

Mirjam Milharčič Hladnik (ed.)

From Slovenia to Egypt

Aleksandrinke's Trans-Mediterranean Domestic
Workers' Migration and National Imagination



V&R Academic

Transkulturelle Perspektiven

Band 13

Herausgegeben von

Sylvia Hahn, Dirk Hoerder,

Stan Nadel und Marlou Schrover

Mirjam Milharčič Hladnik (ed.)

From Slovenia to Egypt

Aleksandrinke's Trans-Mediterranean Domestic
Workers' Migration and National Imagination

With 15 figures

V&R unipress



Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.d-nb.de> abrufbar.

ISBN 978-3-8471-0403-2

ISBN 978-3-8470-0403-5 (E-Book)

Printed with the support of the Slovenian Research Agency and the Office for Slovenians Abroad.

Translation: Barbara Skubic

Language editing: Jana Renée Wilcoxon

© 2015, V&R unipress in Göttingen / www.vr-unipress.de

Alle Rechte vorbehalten. Das Werk und seine Teile sind urheberrechtlich geschützt. Jede Verwertung in anderen als den gesetzlich zugelassenen Fällen bedarf der vorherigen schriftlichen Einwilligung des Verlages.

Printed in Germany.

Titelbild: Courtesy of Anica Stanič

Druck und Bindung: CPI buchbuecher.de GmbH, Birkach

Gedruckt auf alterungsbeständigem Papier.

Contents

Acknowledgements	7
I. Aleksandrinke	
Mirjam Milharčič Hladnik	
1. Trans-Mediterranean Women Domestic Workers: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives	11
Sylvia Hahn	
2. Labour Migration and Female Breadwinners	39
II. From Goriška To Egypt	
Aleksej Kalc	
3. Migration Movements in Goriška in the Time of Aleksandrinke	49
Barbara Skubic	
4. A Drop in the Sea of Foreign Workers in Egypt	73
Daša Koprivec	
5. Personal Narratives of Lives in Egypt and at Home	93
III. Migration and National Imagination	
Dirk Hoerder	
6. Re-Remembering Women Who Chose Caregiving Careers in a Global Perspective: Mothers of the Nation or Agents in Their Own Lives?	117
Katja Mihurko Poniž	
7. Representations and Mythologisations of Aleksandrinke in Slovenian Literature	131

Marina Lukšič Hacin	
8. Women Migrants and Gender Relations: Patriarchy in the Time of Aleksandrinke	157
Jernej Mlekuž	
9. The Newspaper Images of Aleksandrinke and the National Imagination	173
IV. Comparative Perspective over Space and Time	
Sylvia Hahn	
10. Migration and Career Patterns of Female Domestic Servants	195
Francesca Biancani	
11. Globalisation, Migration, and Female Labour in Cosmopolitan Egypt	207
Majda Hrženjak	
12. Slovenian Domestic Workers in Global Care Economies	229
Bibliography	249
Index	267

Acknowledgements

Most of all, I would like to thank Dirk Hoerder, who suggested five years ago to publish a book on the phenomenon of aleksandrinstvo. He read the first draft of the manuscript and gave invaluable suggestions and comments and, as the co-editor of the series *Transkulturelle Perspektiven*, was always available for my never-ending questions and dilemmas. Without his kind support, immense knowledge, and patient editorial work, the year-long process of putting together this book would not have been successful.

The head of the Slovenian Migration Institute at the Scientific Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Marina Lukšič Hacin, supported the project from the beginning and was always helpful as both a colleague and an expert on migration. Ksenija Vidmar Horvat from the University of Ljubljana included part of our aleksandrinstvo research in her project on Slovenian women migrants. Together we organised the inspiring symposium *Dis-membered and dis-remembered: migrant women in national imagination* in May 2013 in Ljubljana. Among other contributors to the book, Sylvia Hahn attended it to share with us her knowledge on women breadwinners and to help with the conceptualisation of the book.

Very special thanks go to Barbara Skubic and Jana Renée Wilcoxon who translated, copy-edited, and proofread the chapters. Without their dedicated precision, endless questioning of unclear sentences, insistence on clarity, and skill in polishing the texts by so many diverse authors with different academic backgrounds and styles of writing, this book would not have been possible. In translating, Stanley Nadel (chapters 2 and 10) and Mojca Vah Jevšnik (chapter 8) were also engaged. Marijanca Ajša Vižintin and Mateja Gliha also helped with preparing the manuscript and Špela Marinšek took care of all administrative matters. Thanks also go to the Slovenian Research Agency and the Office for Slovenians Abroad, who provided financial support for the book.

