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Book Review

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In *Foreign Countries of Old Age: East and Southeast European Perspectives on Aging,* editors Dagmar Gramshammer-Hohl (Slavic studies) and Oana Hergenröther (Linguistics), assemble an impressive array of multidisciplinary research pieces. The first four chapters use a historical perspective on aging in East and Southeast Europe. The following five chapters include qualitative and quantitative research on aging in this geographical area and the last eight chapters explore the literary representations of aging. The book's contents mostly focus on the mutual dynamics between aging and other societal domains, including the state, technology and family. These complex interrelationships serve as the foundation for understanding how individuals envision, encounter and experience the aging process.

As anthropologist and historian Karl Kaser reveals in the first chapter "Old Age in the Balkans," in the period of intense and protracted state restructuring in the 1990s, governments distributed economic resources extremely unevenly, leaving aged persons with minimal support. This policy decision led to a rapid decline in the quality of life for the senior population. A contributing psychologist Olga Krasnova generally concurs with Kaser's observations in the chapter "The Elderly in Russia" (Chapter Nine). In the 1990s, the state went from the Soviet model to a market economy. This profoundly affected all areas of life in the country. The standard of living plummeted, the system of medical provision for the elderly quickly deteriorated, and pensions became practically worthless. Both chapters demonstrate that the states in the Balkans and Russia significantly reduced their societal obligations towards the elderly at the close of the 20th century due to the dramatic socio-economic transformations. Particularly, poverty among the seniors developed as a consequence of sweeping privatization and massive enterprise restructuring.

In chapters ten and eleven, Professor of Russian Language and Literature, Rafaela Božić and Professor of Slavic Literacy, Tatjana Petzer analyze aging in the context of technology. They observe that the relationship between aging and technology changed drastically over the course of a century. Initially, there was an exaggerated, unqualified enthusiasm over the advancement of technology. Today people generally view technology as a practical instrument serving specific objectives. In the chapter "Ageless, Vital, Immortal. Human Transformation in 20th-Century Russian Science and Literature" Petzer further analyzes the literary interpretations of influential technological theories by engineer-turned-writer Andrej Platonov and surgeon-turned-engineer Nikolaj Amosov to elucidate the dynamic interplay between the views on immortality and the wider societal response to technological

innovation. Platonov in his literary works in the 1920s, painted a picture where the solution to immortality lies not in individuals, but in the electrical disinfection of everyone. This would produce "electrosphere" (260), a completely new collective environment, which in turn would guarantee immortality. Platonov's work also reflects the then widely held assumption about collective living as the only way to move forward. Particularly, Petzer affirms that the collective excitement which followed the October Revolution of 1917 engulfed all societal spheres. At that point people were so enthusiastic about the profound changes in their lives, that they truly believed that science and technology would soon erase the last barrier to human flourishing – death itself.

By the mid-1960s it became clear that previous scientific approaches to immortality were naive. At that time, Amosov launched the last attempt to outline in prose what he saw as the path towards immortality. According to the first volume of his book *Notes from the Future*, future populations would be able to enter the state of cryostasis, a prolonged period of being in the extreme cold, which would rejuvenate all bodily systems upon waking from this state. Advanced cybernetic machines would constantly and meticulously monitor all their physiological parameters. Amosov's ideas did not circulate in Soviet society for long, because the censors swiftly reacted and prohibited publishing the second volume of the book.

Fast-forward to the present day when anthropologists are increasingly dealing with the question how technologies and aging processes intersect and coproduce new aging realities and imaginaries. Sociologist Loredana Ivan in the chapter "The Use of Information and Communication Technologies in Family Communication" discusses how Romanian grandmothers make use of various online communication platforms. Ivan found that the grandmothers were active on Facebook, Skype and WhatsApp as these platforms allow them to connect with their children and grandchildren, especially if they live far away. These grandmothers are aware of the risks of social network sites such as exposure to indecent content and concerns over privacy. Yet, they choose to harness the communicative power of social media in order to create and sustain family connections over long distances. To summarize, these different chapters show that the relationship between technology and aging has undergone a major transformation over the past century. The fervent obsession with the seemingly immediate potential of technology to make people immortal within the span of several years, has evolved into a more modest, more realist exploration of such possibilities in the remote future.

Does kinship always provide reliable refuge for people at the sunset of their life? This question animates discussions in the next and last thematic grouping, converging around the interrelationship between family and aging. In the chapter "No Country for Old People" anthropologists Ana Aštalkovska Gajtanoska and Ilina Jakimovska investigate the dark past of the family dynamics in North Macedonia from the 1920s to the 1950s. The ethnographic text delineates a dichotomy existing back then between two categories of individuals: those who are regarded as 'old' yet capable of active engagement in social life, and those who are deemed '*too* old' and thus unable to work or care for themselves, consequently becoming a constant burden to their families. While the first category deserved societal respect, the members of the second category might receive humiliating and even life-threatening treatment from their relatives. Newspaper articles from the 1950s mention hen houses or basements as "homes" for the elderly, and a diet of only a slice of bread a day. The aged person's relatives would justify these actions by claiming elders were burdens that depleted scarce family resources.

Chapter Five expounds on historically situated ethnographic cases of families residing in severely stressed households, both emotionally and financially. In contrast, in Chapter Seven "On Nearness

and Distance: Seniors' Lives in Urban Areas in Slovakia" anthropologist Ľubica Voľanská as well as geographers Marcela Káčerová and Juraj Majo delve into the contemporary trend of financially autonomous elderly individuals who mostly reside separately from their offspring.

The researchers deployed the mixed methods approach, combining 2001 and 2011 census data with interviews which engaged respondents aged 65 and above living in urban areas. The authors express how the interlocutors articulated their attachment to their dwellings through a well-chosen set of quotes in which an overall feeling of warmth glows from their words. The respondents stressed that their flats were not just "spaces," but "places" filled with multiple meanings and powerful emotions (162). While they may hold a strong affection for their closest relatives, they ultimately prioritize the autonomy of their own living space, preferring to maintain their independence rather than to relocate with other family members.

The aforementioned chapters elucidate the shifting dynamics between family and aging. The research in the present volume convincingly shows that in the past, many elderly did not have any options other than to age within the family, even if their relatives treated them cruelly. However, the senior population now has the opportunity to reside independently while maintaining an acceptable quality of life.

The present book serves as a good entryway into the complex and shifting worlds of older adults of East Europe for undergraduate scholars in Slavic studies and Anthropology. This piece illuminates diverse perspectives from the region and gathers a mix of methodologies. Gerontologists would also benefit from the extended discussions of what it means to age in various cultures. The present volume is a timely and elaborate piece of academic prose.