Language – Culture – Politics, Vol. 1/2018
ISSN 2450-3576

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Eva Hoffman's Brief Encounter with Émigré Life and an Immigrant Community Before Entering the Culture of the New World

Abstract

When looking at the portrayal of Eva Hoffman's life in her autobiography *Lost in Translation*, it is evident that in this case the word "translation" has two independent meanings. Firstly, it is connected both with the emigration of her family to the New World, and, secondly with Hoffman's identity and language change. The importance of learning a new language as a medium of translation within a new culture is strongly stressed by Hoffman. In fact, she treats being an immigrant as just a brief interval in her life, and decided instead to translate herself entirely into English, even though different parts of her original cultural identity were still present, which was well visible when she asked herself the very same questions in English and Polish and reached entirely different conclusions. The main goal for Hoffman appeared to be connected with obtaining a solid education in the New World, which she achieved by graduating from Harvard University. This served as a powerful confirmation of Eva Hoffman's success in assimilation.

Keywords: *Eva Hoffman, Vladimir Nabokov, Old World, New World. new language, culture, feeling Polish, feeling Jewish, feeling American, translation, identity, émigré, memory, nostalgia immigrant*

Abstrakt

Patrząc na obraz życia Ewy Hoffman poprzez pryzmat jej autobiografii *Lost in Translation*, oczywiste jest, że słowo „tłumaczenie" ma dwa niezależne znaczenia. Związane jest to zarówno z emigracją jej rodziny do Nowego Świata, jak i z przemianą tożsamości i języka Hoffman. Doniosłość opanowania nowego języka jako medium przejścia w nową kulturę jest mocno podkreślana przez Hoffman. Jako że

bycie imigrantem zostało potraktowane jako krótka przerwa w swoim życiu, zdecydowała się ona całkowicie przejść na angielski, mimo że wciąż obecne były w niej różne osobowości. Było to szczególnie dobrze widoczne, gdy zadawała sobie te same pytania po angielsku i po polsku i osiągała zupełnie inne odpowiedzi. Główny cel Hoffman wydawał się być związany z uzyskaniem solidnego wykształcenia w Nowym Świecie, które zdobyła dzięki ukończeniu Uniwersytetu Harvarda. Było to potwierdzenie sukcesu asymilacyjnego Ewy Hoffman.

Słowa kluczowe: *Eva Hoffman, Vladimir Nabokov, Old World, New World. nowy język, kultura, czuć się Polką, czuć się Żydówką, czuć się Amerykanką, tłumaczenie, tożsamość, emigrant, pamięć, nostalgia, imigrant*

From Polish Background to Becoming a Displaced Person

Eva Hoffman was born in Poland shortly after World War II: a child of Holocaust survivors, growing up in a culture and society quite different from that of the USA. When Hoffman's family left Europe for Canada, young Eva found herself on a journey not just to an unknown land, but to an unknown language and culture as well. Hoffman effectively left the old world behind when entering the new immigrant community. Her transition from the Old into the New World seems to have been somewhat troubled and full of nostalgia for her lost cultural heritage. Paradoxically, her quick osmosis into a new language and culture did not prevent Hoffman from feeling like a stranger in American society: "Perhaps a successful immigrant is an exaggerated version of the native. From now on, I'll be made, like a mosaic, of fragments – and my consciousness of them. It is only in the observing consciousness that I remain, after all, an immigrant" (Hoffman, 1990, p. 164).

The word "translation", as it appears in the title of Hoffman's book *Lost in Translation*, possesses two independent meanings. Hoffman writes about the history of her family's journey to a new country but she also writes about changing her language and identity. Hoffman describes how she gradually loses her mother tongue and acquires a new language. Not only does she switch from one language to another but she also moves to a very different culture. The whole life of the author is viewed through an incoming immigrant's experience:

> It was not my decision to emigrate. I was having what I considered a happy and satisfactory childhood and young adolescence. So for me there was a great sense of rupture about it. And, also, at that time, the differences between Eastern Europe and the West, the differences between Cracow, where I grew up, and

> Vancouver, where we came to, were enormous, so the sense of culture shock was enormous. There was a real sense of shock and perhaps something like a cultural trauma in those first stages of immigration. (Hoffman in Kreisler, 2000)

For Hoffman, the main issue of immigration was a sense of the tremendous importance of language. In her first stage as an immigrant she was clearly in a transitory period where she could speak less Polish but was unable to speak and understand English fluently. For a person who was not using language only instrumentally but who, as Hoffman did, read a lot in her first language and was even planning to become a writer, such a transitory period must have been a very depressing experience: "Language is not something that we use instrumentally, but it is something that truly shapes us, and that truly shapes our perceptions of the world. I always did love languages as I was growing up. I loved books. I loved language as much as music. But that sense of losing language was a very, very powerful and potent lesson in the importance of language" (Hoffman in Kreisler, 2000).

