneck, “Betr.: Türkeipolitik.”

²⁶ BMA to AA, “Betr.: Rückkehrförderung ausländischer Arbeitnehmer und ihrer Familienangehörigen,” May 3, 1982, PAAA, B 85/1604.

²⁷ The West German government had also recruited male mineworkers and female nurses from South Korea as foreign laborers. The invitation, which was not a formal part of the guest worker program, aimed not only to address the labor shortage but also to demonstrate support for South Korea, whose citizens too had endured national division amid the Cold War. Arnd Kolb, ed., *Unbekannte Vielfalt. Einblicke in die koreanische Migrationsgeschichte in Deutschland* (Cologne: DOMiD, 2014).

²⁸ Bundesministerium des Innern, “Betr.: Kabinettdvorange zur Förderung der Rückkehr ausländischer Arbeitnehmer; hier: Wiederkehroption,” June 28, 1982, BArch, B 106/117686.

would have prevented Turks from returning even as tourists for at least several years.²⁹

Even more controversial was the question of whether – and if so, then when – returning guest workers could receive their social security contributions. This problem lay largely in the difference between the Turkish and West German retirement ages. While West Germany paid social security benefits only after age sixty-five, individuals in Turkey typically retired at forty-five or fifty.³⁰ This discrepancy meant that middle-aged guest workers who planned to fulfill their dream of retiring in Turkey might need to wait over a decade before receiving their West German social security payouts. Although a previous policy permitted guest workers to receive their employee social security contributions early after a two-year waiting period, the draft laws under both the SPD and CDU governments offered an immediate payout. But there was a huge catch: they would lose their employer social security contributions entirely.³¹ In criticizing the law, the Citizens Initiative of Foreign Workers in Hanover tabulated the potential lost wages in the hypothetical scenario of a guest worker who had worked in West Germany for eleven years and retired at age sixty-three.³² Assuming that the worker had contributed 23,000 DM overall to social security, he would receive 100,000 DM by age seventy-five if he stayed in Germany. But if he returned to Turkey, he would only receive his 23,000 DM employee contribution, and the extra 67,000 DM in employer contributions would remain in the government's social security fund. Though devastating to the migrants, this provision was a welcome boon to the federal budget.

After devising the remigration law, the next challenge was how to sell it. Given ongoing debates about racism and the longstanding critique of the general idea of a remigration law, proponents portrayed it in a way that sought to reconcile the morally controversial policy with their post-Holocaust commitment to upholding the rights of minority populations. To save face, CDU/CSU members repeatedly made it clear in the press, as well as in heated discussions with Turkish government officials, that the law did not constitute a forced deportation. During parliamentary

²⁹ Interior Senator of West Berlin, "Betr.: Ausländerrecht; hier: Erlöschen des Aufenthaltsrechts von Ausländern, die Rückkehrhilfe in Anspruch nehmen," July 22, 1983, BArch, B 106/117694.

³⁰ Presse- und Informationsamt der Bundesregierung, "Türkische Arbeitnehmer: Rückkehr und Rente," *Sozialpolitische Umschau*, May 11, 1984.

³¹ *Gesetz zur Förderung der Rückkehrbereitschaft von Ausländern*, November 28, 1983, BArch, B 149/161888.

³² "Reise ohne Wiederkehr," *Die Zeit*, May 11, 1984.

debates throughout 1983, Federal Labor Minister Norbert Blüm assured critics that the key word in the law's title was "voluntary." Invoking the politically correct term "foreign fellow citizens" (*ausländische Mitbürger*), Blüm framed the law as a voluntary collaboration between the government and guest worker families. The law, in Blüm's words, was "simply an offer." Because the law's foundation was "voluntariness," it "cannot be exercised against the will of our foreign fellow citizens, but rather only with them ... Therefore, it cannot be a law against the foreigners, but rather it is a law for our foreign fellow citizens."³³ Blüm further insisted that the law would benefit the guest workers not only financially but also psychologically. After years of "unclarity" and "sitting on packed suitcases," they could finally decide to go home.³⁴

Yet, with the dual pressures of unemployment and racism, the law's voluntariness came into question. Although the Federal Senate (Bundesrat) overwhelmingly supported the law, opposition parties in the parliament saw through the guise of generosity. In an extensive debate just two weeks before the law was passed, Green Party representative Gabriele Potthast argued that the law conceded to the population's "fears" and "racist attitudes" and subjected foreigners to "moral, psychological, and political pressure." The SPD, despite having initially developed earlier versions of the law under Helmut Schmidt's chancellorship, now changed its tune. The law, argued SPD representative Rudolf Dreßler, constituted a "deportation premium" and "bargain for the government" that "incites *Ausländerfeindlichkeit*." Even when factoring in their employee social security contributions, Dreßler argued that guest workers would spend much of the payout on their journey home. In his party's estimation, moving a two-and-a-half-bedroom apartment from Stuttgart to Istanbul would cost 6,000 DM on average and up to 8,000 DM if a guest worker traveled even farther to Mersin or Sivas along the Anatolian coast. But FDP representative Carl-Junius Cronenberg, whose party supported the law as the CDU/CSU's coalition partner, pointed out the SPD's "hypocrisy" and noted that they had no ground on which to stand.³⁵

Outside parliamentary chambers, efforts to frame the law as voluntary and magnanimous failed miserably.³⁶ DGB board member Siegfried

³³ Bundesrat, 526. Sitzung, September 2, 1983, 290, BArch, B 106/117965.

³⁴ Deutscher Bundestag, 10. Wahlperiode, November 10, 1983, 2219.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 2230.

³⁶ Rainer Zunder, "Keine Lösung. Rückkehr-Prämie für Ausländer geplant," *Westfälische Rundschau*, June 15, 1983.

Bleicher called the law a “false,” “illusionary,” and socially irresponsible “political miscarriage,” and IG Metall condemned it as a “continuation of the federal government’s kicking out policy” (Figure 5.3).³⁷ For *Die Tageszeitung*, the 10,500 DM was just “pocket money for an uncertain future.”³⁸ A *Spiegel* article titled “Take Your Premium and Get Out” featured a photograph of a Turkish family loading their belongings into their van and was captioned “Splendid deal for the Germans.”³⁹ One Turkish migrant called the law “singularly and solely about saving the German state the social services to which these foreigners are legally entitled.”⁴⁰ Ordinary Germans expressed their concerns in letters to the editor of *Stern*, noting that they were “ashamed” that politicians were rendering migrants “powerless” and “watching the deportation of the Turks with vicious delight.”⁴¹ Although foreign workers were “oppressed” elsewhere, “only the Germans have a special ability to make these people suffer, both as a society and a state.” If “parties who call themselves ‘Christian’” ever opened the Bible, perhaps they would learn the scripture: “Love thy neighbor as you love yourself.”

While the state of West Berlin preempted the federal government by passing its own version of a remigration law in July 1983, other local governments warned against the detrimental effects of a mass exodus of Turks.⁴² In a report called “Zero Hour,” referencing the abrupt transition after the fall of Nazism in 1945, the city of Düsseldorf conjured an apocalyptic vision of what would happen when the last guest worker left. The report predicted that Düsseldorf would lose much more than “the pizzeria on the corner” (a stand-in for guest workers’ beloved economic contributions) and the guest workers’ “friendliness,” “warmth,” and “hospitality” (stereotypical personality traits that contrasted with Germans’ cold affect). Local businesses would lose at least 50 million

³⁷ “Rückkehrprämie ist politische Fehlgeburt,” *Gewerkschaftspost*, 1983 (most likely November or December); DPA, “IG Metall nennt Rückkehrhilfe ein Blendwerk,” *Volksblatt*, December 1, 1983.

³⁸ Klaus Weizel, “Taschengeld für ungewisse Zukunft,” *Die Tageszeitung*, February 24, 1984.

³⁹ “Nimm deine Prämie und hau ab,” *Der Spiegel*, August 22, 1983, 26–31.

⁴⁰ Hakkı Keskin, “Rückkehrförderungsmaßnahmen bieten den Ausländern nichts an,” *Arkadaş*, November 1982, 6–8.

⁴¹ *Stern*, trans. in Mehmet Yaşın, “Naklihaneciler Kapikule’den ancak 3–4 günde çıkabiliyor,” *Cumhuriyet*, May 16, 1984.

⁴² Deutscher Depeschendienst, “Senat beschloß Rückkehrhilfe für Ausländer,” July 12, 1983, BArch, B 106/117694.