When we visited the Museum for the Preservation of the Cultural Heritage of Alexandrian Women in Prvačina with Dirk Hoerder, the members of the Society of Women from Prvačina greeted us dressed in the original dresses of aleksan-

drinke, offered cookies and cakes baked according to the recipes that their grandmothers, mothers and aunts brought from Egypt, and shared with us some of their memories. A warm thank you to all of them and to Vesna Humar who organised the visit for us.

For help in searching for the photographs, I would like to thank Marko Klavora and Inga Miklavčič Brezigar in the Museum of Goriška in Nova Gorica, Kaja Širok and Katarina Jurjavčič in the National Museum of Contemporary History in Ljubljana, and Aleksej Kalc. Mateja Rihteršič made the maps for an easier presentation of the complicated times and contested places. Very special thanks also to Anica Stanič, a daughter of an aleksandrinka, who helped me in finding the right photography for the cover of the book in her personal and intimate archive of her mother's and grandmother's aleksandrinstvo.

I. Aleksandrinke

1. Trans-Mediterranean Women Domestic Workers: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives

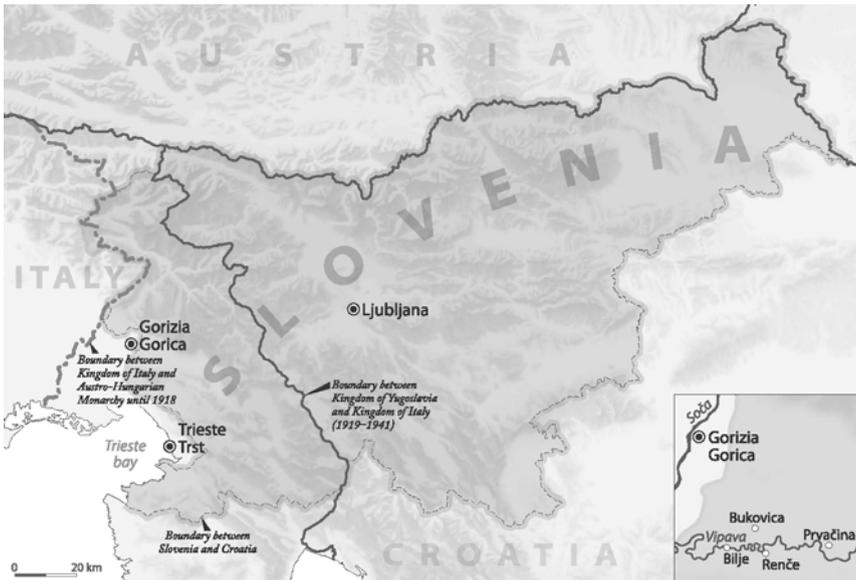
Introduction

Aleksandrinstvo is the general name of the phenomenon of mass emigration from the Western Slovenian region of Goriška to Egypt, whose protagonists, *aleksandrinke*, were women. They were young women, widows, wives, and mothers who sought short or long-term employment in Egyptian cities. They mostly worked as chambermaids, cooks, and various other kinds of domestic helpers, frequently as nannies, sometimes as governesses, teachers, and wet nurses. Since the destination of their migration was the port city of Alexandria, at home they were referred to as *aleksandrinke* – Alexandrian women – and under this name they remain recorded in the collective memory. From the second half of the nineteenth century until 1954, when it eventually came to an end, *aleksandrinstvo* was an important component of the economy of the Goriška region.¹ The Slovenian ethnic territory, a part of the Habsburg Empire for centuries, was divided after World War I. The main and biggest part became a constitutional entity of the new Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (from 1929 the Kingdom of Yugoslavia). The small part in the North, Koroška, became part of Austria as a result of a referendum in 1919. The Western part, known as Primorska, which included Goriška (heavily destroyed during the Isonzo front in World War I), became part of Italy as a result of the Rapallo Treaty. The population in Primorska suffered under the Fascist regime from 1921 to 1943.

