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Martina Cvajner, *Soviet Signoras. Personal and Collective Transformations in Eastern European Migration,* The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2019, ISBN-13: 978-0-226-66225-1, 265 pages

Review by Simona FER

Martina Cvajner's book focuses on the transformations of Eastern European women, migrated from the territories of the former Soviet Union, from the very moment of their arrival in a new country with no relatives, acquintances or friends. The author classifies the situations presented in her book, offering suggestive subtitles, representative for each story. The readers will discover life stories, traumatic experiences, but which, eventually, strengthened those women's characters and social positions.

The group of Soviet women involved in this research, working as care workers in a northeastern Italian city, the author calls Alpinetown, consider themselves survivors. Their previous middle-class lifestyle shattered repeatedly into pieces by the various waves of destruction brought about by what Vladimir Putin defined "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century", the breakdown of the Soviet Union.

They had migrated alone, to an area with no previous history of immigration from their lands. They were not supported, having arrived outside a formalized recruitment program. Their presence was not appreciated or accepted, and most natives, including their employers, had weak ideas about their identities. All of them found jobs in the lowest segment of the local market, as the author details, for household services, and they all had debts to repay or send money to their families, out of their meager or limited salaries. They used to spend evenings or the days they did not work, all together, in a new urban environment, a hostile one.

The author had the chance to observe and participate, for more than a decade, in the process that made these women a stable presence in the urban environment, discovering different identities of them, often divided by strong moral cleavages.

Martina Cvajner's interest is in how everyday interactions forced each of them to fashion new selves, new ways of feeling or thinking and what they should be in the new circumstances. Briefly speaking, they created a set of new social worlds where they could repair the damage of emigration and their social relationship.

The women felt constantly humiliated by the fact that their employers, usually the daughters of the elders they were taking care for, expected them to behave as if they were part of the family, showing a genuine affection for the elderly entrusted to them. At the same time, they showed no interest in the care workers' motherhood. Their employers did not value them for their sacrifice, nor feel the duty to support them emotionally. More than that, some of the elderly people they assisted used to blame them for having left their children behind, in their own countries. The trauma was that the women experienced high levels of emotional stress while quickly learning to hide their feeling of disgust. The group of women reported that employers, especially daughters of the elderly clients had to be described always as mean-spirited and occasionally cruel.

The women mentioned in Martina Cvajner's research that the arrival of their "papers" was a point of no return in their lives, reporting that until then they had little "choice". The lack of papers sharply reduced their options both in Alpinetown and in their engagement with their place of origin. Without legal status, their lives were remarkably similar. For women who had tried to save 60 or even 70 percent of their meager salary, any other option implied a dramatic change in their budget. Other types of domestic services, such as cleaning or babysitting brought more freedom, but the demand varied rapidly and often unpredictably. Employers could terminate contracts or reduce hours suddenly and for a multiplicity of reasons.

The author relates stories of different Soviet women, each with her name: Nica, Vasylyna, Iryna, Valeria, Natalka, Marinela, Alla and many others, who experienced several work places where they acquired a specific identity. Other working situations were emotionally satisfying, because obtaining their papers, the women were able to improve their lives in Alpinetown while maintaining a strong connection to their sending areas, which they could not visit regularly.

When a woman arrived in the city, previous migrants informed her about what assistance was available and what would be most helpful. Some centers were good sources for secondhand clothes, others had excellent Italian language teachers, some volunteers were better than others at finding jobs when women needed them. A trade union office provided some assistance if employers refused to pay. An

outpatient clinic provided healthcare, a hostel, founded many decades ago to protect rural Italian women migrating to the city, could provide, when available, a clean bed for a few nights. Some of women felt comfortable with these agencies, but some not, considering they did not receive things or assistance according to their needs, and more than that, they could not express their anger in Italian language. In addition, these centers could not be a substitute for a place where these women could find emotional comfort and public recognition. They claimed that those places were not really for them, because although formally open to all immigrants, actually catered only to some immigrant groups. As they had been established over the years for dealing with previous waves of immigrants, they were ethnically and linguistically marked. North Africans comprised a wide majority of users of one of these spaces, Albanians frequented another, and a small social center often hosted Latinos. One association claimed to provide a space for all immigrant women, but the women were highly suspicious, considered it a front for Italian feminists and did not want to go there.

The women began to complain that they did not have a place to pray. Alla, a Moldovan woman complained that she had to pray alone or go with her ”grandpa”, the elderly man she took care of, to the Roman Catholic Mass. She felt unable to pray adequately there and alienated from a ritual she could not understand. Therefore, the lack of a place where they felt welcome became a standard complaint the women voiced among themselves, without anybody having any confidence that they could find a solution.

Diana, one of the few Russians in Alpinetown, was strongly committed to the vision of Agape, as an association of Eastern European women, regardless of their ethnocultural origins. The Agape association had been founded to unite, support, provide guidance and represent Eastern European care workers. Diana was the president and Iana, a Moldovan in her forties who had been a university professor and was now a care worker, was the vice president. Diana took it for granted that, as in the collective life of the former USSR, national differences among them should be considered as mere variations of a common theme. When the association was mainly focused on providing a space in which women could congregate and support one another, this assumption appeared to work reasonably well. The language was the glue that held people together and nobody really cared about the passports they were holding. The context changed after the Agape association had its own space and gained a minimal level of recognition from the local authorities. After the success

of the cooking classes, Diana found a precious opportunity that the association should promote an intercultural day when women could invite the families they worked for to share a meal all together. She also suggested they could invite an Orthodox priest she had met, in order to found a small church and celebrate Mass for them, as it had happened earlier for Romanians, with the diocese support.

The leaders of the association thought that their institution was, above all, a way for them to collectively gain respect and recognition from the local community. They felt that the association focused on emotional, religious and cultural matters, so the women could give up their disorderly social life. They also believed that women should be active participants, devoting their energies to implement new projects.

Meanwhile, the initial group of women separated into several distinctive networks, but Diana kept alive the idea of an umbrella organization, approaching it closer to an Italian-Russian cultural association. But in 2016, it ceased activities altogether.

The author's conclusions are that these Soviet women will be overly concerned, indeed obsessed with the practical pressures of everyday survival, with the pressing needs of making ends meet, of finding or keeping a job, of being able to save money to support their families.

Martina Cvajner appreciates that the fruits of their work will gain them social recognition and respect only *there,* in their previous circles of recognition, among those that really matter for them, their relatives and friends"back home".

The author confesses she was an immigrant, but she had arrived much earlier. She was a foreigner, but her naturalization as an Italian citizen was in process. She had been a care worker herself, but she had been employed for years in white-collar jobs and she enjoyed the luxury of a flat all to herself, while the women involved in her project were living in the homes of their employers. For these reasons she feared that she could have been placed in a higher social status, to create a barrier between her and them. On the contrary, cohorts of women entered the research group, warmly participated to the author' s study and revealed their moving life stories as immigrants on the Italian land.