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In his impressive and inspiring study, Matthias Kaltenbrunner tells the remarkable story of the migration history of six villages in the Sniatyn district of western Ukraine from the end of the nineteenth century until today. Until World War I this region was located at the southeastern border of Austrian Galicia, and in the interwar period it was part of Poland.

Beginning in 1898 and more intensely after 1905, these villages were involved in transatlantic migration to Canada. From the second half of the 1890s, Ukrainians from Galicia went in increasing numbers to North America for work or settlement. Between 1899 and 1914, 261,000 Ukrainians migrated to the United States and about 171,000 to Canada (p.130).

A well-known pattern of migration processes is that family and local networks largely determine directions of migration. Usually, migrants go to places where members of their family or larger local community already live. After the first families from Rusiv (the book’s central case study) and neighboring villages left for the Canadian prairies in 1898, Canada became the prime destination of migration from this area. While the first migrants left with the aim of permanent settlement and building new farms in Canada, from 1902 and more strongly 1905, a non-permanent pattern of migration emerged. Now most of the migrants did not intend to settle in Canada, but to earn money for supporting their families and for buying additional land for their farms at home after their return.

Kaltenbrunner’s core interest are the networks among migrants and between them and their villages. His study clearly confirms that such networks were extremely important to the process of migration, but he also demonstrates that they lasted for several decades after World War II, when western Ukraine became a part of the Soviet Union.

While transatlantic migration is the book’s most important subject, it also analyses forced and voluntary migration during World War II and during the period of Soviet rule. Here Kaltenbrunner discusses Soviet arrests and deportations between 1939 and 1941 as well as in the early postwar period, the deportation of forced laborers under German occupation, and labor migration within the Soviet Union.

The author was able to use a very wide range of sources, among them archival material from the Austrian, Polish, and Soviet periods, but also from
Canadian and US archives. Most important for his analysis of village networks are letters that were exchanged between migrants and their families. In addition, he used a large number of memoirs and, for the postwar period, interviews that he conducted with villagers between 2013 and 2015.

The author gained access to a surprisingly large number of personal documents, especially letters. A fact that contributed to the rich source base for these villages is that the writer Vasyl’ Stefanyk (1871–1936) was born in Rusiv and spent most of his life there. His short novel The Stone Cross, first published in 1901 and set, as most of his writings, in his native village, became a classic work of Ukrainian literature on migration and is part of school curricula until today. Stefanyk’s own family—one of his sons migrated to Canada—and the families who served as inspiration for Stefanyk for some of his literary characters, appear also in Kaltenbrunner’s book. Stefanyk’s literary fame clearly contributed to the fact that archives and individuals kept more personal documents than usual or even published some of them.

The strength of the study consists of three points in particular. First, the author very skillfully uses these personal documents in order to analyze networks of migrants and villagers and their economic and emotional ties. His well-written account brings personal fates and motives very close to the reader and they are tied very effectively to the analysis of economic, cultural, and political circumstances. Second, the long-time frame of the study from the end of the nineteenth century until the beginning of the twenty-first century makes strikingly clear that migration (in a voluntary or a forced form) was a central feature of the villages’ and region’s history for the entire period. Furthermore, the author strongly and convincingly situates migration in the context of the social and political conditions of the villages. Thereby, in a way the book is also a history of western Ukraine in the twentieth century from the perspective of villagers’ experiences. Above all, the chapter on transatlantic networks in the Soviet period has a pioneering character (pp.403–544). It shows a remarkable amount of contacts and exchange of letters, goods, and visits from the beginning of the 1960s onward that connected these western Ukrainian villages with former inhabitants in North America.

Furthermore, the study powerfully rejects any image of remote, isolated, backward villages, but demonstrates their “global interconnectedness,” despite the economic poverty that prevails here until today.

Even excellent studies, as Kaltenbrunner’s book clearly is, oblige a reviewer to look for critical points or desiderata. Two should be mentioned here. The
first one is that the study does not really attempt to give an answer to a central question of migration history, i.e., what effect return migration had on the villages as a whole in economic, cultural, or political terms, or if returning migrants introduced innovation and change into villages. The second point refers to the fact that local case studies inevitably provoke the question of the extent to which their results can be generalized. For Kaltenbrunner’s book this question could be asked primarily in regard to its section on the Soviet period. In contrast to most other parts of rural eastern Galicia, in the Sniatyn area the basic political mobilization of the rural population during the last two to three decades before World War I took place primarily within the framework of the left-wing Radical Party. That party remained strong here also in the interwar period. Many migrants left already with some leftist political loyalties that further strengthened or radicalized when they became laborers in Canada. Many of them worked in the harsh conditions of mines. A rather large portion of migrants in Canada from these villages seem to have maintained pro-communist or at least strongly leftist attitudes also after World War II. This may raise the question of the extent to which this rather unusual feature among the post-war Ukrainian diaspora contributed to the number and intensity of contacts in the Soviet period.

In any case, these points are rather suggestions for further research than a critique of this excellent, rich book that is important for Ukrainian history in twentieth century, for Soviet history, and for the history of migration more generally.

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