

BOOK REVIEWS

Migrating Memories: Central Europe in Canada, vol.1 – **Literary Anthology** (460 p.), ISBN 978-86-7746-233-8, Vesna Lopičić, (editor), vol. 2 **Oral Histories** (424 p.), ISBN 978-86-7746-255-0, Rodica Albu (editor). Published by the Central European Association for Canadian Studies, Brno, 2010.

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Published under the care of the Central European Association for Canadian Studies (C.E.A.C.S.), the “twin” volumes with the common title *Migrating Memories: Central Europe in Canada* (Brno/Niš: C.E.A.C.S., 2010) bring together the efforts of academics in the eight European countries participating in the international project “Central Europe in Canada: CEACS Diaspora Project”, initiated at the suggestion of a Romanian professor, Ana Olos, Ph.D., member of the Department of Foreign Languages, North University, Baia Mare, and completed with the financial support of the Canadian Government. The substance and structure of the two volumes are the reflection of a standing interest in this area of Europe in the individual and collective cultural-social destiny of the several migration waves of Central Europeans (a label which includes Romanians and Bulgarians, classified as Eastern Europeans by other standards), in their multifarious responses to the Canadian multicultural and plurilingual environment.

Each of the two volumes consists of eight sections, one for each country participating in the project, preceded by a short preface which outlines the history of migration and introduces the reader to the causes of dislocation – constant ingredients in variable proportions: religious persecution, political oppression as apparent in the process of censorship, the need for social and material security and the natural, human desire for comfort and prosperity; very few, as one Slovak writer points out, were adventurers seeking new horizons. Emigration during the Communist period is referred to as *exile*, and the migrants were in most cases *asylum seekers*; however, the general terms *diaspora* and *immigration* are used to cover both the previously mentioned group and the earlier or recent immigrants. Many of the sections have titles or use mottos which represent an attempt at capturing in one phrase the essence of the phenomenon: Romania’s section in Volume One is entitled “L’inquiétude migrante de la littérature,” pointing to the status of the writer as a perpetual stranger, haunted by his/her act – or sheer intention – of transgressing boundaries and acceding to the *other*: world, language, or person. On the other hand, the Czech chapter in Volume Two, “Identity and Adjustment”,

concentrates the core of the Czech experience, the permanent tension between the effort to integrate and the sense of deprivation, or perhaps desertion, summarized by one of the interviewees as follows: “The quicker the adjustment, the easier the loss of identity” (S.H., p.82).

As the title indicates, Volume One anthologizes literary texts by diasporic authors, each text being preceded by a short bio-bibliographic note. The lifestories are noteworthy in themselves, as they trace as many destinies swaying between professional writing and the use of literature as a personal means of self expression, of venting resentment, nostalgia, or guilt, or on the contrary, an exploration and a means to (re)construct one’s identity. Several themes intersect in the collection, sharing the common search for and a possible definition of the concept of *home*: is that the land left behind or the realm lying ahead, inviting incursion? Was it a home of the natives that was conquered by the settling newcomers, or is it a territory to be permanently conquered by each wave of immigrants?, questions which, in the particular case of Canada, are compressed in a quote by Edward Chamberlin (*If This Is Your Land, Where are your Stories. Finding Common Ground*, Knopf Canada, 2003): “Can the world ever be home to all of us?” The trauma of dislocation and the finality of the separation, be it voluntary or forced (the perception of the new cultural system, seen as a welcoming or at least tolerant world (the Czech Ludmila Zeman, p. 134, or, on the contrary, an aggressive one, where the individual gradually yields his identity, or even dignity (the Serbian Nebojša Kne, p. 274), the comparison between the old and the new worlds (The Croatian Berislav Fabek, p.68), an assessment of the contribution the immigrants from a particular area made to the country of adoption (the Czech Josef Skála, p.123, the Serbians Zora and Rajko Kujundžić, p. 303, The Slovenian Ivan Dolenc, p. 431), one’s troubled and ambiguous relation with the past – of the individual and of the community (George Biztray, p. 166, the Romanian Kenneth Radu, p. 218) to mention only some of the authors anthologized. The actual literary excerpts are often doubled by the direct testimonies of the writers (the Czech Jiří Krupička, p.114): the impersonal factual narrative of the biographer is doubled by the author’s direct address, introducing, explaining, describing himself and ultimately creating himself in the act.

