**Of Employers, Uncles and Interpreters:**

**The Diverse Trajectories of Labour Migrants in the Era of Guest Worker Migration**

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**Abstract**

This article addresses a lesser-known part of postwar migration to Europe: the actual trajectories through which guest workers arrived in the countries of destination. Currently, these trajectories are explained through two models: that of large-scale employer recruitment and that of chain migration through personal networks. This article argues however that these two explanatory models oversimplify a complex historical reality.

First, both models tend to be interpreted rather narrowly. Through an extensive discussion of the many different trajectories of guest workers to the Belgian city of Ghent, this article provides a more diffuse interpretation, focusing on the high degree of complexity within and overlap between them. Second, the existing models do not leave much space for a third category of agents: the so-called migration middlemen. This article places these middlemen in the spotlight, looking at their role as well as at their perception by contemporary actors.

By providing a more encompassing picture of the actual migration trajectories of guest workers, of the many actors involved in them, and of the different migration regimes framing them, the article hopes to contribute to a better understanding of the ways in which people move not only in the past but also in the present.

**Keywords**

guest worker migration; migration trajectories; migration middlemen; social networks; employer recruitment

**Introduction**

Arguably one of the most documented migrations in European history is the guest worker migration of the post-war period. Still, a number of blind spots in our knowledge of this migration flow remain. Especially about the early years of guest worker migration, before the crisis of the mid-1970s, not much contemporary research is available, and historians only recently started looking at this period (von Oswald, Schönwälder, en Sonnenberger` 2003, 20). Partly because of this chronological bias, the actual migration trajectories of guest workers – the ways in which they made their way from their places of origin to the places where they settled – are still shrouded in myth. In collective memory, guest worker migration evokes images of trains and planes filled with young men, recruited to come and work in the coal mines and in heavy industry. Historical research has added another picture to this imagery: that of people arriving spontaneously, following in the footsteps of family members, friends, or fellow villagers, and finding work on their own initiative. Taken together, these two explanatory models do accommodate most guest workers’ modes of arrival. However, the division between official recruitment and spontaneous chain migration does oversimplify things.

First, besides institutional actors at the receiving end and social networks of individual migrants at the sending end, there is a third category of agents. These are the so-called middlemen, intermediaries facilitating the process of migration and connecting specific points of departure and arrival. In recent times, scholars have paid a lot of attention to these middlemen under the denominator of ‘human smugglers’, for example in the context of the refugee crisis in the Mediterranean, or in the context of Mexican-American border crossings, where they are known as ‘coyotes’ (Krissman 2005; Spener 2009; Sanchez 2015). In the field of migration history, the role of these intermediaries has recently become the focus of attention for the Transatlantic migration flows of the 19th and early 20th centuries (Feys 2013, 71–72). For guest worker migration to Europe, however, their role has not been systematically explored. A first aim of this article, therefore, is to turn the spotlight to the involvement of such middlemen in the migration of guest workers in the post-war era.

But the oversimplification of guest workers’ migration trajectories does not only lie in the insufficient attention paid to intermediary actors. At another level, it is the limitative interpretation of the different ‘types’ of trajectories as well as the almost artificial divide between them that needs to be addressed. Here we argue that the division between ‘employer recruitment’, ‘personal social networks’ and ‘migration middlemen’ should be seen as a heuristic model rather than as a reflection of historical reality. A second aim of this article therefore is to deconstruct such ‘ideal types’ and show the high degree of complexity within and overlap between them.

The historical trajectories analysed in this article are those of guest workers coming to the Belgian city of Ghent during the post-war period of economic boom. As guest workers are defined those people for whom work was the means to realise their migration project. The six nationalities chosen - Italian, Spanish, Moroccan, Algerian, Tunisian and Turkish – were those that had a substantial presence in the city during the period under study (1960 to 1975).

**Methodology and Source Material**

The choice for studying guest workers’ migration trajectories from a local point of view was dictated by the need for a detailed understanding of the historical context of arrival, which can only be achieved at the local level. The focus on Ghent was a choice for a middle-sized city characterised by a diversifying economic fabric, which created a wider array of opportunities for newcomers than the more traditional settings of guest worker-research (such as mining towns or other mono-industrial cities). Also the selection of migrants of different nationalities was meant to ensure variation in the trajectories found, as historical contingencies tend to lead to similar trajectories for migrants from the same place of origin. Finally, the selection of immigrants was made on the basis of nationality and year of arrival rather than on a predefined migration category, so that a wide array of profiles could come to the fore, including the ‘legal’ as well as the ‘illegal’, the ‘recruited’ as well as the ‘spontaneous’, etc. These methodological choices opened up our perspective, providing an insight into the variety of these guest workers’ migration trajectories, the many different actors involved and their functioning within a specific historical context. Allowing for such variety was deemed more important than being quantitatively representative for guest workers’ trajectories to Belgium or Western Europe in general.

The research upon which this article is based was not aimed exclusively at migration trajectories, but rather at integration trajectories in the receiving society. However, it soon became clear that the ways in which individuals and groups of immigrants had arrived in Ghent had an enormous impact on where, how and with whom they ended up working and living. Therefore, special attention was paid to these ways of arrival.

