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# The Narrative Construction of Identity among the Namibian Czechs\*

**Abstract:** The main goal of this paper is to explain how the group of so-called Namibian Czechs identifies itself and how it expresses the feeling of belonging to a specific identity in its narrative. The paper is based on the analysis of biographical narrative, which was obtained by the method of oral history, and it also contains information from archival sources and participant observation. The respondents are members of a group of fifty-six children war refugees, who were educated and accommodated in Czechoslovakia between 1985 and 1991. It was a part of international solidarity aid, provided to liberation movements with communist orientation. The analysis of the biographical narrative of the respondents provides us with information about the specific individual reflection on processes of self-identification and a multiplicity of certain identities.

**Keywords:** belonging, biographical narrative, identity, Namibian Czechs, oral history

**Słowa kluczowe:** przynależność, narracja biograficzna, tożsamość, Czesi Namibijscy, historia ustna

The paper presents partial results of the four-year research focused on a group of so-called Namibian Czechs. Information from the research will be used in several articles focused on specific topics but mainly in the author's dissertation thesis, whose main aim is to present comprehensive material about the life story of this specific group and the processes of generating the social identities of members of this group. The article particularly focuses on the narrative

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construction of the identity of the Namibian Czechs and explicit expression of belonging to a certain identity.

The principal reason for delving into this subject was the fact that only three scholarly articles dealing with this group have been hitherto published, two by Tomáš Machalík.<sup>1</sup> Kateřina Mildnerová<sup>2</sup> has recently published an article focused on this group, which deals with the role of language in daily life of this specific group. Contrariwise, a number of articles have been written on a similar group of the so-called “GDR-children of Namibia” – a group of children who are war refugees from Namibia and grew up in East Germany.<sup>3</sup>

The research focuses on the registration of individual experience of the Namibian Czechs and their insight into historical events, which affected their whole life. We suppose that experiencing these events significantly affected the respondents’ identity because they were socialized in two culturally different locations. In both locations, the respondents were viewed as different from the majority. By analysis of the usage of pronouns and nationality categories in of the respondents’ biographical narratives, we try to answer the following questions: How do the Namibian Czechs identify themselves? Why are the Namibian Czechs using specific identities? How are those identities reproduced in social interactions?

## Methodology

In this article, the information was collected during long-term fieldwork, which took place in Namibia and the Czech Republic between 2014–2018. Two field

<sup>1</sup> T. MACHALÍK: *Czechoslovakia on the Battlefield of the Cold War, Angola Civil War and the Namibian Czechs*. In: *Viva Africa 2007. Proceeding of the IInd international conference on African studies*. Eds. T. MACHALÍK, J. ZÁHOŘÍK. Plzeň 2007, pp. 205–220; T. MACHALÍK: *SWAPO Children in Czechoslovakia from the Past to the Present*. In: *Viva Africa 2008. Proceeding of the 3rd international conference on African studies*. Eds. T. MACHALÍK, K. MILDNEROVÁ, J. ZÁHOŘÍK. Plzeň 2008, pp. 280–293.

<sup>2</sup> K. MILDNEROVÁ: “I feel like two in one”: *Complex Belonging among Namibian Czechs*. In: *Modern Africa: Politics, History and Society* 2018, Vol. 6, No. 2. Hradec Králové, pp. 55–94.

<sup>3</sup> S.L. AUKONGO: *Gods Child: How the GDR changed my Life*. Reinbek 2009; L. ENGOMBE, P. HILLIGES: *Child Nr. 95. My German-African Odyssey*. Berlin 2004; C. KENNA: *The “GDR-Children” of Namibia: Homecomers in an Unknown Country*. Windhoek 1999; J. KRAUSE: *The GDR-Namibia-Solidarity Project School of Friendship – Possibilities and Limitations of Intercultural Education*. Universität Oldenburg 2009; Y. NIEKREZEN; C. ARMBRUSTER, M. WITTE: *A Problematic Sense of Belonging, a Media Analysis of the “GDR Children of Namibia”*. In: “*Jurnal of Namibian Studies: History Politics Culture*” 2014, Vol. 15, pp. 95–123; C. SCHMITT, K. KLEIN-ZIMMER, D.M. WITTE: *Growing up Transnationally between SWAPO and GDR – A Biographical Ethnographic Study on Namibian Refugee Children*. “*Transnational Social Review*” 2014, Vol. 3, pp. 28–33; C. SCHMITT, D.M. WITTE, S. POLAT SERPIL: *International Solidarity in the GDR and Transnationality: An Analysis of Primary School Materials from Namibian Child Refugees*. “*Transnacional Social Review*” 2014, Vol. 4, pp. 242–258.

researches were conducted in Namibia, the first one in May 2017 and the second one in January 2018. Interviews took place in different locations in Namibia. Most of them were made in the capital, Windhoek; others took place in the north of the country in Oshakati, Ondangwa, Grootfontein, and Enana. During the research, we<sup>4</sup> interviewed the Namibian Czechs (31), Namibian caregivers (4), Czech caregivers (6), Czech government representatives (3), and Czech adoptive families (2). Archival materials were obtained from state district archives (Prachatice, Nový Jičín) and the archive of the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Personal letters were provided by some of the respondents (10).

