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Back in the Old Country: Homecoming and Belonging in Leonard Kniffel’s *A Polish Son in the Motherland:* *An American’s Journey Home* and Kapka Kassabova’s *To the Lake: A Balkan Journey of War and Peace*

ABSTRACT

Homecoming travel narratives are typically written by first-wave immigrants, their children, or grandchildren. Usually, homecoming books are accounts of emotionally charged travels that oscillate between nostalgia and idealization of the ancestral land on the one hand and a sense of grief, loss and unbelonging on the other. The present paper examines two homecoming travel narratives that sidestep such pitfalls: Leonard Kniffel’s *A Polish Son in the Motherland: An American’s Journey Home* (2005) and Kapka Kassabova’s *To the Lake: A Balkan Journey of War and Peace* (2020). For both authors, a starting point of the journey is a deep bond with their late maternal grandmothers, whose stories of “the old country” have shaped their sense of identity. Neither Kniffel, a Polish-American author, nor Kassabova, a Bulgarian-born writer writing in English, has ever lived in the countries their grandmothers left as young women—Poland and Macedonia. Return travels not only allow them to better understand the interplay of past and present in their immigrant family history but also to accept their homeland as a complex historical, cultural, and personal legacy. Thus, in both books, returning to the ancestral homeland, undertaken at mid-life, is represented as an essential stage in one’s life journey, which results in a symbolic sense of closure and restoration.

Keywords: homecoming, homeland, travel books, non-fiction, travels, Poland, Macedonia.

INTRODUCTION: HOME AND HOMECOMING IN TRAVEL WRITING

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The concept of home is crucial in travel writing for two main reasons. Firstly, “home” serves as a point of reference in travel literature, as opposed to “abroad.” For instance, Terry Caesar argues that “the textual production of abroad in [American] travel writing has enabled the representation of home; moreover, enabling this domestic representation has finally been the purpose of the travel” (5). In essence, many American writers view foreign travel as an opportunity to explore their national identity and contemplate their connection to home (Caesar 2). While some Americans may become too preoccupied with issues related to their homeland while abroad, travellers of other nationalities also tend to compare and contrast the foreign reality with their familiar home culture.

Secondly, a person’s “home” or homeland may also be the destination of a journey. In accounts of “‘home travels’ . . . writers variously celebrate, lament or poke fun at their compatriots, and at the state of their own nation” (Thompson 17). Within this subgenre of domestic travels, one can further distinguish homecoming travel books that describe journeys made across one’s homeland after many years of residence abroad. Henry James’s *The American Scene* (1907), Henry Miller’s *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare* (1945), Norman Levine’s *Canada Made Me* (1958), and Bill Bryson’s *The Lost Continent* (1986) all belong to this category. Homecoming books may have a range of tones, from bitter to humorous, but they all share certain common elements. The writers reflect on how the passage of time has affected landscapes, people, and places that are familiar to them. Considering the significance of these changes, travellers often vacillate between nostalgia for the past and idealization of their childhood home, on the one hand, and a sense of grief, loss, and not belonging, on the other (Rutkowska, “American” 46).

While the motif of a happy return home is to be found more frequently in popular fiction (Bida 3–4), non-fiction travel books present homecoming as a much more complex process, one fraught with difficult emotions. In her seminal study, Svetlana Boym writes about nostalgia as “a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed” (xiii), a spiritual yearning “for an absolute, a home that is both physical and spiritual, the Edenic unity of time and space before entry into history” (8). André Aciman extends this definition to include “*nostophobia*, the fear of returning; *nostomania*, the obsession with going back; *nostography*, writing about return” (7). All these elements, in various combinations, can be identified in accounts of return journeys, which offer forays into personal and national pasts, memory and identity. In some travelogues, revisiting the mother country after years of