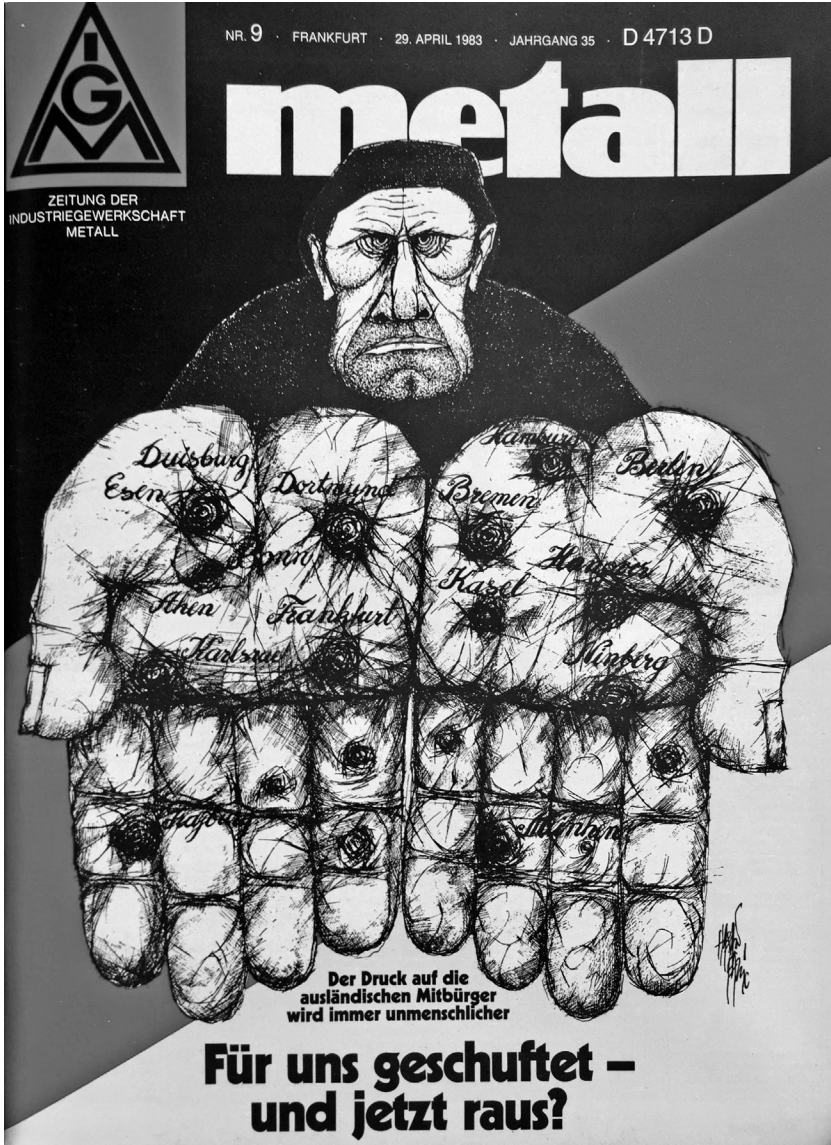


FIGURE 5.3 Cover of *Metall*, the magazine of the metalworkers trade union, opposing the remigration law, 1983. The text reads: “Toiled for us – and now out? The pressure on our foreign fellow citizens is becoming increasingly inhumane.” © IG Metall, used with permission.

DM in revenue. Public transportation would literally screech to a halt, as local trains employed nearly 500 foreign workers. Amid declining German birthrates, the loss of foreign children would force kindergartens and elementary schools to close. The dilapidated buildings in the large housing blocks where guest workers lived would continue to deteriorate – surely, the report maintained, no Germans would want to live under such poor conditions, and no landlords would be interested in investing there. The message was clear. As the headline of an article on the Düsseldorf report put it: “Germany Could Not Survive Without the Foreigners.”⁴³

The Turkish government, too, took up the call for resistance. The two countries’ labor ministers, Norbert Blüm and Turhan Esener, clashed on the remigration law in a July 1983 meeting in Ankara. The meeting made it clear, in the words of *Der Tagesspiegel*, that the Turkish government had “no understanding for Bonn’s problems with the more than 4.6 million foreigners – a third of them Turks – in the Federal Republic.” Calling the proposed law “inappropriate,” “unacceptable,” and “detrimental to our workers,” Esener expressed concerns that Bonn would impose harsher measures against Turkish guest worker families if the law failed to achieve its goals.⁴⁴ Returning guest workers, Esener added ominously, “will be doomed to misery.”⁴⁵ At a press conference later that month, Turkish Minister President Bülent Ulusu called the remigration law “unjust and to the disadvantage of our workers” and urged the West German government not to “resort to measures not supported by the Turkish government.”⁴⁶ Ulusu demanded further that the West German government pay out the returning guest workers’ social security payments, remaining unemployment premiums, and child allowance money in full.

Yet even the prospect of deteriorating bilateral relations did not deter Kohl’s government from passing the law on November 28, 1983. Although the Turkish government continued to oppose all forms of return migration out of a fear of declining remittances, Turkish policymakers finally accepted their inability to influence West German domestic policy and resigned themselves to an anticipated influx of 70,000

⁴³ Joachim Schucht, “Deutschland könnte ohne die Ausländer nicht auskommen,” *Kölnische Rundschau*, October 30, 1983.

⁴⁴ “Türkische Regierung gegen Pläne Bonns zur Rückkehrförderung,” *Der Tagesspiegel*, July 5, 1983.

⁴⁵ “Ankara ‘dönüş primine’ zam, Alman Bakan ‘anlayış’ istedi,” *Cumhuriyet*, July 5, 1983, 1.

⁴⁶ German Embassy in Ankara to AA, “Betr.: Rückkehrförderung: Äußerungen MP Ulus, 08.07.1983,” July 13, 1983, PAAA, B 85/1605.

return migrants – a vast underestimation of the approximately 250,000 men, women, and children who would return within the following ten months.⁴⁷ Official condemnation of the law, however, persisted. Three months after the law was passed, Turkish minister Mesut Yılmaz complained colorfully: “After an invitation sealed in gold ink, they now want to send the Turkish workers home like squeezed-out lemons.”⁴⁸

TO STAY OR TO LEAVE?

“The time has come to make a decision,” wrote guest worker İlyas Suran in a poem. “The Germans have run out of marks and jobs. It makes no sense to stay here any longer. ... Helmut Kohl no longer cares about us.” He continued powerfully: “Do not stay stuck between two mountains. Do not estrange yourself from your nation. Do not end your life in a foreign land. Go on your way friend, back to Turkey.”⁴⁹ As a young man, Suran had migrated from Gaziantep to West Germany as a textile worker and had turned to poetry and music to quell his homesickness. While he chose not to return until the 1990s, his poem captures Turkish migrants’ collective spirit as they navigated both the challenge and the opportunity that the 1983 remigration law presented. Should they stay, or should they leave?

Although the CDU publicly praised the remigration law as a “full success,” Kohl failed to achieve his goal of reducing the Turkish population by 50 percent.⁵⁰ As the June 30, 1984, application deadline neared, the Turkish newspaper *Cumhuriyet* reported that Turkish guest workers “show less interest than expected.”⁵¹ The meager 10,500 DM and the loss of their employer social security contributions turned off most guest workers, who knew they would encounter difficulties in Turkey’s struggling economy. Others stayed in Germany for personal or family reasons, or out of fear of losing their freedom of mobility between the two countries. Still, the remigration law prompted one of the largest mass remigrations in modern European history. In 1984 alone, 15 percent of the

⁴⁷ *Volksblatt*, December 10, 1983, DOMiD-Archiv, P-15528.

⁴⁸ “Ankara fordert von Bonn ‘vernünftiger Lösung,’” *Der Tagesspiegel*, January 5, 1984.

⁴⁹ İlyas Suran, “Almancıya,” May 28, 1986, in Magistrat der Stadt Frankfurt am Main, »Mit Koffern voller Träume...«, 56.

⁵⁰ For one of many examples of the CDU praising the “full success” of the remigration premium, see the party’s 1986 publication: *CDU-Dokumentation* 32/1986, 29, www.kas.de/wf/doc/kas_26763-544-1-30.pdf?110826092553.

⁵¹ “Turk işçileri geri primine yüz vermedi,” *Cumhuriyet*, June 27, 1984.

Turkish immigrant population – approximately 250,000 men, women, and children – made the difficult decision to leave a country where they had lived for over a decade.

The law's implementation had a rough start. Beginning on December 1, 1983, the day the law went into effect, the six employees of the Rhineland-Palatinate State Insurance Agency in Düsseldorf were bombarded with an average of 240 guest workers per day, primarily Turks, demanding the immediate cash payout of their social security.⁵² This rush continued through January 1984. The *Neue-Ruhr-Zeitung* reported that the workers who “stormed” the office reacted with “resignation, disappointment, and outbursts of anger” when they learned that they would lose their employer contributions and that they would receive the money only after they could provide proof of having exited West German borders. Others were dismayed that individuals who had become unemployed before the October 30, 1983, cutoff or had not worked reduced hours (*Kurzarbeit*) for the past six months were ineligible. One man shouted at a social security advisor, “Even upon our departure, we are financing your pension!” “I always had the impression that my countrymen were being scammed,” another concurred.⁵³ Overall, this experience was consistent with accusations that the law did not have guest workers' best interests in mind.

Although statistics varied, the 10,500 DM premium proved far less attractive than the social security payouts. By mid-January 1984, two months into the program's eight-month application period, only 3,200 people had applied for the 10,500 DM.⁵⁴ While policymakers were delighted that 80 percent of the applicants were Turks, they lamented that this number amounted to only one out of every ten who were eligible.⁵⁵ In late February, the DGB reported that only 4,200 out of 300,000 eligible workers of all nationalities had applied for the 10,500 DM premium – “less than a drop on the hot stone.”⁵⁶ To sweeten the deal, the government permitted returning workers to receive up to 75 percent of the premium and the employee social security refund before they returned to Turkey if they paid a small upfront fee.⁵⁷ Applications for social

⁵² Klaus-Dieter Oehler, “Sie lassen sich die Rente jetzt auszahlen,” *RP*, December 13, 1983.

⁵³ “Die Kredithaie lauern schon im Kellerbüro,” *Neue Ruhr Zeitung*, January 25, 1984.

⁵⁴ “3200 Ausländer stellten Anträge auf Rückkehrhilfe,” *Der Tagesspiegel*, January 27, 1984.

⁵⁵ “Zehn Prozent der Türken machen von dem neuen Gesetz Gebrauch,” *Volksblatt*, January 18, 1984.