The research combines biographical, historical, and ethnographic design. Several techniques were used during the field works. A most common technique was a biographical interview, which was used mainly in communication with the Namibian Czechs. Those interviews were sometimes supplemented with semi-structured interviews and participant observations. The semi-structured interviews were used during interviews with caregivers, political representatives, or adoptive families.

The analysis of the biographical narrative of the Namibian Czechs has been used for this article in the main. We take into consideration that the interviewer's presence during the interviews may affect the respondents' narratives. Due to the limited scope of this article, we focus on the postulated identity of the respondents only.

## Theoretical approaches

In this paper we approach identity from a constructivist point of view. The identity can be seen as dynamic and socially constructed in the context of everyday social interactions and communication. As Erik Erikson highlights in his book *Identity and the Life Cycle*,<sup>5</sup> each individual and his or her identity are affected by solving specific social problems. The age predetermines those problems. The most crucial phase for an individual in the process of forming an identity is adolescence. Socialization plays an essential function in acquiring a certain identity. It is especially important if we think about identities, which have been institutionalized by certain political powers, like national or ethnic identities. Benedict Anderson describes the development of those categories in his book *Ethnicity and Nationalism*.<sup>6</sup> We understand national identity only as

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<sup>4</sup> Field research was carried together with Mgr. Kateřina Mildnerová, Ph.D.

<sup>5</sup> E.H. ERIKSON: *Identity and the Life Cycle*. New York 1959.

<sup>6</sup> T.H. ERIKSEN: *Etnicita a nacionalizmus*. Praha 2010.

a product of social classification and human categorization of the world.<sup>7</sup> National or ethnical identity does not represent any given category or entity in the world; they are just categories of social categorization of the world in everyday practice.

In some cases, an individual may have more than one national identity. Communities of such people are often labeled as diasporas or transnational communities. There are many different definitions for the diaspora,<sup>8</sup> for instance, in his article *The 'Diaspora' Diaspora* Brubaker defines three essential attributes of diaspora community as dispersion, homeland orientation, and maintenance of boundary. Traditional diaspora communities are Jews or Armenians, but at present, the number of communities, which are perceived as diaspora is continuously growing. The similar problem is facing transnational identity. Members of transnational communities are most often described as migrants, who remained in direct contact with the country of their origin and affected the reality in country of present residence and the country of origin at the same time.<sup>9</sup> However, as Brubaker<sup>10</sup> pointed out, those specific identities are perceived to be the transcendence of nationalism, but more accurately they are just adaptation of nationalism to different conditions of the present time when individuals often have more than one national identity.

In contrast with diaspora and transnational identities the concept of bicultural identities may appear to be much more general: "An individual who has been exposed to and has learned more than one culture is a multicultural person, but only when this individual expresses an attachment with and loyalty to these cultures can we say that the individual has a multicultural identity."<sup>11</sup> An Individual's ability to participate in the culture of the country of his or her origin or country in which he or she lives can affect the assimilation of those individuals. If a certain individual can participate in the culture of the majority, it is very likely that this individual has become assimilated into mainstream society. If he or she can participate in both cultures, he or she is very likely to become a bicultural individual. Bicultural individuals tend to have the ability to

<sup>7</sup> R. BRUBAKER, M. LOVEMAN, P. STAMATOV: *Ethnicity as Cognition*. "Theory and Society" 2004, Vol. 33, pp. 31–64; R. BRUBAKER: *Grounds for Difference*. Cambridge, MA, 2015; R. BRUBAKER: *Ethnicity without Groups*. Cambridge, MA, 2004; S. HALL, P. du GAY: *Questions of Cultural Identity*. London 1996.

<sup>8</sup> J. CLIFFORD: *Diasporas*. "Cultural Anthropology" 1994, Vol. 9, No. 3, pp. 302–338; S. HALL: *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*. London 1990; W. SAFRAN: *Diasporas in Modern Society: Myth of Homeland and Return*. "Diaspora" 1991, Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 83–99.

<sup>9</sup> P. LEVITT, S. KHAGRAM: *The Transnational Studies Reader*. London 2007; S. VERTOVEC: *Transnationalism*. London 2009.

<sup>10</sup> R. BRUBAKER: *Grounds for Difference*. Cambridge, MA, 2015, pp. 134–145.