absence has a quasi-therapeutic function. For example, Henry Miller, an expatriate returning to the USA at the outset of WWII, expresses a need for reconciliation: “[U]nlike most prodigal sons, I was returning not with the intention of remaining in the bosom of the family but of wandering forth again, perhaps never to return. I wanted to have a last look at my country and leave it with a good taste in my mouth” (10). André Aciman, returning to Alexandria, where he lived as a young man until his Jewish family was exiled from Egypt in 1965, declares: “I had come not to recover memories, nor even to recognize those I’d disfigured, nor to toy with the thought that I’d ever live there again; I had come to bury the whole thing, to get it out of my system” (9). Thus, for Miller and Aciman, the homecoming journey is to provide them with a sense of closure; they neither wish to renew the bond with symbolic home nor think it possible, they rather wish to get rid of the past which haunts them.

The present paper analyzes two contemporary travel books which constitute less typical examples of homecoming narratives as they describe journeys made not by the immigrants or exiles themselves but their grandchildren. Leonard Kniffel in *A Polish Son in the Motherland: An American’s Journey Home* (2005) and Kapka Kassabova in *To the Lake: A Balkan Journey of War and Peace* (2020) describe journeys to Poland and Northern Macedonia, the countries of origin of the authors’ maternal grandmothers. Kniffel is of Polish-American descent and Kassabova comes from a Macedonian family which first immigrated to Bulgaria and next to New Zealand. The writers’ hyphenated identities reflect the experiences of many people living in diasporic communities and postcolonial societies.

In fact, some researchers attribute the growing popularity of genealogy and “personal heritage tourism” (Timothy 118) to the increasingly mobile and fragmented postmodern reality. People living in indigenous and traditional societies do not need to inquire into their origins as “their history seems as much a part of their lives as eating, sleeping, shopping, and going to work. They know who they are because they know where they come from. They acknowledge and thank those on whose shoulders they stand, who passed on their genes, culture and wisdom” (Fein qtd. in Timothy 117–18). In contrast, many descendants of immigrants, exiles or refugees living at present in Western societies lack this sense of rootedness and feel the need for attachment to particular territorial locations as “nodes of association and continuity, bounding cultures and communities” (Rustin 33). Viewed in a wider cultural context, the books analyzed in this paper can be interpreted as accounts of homecoming where “home” is both foreign and distant from one’s usual place of residence, yet also familiar due to the idea of “the old country” being ingrained in the traveller’s psyche. The writers aim to establish a personal connection with their ancestral homeland, relying on the guidance

of their grandmothers during their travels, whose recollections they have preserved in memory. In other words, the journeys are motivated by a desire to experience “continuity of being through continuity of place” (Kassabova 34). In their travel books, Kniffel and Kassabova represent homecoming to Poland and Macedonia as journeys to “the source,” to the origins of family history, as well as a homage to their ancestors. On a psychological level, these journeys function as personal pilgrimages. The authors not only aim to connect themselves to specific places but also to gain a deeper understanding of their desires, anxieties, and aspirations within the context of their family’s immigration history.

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METAPHORS AT THE POINT OF DEPARTURE

For both authors, the trips they make as middle-aged adults—Kniffel is 53 and Kassabova is 40 at the time of the journey—can be traced back to childhood experiences. As children, Kniffel and Kassabova were strongly connected to their late maternal grandmothers, whose stories sparked their curiosity about “the old country” and whose sense of loss they had symbolically inherited. Neither Kniffel, a Polish-American librarian, living in Chicago at the time of his journey, nor Kassabova, a Macedonian writer, born in Bulgaria and now living in Scotland, have ever lived in the countries their grandmothers left as young women: Poland and Macedonia. They are familiar with these countries through their grandmother’s stories, old photographs, and family mementos. Both feel that a decision their grandmothers took in the distant past as young women has had a profound influence on their present-day lives.