⁵⁶ “Kaum Wirkung der Rückkehrhilfen,” *Einigkeit*, April 1984.

⁵⁷ “Nur wenige Anträge auf Rückkehrhilfe,” *Die Welt*, April 25, 1984.

security payouts immediately skyrocketed, outpacing applications for the 10,500 DM premium eightfold. All in all, the Labor Ministry reported that 16,833 applicants of all nationalities – 14,459, or 86 percent, of whom were Turks – were accepted for the 10,500 DM premium, and 2,500 were rejected as not fulfilling all the law's conditions. Whereas the government initially estimated that 55,000 people would apply for their social security contributions, a massive 140,000 applicants – 120,000 of whom were Turks – chose to do so.⁵⁸ Of those, 70 percent took the new option to receive the money while still in Germany so they could finance the expensive homeward journey without succumbing to shady loan sharks.⁵⁹ Hasan Karabiber, an advisor at the Workers' Welfare Organization in Ingolstadt, confirmed that the social security payout – not the 10,500 DM – was the crucial factor motivating the workers he had advised.⁶⁰

Eager to rid themselves of unwanted Turkish workers and avoid mass layoffs, private companies also seized the opportunity to downsize by offering severance packages to any foreign worker willing to voluntarily quit. The timing was enticing: while they could not receive the full governmental payout until they returned to Turkey, they could cash in on the firm's severance package immediately. Ruhrkohle AG, a large mining company in Essen and the largest West German employer of Turkish citizens, was among the first to pursue this strategy. By June 1984, 2,700 Turkish workers – or every eighth foreign worker at the company – had taken a severance package of approximately 11,200 DM.⁶¹ An internal study boasted that 26.5 percent of all the men who had taken the government's remigration premium had been employed at Ruhrkohle AG.⁶² The Gelsenkirchen mining company Bergbau AG Lippe followed suit. Employees who quit before the remigration law's June 30, 1984, application deadline would receive two-and-a-half months of wages, the remainder of their paid vacation days for the whole year, and a 2,600 DM Christmas bonus – all tax-free.⁶³ Combining all the incentives, Bergbau

⁵⁸ "300.000 Ausländer planen Heimkehr," *KSA*, August 2, 1984.

⁵⁹ "300.000 nahmen Rückkehrhilfen," *RP*, August 2, 1984.

⁶⁰ "Wirtschaftskrise fraß die Rückkehrhilfe," *Donau Kurier*, May 1985, AdsD, DGB-Archiv, 5/DGAZ001214.

⁶¹ Leonhard Spielhofer, "Türken sagen der Ruhrkohle ade," *KSA*, August 22, 1984.

⁶² Heinz Esken, *Bericht über die in die Türkei zurückgekehrten Mitarbeiter der Ruhrkohle AG* (Essen: Ruhrkohle AG, 1985).

⁶³ Bergbau AG Lippe, "Aufhebungsvertrag zwischen der Bergbau ASG Lippe / Werksdirektion," AdsD, DGB-Archiv, 5/DGAZ000902.

AG Lippe estimated that a Turkish worker with two children could return to his or her homeland with a hefty amount of cash: 58,481 DM if the worker had been with the company for over twelve years, and 64,929 DM for a period of employment in excess of eighteen years.⁶⁴

Guest workers' reasons for leaving were not only financial. The Turkish Central Bank reported that over 80 percent of the applicants were men between thirty-eight and fifty-five years of age who had lived in West Germany between ten and twenty years.⁶⁵ Nearly all were married with at least one child, and 70 percent had children who lived in Turkey. The vast majority earned 1,000–3,000 DM per month, meaning that the 10,500 DM premium barely amounted to a year of their salary. Eighteen percent were motivated by the 10,500 DM premium initially, while 93 percent attributed their final decision to the social security payouts and 8 percent to the employer severance packages. The Center for Turkish Studies offered a more complex portrait. Only one-third of the surveyed return migrants attributed their decision primarily to financial reasons – split between having already reached their financial goals (16 percent), being unemployed (8 percent), wanting to retire (4 percent), and planning to start their own small businesses in Turkey (6 percent).⁶⁶ For 10 percent of the migrants, either homesickness, personal/family reasons, their children's education, or old age/illness was the primary motivator. Approximately 5 percent each were leaving on account of integration problems, because they no longer wanted to live in Germany, or because they missed their family and friends in Turkey. Despite the varying statistics, the pattern is clear: individual decisions were motivated by a complex constellation of financial, personal, and familial reasons in which the remigration law played a supporting role.⁶⁷

Even though racism was just one of many reasons, the Turkish media emphasized it in numerous reports on returning guest workers – even before the remigration law came into effect (Figure 5.4). One man told *Milliyet* that he was returning because Germans treated Turks “like dogs” or “as though we had leprosy,” similar to how he

⁶⁴ Bergbau AG Lippe, “Rückkehrhilfegesetz – Beispiele über zu erwartende Leistungen,” February 10, 1984, AdsD, DGB-Archiv, 5/DGAZ000902.

⁶⁵ Türkiye Cumhuriyet Merkez Bankası, “Yurt Dışındaki Vatandaşlarımızın Tasarruf Eğilimleri Araştırması: Yurda Kesin Dönenler” (December 1986).

⁶⁶ Zentrum für Türkeistudien, “Türkische Remigranten” (Essen: Zentrum für Türkeistudien, 1992).

⁶⁷ See also the statistics in Elmar Hönekopp, “Rückkehrförderung und Rückkehr ausländischer Arbeitnehmer,” 323–25.

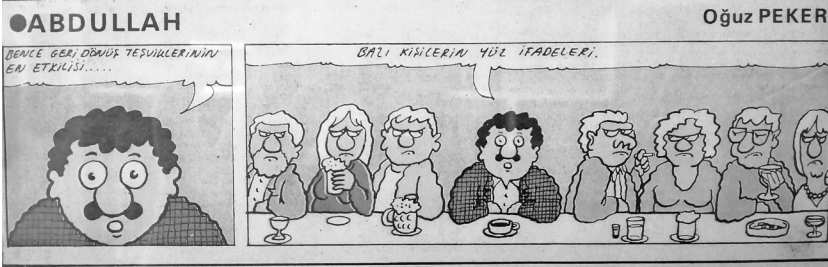


FIGURE 5.4 Cartoon in *Hürriyet* emphasizing West German racism as a main reason for return migration, ca. 1984. The text states: “In my opinion, the most effective remigration incentives are some people’s facial expressions.”

© Oğuz Peker, used with permission.

had seen African-Americans treated in an American film.⁶⁸ Other men told *Cumhuriyet* that they feared the “Turks, get out!” graffiti and the “aggressive German youths with motorcycles ... Enough already!”⁶⁹ The most extensive account came from Turkish novelist Bekir Yıldız, who wrote a series of *Cumhuriyet* articles based on his interactions with return migrants even before the remigration law was passed. “Perhaps if Turks had blonde hair, blue eyes, and could speak proper German, Germans would not consider them foreigners,” one man quipped. “Christians and Muslims are incompatible,” another asserted, and now “we are in the situation of the old Jews.” Just like “how Hitler did it,” the Germans “will slaughter people on the streets.”⁷⁰ In short, Yıldız implied, guest workers who went back to Turkey did not return feeling wealthy and triumphant but rather like “prisoners” who had been locked up in Germany for fifteen years.⁷¹

Yet, because Turkish guest workers were not a homogenous population, the decision to stay or leave was far more complicated. Ethnic, religious, and political affiliations circumscribed their mobility, especially because the 1983 remigration law came three years after 1980 Turkey’s military coup. Understandably, guest workers who were political leftists

⁶⁸ Erhan Akyıldız, “Kapıkule’de her gün 20 işçi ailesi kesin dönüş yapıyor,” *Milliyet*, April 17, 1982, 8.

⁶⁹ Fatih Güllapoğlu, “Kapıkule’de ‘büyük göç’ zilleri çalıyor,” *Cumhuriyet*, August 10, 1983, 1.

⁷⁰ Bekir Yıldız, “Alacağım son kuruşuna kadar almadan dönmem,” *Cumhuriyet*, September 9, 1983.

⁷¹ Bekir Yıldız, “Odediğimiz işsizlik parasını istiyoruz,” *Cumhuriyet*, September 10, 1983.

or who were members of Turkey's internal ethnic minority groups like Kurds and Yazidis feared that upon their return they would be arrested, tortured, or executed. They also knew that if they wished to reenter West Germany yet again to escape persecution, they would face a dual set of barriers: they would not only be subject to West Germany's harsh visa restrictions against Turkish citizens, in general, but they would also likely be denied asylum.⁷² For them, staying in West Germany – even if they wished to return with the remigration premium – was far preferable to precarity in Turkey.

Sometimes, guest workers' fates depended on circumstances beyond their control, such as old age or illness. Guest workers' parents who remained in Turkey, now in their twilight years, sometimes begged their middle-aged children to take care of them or to spend time together before they died. Forty-eight-year-old Osman İşleyen wanted to stay in Germany after living there for fifteen years but resigned himself to returning to his hometown of Burdur. His eighty-year-old mother had fallen ill and could no longer tend to their farm, nor raise his three children who lived with her.⁷³ Burcu İçkili's family was deterred from returning by her father's health condition. Although her father had planned to quit his job just two weeks before the remigration law's application deadline, he had suffered a severe work accident and had broken three vertebrae. His seven-month hospital stay prevented his family from returning to Turkey, even though he had already purchased a home there and furnished it with German furniture brought back on their summer vacations. Fifteen years later, they still had not returned and had resorted to renting their Turkish house to a family with three children. The story turned tragic: an earthquake destroyed the house and killed all three children.⁷⁴

Many guest workers decided to stay because they viewed the remigration law with "skepticism," "insecurity," and "mistrust," and they knew that returning to Turkey would mean losing their freedom of mobility between the two countries.⁷⁵ Although Necla and Ünsal Ö. had strongly considered taking the premium, a German colleague convinced

⁷² Stokes, "The Permanent Refugee Crisis," 35–36.