<sup>11</sup> ANGELA-MINH TU D. NGUYEN, V. BENET-MARTINEZ: *Multicultural Identity – What It Is and Why It Matters*. In: *Psychology of Social and Cultural Diversity*. Ed. R. Crisp. Singapore 2010, p. 89.

switch between those identities. It is called “inter-domain identity switching.”<sup>12</sup> Unlike diaspora and transnational identities, the concept of bicultural identities illustrates the processes necessary for identity making and reproduction. A definition of bicultural identity includes the processes of social interaction, which are essential for flotation of cultural identity.

By analysing the respondent’s narratives, we try to identify how they tend to interact with society and how they identify themselves. Narrative constructivist approach understands memory as a constitutive part of a formation of collective socio-cultural identity. In this respect, we apply Jan Assmann’s theory of communicative and cultural memory<sup>13</sup> to explain how the cultural identity of the Namibian Czechs has continuously been reconstructed within the field of the so called communicative memory which is embodied in living autobiographical memories maintained in communication. Reproduction of specific collective memories, as a matter of fact, represents individual belonging to a particular group of people with whom they share the memory. It results in the formation of collective identity. In Assmann’s theory, the communicative memory is different to a more fixed, formal, and institutionalized “cultural memory” which may be represented by official mythology and institutionalized reproduction of certain aspects, for instance, nations. Both memories play a role in the construction of collective identity. Due to the limited scope of this paper, we focus on the postulated identity<sup>14</sup> of the respondents. Those postulated identities represent strong statements of belonging to a particular category of identity in the narrative of the respondents.

## Biography of the Namibian Czechs

The Namibian Czechs are orphans, half-orphans, or children of former fighters for freedom of Namibia. They spend most of their early childhood in liberation movement camps<sup>15</sup> located in Angola, Tanzania, or Zambia.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>12</sup> M. SHIH, D. T. SANCHEZ, G.C. HO: *Cost and Benefits of Switching among Multiple Social Identities*. In: *Psychology of Social and Cultural Diversity*. Ed. R. CRISP. Singapore 2010, pp. 65–66.

<sup>13</sup> J. ASSMAN, J. CZAPLICKA: *Collective Memory and Cultural Identity*. “New German Critique” 1995, No. 65 (Cultural History/Cultural Studies), pp. 125–133; J. ASSMANN: *Cultural Memory and Early Civilisations*. Cambridge 2011.

<sup>14</sup> Z. BAUMAN: *Identity – Conversations with Benedetto Vecchi*. Cambridge 2004, p. 15.

<sup>15</sup> Liberation camps were governed by political organization and military personnel were present in those camps. For more detail about differences between refugee camps and liberation movement camps, see: C.A. WILLIAMS: *National Liberation in Postcolonial Southern Africa – A Historical Ethnography of SWAPO’s Exile Camps*. Cambridge 2015.

<sup>16</sup> For more information about SWAPO’s camps, see: M. AKAWA: *The Gender Politics of the Namibian Liberation Struggle*. Basler 2014 or C.A. WILLIAMS: *National Liberation in Postcolonial Southern Africa – A Historical Ethnography of SWAPO’s Exile Camps*. Cambridge 2015, p. 129.

On May 4, 1978, the units of South African Defence Force surprisingly attacked the refugee camp in Kassainga in southern Angola, which they considered a military base.<sup>17</sup> During this attack, more than 600 people were killed, mostly women and children. As a result of this action, the South West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO), the leading political organization representing the Namibian struggle for independence, asked the former socialistic countries for help, because they already supported them through shipments of military equipment.<sup>18</sup> As a result, in 1979 German Democratic Republic (GDR) issued the ordinance, in which they committed to create a boarding school for the children from the camps (Maßnahmeplan zur Verwirklichung des Beschlusses des Sekretariats des ZK der SED vom 12.9.1979 über die Errichtung eines Kinderheimes für namibische Vorschulkinde DR2/12321a).<sup>19</sup> The first group arrived at GDR in November 1979 and GDR sheltered 427 children between the years 1979–1989. Czechoslovakia also decided to provide boarding school for the children of the liberation struggle. A resolution from October 1985 officially approved this decision (National archive Prague, NA, A ÚV KSČ, f.02/1. P142/85, k inf.3, č.9746/23, from 30.10.1985).

The key to choosing particular children is unknown. Some of the children are children of high profile SWAPO representatives, but all the children from camps were children of SWAPO supporters. However, the fact that three respondents from the group have the same father but different mothers may serve as an example of practices of high ranks in the party and the level of corruption in it.<sup>20</sup> Most of those children have very little information about their parents' or siblings' identity. Most of them were raised in community nurseries. The children, from five to nine years old, were picked up from different camps. Most of them are members of the Ovambo ethnic group. The main reason for this is the fact that the significant part of all activities leading to independence happened in the northern part of the country where the vast majority of people were Ovambos. Ovambo became a dominant ethnic group of the whole Namibia as a result of repressive actions of the German occupation towards the Herero (and Nama) ethnic groups that had led to the death of more than 75% of the Herero population, the former major ethnic group of Namibia.<sup>21</sup> Most of the respondents

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<sup>17</sup> L. DOBELL: *SWAPO's Struggle for Namibia, 1960–1991: War by Other Means*. Basel 1998.