Thus, from the very first moment of Hoffman's life as an émigré she struggled to gain enough command of English to express her thoughts freely. That is why from the very earliest stages of her immigration Hoffmann decided to write in English, knowing that this is the language she is supposed to live in from now on. Polish was still her mother tongue but she wanted English to be her mother tongue, too. The process of shifting between languages was not an easy one for a person born abroad and for whom the country of youth seemed to be the center of the world. Obviously, cultural values in Cracow, Poland, were totally different from those in Vancouver, Canada. This cultural difference could be regarded as a problem for an immigrant but it also brought some advantages. It gave Hoffman a privileged position of a careful observer of the things that natives could not see because they were used to certain cultural bias, standards and habits:

> I think every immigrant becomes a kind of amateur anthropologist – you do notice things about the culture or the world that you come into that people who grow up in it, who are very embedded in it, simply don't notice. I think we all know it from going to a foreign place. At first you notice the surface things, the surface differences. And gradually you start noticing the deeper differences. And very gradually you start understanding the inner life of the culture, the life of those both large and very intimate values. It is a surprisingly long process is what I can say. (Hoffman in Kreisler, 2000)

Being (Both) Polish and Jewish

In understanding Eva Hoffman, it is essential to remember about the problem of being both Polish and Jewish. This raises the question of identity. Namely, what does it mean to be both Polish and Jewish when these two cultural circles are like two sinusoids, coming close together or falling far apart from each other? Polish-Jewish cultural intermingling seems to be strictly connected to the common history of both nations on the same land in Central-East Europe. Hoffman spent her childhood in Poland and attended school there after the Second World War at a time when Jewish culture was declining in Eastern Europe. When examining Hoffman's life, it is important to remember that Jewish culture along with Jewish people was almost entirely destroyed in Eastern Europe due to the Nazi German genocide of the European Jewish population. Hoffman's family was among the lucky survivors of Hitler's politics. Holocaust survivors developed different attitudes towards their Jewishness. Usually these attitudes fell into two extremes: either denying being Jewish or reveling this fact with utmost pride. In the case of the Hoffmans', they admitted to being Jewish despite the fact that the end of World War II did not put an end to anti-Semitism in Eastern Europe. Eva Hoffman, however, educated in Polish schools and having Polish friends, was immersed in Polish culture which resulted in her developing a double cultural (and linguistic) identity:

> What I sometimes say when people ask me "Are you Polish or are you Jewish?" is what a great Polish Jewish interwar poet kept saying, Alexander Wat (who, in fact, lived in California for quite a few years of his life). He was a great interwar poet, writing in Polish; Jewish. And when people kept asking him, "Are you Polish or are you Jewish?" his answer was, I'm Polish-Polish and Jewish-Jewish." And, you know, this seemed entirely possible when I was growing up in Poland. (Hoffman in Kreisler, 2000)

Hoffman claims that in postwar Poland many people who regarded themselves as Poles and Jews were in a situation similar to hers. Hoffman thinks that to some extent her parents also shared the feeling of being both Polish and Jewish, but Jewishness appeared to be more important to them. This could have been due to the fact that although Hoffman's parents along with many other Polish citizens of Jewish origin felt fully assimilated, some anti-Semitic incidents let them know that not every person thought of them as "Poles." Hoffman, on the other hand, believes that the Polish and Jewish

parts of her identity are inseparable. She admires Poland for its rich culture and revolts against calling Poland an anti-Semitic country, remembering her parents who survived the Holocaust and knowing that reality is far more complex than stereotypes. In her book *Sztetl* (published in 2001), she describes Polish and Jewish communities living side by side, and the relationship between them. This book is important to Hoffman as it shows how decoding, exploring, and deepening of memory activates understanding:

> It was important to me precisely because I felt that the understanding of Polish-Jewish history and of the Polish-Jewish relationship has become so reductive in the West. From the distance, it is so much easier to see it in stark and very reductive terms. And I thought that this was very unjust to that history and to the richness of that history. It was a long and a very fascinating and a very rich relationship, which I could talk about at length. But the notion that Poland is a kind of quintessentially anti-Semitic country was one of the most deeply entrenched sorts of stereotypes and prejudices, and somehow a stereotype which was allowed to remain in its very unrevised version. (Hoffman in Kreisler, 2000)

Hoffman's parents spent the Second World War in their small town in the eastern part of Poland, now part of Ukraine. They were saved by local people who gave them shelter risking their own lives to do so. In 1959, the Hoffmans left Cracow for Canada. And it is the juncture that we can talk about a meeting of more than two identities and languages; namely Polish, Jewish and American identities connected through the Polish and English languages. Hoffman believed that it was essential for her to join together these different parts of her identity.