This involved economic, social and ideological measures that the Italian regime used to force the population to “become” Italian. When the measures stirred revolt, the answer

1 In the book, *aleksandrinstvo* will be used as the name of the phenomenon, *aleksandrinke* as the name of the women who migrated (*aleksandrinka* sing.) and the region of emigration, Goriška (region) and sometimes Primorska (region) as a name for the broader Western part of the Slovenian ethnic territory, which includes Goriška. A number of geographical names throughout the book are used in Slovenian, Italian, or German, in the three languages of this ethnically and linguistically diverse and politically contested territory where borders and names changed constantly during the twentieth century (see Map 1).

was State brutality, forced migration, killings, imprisonments, and devastating tax policy. On the part of the population, the reaction was armed resistance and exodus. People left for Yugoslavia, Argentina, the United States, and women especially, for Egypt. After the Second World War, most of the Primorska region returned to Slovenia, which became part of the socialist federation, Yugoslavia. Slovenia became an independent state in the process of the break-up of Yugoslavia in 1991. (Milharčič Hladnik 2014, 2)



Map 1: The changing borders of Slovenia and the cluster of villages in the Goriška region

Aleksandrinstvo represented a vital economic resource for the households of farmers and workers, while its magnitude also gave it a systemic character. Emigration was a social strategy that had entered into the reasoning of women and of entire communities of this region and played an important role in meeting their socio-economic needs and in planning their individual and collective life paths. As such, it brought with it dramatic changes in the role of women and men, in the value placed on women's work within the traditional economy and within the internal dynamics of their society of origin, both at the level of families and the wider community as well as in the relationships between generations. This emigration had a profound impact on women's self-esteem and, at the same time, on the public image of migrants as non-conventional female characters whose reputation fluctuated between silent thankful adoration and loud moral condemnation. Regarding aleksandrinke and aleksandrinstvo, there are two contrasting interpretations, deeply embedded in the collective memory and national imagination and linked to two different perspectives: the (Catholic)

discourse of suffering and sacrifice and the (feminist) discourse of freedom and emancipation.

On the one side, the emphasis is on female sacrifice, placed in the moralist discourse of the sexually dangerous Orient and the devastating effects of freedom. Female suffering, mourning, and longing for home inside this interpretation even surpass the suffering of the abandoned children and husbands who stayed at home. In this image, two things are blurred: the saving of families, homes, farms, and properties and also the fact that the decisions about migration to Egypt were always tied to family survival strategies. The image emphasised is that of abandoned children as the essence of the phenomenon, and amongst *aleksandrinke*, the ones put in focus are wet nurses and mothers.

On the other side, the emphasis is on the treatment of *aleksandrinke* stemming from interpretations that focus upon their courage, decisiveness, resourcefulness, and success. The suffering and longing are offset by the emancipation and freedom in the multicultural environment of a developed Mediterranean country; and the abandoned children and husbands are offset by the calculations of the great and decisive financial contributions of migrant women that saved families and estates. In the intersection of both interpretations lies not only the question of the politics of gender but also that of the politics of remembrance. Both extremes raise the need for a more wholesome and complex treatment of this migration phenomenon.

From oblivion to recognition

Thus, it is not surprising that the phenomenon was, for half a century, buried under a thick blanket of oblivion, denial, shame, and traumatic memories that we have only recently started to remove. The first public study dates from 1993, when *Aleksandrinke*, a popular book by journalist Dorica Makuc, was published (Makuc 1993).² The book was presented as a part of an exhibition in the Goriška Museum a year later, but they both received only local coverage. The exhibition, curated by Inga Miklavčič-Brezigar and titled *Wives – mothers, servants, wet nurses divided in the struggle for daily bread between the family and the overseas* (1994) was the first attempt to present *aleksandrinstvo* in Goriška.³ Miklavčič-Brezigar's exhibition was accompanied by an Italian exhibition about the institution of wet nursing in the region of Belluno in the nineteenth and the early

2 Dorica Makuc is also the author of a documentary that the Slovenian national television (RTV-SLO) showed in 1974, but at that time it did not resonant significantly among the Slovenian public. The interviews with *aleksandrinke* that Makuc collected in the film and in the book are invaluable material.

3 Inga Miklavčič-Brezigar is also the co-author of the first presentation of *aleksandrinstvo* in English (Barbič and Miklavčič-Brezigar 1999).

twentieth century: rural women joined, as wet nurses, a system of agencies looking for young wives, setting them up for medical check-ups and thus providing healthy wet nurses for aristocratic and bourgeois families in the cities of northern Italy (Perco 1984). Very often, the only possibility of income for rural girls and women who were making the transition from the countryside into town was as nannies or servants; the wet nurses were particularly well paid. The wider historical context significantly illuminated the Alexandrian routes, as the women from Goriška first went to Egypt with their Italian employers. It is not unimportant that both exhibitions gave the most attention to the wet nurses, though they were a minority amongst *aleksandrinke*.

