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Memory and Migrants’ Photo Albums

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This paper draws on findings of the research project “GAME” (Gendered aspects of migration in Southeast Europe: Integration, Labor and Transnational Communication), carried out at the Department of History, Archaeology and Social Anthropology of the University of Thessaly¹. The project investigates the gender dimensions of contemporary forms of migration within the Balkan region, specifically from Albania and Bulgaria to Greece. The new data produced during the project are based on a substantial number of oral history interviews with men and women from Albania and Bulgaria and on ethnographic observations both in the host and in the home country.

One of the basic goals of this project was the creation of a digitized photograph archive and linked website, constituted in collaboration with our informants and based on their personal photographs and their narratives about them. For this purpose seven video-taped interviews with migrants were conducted: five of them of Albanian origin (2 men and 3 women) and two women of Bulgarian origin. They all belong to the age group 30-45 and all have lived through the communist period in their countries and the subsequent collapse of the socialist regime. Before the interview, we have asked our interviewees to choose photos from their personal photo albums which they considered important and represented aspects of their lives both in the country of origin and in Greece. The interview itself focused on the display of the particular photographs and on the meanings attributed to them by our informants. In general we followed their narration in relation to each photo and the memories that were evoked by it. In addition, we were interested in the conditions of production of each photo: when and where a particular photo was taken, by whom and with what means and for which purpose.

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According to Marita Sturken (1999) the personal photograph is an artifact used to conjure memory, nostalgia and contemplation. The photos lend shape to personal stories and truth claims and function as technologies of memory producing both memory and forgetting. However, memory is never fully “ours”, nor are the pictures ever unmediated representations of our past. Cultural theory tells us there is little that is really personal or private about either personal photographs or the memories they evoke: they can mean only culturally. As Annette Kuhn furthermore has argued “memories evoked by a photo do not simply spring out of the image itself, but are generated in a network, an intertext, of discourses that shift between past and present, spectator and image, and between all these and cultural contexts, historical moments” (1995).

In the case of the migration context, we have realized that migrants themselves attribute a special role to personal photographs. Through a constant exchange of photographs from one country to the other, photos serve as the basic channels of communication in a transnational context, transferring information, images as well as ideologies and meanings. Moreover, photographs of the country of origin can function as a “link” to past experiences. As one of our informants characteristically noted, the photos that she has brought with her from her country of origin constitute a valuable heritage to her. Bearing in mind that photographs may show us our past but what we do with them – how we use them - is really about today, we can examine how personal photos of migrants can work as a medium for the articulation, negotiation, interpretation and contestation of past and present experiences. Therefore, issues such as which photographs the migrants choose to show us (or which they don’t), what kind of narratives they set up around them, and what kind of photographs are being circulated within the transnational family are of central importance for a study of memory production in a migration context.

More particularly in the present paper we will try to explore how through photographs migrants:

- a) Renegotiate and re-signify the memory of a past lived in the country of origin.
- b) Create a memory of the migration experience for themselves and for the second generation and also for the family members back in the home country.

At a first glance in Albanian migrants’ photo albums one can easily discern a basic difference in the quality of the photos. This distinction is not without meaning; on the contrary, it indicates an important turning point in their lives. The photos in black and

white celluloid represent their life-period in Albania while the ones in colored celluloid depict life in Greece and their after-migration experiences. Therefore transition from one photographic technology to the other signifies in a symbolic way a double transition for these people: from one state regime to the other – that is from communism to democracy - and from one status regime to the other – namely from citizen of one's own country to migrant to another country.

While this is the case for the Albanian migrants' photo albums, in the Bulgarian women's albums there is a total absence of photos of their former life in Bulgaria. It seems that in a way they choose to keep the two periods – their life in Bulgaria and their stay in Greece after their migration – totally separated. How could we really interpret this absence of the pre-migration context in their photos? Leo Spitzer (1999) argues that we have to take into consideration all contextual information in reference to a photo – especially the discourse that it generates – in order to read and understand the visible but also the hidden meanings in a photo. Having this in mind, Tania's comment on why she doesn't have photos from Bulgaria in her personal photo album here, is revealing: "In Bulgaria, I keep the photos of the life that I had there." It seems that for Tania crossing the border into Greece inaugurated a new life, which in a symbolic way she wants to keep separate from her life in Bulgaria. This is also related to the different patterns of migration for the Bulgarian women in relation to migrants from Albania. These women have usually arrived in Greece alone to work as live-in caregivers of the elderly. For them migration to Greece is considered a temporary project which will yield economic profits for the family which is left back in the country of origin, a kind of interval before they return again to Bulgaria. If we also take into consideration that most of the Albanian migrants started bringing photos from Albania once they started thinking of their settlement in Greece on a more permanent basis, it becomes clear why Bulgarian women adopt different memory strategies.

