SUMMARY

For the American public, the concepts of “family values” and “crisis of the family” have become an integral part of family life itself. For the rest of the world, which whether voluntarily or not is exposed to the American lifestyle via the media, the whole debate is far less meaningful and at times rather confusing. The “family” component of American influence may not be immediately apparent partly because it is mostly the young crowd that is most willing to try new cultural ideas, thus not necessarily thinking in “family” terms. It is fair to suppose, however, that in some societies undergoing profound social change (e.g. the post-communist world), at least some of the new ideas may be borrowed from the West and either take root quite successfully or merge with existing norms. Some of these ideas may not immediately find home in the new setting, not just because they may be alien to it, but due to contradictions inherent within the imports.

This book tries to answer the question of whether there actually are universal, core values that cross the numerous dividing lines and in American society, despite its self-conscious diversity. And if so, are they the seemingly stable and unchanged concepts of the “American dream” or individual effort, or are they in constant flux? I examine how the family is formed (Ch. 1), what are the main elements and ideas behind its function (Ch. 2) and how the immediate family (a couple) treats its ancestors and descendants (Ch. 3). I decided to look at these issues through the prism of positive attitudes and expectations about oneself and relations with others

I chose the middle class as the subject of my research because this huge and amorphous segment of the population is often considered an “exporter” of values to other social groups due to its sheer size and its role in the mass media. In fact, little if anything has been written about this particular group by Soviet and Russian scholars.

The book is organized in partially chronological order. One of my tasks was to look at the 1950s — now seen as the most traditional time. Whereas it was in fact quite unusual from the point of economy and demographics, it was as homogenous as ever in terms of the accepted and practiced family ideology (Chapters 1, 2). I then move on to the next decade, which altered the myth about family togetherness, and yet the vast majority of married Americans continued to live by the old rules. It was not until the 1970’s that no-fault divorce, premarital sex etc. were looked upon with less stigma and some of the most sacred tenets of family life (such as monogamy) were shattered – at least in some groups of society, the mass media and pop-psychology. It would be tempting to look at the 1980’s as a period of continued change – when individualism reached new heights and women began to realize their potential outside the home far more than ever before. But for many people throughout the country, the old rules were not simply a thing of the past, but values to build their lives around. The question of whether the family should go back to the model of the 1950s or evolve was brought in the realm of public and political discourse to an unprecedented extent. While the intensity of the debate didn’t necessarily reflect actual social and demographic trends, one should not underestimate the importance of socially accepted forms for Americans themselves. Even in an era of tolerance, the pressure to conform can be quite strong – for both genders.

I have come to the conclusion that some of the traditional norms have not quite been revived – premarital sex and cohabitation are widespread, despite the historic taboo against them — although there appears to be a limit to how far this freedom may go. Many parents, for example, welcome the desire of young couples to have traditional engagements and rather pompous weddings even when their resources are not grand. (Ch1). Similarly, the expected age of marriage has risen to the late twenties, even though the actual average hasn't increased that substantially. And late childbearing, once uncommon, is a frequently practiced option, if only among upper middle-class women.

Other attitudes have changed quite a bit — although many (particularly women) argue that the burden is still predominantly falls on them, the expectations of men's involvement in domestic chores and especially in childrearing.(Ch 2, 3) have risen almost to create new pressures on the gender never before seen as oppressed (at least in the 20th century). (Ch 2, 3). The internal dynamics of the relationship between future or current spouses appear to be filled with some uncertainty, stemming from a peculiar mix of old-fashioned tricks and unspoken rules with almost excessive openness and schematization of relationships as well as the desire to leave one's fate up to a specialist.(Ch 1,2)

Americans may choose to have fewer children or even remain childless, and invest more in one child. There has been no effective solution to the new dilemma between motherhood and career, so mothers tend to experience discomfort almost no matter which option they choose (or have to choose). At the same time, the expectations of adult children appear to be remarkably stable – starting from the empty-nest period and ending with the degree to which parents and their adult children are ready to interact (whether we're talking about rearing grandchildren or assisting the elderly). The role and the place of the elderly Americans may change, however, as their numbers grow.

Although American family life is divided into more cycles than in the past, some sense of predictability and stability seems to be inherent. No matter how different the definitions of marriage and family may be today, both concepts remain very important for the majority of Americans and, when successful, continue to account for high level of personal satisfaction. It often seems as if it is only the neighbors who are having trouble with the family. In light of the intensification of the political and social debate over family values in the last two decades, this result is ironic. At the same time, it suggests that the system of values is likely to continue to adapt successfully to new stimuli – the integration of more varied ethnic groups, for example — in the future.

The research I initially conducted for my dissertation – which then turned into this book — took longer than I initially anticipated. This was probably for the best, for it gave me the chance to see some the novelties the 1990's. I am grateful to the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology in Moscow where did my Ph.D for sending me as an exchange student with Georgetown University in 1990, where I interviewed middle-class families in D.C. and Maryland and students of the American University in Washington. I also had the chance to distribute my questionnaire among students of a Community College in Harrisburg, PA. Since 1990 I have made several trips to the U.S., before finally moving to Ann Arbor, Michigan with my family. My marriage to an American of Italian-Irish descent who grew up in Newton, Massachusetts provided an interesting opportunity to conduct "included observation."