

SLOVENIAN IMMIGRANTS' PERCEPTIONS OF "AMERICA"

Mirjam H. Hladnik

1. Introduction

I collected life stories of Slovenian women immigrants and their female descendants for the research project, "The Role and Impact of Women in Preserving the Cultural Heritage among Slovenian Immigrants in the United States." The main goal of the study was to highlight, from the historical and contemporary perspective, women's roles, efforts and achievements in reproducing and transforming the Slovenian cultural traditions. The research presupposition was that the role of women in this process is specific because their responsibilities, opportunities, roles and experiences at work, at home and in communities are very different from those of men. The oral history project was focused mainly on recording the women's personal accounts of how this reproduction and transformation actually happened.

I collected life stories for three years, from 2001 to 2004, while living in New York City and travelling to Chicago area, Cleveland, Washington D.C., and Pittsburgh. Their age, generation, or year of migration did not restrict the choice of the sixty-five women narrators I recorded. From different kinds of oral history interviews, I chose the individual life story, which was recorded mainly during one-on-one encounters and enriched by photos and other kind of memorabilia. This method results in personal accounts of life experiences, but it also creates a few problems. As in any research, it is necessary to understand how our own interest and approach to it shape the other's narrative, no matter how neutral the narrator's position is. In other words, "just as treating women as narrators requires interpreting the telling itself, understanding how the researcher's interest and assumptions shape the narrative requires interpreting the interaction itself."¹ What we are listening to, recording and using as our study material is not the woman's actual life experience but only her narrative and her interpretation of it.

¹ Susan E. Chase and Colleen S. Bell, "Interpreting the Complexity of Women's Subjectivity," ed. Eva M. McMahan and Kim Lacy Rogers, *Inter-active Oral History Interviewing* (Hillsdale: Erlbaum Associates, 1994) 80.

Another problem is intersubjectivity itself. It often happens that the narrator does not understand why her life is interesting to the researcher, and it is quite common that the narrator and the researcher only assume that they understand each other's motives and purposes in this complicated communication situation.² However, the most common problem is that women find it hard to believe that somebody might be interested in their lives. This modest self-perception seems to be the key element of self-censoring. And though the oral history interview is clearly a valuable method for uncovering women's perspective and experience, it is not always easy to hear it. As Kathryn Anderson and Dana Jack beautifully put it: "To hear women's perspective accurately, we have to learn to listen in stereo, receiving both the dominant and muted channels clearly and tuning into them carefully to understand the relationship between them."³

Before I had started recording the life stories, I considered intimate and personal accounts of Slovenian women immigrants beyond the well-known work of Ana Pracek Krasna. The auto/biographical experience of the first women immigrants were important to me also because my oral history project came too late to record their stories myself. There was a missing part that I was looking for, a kind of introduction to the stories about "the beginning"—the first impressions of the Promised Land and personal descriptions of the first years of living away from home. I discovered these in three auto/biographical books by Slovenian women published in the United States. These books make a valuable introduction to the process of establishing a "home away from home" and preserving the cultural heritage, described in the second part of the article. This process is reconstructed through some of the narratives by the women of Slovenian origin, mostly the daughters of the immigrant women, who contributed their life stories to the oral history project.

² Allan W. Futrell and Charles A. Willard, "Intersubjectivity and Interviewing," *Interactive Oral History Interviewing*, 83–106.

³ Kathryn Anderson and Dana C. Jack, "Learning to Listen, Interview Techniques and Analyses," ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thompson, *The Oral History Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1998) 157.

2. "Long live America, where women are first!"

In Marie Prisland's *From Slovenia to America*, Mary Molek's *Immigrant Woman*, and Irene M. Planinsek's Odorizzi's *Footsteps Through Time*⁴ we find descriptions of the impressions Slovene women had upon arrival to America and the way life was at the beginning of their stay. The women's perceptions were recorded many decades after they landed in New York. As these present the most vivid memories of the narrators, I regard them as especially valuable. The book by Marie Prisland, who came to America in 1906, conveys mainly her own impressions; Mary Molek described her mother's perception, so the memory span here is even longer. Her mother, who landed in 1908, told Molek her story in the late 1930s, but she did not publish it until 1976. Irene Odorizzi, who had been collecting the life stories of early Slovene women immigrant for many years, finally collected them in a book in 1978.