Another important issue concerns the production of the photographs in the two different periods of life of the Albanian migrants. During the communist regime in Albania, people did not own their own cameras and so all the photos were taken by some professional photographer of the region, whom you could easily find near public places where people would gather – like parks, cafes, schools – and on official occasions (celebrations, weddings, festivals) or you could call upon request. Because of this state of affairs most of the photographs of that period are set out in the public

space and depict very specific and special occasions, related usually to collective action. On the contrary, photos taken since their migration in Greece are most of the times taken with the migrants' own camera, which they bought soon after they came, and a majority of them reflects scenes from personal and every-day life. In a way, through the ownership of their own camera they become the exclusive producers of their “photo archive”, deciding on what or who to photograph and in which pose.

In relation to the above, a great number of our informants' photos from the communist period are related to activities and practices imposed by the state and which expressed notions and ideologies of the communist regime: voluntary work, gymnastic and military drills and demonstrations, team-work. Most of the photos are crowded with people -usually friends, co-students, co-workers – who pose “all together” (a word used very often by the informants) in the camera. These photos, instead of reproducing a memory of the authoritative character of the communist regime, they usually generate a discourse on companies, friendships, collective (team) spirit, affection for one another and a keen nostalgia for this kind of relations and feelings. According to the interviews that we have conducted with many migrants companionship is one of the basic things for which they yearn from their life in Albania. Moreover, it is one of the most important values which they seem to miss in their life in Greece. Thus, it is not without meaning that for example Bujar or Aris decide on showing us photos of the kind that I described above. Analyzing the discourses that are being generated while displaying all photographs of the past, we realize that memory of the past is being re-interpreted through the lenses of today's experiences and “points-of-view”. We have to bear in mind that that the activity of remembering is a complex one, which above all takes place for, as much as in, the present. Following Kuhn's argument in relation to photography – inspired by Maurice Halbwachs' classic work on memory (Halbwachs 1992) - we believe that memory is understood better as a position or a point of view on the present than as an archive or a repository of bygone.

Photographs are never stories in themselves but act as a prop, a prompt, a pre-text; they set the scene for recollection of a past which is always mediated – rewritten, revised – through memory.

It is in this context that we should also examine another interesting contradiction in relation to the content of the personal photo albums of some of the Albanian migrants whom we interviewed. On the one hand we noticed the almost total absence of

photographs which refer to their working environment in Greece, despite the prominent place of work in their life stories. On the other hand, there is an abundance of photos revealing aspects of their working identity before their migration and of former work contexts.

The fact that they choose not to have photographs of their present labor experience or that, if they have, they choose not to show them to us point to issues related to the degrading aspects of migrant labor. The former work experience of Anieza and Bujar as schoolteachers is used to correct the negative image linked to their present working identity (house-cleaning and building houses, respectively). Through the photographs that depict their former work experience and the discourse that the migrants set out while showing these photos, they supplement positively their self-image and they offer a counter-discourse to the stereotype of the migrant-worker that has no education or training qualifications. They narrate proudly details about their job in Albania, they refer to their working duties and they recollect the respect paid to them by the local community because of their role and their job identity. On the other hand they seldom refer to their job in Greece, or have any significant photos from this context. This is more evident, though, in the case of the women. Men, although they possess but a minimal number of photos with reference to their job, they usually hold a separate photo album consisting of photos of their work projects until now². While showing the particular photos they set out a success story in relation to how through hard work they managed to make it up in Greece, and on a second level they confirm their image as good craftsmen.

In contrast to the Albanian men who have very few photographs from their work place, or to the Albanian women who have no photos at all of that kind, Bulgarian women keep a certain number of photographs from their jobs in Greece. Most of these photos depict them with their employers in the workplace of the house, posing in a way that reminds us of common family photographs. In this context, Tania (a Bulgarian woman) has created an archive of photos of all the houses in which she has worked till now. The peculiar working regime justifies in a certain degree this fact, since the working place forms also for these women the private and personal space, which they more or less reappropriate while accommodating it. That is why many

² Most of the Albanian migrants work in the construction business. Photographs of their work-projects work as a sample for their next deal with a potential employer.

times we come across photos of these women posing in houses where other Bulgarian women, friends of them, work as live-in caregivers.

