

Hannah Pool, Senior Researcher at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies, became acquainted with Afghan migrants as a student in Iran and assisted refugees during the migration summer of 2015 before she turned the subject of life on refugee routes into her field of research. Crossing borders is both an academic and a personal matter for her.

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TEXT: SABINE FISCHER

Spending an afternoon behind barbed wire: a group of people fleeing Afghanistan are stuck at the EU border. They have passed through much of what is known as the Balkan route: border crossings with smugglers, a trip across the Mediterranean, months or even years of uncertainty. Now, they wait together at the border with Greece. Families, women, the elderly – and Hannah Pool, a sociologist from Germany. For ten months, she accompanies the group on their dangerous and costly journey to Europe, becoming an academic observer of their sometimes multi-generational flight. The sociologist still has the scenes she witnessed during her field research play out in her mind. One of the older women in the group told Pool, for example, that she had already seen this kind of grey felt blanket from the UN refugee agency in which her grandchildren were wrapped – back when she was a child and fled to Pakistan.

What role do financial resources and social skills play in crossing borders? And how does the journey shape the concept of home and origin for refugees? *Doing the Game: The Moral Economy of Coming to Europe* is the title of the dissertation that resulted from Hannah Pool's observations and has won five awards. For her research at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies, Pool accompanied people fleeing from Afghanistan through Iran and up the Balkan route, conducting interviews with them at various points along their journey.

The issues that Pool addresses in this research have intrigued her for a long time. Since childhood, her curiosity about the world has repeatedly brought her into contact with topics such as origin, migration, and fleeing. "I often combined this curiosity with travel and developed small research projects from it," she says. After finishing her secondary school leaving exams, she travelled for two months in Turkey with a scholarship from the ZIS Foundation and visited a former school friend who had moved there with her Turkish family. "I wanted to know what it was like for her to live in the unfamiliar homeland of her grandparents," Pool explains. While earning her bachelor's degree in international relations at the Technical University of

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VISIT TO

HANNAH
POOL



PHOTO: ANTHONY SAJDLER FOR MPG

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Another view of economics: Hannah Pool researches the lives of refugees on their way to Europe, particularly how these people manage the difficult economic situation on the route.



PHOTO: ANTHONY SAJDLER FOR MPG

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At a prestigious address: the University of Oxford has invited Hannah Pool to work on turning her dissertation into a book as a Visiting Fellow at the Refugee Studies Centre there.

Dresden, she also spent an academic year abroad in Iran as a DAAD scholarship recipient. At the University of Tehran, she met people who had migrated to the country themselves and had a hybrid concept of home.

“My circle of friends in Iran was diverse, but also Afghanistan-centric. Many of my friends were Hazara, a minority persecuted in Afghanistan. They had to flee to Iran in the early 1990s due to their situation. Through their eyes, I began to learn about a different perspective, and question life in Iran in a more nuanced way,” says Pool. During this time, the sociologist became fluent in Farsi. She used her language skills in 2015 as a volunteer translator on the island of Kos and along the Balkan route to help refugees there – a social commitment that led her on a winding path and ultimately brought her to the Max Planck Institute.

there: “My research was only possible because we trusted each other.”

For her doctoral thesis, Hannah Pool held a total of 66 qualitative interviews and took notes on informal conversations with more than 350 people. She followed many of the people – especially the core group of 22 individuals who make up the main part of her observations – through several stages of the journey, from Iran to Turkey and then up to Germany. Sometimes she spent several days or weeks with them, living in the same place and being with them from breakfast to dinner: the scholar with the recording device, listening and putting things into context. During her field research, Hannah Pool became a welcomed guest, immersed in the impossibility of fleeing. Pool does not fail to appreciate what people shared with her during such a challenging time. “I am very grateful for the trust that was placed in me

“It would be presumptuous to think that I could fully understand what people really experience on such a journey.”

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Together with the documentary photographer Felix Volkmar, she prepared various photo exhibitions after her time at the borders of the EU. In cooperation with Afghan and Syrian activists, the two showcased their work at exhibitions throughout Germany. One stop was the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies in Cologne. “I gave a lecture here and was asked if I could imagine working on the topic academically. I was also encouraged to apply for the IMPRS Program,” Pool recalls. The International Max Planck Research Schools (IMPRS) graduate program offers talented doctoral students the opportunity to carry out their research project with the support of a supervisory team. Seminars, workshops, summer schools and conferences complement the program. This created the academic framework for Pool’s dissertation. The content was built on the relationships that the sociologist had already established during her time in Iran – because she knew some of the people she accompanied to Europe from her time studying

and for the stories they told me,” she says. She still handles them with care today: when she speaks, she chooses her words very carefully. She describes many encounters with caution and kindness towards the people who let her participate in their experiences, exceptional situations and thoughts. Often, the people would actively invite her to events on their journey that could be relevant to her research, Pool recounts. For example, she was invited to a conversation with a lawyer on the subject of residence rights. The sociologist was often able to help the refugees in turn by acting as a translator. The relationships that developed are close ones: she was in constant contact with the people who form the main focus of her doctoral thesis throughout their entire journey.

