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Olena Fedyuk ^a

^a Social Anthropology, Central European University, Budapest

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Images of Transnational Motherhood: The Role of Photographs in Measuring Time and Maintaining Connections between Ukraine and Italy

Olena Fedjuk

Photographs occupy a special place among the tokens of love and care that glue together transnational families: they fill in the absences, compensate for the lack of intimacy and serve as a reminder of the ‘other life’ that was disrupted by migration. Through examining the photos that circulate between Ukrainian migrant mothers in Italy and their families at home, I try to grasp desired representations of migration and home, motherhood and family. Collected during fieldwork in Italy and Ukraine, and interpreted in the light of interviews and participant observation, the photographs studied often unravel the conflicting interests within transnational families. The article shows how the pictures that flow between Ukraine and Italy measure time differently abroad and at home, reflect the imagination of success and failure in migration, and illustrate how responsibilities and obligations are unequally distributed within transnational families.

Keywords: Transnational Parenthood/Motherhood; Photographs; Italy; Ukraine; Female Labour Migration

Introduction

This article uses photos as a way of increasing our understanding of the quality of transnational ties between Ukrainian female migrants in Italy and their families in Ukraine. ‘The family is the site of conflicting interests’, wrote Parreñas (2001a: 83). Every member within a family has certain expectations and duties at every given stage of their life-cycle. Migration often challenges the habitual division of roles within a

Olena Fedjuk is Research Fellow in Social Anthropology at the Central European University, Budapest. Correspondence to: Dr O. Fedjuk, Dept of Social Anthropology, Central European University, Zrínyi u. 14, Budapest 1051, Hungary. E-mail: novyjbox@yahoo.com.

family: children become primary breadwinners; mothers are separated from infants; and fathers and grandparents become sole care-givers for children. Maintaining transnational connections is not to be taken for granted; it involves commitment and opportunities (time, money) that have to be present on both sides of the family (see also the articles by Boccagni and by Leifsen and Tymczuk, this issue). The exchange of care, according to Baldassar (2007: 392–3), depends on ‘a dialectic of capacity (ability), obligations (cultural expectation), and negotiated commitments (family relations and migration histories), which change over the family and individual life course’. Therefore, relations within transnational families are not just dependent on individual love and care, but on a number of social, economic and culturally shared expectations, which determine ‘who provides care for whom, how much, when and why’ (Baldassar 2007: 393).

While the transnational migration literature pays much attention to maintaining connections within migrants’ families, most research is done on the care provided for the children and families left behind (Andall 2000; Gamburd 2000; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997; Margold 2004) or on the redirection of migrants’ care and love from their distant families to the children in care in migrants’ workplaces (Hochschild 2003; Parreñas 2001a, 2001b, 2005). In this article, I look at the directionality of care flows within transnational families and question what care migrants receive from their families. What is the distribution of emotional labour within transnational families? Who provides emotional support across distance, and for whom? Using pictures as primary media, I attempt to break the analytical ‘unit’ of the transnational family, without denying the strength of transnational ties and existing care chains. Another pair of questions central to this article is why a migration flow, like that of Ukrainian women to Italy, requires a scrupulous representation and what kinds of performativity of migration are linked to ‘proper’ gender/familial roles, in particular motherhood, within transnational families?

Addressing the material and symbolic value attached to photographs within a wider object circulation occurring among migrant families tackles one of the fundamental issues in transnational migration research: ‘It is worth asking to what extent the researcher’s focus on transnational processes and practices reflects the concerns and emphasis of the participants in the research, as opposed to reproducing the particular conditions under which the ethnographer lives and conducts his or her research’ (Wilding 2007: 332–3). Indeed, on my visits to migrants’ families in Ukraine, I encountered one of the main problems in my research: oftentimes, the family members had a limited image or little opinion of the experiences of their migrant relatives in Italy. However, bringing pictures into the conversation—browsing through albums or showing a few photos—almost always created a bridge of common experiences commented on by both migrants (who have sent the pictures) and their families (who have received them), thus establishing a space for discussing common issues.

Owing to the variety and individuality of the images circulating between migrants and their homes, I do not aim to create any rigid form of classification of images or

the ways in which they function. However, during my research many of the images and the ways in which they were presented to me did fall into several broad groups. I begin by discussing the significance of the exchange of photographs as a part of the larger object exchange described in the literature on transnational migration. Subsequently, I discuss two types of picture: those sent from home to migrants in Italy and photos sent by migrants back to Ukraine.

The materials for this article were collected during fieldwork among two generations of Ukrainians migrating to Italy. Interviews and participant observation were carried out among migrants in the Italian cities of Bologna, Brescia, Ferrara, Milan, Naples and Rome, and among migrants' family members in the western region of Ukraine, between August 2007 and September 2008. The research was done separately with the migrants and their families. Whereas, as a researcher, I had the privilege of being able to move freely across the borders, many of my informants in Italy could not leave the country and their families could not visit them either. While the research is based on multiple encounters with, and discussions about, photographs, the specific pictures used in this article come from five families who gave their consent and generously found time to discuss their photographs with me.¹

