

**Third Workshop on Contemporary European Migration History  
"History-Migration-Anthropology: New Perspectives on  
Migration and Migration History"  
Erfurt, Germany, November 2002**

**Edna Lomsky-Feder and Tamar Rapoport  
Hebrew University**

**Commenting on: How Pomaks from South Eastern Bulgaria cross borders:  
Nesting transnationalism and migration:**

**By: Dimitrina Mihaylova, University of Oxford**

Mihaylova's study is about the Pomaks – a Muslim religious minority from South Eastern Bulgaria. Embarking from this case study, she discusses the linkage between the loosening of national borders, the constitution of identity frontiers, and immigration. Studying the Pomaks enables Mihaylova to deal with major anthropological issues concerning movement and transnationalism, ethnic identity, and national belonging. Exploring the Pomaks she unveils identity shifts and struggles in the wake of the fall of the Iron Curtain. This political transformation loosens the borders in the Balkans. Mihaylova is especially interested in how the loosening of borders between Bulgaria and Greece is manifested in the establishment of cross-national contacts and movements, as well as in the construction of ethnic networks and identity. Her analysis shows how these macro processes have implications on the re-making of identity and on the opening of new opportunities for immigration, but not in the "expected" directions. Listening to and observing the Pomaks who stayed "at home" and following their movement in time and space both inside and outside Bulgaria, Mihaylova discusses the subjective and collective meanings of both domestic transition and border-crossing movements. She offers a multi-layered explanation to these sometimes contradictory movements: historical and economical, cultural and contextual.

Mihaylova's analysis focuses on the manner in which state national policies and antagonistic developments in the Balkan's nationalisms weaken ethnic identification and hinder the re-establishment of networks and links across borders to a point of no return. In my case, she says, while arguing with the anthropology of borderlands and transnational literature, I do not find cross-border hybridisation of identity or the evolvement of common ethnic identity, but rather inter-ethnic engagement in distinction making across the two sides of the border. Loosening of cross-national movement, Mihaylova claims, does not necessarily produce transnationalism. The Pomaks tend to escape the ethnic stereotyping in the Balkan countries by immigration to the West. They are not transnationals.

This is most probably the case of other groups too. In the case of the Russian Jewish immigration to Israel that we have explored, escaping ethnic stereotyping in the native home entails the paradoxical movement of homecoming in a transnational era. The spatial gathering of indigenous Jewish Israelis and Russian Jews in Israel availed by the fall of the same Iron Curtain, entails the emergence of mutual stereotypes between locals and newcomers within one ethnic group. In our case as well as in Mihaylova's case, exploring the "unexpected" problematizes the issue of ethnic and national belonging related to cross national movement. Both cases show the complex link between ethnic and national identity in immigration.

Mihaylova enables us to visit an ethnic group to whom we, or most of us, have been largely blind and deaf. Her study corroborates the theoretical and socio-political importance of studying a seemingly insignificant minor ethnic group. It is precisely the meticulous work of revealing the intriguing identity struggles of a small ethnic minority group that guides Mihaylova in tackling "greater" anthropological issues

and in confronting contemporary post-structural anthropological premises. Reading her thorough ethnographic study and careful, yet daring, analysis we gain new insights that challenge prevalent post-structural academic postulations. It teaches us, among other things, that the socialist state and regime, and the nation state as such, are not necessarily and simply rejected by suppressed groups after their dissolution, that ethnic affinity and identifications across borders are not always activated nor are a desired option, and that centralized engineered operations of collective identity of an ethnic group have multiple and contradictory consequences.

At the same time, the study corroborates “the success of the nation state in imposing antagonistic nationalist project,” as well as the contextualized nature of ethnic identity -- they shift together with the change in social relations and situations. The paper also substantiates the already established assumption about borderlands as fertile grounds for the study of identity borders and borderlines and transitional identities.

The fate of the anthropologist who is not from the “first world” (or who conducts her research outside the “first world”) is to provide a long and detailed description of the case study she explores. What is self-evident when one’s writing is intended for the hegemonic community of scholars turns into a problem, a puzzle that needs explication when it is designed for “outsiders.” This is our fate when we write about Russian Jews immigrants in Israel, this is Mihaylova’s fate too.

Until we read Mihaylova’s paper we always considered the recurring request of editors to “provide more information about the case study” as a burden. We resisted, yet complied with the hegemonic rule of the contemporary, stratified academic world. Yet, reading Mihaylova’s elegantly and beautifully written thick description and her skillful and analytical account of the Pomaks and the ‘Pomak question’

caused us to change our mind. We are fortunate this rule exists. In a world where post-structural jargon is obscuring the clarity of ideas, it is a pleasure to read Mihaylova's narrative, which interweaves theoretical issues, evidence, and description in a delicate balance. At the same time although we are distressed by contemporary trends towards over-reflexivity in anthropological writing, we would like to know more about Mihaylova's positionality in the field she explores. We also think that her important theoretical underpinning stands to gain a great deal from further elaborations.

Mihaylova, we thank you for intriguing us to more and better understand the Pomaks and cross national movement in and outside the Balkan region.