Hannah Pool was always aware of the complexity of her role for and in the group. “I have a German passport; I am an EU citizen and could leave at any time. It would be presumptuous to think that I could fully

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PHOTOS: FELIX VOLKMAR

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Families on their way to the EU: even before her doctoral thesis on migration routes, Hannah Pool followed and supported refugees in the summer of 2015 together with photographer Felix Volkmar. The pictures were taken, among others, on the Greek island of Kos (above) and at the Hungarian border (below). The two then shared their experiences in exhibitions and lectures at various locations in Germany.

understand what people really experience on such a journey.” The sociologist reflected on this limited perspective at length: her dissertation includes 20 pages contextualizing her viewpoint as that of a young European person. In addition, her role repeatedly changed with the different stages of the group’s journey. “In Iran, for example, people clearly welcomed me as a guest in their lives,” Hannah Pool recalls. She was often invited to events such as birthdays or weddings where she could meet other Afghans. “In Turkey, by contrast, we were all strangers – and although they did their best to make me feel comfortable, the roles shifted. At the European borders, I was also perceived as an EU citizen and confronted with questions about why the EU allows such a situation to exist.” The brutality at the borders of Europe is one of the most poignant memories Hannah Pool has of her field research. She is particularly struck by a situation that occurred be-

cesses and shed light on the complexity of migration routes, Pool adopts an ethnographic approach for her work: the focus is participatory observation through intensive field research in the social space. As a researcher, she took part in the everyday life of the groups she observed and gathered data using various collection methods. This approach let Pool think through her research topic in detail at the micro-sociological level and highlight connections in small examples.

Finally, she relied on coded interviews, field notes, information from institutions and academic literature to analyze her research and identify various patterns. One of them is the structure of the “moral economy” on the journey to Europe. This contains a trove of questions such as how social relationships are used to access, exchange, or obtain financial resources, how both aspects relate to each other and what sig-

“The route with its stages, frequent returns and restarts must also be considered as a separate factor.”

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tween Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia. Around 120 people were camping near an abandoned factory in the city of Bihać, far from the attention of Western media. When Pool arrived, she met asylum seekers who were hungry, had open wounds and frostbite, but were cut off from medical care. Their attempt to cross the border to Europe had reached a brutal halt for the time being. “The conditions there were defined by violence. It is hard to describe the brutality with which people in uniform treated those who wanted to apply for asylum,” Pool says.

Her dissertation explores connections and interdependencies along the refugees’ journey’s: what does mutual support, including financial support, look like between people who illegally make their way from Afghanistan or Iran to Europe? What is the significance of their social relationships for obtaining, exchanging, or borrowing the necessary money on this journey? To understand such decision-making pro-

nificance they have for crossing borders on the journey. On the one hand, for example, refugees grind to a halt at certain points along the route due to violence at a border or a lack of money, which they then have to earn as day laborers or in agriculture to pay smugglers. On the other hand, the lending and exchange of money between people who are fleeing together plays an important role. For example, when one woman’s cell phone broke, another in the core group Pool observed immediately stepped in to provide funds for a new one – because both women were aware of the crucial importance of the phone as a means of communication on the journey.

Similarly, Hannah Pool grasped the ambiguity that the term “origin” has for someone who exists in an intermediate stage for so long. “In traditional migration research, the focus is on either the country of origin or the destination country. But the significance of the route with its stages, frequent returns

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and restarts must also be considered as a separate factor,” she says today. In addition, the concept of origin is multidimensional and often develops over generations. “For example, many people from Afghanistan had to flee their original homeland in the 1980s and have been living in Iran since then. When they apply for asylum in the EU, it is now very difficult to provide documents such as birth certificates or passports that prove their origin. Moreover, many of the people I accompanied referred to themselves as Afghans, but this term and their sense of belonging are naturally individual and fluid, and include various places of residence,” the researcher explains.

Today, Hannah Pool is a senior researcher at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies in Cologne. Recently, she moved to a new office: a bright room with little furniture and nearly empty bookshelves. Only Pool’s awards are neatly arranged on a

ugee’s journey.” Crossing borders also continues to define Hannah Pool’s research interests. As a Fellow of the Karlspreis Foundation, she recently participated in a project on the perception of borders during the Covid-19 pandemic. She studied various forms of migration and explored questions such as how the forced curtailment of mobility caused by border closures changed the perception of European solidarity.

However, she has not quite finished her doctoral thesis yet: in the spring of 2023, she will work as a Visiting Fellow at the Refugee Studies Centre at the University of Oxford to publish her dissertation as a book. Then the people who shared their stories with Pool during her research will be able to read the insights the sociologist gained from their experiences. To this day, Hannah Pool has stayed in touch with most of the refugees she spent time with. When she talks about them, she radiates joy. For example, one of

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JENS BECKERT

shelf – the sociologist is very pleased with the recognition her dissertation has received from the academic community. Five awards have already been conferred for her work, including the Dissertation Award from the German Sociological Association (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Soziologie) and the Otto Hahn Medal from the Max Planck Society.

Jens Beckert, Director at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies, does not consider these awards surprising: “Hannah Pool’s work is a breakthrough in research on Afghan refugee migration to Germany. For the first time, a researcher tracked refugees from their point of departure in Iran to Germany,” he says. “By focusing on the financial relationships during the journey, Pool also manages to provide a particularly informative perspective on the social exchange relationships that characterize a ref-

them is now politically active and has become part of the Berlin Citizens’ Council. Another makes successful TikTok videos. “Now that they have reached Germany, they invite me to their homes. It’s a great feeling to see them settling in here and finding their own way – and I enjoy that they still let me be part of their lives,” says Pool.

The researcher is very pleased with the recognition from the academic community. However, what the other audience – the refugees themselves – think of her work is equally important to her. “Some said that their children should read the book to understand their parents’ story,” she says. Two of them already have a copy of her dissertation on their shelves. “The bound book will be another, even bigger step. I am looking forward to their feedback,” says Hannah Pool.