Ukrainian Migration to Italy

Italy is the third-most-popular destination for Ukrainian migrants, after Russia and Poland. There are an estimated several hundred thousand Ukrainians in Italy, of whom 133,000 are officially registered (Caritas 2008). Among the latter, 80 per cent are women. Ukrainians are the fifth-largest migrant group in Italy, and are mostly employed in care and domestic work. According to Caritas (2003), 64 per cent of all Ukrainian migrants are married, 90 per cent have children, but only 6 per cent have their children with them in Italy. Unlike their counterparts from the new EU accession countries,² Ukrainian migrants face strict visa regimes that prolong women's separation from their families. Thus, while Romanian, Polish and Bulgarian migrants can make regular and quite frequent visits home, and even establish working shifts involving two or more women from the same kin network rotating every few months while working for one Italian employer, most Ukrainian women spend two to three years on average in Italy before they are able to obtain some sort of residence permit and thus visit home. For Ukrainian migrants, obtaining the first residence permit usually means being able to go home at least once a year. However, women often spend another five years reapplying for yearly permits, which involves a great amount of paperwork and limits their opportunities to travel. In this context, transnationalism, as an opportunity to move freely across borders, is a luxury that was made possible for some migrants (e.g. Romanian, Bulgarian or Polish) by specific national and EU regulations. For Ukrainian migrants who spend years in tiring legal procedures to obtain long-term residence permits, transnationalism is a privilege that remains one of the main achievements in migration and comes only with years of separation and migration experience.

The feminised nature of migration to Italy has brought to Ukraine a crisis of care within migrants' families, along with clashes of gender roles similar to those seen in the case of female migration from the Philippines and South America (Hochschild 2001; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila 1997; Parreñas 2001a,b, 2005, 2008; see also Carling *et al.*, Leifsen and Tymczuk, and Boccagni, this issue). Specifically for Ukraine, feminised migration led to an outburst of gendered nationalist discussions on all levels, from the populist and media levels to political and religious debates, where this migration was labelled 'migration of mothers'. The departure of women from their families is often discussed in the media as a crisis of family values, a disruption of traditional gender roles, a challenge to masculinity, women's transgression, and the eventual loss of a whole generation of children who grow up without motherly guidance (Keryk 2004; Vianello 2009). Thus, in the June 2009 issue of the *Gazeta Ukrainska*, a monthly newspaper published by Ukrainians in Italy (through an initiative by and with the support of Western Union), the front page covering the 2009 celebration of Mother's Day in Rome contained the following description:

This holiday has come back to us from non-existence, to re-establish an ancient tradition of celebrating woman-as-Mother, the Mother of God and Ukraine—a three-in-one symbol of the all-encompassing love, faith and hope. For Italy—a country with the largest female, maternal migration, Mother's Day carries in itself a symbol of Christian unity.

The description generously compares women to both the Virgin Mary and Ukraine, drawing the boundaries of the nation on the female bodies of its migrants (Yuval-Davis 1997). Such comparisons are quite binding: they glorify women on the one hand, while reminding them that it is their migration that disrupted the unity of the family and the nation on the other.

Thus, Ukrainian migration to Italy is not an exception but rather yet another case in the long list of examples of stigmatisation of female migration that can be found all around the world. Parreñas (2005: 92) draws a remarkably similar picture of the discourses surrounding female migration from the Philippines: '[T]ransnational families of migrant women hold tremendous promise for the transgression of gender boundaries. Women's migration not only increases the economic power of women *vis-à-vis* men, it also places biological mothers outside of the domestic sphere'. While discussing the trap that fixation on normative gender roles can bring into transnational families, Parreñas (2005: 39) warns: 'The idealization of the nuclear family and the public conformity to such an ideal hurt women, since they hide the dysfunctions of the economy at the same time that they deny the nation's dependence on women's labor migration'. She continues that public pressure from states, schools and churches to uphold the nuclear family 'enshrine[s] this type of family at the cost of ignoring the different needs of other types of families' (Parreñas 2005: 30). Such a rigid division of family roles not only condemns transnational migrants' family arrangements as deviant, dangerous and unwanted, but ignores all those practices

that can allow us to understand migrants' choices, strategies and decisions, denying any flexibility within the whole family unit.

Photographs: Performing Migration and Family Ties

'Perhaps one of the most widespread social uses of photographs is as objects of exchange', write Edwards and Hart (2004: 13). They go on to emphasise the multiple layers in such an exchange: 'While the image itself is of course central to the act of giving, receiving and utilizing, the materiality of the photograph is equally part of the social meaning of exchanges'. Photographs which, just like migrants, travel across the borders, can help us to get a better understanding of hierarchies, care-flows existing within and emotional labour invested into migrants' families to maintain transnational connections. In their work on family photographs in the UK, Drazin and Frohlich (2007: 55) note that '[P]hotographs participate in relationships and exchanges', thus emphasising that not only are they the objects of exchange that help to form relationships but, through exchange, they become a form of the relationship in itself. Therefore, my focus will be not only on the content of the image but also on the consumption and framing of the photographs (Berger and Mohr 1975; Drazin and Frohlich 2007; Margold 2004; Wolbert 2001).

Putting photographs as the focus of this article can help to 'evoke experience of emotion, embodied experience [...] in a way that is untranslatable into written word' (Pink *et al.* 2004: 171). Thus, bringing the pictures to the reader allows us to make the notion of the emotional price of maintaining the transnational family more real, sharp and vivid. While the focus on photographs is rare in the transnational migration literature, there have been several groundbreaking works that make use of photographs' powerful expressive potential. Already in 1975, in their book *A Seventh Man*, Berger and Mohr make images equally important to words for representation of the migration experience. In Berger's words, it is 'the photo that defines an absence', that dominates the migration experience for both migrants and their families back home (1975: 16). Wolbert's (2001) text on the pictures exchanged by Turkish labour migrants in Germany and their families explores the role which pictures play in transforming migrants' families into transnational families, while Margold's (2004) text, which looks at expressive production (these are mainly the pictures of migrants taken by themselves) of Filipina migrants in Hong Kong, focuses more on the migrants' transforming subjectivities.