Two types of historical sources formed the basis for this research. On the one hand, a sample of individual immigrant files, providing information on some 1,600 immigrants in Ghent. On the other hand, a collection of interviews with immigrants as well as ‘privileged witnesses’ such as employers, integration workers, etc. Part of these interviews (72 out of a total of 119) were carried out by other researchers, in the framework of MA theses and socio-cultural projects. I carried out another 47 interviews myself, most of which were life-story interviews, and added to those 16 of what I call ‘informal conversations’, which were unrecorded and took place spontaneously. No selection was carried out for the interviews of other projects. For the interviews I carried out myself, interviewees were selected so that immigrants from all six nationalities studied, both men and women, and both early and later arrivals were included in the sample.

The article sets out with a short historical overview of guest worker migration to Ghent to the background of the changing economic opportunity structure and the evolution of migration policy. The body of the article follows a three-tier structure, mirroring the three types of trajectories described above - ‘migration through employer recruitment’, ‘migration through personal social networks’ and ‘migration through migration middlemen’ – whilst indicating the many ways in which the actors, methods and means involved overlapped between these categories and within immigrants’ individual trajectories. The conclusion summarises the main findings and makes the link with related issues in migration studies today.

**Guest Worker Migration to Ghent, 1960-1975**

After WWII, the economies of Western Europe experienced a relatively quick recovery. By the early 1960s this had turned into a full-fledged economic boom, absorbing practically all of the labour force that was available. Already before that, there had been structural shortages of workers in those sectors of the economy where local labourers were no longer willing to work. It were these labour shortages that lay at the base of the large-scale migration of guest workers from the Mediterranean periphery to the European core (Messina 2007, 19–53; Castles 2003, 68–82; King 1993, 19–39).

Not only on a macro- but also on a micro-level, economic developments largely determined the direction of this migration stream. For the city of Ghent, this meant that during the first decades after the end of WWII, hardly any foreign workers arrived, as even local workers had to look elsewhere to get a job (Voordeckers 1966). In the early 1960s however, a sudden upsurge in building activity combined with a boom in the textile industry created an acute shortage of manpower. It was in this context that the first large numbers of guest workers arrived. Less related to the business cycle was the continuous shortage of labourers in the local domestic service sector. Here, smaller but still important numbers of foreign workers came to fill the positions left by locals, who were no longer prepared to do this kind of low-status work [De Bock 2012]. Whereas in 1960, the number of Mediterranean immigrants only accounted for 309 people or 0.2% of the population, by 1966 it had risen to 1,625 or 1%.

That year, however, the economic boom began to slow down. On a national scale, legislative measures were taken to prevent the arrival of new labour migrants by imposing the strict application of the Royal Decree of 31 March 1936, allowing the immigration of foreign workers only after a double, preliminary authorisation was granted. During the years of economic growth, this Decree had been largely ignored, and immigrants who had arrived on a tourist visa were almost automatically granted a regularisation of their residential status. This practice now came to an end (Martens 1976, 139–42; Haex, Martens, en Wolf 1976, 39–41).

The strict implementation of the RD remained in place throughout the entire period under study, despite the fact that already in 1968, a new period of economic growth began. The arrival of new, multinational companies around the developing Port of Ghent created a permanent switch in the city’s economic fabric. From a mono-industrial textile town, Ghent had become a mixed industrial port city with a strongly developing tertiary sector (Allaert 1994). The local labour market thus did not only expand, but also developed a more outspoken duality, with jobs in the textile industry, in construction and at the lower end of the service sector being deserted by local labourers and open to immigrant labour on a permanent basis [De Bock 2013]. By 1970, the number of Mediterranean immigrants had officially risen to 2,496 or 1,7% of the population. Under the new, more restrictive regulations, however, many newcomers were refused a residence permit. These people did not necessarily leave. Many of them became ‘illegal immigrants’, people who resided in Belgium but did not have the right to live or work there (Surkyn 1993).

The upward business cycle did not last. With a delay of a couple of months, the oil crisis of 1973 set off the most serious economic crisis since the Interbellum. This major change in the economic situation pushed many European governments to call an official halt to the further entry of labour migrants (Hollifield 1992, 73–74; Messina 2007, 29–30). In Belgium, such a ‘migration stop’ was announced on 1August 1974 (Aerts en Martens 1978, 36). However, it is precisely in this moment of crisis and blocked migration that we see the arrival of a new batch of Mediterranean immigrants in Ghent. Between 1973 and 1975, their numbers went up by 2,780, reaching 6,330 or 4.4% of the population. A significant part of these new arrivals were family migrants, who were not subject to the restrictive policy. However, most of them were still independent labour migrants [De Bock 2013]. The appearance of these immigrants in the population statistics is most likely the consequence of a regularization campaign (Rea 2000, 321–29). After 1975, the growth of the Mediterranean population in the city slowed down, so that by 1980 their numbers reached no more than 8,804 (Yearly Reports of the city of Ghent).

In the same way the existence of a macro-economic imbalance or a specific migration regime cannot fully explain the extent and direction of international migration streams, so can the economic and political developments described here not entirely explain the actual migration trajectories of guest workers to Ghent. For labour migrants to move to a new area, available jobs have to be advertised, this advertisement has to reach potential candidates and these candidates have to consider the offer a good one. In the case of Ghent, both the textile industry and the domestic service sector had been struggling for decades to attract workers, long before the first guest workers arrived (De Wilde 2007, 94). Only when their old methods no longer sufficed did local employers consider the option to attract foreign workers [De Bock 2013]. In Ghent, it were the active recruitment efforts of employers in these and other sectors that set off guest worker migration to the city. Most of these efforts however had very little to do with the official employer-instigated recruitment as described in the literature.