Marie Prisland⁵ describes being away from home as a mixture of happiness and disappointment. "When I arrived in Sheboygan," she wrote,

I stayed with our neighbors from Europe who had moved into a nice large house. I was served a wonderful dinner consisting of soup with homemade noodles, meat, vegetables, white bread, and even a piece of potica. This was like Christmas dinner at home. (...) As happy as I was with the good food, I was disappointed with several things I saw in America. In Europe almost all the houses are constructed of stone or brick, painted white, some with red tile roofs; here—in rich America—we saw many old, wooden homes. We were surprised at the thick dust in the side streets for in Slovenia we kept the streets clean by sweeping them with hand-made birch twig brooms. I was upset to find insects in

⁴ Marie Prisland, *From Slovenia — to America, Recollections and Collections* (Chicago: SWUA, 1968); Mary Molek, *Immigrant Woman* (Dover: Mary Molek, 1976); and Irene M. Planinsek Odorizzi, *Footsteps Through Time* (Washington: Landmark Tours, 1978).

⁵ Marie Prisland came to the United States in 1906 as a fifteen-year-old girl. In 1926 she founded the Slovene Women Union of America and was its national president for twenty years. She was very active in many Slovene American organizations and wrote for different newspapers and magazines.

the, kitchens and even in our beds. (...) Coming from an immaculate home, I was horrified at what I saw and many a night I cried myself to sleep. If money would have been available, I would return home immediately.⁶

The wish to return back home immediately is found in most of the women's narratives in two other books and in most of the narratives.

Marie Prisland offers interesting sociological interpretations of the impact that the American concepts of gender and class equality, work ethics and democracy had on European newcomers, including her. However, the status and care of women in America in comparison with Europe was a real culture shock to her. "The honor and the freedom which American women were enjoying was a marvel to me. This is not duplicated in any other country on the globe." A few married men, however, were of a different opinion. Used to European behavior, they thought that America was over-protecting the little woman. One complained: "In Europe a man could mishandle his wife and nobody bothered him, but here, if a man beats his wife a little and the neighbors hear her cry, they quickly call the police! The man is taken to jail for something he believed it was his right to do. Isn't the wife his property? And is he not free to do with it what he thinks is right?"⁷

Marie Prisland's very first perception of America upon arrival on Ellis Island, which became a popular quote in several books on immigrant women, deals with the same shocking treatment of women. She wrote: "The day was warm and we were very thirsty. An English-speaking immigrant asked the near-by guard where we could get a drink of water. The guard withdrew and returned shortly with a pail of water, which he set before the group of women. Some men stepped forward quickly to have a drink, but the guard pushed them back saying:

"Ladies first!" When the women learned what the guard had said, they were dumbfounded, for in Slovenia, as in all Europe; women always were second to men. Someone dramatically explained it this way: "First comes man, then a long time nothing, then comes the woman."

⁶ Prisland 51.

⁷ Prisland 53.

Happy at the sudden turn of events, one elderly lady stepped forward, holding a dipper of water, and proposed this toast:

“Živjo Amerika, kjer so ženske prve! ”

(Long live America, where women are first!)⁸

Slovene immigrants are not often mentioned in the vast literature on American immigration history and Slovene women immigrants receive even less attention. But Maxine Seller used the above quotation at the beginning of the introduction to her influential book, *Immigrant Women*.⁹ After the quotation she adds:

For Prisland, who later founded the Slovene Women's Union of America and created a woman's magazine, *The Dawn*, the American dream became reality. Not all immigrant women were so fortunate. For many, life in the United States was bitter and the slogan, “ladies first,” cruelly ironic. “Ladies” were first to be underpaid, unemployed, and abused.”¹⁰

The hard and bitter life of the early Slovene immigrant women in America is the subject of two other books, *Immigrant Woman* by Mary Molek¹¹ and *Footsteps through Time* by Irene Planinsek Odorizzi.¹² Both paint women's hardships in painfully vivid colors, but apart from this similarity the two books are very different.

⁸ Prisland 19.

⁹ Maxine S. Seller, *Immigrant Women* (Albany: State U of New York P, 1994). The quotation was later re-quoted by Donna Gabaccia, *From the Other Side: Women, Gender, and Immigrant Life in the U.S.A., 1820-1990* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1994) 1.

¹⁰ Seller 2.

¹¹ Mary Molek was born to Slovene parents in 1909 in Chicopee, Kansas, and became a writer who published extensively in several Slovene-American periodicals. She translated the work and autobiography of her husband, Ivan Molek, into Slovene.