Recollecting Memory while Entering Permanently the New World

Lost in Translation, in which Hoffman portrays her transition from one culture to another, from one language to another, is divided into three parts: "Paradise," "Exile", and "The New World." This division is made to show clearly, step by step, how a particular person grows up in one cultural and linguistic circle, leaves it, and enters another culture and language. This process appears to be extremely difficult for a person who is fascinated by the culture in which he or she grows up and knows basically nothing about the culture of his/her new adopted homeland. Leaving the Old World may

be a source of strong nostalgia. In *Lost in Translation* Hoffman describes her feelings when leaving Poland. She travels to Canada on the liner *Batory* and after listening to the rhythms of *Mazurek Dabrowskiego*, the Polish anthem, she experiences her first bout of nostalgia:

> I desperately want time to stop, to hold the ship still with the force of my will. I am suffering my first severe attack of nostalgia, or *tesknota* a word that adds to nostalgia the tonalities of sadness and longing. It is a feeling whose shades and degrees I'm destined to know intimately, but at this hovering moment, it comes upon me like a visitation from a whole new geography of emotions, an annunciation of how much an absence can hurt. (Hoffman, 1990, p. 4)

Hoffman recollects Vladimir Nabokov's remarks about Russian children's memories of the pre-revolutionary period made in his memoir *Speak, Memory*. According to Hoffman, Nabokov claims that "these children were blessed with all excess of sensual impressions" (Nabokov in Hoffman, 1990, p. 114-115). After the disaster of the communist coup in Russia it had become a fact these impressions were supposed to compensate these people the results of emigration and were able to create the impression that time has just stopped.

This type of feeling, which seemed to be shared by Nabokov and Hoffman, appeared to be a strong source of nostalgia for their lost paradise.

> Loss is a magical preservative. Time stops at the point of severance, and no subsequent impressions muddy the picture you have in mind. The house, the garden, the country you have lost remain forever as you remember them. Nostalgia – that most lyrical of feelings – crystallizes round these images like amber. Arrested within it, the house, the past, is clear, vivid, made more beautiful by the medium in which it is held and its stillness. (Hoffman, 1990, p. 115)

Hoffman believes that nostalgia could be regarded as a source of poetry full of inward visions of what was lost, and it could also be regarded as a form of special fidelity to the lost past. But for many years in most societies nostalgia was also commonly treated as a type of illness, an illness that makes a particular person incapable of a full adjustment to the reality of social life of a community she or he belongs to. "As I walk the streets of Vancouver, I am pregnant with the images of Poland, pregnant and sick. *Tęsknota* throws a film over everything around me, and directs my vision inward. The largest presence within me is the welling up of absence of what I have lost. This pregnancy is also a phantom pain" (Hoffman, 1990, p. 115).

Hoffman believes that on a social level many of the ideologues of the future disregarded the past and the memories of the past. It was so because the past can be dangerous for the new Utopias "marching in." And this was exactly what happened in the case of many people under the communist regime in Russia and Poland. And probably that is why Hoffman stresses that only some Eastern European intellectuals were immune to this type of the so called progressive thinking.

> The ideologues of the future see attachment to the past as the most awful of all monsters, the agent of reaction. It is to be extracted from the human soul with no quarter of self-pity, for it obstructs the inevitable march of events into the next Utopia. Only certain Eastern European writers, forced to march into the future too often, know the regressive dangers of both forgetfulness and clinging to the past. But then, they are among our world's experts of mourning, having lost not an archeological but a living history. And so, they praise the virtues of a true memory. Nabokov unashamedly reinvokes and revives his childhood in the glorious colors of *tęsknota*. Milan Kundera knows that a person who forgets easily is a Don Juan of experience, promiscuous and repetitive, suffering from the unbearable lightness of being. Czeslaw Milosz remembers the people and places of his youth with the special tenderness reserved for objects of love that are no longer cherished by others. (Hoffman, 1990, p. 116)

