

**BOOK REVIEW:**

**Lisa Wiśniewski (2025). *Navigating Education as a Forgotten Immigrant: Perspectives from the Eastern European Community*, Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books**

 **Ana-Maria Hojbota**✉

Honorary Consulate of Romania to Connecticut, USA

A sociologist and second-generation Polish Immigrant, Lisa Wiśniewski writes from within the world she studies, grounding her scholarship in lived experience. Her book, *Navigating Education as a Forgotten Immigrant: Perspectives from the Eastern European Community*, contributes to the understanding of diasporic communities and social networks in the American Northeast. Based on a set of structured interviews, the volume contains a compelling collection of life narratives of first- and second-generation immigrant Eastern European Americans. Through conversations that reach great depth and range, it introduces readers to these communities by personalizing their journeys and struggles at a time when migration desperately needs to be humanized. I recommend this book to anyone interested in understanding Eastern European immigration to the U.S., minority-supportive educational policies, or immigration in general.

As the title readily suggests, political stakeholders, academics, and journalists have overlooked these communities' stories, histories, and needs. Alongside her interlocutors, Lisa Wiśniewski acknowledges this epistemic gap: that neither their countries of origin, their cultures, nor the histories of their local communities are well represented in North American public life or media. The author makes the case that migration stories are important: for the communities' sense of identity and history, and secondly, for their potential to influence public opinion and political change. The book touches on Eastern European national narratives, the major changes the area went through, embracing or rejecting features of the new democratic regimes and supranational structures they integrated into, while still metabolizing traumatic pasts. The author's voice brings the diversity of Eastern European immigrant voices into harmony in a coherent montage: the interview material is carefully cropped, edited, and summarized to ensure flow, clarity, and readability. While the author's interventions in the form of summarizations can seem intrusive at times, they reflect a concern for taming an extended material otherwise difficult to control, both thematically and in scope, given the researcher's ambition

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✉ Research Director, Honorary Consulate of Romania to Connecticut, USA; e-mail: a\_hojbota@yahoo.com.

and the topic's generosity. It carefully veers away from slipping into academic density, addressing a diverse readership.

The book is structured into ten chapters grouped in two parts: one focuses on in-depth interviews with first-generation immigrants, and the other is a kaleidoscope of personal stories of second-generation members of the same communities. This collection of regional pickings allows us to see the commonalities in this conglomerate of ethnic groups in comparison, how they define their ethnic identities, family roots, and the strength of their connection to their home countries. We are guided through various eras, and we see how social connections waxed and waned due to historic events and political changes in their home countries and in the US. A brief historical overview of the immigration waves that started at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century continues with the stories of first-gen Anna, Rafal, Jacek, Dana, and Tymofii, followed by the second-gen voices of Lara, Julie, Pavlo, Julianna, and Natalie. We are walked through the family history, how they left their home countries, adjusted to the new home, and how they define their identities now ("Who am I today?"). The second-generation experience has an extra focus on how the respondents manage to navigate multiple cultures. Each section ends with a succinct exploration of the central themes. The concluding chapters break down the themes in an organized manner, identifying the unique challenges of different generations. A common striving and source of pride emerges, that of working "harder to preserve everything that makes them who they are" (p. 101).

Eastern European communities played a crucial role in including and integrating newcomers by providing access to family and community support networks and resources, to the know-how and social mobility opportunities they would otherwise lack. Bringing together people sharing ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds, many of these communities were not impermeable enclaves, but they were intertwined, resembling the multiculturalism of some of their homelands. This pan-ethnic solidarity became especially visible over the past years, after Russia invaded Ukraine, when Polish, Ukrainian, Lithuanian, and other ethnic communities came together to fundraise and welcome war refugees.

The interviews walk us through how languages, symbols, and customs are lost and regained after fleeing wars, deportations, and serial displacement. Losing the comfort of speaking exclusively in one's own native language, the physical connection to a homeland and its traditions, deprives immigrants of a sense of rootedness and authenticity. Newcomers build that sense of belonging and connection abroad by recreating bits and pieces of their homeland. In this way, diaspora communities work as living museums or time capsules preserving language and culture, as can be witnessed in the ethnic markets, bakeries, and restaurants, but also other sites for gathering and socializing, such as churches, festivals, or Sunday schools for languages and folk dances. Newcomers are struck by the commitment and piety their communities have for maintaining heritage, some of which are either dormant or kept on life support in the home countries, if not forgotten. First-gen-er

Rafal describes the popularity of folk dances and the reactions he got when he admitted he is not familiar with them: *“Do you dance the polka? I said polka, what? I didn’t realize how popular it was in the States. Because we listen to like Polish rock music and all this other stuff.”* (p.27)

Cultural preservation becomes a duty, no less stringent than the deservingness narratives and the hidden expectations that press newcomers to constantly justify their worth to American society. Not seldom, preserving one’s language and culture is achieved despite ingrained societal biases and barriers, ironically coming from the same institutions that should honor them, such as when school teachers or paraprofessionals discourage bilingualism. For parents and the larger communities, heritage maintenance appears to be as important as helping their offspring become American, especially during the long, suspicion-charged Cold War years. The stronger the pressure to assimilate, the more resilient the desire to tend to one’s roots. Some diaspora community members seem to regard themselves as custodians of “pure” ethnic identities, bearing the home country’s genuine culture, as they bypassed soviet occupations or communist ideologies, which have not tainted or suppressed their cultural “essence”. These beliefs are reflected not only in an observable fear of cultural loss or dilution but also in the existence of moral hierarchies within the communities. Second-generation Pavlo, for instance, remembers being called a communist by a classmate sharing his ethnic background.