¹² Irene Planinsek Odorizzi was born in Joliet, Illinois, and was very active as a national heritage director of the Slovene Women's Union of America for decades. She wrote many articles entitled “The Immigrant” for the monthly publication of SWUA, *The Dawn/Zarja*.

Immigrant Woman is a fictionalized biography of Mary Molek's mother, an immigrant woman at the beginning of the twentieth century. Molek's mother does not have a name because her story is meant to be the story of immigrant women in general. The author describes them as follows:

Their composite efforts, dedication to work, indefatigable physical and mental labors, resourcefulness, self-pride, and aspirations toward nobler human potential and dignified activities helped to weave the fabric for the affluence that was to be. Not that this affluence necessarily derived to them; they were frequently prime targets for exploitation. In this respect they fared even worse than the Blacks in times of slavery. For, unlike the latter, these twentieth century immigrant women—and men—were indirectly and helplessly 'bound hand and foot' in the circumstances of the labor and economic structure they had fallen into, and they were not provided with food, shelter, or physical care. Neither were they free in any modern sense. Although no money was exchanged in buying their bodies, the fact that steamship agents banded them on ships and transported them to America made the newcomers as thoroughly bought as anyone in direct exchange for money.¹³

Mary Molek's biographical text is a poetic "quilt," a texture rich with the three stories that are told by the author simultaneously: about her mother and herself, about her mother's struggle to survive and live according to her values and norms and her daughter as an object of this goal, and about the narrator watching these values and norms slowly becoming her own. It is exceptional for its literary "patchwork" form as well as for the author's sincere dealing with topics such as the importance of having a male child, marital problems, or the shocking experience upon arrival in America, so different from that of Marie Priland. Mary Molek quotes her mother saying: "If I had known, I'd never have come. Never left my homeland! The promises he made! The letters he wrote! The country I'd come to! I'd have everything!—This! This isn't what he promised me!"¹⁴

The narrative of the author's mother is full of disappointments. The description of her first days in the new country is a good example:

¹³ Molek 5.

¹⁴ Molek 23.

I remember that first day in America very well. Second day, really. I had been riding on the train all night. Across ugly country. Nothing but prairies, dusty roads. Oh, this must come to an end soon, and that beautiful land come. That wonderful part where I was going, not so vast, so uncultivated, so unplanned. There'd be hills, mountains maybe, and lush valleys. Then the squeaking wheels came to a stop. There I was, standing on tiptoe. (...) Only when I looked out and saw the pastureland fenced in by barbed wire and cows grazing here and there did I come to. "It must all be a horrible nightmare," I thought. Villages with dilapidated frame houses; ugliness. To think back to the lush beauty of the tiniest of European villages. No! It can't be that I'll find myself in one of these. (...) I fumbled to the green bench propped up against the building. I sat down upon it, and I cried like a child. I looked up at your father, and I thought I had never known him at all. "I – I don't want to get married!" I said. "I want to go home!"¹⁵

Irene Planinsek Odorizzi's *Footsteps through Time* is a compilation of life stories as told or written by the narrators, Slovene women immigrants. When they recounted their life stories they were all old. Common to them all is the hard everyday life, which, after decades of tiring work, brings a better life to them and to their children. As Mitzi from Jesenice describes those first decades:

I think that I remember those days the most because they were the busiest and the hardest ones. We put so much of our bodies and souls into living, that the memory of these early days could never be forgotten. Every day was work, work, and more work. Never vacation and very little sleep. (...) When I look back now, I wonder how we immigrants ever managed in those early days. Then I realize that we were able to suffer those hardships because we knew we had to stay. There was no future for us back home, only here in America.¹⁶

As Julia, who immigrated from Trbovlje in 1921 wrote: "In those early days, after we came to America, money was scarce and we had to do

¹⁵ Molek 38–39.

¹⁶ Odorizzi 33–34.

everything possible to make ends meet. (...) There were many rainy days, such as when the mine closed down; the unions went on strike, and finally when the big depression came. The five years of hard work and savings had already gone by, but we were no closer to our goal in life than the day we had made our plans to come to America.”¹⁷ And what were their plans? Mitzi from Jesenice described the typical Sunday afternoon, when the boarders brought beer to the house and there were accordion and singing; they all wanted to remember their homeland. America, she wrote, “was only temporary for us; a place where we would work hard, save our money, and return to Slovenia in a better financial state than when we left. There we could buy a home or a farm and resume a life that was started years before. But that’s not the way it happened, because the majority of us stayed in America, bought homes, raised our families here, and before we knew it, we were calling the United States our home and Slovenia the ‘old’ country.”¹⁸

Most of the women described their first perception of America with the big meal box new immigrants got upon arrival or purchased them on the train. As Marie Prisland, they were impressed by the good food that was cooked in Slovene communities, white bread and meat, and often very disappointed at the state of housing and the landscape around the industrial cities. All of the women felt homesickness, which became bearable only after they became old.