Quitting the past is a traumatic experience. Hoffman recollects her memories of Cracow, which she loved for its high-brow culture and its rich cultural heritage. She also remembers the villages where she used to spend her summer holidays and thinks about her friends with whom she spent days discussing music, art and literature. At the same time she knows nothing about Canada, which to her seems to be about as much familiar as the Sahara. So, she turns the Old World, the world of her youth, into an idyll. Indeed, her parents' choice to emigrate to Canada seems to be quite accidental, as during the years of the Second World War, when the family was in hiding, Hoffman's father read a book by Arkady Fiedler called *Canada Fragrant with Resin*, which to him symbolized freedom and the wilderness.

While examining the Hoffmans' life in the Old World, Eva Hoffman points to the fact that the ancient customs and the way families brought up their children differed from the current ones. Her mother, for instance, was not allowed to have any encounters with boys; even talking to them

was forbidden. Hoffman confesses to not knowing how her parents could have possibly come to know each other before their marriage. She is sure that their marriage must have been a rebellion against the customs of their community, especially that Hoffman's mother was against the traditional role of women, as visible in her lenience towards Eva not learning how to cook or sew; in her mother's opinion there were more interesting things to do. It seems clear that even though Hoffman's mother was from a religious orthodox Jewish family, she abandoned this tradition in favor of a modern, secular way of life. And this was the reason why she wanted her children to behave like cosmopolitan city dwellers. Hoffman's father treated Eva like a boy, wanting her to be good at all games and physical exercise, encouraging her to take up as many sports as she could.

Cracow, the place where the Hoffman family settled after the war, was well known for everything which stands for high-brow culture. The young Eva seems to be fascinated with Cracow, a city soaked with history: full of old cafes, medieval and Renaissance churches, and baroque arcaded buildings.

Apart from Cracow's cultural heritage there was also the communist regime. At that time school was a place in which history was falsified and young people were cheated with the utopian vision of building a perfect society. Hoffman, however, seemed to be more interested in music than current political issues. She was highly excited with Artur Rubinstein, a great Polish pianist coming to Poland to give concerts in Cracow's Symphony Hall. In Cracow, people spent a whole night waiting for the Symphony Hall to open and for the tickets to go on sale. This was also an important moment in forming Hoffman's identity, as for her, music was the only universal language far removed from current political issues.

So, Cracow was Eva Hoffman's very special personal paradise. This impression formed a long lasting paradox in Hoffman's life as she carried or perhaps translated the notion of internal paradise across temporal and spatial boundaries. In the very first passages of her book when Hoffman wrote about leaving Poland on the *Batory* liner, she also added her memories of the stylish party she attended in New York long after she had left the *Batory's* deck. This was connected with meeting a woman who claimed to have had an enchanted childhood. She said that her father had been a high rank diplomat and she had lived in comfort surrounded by servants. But this style of life came to an end when the woman was a thirteen-year-old girl, which created a feeling in her that she had been exiled from paradise, devoting the rest of her life to the search for it:

> No wonder. But the wonder is what you can make a paradise out of. I told her that I grew up in a lumpen apartment in

> Cracow squeezed into three rudimentary rooms with four other people, surrounded by squabbles, dark political rumblings, memories of wartime suffering, and daily struggle for existence. And yet, when it came time to leave, I, too felt I was being pushed out of the happy, safe enclosures of Eden. (Hoffman, 1990, p. 5)

The transition from "paradise" to the New World began on the *Batory*, the ship transporting large numbers of people eager to be cut off from their European roots in order to start a new life in America. Unlike her parents, who definitely wanted to leave Europe behind, Eva Hoffman decided to analyze her past. And after having had a strong feeling that she had been forced to leave Poland, Eva Hoffman experienced the first strong attack of nostalgia. Perhaps the memories of Cracow were so strong that Hoffman felt an absolute need to return to the place she was expelled from. In these terms, leaving the city of Cracow may mean the removal from Eden. And the power of paradise could be seen only when one had been expelled from it. For a thirteen-year-old girl, leaving the beloved place was close to life ending: "I don't want to be pried of my childhood, my pleasures, my hopes for becoming a pianist". (Hoffman, 1990, p. 4) And till the day of departure Cracow symbolized for Hoffman "both home and universe" (Hoffman, 1990, p. 5) whereas Canada was associated with "ominous echoes of 'Sahara" (Hoffman, 1990, p. 4).