⁷³ Mehmet Yaşın, "80 yaşındaki anam yüzünden kesin dönüş kararı verdim," *Cumhuriyet*, May 16, 1984.

⁷⁴ Burcu İçkili, "Deutschland mein Zuhause?!" in Bernardino Di Croce, Manfred Budzinski, and Verein Migration & Integration in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, eds., *Nicht auf Augenhöhe? Erfahrungen und Lebensgeschichten zum Thema Migration und Zweiter Generation in Deutschland* (Karlsruhe: Loeper, 2009), 70–74.

⁷⁵ Ölçen, *Türken und Rückkehr*, 9–10.

Ünsal otherwise. Anyone taking the money was “an idiot,” the colleague insisted, because they would only be receiving their employee social security contributions and foregoing their employer contributions.⁷⁶ The couple also did not want to detach themselves from West Germany, where they had lived for two decades, and they knew that taking the premium would mean relinquishing their residence permits at a time of heightened visa restrictions on Turkish citizens. Ultimately, Necla and Ünsal decided to return to Turkey in the 1990s, retiring in the quaint beach town of Şarköy rather than their bustling home city of Istanbul. In an interview thirty years later, the couple expressed no regrets, because their decision to wait allowed them to maintain their lives in both countries, and they could still travel back and forth on their annual vacations.

For many families, the decision to stay or leave was unclear. Murad B., a self-identified “suitcase child” who was born in Germany but sent to Istanbul to live with his grandparents, recalled that his parents had repeatedly promised to return. They had even stored unopened boxes of German consumer goods in their attic, in anticipation of one day bringing them to Turkey. Although the 10,500 DM remigration premium was “clearly attractive” to Murad’s parents, and although they feared the rising racism, his parents lived well and had become accustomed to life in Germany. “They traveled, they had a car, they were driving to places they probably never could have gone to otherwise,” Murad explained, and “they didn’t want to let go of these possibilities.” Crucial to his parents’ decision was that his father, like thousands of former guest workers, had opened his own business.⁷⁷ Returning to Turkey – with or without the 10,500 DM premium – would require him to close his relatively lucrative tailor shop and try his luck in Turkey’s volatile economy. The tailor shop had also given his parents “very good contact” with German customers, whom they considered close friends. Murad’s parents were thus left wavering back and forth – “Are we going, are we not? Are we going, are we not?” – and eventually decided to stay.⁷⁸ Thousands of miles away, Murad continued to see his parents and younger sister only during their vacations.

The Uğur family, profiled in a West German television report, was also split along a generational divide. The father, Ali, had become

⁷⁶ Necla and Ünsal Ö., interview.

⁷⁷ On former guest workers who started their own businesses in Germany, see: Zeppenfeld, *Vom Gast zum Gastwirt?*, chapter 6.

⁷⁸ Murad B., interview.

unemployed, and the meager unemployment money was insufficient to feed his wife and three children. His thirty-six-year-old wife, Nezat, also wished to return to Turkey, since she felt isolated and missed her large family, especially her female relatives. For both parents, the rising racism of recent years was cause for concern. The tea house that Ali frequently visited had recently been vandalized: rowdy German youths had thrown a rock through the window, sprayed graffiti reading “Foreigners out!” on the walls, and attacked a Turkish customer. But Ali and Nezat also had to act in the best interest of their children, who loved living in Germany. The youngest two spoke German fluently and had many friends at their kindergarten. The older daughter, Şerife, was earning all “A”s in her middle school and was worried about switching to a Turkish school. The Uğur family was thus relegated to a liminal position between staying and leaving, perched on a generational divide.⁷⁹

Whereas the Uğurs wanted to keep their children in Germany, other parents returned precisely because they wanted to prevent the “Germanization” of their children, who had long been derided as *Almançı*. In a survey of eighteen returning families, 62 percent of parents cited “problems of the children” as a main motivation for their return, while another study attributed many decisions to the “fear that children could too strongly Germanize.”⁸⁰ “We came here to escape Germanization and to become real Turks,” one teenage boy explained.⁸¹ Echoing longstanding discourses about the cultural estrangement of “*Almançı* children,” parents feared the dual loss of their children’s Turkish language skills and Muslim faith. For Yaşar Fuad, who identified as a pious Muslim, returning to Turkey was a means of “saving one’s child,” since integration necessarily entailed “forgetting God’s commandments” and “acting like Christians.” Children exposed to Germany for too long would become *gâvur*, a derogatory term for non-Muslims, and would engage in “sinful” (*günah*) and “forbidden” (*haram*) behaviors like abandoning prayer and study of the Koran, eating pork, drinking alcohol, disrespecting elders, and having premarital sex.⁸²

⁷⁹ Engler and Trottnow, “Fremde Heimat.”

⁸⁰ Topraklar, *Zur Situation türkischer Rückkehrfamilien*, 20; Klara Osiander and Johannes Zerger, *Rückkehr in die Fremde. Die Problematik der Remigration junger Türken/-innen und deren Familien in ihr Heimatland. Oder: ‘Keine Ahnung und zurück’* (Augsburg: MaroVerlag, 1988), 61.

⁸¹ Dilek Zaptıoğlu, “Wir kamen hierher, um Türken zu werden,” *Bizim Almanca*, April 1987, 13–16.

⁸² Schiffauer, *Die Migranten aus Subay*, 149, 243, 303, 350.

Since most Turks who applied for the remigration premium were married men who returned with their wives and children, the story of Fatma Koçyiğit stands out. Born in Gaziantep, the forty-eight-year-old woman had followed her husband to Germany in 1970 and begun working as a maid in hotels and restaurants. Although she sorely wished to return to Turkey, her husband had underestimated Turkey's high inflation rate and could not afford to purchase a farm there. Soon, Fatma discovered that her husband was cheating on her with their neighbor's daughter and that he wanted a divorce. When she asked for money for their children, her now ex-husband beat her – but, not knowing German, she did not go to the police. After sending her children back to Turkey to stay with relatives, Fatma became so “depressed” and “anxious” that she needed to be hospitalized and was fired from her job. But since she did not have a work permit, she could not receive unemployment benefits. In the meantime, her ex-husband was imprisoned for possessing marijuana, leaving him unable to provide any financial support. Fearing that she would “die alone,” Fatma decided that her only option was to “bow my head,” wait to receive the remigration premium, and finally “return from this hell.”⁸³ Yet given that the government rejected thousands of applications for the premium, Fatma's future was likely insecure.

After they made their difficult decisions, the 250,000 men, women, and children who left Turkey with the remigration premium now embarked upon a mass exodus – packing their bags and hustling back to Turkey before the September 30, 1984, deadline for exiting West German borders (Figures 5.5 and 5.6). At the local level, the effects of this mass exodus were especially visible in cities with high Turkish populations. One of the most extreme cases was the Ruhr city of Duisburg, home to numerous coal and steel factories like Ruhrkohle, Thyssen, Krupp, and Mannesmann. “If the Turks go,” warned the *Bonner Rundschau*, Duisburg will turn into a “ghost town.”⁸⁴ That prophecy came true: by mid-February 1984, nearly 4,000 Turks, had left the city.⁸⁵

Over half the Turks who left Duisburg lived in Hüttenheim, a neighborhood pejoratively nicknamed “Türkenheim” because every eleventh resident was Turkish.⁸⁶ Nearly all of them had received severance

⁸³ Mehmet Yaşın, “14 yılın sonunda: Bilet param bile yok,” *Cumhuriyet*, May 13, 1984.

⁸⁴ Hans Wüllenweber, “Tausende von Türken packen schon die Koffer,” *Bonner Rundschau*, February 7, 1984.

⁸⁵ Hannelore Schulte, “Der Abzug der Türken. Wie Duisburg viertausend Menschen verliert,” *Die Zeit*, February 10, 1984, 13.

⁸⁶ “Ausländer. Dramatische Szenen,” *Der Spiegel*, February 27, 1984.



FIGURE 5.5 A Turkish family packs their van with all their possessions, preparing to return to Turkey permanently after taking the remigration premium, 1984. © akg-images/Guenay Ulutuncok, used with permission.