Emma from Trbovlje was educated and worked in Zagreb before joining relatives in America. She described her beginning with an exclamation: “America surprised me! I thought that it would be possible to secure the same type of employment, which I had enjoyed in Zagreb, but my dream was shuttered when I realized that my unfamiliarity with the English language was a barrier to any good position. Many times amid my tears of discouragement I would say, ‘If that ocean weren’t there, I would walk back home.’”¹⁹ After forty years, she finally returned to Slovenia. “I was home again,” she wrote

visiting and speaking endlessly with people, who were part of my past, learning to love those who were now the present, but at the same time realizing with each passing day, that I was no longer tied to my homeland as I had imagined. My

¹⁷ Odorizzi 96.

¹⁸ Odorizzi 33.

¹⁹ Odorizzi 19.

heart, which had carried the weight of loneliness for four decades, suddenly was lightened and relieved from fantasies of what might have been. (...) America—my new home—was my real home. My roots were firmly transplanted from the “old country” to the “new country.” My heart was now at peace.²⁰

3. “Oh, everything was tradition!”

I start the presentation of the oral memories I collected with a description of the beginning of a stay in the United States as recounted by Marie Gombach two years ago. It echoed the memories in the three mentioned books. I was amazed when the topics of the poor houses, the sad landscape, the hardship and homesickness were described to me in a vivid, though weak voice.

When we came to America, it was 1935, it was a deep depression in this country. We came to Cleveland on March 9, 1935, and it was wintertime, it was so awful. Me, my mother and my brother, we just cried. We thought it was a terrible place we came to, it was so desolate. We had never seen frame houses before, we “in the old country” had big stone houses, six feet tall. We were not happy, but we are still here. Going to school at that time was difficult, the schools were not geared to accept foreign children, the teachers were not trained to deal with children like us. Nobody really cared because nobody really wanted us here, nobody wanted us to come here. (...) It was a very difficult period of our lives and it was very hard for my mother. I remember when I sang with one of the children’s groups. This was shortly after we came to this country. I used to sing but I lost my voice when my mother got sick. I had a nice little voice. I remember at the concert I had a solo—“Kje je moj mili dom?”²¹—and I just broke up and the whole audience cried with me. That was so moving for me. That

²⁰ Odorizzi 30.

²¹ “Where is my sweet home?” a sad folk song.

was the way I felt, you know. If somebody had said, "Pejd nazaj,"²² I would have gone back at once.²³

The experience of homesickness and hard life is undoubtedly the most common one among Slovenian immigrant women. However, there are important differences, which were caused by particular immigration circumstances. Four sisters, Betty, Vida, Marion and Sophie, all in their seventies, recounted how their father came to the United States in 1908, went back to Europe to serve during the First World War and then came back and sent for his fiancée, their mother, in 1921. This couple was from the same region in Slovenia as the parents of Marie Gombach and settled down in the same neighborhood in Cleveland. But they did it long before the Depression hit the country and were therefore in a much better position. The four sisters in their narrative described the big difference this made:

Without much money we had a very good childhood, always fun. We always had music in our house. Collinwood was the neighborhood, a beautiful church. We always spoke Slovenian at home and we enjoyed life, picnics with the singing group. It was like an extended family. We knew everybody, it was an all-Slovenian community. Our parents talked so much about Slovenia we thought we had lived there. At dinnertime we talked about everything and they always brought back things that happened in their childhood in Europe. So we knew names of every neighbor and friend. And when we went there in 1973 with the singing group Jadran, our mother took us to the whole village. At that time all her friends were still alive so we met them and we knew all their names. We knew where we were going because we knew all the roads and paths by heart. And there were older people calling to our mother, "O, Johanca, pa si pr'šla nazaj!"²⁴

Mimi Mejac explained how her father's change of job made a big difference during the Depression in New York:

²² "Go back", in Slovenian.

²³ The narrative by Marie Gombach, recorded in Cleveland in May 2003.

²⁴ "O, Johanca, you did come back!" in a dialect. The narrative by Betty Rotar, Vida Zak, Sophie Matuch and Marion Slejko, recorded in Cleveland in May 2003.