<sup>18</sup> For more information about international aid provided by Czechoslovakia, see: P. ZÍDEK, K. SIEBER: *Československo a subsaharská Afrika v letech 1948–1989*. Praha 2007.

<sup>19</sup> Action plan to implement the decision of the Secretariat of the Central Committee of the GDR of September 12, 1979 on the construction of a children's home for Namibian preschool children DR2/12321a.

<sup>20</sup> For more information about these practices, see: M. AKAWA: *The Gender Politics of the Namibian Liberation Struggle*. Basler 2014.

<sup>21</sup> For the information about the history of Namibia before the colonial rule until the 1960s, see: R. FIRST: *South West Afrika*. Middlesex 1963.

remember very little from this period in their life.<sup>22</sup> Some of them remember mostly traumatic experiences associated with the fighting for independence. The conditions in the camps were not ideal; most of the children were happy to go and experience a different place. They were also happy because some elders convinced them that Czechoslovakia is: “[a country where sweets are growing on the trees].”<sup>23</sup> From this period of life, eleven respondents remember their mother and only six of them were aware of their father. Most of the children were taken together; they did not establish strong relationships with their families.

The children arrived in Prague on November 14, 1985, and they were placed in the boarding school in Bartošovice. Thanks to friendly and kind staff most of them mastered the Czech language within six months. Czechoslovakia did not have any specific curriculum for the education of international students; children were educated following the regular curriculum in the Czech language. Even though there were efforts to prevent their integration in the Czech society. Six Namibian caregivers and one director accompanied those Namibian children. Their main role in the program was to ensure that the children will not forget their native language and will be familiar with the situation in Namibia. For that purpose, lessons of Namibian traditions were created by this staff and children were raising the Namibian flag every morning. Children were accompanied by the Czech staff during the day and the Namibian one during the night. Speaking in Czech was strictly prohibited during the night. If they spoke Czech in that time or misbehave, they were physically punished by Namibian caregivers, as one of the respondents describes: “[Namibian aunties they used to beat us. Put your head under the bed, and they beat you. It was part of disciplining us. You be afraid because if you do a mistake, you are going to be beaten.]”<sup>24</sup> Sometimes the whole group was beaten: one respondent recalls a specific event during which the whole group was punished: “[When we were in Bartošovice, group one, we were making noise and, a teacher said that... You guy are making a noise like monkeys. We were bitten ... bitten crazy ... apparently we were embarrassing them ... Why are they calling us monkeys? We were embarrassing our country, our elders ... but why?... do not kids jump when the teacher is out of class?]”<sup>25</sup> Because of those cruel practices, the children developed an aversion to all that reminded them of their Namibia: “[But we did not like it, because those Namibians caregivers used to be very strict, so we prefer to be with the Czech one, nobody like those Namibian traditions.]”<sup>26</sup> In consequence, instead of preserving the Namibian

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<sup>22</sup> Quotations of the respondents are listed in their original wording. Full texts of interviews are preserved in the personal archive of the author. Most of the interviews were conducted in English language, some in Czech language and one in Ovambo language.

<sup>23</sup> Respondent n. 18.

<sup>24</sup> Respondent n. 12.

<sup>25</sup> Respondent n. 14.

<sup>26</sup> Respondent n. 5.

traditions, the children got accustomed to the new environment very well and most of them created strong relationships with the local families, children, and their teachers. Many of them recall that time as one of the happiest moments in their lives: “[That was the best childhood I can ever have, there was no hunger or suffering... when I get there I forget what means to suffer.]<sup>27</sup>” or “[It was very happy childhood in Bartošovice, I will never forget that. We received such love, lots of love, that kind of love we never experienced before.]<sup>28</sup>”