The fictionalised accounts of *aleksandrinke* by Slovenian writer Marjan Tomšič (2002, 2006) followed this highlighting of wet nurses: while his immensely popular novels introduced *aleksandrinstvo* to the wider Slovenian audience for the first time – and won the author the highest national cultural award – his fictionalisation stuck obsessively to the Catholic normative regarding sexuality, presented the suffering and destruction of women, and, for the most part, judged and condemned *aleksandrinke*. With Marjan Tomšič's novels, an equation sign was drawn between *aleksandrinke* and wet nurses as well as between *aleksandrinstvo* and abandoned children; the collective memory was fixed. The phenomenon of the female migration in all its scope was – again – reduced to the prescribed social and religious perception of a (lactating) mother, and the understanding of the societies, fatally linked to the migration, set into the Orientalist interpretation. But this time, not for long.

In 2005, there was a sudden and unusually intensive breakthrough in the treatment of *aleksandrinke* – both in methods and in interpretations. Works and projects appeared in different fields: art projects, documentary films, theatre performances, lectures, exhibitions, and research. Also in 2005, the interested public from the villages in Goriška organised themselves into the Society for the Preservation of the Cultural Heritage of the Alexandrian Women;⁴ a year later, a participatory museum of *aleksandrinke* opened in the village of Prvačina. From the local level, where the positive treatment of *aleksandrinstvo* appeared in the form of collecting material and immaterial heritage and organising exhibitions, round tables, lectures, performances, and events, the interest now spread to the national level.

Daša Koprivec, a curator in the Slovene Ethnographic Museum, who also prepared the exhibition in Ljubljana, started researching the phenomenon. The representatives of the state unveiled memorial plaques in Egypt in 2007 and 2010 and attended the openings of exhibitions and symposia. The exhibition *Hidden*

4 The Museum's and Society's website: <http://www.aleksandrinke.si/eng/>.

*Faces of Alexandria: Slovenian school sisters and aleksandrinke*⁵, prepared in the Goriška Museum in 2009 by Inga Miklavčič-Brezigar, was opened by the president of the Republic of Slovenia with the Egyptian ambassador also in attendance. National and international audiences got acquainted with aleksandrinke via an extremely well-received documentary of the same name, which was a Slovenian, Egyptian, and Italian co-production (Pevc 2011). It was shown on Slovenian national public television, had a normal run in the Slovenian art house cinema network, and was screened in Egypt and at many festivals at home and abroad. It won a number of awards, including the Prešeren Fund Award, the highest Slovenian award for culture for the director Metod Pevc in 2013.

This breakthrough spurred further in-depth scientific study and research: conferences and symposia were organised, studies conducted, and academic articles published. Researchers in Trieste organised a bilingual conference and published a bilingual academic monograph *Le rotte di Alexandria, Po aleksandrijskih poteh* [Following the Alexandrian Routes/The Routes of Alexandria] (Però, Vascotto 2011). In it, historian Marta Verginella picturesquely describes the consequences and interpretations of the transgression of not only geographic, but also social and national borders:

The first to have written on female transgression of social and national borders were travellers who visited Egypt, priests who were worried about the moral life of female migrants and later also politicians and municipal administrators who were dealing with economic and administrative consequences of female migration to Alexandria and Cairo. For the nationally minded men who supported the image of a “loving and caring wife and mother”, the wet nurses from Primorska were a source of great shame, as they left their own children to feed those of strangers’. From the point of view of the defenders of national interests the women who were leaving to Egypt were “hindering the defence power of the nation”. Foreigners could have easily – in the absence of the family and village control – seduced and dishonoured them: abroad, even the most virtuous girls and wives could become women of dubious reputation. (Verginella 2011, 156)

Between sacrifice and emancipation

Aleksandrinke so prišle domov [Aleksandrinke returned home], an extensive book of testimonies and memories of the descendants of aleksandrinke richly equipped with photographic material was published in 2012. The author Peter Zorn, himself a descendant of an aleksandrinke, wrote in the introduction that

5 The Congregation of the Sisters of the Order of St. Francis and of Christ the King has worked in Alexandria since 1908.

the book is neither a history book nor a work of fiction – it is “a book, written with heart”:

The word “aleksandrinka” was almost a swear word for decades in our villages. Women didn’t want to talk about their lives and experience abroad, because the society branded them as unchaste, as bad wives and mothers. Only in the last couple of years are we learning about and recognising their role. They were fighters for national rights, they started the process of emancipation of women and their equality, they were the heralds of Slovenehood abroad. They brought money, but also knowledge and culture to Primorska. To know aleksandrinke means to know an important part of history of the nineteenth and twentieth century. (Zorn 2012, 10)

Zorn caught the last moment to gather testimonies and memories of this great migration of women from Goriška to North Africa. All aleksandrinke are dead by now, and their stories have survived in the memories of their descendants and relatives. In Zorn’s book, one testimony after another tells us about women from farms in debt that, after the devastation of World War I, came under the fascist government of Benito Mussolini, who used high interests on the loans as an effective instrument of the denationalisation policy and expropriation.