**Migration through Employer Recruitment**

In American migration studies, the role of employers as driving forces behind large-scale migration has for a long time remained under-exposed (Krissman 2005, 11–13). This is not the case however for research into European guest worker migration, where the role of employers has tended to be centre-stage. The guest worker-system functioned as follows: In the sending countries, prospective employers and authorities advertised the employment opportunities abroad to candidate-emigrants. These candidates then were to present themselves at a recruitment centre, where those that fulfilled the required conditions were selected. According to the needs at the receiving end, groups of candidates were called in for departure. After a final selection procedure, these recruits would be taken to their destination, their transport paid for them. This whole process was legally framed through bilateral and multilateral agreements between sending and receiving countries (s.n. 1959, 268–302).

The images of trains packed with young men, or of new arrivals being greeted by officials as they descend the stairs of the airplane, are well known. They are part of Europe’s collective memory. Hundreds of thousands of guest workers have arrived in exactly this way. In the case of migration to Ghent, however, this particular trajectory is rare. Despite the arrival of considerable numbers of guest workers in the city throughout the 1960s and 1970s, there were only a few instances of official recruitment as described above [De Bock 2013].

The first of these took place in 1966, when the *Union Cotonnière* – then the city’s largest textile company – proceeded to officially recruit a contingent of foreign labourers in Tunisia. This recruitment effort was repeated by the same company, now expanded and renamed UCO Ltd., in 1970. It was copied by the AKZO-Fabelta company in 1970 and again in 1974.[[1]](#endnote-1) Each time, a small group of Tunisian young men arrived in Ghent to work for the company that had recruited them. These officially recruited labour migrants were offered a one year-contract as well as employer-provided housing, as stipulated by the bilateral agreement signed between the Belgian and the Tunisian state in 1969 (Moniteur Belge, 17/06/1977).

Why did these companies proceeded to what was generally considered a cumbersome and costly operation, and this at a time when hundreds of immigrants were already available on the local labour market, many candidate-workers were arriving in Ghent spontaneously, and more informal ways of recruitment were well known (see further)? In order to understand this, we need to take a closer look at the profile of these recruits. This shows us that skilled factory workers and former white-collar workers were remarkably more present amongst Tunisian immigrants.[[2]](#endnote-2) The extra effort employers were prepared to go through was likely related to the possibility direct recruitment offered them to select a more interesting labour force. Further, and possibly even more so, it was the involvement of an intermediary figure, the catholic priest Marcel De Baere, that played a pivotal role in the companies’ decision. Father De Baere was not only a priest, but also honorary consul of Tunisia in Ghent.[[3]](#endnote-3) His mediation and contacts on the ground most likely ensured a swift handling and a prompt execution of the recruitment requests. His involvement can also explain the choice of employers for a country from which almost no immigrants had come to Ghent on their own initiative.

The scarcity of official recruitment efforts in Ghent however does not mean that local employers were not interested in recruiting groups of foreign workers. However, clearly, the system did not match their needs and desires. Most likely, this is related to the fact that their need for foreign labour was not structural enough to warrant the administrative hassle and the often long waiting time official recruitment entailed, or that they did not have the infrastructure or the means to deal with the many (financial and practical) obligations tied to the recruitment procedure.

As an alternative, many employers resorted to different forms of ‘unofficial recruiting’, going from actively advertising work in places known to be frequented by foreign labourers to outright stealing other companies’ foreign labourers – a practice that has been reported throughout Western Europe during the period under study (Khoojinian 2014, 317-321-391).

In the case of Ghent, an example of the latter can be found in the first foreign recruitment effort by the *Union Cotonnière* in 1963. Over the course of that year, the Direction Committee had repeatedly discussed but never approved the possibility of recruiting foreign workers, because of the (mostly financial) ‘inconveniences’ it would entail. However, the Director of Personnel did decide to recruit labourers abroad anyway. Through his doing, the first Algerian immigrants arrived to work in the *Union Cotonnière* in the autumn of 1963.[[4]](#endnote-4) To the Direction Committee, he presented their arrival as ‘spontaneous’:

*For a while now, we have been able to hire new personnel, and for the moment, our job openings have been more or less filled. More specifically, we have been hiring a certain number of Algerian labourers, who have come spontaneously from France.[[5]](#endnote-5)*

In reality, however, the personnel office had unofficially engaged an Algerian middleman to go and hire Algerian labourers living in the French border region Nord-Pas de Calais. Among those recruited was Dahmane:

*They came from Ghent to get us. It was the Union Cotonnière who needed a workforce. They sent someone, an Egyptian who worked as an engineer here, in the Union Cotonnière, who went there, together with an Algerian, Bouziane, who was, well, he came to France now and then, and he went to where all the immigrants lived. … We were there. So he hired us, he said ‘Those who want to leave, such and such day, such and such time, we will take everybody’. And on Monday, there was a bus that left, and so we came by bus.*[[6]](#endnote-6)

Most of these Algerians however would not stay in Ghent for long.[[7]](#endnote-7) Already in 1964, the *Union Cotonnière* therefore went on to hire a number of Moroccan migrants in order to remedy its continuous labour shortages. One of the people recruited this time was M’Hamed:

*Two months later, so after those two months in Brussels, he went to work in Ghent, in UCO. On the 7th of October 1964. … The boss of UCO had a shortage of labourers. He came looking for people in Brussels. There were seventeen people together, Moroccans, who were enrolled in the Labour Office. They were looking for work. The boss of UCO came to Brussels and promised those seventeen people that he would find them a house in Ghent.*

Once more, the company opted for an informal way of recruiting. Instead of an individual middleman, it was an agency that functioned as the link between employer and foreign labourers.

