

REVIEW

Mirjam Milharčič Hladnik and Jernej Mlekuž, eds. *Going Places: Slovenian Women's Stories on Immigration*. Akron, OH: The University of Akron Press, 2014. 128 pp., \$19.95 (paper). ISBN: 978-1-937378-71-4.

Thirty or so years ago, the only sustained reference to Slovenian women migrants in mainstream cultural studies of immigration may have been in Maxine Schwartz Seller's seminal book of essays, *Immigrant Women* (Temple University Press, 1981). In it, Schwartz Seller relates an anecdote of Ellis Island in 1906 from Slovenian immigrant Marie Priland's memoirs. When a group of Slovenians asks for water, a guard brings the women a pail of water. He pushes the men back, saying: "Ladies first!" Surprised—but happy—with this sudden turn of events, one elderly woman steps forward and raises her cup in a toast: "*Živijo Amerika, kjer so ženske prve!*" (Long live America, where women come first!) Editor Mirjam Milharčič Hladnik invokes this story in her introduction to *Going Places* as a humorous aside, one which also begins to sketch out the meager ethnographic history of Slovenian women's migration in book-length studies. Milharčič Hladnik and Jernej Mlekuž build on Schwartz Seller's understanding of the women's agency and strength in the face of hardship in the United States. They layer onto it a rich consideration of women's roles over the course of a full century in social and cultural institutions across several different countries, including Egypt, Argentina, the United States, Austria, and Italy.

Schwartz Seller argues that women are active, rather than passive, in their participation in political, social, and educational life. Milharčič Hladnik and Mlekuž use Schwartz Seller's argument as a point of departure, moving beyond her reflection on Slovenian women in particular to shade in the contours of women's lives in migration. The book builds on the work of gender and migration scholars of the last three decades who theorized women's migration as a distinct experience from men's. It lacks the multi-ethnic span of recent studies of women as subjects of migration studies, such as *The International Migration of Women* (Palgrave, 2008), which

considers migrants of several different nationalities. Yet *Going Places* is not American or Eurocentric and instead follows a more recent trend of tracing migrants from one common location to their new homes across the world. Further, *Going Places* is less worried about scaffolding cultural frameworks for understanding larger global migration phenomena in a political or economic context; instead, it takes a more ethnographic approach to migration as an individual experience. Milharčič Hladnik calls it a “holistic material-emotional approach” which reveals the “contradictions, ambiguities, and complexities in everyday decisions in a dynamic social context of immigration” (8). Replete with photographs and scans of handwritten letters and other artifacts, such as tickets, textbooks, and journals, the volume features a trove of primary sources for readers’ consideration. Unlike *Go Girls! When Slovenian Women Left Home* (Žaložba, 2009), this collection considers more deeply women’s lives in their new homes, as well as the effects their migration had on their families left behind, rather than their reasons for leaving Slovenia.

The book is organized into three sections, each of which contains two chapters. The first section is entitled “Transnational Emotions: Those Who Left and Those Who Stayed,” and features one essay on women migrants to Cleveland, Ohio in the 1930s, and another on a woman left behind as her husband works in the Netherlands in the late 1920s. The second section, entitled “Silenced Stories: Emancipatory Experiences,” features the experience of maids in Cairo and Alexandria in the post-WW I era in one chapter, and another on the role of Slovenian migrants as maids in Italy in the first half of the twentieth century, with a focus on the 1950s. The third section, “Active, Skilled, Ambitious,” charts the course of female straw hat makers as entrepreneurs abroad in the first thirty years of the twentieth century in the first essay, while the final chapter of the book looks at women who work with the European Union in Brussels in the early 2000s. While the experiences, occupations, geographical locations, and times of each of these essays may not seem to overlap, these studies are united by a common focus on individual narratives. In approaching the study of women’s migration in this way, the book maps what Mlekuž calls an “intricate emotional landscape” (235) which allows readers to negotiate their own sense of women’s experience.

The first essay, “A Slovenian Bride in Cleveland: Emotions in Letters,” sociologist Mirjam Milharčič Hladnik traces a series of letters between the Valencic-Udovič-Hrvatina family. She focuses on one woman, Pepica, as a unifying force among the family’s letters that reach from Jelšane to Cleveland and Buenos Aires, Argentina. Unique in Milharčič Hladnik’s study is her access to both sides of the family’s correspondence; that is, she traces letters sent from Cleveland describing Pepica’s transition to American life starting in 1930—but also sees responses from Pepica’s family back home. She illustrates Pepica’s homesickness with letters, such

as one cited from 1941, which reveals the candid nature of correspondence family members maintained: “I always dream about her, but when I get home I can’t find her in the house anymore, so I look for her in the graveyard. ...So please, write to me where Mama is buried, if she’s near late father” (52). The chapter also traces the gifts of coffee beans, sugar, clothing, and other so-called “luxuries” from Cleveland that Pepica sends home during times of economic crisis in the former Yugoslavia. On the receiving end, a relative remembers: “Sometimes I was really embarrassed in front of my friends who had nothing to wear” (53). Milharčič Hladnik uses this account of one woman’s letters to expose the complexity of trans-Atlantic familial relations and to show “the conceptual connections between communities that are sending and communities that are receiving” (34). She frontloads the chapter by theorizing the writing practices of migrants, more generally speaking, and uses a narrative approach to integrate her specific primary source materials throughout.