FIGURE 5.6 Turkish women in Kreuzberg pack their cars and say goodbye as they await their families' departure, 1985. © Bayerische Staatsbibliothek/stern-Fotoarchiv/Jürgen Müller-Schneck, used with permission.

packages from the local steel plant Mannesmann AG. Although company spokespeople would not admit it, Mannesmann's climate was decidedly racist. Hasan Özen, who began working at Mannesmann in 1966 and was elected to the employee council of the metalworkers' trade union IG Metall in 1975, recalled that his German colleagues repeatedly exclaimed phrases like "Dead Turk!" and "Turks out!" – which implied that "I should leave Germany, otherwise they'd kill me." While Özen dismissed these coworkers as "just a couple of idiots," many of his Turkish colleagues took the rising racism as a cue to leave.⁸⁷ Turkish employees at Mannesmann also cited the rising racism in a new discriminatory company policy. The board had recently mandated that all employees take an allegedly "subject-oriented" mathematics and language test to determine which workers' language skills made them suitable for higher-level tasks. The exam had the indirect, although intentional, effect of motivating workers' decisions to leave. As a local Turkish social worker who had counseled many Mannesmann employees explained, the language test created a "competitive atmosphere" in which "everyone believed that they would lose their job tomorrow."⁸⁸ Derviş Zabo, who had worked at Mannesmann for fourteen years and had become a foreman, expressed his anxieties about his lack of job security in a 1984 interview: "If I do not pass the test, Mannesmann will probably send me to a temp job firm, and the temp firm will want to give us other random jobs, like road maintenance or digging trenches."⁸⁹

As Mannesmann employees and their families abruptly left their homes, West German journalists descended on Duisburg-Hüttenheim. A ten-page photo essay in the West German magazine *Stern*, which also circulated to Turkish readers, told the story from the migrants' perspective.⁹⁰ Titled "The Expellees" (*Die Heimatvertriebenen*), in reference to the mass migration of ethnic Germans from Eastern Europe after the Second World War, the article aimed to attract sympathy. The photographs depict men on a train platform staring wistfully into the distance, old women in headscarves hugging one another, and children watching somberly as a group of men lug a washing machine into a moving van. The captions

⁸⁷ Hasan Özen, interview, VHS (1992), DOMiD-Archiv, VI 0310.

⁸⁸ "Aus Duisburg reisten 4000 Türken ab," *Der Tagesspiegel*, March 1, 1984, DOMiD-Archiv, P-15539.

⁸⁹ Horst Röper, "Der Türke kann gehen," *Politik Aktuell*, Westdeutscher Rundfunk (1984), DOMiD-Archiv, VI 0233(15).

⁹⁰ Gerhard Krömschröder and Mihaly Moldavy, "Die Heimatvertriebenen. Exodus der Türken," *Stern*, March 1, 1984, 20–29, DOMiD-Archiv, P-15540.

were mournful and foreboding: “Goodbye in Duisburg-Hüttenheim... Hugs, kisses, tears. Compassion for the old and young who are leaving Germany forever – and for those who are staying in the Turk-Ghetto (*Türken-Ghetto*). Will they also have to go soon?” The article went beyond most German portrayals, however, as the journalist drove with a former Mannesmann employee and his family back to their hometown of Kahramanmaraş, reporting on both their excitement and misgivings.

In a *Die Zeit* article also republished in the Turkish newspaper *Cumhuriyet*, a German teacher in Hüttenheim shared her perspective on the mass departure. She described the scene as both somber and chaotic – a mad dash to leave with as many West German consumer goods as possible. “Already many windows are missing their flower boxes, and cardboard boxes piled high are awaiting their transport,” she marveled. “Almost daily the Duisburg department stores are delivering goods that will be taken to the homeland: washing machines, television sets, video recorders, and entire living room furniture sets.”⁹¹ As predicted in the City of Düsseldorf’s foreboding “Zero Hour” report, she emphasized that the mass exodus bore serious consequences for the local economy. Duisburg’s business owners complained about a loss in profits of up to 50 percent. Shops had closed, and many feared layoffs of German employees.⁹² The demographic changes also affected schools, where 80 percent of students were Turkish. By the end of 1984, one of the second-grade classes in Hüttenheim was predicted to have only six or seven children left.

Although she attempted to empathize with her students, the Hüttenheim teacher problematically exoticized Turkish culture and reinforced tropes of Turkish backwardness. “We are not letting go of ‘our’ Turks with light hearts,” she lamented. She would miss the exciting street festivals featuring kebab and Turkish pizza, honey-soaked cakes, and girls wearing colorful “traditional” clothing. Likewise, she would miss seeing the trash containers spill over the lawn, the elderly women in ruffled skirts crouching down on the ground knitting to pass the time, the loud calls of “Öğretmen, öğretmen!” (Teacher, teacher!), and the need to develop new modes of communication based on hand and foot gestures. All of these gave her the feeling of “being far away – somewhere on vacation.” By contrast, she noted that German parts of the city were far less exciting, with their pristine white houses, perfectly trimmed hedges, and orderly flowers. The only sign of children was a lone German girl

⁹¹ Schulte, “Der Abzug der Türken,” 13.

⁹² *Ibid.*

wheeling back and forth on her tricycle, warned by her parents not to venture beyond the front lawn.⁹³ Most troubling to her, the fate of the Turkish children whom she had worked so tirelessly to educate and integrate was bleak – particularly for the girls. Not only would they be perceived as “Germanized” in Turkey, but, echoing derogatory critiques of Turkey’s allegedly patriarchal culture, she feared that they would quickly be forced into marriage and motherhood. “What awaits them? ... In a few years, will these outgoing girls, who are so eager to learn, turn into fat, worn-out women like most of their mothers?”

However problematic, the article revealed the underacknowledged reality that the decision to leave had consequences not only for Turkish migrants but also for Germans. After up to two decades of living and working in West Germany, Turkish guest workers and their children had undoubtedly become part of German society. But when border officials stamped their residence permits “invalid,” they also stamped out their lives, friendships, and connections in West Germany – leaving only memories. As Germans watched them leave, emotions were mixed. While those who embraced the racist cry “Turks out!” cheered with delight, others truly mourned their absence. The situation had flipped. When guest workers first stepped onto the trains to West Germany in the 1960s and early 1970s, they waved goodbye to the loved ones they left behind. Over a decade later, upon the mass exodus of 1984, they stood outside their homes in German cities and waved goodbye not only to their Turkish neighbors and friends, but also – especially for children – to their German ones. School classes held goodbye parties for Turkish students who were leaving, neighbors exchanged parting gifts, and sobbing friends savored last hugs at the airport. In both moments, the rupture was both exhilarating and heartbreaking.

UNREALIZED DREAMS

“We killed our passports,” return migrants regularly noted, expressing the seeming irreversibility and permanence of their “final” return.⁹⁴ For the 250,000 men, women, and children who took the 1983 remigration premium and left Germany, the homeward journey came full circle. For their final return, they either stepped onto airplanes or loaded up their cars with all their belongings and drove on the same familiar

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Wolbert, *Der getötete Paß*, 7.

route that they took on their annual vacations: the Europastraße 5, the treacherous international highway or “road of death” through Austria, Yugoslavia, and Bulgaria. But this time, their baggage felt even heavier. While their vacations had always been temporary, a new sense of permanence and anxiety loomed: How would they fare upon their permanent return? Would they come to regret their decision? Would they finally realize their dreams of financial success? While many achieved their dreams, others missed their lives in Germany and encountered harsh difficulties *re-integrating* into Turkish society. Although they remained derided as “Germanized,” the stereotype of the wealthy *Almancı* did not always materialize and many found themselves not only socially ostracized but also financially bankrupt. As *Der Tagesspiegel* put it bluntly, “This homeland may be more foreign to them than Berlin-Kreuzberg, Cologne-Ehrenfeld, or the Ruhr region.”⁹⁵ *Cumhuriyet* concurred, turning the concept of “integration” on its head: “Life abroad is over. Now they must get used to Turkey.”⁹⁶

Even before the 1983 remigration law was passed, customs officials at the Bulgarian-Turkish border at Kapıkule were already estimating a problematically large increase in border traffic. In 1982, the border authorities had reported that approximately twenty or twenty-five families passed through the border for permanent remigration each day, but they expected to be overrun in 1984.⁹⁷ Officials were aware that this situation would be “different” than the traffic and chaos even during peak vacation season, and they were already building new inspection sites along the border to accommodate what they anticipated to be kilometer-long queues of guest workers transporting all their possessions and furniture, all of which needed to be inspected and accounted for on customs forms. The officials estimated that they could only accommodate 300 cars of returnees per day, and already the border guards and returning workers were “drowning” in the paperwork, with lost passports and incomplete customs forms.⁹⁸

As anticipated, the scene at Kapıkule in the months before the September 30, 1984, deadline was far more chaotic than it had ever been on their vacations. A *Cumhuriyet* reporter accompanied guest workers on

⁹⁵ “Hunderte von Türken warteten vor den deutschen Konsulaten,” *Der Tagesspiegel*, October 7, 1984.

⁹⁶ Yalçın Pekşen, “Gurbet bitti, sıra Türkiye’ye alışmakta...” *Cumhuriyet*, October 15, 1984.

⁹⁷ Akyıldız, “Kapıkule’de her gün 20 işçi ailesi kesin dönüş yapıyor.”

⁹⁸ Güllapoğlu, “Kapıkule’de ‘büyük göç’ zilleri çalıyor”; “Kesin dönüşler arttıkça Kapıkule’de kargaşa büyüyor,” *Cumhuriyet*, June 12, 1983.

the long drive back from Germany to Turkey along the Europastraße 5 – through the border check points at Austria, Yugoslavia, and Bulgaria – the same drive they had made so many times before. He drove along with one guest worker, who was heading back from West Berlin to his home village of Bakırköy. At Kapıkule, the border guards were so swamped that they resorted to dividing the cars into two lines – one for the returning workers and one for vacationers. “It takes half a day to complete the paperwork,” the reporter noted. “In the remaining half day, the car is searched.” A border guard quoted in the article further explained the delay: “Even if all the officers are mobilized in July and August, it will still take three or four days for all the cars to enter.” Finally, the guest worker and the accompanying reporter passed through the border in one and a half days and unpacked his bags in Bakırköy – everything he had to show for thirteen years of his labor.⁹⁹

But not all returning guest workers could breathe a sigh of relief as they unpacked their bags and settled into their homes in Turkey. Due to problems implementing the 1983 remigration law, many encountered immediate financial hardship. In the first four months after the September 30, 1984, deadline, the Braunschweig Labor Office received over one hundred handwritten letters from returning guest workers who had not yet received their money. Hursit U., who provided the most detail, described the convoluted process. In May 1984, after being advised by the Turkish language interpreter at the Braunschweig Labor Office, Hursit had filled out an application for the remigration premium. He was assigned a “remigration assistance number” and received a letter confirming that he had fulfilled all the requirements. The next step was crucial: upon exiting West German borders at either the airport or along the highway, Hursit needed to present two copies of a red and green “Confirmation of Border Crossing Form” for the border guards to sign and stamp. While Hursit was supposed to keep the green copy for his own record, the red copy went through a complex paper trail. The border guard had to forward the red copy to the Federal Labor Office, which would then forward it to the local Braunschweig Labor Office. Only upon the red copy’s arrival in Braunschweig could the money transfer begin. The money would be transferred to the bank account and address that Hursit had provided.