The selection in each collection is a mosaic of genres, styles, voices as well as languages and they come from authors of most varied educational, social and professional backgrounds: besides the systematic and well coordinated effort of identifying, storing, assessing and selecting the literary products of the diasporas coming from the eight countries, one of the main goals of the project, as pointed out in the Introduction to the first volume, was to circulate and make accessible a range of valuable texts which otherwise, given the limited scope and quite often the language barrier, would be unlikely to raise to prominence as representative of ethnic groups marginalized through cultural displacement. The

texts are in many cases translations into English or French: as is the case of other migrants, some of the authors (mainly the newly arrived whose connection with the mother tongue is uninterrupted and degree of acculturation is reduced) presented here choose to continue to write in their native idiom and publish in their country, targeting an audience they are already familiar with, or the respective diaspora community in Canada; in either case, language may act as an isolating factor, rooted in the migrants' belief in the untranslatability of their work and possibly in the non-transferability of their experience of dislocation, with the feeling of frustration or anxiety it can cause. It would have therefore been of great interest to have information on the status of the text (genre, language of publication, translation from, publication place etc.), which is not consistently provided throughout the volume.

In Kenneth Radu's *Baba* (218–226), the succeeding generations and their various degrees of adaptation to the new environment, as well as the relationship among them: while the first generation of migrants (the octogenarian Romanian *Baba*) is set in her ways and oblivious of the surrounding Canadian reality, seeming to live in a temporal loop, her 50-year old daughter Vera is a successful adapter, eager to downplay her heritage for the sake of tolerance and good measure; while they take great pride in it, the great-grandsons are already severed from this legacy: religious, linguistic, culinary even: "They delighted in their grandmother's foreignness and loved her *placinta*" [221], but didn't understand a word of the stories she enjoyed telling them: the stories are thus ironically lost on the only accepting audience and the continuity. This story, part of a volume of prose in English, will probably sound familiar to many Canadian families belonging to other ethnic groups; it seems an apt illustration of Bennett's ethnocentric and ethnorelative stages (see vol. 2, XI) of the migrant's insertion into the country of adoption.

This text, marked by a detached yet benignant tone, is one among the few entirely fictional; not surprisingly, most of the excerpts are first person narratives, not just life stories, but stories of the self: autobiographies (the Czech Jiří Traxler, p. 132, or the) and memoirs, letters to the people left at home (the Slovak Peter Petro, p. 374); even in the case of novels, the preferred vehicle is the first person narrative, the characters are members of the ethnic community, recognizable by their names and their issues, individualized yet prototypical of the group they belong to. The kaleidoscopic nature of the anthology is further reflected by the number of non-fictional texts included: essays (the Romanian Călin Andrei Mihăilescu, p.243), (alternative) history books (the Czech Rudolf Čeněk Čermák, p. 90), (presumably) newspaper articles (the Bulgarian Andrei Yakimov, p. 25); some texts, however, transgress genres and would have, anyway, most probably benefited from a more exact indication of the status and nature of their source – while the restrictions of editorial space in an endeavor of this kind account for the size of the excerpts, they are sometimes difficult to

assess or even relate to as a reader when there is no clue even whether they are complete texts or fragments.