Historian Marjan Drnovšek authors the second chapter in the “Transnational Emotions” section: “A Wife at Home: Longing and Writing.” Drnovšek presents an analysis of sixty-one letters written by a wife, Francka, to her husband, Maks, between 1 March 1929 and 26 January 1930. During these eleven months, Francka is left behind in Gorenjska while Maks works abroad in coal mines in Heerlerheide in the Netherlands. Francka writes to her husband, pleading with him to answer her letters, updating him about their children, and expressing sadness at his absence. She also debates moving to the Netherlands, questions the conditions at the coal mines, and gives frank accountings of expenditures and debts. Drnovšek acquired these letters at a flea market in Ljubljana and pondered the ethics of reading, analyzing, and publishing works not originally intended for a public audience. He concludes by redacting the names and identifying characteristics in his study, writing that nevertheless he is “led by the conviction that intimate personal correspondence is a valuable piece in the mosaic of migrants’ correspondence” (71). His conclusion seems to underwrite a larger argument for the book as a whole, while his attention to detail in Francka’s letters represents a case study in longing and heartbreak.

The second section begins with a chapter by anthropologist Daša Koprivec: “Aleksandrinke in Egypt: Between Condemnation and Adoration.” She chronicles the lives of a group of women who left Slovenia to work in Egypt as nannies and maids in hotels or with families. She explores the overarching trends of women who she writes “have come to Slovenian consciousness as so-called women with a wound on their soul, divided between home and Egypt, between life in the rural environment and the cosmopolitan city” (127). Koprivec notes that the case of the *Aleksandrinke* remains unique in part because it was mostly women who migrated to Egypt, and because they did so temporarily. The migration

pattern began in the late 1800s and continued into the first half of the 1900s, with women sending money home over the course of a few years away so husbands and fathers could buy land or pay off debts. The *Aleksandrinke* found work as wet nurses and nannies—leaving their own children behind to care for others'. After World War II, they returned home in large numbers and faced difficult readjustment periods. Knowledge gained in Egypt was considered by many to be irrelevant in a Slovenian context, and these women's experiences were largely overlooked until a recent revival of interest. Koprivec did fieldwork in Cairo, Alexandria, and the Goriška region of Slovenia to uncover the experiences of this forgotten group of women, who have come to be known as the *Aleksandrinke*, after the name of the port where they docked upon arrival in Egypt - Alexandria. Koprivec traces the arc of the migration patterns, women's jobs, and their attachment to their "children by blood"—and "children by milk" (127)—through short bits of interviews with the *Aleksandrinke* and with their former charges in Egypt, as well as with their children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren in Slovenia, Australia, Canada, Switzerland, and Denmark. Her chapter features a number of photographs of the women in Egypt and Slovenia from the Ethnographic Museum in Ljubljana.

Geologist, ethnologist, and cultural anthropologist Jernej Mlekuž authors the fourth chapter: "Dikle in Italian Cities: Personal Experiences, Public Interpretations." He presents his central question: "What did migration mean to the women, the house servants?" (139). Mlekuž records women's longings for adventure, plans of escape from poverty, and economic independence. He transcribes women's descriptions of the work as servants as difficult yet often preferable to working at home on a farm. Deemphasizing the traditional authority assigned to male voices in favor of amplifying the voices of working class women, Mlekuž allows the women to speak for themselves through his retelling of several stories after extensive interviews. He briefly reviews the reasons Slovenian women migrated to Italy before and after WW II, and on their brief—often transitional—periods as maids in Italian cities. While traditional wisdom holds that their work was cursed or akin to slavery, he finds that women remember their experiences as decidedly better. Mlekuž acknowledges that perception may become distorted through the prism of time, but nevertheless asserts that these women's voices are the most important in the conversation on their roles as household servants in Italy.

The third and final section, "Active, Skilled, Ambitious," begins with ethnographer Saša Roškar's chapter: "Slamnikarice Abroad and at Home: Ladies and Entrepreneurs." She considers the role of straw hat makers who left to work temporarily or permanently in other parts of Europe and in the United States from roughly 1880 through the 1930s. Like the *Aleksandrinke*, the *slamnikarice* were largely women and capitalized on work opportunities abroad to send money home to Slovenia. Unlike the

Aleksandrinke or other migrants, however, the *slamnikarice* were skilled workers and often fared better economically and socially as a result. Roškar works with remnants of their correspondence and journals, as well as through interviews with their children, relatives, and neighbors. She presents several women's stories and life circumstances to illustrate many of the similarities among the women, but she also contextualizes the differences in their personal lives as a way to recapture and record a lost set of stories that show women migrants as skilled and enterprising individuals.

Cultural anthropologist Tatiana Bajuk Senčar's final chapter, "Eurocrats in Brussels: Contemporary Career Women," jumps forward in time to the early 2000s, when many Slovenian professionals—including the author—found themselves in Brussels, Belgium at the European Union headquarters. She highlights three women's stories, each of which represents a different cross-section of the population of female workers in Brussels. Helena, for example, was predisposed to travel due to her parents' work abroad and since she studied outside Slovenia. Veronika came to Brussels in the 1990s as part of an effort to establish Slovenia as a candidate for membership in the EU. Hana, for her part, was working in an institution in Ljubljana, where she found out about EU short-term contracts in Brussels and stayed on. Bajuk Senčar also discusses women who came to Brussels for other reasons, such as a spouse's job. She concludes by commenting on this first generation of Slovenian Eurocrats, noting that their story may become more common in the future as "living long-distance... [is] a potential model of Europeanization" (230).

The editors do well to organize the chapters as they do into three sections, which helps the book achieve a sense of cohesion and build toward a mosaic, as Drnovšek calls it, of diverse migrants' experiences. Each author also theorized their ethnographic approach in the first quarter or third of their chapter. Read as individual essays, this structure works; when read together, however, this justification of similar methodologies becomes repetitive and might have been more neatly stitched together in an introductory chapter that dealt with the value of analyzing subjective documents such as interview transcripts and personal correspondence. Yet as a whole, the book gives a name and a face to more abstract statistics of trends in migration and thus succeeds in promoting new understandings of women migrants over the course of a century.

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