Bilje village, devastated during World War I
Source: Museum of Goriška, Nova Gorica

The only thing that protected farms from repossession was the migration of women who went to work in Egypt. Later what was pinned onto them was an image of loss, pain, and guilt for having left their families and their homeland. In

reality, they left so that their families could survive and their homeland would not be completely erased.

When they were leaving, they were afraid of the culture shock upon their arrival abroad. But migrant workers do not have time to be shocked. Aleksandrinke had to immediately adjust to the cultural habits of the environment, learn new languages, and start working. Through testimonies, Zorn's book presents what Aleksandrinke did in Egypt. They did interesting things and were successful. The photos show proud, smiling women who found themselves in big cities, women who learnt to speak Greek, Hungarian, English, Arabic, and French and sent home all the money they earned. They knew how to help each other and find their way among the Arabs, Jews, Greeks, and English. In fact, the cultural shock happened when they returned home. The environment rejected them as strangers and tried to burden them with guilt. If the women who returned refused to understand their experience as loss, sacrifice, and pain as is appropriate for a woman, the environment refused to acknowledge their migrant experience at all. It demanded that they understood their departure as a loss. This is why many re-embarked the steamer for Alexandria with relief and anticipation.

The theoretical and conceptual framework of Aleksandrinstvo research

Until recently, Aleksandrinstvo was completely overlooked in the migration studies and Slovenian historiography. Even globally, waged domestic work has only recently been given more attention. This is all the more unusual, if we know that waged domestic workers

form the largest single female category of migrant labour, not only in the twentieth and twenty-first century but in fact throughout the history of migration. This is accounted for by economic restructuring processes (mainly agrarian and in the textile industry), by an uneven distribution of wealth between regions and nations, and by changes in the international division of labor (Harzig 2006, 48).

The reason for the invisibility of the female migrants and their specific work, which is globally expanded and true for the past and for the present, was well defined by Sheila Rowbotham (2001, xvi):

One reason for the lack of visibility has been the nature of female migrants' occupation. In many cases they went into domestic service or served as wet nurses – activities which have never been regarded within the prevailing definitions of “work” or the “economy” and have thus defied statistical reckoning. This is a gendered obscurity in a double

sense. The women leave no traces because they are female *and* because the framework of who is to be seen has been biased towards the male.

Sylvia Hahn explains in her chapter on labour migration and female breadwinners how some nineteenth-century statisticians and demographers as well as a few early twentieth-century sociologists noticed female migration, but generally downplayed its extent and significance, or ignored it entirely. Until late in the twentieth century migration history remained an essentially male history for long periods of time. Hahn presents many examples and some life stories of female (labour) migrants who supported their children and families with their earnings and became major breadwinners. It is important to understand that in past centuries female breadwinner migrants were not uncommon and they are not only a recent phenomenon as we are accustomed to expect.

Within the female migration, *aleksandrinstvo* is a totally specific phenomenon because of the nature of *aleksandrinke*'s work and within it, the emphasised role of wet nursing. No other form of female migration cut so painfully into gender relationships, family relationships, children's memories, and the collective memory and thus produced interpretations that were this emotionally charged, completely opposing, and controversial. Migration studies in Slovenia have only begun paying more attention to the phenomenon in recent years, because it was only recently that female migrants even became the subject of research (Škrlič 2009, Koprivec 2006) and not only "subjects" but persons with their own stories, individuals with their own experiences. We can say that the attention given to female migrants has been sharpened within the biographical-narrative methodological approach to migrations (Milharčič Hladnik, Mlekuž 2009).

The initial orientation of this approach to the research of migrations in general, and *aleksandrinstvo* in particular, takes cues from the research approach of Abdelmalek Sayad. He claimed that the sociology of migration must be self-reflective: every research of migration phenomena is at the same time a social history of the migrants and a social history of the migration phenomenon discursive research. More than any other social phenomenon, migration research is subjected to politics, and for a good reason: it is a phenomenon that in all forms – demographic, economic, social, cultural, and political – is pinned to establishing and strengthening the existing social order and stability of the institutions (Sayad 2004). Of course *aleksandrinstvo* is also about retaining and reinforcing the existing social labour division between genders and the stability of prescribed gender roles. This may be, more so than in any other form of migration, obvious with women – but not in general. A special and exceptional circumstance of *aleksandrinstvo* is the nature of the work – care work in families, which even today is incomparable to any other work – and from it the origi-

nating stigmatisations of women, the insinuations of their immorality, the pathology of abandoned children and homes, and the traumatic memories.