⁹⁹ Mehmet Yaşın, “Naklihaneciler Kapıkule’den ancak 3–4 günde çıkabiliyor,” *Cumhuriyet*, May 16, 1984.

Certainly, there were several places where this complex chain could break down. Many returning guest workers who wrote to the Braunschweig Labor Office were unaware that they were supposed to have the form officially signed and stamped by a border official. Nor were some border officials aware of their responsibility to mail the red copy to the Federal Labor Office. Instead, they simply handed both signed and stamped copies back to the guest workers. Mustafa K. admitted that he had “clumsily” given the form to a friend in Hanover, and Mestan P. had handed the form to a friend who was waving goodbye to them at the airport.¹⁰⁰ Two men had given the form to the travel agent from whom they had bought the plane tickets.¹⁰¹ Others, who had chosen to drive home, opted to send the form via post at various stops along the international highway Europastraße 5. One man mailed it from an Austrian post office in Salzburg, and Hayrettin Ö. put it in a mailbox as soon as he crossed the Bulgarian-Turkish border.¹⁰²

Problems arose even when guest workers properly submitted their forms at the West German border. One German man wrote to the Federal Labor Ministry complaining that his colleagues had witnessed the lackadaisical attitudes of the border guards at the Cologne Airport. “The personnel employed at this border protection station were apparently so overloaded,” he wrote, “that it was no longer possible to issue the required border confirmation to the departing Turks.”¹⁰³ Shockingly, “many of the officials were on a coffee break!” Overwhelmingly, however, border officials deflected blame onto the guest workers. Pejoratively, the Border Police Directorate complained that only half of the “partially illiterate foreigners” exiting through the Hanover Airport had accurately filled out their forms. The resulting quarrels and confusion led to “unacceptable impairments on border police control” and a “break-down of flight operations.”¹⁰⁴ No matter who was to blame, confusion about

¹⁰⁰ Mustafa K. to Yelkenkaya, November 14, 1984, DOMiD-Archiv, E 0987,36; Mestan P. to Yelkenkaya, November 29, 1984, DOMiD-Archiv, E 0987,36.

¹⁰¹ Hinditti to Yelkenkaya, October 31, 1984, DOMiD-Archiv, E 0987,36; Cemal T. to Yelkenkaya, November 29, 1984, DOMiD-Archiv, E 0987,36.

¹⁰² Anonymous to Yelkenkaya, October 7, 1984, DOMiD-Archiv, E 0987,36; Hayrettin Ö. to Yelkenkaya, September 25, 1984, DOMiD-Archiv, E 0987,36.

¹⁰³ Hans Merz (Finanzagentur International) to BMA, “Betr.: Vollzug des Gesetzes zur Förderung der Rückkehrbereitschaft von Ausländern; hier: Grenzübertrittsbescheinigung,” March 20, 1984, BArch, B 106/117696.

¹⁰⁴ Grenzschutzdirektion (Eisel) to Bundesminister des Innern, “Betr.: Gesetz zur Förderung der Rückkehrbereitschaft von Ausländern (RückHG); hier: Grenzübertrittsbescheinigungen,” April 19, 1984, BArch, B 106/117696.

what to do with a double-sided piece of red paper curiously led to a deterioration of West German state control.

Aware of the possibility for confusion at the border, the West German Foreign Office had authorized a backup procedure: anyone who neglected to have their forms signed, stamped, and submitted by the border officials could physically go to a West German embassy or consulate in Turkey to deliver it in person by the September 30 deadline.¹⁰⁵ But even this option led to chaos. *Der Tagesspiegel* described the “hectic and even tumultuous scene” at the West German Consulate Office in Istanbul in the days before the deadline. Four hundred returning guest workers were “crowding the steps” of the building, and many had slept there overnight, leaving the consular officials “totally overextended,” “close to a nervous breakdown,” and “on the verge of tirades.”¹⁰⁶ Submitting the form to diplomatic offices also posed a problem for returning guest workers. Since the embassy and consulates were located only in major cities, those returning to smaller towns and villages had to make an additional costly and time-consuming trek. This provision proved especially problematic for one man, whose village was located 700 kilometers east of the nearest diplomatic office. Frustrated to find the embassy closed when he passed through Ankara during his drive home, he refused to make another trip. Instead, he put the form in the mail and hired a Düsseldorf-based financial agent to ask about the status of his premium.¹⁰⁷

Transferring the money into Turkish bank accounts presented another source of confusion. Despite submitting his form properly, Şevki K. checked all his bank accounts but found no money in his name: “I went to Fakat Bank and even telephoned the bank in Ankara and the Merkez Bank in Istanbul. I called them one by one ... Which bank was it sent to?”¹⁰⁸ The comments in the margins of the letters to the Braunschweig Labor Office provide some insight into what might have happened. Repeatedly, labor office officials insisted that they had already transferred the money months before. On Bekir M.’s letter, one official expressed his frustration with an exclamation point: “Sent to the

¹⁰⁵ AA to German Embassy in Tunis, “Betr.: Gesetz zur Förderung der Rückkehrbereitschaft von Ausländern (RückHG); hier: Vordrucke ‘Grenzübertrittsbescheinigung,’” January 25, 1984, PAAA, B 89(ZA)/190385.

¹⁰⁶ “Hunderte von Türken warteten vor den deutschen Konsulaten.”

¹⁰⁷ Merz (Finanzagentur International) to BMA.

¹⁰⁸ Şevki K. to Yelkenkaya, December 2, 1984, DOMiD-Archiv, E 0987,36.

above-named account on July 10!”¹⁰⁹ The case of Halil A. is particularly revealing. In his letter, Halil requested that the Labor Office transfer his social security contributions to Ziraat Bank in Torbalı. The marginalia, however, indicates that the Labor Office had already sent the money three months prior in the name of a certain “Mehmet A.,” likely a friend or relative of Halil, to the Sparkasse Regional Bank in Horb am Neckar.¹¹⁰

Having failed to receive their money, the letter writers expressed financial difficulties. Halil S. put it bluntly: “I regret coming back.”¹¹¹ “I really need the money,” wrote Ahmet Y., who claimed to have only 20,000 lira left in his wallet.¹¹² Ramazan B. described his situation in more dire terms: “There are five of us here (my children and I), and we have run out of money.”¹¹³ Şevki K., who had hoped to retire from manual labor after over a decade of working in the Peine Steel Work in Salzgitter, found himself once again seeking factory employment.¹¹⁴ Others needed the remigration premium and social security payout as start-up capital for their own small businesses. Necati T., who also wanted to start his own business, described his and his family’s situation more positively: “We got to Turkey safe and sound ... Turkey really is beautiful. Everyone is happy here. Now my only concern is whether or not I will be able to start my own business here. God willing, I will be the boss of my own workplace.”¹¹⁵

The delay in the payment was especially troubling because many guest workers had spent large quantities of money preparing for the homeward journey itself. Like during their annual vacations, family and friends at home expected gifts, and coming home empty-handed signaled both selfishness and economic failure. But now even more crucial was the need to load up their cars with German consumer goods, likely for the last time, to furnish their homes in Turkey. In the months and days before leaving, they rushed to buy furniture, refrigerators, washing machines, televisions, video recorders, and other household appliances.¹¹⁶ As *Cumhuriyet* reported, “The remigration premium and social

¹⁰⁹ Bekir M. to Yelkenkaya, September 27, 1984, DOMiD-Archiv, E 0987,36.

¹¹⁰ Halil A. to Yelkenkaya, December 1, 1984, DOMiD-Archiv, E 0987,36.

¹¹¹ Halil S. to Yelkenkaya, November 1, 1984, DOMiD-Archiv, E 0987,36.

¹¹² Ahmet Y. to Yelkenkaya, November 31, 1984, DOMiD-Archiv, E 0987,36.

¹¹³ Ramazan B. to Yelkenkaya, October 1984, DOMiD-Archiv, E 0987,36.

¹¹⁴ Şevki K. to Yelkenkaya, July 29, 1984, DOMiD-Archiv, E 0987,36.

¹¹⁵ Necati T. to Yelkenkaya, undated (likely late 1984), DOMiD-Archiv, E 0987,36.

