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THINKING GENDER 2010

Once Again about the Generation Gap: Women of Ukrainian Descent in the U.S.A. and their Community-Building Efforts.

This presentation is based on the findings of my ten-month ethnographic fieldwork in the Ukrainian community in New York, NY, combined with archival research and interviews with the members of the UNWLA, and lays out some of the directions of my PhD dissertation. The Ukrainian National Women's League of America (UNWLA) was founded in New York in 1925 and saw as its primary aim an active involvement of Ukrainian migrant-women into an organized community life. Today it is a non-partisan charitable organization which combines cultural activities with political lobbying, thus fully occupying the space allowed by their location in the diaspora, as discussed in current works on the construction and maintenance of global diaspora communities (Werbner 2002). Over the past five years, the UNWLA has been among the most successful diaspora organizations in engaging newly-arrived migrants into its work. At the beginning of the 1990s, when new migrants from Ukraine started to arrive to the U.S.A., the communication between the 'old' and 'new' Ukrainians in this country was marked by certain tensions – ranging from mutual suspicion to even hostility; and the emerging dialogue, in which women seem to take the lead, marks changes in the diaspora's orientation and calls for a closer attention to the place of women in the life of a migrant community.

Instead of looking at the history of the organization as a coherent story, I suggest examining conflicts and negotiations within that history; I am analyzing the negotiations between or among women that belong to different waves of Ukrainian migration to the U.S.A., have a

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different social background, belong to different age groups, and whose relation to the homeland and understanding of women's role in the nation- and community-building are sometimes conflicting. But instead of asking whether women's interests were once again surrendered for the greater community's good[1], I suggest that the success and failures of the dialogue between those different groups provide convenient grounds for analysis of the intersection of gender and ethnic identities of the diaspora at large.[2]

The idea of a Ukrainian women's organization which would unite the efforts of existing women's groups and individual women participating in the Ukrainian community life in the U.S. had been in the air for at least a decade before the Ukrainian National Women's League of America was set up (1925). The organization was established by well-educated women who were either the descendants of the first-wave Ukrainian migrants to the U.S. (pre-First World War, 1891-1914) or the second-wave migrants who left Ukraine after the WWI when the struggle for the country's independence had been lost. This make-up determined two goals that channeled the organization's work – participation in the Ukrainian community life in the U.S., and support of the Ukrainian people's struggle for independence of their own country (Kohuska 1952: 523). Those goals remained intact when the WWII refugees who were fleeing the communist regime joined the UNWLA.

Most of the work of the organization was done around charitable, educational, and cultural activities. They were organizing Ukrainian festivals, running Sunday schools for children, setting up exhibitions about Ukraine in public libraries of their towns and cities. The

[1] (see Hall 1993; Kaplan 1999; West 1997; Yuval-Davis 1997)
[2] In my definition of diaspora and its construction I follow the discussion by Pnina Werbner (2002), who sees it as a transnational community rooted in local material practices.

UNWLA also participated in political lobbying. After the WWII, for example, they raised money for the Ukrainian women and children who found themselves in camps for displaced persons in Europe. At the same time they appealed to the U.S. government to accept the Ukrainian war refugees.

Officially rejecting the "limited goals of women's emancipation" (Kohuska 1952: 32), while proudly stressing their status of an independent organization rather than some women's chapter of a diaspora's umbrella organization, the UNWLA has always been reluctant to clarify whether it was women's or national first. Indeed, their engagement with women's movement, though never stressed, was surprisingly consistent. The event that triggered the establishment of the organization was the exclusion of the National Council of Women of Ukraine from the International Council of Women in 1925; the membership was suspended on the grounds that they did not represent an independent state. Thus from the very beginning, the UNWLA presented their cause as a continuation of the Ukrainian women's movement which could not freely develop under the Polish and later communist rule in Ukraine.[3] In 1948, they initiated an establishment of the World Federation of the Ukrainian Women's Organizations (WFUWO) – an umbrella group which currently unites 23 Ukrainian women's organizations in diaspora and has a consultative status with the Economic and Social Council of the UN and with UNICEF (since 1993). They also joined the National Councils of Women of the U.S. (1952) and the World Movement of Mothers. Their membership in international women's organizations, however, was

[3] That the UNWLA was continuing the cause of the Ukrainian women's movement has been recognized both by the Ukrainian women's organizations that emerged in the 1990s and by the scholars studying the history of the Ukrainian women's movement. See, for example, Martha Kichorowska-Kebalo, "Exploring Continuities and Reconciling Ruptures: Nationalism, Feminism, and the Ukrainian Women's Movement from the Mid-Nineteenth Century to the Eve of the Twenty-First," *Aspasia* 1 (March 2007): 36-60 for the arguments that Ukrainian women's organizations in the diaspora should be studied as a part of the Ukrainian women's movement.

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often framed as serving the general Ukrainian cause because it allowed them to present the examples of human rights violations in the USSR in the international arena.

