

REVIEWS

Mirjam Milharčič Hladnik and Jernej Mlekuž, eds. *Krila Migracij. Pomeri življenjskih zgodb*. Ljubljana: Založba ZRC, 2009. 250 pp., €14.50 [= \$18.75]. ISBN: 9-789612-541125.

The constant, all-pervading anxiety that coeditor Jernej Mlekuž observes in his grandmother in the opening lines of this book reveals the extent to which she lived her life as a migrant. The schizophrenic unease of being neither here nor there, neither in the homeland of one's birth nor in one's adopted homeland, creates both fear and anxiety. Mlekuž individuates these two traits as especially typical of migrant women. How easy it was for me to read his statement that "Moja nona, gospodinja pomočnica in nato gospodinja, kot bi jo obleke današnje statistike, je večino svojega življenja preživela v nenavadnem strahu" ('My grandmother, a housemaid and then a housewife, as today's statistics would define her, lived most of her life in an unusual state of fear', 9), and to immediately and quite truthfully replace *Moja nona* 'my grandmother' with *Moja mama* 'my mother'. The personal, informal, discounted histories that follow in the volume repeat the tenor and approach set by this introductory essay, bringing their subjects forward to today. In order to recount the full story of Slovenian migration, they have not overlooked the women that have recently entered Slovenia as migrants. In all of the stories, it is clear that statistics are not enough; there are also human elements filtered through tears and anxiety to be considered.

The seven studies in this volume (supplemented by two introductory essays) trace the histories of Slovenian women that left their homeland under duress, often political or economic, and always personal. As coeditor Mirjam Milharčič Hladnik points out in her introduction, the

narratives of these women connect all migrant women, not only those of Slovenian descent. In comparing her sociological studies on Slovenian migrant women, Milharčič Hladnik can see the same story unfolding in her own household in the present time—but with her Tibetan nanny, who has asked for political asylum in the U.S. How much of me, she rhetorically asks the nanny, is in you?

Milharčič Hladnik's emblematic question becomes a fundamental consideration in recounting the histories of women. In my own oral history interviews, I have found that men's stories of emigration differ from those of women. Men tell me what happened in their lives. Women, on the other hand, deepen their stories by also describing how they felt. As Milharčič Hladnik points out, this is an undeniable privilege for us as researchers because we are strangers welcomed into the most deeply guarded hearts of the women we study and whose lives we record. However, as she continues, the undertaking carries with it enormous responsibilities, for it is the researcher in the end that will determine whose voice will be heard, and what will remain in History. Using the works of Alessandro Portelli, Gabriella Gribaudi, and others for her theoretical point of departure, this author, like the other essayists in the volume, seeks to enrich the Slovenian history of migration by probing the connections and networks created by acknowledging the value of the intimate, the personal, of families and friends in each story.

Three essays focus on epistolary history. Mirjam Milharčič Hladnik, Marjan Drnovšek, and Urška Strle recount stories emerging through letters between family members. Initially, pen and paper were often the only means of keeping in touch with the family, of creating and maintaining long-distance family networks. All three researchers agree that women were the primary keepers of such networks. Because their letters were usually meant for select family readers, each researcher had to resolve the challenges of making public what was intimately private. The fact that Drnovšek's sixty-one letters were bought at a public market did not exonerate him from respectful responsibility toward his subjects. Strle's essay about the decision of nineteen-year old Stanka to establish a new life in Canada also points to the problematicity of language.

Often the language is "multifiltered," not only in its grammatical and linguistic aspects, but especially in its connotative repercussions. As Mlekuž, following the fundamental work of Edward Bruner, describes in his essay on the understanding of *Lepa Vida* (which is often dichotomous, depending whether it is considered from the perspective of the family left behind, or by the Lepa Vida figure herself), there exist substantially differing accounts of reality, depending first on how it is experienced and, second, on how it is expressed. Mlekuž reminds us that every retelling of a migrant experience is inevitably a reconstruction of that experience. The

psychological effects of being removed from their own families in order to work elsewhere were both devastating and liberating. The young girls that went to work as maids in Italy (the focus of Mlekuž's "Maledet? Schiavitu? Ko oblastni glas utihne" [Cursed? Slavery? When the Authoritative Voice Falls Silent]) or as nannies and wet-nurses in Egypt (the focus of Katja Škrlj's "Komaj sem čakala, da zrastem in postanem aleksandrinka. Demitizacija aleksandrink" [I Could Hardly Wait to Grow Up and Work as a Maid in Alexandria: Demythologizing the *Aleksandrinke*]) were able to support their families, but at the cost of being largely separated from them, often permanently. Despite this, Škrlj notes that, in voicing their stories, these women reject victimhood. A similar attitude is seen in the contributions by Sanja Cukut ("Hotela sem samo videti svet okoli sebe. Ženske iz Rusije in Ukrajine v Sloveniji" [I Just Wanted to See the World Around Me: Russian and Ukrainian Women in Slovenia]) and Špela Kalčič ("To je moj džihad. O tem, zakaj so se nekatere Bošnjakinje v Sloveniji začele pokrivati" [This Is My Jihad: Why Some Bosnian Women in Slovenia Started Veiling Themselves]). To see the hijab as a freedom of choice, where not wearing it diminishes self-identity and points to a lack, as interviewee Ališa states, may be interpreted as subversive in the binary tension of Muslim vs. non-Muslim. However, a closer examination under a wider lens tinted with post-Foucauldian empathy shows that, in fact, all of the stories recounted in this volume are of women that were or are subversive in their own way. They have insisted on speaking in History, insisted on their right to be heard and counted.

The process of documenting micro-histories is often difficult, fraught with pitfalls as the storytellers recount, person to person, the vicissitudes of their lives. All of the case studies in this volume have been prepared with professionalism; using sound theoretical bases, and admirable standards for collecting these histories (including bearing in mind that they belong to real people that have entrusted the researchers with their personal stories). Each chapter flows seamlessly into the next, offering a loose chronology of Slovenian women's migration from the earliest years of the twentieth century, to women's migration to Slovenia in the first years of the twenty-first century. Complemented by the academic observations of the researchers, the stories are fascinating, interesting, poignant, and, most of all, an important record for migration studies. Reproductions of photographs and letters enhance each chapter. The up-to-date bibliographies included at the end of each study are noteworthy in their breadth. This highly readable volume will be much appreciated by academic researchers and pleasure-readers alike.

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