Migration system of aleksandrinstvo

The research of aleksandrinstvo and the migration experience of aleskandrinke is thus a matter of migration politics as well as gender politics. We must understand it in the concrete historic and social circumstances which we could name migration systems. How can we place aleksandrinstvo within a migration system? The finding of Christiane Harzig (based on her long term historic research) will serve us as a starting point:

As migrants of past and present show, migration works within transworld migration systems which are formed not only by global capitalism but by well-informed global players – the migrants themselves – performing multiple gendered functions, deciding about their moves in transnational communities, considering their assets on the global labour market and relying on networks formed by family, kin, friendship and neighbourhood/village. Within these transnational processes women are often decisive agents pursuing their own agenda at the local and global levels, negotiating gendered strategies and options. (Harzig 2001, 25)

To understand the strategies, patterns, and negotiations within (female) migrations, as Harzig explains, we must divide the research into three levels: micro, meso, and macro. The migration phenomenon of aleksandrinstvo must be understood through an analytical approach that places people in the focus of decision: individuals and their immediate family, extended family, and village environment. On this level, it is of key importance that we take into account the gender specific roles of people involved in the migration decisions. On the other hand, the decisions are a part of the cultural, social, political, and economic context, both in the narrowest sense of the home town environment as well as in the widest scope of the global world. We must consider all three levels of the system of migrations: micro, meso, and macro.

On the macro level, aleksandrinstvo is to be understood as a migration phenomenon with its origin in the Habsburg Monarchy and later under the Italian fascist regime, which ruled cruelly over the Slovenian ethnic territories annexed to Italy after World War I. On the macro level, the political, social, and economic situation in the target country of migration – Egypt – is also important. As Sayad warns, we must always consider the wholesomeness of the migration process and consider the connections between societies and states and thus with all our strength resist the reductionist perspectives and one-sided analyses, where emigration and immigration, and also the place of emigration

and the place of immigration, are dealt with separately. Thus Sayad (2004, 2) says:

Any attempt to construct immigration as a true object of science must, finally, be a social history of the reciprocal relations between these societies, of the society of emigration and the society of immigration, of relations between emigrants and immigrants, and of relations between each of those two societies.

For this reason, there are chapters in the book that describe places of emigration and places of immigration as a common social and cultural history. Aleksej Kalc places *aleksandrinštvo* into a wider context of emigration from the Habsburg Monarchy and thus sets the first stable stone in the path of reinterpretation of this phenomenon. He shows that the various forms of migration by men and women into numerous directions were an inevitable part of life at the time. The retrospective delusion that only shows us the modern world as globalised is at this point effectively replaced by the presentation of the mobility of the population and the transnational and transcultural connections. The author emphasises that we have to observe this specific wave of female migration in a wider context of the extreme mobility of the population. His text shows that *aleksandrinke* were part of the domestic workers migrations to different directions. But the direction Egypt did matter a lot. It is not only about understanding the system of migrations within the connection made up by ship lines between Trieste and Alexandria and the fact that the sea journey was relatively short – that Egypt was, in fact, close. Neither is it only about the fact that for more than half a century there was an exchange of existentially necessary financial, emotional, and informational goods between the villages in Goriška and the temporary addresses of women in Egypt. The issue here is that the migration direction in the case of Egypt is something completely different from that of the United States of America, Argentina, or England. Egypt is “the Orient” and the policy we have to take into account – policy of gender, policy of migration – was embedded in Orientalism (Said 1978).

In a detailed description of Egypt, Barbara Skubic thus particularly emphasises the modernisation processes – social, political, and cultural – that formed the country long before the opening of the Suez Canal. She presents the places of immigration in a wider cultural and historical context and paves another stone on the road to the deconstruction of the stigma attached to the women who migrated and the families they left behind, which persevered long after the phenomenon was over, well into the 1990s. Her chapter is an insight into the social circumstances of the fast developing Egyptian society caught in the vice of the European colonial politics and at the same time a microcosm of life circumstances – not of the rich merchant employers, but of the multitude of (migrant) workers. The framework of the working class organising and activism



Trst – Trieste 1907

Source: National and Study Library, Trieste

radically surpasses the Orientalist image of water-and-tamarind sellers, but also that of the elegantly dressed *aleksandrinke* – servants we could almost mistake for the ladies they served. It is a deconstruction of the stereotypical images of Egypt that have unfortunately been retained – in the popular images but also in academia – until today.