On November 23, the whole group was relocated to a reconstructed area in Prachatice. The children continued with their education at school. The Czech staff from Bartošovice did not accompany the group; however, most of the respondents did not have any problems to establish relations with the new members of the staff. Half of the respondents had “adoptive families” in Prachatice. Those adoptive parents were in most cases employees of the boarding school. For instance, one respondent describes his relationship with the cook from the boarding school: “[They have given me the true love, or the true meaning of family and love from the parents. Those people treated me like their own child.]<sup>29</sup>” Apart from those relations, every child was involved in some leisure time activity, such as sports or dancing. Some of the respondents even played soccer for the local team in the third league. The children were allowed to participate in those activities without the supervision of their caregivers. The social interactions with the Czech environment began to be more complex. The children were starting to think about their future professions. The Czech language was used in everyday communication even among peers from the group: “[Among each other, we only used to speak Czech. We never used Oshiwambo with one another.]<sup>30</sup>” The first of the Namibian caregivers left the group in December 1988, due to health problems. In 1990, the other three left the group in order to participate in the first free election in Namibia. Only two of the Namibian caregivers remained. They wrote a letter to the government of Czechoslovakia, in which they demanded repatriation of the whole group. They insisted that all the children should sign the letter, some of them were even influenced by them and signed the letter voluntarily, others were forced and threatened to do so. “[I was one of the kids which did not want to go back because I knew that we are going to suffer there. We were forced to sign the letter that we want to go back, even if it was not true. Everyone signed. I was one of the last that signed.]<sup>31</sup>” The letter was sent on July 29, 1991. The main reason for the repatriation was political. Namibia achieved its independence, and Czechoslovakia began its economic and political transformations. Namibian exiles from all over the world were returning to the country,

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<sup>27</sup> Respondent n. 11.

<sup>28</sup> Respondent n. 15.

<sup>29</sup> Respondent n. 20.

<sup>30</sup> Respondent n. 20.

<sup>31</sup> Respondent n. 11.

even the GDR group.<sup>32</sup> The direct threat for security in Namibia no longer existed and none of the sides involved were willing to finance the schools. Most of the respondents recall how difficult it was for them to leave Czechoslovakia. One of the respondents was accompanied by her “adoptive mother” until the very last moment at the airport: “[They did not want to let me go. They begged to keep me. They tried to speak to authorities, but it was not helpful. I did not want to go. It was extremely tough. I was holding on her, I basically have to be pulled off her. I was grabbing and crying. Every time you recalled that moment to her, she will be crying. I was used to them. They were my parents that I knew. I did not want to go anywhere. I think that was the most difficult thing that I ever had to do in my life, I felt like I have been separated from my parents.]”<sup>33</sup> The repatriation took place in September 1991.

The whole group arrived at Windhoek airport, where the official delegation and press were awaiting the children. Shortly after, the children were placed at the boarding school in Usakos. During the time in Usakos, children were supposed to learn the English language and get used to the new environment. Afterwards, children were picked up by their parents or some relatives. Some children stayed as nobody came to collect them, therefore they transported some of them to Windhoek and others to Ongwediewa. Some of them were picked up by their family relatives, but three respondents remained there until the foster family was arranged. It was a very traumatic experience for every member of this group. Most of the respondents state in their narratives that they were not even born in Namibia and the whole environment was entirely new for them. “[I hate it. I was not ready to come here, and the worst part is that most of us were not even born here. We were born in exile. What is this country? Is this where I am going to live? And why? I felt like I am lost.]”<sup>34</sup> Most of the respondents were afraid of their own parents or family members. “[My parents were like when you came back; you are like ignoring us. But how do you explain to them that I never grow up with you. What do you expect from me? I cannot just run into your arms and said: ooo, i missed you, mummy, I missed you, father. [...] Ok I had some flashbacks, so I remember them, but some kids were even crying, that they do not want to go with their parents, they do not even know them. So lots of parents were disappointed. They were like: oooo, our own kids do not like us, they do not want us, some are even crying that we are not their parents.]”<sup>35</sup> or “[I came to see my mother when I came to Namibia in 1991.

<sup>32</sup> For more details about the reason for repatriation of this group, see: C. SCHMITT, K. KLEIN-ZIMMER, D.M. WITTE: *Growing Up Transnationally between SWAPO and GDR – A Biographical Ethnographic Study on Namibian Refugee Children*. “Transnational Social Review” 2014, Vol. 3, pp. 28–33.

<sup>33</sup> Respondent n. 20.

<sup>34</sup> Respondent n. 20.

<sup>35</sup> Respondent n. 26.

