

Empty homes: The psychological effects of migration on the ones that stayed in Romania

“It is the dream of arriving, the oldest story of the world: The longing of a place to stay. The ancestors, the jellyfish, the microbes, the fish were longing. The hands with which people hold on with, with which they hold themselves over water, are the heritage of the sea animals. Their fins made the longing real, with them they climbed 380 Billion years ago from the foam onto the land. Some hesitated and stayed behind. Some proceeded, further and further. Why? Where was the longing calling them? Why do they cross the world searching? And where do they settle down?”

Pending Homes Documentary

This quote sums up the journey we have started with our "HOMING/ /searching for home" project. Focusing our research in Germany and Romania, we wanted to find the feeling of home. For the ones that have left their country, for the ones that have returned, for the ones that have stayed, for the ones forever on the road:

Where is home? What makes a home home? How does home feel like?

Our research started in Romania and we quickly found out that home is not easy to talk about. What remains of a home, when all are gone?

9 Romanians leave their home every hour to find work in another country

200 Romanians leave their home every week to make a new home in another country

100 000, 110 000, 120 000 and more and more Romanians leave every year their home to escape the life and work conditions in their country

Approximately 9.700.000 Romanians commute between their old home and new home to find a better life

Romania entered the European Union in 2007. My generation was the first one that had the doors of the world wide open after graduation.

We were raised as “export” children. From an early age we were fully equipped and prepared to leave once we graduated. We learned many languages, we were expected to be the best at everything we did, to develop will power and keep striving no matter the odds, to work hard because “hard work pays off”. From export child to work machine, because in the comunist mentality your worth and identity are strongly defined by your work and endurance. We owed it to our parents to become successful because of the sacrifices they have made to provide us with the life they weren’t allowed to have, with the opportunities they didn’t have. Little did they consider back then, what the consequences would be for their lives to have raised an “export child”. We left to never return.

Others left to return. The older generation left to find work, to provide for their children and families. They felt forced into it by the economical circumstances. They left because they saw no other way of survival. Most left for a few months, which became years. They weren’t equipped with many languages or the mentality of having rights or being able to get help. They were

equipped with a feeling of sacrifice and guilt for leaving their children and families behind, a feeling of pausing their real life to go in a foreign country to work, a deep longing for home and the trust that “hard work pays off”. Many have returned after years to find a beautiful home, but empty. The children are grown ups and moved away, the neighbors are mostly gone and everything has changed. Little did they consider back then, what the consequences would be for their families to have been left behind.

“I was ten years old when I found out that my best friend would move with her parents to Canada. It was the first big loss that I have felt.

And then it came over and over again, the news that friends and acquaintances would move away. Every month. Every week. Every day. From a certain point it stops hurting, one becomes hardened. And then comes a thought, like a shadow:

If everyone leaves the country, then one is a stranger in its own country. Is one still home?”

Elise Wilk, Letter to the President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker

When we asked people living in Romania what home is for them, most of them replied that home is their family, their loved ones, their friends, their community. Even if all those people were gone, the definition stayed unchanged. Did their home live abroad, separate from them? And where did this leave them?

When we asked about the biggest fear they answered that it was loosing their family, or loved ones, being abandoned by them. All of those interviewed have multiple family members and friends that have left to study or work abroad.

They are constantly confronted with their biggest fear and their feeling of home is threatened every day. A young parent told us : “ I don’t know what I would do if my sons decide to go when they grow up. I will probably become an alcoholic. It hurts my heart to see that young people have no chances here. I don’t want the lights here to go out.”

If we look at the generation that has raised the “export children”, they are in their late fifties, early sixties now. A big percentage of them are retiring or retired. They have worked hard all of their life. They have fought to free Romania of communism so that they have a better life. They look at the news and see that actually not much has changed.

Many of them worked abroad for years. My mother for example, worked in Italy as a carer for more than 10 years. She was 24 hours on call for her Alzheimer patient, living in the same house. She was just a worker, or as she calls it now “a prisoner”. Every day was the same. With no time to make new friends, with no free time for holidays, all her social contacts became digital.

When she returned to Romania, she found a home where she never lived on her own. The last time she lived there, she was a mother raising her daughter, who was finishing school. I was now living abroad. Our neighbors and her best friends were mostly abroad. The house was empty. The identity she was looking forward to come back to, the one that gave her strength over all these years, was stripped away in seconds. Her purpose also.

She was now an exhausted, retired woman, questioning the purpose of it all. She felt there was nothing left for her to do and was waiting to die, even though she finally had time to enjoy her life and do all the things she wished to do for all those years. It took her years to understand her depression, because there was no help or support from the system. That generation was raised to keep going, so they wouldn't talk about the hardships and pain of leaving their home. They were considered lucky by the ones that have stayed, because they had the courage and opportunity leave, to make money for their old age. She still considers that we were born to work and with nothing to work she sees herself unworthy in the eyes of society.

There are numerous people in her situation. Many of them missed their children growing up, leaving them in the care of their relatives or neighbors. The guilt and pain connected to their decision is too heavy to feel. There is nothing more they would wish than to spend their lost time with their children, but somewhere they feel they deserve to be abandoned by them, because they have done the same. Only now they realize that all the money they have earned, can't fill that void. This pattern of abandonment keeps repeating in many generations we have interviewed. Romania used to be a country where the older generation would be part of the family, now we can observe more and more separation. If ten years ago, the weekly visits were not even a question, now we can observe that sending money to the parents replaces the visits. If ten years ago nobody would even think of placing their parents into a retirement home, now more and more are choosing to do so. One young woman said: "For me, my group of friends are my family. My parents weren't there when I grew up. I love them, but I don't really feel I know them. Even though now they are here, I find it strange to spend Christmas with them. I spent most of them with my friends, so I want to be with my friends. I feel as if I don't know how to be a daughter and it is uncomfortable to see it hurts them, but I just can't fake it."

I grew up poor, but my family was together, the young and the old. I grew up in a big city, but my neighbors were treated as family. They were feeding me when my mother was working, they were punishing me when I was naughty. The doors of the homes weren't locked, we would go in and out without announcing beforehand. If I had a toy, it belonged to everyone. If someone baked a cake, everyone would receive a piece of it. I grew up with laughter filling my street, children playing, old people chattering, I grew up with music, dance and lightness, because no hardship should be taken too seriously.

Now when I go back home people have a much better financial situation, but they are all frozen alone in their empty homes, looking at the altars they build- made out of hundreds of pictures of their gone away children. Waiting for them to come home for a week or two. Waiting to die, because they haven't been taught that there is more to life than work and sacrifice. The doors are locked and the only sounds on my street are those of cars.

A young mother that has returned to live in Romania after many years of living abroad told us: "We lost the village feeling and we are trying to recreate it. Romanians are a family house-owner nation. We are looking for a feeling of belonging, of community. Our houses are blankets for our souls. One million blankets."

The consequences and lessons of Romania entering the European Union are only starting to emerge and it is hard to imagine a bright future soon in this empty home. Many people are starting to return back home, many people have committed to creating a change in Romania and while we might think it is Romania's business only, I would like us to question what role the European Union plays in this and what responsibility it should take. Also, what role if any do we play as individuals. How do our habits feed separation? Is our home empty too?