The *Batory* liner for Hoffman created a great division between the old and the new world. The *Batorys* served as a symbol of Hoffman's transformation but it also served as a symbol of painful translation of her memories to a new life in Canada. Translation, which etymology explains, is rooted in the Latin word, *transferre*, meaning to bear or pull across, is materially represented by this ship. The text, in the person of Hoffman, which is to undergo the translation, is literally being pulled across the Atlantic Ocean to the shores of another world in order to be modeled into another language and interpreted in a different context. The fact that the *Batory* both begins and ends. Part I of *Lost in Translation* is primary evidence that what is being described is in fact the only paradise that Hoffman herself can recover, which is ultimately a paradise in translation.

Bearing in mind life in Poland as it was (despite all the difficulties occurring in post war Europe) and Cracow's unique atmosphere (Hoffman's paradise), the decision to emigrate made by Hoffman's parents had to be very painful for all the members of the family. But after having left this paradise she gradually discovered that paradise represents a place which cannot function without creating its antithesis.

Vladimir Nabokov who had experienced the life of an émigré much earlier than Eva Hoffman did, believed that his Russian years constituted the "thetic arc" of his early life (Nabokov, 1999, p. 211). Effectively Nabokov's life in pre-war Europe created the antithesis to his Russian past. And in this respect, life in America formed a synthesis which in turn was leading to the creation of a new thesis. This concept similar to (or derived from) Hegel's triadic series, Nabokov explained by the means of a spiral and spiritualized circle. Although not using the term spiral Hoffman similarly to Nabokov believed that her life odyssey could be explained by the means of post-Heglian triadic series. The way Hoffman constructed her memoirs *Lost in Translation* (1990) dividing it into chapters named "Paradise," "Exile," and "The New World" is a clear indication of her implementation of the post-Heglian triadic series. Hoffman treated her life in Poland as thesis, her emigration was the antithesis, and finally her translation into the New World formed a synthesis.

Although Hoffman experienced nostalgia for her lost "Paradise" she did not consider writing in English as a personal tragedy. For her this was the final proof of her synthesis in the New World. Contrary to Hoffman, Nabokov treated his exile from Russia as a constant source of nostalgia, however, he also felt a strong affection for his adopted country the USA. Nevertheless, abandoning the Russian language in favor of writing in English, was for him a personal tragedy. Nabokov's defense strategy was to ignore the linear flow of time flow and to boldly claim that he didn't think in any language: his thought being connected with free associations of pictures in his mind.

Likewise, a particular attitude towards time appears to be extremely important in Hoffman's narrative. She consistently uses the present tense in each of the three parts of her book as if the present time concerning former events in Hoffman's life was never over. This is especially significant at the beginning of *Lost in Translation*. Hoffman says: "It's April 1959, I'm standing at the railing of the *Batory's* upper deck, and I feel that my life is ending." (Hoffman, 1990, p. 3) And then at the beginning of the second part of her book Hoffman says: "We are in Montreal, in echoing, dark train station, and we are huddled on a bench waiting for someone to give us some guidance. Timidly, I walk a few steps away from my parents to explore this terra incognita" (Hoffman, 1990, p. 99). It seems that for Hoffman, the present remembered (as it was) has never ended or at least she pretends to believe so.

On the other hand, Hoffman desperately tried to adjust herself both mentally and in terms of physical conditions to the present immigrant life in Canada. This type of transition constituted a danger of definite breaking off with her still subconsciously existing past, and could not guarantee Hoffman

a complete melting into a new culture and language. Unlike the translation of an actual text, the transition of a life poses entirely new challenges. In Eva Hoffman's case, she was simultaneously both text and translator. Although her childhood has effectively ended at the end of Part I to become a complete text unto itself, Hoffman as a translator was barely cognizant of, much less fluent in, the new languages she had to translate herself into. As a result, Paradise, though originally enacted in Poland before 1959, emerged only after Hoffman was fully assimilated into the language of the new world.

However, by the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, Eva Hoffman, being fully assimilated in a new culture and language, had a unique chance to visit her lost paradise. After the communist regimes in Eastern Europe had ended, Hoffman paid a short visit to Poland, also visiting other former East-block countries. While visiting Poland, she was able to recall hidden memories from her childhood. Hoffman remembered Poland as a place idealized in her mind, the home of her sheer happiness: "Happiness, Freud said, is the fulfillment of childhood wish; meaningful knowledge, perhaps, is the satisfaction of childhood curiosity" (Hoffman, 1994, p. X). Because Hoffman had been deprived of what she loved, she often felt as if she were stuck in the memories of her early years.