My mother was caring baby on her back, and I was saying: No, you are not even my mother, my mother only had me. Then she started explaining everything.]”<sup>36</sup> Every respondent state in their narrative that they experienced cultural shock after the arrival. Firstly, they were not fully able to communicate with their surroundings: “[It was extremely difficult, I remember, when we came back, we hardly knew any English. You know, we were so much integrated into Czech society that we basically knew only Czech, Oshiwambo was non-existent. You have to learn everything from scratch. Most of the people failed very first grade when we came back.]”<sup>37</sup> Apart from the language barrier, the respondents had problems with different cultural norms and believes: “[You think very differently from the majority, they also behave differently. You need to get to know others and learn how to cope with them.]”<sup>38</sup> The situation was more manageable for respondents from wealthier families, but especially kids from poor rural families had many difficulties adapting to a new environment. “[I had to learn a lot of things. How to take care of stock, how to walk in the field, many many things and it was terrible. But you just have to do it; you have to become like everybody else.]”<sup>39</sup> In some cases, respondents have to walk to the school for more than three hours. Some parents or relatives could not even afford the education for the respondents. Probably the most challenging thing for every respondent was the separation from other members of the group: “[We grew up like sisters and brothers, and then they separated us. It was very sad. ... even when our parents came to pick up us, some were crying because you are leaving your family.]”<sup>40</sup> Another child admitted: “[even when I was with my family, I felt lonely. I missed my friends.]”<sup>41</sup> Some of the respondents were fortunate enough to maintain the contact with the others from the group. Especially in Windhoek and Oshakati were such relations possible. Those respondents communicated between each other in the Czech language. Most of the respondents state in their narratives that they were repeatedly reading Czech books, which they brought to the country with them in order to maintain Czech language skills. During this time some respondents maintained contact with the Czech Republic and were trying to manage everything for their return there. After several unsuccessful attempts, a remarkable coincidence happened as one member of the group accidentally met ambassador JUDr. Pavol Vošalík,<sup>42</sup> and with his selfless assistance and after

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<sup>36</sup> Respondent n. 24.

<sup>37</sup> Respondent n. 20.

<sup>38</sup> Respondent n. 25.

<sup>39</sup> Respondent n. 20.

<sup>40</sup> Respondent n. 12.

<sup>41</sup> Respondent n. 25.

<sup>42</sup> 06/1997-10/2001 Ambassador of Czech Republic for South Africa, Namibia and Botswana in Pretoria.

having fulfilled several conditions, some of the children gained scholarships at Czech universities.

Between 1998 and 2002, fourteen of the Namibian Czechs were granted scholarship at various universities. They chose fields of study on their own. However, after the hoped-for return, they were confronted with a new social reality in the Czech Republic. “[I have to say that child’s imagination and reality are two completely different things.]”<sup>43</sup> There are no doubts that after ten years the Czech society had to undergo some changes and transformation of their entire political and economic system. On the other hand, probably the children idealized their memories because of their difficult situation after the return to Namibia. They were also adapted to much smaller towns; Bartošovice had only 1,500 citizens during the time of their stay and Prachaticice had around 10,000 citizens. The university cities were much bigger, so they were more impersonal. Their study achievements were different, probably regarding individual efforts of each of them. Unfortunately, everybody from this group endured racial attacks. Most of them were only verbal, but occasionally, even physical violence occurred. However, most of the respondents still consider the majority of Czechs very friendly. After completing their studies, some of them decided to stay in the Czech Republic for longer; some returned to Namibia because they did not want to undergo the bureaucratic process related to obtaining a visa. In 2018, there was only one Namibian Czech living in the Czech Republic.

At present, the conditions in which the Namibian Czechs live differs. According to the information given by various respondents, three members of the group have already passed away, one is in custody, and eight are unemployed. Many respondents work for the police or army forces. Some others work in administration or health care. Only two of them think that they are fully integrated into Namibian society. Others, in their narratives, point out differences between them and the majority society of Namibia. Most of the respondents have problems with establishing partnerships with local people. Women, in general, have a lousy opinion about Namibian men: “[Here in Namibia men do not treat women nicely, especially our color. They do not marry. They just impregnate a girl and do not marry. They do not have the commitment to stay just with one woman. They prefer to cheat and we ladies, we want to get married, but them, they do not understand.]”<sup>44</sup> Male respondents, in general, do not complain about Namibian women that often, but part of the group, which was attending universities in the Czech Republic do complain. They said that Namibian women are too materialistic and do not understand the concept of romantic love. The majority of the respondents state that the Namibian society is labelling them: “[They always call you this name, you know, *owaluky*. It is like you are classi-

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<sup>43</sup> Respondent n. 23

<sup>44</sup> Respondent n. 15.

fied in this group, which just want to get and do not want to do anything. So obviously you sometimes do not want to be classified with that group, because you tried really really your best to reintegrate yourself into society and became like everybody else.]”<sup>45</sup> Struggle-kids or exile kids are other names used by the Namibian society to label people, which were born in exile. This group of people sometimes protest in front of government buildings in order to gain some benefits, because they think that because of their exile experience, they have been disadvantaged. After protests, positions in police and army were offered to some of them. Because of that they are often stigmatized. With the help of modern technologies, nearly every member of the group is nowadays in contact with each other. Every year the official gathering of Namibian Czech is organized. Nearly half of the respondents are still able to communicate in the Czech language, and others are still able to understand many words, but their ability to express themselves has faded. Most of the respondents still watch Czech movies, listen to Czech music, and follow the news from the Czech Republic.