Apart from job-related photos, Bulgarian women also keep more photos depicting scenes of these women's every-day life beyond their working environment: with other Bulgarian women in the park during their mid-day time off, on the beach with the same company, in birthdays and name-days of themselves and friends etc. However, the discourse deployed by our informants commenting on this second set of "socializing" pictures is also closely related to the working regime: comments on a woman's employer who happens to be depicted in a photo, complaints about the particular working context which leaves them no free time at all and so forth. In general we noticed that both the photos outside the house-working place and the ones inside it, reveal that for these women memory of the migration experience is totally related to their working experience.

What kind of memory of the migration experience is being produced, though, for their family in the home country through the photographs that they decide to send them and which are supposed to depict life in the host country? They are not photos from work, but the ones depicting these women in the park and in leisure time, carrying thus a sense of entertainment and pleasure for people in the home country. In this way, a very particular idea and memory of the migration period is being constructed, which presents an idealized image of their daily lives in the host country. The same is also true for the Albanian migrants. For example in Bujar's photo album we see that among the first photos that he sent back to his family was one depicting a table full of different foods, fruits and drinks - a sign of affluence – while Vaso tells us that she has sent to her family photos of their expensive new-bought car – a sign of technological modernity and a symbol of economic and social status and success. In this way, we notice that through visual documents people can play an active role in the construction and reproduction of a certain memory.

When we visited together with Anieza (an Albanian informant) her mother in Albania we realized that, as Anieza had told us, her mother keeps all the photos that Anieza sends her in a specific towel. Addressing herself to her daughter while holding this towel she stated: "Here I have you". The photos which constitute company and comfort to the old woman, also form records of both absence and presence because through them Anieza, although being far away, is in a symbolic way always present.

On the other hand, what can we learn from the photos that travel the other way around? The pictures that are being sent from migrants' families, friends and relatives from the home countries usually depict family rituals having taken place there: marriages, baptisms and the arrival of new family members, national holidays, family gatherings and celebrations. These kinds of photos are used to preserve a pre-migration family memory, but also to produce a memory of the new transnational family. Through these photos, which depict any possible transformations of the family unit, migrants have the opportunity not merely to be witness to but actively to participate in certain family rituals which are integrally tied to the ideology of the family. In the context of the transnational family, the photos function as important mediators for the family's cohesion and togetherness. The same purpose seems to be served by the family photographs that migrants send back home which also depict similar patterns of family life.

We would like to conclude by considering the role that migrants' photo albums might play in the creation of second generation migrants' memory. The photos that Anieza has taken in the host country and the ones she has brought with her from Albania constitute an important heritage for her children. As she pointed out she wants her children to keep the photos that have been taken since their migration in Greece and look at them when they grow up in order to always "remember" where they started from - the family's migration story. These photos which, according to Anieza, act as records of their economic and social mobility in the host country, become in a way documents of the migration experience. On the other hand the photos which have been brought from Albania "feed" the memory of a historical past and of a country in which the children have never lived. In Anieza's photo album, we find a photo of Skenterbei - who is perceived as one of the greatest historical personages of Albania, and whose memory played an important role in the construction of Albanian national ideology. She stated that she has deliberately included the particular photo in the album in order for her children to find it and through it to be able to set a discussion concerning the historical past of Albania. In this way, every time her children will look at it they will "recollect" something of the history of their country of origin. In the particular case the photos can become the means for the children to discover and reappropriate a country which is presumed to be their home-country and a historical past which is totally unfamiliar to them and to which they won't have the chance to be introduced through school. In conclusion, we

would say that both the personal stories and the historical narrations that certain photos of Anieza's album generate, form the "tools" for her children to construct or renegotiate a certain memory and image of the country of origin.

Conclusion

Considering migrants' photo albums as a generative ethnographic locus for the study of the production of migrants' personal and collective memory, in this paper we tried to explore how migrant subjects renegotiate past and present experiences in relation to their migrant status. Personal photos have a significant part in the production of memories, offering us pasts which in one way or another reach into the present, into the moment of looking at a picture. They actually work as a mechanism through which the past can be constructed and situated within the present. Through the process of producing, selecting, ordering, displaying photographs, a meaning is actually in the process of making itself in relation to the specific historical and cultural context in which this process takes place. Taking this into consideration there can be no last word about any photograph, but each time we look at a photo new meanings and interpretations of the past are produced. Bearing this in mind, the digitized photograph archive and linked website that will be designed in the context of our research project can function as another "site" of memory production. Issues related to the fact that we are responsible for the creation of a new "photograph album" by choosing certain photographs and providing a particular interpretive framework through our comments, and that a number of visitors of the site are going to "read" these photos according to their own social background, should make us more aware of issues related to the constant reshaping of memory and the power relations involved in this process.

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