Before the journey described in the book Kniffel had been to Poland only once, accompanying his mother on a short visit. This time he returns with a specific objective in mind:

So I have returned to Poland, this time not to pass through but to live here, where my grandmother lived, to see if any threads of Polishness still dangle from that severed connection. What happened to the people in the few old pictures and letters I have packed in my suitcase? And why did they stop writing fifty years ago? I want to know what I missed by being born in America, to understand what it means to lose two thousand years of history in the time it takes to buy a ticket on a ship leaving “the old country” for the new. (Kniffel 4)

Interestingly, the metaphor Kniffel uses in the passage suggests how painful this symbolic break or rupture which happened in the past is for him personally. Dangling threads evoke violently torn material, or even a deep

wound with tattered blood vessels that will not heal on its own. It needs to be tended. The first step is learning Polish, the language of his ancestors, that he never spoke. Next, Kniffel travels to Nowe Miasto Lubawskie, a small town in the north of Poland and lives there for a few months, searching for relatives, learning to cook Polish food, and participating in religious and national festivals.

At the beginning of her book, Kassabova, similarly to Kniffel, resorts to a metaphor to represent how she feels about the legacy of migration. She recalls the story of a massive earthquake which left the Republic of Macedonia in ruins in 1963. To this day, the clock at Skopje's central railway station is stopped at the hour of the earthquake to commemorate this tragic event:

Sometimes, I feel like that clock. It's an irrational feeling, out of joint with the present: ruins all around, stuck in a long-ago moment of disaster. I knew this stopped clock legacy had come down from my mother but I wanted to find out where that came from and how others carried it. I wanted to know what creates cultural and psychological inheritance, and how we can go forward with it. (Kassabova 6)

The image of a frozen clock suggests stasis, an inability to move forward in life. Another image, frequently evoked in the first pages of the travelogue, is a recurrent dream of flood in which Kassabova is either helplessly watching the disaster from the shore or swimming desperately, trying to save those still alive. Both the frozen clock and the water dream are evocative of death, loss and uncertainty, caused by powers beyond human control.

Thus, in both travelogues a sense of uprootedness caused by the grandmothers' immigration also results in longing and nostalgia in their grandchildren. Their mid-life journeys in search of belonging become a necessary step to mend what has been broken. As Kassabova claims: "Some places are inscribed in our DNA yet take a long time to reveal their contours, just as some journeys are etched into the landscape of our lives yet take a lifetime to complete" (1). Incidentally, both travelers begin their visits in spring, perhaps believing this to be the best season to embark on a journey aimed at searching for answers and starting a new stage of life.

"HOME IS WHERE YOU CAN BE RECOGNIZED"

A staple scene in many homecoming narratives presents an exile returning to his or her home town. There is initial excitement at finally being back, joy at being able to revisit the old haunts, there are also the tears. Inevitably, the

author evokes “the big themes: the return of the native, the romance of the past, the redemption of time. All of it followed by predictable letdowns: the streets always much narrower than before, buildings grown smaller with time, everything in tatters, the city dirty, in ruins” (Aciman 1). While such negative emotions are commonplace in accounts of first-generation diasporic returnees, first impressions are quite different if the traveler has no personal memories connected with the place he or she visits. That is why joy and exhilaration expressed on the first pages of *A Polish Son* and *To the Lake* is not tinged with nostalgia, regret or sadness. “The old country” seems oddly but assuredly familiar. Even though Kniffel and Kassabova have just arrived, they feel a sense of connection and familiarity, which comes from the awareness of their own biological and cultural allegiance to this land. They do not feel themselves to be tourists but rather a native son and daughter returning home after a long time.

Moreover, both authors emphasize the generational circularity of their journeys—after 80 or 90 years they return to exactly the same towns, villages and roads their ancestors once left behind, thus performing, symbolically, “the return of the native.” Looking at the old buildings in Nowe Miasto Lubawskie, Kniffel wonders, excited, whether his grandmother walked past them as a girl when she came to town from her small village on market days. The local people look and act in a familiar way: “Everyone reminds me of a cousin in America” (Kniffel 7). He notices an old woman who resembles his grandmother—“toothless, her wrinkled face encircled by a floral babushka”—and is surprised by his reaction: “I want to stop her, hug her, and tell her I am home here with her” (Kniffel 165). At some point he realizes he could easily pass for a native.