Images have recently been picked up by several hypermedia/online projects as a powerful tool for mapping out migrants lives—that is, their connections with homeland, within families, migrants' making sense of their past and present, and ideas of home (Miller 2009; Pythagoras Project nd). Following these works, this article looks at the exchange of photographs within transnational families, not as an accidental collection of snapshots, but as deliberate (if not conscious) representations of home and migration experiences and of life in separation. Such representations,

I argue, are heavily informed by the differing expectations and obligations assumed within the course of migration by migrants and their non-migrating families (see more on this in Zentgraf and Stoltz Chinchilla, this issue).

Since the 1990s, when the migration literature shifted its focus to the transnational nature of contemporary migration, special significance has been given to the flows of remittances, material objects and, partially, photographs within migrants' transnational communities. In one of the earliest texts on transnational migration, Basch *et al.* (1993) attribute great importance not only to remittances but also to the flow of goods (including tapes, videos and records) between Vincentian and Grenadian immigrants to New York and their homes. Such a flow of material objects serves, in the authors' argument, as both a means of creating meaningful, multidimensional connections across borders and as proof of the existence of transnational social fields.

In her account of a village in the Dominican Republic, of which a third of the inhabitants are working in Boston, Levitt (2001) starts her description of the visibility of migration by referring to the villagers dressed in T-shirts embossed with Boston company names and logos, and to the presence of multiple objects, like the packaging from food and drink products produced in the USA. To the author, this visible presence is the first trace of migration that grabs the attention of a visitor; the presence of objects marks the absence of people and points to the transnational links of the local village.

A special focus on the flow of objects and photographs comes in the transnational literature with the development of transnational parenthood—specifically, the transnational motherhood literature. Parreñas pays significant attention to what she calls 'bridges of constant communication' (2001a: 142)—that is, the exchange of letters, phone calls, tapes and videos. All these exchanges serve as a way of making separation more bearable, maintaining connection, making up for the lack of intimacy, proving love, and re-enacting a family at a distance. Gamburd (2000) uses pictures of migrants' families in Sri Lanka to visually document the absence of the migrating mother. The photos in her text present strikingly contrasting groups of very young children and ageing care-givers.

Documenting absence and maintaining transnational connections are not the only roles that photographs perform. Talking about female migrants from African countries to Italy, Andall (2000) discusses how, in the pictures sent home, migrants pose in front of an object of luxury in the house of their employers, thus demonstrating their own success and access to Western goods. As described in the transnational literature, pictures therefore function not only as a way of connection but also as a way of representing and performing migration, especially for the audience that stays behind. Performing such functions, these photographs cannot be seen as accidental, but are selected and used in ways that make it possible to approach the imagined ideal of 'proper' motherhood, dutiful migrant and caring family in separation.

The Role and Place of the Photograph in the Family

Like many Ukrainian migrants who live at their place of work in Italy, Inna (49) and Ihor (50) created their own ‘Ukrainian corner’—a little space of remembrance and active association with their homeland (Figure 1). The dwellings of Ukrainian migrants in Italy rarely bear many signs of the personalities of the people who live there. Unless it is a flat where a whole family who migrated lives, these dwellings are highly temporary, even if inhabited by the same people for years. Sparsely equipped with borrowed furniture and things given away by Italian employers—all good-quality furniture and valuable presents are sent back to Ukraine—these dwellings are mostly rented shared-room accommodation or simply a room or half a room in the household of a migrant’s employer. However impersonal, each one of these dwellings has some little shrine composed of icons, family pictures from home, political and religious souvenirs and, often, a Ukrainian flag. These shrines come in numerous forms and shapes and contain various components, but they are always present, and it is always pictures from home that occupy the prominent position in them.

On my visits to Ukrainian migrants in Italy, every home I went to had a number of pictures from Ukraine on display. In contrast, on my visits to the homes of the migrants’ families in Ukraine, I rarely saw pictures displayed of their relatives



Figure 1. Bologna, 2007. The mantelpiece of a room in an Italian home, where a Ukrainian couple works and lives, is decorated with pictures of grandchildren, icons and religious souvenirs from holy places. There are also two Ukrainian flags, a picture of Ukrainian Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko and her party’s flag, and a symbol of Ukrainian statehood, the *bulava*.

(often mothers) sent from Italy. Most such pictures were stored in albums and envelopes or on the computer, while those on display were from the days when the family was together. In their article on the significance of different framings of photographs in English homes, Drazin and Frohlich (2007: 51) suggest that the location of photos, their public display, or their absence from visible spaces, should not be seen as accidental: '[T]he range of ways of materially contextualizing photos (which we call "framing") in the home map out a family's collective intention to share memories in future with assorted relatives'. Viewing a display of photos as a materialised intention to preserve certain selected memories for future recollection leads us to ask what—in transnational families, where daily experiences and routines of familial interactions are disrupted—is meant to be remembered and by whom. I argue that choices on such matters are dictated not only by the differentiated roles and responsibilities allocated within the transnational families in times of migration, but by the very goals and imagination of the migration enterprise.

In the context of transnational families, the photographs and their framing in themselves become a form of sharing, which helps to make up for distance and absence (Margold 2004; Miller 2009; Wolbert 2001). For domestic live-in workers, whose work and privacy spaces often collide, a display of pictures from home often demarcates an asylum of what is really 'theirs', occupying a limited space on a shelf or bedside table, sharing a territory with objects that, at home, would not be kept together—pictures of family and of political leaders, religious calendars, small flags and icons. However, when the living space coincides with a workplace, these pictures together with *all* other objects are placed in such spaces on the basis of one criterion: they all mean *home*.