Interestingly, the stories and representations of their own countries that newcomers find in their historical communities seem to strike them as fundamentally different than the ones they grew up with at home: *“When I immigrated, I was thinking of Poland was different than you know people who immigrated in 1900s. They have a different view of Poland, what it should be, and I had a different view that we had lived there.”* (p. 27). Future scholarship could look into the divergent ways national narratives develop in diasporic communities and why.

The book’s architecture, which is split between stories of first-generation and second-generation immigrants, strengthens the author’s case for the need to “remember” and support these minority communities. We are allowed to see in parallel how newcomers are socialized in these receiving communities, and then how the offspring are too: a pressure to adopt the American values while preserving the heritage culture. Both newcomers and children are instilled with individualism, self-reliance, and competitiveness as core American values, sometimes in ways that resemble survival training, with novices left to their own devices so that they can figure out the essential skills to become autonomous and develop the resilience necessary for sustenance.

The book lets us witness how elements of complicated histories, inherited trauma, and mixed feelings about one’s heritage can be in dissonance and a source of identity struggle and intergenerational tension as well. We sense the discomfort second-gens feel when pressured to perform ethnic identities, a pressure coming from the family, the community, and sometimes from society at large. A requirement

to embody an ethnic affiliation, to perform distinctiveness, and “diversity” can erode true identification, authentic pride, or feelings of cultural ownership. Such complex dynamics transform these interviews into what resembles a therapeutic set of confessions, in which respondents try to reclaim ownership of their personal stories and identities, elements that easily get trumped by affectively charged political narratives of the “dangerous other” with roots in the Cold War period. We witness respondents pushing back against historical and cultural representations of their ethnic group and more general negative narratives about immigrants.

From stories of escaping the Holocaust, famines, deportations, or family betrayals to the secret police, Eastern European stories seem to share a particular granularity. Such narrative gaps, while having motivational pull for next generations, who feel compelled to know more about the family and national history, imprint a certain porosity that opens accounts to self- and other-stereotyping. For instance, forebearers are at times mentally grouped and idealized as the special “people who defeated communism, who fought the Soviets”. Past sins are readily disregarded, and a collective amnesia seems to portray forefathers as essentially righteous, despite having been part of the same collectives that perpetrated acts of torture and treason against members of their communities during the Holocaust. Such a sanitized narrative of the country’s past can be identified in Dana’s account of the Romanian Holocaust. Her account employs a popular feel-good framing of the events, which places the responsibility in the hands of the German leaders, glossing over the contribution of local authorities and civil society in the atrocities.

The book highlights the respect respondents display for the sacrifices of forebears. At times, they use comparisons to explain choices and allegiances. Julianna contrasts her mother’s homeland, “small little town, not much going on, very poor country, very poor town,” with Connecticut, where “everything looks the same. Every every, every, every area, the majority of the state is nice. You know, all the houses look the same, there is no extreme poor people” (p. 119). While this overlooks Connecticut’s stark wealth disparities (being in the top in the US), such subjective contrasts illustrate how symbolic “heres” and “theres” shape the emotional idealization of what one chooses to call home.

Telling stories and amplifying them restores the individuals’ and communities’ agency. At the same time, it reminds us that identity construction is a fluid, ongoing, and dialogic process. Lisa Wiśniewski’s interview collection masterfully demonstrates this dialogical quality, which plays a central role in today’s political climate, inoculating against the essentialist, ethnonationalist mindsets that lead to collective narcissism and revisionism. Our stories are shaped by the stories we have been told and continue to hear. The book is a living testimony to the intense preoccupation of the second-generation immigrant with the family past and identity. Projects like this book will, hopefully, deepen the communities’ motivation for self-understanding, to explore family, national, and diasporic histories while critically distilling outdated community or parenting norms, or pernicious narratives.

Narratives are resilient, and we see how they work to hold communities together, defend their collective reputations, and set expectations. However, the volume shows how they can also become counterproductive. While doing everything to provide the means for a comfortable life, offering plenty of opportunities to build educational aspirations and material support, Eastern European parents are not always equipped to help offspring navigate the US higher education, nor acknowledge the need for support. If the parents absorbed most of the culture shock while emigrating, the children's burden manifests while navigating education, particularly college, away from their families and communities. Immigrant parents' emphasis on self-reliance, shaped by their own strivings to prove their deservingness and self-reliance in America, can become an excessively burdensome expectation when placed on their college-age children, especially in the US, where the stakes and costs of choosing the right path are so high. Professor Wiśniewski faced these barriers herself, overcame them, but doesn't believe this transition needs to be as difficult and confusing. Thus, in her *extra muros* work, she supports international and immigrant students, showing how second-generation students can critically appraise their inheritance, renegotiate identity, in the service of asserting their rights, and work toward stronger systems of social support and mobility.

A more critical engagement with the existing literature on the topic would have satisfied the scrupulous readers. The volume nevertheless opens up avenues for further interesting research investigations: how second generations recover their cultural agency and identity, how they refine their understanding of politics and democracy, within diasporic communities. While building strong educational aspirations, immigrant parents also tend to be less comfortable navigating the post-secondary educational system than U.S.-born parents. Lisa Wiśniewski's book is pedagogical in that it tells us that stories are important, all stories, not only the presentable ones, those of overcoming or spectacular success. It is also an open invitation to educational scholars and administrators to engage with immigrant parents and communities more directly, and recalibrate the aims and impact of education itself on minority communities.