## Identity of Namibian Czechs

This section is dedicated to a strong statement about the identity of respondents selected from the biographical narrative of the respondents. Those statements can be divided into three types. The first, statements which describe the level of the individual’s assimilation into Namibian society. The second, statements which pointed to differences between their behavior and the behavior of the majority in Namibia and the third section is dedicated to specific categories, which respondents created, to describe their own identity.

Despite the differences in the level of assimilation, most of the respondents state in their narrative that they do not fully integrate into Namibian society: “[Even until now, I still do not fit.]”<sup>46</sup> Respondents in their narrative state that the socialization causes this problem in a different environment: “[I do not really think that I will adapt for 100% because I did not grow up here. I did not grow up in a village like my other siblings.]”<sup>47</sup> After the sudden repatriation, they did not have any particular scheme, which would eventually help them with assimilation: “[Firstly, we were Czechs. The only difference was that we were black. And then they brought us back to Africa, and they just left us here. We did not have enough time to get used to this place.]”<sup>48</sup> In this case, one of the respondents is referring about the lack of assistance provided to the group

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<sup>45</sup> Respondent n. 20.

<sup>46</sup> Respondent n. 18.

<sup>47</sup> Respondent n. 26.

<sup>48</sup> Respondent n. 7

after their repatriation. The group was provided only with courses of English language in Usakos. Every single respondent has problems with assimilation into the Namibian society.

Even until present, some of the respondents state that they behave differently from the majority of the Namibian society. Some of them state that they cannot get used to time perception in Namibia: “[I do not like African time. If I tell you two o’clock, I will only wait for ten minutes, if you are not here, then I am gone. You think that I will waste my time for somebody who is not turning up? That is how I am.]”<sup>49</sup> Other differences, which respondents recount are related with raising of children: “[Even the way how I am raising my children. I am just doing it in a way we were brought up in Europe. I do not do it in a way African doing it. I do not believe in beating, I just believe in talking.]”<sup>50</sup> Pronunciation of words in the local language, that is, Oshivambo was very challenging for all of the respondents. In most cases, it took them between six up to twenty-four months until they were able to express themselves fully. In some cases people can recognize differences in the respondents’ accent. Some of them have encountered derogatory remarks, for example, “[You cannot even pronounce your mothers’ language. But some words are very hard to pronounce, and some people are just like: ‘Oo you just pretend it, you think that you are special.]”<sup>51</sup> This distinct accent associates the respondents with a special group of people in Namibian society, who are perceived to be different: “[They always call you this name, you know, *owaluky*. It is like you are classified in this group, which just want to get and do not want to do anything. So obviously you sometimes do not want to be classified with that group, because you tried really really your best to reintegrate yourself into society and became like everybody else.]”<sup>52</sup> Apart from the local name *owaluky*, this group is often labeled as *struggle kids* or *exile kids*. This group consists of people who were born and brought up in exile. As this group had problems with reintegration into the mainstream society, some assistance was provided. Posts in governmental organizations were offered to them, such as positions in police and army. The majority of Namibians do not like members of this group because in exile they had free education and new positions were created just for them. Very often they labeled them as lazy and spoiled from life in Europe. This classification was one of the main reasons why assimilation was so difficult. Probably because of this fact some of the respondents stated: “[I feel like a foreigner, I cannot relate to locals.]”<sup>53</sup> Further on in her narrative she states that she prefers to meet with other people from exile: “[They are not

<sup>49</sup> Respondent n. 4.

<sup>50</sup> Respondent n. 4.

<sup>51</sup> Respondent n. 26.

<sup>52</sup> Respondent n. 20.

<sup>53</sup> Respondent n. 14.

from here, but they are trying to fit in. We have got something in common.]”<sup>54</sup> Only two respondents state that they are fully integrated into the Namibian society: “[We just adapt to the situation here in Namibia. We get used to the Namibian live.]”<sup>55</sup> In these cases, the ability to communicate in local languages was the most important factor that helped them: “[I managed to fit into the system, you know. I learned Afrikaans, Oshiwambo, I became Namibian.]”<sup>56</sup> Apart from language problems, some respondents state that the perception of love and relationships in Namibia is completely different. Those differences were in most cases described by male respondents who have been in the Czech Republic at universities. Even the female respondents who did not go to universities in the Czech Republic and therefore did not have any direct experience with love relationship in the Czech Republic state that the relationships in Namibia are different. Despite their criticism towards other Namibians, none of the respondents is in the relationship with another member of the group. Three respondents have a partner from the Czech Republic and the rest from the Namibian. The inner-group relations did not occur in this group probably because most of the respondents see other members of the group as their close relatives or even family members: “[They are more important for me than my brothers and sisters. In fact, they are my brothers and sisters. They are the people, I grew up with. Those brothers and sisters, which were given to me in Namibia, they do not even know about me. Those from the Czech Republic, they know everything; they are my real family.]”<sup>57</sup> Until now the respondents communicate with each other mostly in the Czech language. Some respondents, who have been separated from the group members, lost their ability to express themselves in Czech. They still can understand most of Czech and on rare occasions they also use the Czech language in their communication: “[Even when we are no good, we can still sit and gossip someone in Czech and nobody will understand, which is a good thing.]”<sup>58</sup> The respondents, who have been at universities in the Czech Republic, are completely fluent and they are using the Czech language freely in their communication with other members of the group, in communication with a friend from the Czech Republic or occasionally when they meet someone from the Czech Republic.