Another factor that I found looming large in migrants' choices about displaying certain images but not others was formulated by Drazin and Frohlich (2007: 68): '[T]he motivation behind photographic framing practices does not only lie in the recapturing of the past, but the preservation and realization of possibilities for the future'. In this sense, to display a picture of the family in a migrant's dwelling makes it possible to imagine the possibility of return and future reunification. In contrast, displaying a picture of a migrant mother who is away is to remind a family of separation. It therefore makes sense that the only pictures of migrants exhibited in migrants' homes are pictures of migrants' visits or pre-migration pictures in which the whole family is together. The pictures thus establish 'the right' order of things, giving hope for the possibility of re-establishing this disrupted order in future.

Asymmetries of Keeping in Touch

However, such 'good intentions' often lead to neglect and the ignoring of migrants' lived experiences. Very often, maintaining connections under conditions of separation becomes the migrant's responsibility. It is usually the duty of the migrating relative not only to be in touch by phone (since s/he commands more resources than the family at home) but also to constantly indicate their interest in life in Ukraine,

and to present their period in Italy as an empty limbo in which time does not move, life is not lived, and only work and the sense of separation from the family are present. Strikingly, the unequal distribution of duties was normalised and internalised not only by migrants' families but also by migrants themselves who, on top of the effort of working abroad, had to pick up the larger emotional and practical share of the family's communication. To illustrate such asymmetry, I recount here the story of one migrant interviewee, Ljubov, whose pattern of communication with her family proved typical rather than exceptional.

Ljubov (47) had come to Italy six years earlier, and had since brought over her two younger children. Her third and oldest son, 28-year-old Dmytro, was married and living in Ukraine. While visiting her in Naples, I saw Ljubov making phone calls to Ukraine several times a week; she maintained contact with the widest circle of relatives—that is, her son, her daughter-in-law, her daughter-in-law's mother, and even the Ukrainian girlfriend of Ljubov's middle son and the girlfriend's father. She was also directing the renovations of her new flat in Ukraine and keeping in touch with the care-giver who looked after her disabled sister. On multiple occasions, Ljubov discussed details of her son's life in Ukraine, for example, relating how unhappy she was that Dmytro had no time to fix his and his wife's room or to buy the furniture that they lacked.

On my visit to Ljubov's eldest son, Dmytro, in Ukraine (when Ljubov was still in Naples), I was only able to talk to Dmytro's wife Olena who, despite the constant contact with Ljubov, had very little idea of her life in Italy. She knew that Ljubov had a job, but could not give any details of what it was. She knew Ljubov lived in a flat and that the youngest of Ljubov's children went to school. Olena had no pictures of Ljubov in Italy and, when I handed them some that I had taken of Ljubov on the promenade in Naples, the family looked at them for a brief moment and stuck them into the album in one bunch. Despite all their communication, Ljubov's family in Ukraine did not know that she had married an Italian and subsequently been widowed, a fact that Ljubov does not like to advertise but that would not be so difficult to deduce, if only Ljubov's relatives cared to know it.

I witnessed a similar disproportion of knowledge about each other's lives among most transnational families I interviewed. A part of this unevenness can be attributed to the fact that, for the family members who have stayed behind, it is indeed very difficult to imagine life in the country of migration (Carling 2008). However, while some of the women I interviewed in Italy even knew what their children were wearing on that day in Ukraine, most families in Ukraine could not even answer questions such as 'Where does your mother live now?' or 'Where does she work and what does she do at work?'. Carling (2008: 1457) suggests that the inequality of the emotional labour put into keeping in touch stems from a differentiated positioning of migrants and non-migrants within the 'moralities of transnationalism', in which it is the migrant's obligation to revitalise and nourish transnational connection, as a form of paying the 'gift of commonality'. In the case of Ukrainian female migration to Italy, these obligations are magnified by the fact that it is the mothers of the families who

are migrating, and even if they are doing it with the family's consent and for the common good, they are expected to make up for their absence; they often feel guilty for leaving their parents, husbands and children behind (also see Zentgraf and Stoltz Chinchilla, and Boccagni, this issue).

Pictures from Home: Connecting to the 'Real' Life

Maintaining connections within transnational families between Ukraine and Italy is getting easier owing to the increasing availability of free Internet communication like Skype and chat programmes, relatively low phone tariffs (especially those from Italy to Ukraine) and the availability of mobile phones, which permit being 'on line' virtually at any moment. However, such simplification of communication hardly translates into equal investment in communication: it still remains primarily the responsibility of the migrant to keep in touch.

Printed photographs occupy a special place in transnational communication. They travel between Italy and Ukraine just like people: 30 or more hours in overloaded and often overcrowded minibuses that run in their thousands every Thursday from Ukraine to Italy and every Sunday back to Ukraine. The images are sometimes recorded on discs, but more often as paper prints, so that they can be immediately seen. When picked up by migrants from the minibus parking lots in Italy at the weekend, they are then carried around for a while in women's purses to be shown with pride at work to Italian employers, and in parks and fast-food places to friends, before some of these images secure their place in the little 'shrine' at their Italian accommodation. Unlike telephone communication or Skype connection, which is gradually becoming more common among some families, printed photographs possess mediality and materiality, which is crucial for their further circulation and use. When talking of the significance of picture exchange among Turkish guest-workers in Germany and their families, Wolbert (2001: 27) emphasises: '[I]n a letter only ideas of the sender can be shared with the addressee. A picture, however, can be held, owned and displayed'. Thus, only printed images can be placed on the wall, shelf or bedside table, demarcating 'home', 'something that is truly theirs'. Thus, photographs do not only inform the viewer about the addressee; through their material form, they become a physical medium that bridges the distance and fills up the absences in transnational relationships.