A similar sense of “genetic” belonging is recorded by Kassabova in her account. Even at the airport in Skopje she feels “dunked in a genotype soup: all the men looked like my cousins” (28). During her first week in Ohrid she is repeatedly stopped by the elderly people and asked a quintessential Ohridian question: “Whose are you?” It seems her physical appearance betrays her origins, she is immediately identified as a descendant of the old Ohridian family. She visits relatives and finds new ones, discovering with surprise that she is probably related to most old families in the town.

Thus, in both travel books, ancestral land is, from the very beginning, represented as the space where the traveler naturally belongs because of his or her biology/genealogy. Obviously, in the broader, socio-political context, the concept of “natural belonging” to a particular nation or ethnic group may be contentious. As Guelke and Timothy point out,

[a]ncestry is a fundamental basis for citizenship in nations that wish to limit immigration or, alternatively, to repatriate individuals with

the accepted ethnic identity. . . . Ancestry defines the parameters of contested space in volatile political hotspots: who has a right to occupy a particular place by virtue of birthright, and who is an interloper or “new immigrant.” (9)

Though such a concept of genealogy-based ancestry may be used in some nations’ policies to exclude groups of people on the basis of their origin, for the individuals engaged in a personal identity quest it is quite a useful tool in forging a sense of belonging to a place.

As Kassabova and Kniffel walk the streets their grandmothers once walked they do not feel like outsiders, and neither are they perceived as strangers, whose presence may provoke a hostile gaze. Many non-Western immigrants returning to their native land immediately feel the difference in how they are perceived in the public sphere. Since in the home country they are physically similar to the people on the streets, they finally become free from condescending gazes reserved for the outlanders. “Home is where you can be recognized (as the particular person you are and as one of the category of normal persons) by others” (Morley 47). Kniffel and Kassabova feel “at home” in Nowe Miasto Lubawskie and Ohrid, respectively, because people from these local communities recognize them and offer warm welcome, sharing an occasional story, a meal or a small gift with them.

However, after a week, the lack of anonymity begins to bother Kassabova; she even starts avoiding certain lanes in the Old Town because “you felt as if you were watched by the houses” (70). On the one hand, she enjoys a sense of kinship with the Ohridians, seeing them and herself as living traces of the Christians and the Muslims, who inhabited the lake region for ages. On the other hand, she rebels against the concept of the “Balkan fate,” expressed by one of her interlocutors in a simple statement: “You can’t run away from family” (Kassabova 56). Kassabova realizes that her strong-willed, creative, temperamental grandmother was, as a young woman, forever torn between her obligations towards the family and a desire to be free. Anastassia did escape the stifling, patriarchal, provincial Ohrid to live in more cosmopolitan, urban Sofia but she missed her original home for the rest of her life and conveyed this longing to her granddaughter. Staying in Ohrid and talking to its inhabitants, both her relatives and strangers, allows Kassabova to observe the clearly prevailing gender roles in Balkan families. This is also a part of the genetic and psychological legacy that she has to recognize as a part of her family’s internal landscape.

Unlike Kassabova who never lost contact with her relatives still living in Ohrid, Kniffel comes to Poland with no telephone numbers or addresses. It seems his main motive behind looking for an extended family

is simply loneliness. His grandmother and mother are long dead; he has neither siblings, nor a spouse or children. During his stay in Poland, Kniffel manages to find many descendants of his grandparents' brothers and sisters, to visit them and to fill in the gaps in family stories, disrupted by immigration. This patching up of broken ties is symbolized in the text by a recurrent scene of sitting at the table and looking together at old family photos, letters, and postcards. Every Polish family he visits owns a box of family memorabilia, functioning much like "a window onto the past." Personal memories of places, people and historic events associated with them not only make the author familiar with lives of distant relatives but also allow him to feel a welcomed part of an extended family, someone who deserves to know these stories. The act of sharing Polish and American family stories over boxes filled with old photos becomes a symbolic affirmation of common roots.