On the meso level, the important issues when deciding to migrate are family economics, the search for work and independence, and the information about possibilities, all in the context of the region. In the case of the analysis of *aleksandrinstvo*, it is particularly important as well to understand the meso level when it comes to taking decisions, and within that, especially family. Dirk Hoerder (2002, 20) states:

The concept of family economics, along with the inclusion of nonmeasurable emotional and spiritual factors in the negotiating process, avoids the reductionist approach to wage differentials and permits a comprehensive approach to decision-influencing factors. Family economics combine the income-generating capabilities of all family members with reproductive needs – such as care for dependants, whether children or elderly – and consumption patterns so as to achieve the best possible results according to traditional norms. Allocation of resources depends on the stage of the family life-cycle and individual life-courses as well as on gender and generational power hierarchies.

On the one side we thus have decisions based on expecting profits, acquiring independence, a better life for the family and the individual who will migrate; on

the other side there are just as big concerns about losing support, emotional ties, and help. Hoerder calls the methodological approach that takes into account the economic, cultural, social, and emotional complexity and conditioning of migration decisions and their consequences in the place of origin as well as the place of migration – for those who leave and for those who stay – the “holistic material-emotional approach”. This is an extremely important approach for dealing with *aleksandrinstvo*, because we can use it to argue systematically the reductionist discourse, so rooted in the Slovenian territory, when studying this phenomenon. With the holistic material-emotional approach to the understanding of *aleksandrinstvo* we meticulously take into account all the individuals in this migration phenomenon as actors in the process of decision-making and their consequences: “Decisions about life-courses, levels of subsistence, and aspirations for betterment involve a conglomerate of traditional cultural norms and practices, of actual emotional and spiritual needs, and of economic rationales,” emphasises Hoerder (Ibid.).

In this sense, our analysis may include the infinite series of emotions that decisions of migration triggered. In those who left and in those who stayed we can follow the life currents of the feelings of loss, abandonment, homesickness, missing, loneliness, alienation, anger, despair, resentment, incomprehension, but also happiness, independence, empowerment, courage, satisfaction, and fulfilment. The holistic material-emotional approach forces us not to miss anyone in the intertwining of the migration phenomenon actors.

In the case of *aleksandrinstvo*, this is ever more so important, because the phenomenon is so diversified. When we try to understand its material-emotional aspects, we must make a distinction between women who worked as nannies and those who worked as wet nurses, and between both these categories and the women who did other types of work. We must differentiate women who had their children with them (or at least in the same city) and those who left them at home in Goriška. We cannot treat single women and those who were married and mothers in the same way. When it comes to children, we know stirring stories of truly abandoned children whom nobody cared for, but also testimonies of childhoods a lot less dramatic. Some men accepted their wives’ absences without any problems, some had more difficulties. And then there are the children the *aleksandrinke* cared for and their testimonies of how their nannies marked their lives and identities. We could go on, but we can already understand that, when analysing this phenomenon, the already mentioned focus on individuals and their concrete life stories is the most helpful. It is the subjective perception of the migration process, into which everybody, those who leave and those who stay, that most precisely reveals the complexity of migration experiences. The complexity of the elements of the migration experience – family, politics, transnational and trans-local community, moral norms, prescribed

gender roles, sexuality, ethnicity, and nationality, and in the case of aleksandrinke even endangered nationality – indicates also to the extreme complexity of their identities and subjectivities.

For this reason, the central part of the book is dedicated to life stories, memories, narratives, correspondences, and all other “valuable warehouses of individual memory” (Verginella 2004). Daša Koprivec has collected numerous testimonies of descendants and relatives of aleksandrinke and the children they cared for, and completed them with other sources that shed light on the subjective perception of the migration process. In this way, she most convincingly deconstructs the mythologisation and demonisation of aleksandrinke and at the same time unfolds the transnational networks of connections that fatefully marked the lives of all those involved. In a wide scope of different stories, routes, and returns, there lies an exceptional wealth of destinies, decisions, and identity transformations. The controversy of the status of women, children, men that aleksandrinstvo produced is an endless source to understand the daily negotiations of an individual as an agent on the large scene of history. The presented narratives and memories link the entire world and the entire century and thus allow the sharpening of both the perspective of gender and the perspective of human subjectivity.