Images of Children

Images from home, first and foremost, demonstrate the flow of time, the changes that have happened at home during a migrant's absence, and the progress the family has made. More importantly, such images usually capture the growth of children and grandchildren. Along with pictures of family and religious celebrations, marriages and the birth of new family members, they bring the sharp realisation of separation but also a sense of 'normality' and flow of life in Ukraine. Together with frequent,

often daily, telephone conversations, such images update the migrant on the changes, allowing them to somehow remain a part of these events, keeping the door open for the possibility of stepping back into the flow of life in Ukraine.

Figure 2 is a semi-humorous picture that Nadia received from her brother during her four-year stay in Italy. When Nadia learnt that she had a newborn nephew, she sent him a set of baby clothes. The photo she received back not only acquainted Nadia with the new family member, but also demonstrated gratitude for the present, acknowledging Nadia's presence in her nephew's life. It also pointed out to Nadia, a mother of two herself, how she was out of touch with reality and how she could not even approximate the size of the baby! Nadia commented that the photo made her laugh but also made her feel really far from her family in Ukraine.

Mothers and Children

In order not to limit the role of circulating pictures strictly to calculated messages of representation, it is important to emphasise their great emotional significance. This holds especially true for the exchange of pictures between children and parents. Children are probably the most vulnerable members of transnational families, and their frustration with the separation often comes through in pictures. However, such images and the messages encoded within them hardly make migrants' burden of separation easier. Such pictures often provoke a painful longing for home, a sharp realisation of absence and a sense of guilt for making the decision to leave.



Figure 2. Ivano-Frankivsk, 2004. A picture sent to Italy documenting a set of baby clothes that Nadia has sent from Italy for her newborn nephew. The picture jokingly but convincingly demonstrates how wrong Nadia was in her estimates of the size of the baby.

The prime significance of the visual aspect of communication between migrated parents and children soon became clear. Thus, in one of the pictures sent to Italy, 15-year-old Rostyslav (after two years of separation) writes on the back of the photograph: ‘Mother! What are you like now? Come back!!! I am very lonely!!! Kiss you. Miss you. Rostyslav’. In his message, Rostyslav does not ask his mother how she is or about her life in Italy. He asks her ‘What are you like now?’, referring to both visual and internal changes that might have happened during their separation, revealing the lack of the intimacy that only comes with daily interactions and presence. In the children’s world, where physical, visible transformations are a part of everyday life, visual images provide a closeness that even phone calls often cannot provide.

In Figure 3, Andrij, Nadia’s son whom she left when he was 14, took a picture of himself in order to send it to her in Italy. The inscription reads: ‘I took this photo with my mobile phone and printed it on our printer, so that you know what I look like now. I have already built up some muscles’. While formulated in a slightly jokey manner, the importance and intimacy of this image is striking: for a boy whose mother left when he was 14, the two years have been a lifetime in which he feels he has transformed into a man, and even his body went through some major transformations. The need for his mother to catch up with his new self, his new look, could be substituted neither by e-mail nor by daily telephone conversations. Here, the photograph’s ability as ‘enabler of the unity’ (Wolbert 2001: 24) comes through powerfully. Another clear message of this image is that of the new

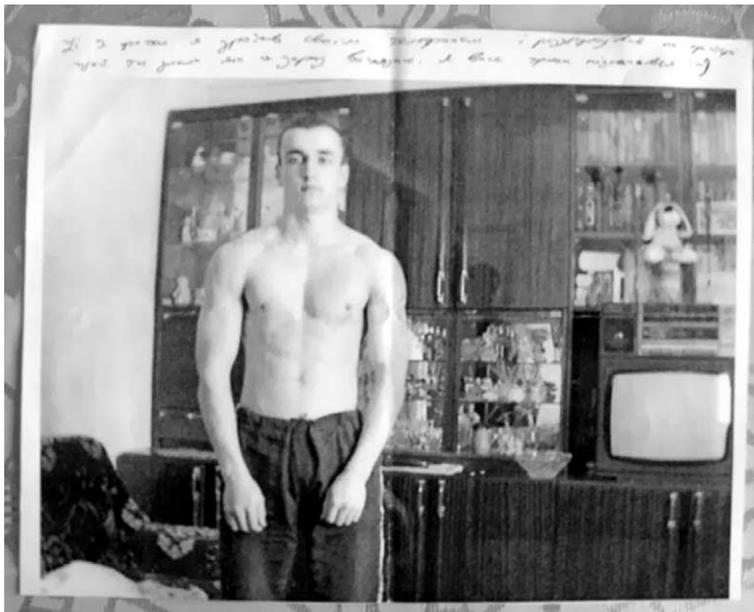


Figure 3. Ivano-Frankivsk, 2006. Updating his mother in Italy on his current looks, Andrij has sent this picture after a few years of separation.

acquisitions that Andrij had made, obviously with the help of his mother's money—a mobile phone and a new printer.