While the prose in this volume covers a comparatively wide array of modes and voices, the lyrical examples appear to be more evenly distributed towards the two far sides of the Canadian experience: acceptance and integration vs. rejection, regret or confusion. At one end lie verses celebrating the hospitality and magnanimity of the adopting country, sometimes in a declarative eulogistic manner (like the Bulgarian Sonia Anguelova's *Montréal: paysages humains – visages urbains*, p. 18-25 who claims "Montréal je t'aime" and "mon Amour tu es beau"), sometimes in more subdued tones. At the other end, the traumatic immersion in the new universe is called out in the title, named in order to be exorcised (*Exiled*, by the Serbian Nikola Miščević, p. 269, *Emigrant*, by his conational Srđan Bajić, p. 269, *Emigration*, by the Romanian Flavia Cosma, p. 205). The vicissitudes of being the alien, the other, the sense of uprootedness and failure find their way in their verse: "Noblemen and rogues,/ sad Bulgarians, strange old birds/.../in Canada deliver pizzas./Indifferent, hopeless and/helpless, like me." (the Bulgarian Alexander Banderov, p. 7) and a hybrid, indeterminate status indicate a deep feeling of identity loss: "I don't know if I'm a peasant or a cow-boy;/a stranger in both lands." (the Serbian Dragana Konstantinović, p. 283). One theme that is recurrent in the poetry collected in this volume is that of the poet's struggle with the foreign language which seems to resist the creative effort in the same manner in which a wild territory resists conquest or intrusion ("Though she will never fully chart this language/she can say,/almost perfectly./ This language is my land now. You know?"), the Hungarian Endre Farkas, p. 180); sometimes, however, the struggle may end in victory and the need for self expression brings words to the brink of articulation ("Pregnant words stick to the tip/of my tongue/ making me sick with waiting.", the Romanian Diana Manole, p. 210). In a nutshell, most of the poetry of the diasporic authors – at least that anthologized here – is a permanent effort of integrating the need for belonging, the recurrent return to the roots, mainly represented by one's mother tongue and the memories of home. Not being able to assess the representativeness of the selection (there is no indication in this respect in any of the prefaces, other than that of the availability), the reader may still be left with the discovery of a surprising sense of unity of theme and voice in the manifold pieces in the poetry selection.

The second volume, consisting of interviews by members of the diaspora from the eight countries participating in the project, benefits from an introductory (*Migrating Memories 2: His Story, Her story, Their Stories*) rich in information regarding the criteria used for the collection (for instance, the type of interview, which may differ in the case of some academics engaged in the activity with, however, a number of common questions) and selection of the

material, the stages of the research done, as well as technical information such as the conventions used in the transcription process. A brief outline of each chapter/collection, pointing at the historical accidents in each group's migration and at elements that set it apart from the common pattern, helps the reader by mapping the "geography" of the personal histories provided by the interviews; in some cases (especially the Slovak and the Romanian section), this may turn into an extended more comprehensive study of immigration in its various aspects: language, cultural life, forms and degrees of integration etc.). The introductory note offers both historical data (first recorded migration, migration waves and their respective periods, reasons for dislocation) and facts about the specific evolution and activity of each group in the social arena (publications in the language of the community, celebrations, ethnic associations etc.); in this otherwise comprehensive introductory note, the lay reader, and the specialist may perhaps have equally benefitted from further statistical data, mainly concerning the geographical distribution of each group, and their possible area of choice (with the notable exception of the chapter on Romania). However, the detailed and transparent information regarding the age group, cause of migration, language of choice of the respondents .

In each chapter, a distinct undertone is felt throughout, possibly due to the unifying effect of the interviewer – selector. Geographical, political and historical facts shape the profile of the migrant as an individual as and a group. The statistics can, however, be unreliable for precisely the same reasons: the case of the Czech and Slovaks is exemplary in this respect, who were counted together for the most part of their history of emigration, in spite of the fact that the Czechs claim to have the oldest records of immigration to Canada, a title for which they compete with the Croatians. The statistics in the case of the Bulgarians, who reached the new continent comparatively later than other nationalities, are somewhat mystified by emigrants from the various territories then part of the Kingdom of Bulgaria which were to be incorporated in other state entities (the most obvious example is that of Macedonia, to which a peculiar statistic accident can be added due to which in the early migratory wave, Romanians and Bulgarians came to be counted as one group in the Canadian census). Although many Bulgarians who emigrated with the second wave (World War II) made a name in finance or industry, and many of those who entered Canada with the third group (following the fall of Communism) distinguished themselves in the Canadian universities, reasons to believe that they are successfully integrated, all the people interviewed consider that the Canadians are impenetrable, so they confine their closer relations to other immigrants who, most likely, can share their condition: even in such an open, multicultural environment, the newcomers can still feel as outsiders.