Another kind of migration trajectory that could be accommodated under the header ‘employer recruitment’ was that of people being hired by fellow-countrymen who had become employers themselves. The effect of ‘ethnic niche economies’ on the attraction of migrants and the direction of migration streams has been amply described in the literature (Waldinger, Aldrich, en Ward 1990, 35–38; Boissevain e.a. 1990, 141–43; Faist 2000, 20–21). In Ghent, during the period under study, these ‘ethnic niche economies’ mostly involved Italian entrepreneurs. Their presence in the city had been established already in the interwar period. After the war their businesses were booming and in dire need of labourers, which they preferred to look for in their hometowns [De Bock forthcoming]. One example is the business of Italian mosaic maker Antonio, who recruited a great deal of his staff directly from his native Friuli, making use of what we could call ‘old world-networks’ of old acquaintances, family and friends.[[8]](#endnote-8) Also more recent immigrant entrepreneurs such as restaurant owners Gianni and Mauro, both of whom set up several businesses in Ghent over the course of the 1970s, mainly turned towards their native town Bisceglie (province of Bari, Puglia) in order to recruit their workforce.[[9]](#endnote-9) Many of their employees were family members. Others were tied to their *padrone* more indirectly, through weaker yet mostly old world-ties, such as Girolamo, who was recruited by Mauro at age 15:

*I came to Ghent, because in Italy, they paid very little, when you worked. I was young … when I left Italy, I was 15 years old, so, I didn’t earn much money, there wasn’t much work, and my mother knew a man here in Belgium who had 15 restaurants. … So this man, my mother knew him very well, because he lived near my house, in Italy, and she sent me here, on my own, when I was 15.*

As opposed to the instances of employer-instigated recruitment discussed above, in the case of these Italian employers, the hiring procedure was far from anonymous. Employees were recruited through and because of their personal connections with their employers, who were migrants or descendants of migrants themselves. Therefore, this recruitment could also be classified as chain migration or ‘migration through personal social networks’. However, the fact that those initiating the chain were employers who, rather than just mediating (in the case of middlemen) or facilitating (in the case of social networks) the move, actually created the positions that would allow newcomers to realise their migration project, asks for a different interpretation. The hybridity of this kind of trajectory also becomes clear by the fact that in most cases, the migration of the recruits was regulated through the channel of ‘nominative recruitment’ – an administrative procedure that had to be set in motion by the employer, providing a legal framework for the arrival of those who moved as part of a migration chain (see below).

**Migration through Personal Social Networks**

Migration researchers of all disciplines have long been drawing attention to the role of social networks in determining the direction, composition and persistence of migration movements (Gurak en Cases 1992; Haug 2008). However, within the study of guest worker migration, which was supposed to be controlled and regulated by states and employers exclusively, the importance of these networks has come to be recognised only since the 1990s. Nowadays, most experts posit that actually the majority of guest workers have made it to Western Europe through such a network of relatives, friends, and acquaintances. These migrants were called ‘tourists’ by their contemporaries, as they made the trip on a tourist visa, only trying to regularise their status after they had managed to secure a job (Wilpert 1992, 184–85; Reniers 1999, 5–6; Akgündüz 2008, 58–59, 85–93).

Also in Ghent, the majority of guest workers seem to have arrived through their personal social networks. An important indicator of this – and the only quantitative indication of such chain migration our data can provide – is the clustering of migrants from specific places or regions of origin (Gurak en Cases 1992, 157). In the city of Ghent, it are Turkish immigrants from the district of Emirdağ (province of Afyon, Central Anatolia) who have generated the most dynamic migration chain. Over half of Turkish labour migrants arriving in the city between 1960 and 1980 were born in or around the town of Emirdağ. No other single town, city or even region around the Mediterranean has accounted for such a large number of immigrants arriving in Ghent. There are however some smaller concentrations of Turkish immigrants from Posof (province of Kars, Black Sea Region) and of Yugoslav Turks from Istanbul. Further, Ghent has seen the arrival of a higher than average percentage of Moroccan immigrants born in the village of Tafersit and the nearby town of Temsaman (province of Driouch, Oriental region), and in the city of Casablanca; Algerians from the town of Bou Saada (M’Sila province, Hodna region); Spanish from the capital Madrid and from the cities and towns of Burgos (Castile and León), Pontevedra, Rianxo and Ortigueira (Galicia), Tunisians from the towns of Jemmal and Moknine (Monastir) and the cities of Sousse and Tunis, and Italians from the towns of Longarone (Belluno, region of Veneto) and Bisceglie (Bari, region of Puglia) and from the capital Rome.