Presents Received from Italy

Photographs of presents received from Italy constitute another common category; these images often serve as tokens of a migrant's presence in the life of the family, as they document the material exchange that is already seen as a token of dedication, love and unity of the family. Thus, in the seemingly trivial Figure 4, Nadia's aunt is posing rather unconventionally in her nightdress. When I asked Nadia why her family chose to send such a slightly 'indecent' picture, Nadia explained that the nightdress was a present she sent home to her aunt from Italy, and that she was happy to see that the gown fitted and was used. The pictures of the presents received have thus closed the circle in the material exchange chain.



Figure 4. Ivano-Frankivsk, 2005. Migrant's aunt demonstrating a present from Italy: a brand new nightdress.

Iryna (50) stayed in Italy illegally for six years. In the meantime, her daughter graduated from university, got married and gave birth to Iryna's first grandson, Mykhailyk. Iryna talks to him on the phone and, when asked, Mykhailyk says his grandmother is in Italy and points at the phone. For his third birthday, Iryna sent him an electric car, which cost her over 100 euro. For Iryna, such an expensive gift for a three-year-old grandson was important as a way of demonstrating her unconditional love for and loyalty to him despite their separation, and that the family enjoyed top priority with her. Meeting their obligation, Iryna's family was very careful to explain to the young child that the present was from his grandmother, who he already knew lived in Italy. Mykhailyk, however, drew his own conclusions and, when talking on the phone to Iryna, he told her that it might be a present from her but it was the grandfather (Iryna's husband) who brought and gave it to him. This innocent example of the child's reasoning left Iryna quite sad and made her realise how time spent in migration is lost at home and cannot be made up even through frequent communication on the phone. Iryna added that it was the 'last straw' that confirmed her decision that it was time to go back to Ukraine.

The pictures of the presents received from migrants and distributed among family members are, however, of incomparably greater emotional value to migrants themselves than to their families. Nadia, who returned from Italy in 2006, keeps all the pictures she sent from and received in Italy in several huge paper bags stored in a wardrobe. She does not display this part of her life in her family house but keeps it privately to herself. At my request, Nadia and her sister Ira (who never went abroad) went through hundreds of pictures, remembering how it was when Nadia was in Italy. Among them were numerous pictures of Ira's wedding, which had been sent to Italy. Many focused specifically on the details of Ira's dress and jewellery. Nadia commented: 'My sister is the sixth child in the family and she was sure that we would never have the resources to give her a proper wedding with a white dress. When I went to Italy, I sent her money for the dress and bought her very expensive jewellery, because I wanted her to have the best. She sent me this and many other pictures from her wedding and I was on the phone with her throughout most of the celebration'. Nadia has tears in her eyes as she recalls this but, for Ira, these sentiments and memories are apparently less vivid. As we talk over the pictures, she just shrugs her shoulders and says that it was so long ago (three years) that she can hardly remember all these details.

Material Acquisitions: Money Put To Good Use

Another group of images that clearly stands out relates to the development of a common project into which a migrant invests money. The progress of the house construction or renovation, a new car, mobile phones—all these images reinforce a sense that, though they may be separated by borders, the families are working on a common economic and social project, live by the same values and strive for

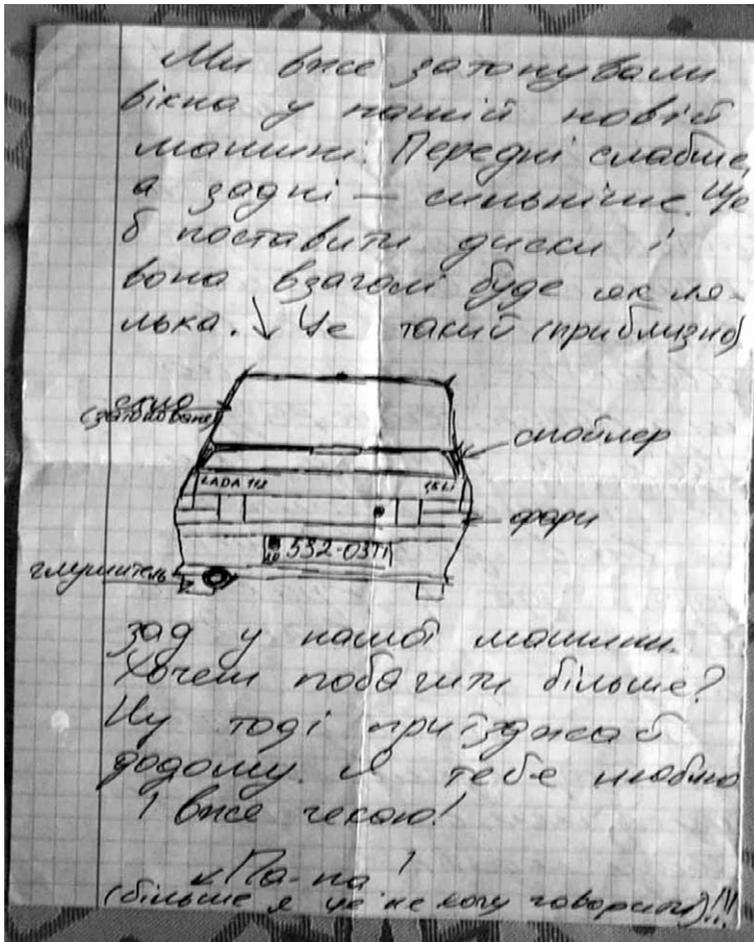


Figure 5. Ivano-Frankivsk, 2004. A letter sent to Nadia in Italy by her eldest son tells her about the car that was purchased with the help of the money Nadia has remitted home. The inscription runs: 'This is how (approximately) the back of our new car looks like. Would you like to see more? Well, then you have to come back home. I love you a lot and already waiting for you! Bye-bye! (I don't want to say this ever again)!!!'.

similar goals. Importantly, they tell migrants that, while they sacrifice their chance to be at home with the family, they should not doubt the importance of their migration for the family; while the migrant works abroad, the family takes care of the rest, so that when the family reunites, the sacrifice of separation will not have been wasted.