WALKING THE OLD ROADS, RECREATING THE PAST JOURNEYS

In homecoming narratives, travel routes are typically based around visiting towns, places and landscapes which constitute the background to family stories. According to Basu, who studied the experiences of Scottish diasporic returnees and heritage tourists, the desire to trace the physical remnants of the family past represents a "spatialization of memory" as sites come to function as "sources of identity" (45). Visiting ancestors' graves, the ruins of their houses or even walking the same roads becomes a way of reimagining the family past. What seems to matter most in such travel experiences is sensory engagement, actual setting foot on the soil, seeing the landscapes, touching and smelling the ancestral land (Timothy 121). The significance of a visited site or admired landscape rises in proportion to its connection with family history. That is why, for example, the ruin of Kniffel's grandmother's house is literally "the best ruin" he has seen in Poland. The old school, which his grandmother must have attended, the old path leading to it, the old parish church in the village—all these sites function as "sacred personal spaces" in his narrative (Timothy 120).

Another strategy that both travelers use to make connections between the past and the present is retracing parts of their grandparents' immigration journeys. Kniffel recreates the journey his grandmother made as a young girl going from her native Pomeranian village of Sugajno to Bremerhaven where she boarded the ship to America. In Bremerhaven Kniffel visits the local museum with an exhibition devoted to the Great Migration and tries to act as a tourist but, unexpectedly, finds it difficult.

In Bremen I walk the affluent streets, where friendly locals are eager to take my money, to answer my questions, smile, and proudly show off their English. Such a civilized place, this Germany of the twenty-first century. “Who won the war after all?” I wonder. Certainly not Poland. You had to be on the “wrong” side to be a winner in the postwar half-century. I walk the streets of Bremen and have everything in common with these people, even a German name—their fashion flair for black, their taste for middle-eastern food, their liberal politics. (Kniffel 114)

The underlying question here seems to be “Where do I belong?” For an American visitor with a German surname, it is a relief to be back “in such a civilized place,” among people who can speak good English, whose fashions and lifestyles are comfortingly familiar. And yet, while feeling at ease, Kniffel also feels alienated. There is deep irony in the remark about the necessity of being on the wrong side to be a winner in the war, a remark which betrays not only his knowledge of Eastern European history but also cultural and emotional allegiance to Poland.

The passage quoted above is followed by a scene in the hotel where he overhears Polish maids “chattering in the hall as [they] scurry away to earn a few precious marks making German beds, no doubt grateful for the opportunity to take whatever money they can earn back home to Poland” (Kniffel 115). No authorial comment is offered, but it is hard not to see history repeating itself. At the beginning of the 21st century, Polish women are still forced by economic circumstances to leave their country and seek work abroad, just as his grandmother in 1913 was compelled to seek a better life in America. These Polish maids and other immigrants make the prosperous and comfortable lives of the citizens of Bremen possible. Their presence is taken for granted. To acknowledge this presence and ponder its historic significance, even between the lines, is to identify oneself as an outsider in the Western world. Unsurprisingly, while leaving Germany, Kniffel has “a sense of ‘coming home’ to Poland, to my land, my people, for better or worse” (116). Thus, the experience of retracing his grandmother’s immigrant journey reinforces his own sense of belonging in the ancestral homeland and a sense of kinship with Poles, victims rather than winners.

Similar experiences of following ancestors’ footsteps are recorded in Kassabova’s travelogue. She walks the streets of old Ohrid with an awareness that her “grandmother had known every single lane, every hidden chapel. I wanted to rekindle some of that intimacy” (Kassabova 34). On another occasion she retraces a boat journey that her great-grandfather Kosta once made in 1929, having to flee Macedonia for political reasons. After sailing across the lake she makes a point of walking back to town on foot—a 7-hour-long walk in hot weather—because after 4 years of exile,

Kosta returned to his home town in this manner. While walking she reflects on family history, noticing a pattern repeating itself: “[O]f absent men and women left behind, unbending women who dislocated themselves and their loved ones out of shape trying to right what had gone wrong with the family, the world, life itself” (Kassabova 95).

