4 Does socialism make a difference? Dual-career families in the Soviet Union and the German Democratic Republic

Introduction

As work organization and attitudes toward work and family life are not isolated from the larger political and socio-economic structure, I decided to include a number of interviews with professionals from countries with structures quite different from those characterizing the United States. In particular, I am interested in the contrasts between socialist and capitalist societies. In this chapter, I explore the effects of school and work organization on personal relations outside work in marriage and with friends, in the German Democratic Republic and the Soviet Union. The first problem is whether these two socialist societies have at all succeeded in introducing a more co-operative orientation among the children at school. Secondly, I try to understand whether there is any continuity in this respect at the place of work after formal education has ended, in particular, whether professionals are involved in co-operative work groups with control over their own work lives. Thirdly, I discuss job security and other social supports, including those that make women’s participation in the labour force feasible on the large scale that is characteristic of Eastern European countries. Finally, I make an effort to link what happens in the world of work to certain developments in the family and in friendship.

Perhaps it is helpful to begin with some comments on the historical and political background of the Eastern European interviews.¹ In all interviews which take place over a short period of time there are reflections of experiences of years of living and changing. Some of these important experiences that shape feelings and human relationships are particular to the personal
life history of the respondent; others are more shared, shaped by the political, economic and historical conditions of a certain period. These past experiences are reflected in the values, outlooks, and reactions of people not only to what they lived in the past, but how they see what is happening in the present and what they hope for in the future. I think that both the Jews who emigrated from the Soviet Union and who constituted the majority of my Russian respondents and the East German professionals I spoke with had such a shared past political experience which was crucial for their development and present perspective. More than half the Soviet Jews spontaneously mentioned sorrows and difficulties connected with the Second World War and with camps during Stalin's regime. A few had parents who were killed during the war by the Nazis; even more spoke of having parents who had been in a Soviet camp. Some parents died in camps, others remained for as long as twenty-five years. One woman's mother was in a camp for twenty-five years, her father, a high level party communist, was killed in a purge. The father of one of the people I spoke with, in turn, was the head of a Soviet concentration camp. Of the older people I interviewed, one had spent eight years in a Soviet camp and then was fired from his work during a purge. One physicist had seen twenty-two fellow students taken away; these are only a few of many incidents that were described. For many of these people, the fear of unpredictability remained; one could not be absolutely certain of not being picked up and taken away. This alienated them from their regime, from their nation; and because some thought that these experiences had something to do with their being defined as Jewish, they tended to have fears and to see their destinies as somewhat apart from those of other Soviet citizens.²

Nearly half the Germans I spoke with had fathers killed in the war; two women were in Dresden during the bombing of the city. One family had emigrated during the Nazi period to the Soviet Union because they were communists and then returned years later to Berlin. The deaths of parents of the East Germans were mentioned in a very specific context, as explanations of why they grew up in poverty. There was no self-pity; they did not seem to identify with the experiences of their parents.

Many Jews in the Soviet Union and East Germans experienced extreme poverty after the war. There were severe food shortages; thousands of peasants in the Soviet Union died of hunger. For