The value of images sent across the border is not necessarily equal for both migrants and the family. Migrants seem to be much more dependent on these images for maintaining emotional strength away from home. Similarly, it is the picture sent from home that reinforces the 'normality' and flow of life in the fullness of familial

interactions and daily activities, development, growing up and life-cycles, while migrants' lives are perceived to be captured in limbo. Olha Kozak (2003: 35), a migrant domestic worker and author published in a Ukrainian anthology of lyrics, poetically expresses this common sense of life passing by so often expressed in migrants' accounts:

In Ukraine one counts minutes:
 Someone has a funeral,
 Someone has a baptism.
 Yet here, time stands still and doesn't move:
 You live, but there is no life . . .

Pictures Sent Home: 'No-Story' Photographs

Images sent both to and from migrants are burdened heavily with representations. In her auto-ethnography on visiting her parents' country of origin as a second-generation migrant, Ramirez describes how, before family reunions, her mother would cautiously select the images that she would later show to the relatives. These would comprise some indisputably beautiful shots but also some very average pictures. When asked why she decided to include those images, she answered 'that she was quite aware of not wanting to portray their lives in Australia as perfect and wanted to balance out the good photos with some unflattering and simple ones, to avoid creating a gap between their extended family and themselves' (Ramirez *et al.* 2007: 425). Similarly, Ukrainian women who migrate alone have to be extremely cautious not to stir up the mistrust and jealousy of their spouses, gossip within extended families and neighbours, or feelings of neglect in their children.

None of the pictures sent can have the same value or be measured against the same scale (Ramirez *et al.* 2007). Thus, while pictures from Ukraine have more emotional value, those from Italy have to be much more carefully selected in terms of how they represent the migrants' lives. One contributory factor is that these pictures are sent from Italy—a more affluent country—back to the family, and they should not suggest or feed in any way into the dominant Ukrainian public opinion that a migrant's life is easy. In contrast to the situation described by Margold (2004) with Filipina workers in Hong Kong, who send home pictures from fancy shopping centres depicting them smiling and happy in fashionable new clothes, the pictures of Ukrainian women in Italy, to use Wolbert's (2001) analysis, are *not supposed* to tell any story. As a mother of a family, a migrating woman should be careful not to suggest that she has found a new self, a new life, or been able to experience something that was otherwise repressed by her situation at home.

During a nine-day walking pilgrimage dedicated to the well-being of the families of transnational migrants, organised by the Ukrainian Greek Catholic church (UGCC), Father Pavlo, one of the leading figures in the establishment of the UGCC in Italy,

emphasised in each of his daily talks the growing insensitivity and indifference to the lives and feelings of women working abroad displayed by their families, including their children:

It often happens that we stay in Italy for years [...] sending money home, working days and nights, bearing the separation. Our families miss us, but after a few years, everyone gets used to it, children get used to managing by themselves. And then when we have enough and just want to go back home, it is our families who convince us to stay. How many women have told me that when they phoned home to say they were returning for good, they only heard their families reasoning: 'But what would you do here? There are no jobs here. Maybe you should stay some more'. This is how we get pushed out by our own families.

Father Pavlo, however, partially puts responsibility on women themselves for generating this attitude in their families. He explains that many women are reluctant to tell the truth about their work even to their children and family, because they find it either very undignified or because they do not want the family to get frustrated about the difficulties their mothers go through. Olha, who has been in Italy for over five years, seems to be trapped in the patterns that the majority of the women I talked to ended up in to a greater or lesser degree:

I have a great relationship with my sons (20 and 25) but I don't like to tell them that I work five jobs to earn this money. If they knew how hard it is for



Figure 6. Genoa, 2007. The picture is taken during a group trip (from Bologna to Genoa) organised by the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church for Ukrainian migrants.

me, they might refuse to take the money. [...] But even when I start talking about this, my youngest son hugs me and says that he is very grateful for my sacrifice, but he can't stand listening to how hard it is for me in Italy [...] so I don't tell them.

While Olha sees her relationship with her sons as perfect, it is obvious that, after a speedy divorce from her husband and given her sons' reluctance to listen to her, she has nobody to talk to about her actual everyday experiences and emotions. During my visit to Olha, I saw her calling home often several times a day, discussing minor details of the happenings in Ukraine, but I never heard her discussing anything unrelated to the family back home. Her position within her family denies her any multiplicity of roles; even if she is divorced and has brought up children and two grandsons, her role within her transnational family is that of a mother. There is no space for acknowledgement that Olha lives a life in Italy, that she has five jobs where she interacts with colleagues, that she is acquiring new qualifications as a nurse, or that she lives with an Italian man—in fact, for anything that is unrelated to her Ukrainian family. The pictures that Olha sends home on rare occasions are of Tuscan landscapes and historical sites.