Inevitable Cultural Translations in the New World – Starting a Life in a New Language

After a definite breaking of the ties with the Old World had become an irreversible fact, one of the crucial moments connected with Hoffman's change of linguistic identity was the decision to keep her diary in English. From now on, Polish was pushed out by the incoming English, making Polish the language of her past. She understood that language would be her most important instrument in overcoming immigrant marginality, and she took pains to improve it: "My mother says I'm becoming "English." This hurts me because I know she means I'm becoming cold. I'm no colder than I've ever been, but I'm learning to be less demonstrative. I learn this from a teacher who, after contemplating the gesticulation with which I help myself describe the digestive system of a frog, tells me to "sit on my hands and then try talking." (Hoffman, 1990, p. 146)

After Hoffman had started to write her diary in English she had accepted the fact that the Hoffmans' emigration from Poland was irreversible. Choosing English as her new language was an attempt to reconcile herself with what had happened: "Because I have to choose something, I finally

choose English. If I'm to write about the present, I have to write in the language of the present, even if it's not the language of the self." (Hoffman, 1990, p. 121) This choice seemed to be inevitable as Hoffman desperately wanted to get used to life in a new society.

Because Hoffman wanted to treat her immigrant status as just a brief interval in her life, she decided to translate her entire self into the new culture and language, even though it was not the culture and language of her true passions and emotions:

> As a result the diary becomes surely one of the more impersonal experiences of the sort produced by adolescent girl. These are no sentimental effusions of rejected love, eruptions of familial anger, or consoling broodings about death. English is not the language of such emotions. Instead, I set down my reflections on the ugliness of wrestling; on the elegance of Mozart, and how Dostoyevsky puts me in mind of El Greco. I write down Thoughts. I Write. (Hoffman, 1990, p. 121)

Writing a diary in English was also an attempt to create and withhold this part of Hoffman's persona which she believed she would have developed in Polish. "I write in my public language, in order to update what might have been my other self" (Hoffman,1990, p. 121). That is why Hoffman believed that this diary was about her but at the same time it was not about her at all.

Hoffman's immigrant "split personality" seems to be an immanent part of her identity. When she was considering marriage or becoming a pianist she reached two different answers depending on the language in which the question was asked:

> Should you marry him? The question comes in English.
> Yes.
> Should you marry him? The question echoes in Polish.
> No.
> [...]
> Should you become a pianist? The question comes in English.
> No, you mustn't. You can't.
> Should you become a pianist? The question echoes in Polish.
> Yes, you must. At all costs. (Hoffman, 1990, p. 199)

Through writing Hoffman was able to develop her English self-existing predominantly in the abstract sphere of thoughts: "When I write, I have a real existence that is proper to the activity of writing – an existence that takes

place midway between me and the sphere of artifice, art, pure language." (Hoffman, 1990, p. 121)

Hoffman understood that the only *lingua franca* of the world she found herself in was English. No matter whether she was pleased with it or not, she knew that the current situation left her no choice but to abandon her mother tongue, which was Polish. So Hoffman decided that the English language was the only one which could serve as a basis of her functioning in the society she was transplanted to.

However, her functioning in a new language was characterized by a certain deficiency: "the problem is that the signifier has become severed from the signified. The words I learn now don't stand for things in the same unquestioned way they did in my native tongue" (Hoffman, 1990, p. 106). For example, Hoffman recollects the notion of the word *river* in Polish which possesses a meaning of something vivid, full of sound, while in English the same word stands for something cold, without an aura. When she talks about *kindness*, a word which in Polish possesses some degree of irony, she is surprised that in English the same word is treated as a highly positive virtue: "Even simplest adjectives sow confusion in my mind; English 'kindness' has a whole system of morality behind it, a system that makes 'kindness' an entirely positive virtue. Polish kindness has the tiniest element of irony. (Hoffman, 1990, p. 108)

Bearing in mind the apparently funny but often painful linguistic diversities, Hoffman understood that after having left the Old World, English was the basis for forming her own sense of 'self'. She constantly feared the danger of losing her own identity through transformation to another culture and language which equaled being lost in translation. Hoffman also feared that the spontaneity of speech in her mother tongue which obviously was characteristic to native speakers of Polish, could be lost in her newly adopted language:

> The fear of losing this inborn spontaneity of response was also connected with facing the danger of losing Hoffman's personal language. The language which was full of emotions related to her past life. Losing this private interior language also meant losing all the inside images. I have no interior language and without it, interior images. (Hoffman, 1990, p. 108)

Hoffman believes that translation can affect a particular person in two entirely different ways. It can either destroy someone's world and identity or, which is more common and desirable, it can substantially enrich their world and identity: "Ultimately, if translation doesn't break you it can enrich you

very much. And one adds a whole new perspective on the world, a whole new vision of the world, a whole new internal world" (Zournazi, 1998, p. 5).