(Table 1 about here)

These figures however require careful interpretation. To begin with, for migrants coming from big cities such as Casablanca, Madrid or Rome, a shared place of origin obviously is less indicative of the existence of actual personal networks than for migrants coming from smaller towns and villages (Wilpert 1992, 179). Further, as many Tunisians and Italians arrived in Ghent as a consequence of employer recruitment (see above), it is difficult to establish to what extent their concentrations were a result of chain migration or of recruitment in specific areas. Most likely, they were a mix of both. Also for other nationalities, a mix of chain migration and employer-recruitment was common. Many employers, on the lookout for ways to add to their labour reserves, saw in their employees’ personal networks a great way to facilitate the recruitment of new labourers. They encouraged their employees to actively advertise the available jobs within their personal networks, also those who still lived in the home country. This encouragement could take the form of a formal premium system, as in some textile factories, where immigrant labourers received a considerable sum for every new immigrant they brought to the factory.[[10]](#endnote-10) Over the period 1963-1966, workers in the *Union Cotonnière* for example could get a bonus of 500 francs – a nice sum when compared to their hourly wages of 37.25-49.50 francs/hour (De Bruyn 1966, 19).

In some cases, employers would even take on a more official commitment, filling out the paperwork and paying the fees so that people residing abroad could come to Belgium through the mechanism of ‘nominative recruitment’ – a way of recruiting through the official system aimed at specific individuals rather than at anonymous groups of guest workers. Such nominative recruitment was also attested for Germany by Czarina Wilpert and for the Netherlands by Anita Böcker (Wilpert 1992, 184; Böcker 1994, 88). In Ghent, the only employer who seems to have regularly recruited foreign workers this way was the *Union Cotonnière*. One of these workers was Mohamed, an experienced textile worker in Morocco, who arrived in Ghent in 1973:

*Because yes, they sent him everything, they sent him his contract, they sent him a plane ticket, his address, the house keys, everything, they sent him everything. … And they landed here in Zaventem (Brussels International Airport, ed.), and they came to get him, from UCO.*

Both immigrants and employers benefited from this scheme. The former could come to Europe more quickly and easily, the latter could obtain new labourers faster and also gain the upper hand in the management of their foreign labour force (Akgündüz 2008, 63). In the case of nominative recruitment, the input of employers in the immigrant’s trajectory and, for our argument, the overlap between ‘migration through employer recruitment’ and ‘migration through personal social networks’ was as good as complete.

For the large majority of guest workers, some kind of involvement of their personal social network seems to have been pivotal to their migration, at least at some point in their trajectory. Most interviewees confirm that they have come to Ghent in order to join someone they knew. However, it also becomes clear that this ‘someone’ did not necessarily fall within the category of old world-ties, but included people whom they had encountered after leaving home. Most network studies focus exclusively on social contacts based in the place of origin. In reality, migration networks almost always include a broader range of contacts, who are not kin or friends, but are included on the basis of their usefulness for the migration project (Gurak en Cases 1992, 161–62, 165). We could call these other contacts ‘new world-ties’, as they were (mostly) formed outside the country of origin. In our case study, such new world-ties played a prominent role in the trajectories of many newcomers, and especially those of the pioneers.

When Ömer, a Turkish pioneer in Ghent, arrived in Brussels in 1964, he went to live with his wife’s uncle for a while. However, he and his friend soon ended up on the street. Luckily, they were taken in by someone they had met only recently, the owner of an Albanian café:

*There we were, with money but without a place to live. Luckily, there was an Albanian café in the neighbourhood, where we went every day. They played Albanian, Bulgarian and Macedonian songs there and the boss did not ask us for money. We could drink whatever we wanted without paying, because we were ‘tourists’. So when we were kicked out of the house we moved in with him. He provided for us.*

Often, it was through these new world ties that the future pioneers learned about the opportunities in Ghent. This is what happened to Faruk, who was only 17 when he arrived in Brussels in 1965:

*When I arrived in Brussels I was almost out of money. I lived together with six or seven others. They told me that I could easily find a job, because I was young and they were looking for young people in the textile factories. One way or another, they knew that there was work in Ghent. After one week they brought me to Ghent. Two days later we went to the textile factory UCO.*

In how far such help was as freely given as the stories suggest, remains to be seen. Most likely, these relationships were less reciprocal than the interviewees (like to) remember – although Khoojinian (2014) has noted that a lot of people were involved in this kind of ‘placements’ without any personal profit (Khoojinian 2014, 323). In reality, of course, there are many kinds of relationships between the actors of a network, some of which are highly unequal and markedly asymmetrical (Krissman 2005, 17–24). As some actors in a network come to be specialised in providing migration-related services and relations between them and their ‘clients’ become less reciprocal, we tend to speak of ‘middlemen’. The third part of this article will explore the roles of such middlemen.

**Migration through Migration Middlemen**

We have already seen how ‘intermediary actors’ played a role in employer-instigated migration of guest workers to Ghent. The most influential middleman in the history of guest worker migration to Ghent, however, was actually a woman: Josephina Ysern, better known as Madame Billault. She was a Spanish immigrant who had arrived in the city in the 1930s and set up a Spanish delicatessen in the old port area. However, it was not the Spanish wine that made her famous, but her activities as a kind of employment agency for domestic workers, which she would start from the 1950s onwards.