¹¹⁶ Türkiye Cumhuriyet Merkez Bankası, “Yurt Dışındaki Vatandaşlarımızın.”

security money enter Turkey not as marks but as goods.” The West German government successfully “hit several birds with one stone,” as guest workers spent the money to “stimulate the German shopping market.”¹¹⁷ But, because they could only receive the entire payout once they had exited German borders, many financed these purchases with loans from shady creditors who charged exorbitant interest rates of up to 50 percent.¹¹⁸

Once they had their finances in order, they settled into their new lives in Turkey. Guest workers overwhelmingly returned to the places where they had been born or had lived prior to migrating to West Germany. But for many, new locales were appealing. One survey reported that 46 percent moved to Turkish cities, 39 percent to towns or large villages, and 15 percent to small villages.¹¹⁹ While statistics about their new employment varied, studies reflected a disconnect between their dreams and the reality. Dispelling the stereotype that returning guest workers dreamt of becoming taxi drivers, a survey the year before the remigration law revealed that guest workers’ most desired sector was overwhelmingly manufacturing (39 percent), followed by trade (23 percent), agriculture (16 percent), service (13 percent), construction (6 percent), and transportation (3 percent).¹²⁰ By the end of 1986, however, another survey reported that only 10 percent actually owned manufacturing firms.¹²¹ This discrepancy owed in large part to the high start-up cost of factory equipment, which – even with their 10,500 DM and employee social security contributions in hand – most guest workers simply could not afford.

For many guest workers, the dream of owning a small business turned into a nightmare. Having underestimated Turkey’s economic crisis and hyperinflation, they set up businesses that flopped, and many went bankrupt. Surely, guest workers who returned with the 1983 remigration law could have anticipated these failures. In the months before the mass exodus, horror stories and news articles on the subject were rampant in both countries. The editor of *Blickpunkt* reported on numerous businesses that had failed in the coastal city of Alanya. A former Ford factory employee named Taner was struggling to keep his ice cream shop afloat. “Children never come by,” he bemoaned. “They don’t have money for an

¹¹⁷ Yaşin, “Naklihaneciler Kapıkule’den ancak 3–4 günde çıkabiliyor.”

¹¹⁸ “Die Kredithaie lauern schon im Kellerbüro.”

¹¹⁹ Türkiye Cumhuriyet Merkez Bankası, “Yurt Dışındaki Vatandaşlarımızın.”

¹²⁰ Werth, et al., *Rückkehr- und Verbleibabsichten türkischer Arbeitnehmer*, 357.

¹²¹ Türkiye Cumhuriyet Merkez Bankası, “Yurt Dışındaki Vatandaşlarımızın.”

ice cream cone ... They would rather jump into the harbor off a slanted piece of wood. It's cheaper." Taner's neighbor, Mehmet, had opened a German artisanal craft shop that sold luxury items like fancy lamps and bronze sculptures. Mehmet was clearly out of touch with the needs of Alanya's population, who were "busy scrambling together enough money for their basic subsistence." After losing all their savings, the editor wrote, Taner and Mehmet ironically reverted to the same poverty as before their migration to Germany.¹²²

The most notorious and well-publicized case was that of İsmail Bahadır from Konya, the celebrated "Millionth Guest Worker from Southeastern Europe." In 1969, at age twenty-four, Bahadır was gifted a brand-new television upon his arrival at the Munich Central Train Station – a symbol of the riches to come. Upon returning to Konya in 1982, however, Bahadır lost 20,000 DM in his twice-bankrupt metalworking firm and had "nothing left" of his 27,000 DM in German social security. After resorting to selling his house, his large family moved into a tiny two-bedroom apartment in a dilapidated building. Bahadır also experienced difficulties "reorienting" himself in the now bustling city, which "was suddenly more than three times as big as before." Rather than close-knit communities, he encountered only "strangers" who had migrated to the city from the villages. "If you ask me," Bahadır explained, "when we were in Germany, we did not have as many problems." If the family had stayed in Germany, they could have saved more money, "and things probably would not have gone as badly as they did here."¹²³

Reports of unfulfilled dreams and social ostracization increased markedly following the mass exodus. One West German article, tellingly titled "The Almancis," reported on forty-two-year-old Muzaffer Kılıç, who had returned to Istanbul in 1984 with his wife and daughter after eleven years working at a manufacturing company in Bremen. Although he was making good money in Turkey in his small store selling natural gas for cooking and heating, he went broke because his liras were "worthless." Due to Turkey's exorbitant inflation, his earnings were mere *pfennigs* compared to the Deutschmarks he made in Germany. "It would have been better if I had not given up my well-paid job in Germany," he said.

¹²² Ulrich Horb, "Nix versteh'n. Deuschtürken in der Türkei," *Blickpunkt*, September 1983, 36–39. DOMiD-Archiv, P-15515.

¹²³ "Rückkehrer in Konya," *Teestube*, VHS (undated, likely 1990), DOMiD-Archiv, VI 0217.

“Here I am a foreigner and on top of that still a poor man. I had not expected that.”¹²⁴ Süleyman Taş, whose family returned to Mersin after fifteen years in West Berlin, also felt ostracized. “We are strangers in our own country, too. The adjective ‘foreign’ has stuck with us ... They have changed our name to *Almancı*.”¹²⁵

Just like the initial migration to Germany, the return to Turkey destabilized family life and gender roles. For women who had worked grueling hours in West German factories, returning to Turkey typically meant returning to the domestic sphere – this time, however, as housewives. Although they enjoyed their new middle-class status, they encountered new marital challenges. For many, the gendered division of household labor changed dramatically. Whereas spouses who were both working typically shared housework in West Germany, many new housewives complained that their husbands – whether retirees, wage laborers, or small business owners – now expected them to handle all the cooking, cleaning, and childrearing. “My husband sits at the coffee house all day,” one woman explained. “He expects his food on time and does not help at home. If I am running a bit late, he leaves and goes to a restaurant.”¹²⁶

When they were not doing housework, many women found themselves socially isolated and unsure how to spend their newfound free time. Some did not return to their homes, but rather to big cities where they knew no one. Given that Turkey was still experiencing high levels of internal rural–urban migration, women who returned to villages were dismayed that many of their closest friends and relatives had left for Turkish cities. Even in cases of reunions, years of estrangement had changed social dynamics: it was one thing to chat during a temporary vacation, and another to maintain deep friendships upon a permanent return. One woman reported that village women gossiped about her “because I am an *Almancı*.” Not only did they mistakenly envy her perceived wealth, but they also perpetuated longstanding tropes about female sexuality abroad. Believing that Germany turned women “corrupt,” they viewed her more “harshly” and “suspiciously” than returning men: “One sideways glance, and they immediately think I have a boyfriend in Germany.”¹²⁷ Over time, however, women began rekindling relationships or forging new ones. Curious for a glimpse inside the

¹²⁴ Uwe Gerig, “Die Almancis,” *Frankfurter Neue Presse*, June 28, 1986.

¹²⁵ Mehmet Yaşın, “Türkçe yazamadığı için, kızıyla komşular aracılığıyla mektuplaştık,” *Cumhuriyet*, May 14, 1984.

¹²⁶ Topraklar, *Zur Situation türkischer Rückkehrfamilien*, 24–27.

¹²⁷ Pagenstecher, “Die ‘Illusion’ der Rückkehr,” 159.

“*Almanci* family’s” house, neighbors came over for tea to chat about the prices and quality of German-made appliances. Though superficial and boring, these conversations often evolved into close friendships that sustained them while their husbands were working or socializing with other men outside the home.

Women’s experiences, however, were not homogenous. Some returned from West Germany alone, either divorced or still mourning their husbands’ deaths. For them, the struggle to reintegrate required finding a new husband or, sometimes with great delight, navigating life in Turkey as a single woman. Many returning mothers assumed new roles as primary caregivers after years of leaving their children behind with grandparents or other relatives in Turkey. Yet given the years of separation, in some cases as long as a decade, they sometimes struggled to establish parental authority and to bond with their children, who in many cases resented being ripped from their grandparents’ home and placed under the care of their “foreign” mother. The situation was different for women whose children had reached adulthood in West Germany and were not required to return with their parents in accordance with the 1983 law. One woman was especially upset that she had returned without her son, an in-debt alcoholic who was having an extramarital affair with an older German woman with three children. For her, reintegrating meant coming to terms not only with the separation of her family, but also with the reality that she would likely be unable to find a Turkish woman for her son to marry.¹²⁸

Amid all these financial and social struggles, the Turkish government was nowhere to be seen. Due to their financially based opposition to the guest workers’ return, officials in Ankara had taken no substantial measures to prepare for their economic or social reintegration. After a decade of Turkey blocking the West German government’s proposal to direct its development aid toward helping guest workers start their own small businesses, the returning guest workers were reaping the bitter consequences. “I didn’t get a single *pfennig* from the state. I just did it myself,” complained Hüseyin Uysal, who built an automated carpentry factory in Ankara after fourteen years in West Germany.¹²⁹ Süleyman Taş, whose business also failed, expressed a much harsher sense of betrayal. “The state has always expected foreign currency from us, but never offered a helping hand and never spoke out against our

¹²⁸ Wolbert, *Der getötete Paß*, 69–70.