In both books, the authors’ acts of retracing their grandparents’ past journeys have an important function. The travels of the past provide a scenario for the present, and despite all the political and historical changes which have shifted borders and rewritten the maps of Poland and Macedonia, the land itself—its rivers, mountains, valleys and lakes—has remained unchanged. In this landscape hallowed by memories of their ancestors, Kniffel and Kassabova tread as pilgrims following a prescribed route, performing a personal ritual of reattachment to the old country.

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RETURNING TO THE SOURCE

As I have already mentioned, homecoming journeys in *A Polish Son* and *To the Lake* are also represented as therapeutic ventures. The trope of travel as self-therapy, usually performed after a traumatic event in one’s life, is fairly common in autobiographical travel writing at the turn of the 21st century (Rutkowska, “Encounters” 100). Such journeys are usually planned as long, solitary hikes in demanding terrain, because physical effort is believed to be conducive to reflection and mental healing. Though neither Kniffel nor Kassabova make their journeys deliberately demanding or strenuous, there is a sense, in both texts, of returning to the symbolic center or source of energy. For Kassabova such a site is the Ohrid Lake, where her ancestors were born, lived, traveled, worshipped and died since the 17th century. As she travels and walks along its shores, she tries to sketch a “deep map” of the lake and its environs, considering its geology, archaeology, history, folklore and literature.

In Kassabova’s narrative, the Ohrid Lake is not only represented as a physical body of water but also as a metaphysical reservoir of light and energy that seems to welcome and accept her—body and soul. Having read about the geological origins of the lake, Kassabova knows that it existed long before first humans started living on its shores. This fact amazes and fascinates her; the lake seems both primordial and everlasting, endowed with the ability to cleanse and renew itself thanks to the springs which continually bring new water, new life to it. As if sensing the powerful spiritual energy of the site, countless generations living on its shores offered thanks to God and venerated numerous saints in the chapels raised around the lake.

The final leg of Kassabova's journey takes her to St. Naum Monastery of Ohrid, the place that her grandmother loved dearly and frequently visited. St. Naum, the first Bulgarian early medieval saint, has always been venerated in the Balkans as a healer of mental afflictions. In the monastery's hotel room the traveler begins to experience lucid dreams, feeling the uncanny calming presence of a luminous lake that engulfs and cleanses the self: "[I]he entity was eventually all around me or I was part of it—not as myself, but as what remained of me once my dying self was out of the way . . . I began to feel that I was being dreamt by the lake" (362). Her personal ritual of healing involves the sojourn at St. Naum's and daily swimming in the cold waters of the lake. The book concludes with a description of the final swim that becomes a symbolic letting go of the past, of her own sense of guilt, of sadness and fear.

Past and future fell away . . . The further out I swam, the more it felt as if I was flying, and the lighter everything became . . . All is one. Don't let me forget this . . . Forgive them, forgive me, forgive us . . . Every possibility is still at the source . . . wade in and free yourself of the burden you've been carrying for centuries, become anything. (Kassabova 372)

The passage functions as a farewell to her ancestral land, as a prayer, and as a message to herself and to the reader. Vowing never to forget what the lake has taught her—"All is one"—she feels happy, strong and free. Returning to the essential source of energy, epitomized by the lake, has allowed her to claim a form of continuity with her ancestors but also to bury the past and move on with her life. Thus, the travelogue is concluded with a metaphysical, revelatory experience.