Through her business, Madame Billault came into contact with the local noble and bourgeois families. Before the war, most rich families in Ghent and environs recruited their servant girls, housekeepers, cooks etc. from the Flemish countryside. After the war, however, few locals still wanted to work as in-house domestics (De Keyzer 1995). At that very same moment, hundreds of thousands of people wanted to leave Spain in order to find better paid jobs. Madame Billault made the connection between these candidate-emigrants and the employment opportunities in Ghent (Vanoutryve 1968, 53, 60). Through her doing, young girls but also married couples came to Ghent directly from Spain, as testified by Maria del Pilar:

*… she had a lot of contact with the people. Rich people, well-to-do people. And yes, they asked her for a servant, a Spanish girl, and she immediately looked for a girl. She looked for them from Belgium. It wasn’t that easy to come here from Spain. So the girls came and as she had many relations here, they could get their papers. And they stayed here. … There were even married people coming over to work in the big houses, together, as couples.*

Whereas to all accounts, Madame Billault provided her services for free, other middlemen often only ‘helped’ immigrants in exchange for money. However, even though some contemporaries – in particular the Belgian alien police and the media – considered them unscrupulous human smugglers, the immigrants themselves seem to have regarded these intermediaries rather as facilitators. This difference is reflected in the terms used to refer to them, as testified by a police file reporting on a 1966-1967 investigation into a so-called ‘ring of human traffickers’. Whereas the Ghent police spoke about the activities investigated in terms of ‘crimping foreign labourers’ and ‘fraud’, the suspect talked about ‘helping to find work’ and being paid for his services ‘as an interpreter’.[[11]](#endnote-11) Also in many of the interviews that were used for this research, migrants themselves refer to these middlemen as ‘travel guides’ or ‘interpreters’ rather than ‘smugglers’. Such a difference in perception has also been noticed by present-day researchers looking at the activities of migration middlemen. In her research on smuggling facilitators across the Mexican-US border, Sanchez for example noticed the clash between ‘the official, pro-criminalization narratives of the state, where coyotes appeared as heinous monsters preying on the desperation and vulnerability of agency-deprived and manipulation-prone immigrants’ and the picture sketched by the coyotes themselves of ‘smuggling as a community activity driven by solidarity’, supported by similar stories from their so-called ‘victims’ (Sanchez 2015, 4–5). However, this does not mean that there were no cases of abuse. Sometimes, middlemen did ask exorbitant amounts of money, or did not provide the services they had been paid to do. These particular individuals were considered crooks and cheats by the migrants, but apparently, they were not seen as representative of all middlemen.

The migration middlemen we encountered in the sources can roughly be divided into two categories (although sometimes, they moved from one to the other), depending on their geographical territory and what could be considered their main task. The immigrants who made use of their services referred to them with different names. On the one hand, there were the ‘travel agents’ or ‘tourist guides’. These people were paid by candidate-emigrants to provide them with the right paperwork and help them cross international borders. Some of these ‘agents’ had actual offices in the home country, as was the case for a certain Halit, who was purported to have a ‘tourist office’ in Sirkeci, Istanbul, from where he sent buses full of ‘tourists’ (labour migrants who did not possess the right paperwork) abroad, together with a number of ‘travel guides’ who worked for him.[[12]](#endnote-12) It was through such a ‘travel guide’ that Gazi, a first generation Turkish immigrant, originally came to Europe:

*A friend from Afyon had brought a bus full of people to Europe before and that is why we trusted him. He brought over people as tourists. … We left with the bus from Emirdağ to Ankara. In Ankara we got a visa. … Then the bus drove us to Milan via Bulgaria.* *… Four of us went from there directly to Brussels, but the man who had brought us here, had cheated us. He had given us the guarantee that there was work and that was not the case. … My friends were angry at the man who brought us and somebody even pulled a knife. But the man ran away, without even waiting for his money*.

Clearly, these ‘travel guides’ did not always live up to their promises. Other cases of abuse from unofficial ‘recruitment firms’ have been reported by Khoojinian in his study on Turkish migration to Belgium, where he also describes how widespread the phenomenon of migrating through the mediation of ‘travel agents’ and ‘tourist guides’ really was (Khoojinian 2014, 322–25).

Once they had made it to one of the receiving countries (not necessarily the country of their choice), migrants could appeal to yet another category of middlemen, whom they tended to call ‘interpreters’. These ‘interpreters’ operated within a specific receiving country, where they made a business of ‘helping’ newcomers to find work and arrange their papers. Generally, they were immigrants themselves, who had managed to learn (one of) the language(s) of the receiving country and come to understand the ways in which the system worked. In Ghent, one of the most active matchmakers was Ömer, who had made his way to the city himself by using a Brussels-based middleman:

*A man of Bulgarian origin told us he could find work for us ... One day, the Bulgarian was there again and he asked me: what kind of work do you actually want? I said: I have worked in a spinning mill, I know all about that. I am a skilled worker. He promised me to ask around and the next day, he was there again: maybe I’ve found something for you, he said, in a textile factory.*

Ömer however did not intend to pay this man for his services, and made his way to the textile factory – which turned out to be in Ghent - on his own. As he had studied French in high school, he quickly managed to talk to employers, and set himself up as one of the first Ghent-based Turkish ‘interpreters’:

*Then I started working as an interpreter for the workers who just started. I had to guide them and teach them the job, and when there were problems, I had to interpret or solve the problems. At that time, way too many workers came to ask for a job and that’s why I started asking them for money: of some of them I asked 1.000 francs, of others 2.000 or 2.500 francs, depending on their means.*

Ömer did not just ask money from those looking for work. He also received a lump sum from the employers for each worker he brought to the factory gates. Whereas Ömer limited himself to matching workers and job opportunities, some ‘interpreters’ went further, trying to arrange for the newcomers’ paperwork and searching for jobs in a wider area. An example of such an ‘interpreter’ was Feramus (the suspect in the above-mentioned investigation), a Turkish immigrant from Posof living in Heusden (province of Limburg). In the mid-1960s, he ‘interpreted’ for several Turkish immigrants who did not manage to find a job in Limburg.[[13]](#endnote-13) Together with his Belgian girlfriend, Alice, Feramus brought small groups of Turkish labourers to the city and tried to find them a job. Alice went to the registrar’s office to arrange their residence, while Feramus fixed their work permits at the labour office. For this service, he allegedly asked them 1,600 Belgian francs per person, or about one week’s wages.[[14]](#endnote-14)

In Limburg, Feramus and Alice added to their income by providing temporary housing for newcomers as well. This was a common practice among many ‘interpreters’. They rented out rooms or beds in shared rooms in lodging houses, run by themselves or by others from their network. Often, the standard of these lodgings was very low, whereas the rent they asked was relatively high. In order to combine all of these activities, these middlemen sometimes worked in close cooperation with others, both immigrants and locals. Not rarely, they ran their ‘business’ with a Belgian partner or spouse. This was not only the case for Feramus, but also for the most notorious Turkish matchmaker in Ghent, an immigrant called Necmi, from Posof as well. As he himself had worked in the Limburg coal mines before coming to Ghent, it was mostly there that he recruited his clients: Turkish immigrants who wanted to escape the mines. Cemil, one of the Turkish pioneers in Ghent, was one of those people. He probably came to Ghent through either Feramus’ or Necmi’s doing:

*In Ghent I did not have any family, I didn’t even know anyone there. Why then did I decide to go to Ghent? That was because of that man who had found us a job. He brought us here. We also gave him money – in those days, no one did anything without money! … He found a job for us and he told the boss that we needed money, he said: ‘Let them work here for a while’.*

Together with his Belgian partner, a woman who was nicknamed ‘Dikke Trees’ (Fat Thérèse) by the Turkish immigrants in Ghent, Necmi set up a thriving business looking for jobs for his fellow countrymen and housing them in a rundown lodging house, where they had to pay 500 francs per week for a bed in a double room. Necmi and Trees were known as real crooks, taking advantage of the often vulnerable position their ‘clients’ found themselves in. As a consequence of the investigation mentioned above, however, Necmi found himself expelled from the country, never to return (De Gendt 2014, 59–60). Feramus and Alice, on the other hand, were more the kind of middlemen who helped those people that needed it and barely managed to make ends meet. This is, at least, what the police report says:

*From conversations that we tried to have with several Turkish people, and that were very difficult because of their limited knowledge of Dutch, we have learned that Mert time and again takes in impoverished countrymen, moves around the country fort hem, mostly does not succeed in finding them a job and in those cases in which he does find them a job, is not paid at all.*[[15]](#endnote-15)

Such a division between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ middlemen is, of course, highly arbitrary. However, when we dig deeper in the source material, we do tend to find elements that allow us to position the individuals concerned to either one or the other side of the spectrum. Such a positioning should be based mostly on the perception of the immigrants who made use of their services, rather than that of the host country authorities or the media (Sanchez 2015) – who, also in the era of guest worker migration, excelled in selecting ‘scandalizing’ stories of the ‘cheating crimps exploiting foreign workers’.[[16]](#endnote-16)

**Conclusion**

In the introduction to this article, we stated that we had two main goals. One, to introduce the category of migration middlemen into the history of guest worker migration. Two, to complicate the all-too-neat picture of guest workers’ migration trajectories by showing the overlap between the different categories and the combination of different kinds of actors within individual migrants’ experiences.

The detailed description of the trajectories of guest workers provided throughout this article clearly shows the complexity of this historical reality. Even though these temporary labour migrants were supposed to move within the tightly regulated framework of negotiated bilateral agreements, their actual trajectories were widely diverging.

In the specific case of Ghent, only a minor percentage of guest workers arrived within a contingent of anonymously recruited labourers – and even their migration had been facilitated by an intermediary figure. Clearly, not everywhere in Western Europe did the official ‘guest worker system’ take hold. The lack of official recruitment efforts from the side of the employers studied here can probably be related to the fact that their need for workers was not long-term and structural, but highly dependent on the business cycle (textiles and building) or that they only needed individuals or small numbers of workers (domestic services and other sectors). In both cases, the official recruitment procedures would not do, as they were slow, cumbersome and expensive. Employers in Ghent did recruit foreign workers outside of the official regulations, commissioning external individuals and agencies or making use of their personal social network, in the case of immigrant entrepreneurs.