With the aspiration for the independent Ukrainian state as the main *raison d'être*, the Ukrainian diaspora in the West could not avoid the feeling of a crisis once Ukraine acquired its independence in 1991, and the UNWLA did not stay aside from the general discourse.[4] Now that the Ukrainian women in Ukraine did not need to be represented by anyone else, the organization had to re-orient its work one way or another. The feeling of the crisis was aggravated by the encounter with "other", Soviet-born Ukrainians, who started to arrive to the U.S.A. in great numbers in the early 1990s, bringing their set of relations to the homeland and their national identity different from that of the diaspora. The high expectations soon turned into a bitter frustration and the established diaspora essentially rejected a possibility of any dialogue with the fourth wave migrants, labeling them "homo sovieticus" for the high number of Russian speakers among them and their "ignorance" of the Ukrainian culture[5]. The new migrants were criticized for their passivity and unwillingness to join the established diaspora organizations, and were said to be interested only in the community-organized credit unions and sometimes churches – this attitude, even if with somewhat faded freshness and sharpness, still often underlies the communication between the representatives of the two waves[6].

The early references that the UNWLA makes to the "newcomers" were highly critical, too, and their engagement with the community activities was seen as "not plausible or foreseeable" (Zajac 1993: 19). However, it was gradually replaced with the understanding of the

[4] The Ukrainian National Women's League of America – Growth or Decline at the Times of Ukrainian Independence?" (Krawczuk 1998), "Looking for New Signposts: Ukrainian Community in the U.S. Today" (Markus 2001) – articles with these and similar titles mushroomed in *Our Life* (the official monthly of the organization) throughout the 1990s.
[5] (Markus 1998: 165; Satzewich 2002: 196)
[6] (Andriychuk 2005: 389; Kurowyckyj 2001: 19)

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important role the newcomers may have for the life of the diaspora. Already in the late 1990s, the "newcomers" become the main target of the UNWLA recruitment campaign, and the new recruitment kit, compiled last year, further restates the readiness to take into account the challenges the new migrants face and some willingness to adjust the organization's work in order to accommodate their needs. It is noted, for example, that the majority of recent migrants came to the U.S. for economic reasons and often have to use a part of their income to support their families in Ukraine. Together with the fact that a lot of them work in low-paying sectors, it may discourage them from the membership in the organization because of the dues to be paid. One of the suggestions goes that the contributions the migrants make to pay for the education of their children back at home or support of their parents could count in place of their membership fee, since a major part of the UNWLA's charity is directed towards children's education and support of the elderly. In addition, the "dues-free" first year membership has been introduced.

It can be argued that this change was connected not so much with the changing attitude to what counted as a marker of Ukrainian-ness as with the practical need of the organization and community to open the doors to new members if they wanted to continue to exist. The Ukrainian diaspora community in the U.S. entered the 1990s well-integrated and well-assimilated into the society of the host country with a rapidly growing level of language loss. Because the Iron Curtain stopped almost any migration from the territory of Ukraine after the WWII, already in 1980 American-born Ukrainians constituted over 80 percent of Ukrainian ethnic community in the U.S., and even among the majority of the post-WWII migrants the U.S. was thought of as a homeland (Pawliczko 1994: 363).

In this context, it was hard to miss the potential contribution the fourth wave could have for the community; in demographic terms, between 1990 and 2000 the fourth wave increased the

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number of persons of the Ukrainian ancestry in the U.S.A. by 21.5 percent (or by 155,000 persons in absolute numbers) and the number of Ukrainian speakers by 16.4 percent (Wolowyna 2005: 268). Whether it was a valid argument by itself or not, the UNWLA was among the first to hear it. They were not the only ones who remembered the tensions between their parents when those arrived to the U.S. and the established Ukrainian community in this country in the early 1950s. However, they seem to be among the few who believed that personal conflicts should not impede the work of the organization that had been nurtured by several generations of Ukrainian women. And to find out 'why', we have to go back to the question of whether the league has been women's or national.

To quote one of my interviewees, "The UNWLA would always come first, then the children, her work, and only then the husband… usually there was almost no time or energy left for the husband," joked he when reflecting on his mother's involvement with the UNWLA's work. For a great number of women, the UNWLA became the cause of their life – it was the space they created for themselves, the space where they could realize their ambitions, build up their skills, be a part of a worthy cause, and just have fun. To embrace the "national cause" was empowering because they believed in its importance, but also because it allowed them to learn how to petition their senators or international organizations, and how to communicate with the local press when they wanted to correct some information related to Ukraine or to explain the difference between Russia and the USSR. And to build the Ukrainian Museum in New York, which was then given to the community as a present, or to redistribute over 4 million dollars in scholarships for Ukrainian children in Brazil, Poland, Romania, Ukraine and many other countries may be a good example of a diasporic transnationalism, however, it also required a lot

of skill-building and learning on behalf of the women who proudly took up those causes out of their own initiative.

Among the most important things that were learned that way, was how to be American and to engage with the "American way of life" even if for helping keep the connection with the homeland of their ancestors. Whether this will be a cause interesting enough for the fourth wave migrants, who are still looking for their own niche in the organization is too soon to tell.

In Place of Conclusions

I used the word "empowering" a few sentences ago, however, I want to stress that I do not mean to ask whether an involvement into a "nationalist" project or work for the general community good can be liberating for women. It is more important to analyze how women manage to use certain gender norms and expectations for their personal growth and benefit, and what they have to compromise for that. The context of a diasporic community opens additional horizons for analysis because it invites us to consider the role of women in the making of a diaspora. What is their contribution into the overall visibility of diaspora in the country of settlement and for the homeland? And what allows women to organize independently? These are only a few of the questions that should be put forward in the research which would aim to gender diaspora studies and enhance our understanding of the women's involvement with nationalist projects on a transnational level.

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