According to Hoffman, the process of translation is peculiar to almost every immigrant who decides to reveal eagerness to switch from one cultural and linguistic identity to another. It is not a question of whether this change was undertaken more or less consciously on the part of a person who was one of the emigrants from the Old World. It is the question whether this change enriches and helps to develop the new identity of a person who decided to start a new life in the New World. "It is partly the process of growing up. But it is very extreme if it is compounded by immigration, and it also means that one is very conscious of it – both of the rifts between two identities and of the melting" (Zournazi, 1998, p. 5).

Hoffman states that having acquired the experience of living in different cultures and historical times can be highly beneficial, as it gives a particular person a type of historical and cultural scope that people brought up in one culture and language lack. Having a chance to live in different cultures can also form an internal distance to what a particular person can see or experience: "And when you have these distances within yourself then you can see. It awakens vision and creates arcs of space and time. Otherwise, if you don't have this distance, you cannot see yourself internally and you become your own blind spot" (Zournazi, 1998, p. 6).

Hoffman claims that everyone, no matter whether he or she is of immigrant descent, requires distance for achieving understanding and acceptance in the society. This is due to the fact that having had just one internal identity a person is not capable of knowing himself or herself adequately. Consequently, he or she is unable to understand others.

When assimilating, it is also important to acknowledge whether the particular society is ready to accept *others*:

> I've heard American expatriates and other immigrants to Western Europe complain that the societies of England or France are stratified, closed, and impregnable from the outside. When I begin the process of my Americanization, I find myself in the least snobbish of societies and the most fluid of generations. It's that very mobility [...] that makes assimilation an almost outmoded idea. (Hoffman, 1990, p. 195)

In the final chapter of *Lost in Translation*, Hoffman often refers to herself as an outsider wishing to be taken in. And living in a multicultural society, she often asks herself whether complete assimilation is possible: "Ironically eno-

ugh, one of the ways in which I continue to know that I'm not completely assimilated is through my residual nostalgia – which many of my friends find a bit unseemly, as if I were admitting to a shameful weakness – for the more stable, less strenuous conditions of anchoring, of home" (Hoffman, 1990, p. 197).

Hoffman seems to be fascinated by the way Vladimir Nabokov dealt with his immigrant experience, and with the way Nabokov treated his personal tragedy of exile from his beloved Russia.

> I wish I could breathe a Nabokovian air. I wish I could have the Olympian freedom of sensibility that disdains in his autobiography, to give the Russian Revolution more than a passing mention as if such common events did not have the power to wreak fundamental changes in his own life. [...] I wish I could define myself – as Nabokov defines both himself and his characters – by the telling detail, a preference for mints over lozenges, an awkwardness at cricket, a tendency to lose gloves or umbrellas. (Hoffman, 1990, p. 198)

What strikes Hoffman most in the Nabokovian world is that such a sphere is according to her lighted, lightened, and enlightened by the most precise affection. And this type of affection should be treated as unsentimental because it is absolutely free without limits or boundaries. And in this respect, Hoffman believes that Nabokovian characters have the power to be perfectly themselves. In contrast to Nabokov, Hoffman sees herself as a person "formed by historic events and defined by sociological categories" (Hoffman, 1990, p. 198). In this context Hoffman describes herself in the following way:

> I am a Jew, an immigrant, half-Pole, half-American. I suffer from certain syndromes because I was fed on stories of the war. [...] I haven't escaped my past or my circumstances; they constrain me like a corset, making me stiffer, smaller. I haven't bloomed to that fullness of human condition in which only my particular traits – the good mold of my neck, say, or the crispness of my ironies matters. (Hoffman, 1990, p. 198)

Hoffman seems to be fascinated with the lightness of Nabokov's victorious response to the condition of exile. "Of all responses to the condition of exile his is surely the most triumphant, the least marred by rage, or inferiority, or aspiration. His observations are those of entirely free man" (Hoffman, 1990, p. 198).