In contrast, Kniffel's narrative offers no such grand, climactic closing scene. For him, a sense of identity and belonging is achieved gradually in quotidian ways: speaking Polish on a daily basis, searching for archival records and distant relatives, cooking traditional Polish food, participating in religious festivals. All these activities help him to assimilate parts of his genetic and cultural legacy and, in this manner, mend the metaphorical "severed connection" that brought him to Poland in the first place. Extensive genealogical research culminates in the realization that he belongs to the big clan of descendants of his grandmother and her siblings, scattered across the world. The narrative ends with a vision of a family gathering in Cracow, the historical capital of Poland, the heart of the ancestral homeland:

I dreamed of a family reunion here in this ancient city, with enough relatives to fill the entire Sukiennice—cousins from America, all of the grandchildren of Helena Bryszkiewska and Antoni Brodacki, and

all the grandchildren of their brothers and sisters, from France and Germany and England, Canada and Australia, not separated by language but understanding one another's stories. What a gathering that would be. (Kniffel 228)

68 | Though such a reunion remains only a dream, Kniffel leaves Poland with a sense of mission accomplished. Paying homage to his beloved grandmother, “a Polish son” visited the homeland she could never return to, found material records of family history and dutifully preserved it all in the book. Thanks to his efforts, distant relatives on the two continents have learned about one another's existence and were able to complete the missing bits and pieces of their shared family past. Catherine Nash, who researched the significance of the practice of genealogy, observed that for some individuals it can become “a means of doing family”:

This is in the sense of the making of new or renewed family relationships socially around the sharing of genealogical interests and information within or between generations and within and beyond the immediate family. Individuals practice their own place in those generations as custodians of genealogical knowledge and weave new members into the family through genealogical gifts of knowledge and labor. (5)

Indeed, Kniffel's book makes it clear that gathering data on family history through archival search and oral history becomes for him “a practice of making relations” (Nash 5). Living in Poland makes the author realize that his home is both in Poland and in the United States. The last chapter of his book ends with the words “And now, for me, czas do domu. It's time to go home” (Kniffel 226). Significantly, Kniffel uses both Polish and English in this final good-bye to emphasize that he feels “at home” in both languages, in both cultures and in both countries.

CONCLUSION

Journeys to the land of ancestors described in *A Polish Son* and *To the Lake* offer an interesting perspective on what might be termed “inherited memory.”¹ These travels would not have been made if it were not for the recollections of the writers' grandmothers, whose love for the mother country has become a part of their grandchildren's own sense of self. Since their immigrant grandmothers could not return to the countries of their youth, their grandchildren enact the symbolic return on their behalf.

¹ I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer of this paper for this suggestion.

These journeys become for them a form of self-analysis. Focusing on the symbolic content of these inherited memories, the writers make pilgrimages to “the old country” hoping to affirm their identity in the historical and geographical context. The past offers a key to understanding the present; in the dedication to her book Kassabova writes that “The dead open the eyes of the living.” Continuing the mission of their grandmothers, who, throughout their lives, remained faithful custodians of ethnic heritage and national identity, both writers assert that discovering one’s roots has enriched them and brought them closer not only to understanding their “grandmother’s people” (Kniffel 160) but, first and foremost, to understanding themselves.

In most travel narratives, which follow the circular pattern of a heroic journey, the traveller returns home with “messages of self-knowledge . . . rebirth of the self, and improved relationships” (Lackey 133). Following this tradition, Kniffel and Kassabova represent homecoming as a venture which results in self-discovery, enabling a symbolic sense of closure and restoration. Paradoxically, it seems that such a positive outcome of the journeys is possible because, as grandchildren of immigrants, the writers can, on the whole, avoid the disillusionment experienced by the first-generation diasporic returnees. When the latter return home and write about it, they can neither recreate the past nor accept the present. In contrast to them, Kniffel and Kassabova have no past memories of their own to confront with the reality of Poland and Macedonia. In the travelogues, the authors subject their grandmothers’ recollections to literary and psychological analysis, adding their own experiences and observations. They use family memories, oral history, and encounters with relatives and with the land to create a sense of historical and geographical belonging. Home is what they make it to be.

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