My parents came to New York around 1922. My mother worked in a hat factory making fancy ladies hats, and my father started in a hat factory but then worked in maintenance for the New York subway system. This was big help when the Depression came and the workers in the factory lost their jobs and my father just got a big decrease in his salary but was still able to support his family. And also helped other Slovenians who had nothing. They used to come to our house and I remember my mother giving bread and people leaving our house with shopping bags full. My father was always mad at my mother because she was giving away everything, but my mother always had this open hand and was called St. John's kitchen. I had a brother and a sister and my mother always believed in education. People made fun of her, like why is she sending children to school, especially girls, instead to work. My sister refused to go to college; she wanted to go to work, but my brother, and me we did go to school. I went to college and majored in biology and minored in chemistry. When I started school I didn't know any English at all. But then I learned so much that I skipped the second grade. So I can speak both. At home, my mother and sister talked only Slovenian and if we talked in English my mother said, "I don't understand, speak Slovenian."²⁵

Regarding the Slovenian language, these two stories are quite unique. Most of the daughters of the immigrants from Slovenia stressed out that they didn't speak Slovenian at home and they didn't learn it even if they lived in a very Slovenian community. Mary Lou Voelk, who grew up in Minnesota is now the Heritage Director of the Slovenian Women's Union of America. "Food, religion, festivities," that's what her mother, the immigrant from Slovenia, passed to her. In her opinion, it is the basics of traditions and traditions is the most important foundation of a family. "Not the language," and in her case not the stories of the Old Country. "Soup, apple strudel, that is in my mind. And then on Sundays during the summer—I lived in a very Slovenian neighborhood—they

²⁵ The narrative by Mimi Mejac, recorded in Washington, D.C. in April 2003.

would go up to a big lawn and they would sit and food came from somewhere and they would sing. Just sing... ”²⁶

Marlene Parrish, in her late sixties like Mary Lou, described the same elements of cultural traditions and identity, which were preserved or lost and forgotten. Preserved were food, festivities, religion and music; language was lost. “I remember mostly from my childhood music and music was polkas,” recounted Marlene Parrish, who remembered also how her origina and traditions made her feel embarassed as a child.

On my mother’s side I had a cousin who played button box accordion and I was kind of horrified that anybody knew I had a cousin who played button box accordion. I mean, you know, when you are little, you think, oooo, no... And we always had music, polkas everywhere. I remember the food mostly. Always a lot of pork, sauerkraut, maybe stuffed cabbage, peppers and a lot of what we called, a sharp salad. A lot of soups, and always potica. As a little girl I was a bit embarassed. When you are in elementary school and there are French with Napoleon and Greeks and Romans, and Brits and Scots and there are no Slovenians there, you think as a little girl, “Hey, we are not quite up there.” That’s why I asked my mother if I can be something else beside Slovenian.

Her mother suggested she could identify herself as Austrian since the ex-empire was the country of her parents. She admitted that also the language was an embarassment to her because “all the children wanted to be American.”²⁷

This is a typical situation for the children of immigrants as they interacted with not only more Americans but also with the most important mechanism of assimilation, the public school system. There, the first identity crisis occurred to everyone. Donna Gabaccia writes, that the second generation faced particularly complex choices because “cultural change and structural assimilation proceeded at differing rates” (Gabaccia 1994, 114). In the life stories I recorded we can find three types of decisions. Some of the women turned from their Slovenian origins and community in embarrassment and quite a few of them went to study and pursue a professional career. Some stayed close to their families and communities and are, as ladies in their seventies, still very

²⁶ The narrative by Mary Lou Voelk, recorded at the Heritage Museum of the Slovenian Women’s Union of America in Joliet in February 2002.

²⁷ The narrative by Marlene Parrish, recorded in Pittsburgh in November 2002.

active. Most of them found a personal combination of assimilation and preserving traditions, the combination they also passed to their children. Gabaccia mentions that, "Immigrant children called this "walking on the edge," or living "between worlds" (Gabaccia 114). My narrators talked about being nowhere at home, having no roots, or being from two homelands. The son of immigrant parents, who came to Cleveland in 1930, told me that growing up in the 1960s, one just gets used to be "schizophrenic." Or as another Slovenian Clevelander put it: "During the week I was American and on the weekend I was Slovenian."