¹²⁹ Ümit Kivanç, “Almanya’dan gücü olan dönsün,” *Cumhuriyet*, March 31, 1983, 7.

oppressors,” he said. “Now the government is not taking care of us when we return.”¹³⁰

To save face, the Turkish government tried but failed to change its tune. In June 1984, in the thick of the mass exodus, Mesut Yılmaz announced that the Turkish government would take measures to integrate returning migrants into the economy. “There is a great need in the industry for workers who are young, experienced, and returning,” he explained, in a vast overstatement of the truth. “Therefore they will be immediately employed.”¹³¹ But that promise was dead on arrival. In reality, the vast majority of returning guest workers were not “young” but rather middle-aged or reaching retirement, and the Turkish government did nothing to ensure their employment – let alone their immediate placement. This neglect persisted throughout the 1980s. In 1988, a Turkish Labor Ministry official told reporters that returning guest workers would receive no special treatment in the allocation of jobs.¹³² The same year, in a press conference with West German journalists organized by the Association of Turkish Chambers of Commerce, Prime Minister Turgut Özal proclaimed: “The Turks who receive unemployment money in the Federal Republic of Germany should stay there and not come back.”¹³³

The complaints of economically struggling returning guest workers did, however, compel the Turkish government to soften its stance on the question of how to spend West German development aid. In November 1984, the two governments revised their previous cooperation on development aid programs as codified in the 1972 Treaty of Ankara. Although they continued to fund Turkish Workers Collectives, the Turkish government now conceded to implementing West Germany’s originally proposed “individual support model,” by which development aid would be directly placed into the hands of returning guest workers. But this time they were more cautious. Rather than the initial idea of offering aid to any guest worker who planned to return, they now restricted the criteria to individuals who had already returned and who already possessed the technical and managerial skills, as well the capital, needed to start their own businesses in industrial sectors. By August 1989, this program had distributed loans

¹³⁰ Yaşin, “Türkçe yazamadığı için, kızımın komşular aracılığıyla mektuplaştık.”

¹³¹ “Kesin dönüş yapana iş kredisi verilecek,” *Cumhuriyet*, June 12, 1984.

¹³² Trottnow and Engler, “Aber die Türkei ist doch meine Heimat...”

¹³³ Mehmet Aktan, “İşsiz Türkler Almanya’da kalsın,” *Bizim Almanca*, February 1988, 8–9.

of between 50,000 and 70,000 DM to more than 600 returning workers at an advantageous interest rate of 26 percent – nearly half the typical interest rate in Turkey.¹³⁴ But, out of thousands of returning workers, assisting only 600 proved insufficient. The sense of betrayal remained as strong as ever.

For both the West German government and the guest workers themselves, the disputedly “voluntary” 1983 remigration law was not a success story but a cautionary tale. Not only did it concede to the passions of popular racism, but it also failed to achieve the intended outcome. Rather than fulfilling Kohl’s desire to “reduce the Turkish population by 50 percent,” the law prompted only 15 percent to take the money and leave. And, although celebrated as a potential boon to the West German economy, the mass exodus proved a financial disaster. At 180 million DM, the total amount spent on the payout of the 10,500 DM premium plus the additional 1,500 DM per underage child was manageable.¹³⁵ But, at 1.7 billion DM, the need to swiftly refund 140,000 employee social security contributions in 1984 alone proved devastating. By comparison, during the previous three years, the government had only paid out 250,000 DM annually in early employee social security contributions, distributed among 30,000 returning guest workers.¹³⁶ And due to a failure of administrative oversight, some guest workers had received their payout without the two-year waiting period, even though they had not actually left the country.¹³⁷ Although in 1985 these costs dropped substantially, the federal government found itself strapped for liquid cash and forced to dip into its emergency reserve. As policymakers internally lamented this failure, they attempted to publicly save face. The 1983 law, announced the Labor Ministry misleadingly, was a “full success.”¹³⁸

For the migrants themselves, returning to Turkey intensified their sense of estrangement. Turkish scorn for returnees was best captured in a 1984

¹³⁴ Birgit Jesske-Müller, Albert Over, and Christoph Reichert, *Existenzgründungen in Entwicklungsländern* (Kassel: Wissenschaftliches Zentrum für Berufs- und Hochschulforschung, 1991), 89–93.

¹³⁵ “300.000 Ausländer planen Heimkehr.”

¹³⁶ “Beitragserstattungen von 1981 bis 1984 nach Postmeldungen,” January 1985, BArch, B 149/93369.

¹³⁷ “Auswirkungen des Rückkehrförderungsgesetzes auf die Beitragserstattungen in der gesetzlichen Rentenversicherung,” June 28, 1985, BArch, B 122/93369.

¹³⁸ Rolf-Dietrich Schwartz, “Rückkehrhilfe ‘voller Erfolg,’” *FR*, August 2, 1984.

Hürriyet article, reprinted twice in *Der Spiegel*, which sensationalized the mass exodus as a belligerent invasion by foreign foes.

It needs not be said who the *Almançı* are. They are now coming home one after another. And they are bringing Germany with them. If they only brought cars, refrigerators, washing machines, dishwashers, or videos in their moving boxes, it would not be so alarming. But they bring something else very different from Germany, namely everything to which they got accustomed there, and that is the bad thing. Turned entirely inside-out internally, the renegades stroll in arrogantly. What they saw in Germany, they are now looking for here. Every sentence begins with, 'In Germany.' We will still have a lot more to endure with these *Almançı*. And they with us. In the end, one of us will have to give in. We'll see who.¹³⁹

With this spirited and foreboding call to arms, the existential struggle for Turkey's national survival was there for all to see. Whether or not they chose to return, by the 1980s all migrants were homogenized into *Almançı*, feeling estranged even from their own home country.

Citing both social ostracization and economic failure, up to 50 percent of Turks – both the guest workers and their children – regretted the decision to return.¹⁴⁰ Despite their residence permits having been stamped “invalid,” many attempted to return to West Germany. By November 1984, just two months after the end of the mass exodus, the West German Consulate in Izmir reported that dozens of Turks who had taken the money and returned were increasingly applying for West German tourist visas because they regretted their decision.¹⁴¹ “I'd pay back the remigration premium with interest plus interest on the interest,” one man wrote, while another promised he would be willing to work sixteen hours a day if he were allowed to return.¹⁴² But they had no recourse. With the 250,000 men, women, and children finally out of sight and out of mind, the West German government turned its attention to the dealing with the 1.2 million Turks – and over 4 million “foreigners” of all nationalities – who remained. For the Turkish government, which had spent over a decade trying to prevent a mass remigration, assisting with the guest workers' economic reintegration was simply not a priority.

¹³⁹ *Hürriyet*, quoted in Mareike Spiess-Hohnholz, “Meine deutsche Lehrer haben mich geliebt.”

¹⁴⁰ Zentrum für Türkeistudien, “Türkische Remigranten.”

¹⁴¹ West German Consulate in Izmir to AA Bonn, “Betr.: Gesetz zur Förderung der Rückkehrbereitschaft von Ausländern,” November 19, 1984.

¹⁴² Baha Güngör, “Heimweh nach dem fernen ‘Almanya,’” *Der Tagesspiegel*, August 11, 1985.

Feeling abandoned by both countries, the return migrants were left to fend for themselves.

Spreading transnationally through both rumors and media accounts, horror stories of guest workers' unrealized dreams not only supported criticism of the 1983 law's sinister intentions but also contributed to a stark decline in return migration. After the rate of remigration peaked at 15 percent in 1984, it plummeted to 3–4 percent the following two years – well below its 5.5 percent average in the first three years of the decade – and hovered at just over 2 percent well through the late 1980s and into the 1990s.¹⁴³ Whereas in 1983 the West German government reported that 75 percent of guest workers wanted to return, a 1986 survey revealed that only 19 percent had concrete plans to do so.¹⁴⁴ This decline occurred even in the aftermath of the West German government's attempt to provide other financial incentives throughout the 1980s, such as the ability to transfer their West German real estate savings accounts to Turkey for building or purchasing houses there.¹⁴⁵ The decline owed not only to the reality that most of the migrants who seriously planned to return had done so in 1984, but also to horror stories of the “economically desolate situation in Turkey,” as the management of the mining firm Ruhrkohle AG put it.¹⁴⁶ It was not uncommon, reported one Turkish journalist, for return migrants to write letters to their friends in Germany warning them, “God willing, stay where you are. We have made a huge mistake.”¹⁴⁷

For the 1.2 million Turkish migrants who remained in West Germany, the decision not to return provided further evidence of their “Germanization.” Friends and relatives in Turkey, who hoped for the return of their loved ones, were often surprised – and even offended – to learn that they were not planning to return anytime soon, even when

¹⁴³ Statistische Bundesamt, cited in chart in Beate Jankowitsch, Thomas Klein, and Stefan Weick, “Die Rückkehr ausländischer Arbeitsmigranten seit der Mitte der achtziger Jahre,” in Richard Goldstein, Peter Schmidt, and Martina Wasmerin, eds., *Deutsche und Ausländer. Freunde, Fremde oder Feinde?* (Berlin: Springer, 2000), 93–109.

¹⁴⁴ “Immer weniger ausländische Arbeitnehmer wollen in ihre Heimat zurück,” *Druck und Papier* 19 (1986), DOMiD-Archiv, P-15590.

¹⁴⁵ Deutscher Bundestag, 10. Wahlperiode, “Entwurf eines Gesetzes über eine Wiedereingliederungshilfe im Wohnungsbau für rückkehrende Ausländer,” August 28, 1985.

¹⁴⁶ “Türkische Bergleute der Ruhrkohle verunsichert: Wirtschaftliche Lage im Heimatland ‘desolat,’” *Westfälische Rundschau*, December 6, 1988, AdsD, DGB-Archiv, 5/DGAZ001214.

¹⁴⁷ Güngör, “Heimweh nach dem fernen ‘Almanya.’”

given the “generous” financial offer of the 1983 remigration law. In the view of the home country, it was not only the migrants’ selfish spending habits, diminishing language skills, and religious abandonment that had transformed them into *Almanca* but also their fundamental decision to remain abroad. Becoming *Almanca*, in this sense, was a choice. Not only had the migrants become passively estranged through their exposure to Germany, but they had also actively chosen to estrange themselves.