As is true for guest worker migration in general, most guest workers in Ghent arrived through such personal networks. However, only few managed to make it to the city using only their old world-network of family, friends and hometown citizens. In many cases, future employers were actively involved in this network-driven migration, even officially, through the procedure of ‘nominative recruitment’. In many other cases, the nodes in the migrants’ personal networks that led to their arrival in Ghent were what we have called ‘new world-ties’. These were people they had met on the way, and whose insertion into their network greatly expanded its reach and the opportunities it offered. It seems that such ‘new world-ties’ – which can be considered ‘weak ties’ – functioned best in times when borders were relatively open and employment was plenty. Old world ties were always functional, but became especially important when borders were actually closed and opportunities scarce.

Finally, many guest workers also made use – for part or all of their trajectory – of (semi-)professional migration middlemen. Some of these worked for free, but most of them required payment. Those who arranged for international travel were often called ‘travel agents’ or ‘tourist guides’; those who moved within a more limited area tended to go under the name of ‘interpreters’. The use of ‘tourist guides’ seems to have flourished both at the beginning of a migration stream, when social networks were not fully functional yet, and at times when immigration regulation and border controls were becoming stricter. ‘Interpreters’ were more important also at the beginning of a migration stream, and at times when economic opportunities were shrinking.

If we would only consider the official frameworks regulating postwar labour migration, neither personal social networks (‘uncles’) nor migration middlemen (‘interpreters’) had a role to play in the arrival of guest workers in Western Europe. Any migration trajectory that took place outside of the official channels was branded irregular. However, in times of economic boom, many actors in the receiving states encouraged this kind of migration, especially employers, who took advantage of the costless arrival of so many potential employees. The changing economic reality combined with a growing problem of ‘labour poaching’ by foreign firms led authorities and employers alike to more actively combat irregular migration from 1966 onwards. This included a crackdown on the activities of migration middlemen, as they were involved in crimping and they impeded an efficient control on the arrival of new immigrants. It also entailed a change in policy, with a return to the restrictive RD of 1936 from 1967 onwards. Still, this criminalization did not actually stop irregular migration (Khoojinian 2014, 323–91). Research into recent migration streams has shown that in fact, tighter migration policies only serve to further encourage the use of migration middlemen, who wield ever higher prices and make use of more dangerous methods as border crossings become harder and riskier. More research into the complexity of historical migration trajectories, and especially research that focuses on their evolution over time, relating them to the multiple economic and political changes that impacted on migration, will provide deeper insights into these relationships, and hopefully help us to make better informed choices in migration policies today.

**Interviews**

*From other projects*

Celal, Cemil, Gazi and Ömer, first generation Turkish immigrants, interviews from Neirynck et al. 2002

Faruk, Turkish immigrant, interview from Vandezande 1994

M’hamed A., Moroccan immigrant, interview from Tytgadt 2002

*By author*

Abdeslam S., Moroccan immigrant, 14 and 29/11/2007, Willebroek

Ali Gh., Tunisian immigrant, 13/10/2010, Ghent

Amand, former personnel manager AKZO-Fabelta, 09/03/2011, Drongen

Clelia, daughter of mosaic maker Antonio, 15/02/2011, Ghent

Dahmane, Algerian immigrant, 26/10 and 10/11/2009, Wondelgem

Enzo, italian immigrant, 31/07/2010, Ghent

Father Valère, former assistant of father De Baere, 23/03/2011, Oostakker

Maria del Pilar, Spanish immigrant, 18/01/2011, Drongen

Mohamed T., Moroccan immigrant, 09/02/2008, Ghent

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1. Interview with Ali Gh., Amand and Abdeslam S. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Of my sample of Tunisian immigrants in the textile industry (1966-1974) (n=45), 26% had worked as a skilled factory worker and 49% had worked in a white-collar job or had been a student. In a similar sample of Algerian, Moroccan, Turkish, Spanish and Italian labourers (n=89), this was the case for only 17% and 9% respectively. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Interviews with Amand and father Valère. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Rapports du Comité de Direction 09/04 -16/07 - 10/09/1963. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Rapport du Comité de Direction 03/12/1963. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. This story is corroborated by the immigrant files, showing 84% of Algerians in 1963 (n=19) coming from Nord-Pas de Calais. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Of my sample of Algerians in 1963 to work in the *Union Cotonnière* (n=13), 62% stayed for less than one year. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Interviews with Clelia and Enzo. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Interview with Gianni. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Rapport du Comité de Direction de l’Union Cotonnière, 20 août 1963. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Ministry of Justice, Administration of Public Safety, Alien Police, third deposit, file 383, Interview with MF from Heusden, 21/01/1967 by the BOB Hasselt and Report of the BOB Gent, 12/12/1966. (Courtesy of Mazyar Khoojinian) [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Ibidem. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Archives of the Ministry of Justice, Administration of Public Safety, Alien Police, third deposit, file number 383, Interview with MF from Heusden, 21/01/1967 by the BOB Hasselt. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Calculated on the basis of the average bruto daily wage of a textile worker in 1965 (309 francs). Nationale Bank van België, Belgische Economische Statistieken 1960-1970. Deel II. Tabellen, p. 159 [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Ministry of Justice, Administration of Public Safety, Alien Police, third deposit, file number 383, PV BOB Hasselt, 24/01/1967. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. As in an article in Le Soir: “*La pénurie de mineurs en Belgique. Des racoleurs escrocs exploitent la main d’oeuvre étrangère”*, 5/7/1963, cited in Khoojinian 2014, p. 341 [↑](#endnote-ref-16)