Lonely Vacation

Probably the most common type of photograph sent home from Italy are those taken during rare vacations or against the background of local historical sites. Migrants' pictures usually present them against a church, or an exotic blossoming tree, maybe against the sea as the background. The purpose of such settings resonates strongly with Wolbert's (2001) description of photographs sent over a decade from Berlin by the father, Ilyas, to his Turkish family back home as amazingly repetitive; in most of them, Ilyas is standing at full height, neutral in his posture, against an unidentified landscape, some scenery or in the middle of a room. All of these pictures carry surprisingly little information about Ilyas' life in Germany. However, as Wolbert analyses, it is not the point of these pictures to give any information about his life or to tell any story, other than that Ilyas is in good health and thinks about his family. Wolbert then refers to the point that is crucial for the intentions of the Ukrainian women migrating away from their families: 'Photographs that do not situate the photographed person as belonging to a new group or another place, serve as a proof that the sender has not become a part of an alterneity. For this reason, they are not supposed to tell a story' (2001: 27–8). The 'vacation' pictures seem to serve this aim perfectly. Moreover, they bring out the notion of 'absence': the migrant is usually alone, thus demonstrating the absurdity of loneliness—even though the migrants are surrounded by the most beautiful landscape, and living in such a romanticised country as Italy, they are not enjoying it without their families.



Figure 7. Benevento, 2003. Embroidering traditional Ukrainian Easter towels in a park in Italy.

Ukrainian Life in Italy

Another ‘favourite’ topic for migrants’ pictures—with a clear purpose—can be seen in the images of social activities that are somehow related to Ukraine: usually a celebration of religious or social festivals, maybe a political event. In these pictures, migrants assert their belonging to Ukraine, at the same time reminding families at home that, even in Italy, they live a Ukrainian life. In Figure 7, two Ukrainian migrants are depicted in their rare free time (usually one day and one afternoon a week for live-in domestic workers). Though the picture is taken in Italy, there is absolutely nothing to indicate that. It is their activity that is the focus—the embroidering of traditional Ukrainian towels—demonstrating their non-participation in Italian life and their use of their rare free moments to do something highly associated with the traditional woman’s role. One can be sure that their thoughts are also about home while they are embroidering the traditional floral design. It is a ‘safe’ picture to send; it makes it possible to dampen potential feelings of jealousy among some members of the family and to emphasise once again that the best place to be is at home in Ukraine, even if the migrants now live in this seemingly affluent place, Italy.

In many instances, the pictures sent home (be they of the ‘lonesome’ vacation type, of migrants on the phone with the family, or with presents sent from home) are static; unlike pictures from home, which demonstrate change, these images confirm ‘non-change’. Migration thus is depicted and perceived as a limbo in which a migrant

puts her life on hold, until she returns to her family and gets a life again. Presenting life in migration as static and not moving without one's family is also a 'safe choice' for a mother. Thus, on top of dealing with the stress of downward professional mobility, and the social traumas of moving away from home and starting from scratch in a new environment, many migrant women have the double burden of dealing with their own hardships and helping their families to deal with separation. For many, the calls of their husbands from home with demands for more money and accusations of prostitution in a foreign land are a part of the migration experience, as are accusations from children that 'You have abandoned us'. Under these circumstances, the lives of migrants in Italy are followed with a particularly jealous eye from Ukraine and from country-fellows in migration. Only through constant reinforcement of common goals, loyalty and recognition of the differentiated duties and obligations can a transnational family maintain ties that have become too fragile through separation, suspicion and distance.

Conclusions: The Transnational Family as a Site of Conflicting Interests

Photography can be seen as the 'glue' which bonds together transnational families, where the 'close relationships inform their sense of obligation to care for each other and result in the ongoing transnational exchange of emotional support' (Baldassar 2007: 393). However, while functioning together on certain life-projects, transnational families should not be seen as homogenous units. First and foremost, they are 'sites of conflicting interests' (Parreñas 2001a: 83), and seeing them as such allows a stepping-away from an idealisation of free transnational flows across the borders and a clearer understanding of the unevenness of transnational social fields and differentiated obligations and duties within them.

The differentiated framing and consumption of images by migrants and their families is heavily rooted in the very purpose and experience of migration. 'The motivation behind photographic framing practices does not only lie in the recapturing of the past, but the preservation and realization of possibilities for the future' (Drazin and Frohlich 2007: 68). Therefore, it is not separation but the possibility of reunification that a picture has to profess. While pictures exchanged in migration carry necessary information and somehow bridge the gap of distance, they are not intended to be remembered or shared together in the future. What is intended to be remembered are the times spent together, a hope that there will be reunification. Migration, therefore, has to be seen as temporary and should not be celebrated by the family. Only moments of unity are worth remembering in photographs.

Among the tokens of love and care that flow across the borders to bond together transnational families, photographs occupy a special place: they fill in the absences, compensate for the lack of intimacy, and serve as a reminder of the 'other life' that was temporarily left behind. Unlike migrants themselves, whose transnational movement is often limited by visa regimes, legality status, tight work schedules

and economic restrictions, the flow of photographs not only maintains but also constitutes transnational connections. The content and the directionality of the flow of these photographs thus reflect the larger composition of transnational ties, speaking volumes of the obligations, moralities and hierarchies within these networks.

Transnational parenthood, especially motherhood, cannot survive without careful representation by both migrants and their families left behind; the images of a family's life separated by distance cannot be sent without an attentive strategising and a consideration of the effect they may have on the receiver and the judgments they might evoke. Such photographs often mirror the desired representation of migration and home, the 'proper' roles of a mother and a child, idealised notions of home, familial roles and the common future. The pictures that flow from Ukraine to Italy measure time in migration and at home, reflect the imagination of success and failure, and speak of responsibilities and obligations distributed very unequally within transnational families.

Notes

- [1] The names of all individuals have been changed.
- [2] For Italy, the greatest flows are from Romania—625,000 officially registered migrants; Poland—90,000; and Bulgaria—33,000 (Caritas 2008).

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