The strong statements about the national identity of the respondents are universal in their narratives. Some respondents state that they feel like their national identity is Czech: “[I am still Czech, and I will be Czech forever.]”<sup>59</sup>; “[I think

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<sup>54</sup> Respondent n. 14.

<sup>55</sup> Respondent n. 15.

<sup>56</sup> Respondent n. 20.

<sup>57</sup> Respondent n. 7.

<sup>58</sup> Respondent n. 20.

<sup>59</sup> Respondent n. 21.

that I am Czech, not Namibian.]”<sup>60</sup> One respondent who has been in the Czech Republic at the university states: “[I feel like Czech, but it is something, which white Czech born in the Czech Republic will never understand. I do not know how to explain it to him.]”<sup>61</sup> Others refer to their childhood in Czechoslovakia, which they conceive to be determining their identity: “[I am Czech. I am from the Czech Republic; it is where I started my primary.]”<sup>62</sup>; “[For me (Czech Republic) it is my home because here in Namibia people do not understand me. Like I have the Czech mentality,]”<sup>63</sup> or “[The majority of people, they used to call me white. Apparently I am a black person by my color, but I am a white person inside. Maybe it is just because they brought me up and I have to act like them.]”<sup>64</sup> In most cases, respondents describe their national identity to be somewhere in between two national categories: “[I think that I am different than other Namibians. 90% of my body is in the Czech Republic, and 10% is in Namibia. That is why I think that I am different. Even when I speak with locals, they do not understand me.]”<sup>65</sup>; “[I fell like a foreigner in my own country. I think that I am little bit Czech and a little bit like Namibian, so I do not belong anywhere.]”<sup>66</sup>; “[I feel like I am unique. Like two in one.]”<sup>67</sup> Or “[I am Namibian Czech. I will forever be Namibian Czech, forever and ever. That you cannot change.]”<sup>68</sup> Only in three cases the respondents state that they feel like Namibians and that they are fully assimilated into Namibian society: “[I am Namibian, and that is how I will always be, but within me, I also have some Czech roots, which I do not want to throw away. I would like to keep it with me.]”<sup>69</sup>

## Conclusion

The Namibian Czechs consider themselves as outsiders with a problematic sense of belonging within the overlapping scopes of family, culture, society, and nation. Their double and ambivalent ethnocultural identities mark them out as being culturally different in Namibia, while in the Czech Republic their otherness is constructed mainly around their physical difference (being “black Czechs” as they call themselves). The identity of the respondents is therefore bicultural.

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<sup>60</sup> Respondent n. 19.

<sup>61</sup> Respondent n. 28.

<sup>62</sup> Respondent n. 15.

<sup>63</sup> Respondent n. 3.

<sup>64</sup> Respondent n. 4.

<sup>65</sup> Respondent n. 27.

<sup>66</sup> Respondent n. 29.

<sup>67</sup> Respondent n. 2.

<sup>68</sup> Respondent n. 20.

<sup>69</sup> Respondent n. 11.

Some individuals tend to inter-domain identity switching, others having a fused identity. Only a few of them fully integrated into the Namibian society, because they lost their ties with other Namibian Czechs, but they describe this process as very problematic. At the moment, only one Namibian Czech is living in the Czech Republic. His identity is dual and full integration into the Czech society has been intermitted with numerous racial attacks. He also experiences prejudices daily. It confirms the social constructivist theories that describe identity as situational and socially conditional. Most of the Namibian Czechs who are living in Namibia choose in their interactions inter-domain identity switching. When they interact with other Namibians, they speak the Namibian language and behave accordingly to cultural norms of the Namibian society.

On the other hand, when they meet with each other, they prefer to use the Czech language (if language skills of all participants allow) as the language of their communication and their behavior also slightly change. Because of a shared traumatic past, the inner group solidarity is among most of the respondents strong. Shared identity is reinforced and reproduced mostly through their biographical narrative. Individuals who participate in the reproduction of this narrative created “official version” of the story as it was discussed numerous times, especially during annual gatherings. When those individuals tell their life stories, the similarities in them are obvious and striking. Since they do not share a similar story with any other individuals, and none of them has an in-group relationship, their story is not very likely to be passed on to another generation.

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