The “gender paradox”

The relations, relationships, and statuses that aleksandrinstvo shook were many. In the forefront, there was the prescribed status of a woman in the society, which through the religious norms required that a woman be subjected to a man, that her activities be limited to the private, these norms enforced economic dependency, prohibited education beyond secondary level, and also prohibited political participation. On the level of family, the subordination of women was determined by the system of the law of inheritance, the absence of the right to be paid for the work done, and the obligation of woman’s care for children and family members. The departure of a woman from her home to go abroad to help with the survival of the family members, retaining or improving the material status of the family property made a radical cut into the prescribed female role in the society. Of course the cut was linked with the control over women, so it was particularly deep when it came to wives and mothers. With them, the need of the Catholic Church, the traditional community, and the conservative society for the total control over their behaviours, activities, reproductive abilities, and the prescribed moral behaviour, was the greatest.

Paola Corti describes “a traditional specialty of women from mountain villages” in northern Italy, who left as wet nurses to France, and draws particular



Renče village in the 1920s

Source: National Museum of Contemporary History, Ljubljana

attention to the extreme surveillance they endured on the part of the Italian authorities: “Both consular officials and Italian prefects took pains to survey, and control, this type of work because it was believed to threaten family morality, and to lead to crime and imprisonment as peasant families disintegrated.” It’s interesting that, contrary to the belief of the authorities, many wet nurses called their husbands to join them, “thus using their relatively secure wages to stabilize a longer-term earning campaign involving other family members” (Corti 2002, 144). Regarding the surveillance of migrants in the target country, Sylvia Hahn’s study is enlightening: she found much evidence on the extremely precise and cruel control over domestic workers in the Habsburg Empire, carried out by both the local population and the police over the newcomers, particularly women. The intensity of the surveillance was linked to the social status, profession, and gender and the most controlled of all were single women:

Detailed interrogation of women “picked up for questioning”, the arrests and interrogations, such as those of female “strangers”, were often carried out in a seemingly arbitrary fashion. The grounds were invariably suspicion of prostitution, illegal peddling, failure to officially register subtenants, or vagrancy and homelessness. (Hahn 2001, 122)

Every perspective marked by gender must include both genders. For this reason, it’s important to remember that in the structure of the women’s status in a

society and family, we must also see the male side, although it is sometimes left out from the explanation. For a man – and even more so for a married man and a father – the prescribed gender code of behaviour (and emotions) demanded carrying out control over women, caring for the economic survival of the family and the estate, and not intervening into the female work of childcare and care of the elderly family members. For this very reason – and we cannot stress this enough – the departure of woman abroad cut radically and irreversibly into the prescribed social role of a man as well. Only in this context can we start to understand the most frequent and the most stubborn theme of *aleksandrinstvo* in the Slovenian collective memory, in Slovenian literature and cinema – the theme of the abandoned children. Why did the theme of abandoned children and consequently the cruel mothers who “abandoned” them overpower all other aspects of this specific migration phenomenon? Daša Koprivec’s exhaustive research, which in this book explains the ways of caring for children within the extended family, through family and friendship networks, village and neighbourhood networks, and female solidarity structures prove that for the most part, children were taken care of. For this reason it is even more unclear why until recently the main image of *aleksandrinke* was linked to the image of abandoned children.

We can find one of the answers on the other side of the world, in another millennium, in the analysis of the Filipino migration phenomenon by Rhacel Salazar Parreñas (2001, 2005). The author draws attention to the specific situation of female migrants which is completely incomparable to the position of the male migrants and draws a precise image of the female captivity into the traditional cultural patterns, through which the un-altered control over them is attempted, regardless of the enormous changes of the globalised world. Female migrants, in this case the Filipina women, are the subject of passionate public ideological campaigns in their home environment, where they are stigmatised as bad mothers who have rejected their children for a couple of dollars. The Philippine media incessantly quote the research and findings about children of female migrants who suffer from various physical and psychological diseases caused by the absence of their mothers. Parreñas used her research to verify these findings and found a number of very different cases, from children who for various reasons feel the absence of their mothers as an irreparable loss, to children who are perfectly content with such absence and respect their mothers’ efforts to give them a better life.

As the actions that maintain transnational families do not always abide by their institutional and structural context, I found that a gender paradox of reifying and transgressing gender boundaries limits the potential for gender transformation in Filipino transnational households. More specifically, I observed that while the structural arrangements of transnational households sometimes force the unavoidable