Jean Pohar Ficek from La Salle, not far from Chicago, who grew up in the 1930s, remembers the complex combination of reproduction and transformation of cultural traditions. The Slovenian language was ignored, because to know English was crucial. On the other hand, there were many cultural activities in Slovenian at home and in the community: "Oh, everything was traditions! All our meals were always Slovenian food, always. Nothing was American. We had gardens where we grew all our vegetables and fruit. And as a child I remember I wished, 'If we had some of those peaches from the store.'" ... They had a cellar to store vegetables and fruit and sauerkraut. Her father also made traditional Slovenian sausages and wine. "And whenever somebody came to our house he got wine and he went home happy. ...In La Salle we had a Slovenian Home where all the Slovenians met. On the first level it was like a tavern and food and then on the lower level it was a hall for the receptions. And then on the upper level they would have plays, a lot of Slovenian plays. In Slovenian, yes."²⁸

It is obvious that food, religion and festivities were the core elements of the cultural traditions that were practiced in everyday life. On the other hand, there was a vibrant cultural life in every Slovenian community that went far beyond the traditions. Slovenian immigrants built national homes and reading rooms; they had plays, choirs, operas, concert events all in Slovenian; they established newspapers and magazines, and published books; they had drama and singing groups and they sang Slovenian songs at every occasion. They recorded these songs in studios as early as 1917. In all these activities, at home and in the community, immigrant women played the crucial role. As Mary Molek put it sarcastically: "These young women were not 'the tired, the poor' proverbially greeted with open arms by the Statue of Liberty. Neither

²⁸ The narrative by Jean Pohar Ficek, recorded in Joliet in February 2002.

were they descendants of uncultured, uncivilized lands. They were, instead, bearers of an already-established cultural heritage, centuries old...”²⁹

4. Conclusion

These recorded life stories confirm that the woman’s role in preserving and transforming cultural heritage among immigrants was extremely important on the public as well as on the private level. Women were the activists in the Slovenian community, in the church and in organizations; they were members of the singing, dancing, and theatre groups; they worked in countless volunteer projects; and they were active in their own women’s organizations, many of them in more than one. But because an important part of cultural heritage was preserved at home and in the kitchen, which has traditionally been the woman’s domain, the woman’s role was wider and its impact on the identity of family members crucial. As a homemaker, a woman spent more time at home than her husband even if she was employed; she looked after children; she used the Slovenian language at least when referring to food; she prepared regularly or at least occasionally Slovenian dishes; she celebrated Slovenian holidays and added something Slovenian to the celebrations of the American ones; she talked about the people of the same origins and maintained correspondence with the family and friends back home.

Immigrant women established a collective memory from which the next generations were able to choose the elements of cultural heritage for their ethnic identity—if they chose to do so. As Marlene Parrish, who was embarrassed by her Slovenian origin sixty years ago, says: “My granddaughters now are black. My son married and adopted two little black children. I have a hilarious picture of me teaching my black granddaughter how to make potica. And I said, ‘Traditions go on, I don’t care what you are.’”³⁰

Scientific Research Center of the
Slovene Academy of Sciences

²⁹ Molek 5.

³⁰ Parrish 2002.

POVZETEK**PREDSTAVE SLOVENSKIH PRISELJENK O "AMERIKI"**

Besedilo predstavlja izsledke raziskovalnega projekta, Vloga in pomen žensk pri ohranjanju slovenske kulturne dediščine med slovenskimi izseljenci in njihovimi potomci v ZDA. Avtorica jo je zastavila kot študijo ustne zgodovine zato je snemala življenjske zgodbe žensk slovenskega porekla v različnih mestih, Clevelandu, New Yorku, Chicagu, Washingtonu D.C. in Pittsburghu. V obdobju od 2001 do 2004 je posnela več kot 65 življenjskih zgodb žensk, ki so bile izbrane le po enem kriteriju, to je, da so bile pripravljene sodelovati.

Ugotovitve, ki izhajajo iz teh pripovedi, poudarjajo pomen žensk za ohranjanje kulturne dediščine in etnične identitete tako na javni kot zasebni ravni, tako v skupnostih kot družinah. Ta vloga žensk je specifična in zaradi njihove vloge pri socializaciji otrok še toliko bolj odločilna. K življenjskim zgodbam avtorica dodaja citate iz treh avto/biografskih knjig, ki so jih pisateljice slovenskega rodu napisale in objavile v ZDA. Te malo znane knjige se ukvarjajo s percepcijo »Amerike« med priseljenkami in načini prilagajanja v obdobju do leta 1940 in omogočajo vpogled v osebne izkušnje migracijskega procesa skozi žensko perspektivo.