For Hoffman education was highly important during the process of assimilation in the New World. A vital step in this direction was leaving Vancouver, Canada, which for Hoffman was the place she had first made contact with America. But because of that it was also the place of her exile from the Old World. It certainly is not a coincidence that the beginning of the final chapter of Hoffman's autobiography, *The New World*, presents her struggle to obtain a solid education. But instead of Vancouver, Canada, it was Houston, USA where she started her journey to enter permanently the New World. After having graduated from Rice University, Texas, Hoffman's next stop was Harvard University, one of the centers of American high-brow culture. "I'm Eva, I live in Cambridge, Mass., I go to Harvard University, I keep repeating to myself. [...] My friends assure me that, having come to the republic's eastern shore, I've landed in the real America at last" (Hoffman, 1990, p. 202).

By obtaining a solid education in the New World, Hoffman wanted to establish her place in America. After having graduated from Harvard University and starting her professional career in the USA, Hoffman was sure that she definitely wanted to end the condition of being a stranger.

> I no longer want to tell people quaint stories from the Old Country, I don't want to be told that "exotic is erotic," or that I have eastern European intensity, or brooding Galician eyes. I no longer want to be propelled by immigrant chutzpah or desperado energy or usurper's ambition. I no longer want to have the prickly, unrelenting consciousness that I'm living in the medium of a specific culture. (Hoffman, 1990, p. 203)

This was the moment when Eva Hoffman got rid of all the doubts whether she should mold herself to the society of her newly adopted country. After having received her Ph.D. from Harvard University, she stated that she had in effect been given the certificate of full Americanization. And finally, after spending years living in the New World's society and culture, Hoffman discovered that when she talked to herself, she talked in English. "English is the language in which I've become an adult, in which I've seen my favorite movies and read my favorite novels, and sung along with Janis Joplin records. In Polish, whole provinces of adult experience are missing" (Hoffman, 1990, p. 272).

Hoffman's past was well remembered by her and influenced the creation of her identity in the New World. But at the same time she knew that there was no return to her Old Word's childhood harmony. That harmony was, for her, more an ancient myth than a reality. The differentiating sign that mar-

ked Hoffman's translation into America was the reverse of Wheeler's concept (Wheeler, 1971, p. 2): that of a constant and irremovable cultural and linguistic opposition between immigrants and America. Contrary to Wheeler's concept, Hoffman's life in a new language had the result that Polish was no longer the one true language against which she lived her secondary life. Even speaking Polish, she knew that it was infiltrated by English (Hoffman, 1990, p. 273). This caused Hoffman to believe that she was somehow a sum of her languages – the language of her childhood and family and the language of her education and adolescence in America.

Conclusions

When looking at Hoffman's life story through *Lost in Translation*, it is evident that the word "translation" has two independent meanings. It is connected both with the emigration of her family to the New World, and with Hoffman's change of language and identity. The importance of learning a new language as a medium of translation to a new culture is strongly stressed by Hoffman.

Changing cultural and linguistic identity in the New World was especially difficult for Hoffman. It has to be remembered that while emigrating from Poland, she already possessed a strong feeling of a double Polish-Jewish identity and of belonging to both cultural traditions. Even though Hoffman was born after the Second World War had ended, her parents made Hoffman aware of their struggle to survive the Holocaust. From those times this part of her Jewish self was and is an important element of her personality, which later she expressed in *Shtetl*, a book describing the vanished world of Polish Jews.

The division of Hoffman's autobiography *Lost in Translation* into three parts: "Paradise," "Exile," and "The New World" is not coincidental. It shows how a person brought up in one culture and language, leaves his or her country of origin, wonders around in the New World, and then adopts a new culture and language. At the beginning of this process nostalgia for the lost paradise is often present, as quitting the past is a traumatic experience. A border line between the old and the new was the *Batory* liner, which brought the Hoffmans to America. Her life odyssey could be well expressed by Nabokov's spiral and spiritualized circle. She also seemed to be fascinated by the way Nabokov dealt with his immigration. The Nabokovian attitude consisting of a certain lightness of being during his years in exile fascinated Hoffman, as she felt herself formed by historic events and defined by sociological and linguistic categories.

From the beginning of her immigration, Hoffman decided to keep her diary in English. As being an immigrant was treated as just a brief interval in her life and decided to translate herself entirely into English, even though different parts of her personality were still present, which became all too visible when she asked herself the same questions in English and Polish and reached entirely different answers in each. The main goal for Hoffman appeared to be connected with obtaining a solid education in the New World, which she achieved by graduating from Harvard University. This was a confirmation of Hoffman's successful assimilation.

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