

Eleven Years and a Day

The way back to life leads to a small street. The park cemetery lies in the middle of a Marzahn housing complex, a working-class neighborhood. Around 2,000 Vietnamese live in this area. Hohenschönhausen, Marzahn and Lichtenberg; those are the districts of Berlin where many of them have settled down.* It is a cold and windy January day. The S7 runs through a grayish landscape surrounded by plain panel houses. Thanh Ngọc Lê**, 28, takes a short look at her watch. She observes a row of these buildings through the side window of her wagon. Only 100 meters lie between the past and the present. A glass pane separates them from each other. More than eleven years ago, Tâm***, one of her best friends, committed suicide at this place. She was mentally ill. She jumped off from one of those high-rise buildings near Springfuhl. It is a tragedy when a child dies before its parents. They came home and the only thing that remained of her was on the table. A damn piece of paper. No goodbye letter but a note about the food in their fridge. An announcement drowns out the silence. The train continues its journey after a two-minute break.

The more you approach the city center the more colorful the surroundings. The passengers are much better dressed and more multicultural. There are Africans, Asians, Arabians; their diversity quite evident in phone (conversations). Berlin has changed a lot in the last ten years. Ngọc lives in Hackescher Markt, a trendy neighborhood where tourists dominate the streets. She did an apprenticeship and has been working as a marketing assistant in a medium sized textile company for more than three years now. Of course her parents didn't approve of her career choice. Like many other Vietnamese parents they don't think much of an apprenticeship, which in their eyes has a low social status.

Ngọc's parents don't work anymore. Their health couldn't withstand those years of toiling inside a snack stand. Most of the former contract workers earn their living by running flower shops, grocery stores, alteration shops or nail studios. Those who have more capital invest in trendy restaurants with feel-good interior design. The era of snack stands offering stir-fry is definitely over. A row of Thai/Viet/Sushi restaurants with Europeanized menus has been sprouting like mushrooms all over the city****. With the help of these investments the

parents want to give their children a better future. In contrast to them, contract workers, who came and were supposed to leave East Germany after their assignment. It was not an easy time for them in the GDR. They toiled in factories. They lived in isolated houses. Contact to locals was not desirable. They worked and worked and sent the money to their families back home.

And then the Berlin Wall fell down.

Leaving or staying? Ngọc's father chose Germany. He eked out a living and bought his family over. It was 1995. Everything was strange to her when Ngọc came to Germany. She was 11 years old and went to the fifth grade of an elementary school in East Berlin. She was a cheerful girl. Good at math. Played a lot. Fell. Stood up. Laughed. Cried. And fell in love for the first time when she was 17. It was not okay for her parents because a boyfriend meant distraction from school and therefore troubles. She was supposed to study hard, deliver good marks and in particular obey. This is anything but natural for the Vietnamese generation that was born or raised in Germany. It is that Confucian perception that requires children to orientate themselves at their parents' wishes because they bought them into the world and raised them. That means children owe respect and obedience - "filial piety" - to their parents. The Vietnamese generation contract looks like this: we work really hard for you so don't disappoint us. Most of the parents have always highly valued education since they never had much of it. They strive for the academic success of their offspring. This means good school performances, good university results and ultimately a good job. When these things are done, questions about marriage and family planning will follow. It could be quite tough, overbearing and demanding. Of course they love their children like any other parents but they have neglected the fact that their offspring has grown up in a country with other definitions of success and happiness. Some of the children follow their parents' instructions. Some loose themselves. Not everybody swims in the same direction.

Success stories about young Vietnamese living in Germany can to be found everywhere*****. Newspapers often write about them; *die ZEIT*, for instance, calls them "[the Vietnamese wonder](#)." Vietnamese are seen as ambitious, diligent and striving; some kind of a model minority like Asian Americans. However, their success is also not spared from an underbelly. Things are bubbling underneath the surface.

The pressure is enormous. Many get in trouble because of bad school performances. “Good marks are unfortunately often the only interests of many Vietnamese parents,” said Thanh Thùy Lương, social counselor at the Lichtenberger Barnim School that has a high percentage of Vietnamese students. The pressure is not as extreme as described in [Amy Chua’s](#) controversial book [Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother](#) but the parents’ ambition is quite evident. Some of them expect too much and forget their children’s German identity. They still live in their Vietnamese world and can’t relate to their children’s problem or see them as secondary matters. When Ngọc told their parents about how she was teased by her classmates they didn’t understand and simply played down the racist insults. Their daughter’s explanations fell on deaf ears. Fiji, cigarette- mafia*****, so what? You shouldn’t be so angry and focus on studying, they told her. As of today they have not understood that their daughter has been bottling everything up for years. Tâm got it worse. Her life was a short and strenuous one. Her parents worked all day and seldom saw her. Their absence was their presence. And when they saw each other there was always something to argue about. Sometimes because of her marks. Sometimes because of her friends. Tâm shut herself away. Her parents thought of her abnormal behaviors as puberty mood swings. Mental illness? There is no such thing among Vietnamese. People with mental disorders are labeled as crazy. The resulting stigma often prevents these conditions from being addressed within Vietnamese communities.