One of the very intriguing aspects that the interviews can offer a hint at is the immigrants' relation to language: their native language on the one hand and

the language of the country of adoption, on the other (English mainly, also French). According to the protocol, the question(s) related to linguistic proficiency is touched on in all cases. Choice of the language in which the interview is conducted is relevant: most interviewees choose to converse in their mother tongue (the texts are translations), which obviously contributes to helping them relax and offer articulate and complex answers; and many confess that they still use their mother tongue as their chief vehicle “for expressing thoughts and feelings” (Kristina Marinova, p.10). When this is not the case and English is preferred for the interview however, the way the answers are given may offer insight into the level of proficiency and the command of the official language: at times, the speakers lapse into their native idiom, or use corrupted incorrect forms. The struggle with the linguistic factor in the process of integration is especially important in professional insertion: while some may find themselves advantaged (for two Romanians, the story was different: Rodica Tirian works as a terminologist and felt from the start “like a fish in the water” (p. 184), while for A.O. practicing as a counselor and social worker was initially set back by insufficient knowledge of the language. The language related question may also produce the most unexpected sample of humour, such as when nonagenarian A.H., after the question on the language in which he prays, gives a startling reply to the question *In which language do you curse?*: “I do not curse. I am a man of good manners.” (p.329)

The interviews come in an astounding variety of form, content, tone. Beside the actual narrative, the reader is fascinated by the personality of the humans who related their story, as reflected by their answers. Some interviews are just hesitant (the Romanian Ruxandra Andriescu, p. 226) or linear (the Czech F.L., p. 90), while others seem to be painful incursions into a forbidden territory and the interviewee, although having consented to answer, seems to reluctantly yield information about their private secret “history” which is, apparently, best kept “secret” and private (the Czech S.H., pp. 113 -114); others complain about the Canadian environment in a similar manner: “My first negative impression was lack of privacy. There isn’t a place where you can hide [...]” (the Serbian AleksandraSavić, p. 267). As the editor of the Czech chapter mentions, many – one can presume not only in this section, but in any of the others – people are “worried when somebody asks them about their life” (p.80), presumably because of their bad experiences with the communist regime. Other interviews, on the other hand, contain long narrative stretches, going on for pages on end without any prompt from the interviewer (the Czech J.K., p. 102, for instance, gives mostly two to three-page answers); a gregarious and communicative personality may partly account for it, but one cannot help suspecting that an inner need is felt to relieve through the recount a pressure that had built, the necessity – as for basically any story – to reorganize and ultimately re-create one’s experience as a meaningful sequence.

Some of the stories are stories of success and recognition, even from the start (mild tales of undramatic removal and reinsertion in a different – but not necessarily strange or alienating – environment, while others are heart breaking accounts of persecution, deprivation and danger, of separation of families, some of which could never be reunited or see each other again. It is, however, interesting to note, that in spite of such dreary antecedents, none – or very few – retain bitter feelings towards their native country, even when criticism about the mores, political and administrative system or economic development of the fatherland is offered. Many express a yearning for the lost “home”, even if returning is now possibly in virtually all cases, unlike the times during the communist regime, years of heart rending separations and final decisions. In almost every story, the interviewees voice feelings of gratitude and appreciation for the generosity of the country which accepted and welcomed them, for the values it promotes: tolerance, industriousness, the observance of and respect for rules of the law abiding population – again, in spite of occasional criticism of various aspects (the health system, immigration offices etc.) In itself, this is proof that the Canadian policy of tolerance and multiculturalism is a story of success.

The two volumes felicitously correlate the subjective and the objective, the individual and the collective, the geographical and the historical in order to offer the reader an extensive and accurate outline of the phenomenon of emigration from the former communist countries of the Soviet Block: Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Croatia, Hungary, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia and Slovenia. Personal stories of achievement and confidence alternate with dramas of disappointment or regret. Language is confirmed as an instrument of social and professional insertion and, at the same time, as a barrier between people, between one’s inner world and the outer world, and literary creativity springs at the conflicting point between them. The many faceted reality of immigration finds a truthful, professional, yet accessible mirror in the collected work of the academics involved in this project. I think that beside this accomplishment, its ultimate success lies in two directions: on the one hand, the potential for further growth of either collection, of literary expression and of interviews – both corpora may and will be expanded by future endeavour to be used in other fields (demography, linguistics, history, anthropology etc.); on the other, the luck of having had the chance to capture fragments of oral history as recounted by the few remaining witnesses of times gone by, of recent history that would otherwise have been lost. The effort and genuine interest for the **story** and **history** of the human being makes the volumes – and the project they spring from – a commendable piece of academic work and an interesting reading.