“I first contemplated suicide when I was 18,” said Ngọc. It was the time period when the conflict between her and her parents became unbearable. The reason was not only parental pressure but also the clash of different attitudes toward life. They have never been satisfied with her achievements. The typical “not good enough” syndrome. On top of that the constant fight between her parents got worse. There was not enough air to breath. Ngọc wanted to get away. Away from her parents’ apartment. Away from Marzahn. She has been living alone for five years now and only visits her parents occasionally. The gap between them is just too big. It is a love-hate relationship. She loves her parents but can’t stand her mother’s bigotry and her father’s authority. There is no intimacy between them. It is as if both worlds exist in parallel. “The parents really put a lot of effort into giving something to their children but unfortunately the wrong things. Many of the children are emotionally neglected,” said Lương, who also works at [Lebenswelt gGmbH](#). This West Berlin-based organization is one of the many agencies of the so called free youth aid (freie Jugendhilfe) that cooperates with the youth welfare office. They are responsible for the clearing process of a case, that is to say the

investigation of an incident and the measurements. Other institutions that also take care of Vietnamese families are, for instance, [KJHA](#), [VIET-FAMILY](#), [Reistrommel](#) or [navitas](#). Lebenswelt offers, according to the agency itself, psychological and socio-educational counseling for young people and their families, in particular immigrants. The organization focuses on a lingual and cultural approach and has, according to Luong, the most Vietnamese employees under contract. The issues range from parenting problems to daily conflicts. There are families in which the father is heavily involved in gambling activities. There are families in which intellectually and physically disadvantaged children are hidden. Out of shame and protection. The question is for whom. There are families in which one of the parents is psychologically ill and consequently unable to cope. To address these issues a [Vietnamese-speaking special health care center](#) for the treatment of all psychiatric illnesses has been established at the Department of Psychiatry of Charité - Universitätsmedizin Berlin. It is persistently and disturbingly present.

In many cases the relationship between parents and children fails at language barriers and a strict and authoritarian parenting style. Name-calling and physical violence are part of this. There is a lack of closeness and affection. Of course there also problems in German families since no one really knows what happens behind closed doors. What the children hear and see is, however, the surface of an ideal German family life in which the parents are more understandable and dialogues are desirable. Children who grow up with two cultures suffer from a contradiction in themselves because the value systems are so contradictory. This cultural bipolarity is boon and bane at the same time.

A meeting between a family and the youth welfare office takes place when a family member requests support or somebody notifies the abnormalities. The latter is what happens within Vietnamese communities. Most of the hints come from kindergartens, schools, doctors and hospitals. A consulting process takes six months and will be mostly extended. The youth welfare office plays a significant role because it is the contact point for families, agencies and institutions such as kindergartens, schools and hospitals. The main problem among Vietnamese is that the parents don't pay attention to the laws or in most cases don't know that they have violated the laws. Violence is, for example, part of a Vietnamese parenting style. After all they were raised that way by their own parents so why should it be different with their children? "Ignorance and lack of knowledge for this issue are very common among Vietnamese parents. Most of them will be only active if they have violated a regulation and

then it would be too late,” confirmed Hoài Nam Nguyễn, a former employee of Lebenswelt. Raising awareness would be therefore definitely beneficial. Prevention is better than cure. The parents need to be sensitized for this. They can ask for help but only a few of them know about the availability of support. Thus, a direct approach in day-care centers, schools and hospitals is the first step toward a sustainable awareness measurement. Of course the conflict between Vietnamese parents and their children is very culturally based and it is safe to say that their Germany born grandchildren will have an easier life. As a matter of fact, they won't have to grow up with this kind of generation gap but it doesn't mean that you can't change the current situation because it is a natural development.

Silence comes back to the train. Perhaps Tâm would have still lived if she and her parents had known about these possibilities? If. What a terrible word. Ngọc remains silent. Her gaze is empty. Next stop Berlin Alexanderplatz. An announcement voice informs about connecting trains. Ngọc enters another train. It stops for exactly 1 minute and moves in the direction of Potsdamer Bahnhof.

* <http://www.berlin.de/ba-lichtenberg/politik/integrationsbeauftragte01.html> The number of Vietnamese registered in Lichtenberg is 3,800. They are the largest immigrant group in this district. More than one third of the Vietnamese living in Berlin are from Lichtenberg.

** Name has been changed

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**** On the basis of these gastronomic developments it is possible to analyze the economic history of Vietnamese living in Germany but this is another story.

*****<http://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article12458240/Die-besten-deutschen-Schueler-stammen-aus-Vietnam.html>

<http://www.fr-online.de/wissenschaft/grosser-bildungserfolg-von-migranten-vietnamesen-oft-die-besseren-schueler,1472788,3271578.html>

<http://www.spiegel.de/schulspiegel/leben/ehrgeizige-vietnamesen-streben-fuer-die-familienehre-a-733046.html>

<http://www.tagesspiegel.de/berlin/wo-bildung-zaehlt/1428758.html>

***** derogatory terms for Vietnamese