

Finding Home in Babel: Transnationalism, Translation, and Languages of Identity

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
(American Culture)
in The University of Michigan
2008

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2008

Dla Babci i Dziadzia z podziękowaniem
For my Grandparents with gratitude

Acknowledgements

This project could not have been completed without the generous support of many people. They are proof that the American Dream is a collective enterprise.

My first thanks go to my family in Poland: my grandparents Maria and Stanislaw, my sister Natalia, my niece Emilia, my aunt and uncle Anata and Zenek, my cousin Wojtek, and, of course, my mother Basia in California. I would not be the person I am today without them.

I am grateful for the encouragement and feedback of my dissertation committee: co-chairs Anita Norich and Magdalena Zaborowska, and members Todd Endelman, Deborah Dash-Moore, and Tiya Miles. This project took root in Magda's *Immigrant Narrative* seminar with a paper on Eva Hoffman's Lost in Translation. Magda has been a model scholar for me. She has always encouraged me and her friendship has gotten me through some of the most difficult times of my graduate school career. She read each page of this manuscript with the utmost care, offering comments, feedback, and editing advice with untiring patience and understanding. Magda and her son Cazmir embraced me as part of their family—*Dziekuje!* I took my first graduate seminar in Jewish American literature with Anita; I immediately realized how much I could learn from her insight and keen eye for the historical and social contexts of literary texts. Throughout the last six years,

her house has been my home time and again, a place where she and her daughter Sara have always made me feel welcomed—*A sheynem dank!* Both Magda and Anita helped me with the research and the writing of this project; throughout it all they were generous with their time and advice, guiding me through the steps of this difficult process.

During more than four years of my graduate school career, I have had the privilege of working with a group of outstanding women on the innovative and exciting Global Feminisms Project: Abby Stewart, Liz Cole, Jayati Lal, Wang Zheng, and Kristin McGuire. From them, I learned about feminist activism, oral histories, and the politics of translation.

Many thanks to my colleagues and friends at the University of Michigan for keeping me sane: Alice Weinreb (my insanely smart friend who edited parts of this manuscript), Deidre Wheaton and Rachel Peterson (my fellow travelers), Aimee Germain and Laura Krinock (my ‘L-crew’), and Danya Keene (my neighborly friend). And to Louis Ciccirelli whose creative and inspirational editing helped me to complete this project.

Many thanks to colleagues and friends in the American Culture Program: Evelyn Alsultany, Matthew Briones, Kristin Hass, Catherine Daligga, Rabia Belt, Jessi Gan, Tayana Hardin, and Kiara Vigil. I also owe a debt of gratitude to the administrative staff of the American Culture Program for their untiring efforts on behalf of graduate students, and especially to Marlene Moore, who always found time for me.

A heartfelt thanks to Jadwiga Maurer and Irena Klepfisz for patiently answering my many questions. Their works and words continue to inspire me. I would also like to thank Jadwiga Maurer's friends who met with me in Poland: Regina Renz, Stanislaw Obirek, Jerzy Daniel, and Basia Predygier.

I was first introduced to the field of immigration studies at California State University, Fullerton, where I received my Bachelor's and Master's degrees in American Studies. Pamela Steinle, whose course on American Character motivated me to seek a degree in American Studies, continues to be my close friend/sister, mentor, and reader. Some years ago, Pam insisted that, despite my immigrant misgivings, I was good enough to pursue a Ph.D. She was right. I will always be grateful for her unwavering faith in me. Thanks also to Leila Zenderland and John Ibson, who helped to get me here. Thank you, as well, to my friends and adopted family in California: Suzanne (the bestest friend a girl could have), and Leo & Quinn (my model relationship).

This project would not have been possible without the financial support of various units at the University of Michigan: the Program in American Culture, Marshall Weinberg and the Frankel Center for Judaic Studies, the Center for Russian and East European Studies, the Center for the Education of Women, the Horace H. Rackham School of Graduate Studies, the Department of Comparative Literature, and the Global Ethnic Literatures Seminar. Funding was also provided by the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture.

I dedicate this dissertation to my grandparents. My *babcia* Maria, whose personality I have gladly inherited, has raised two generations of children, and is in the process of helping to bring up her great-grand daughter, Emilia. I will be happy if I have half of her strength, energy, and wisdom when I reach the beautifully ripe age of 82. The loss of my *dziadziu* Stanislaw in March of 2007 is irreparable. He was our pillar of strength, good humor, and patience. We will always miss him.

Preface

In Tadeusz Borowski's short story "The Battle of Grunwald," an American soldier mistakenly shoots a Jewish woman who lives in a Displaced Persons camp in allied occupied Germany. The narrator of Borowski's story remains nonplussed by the event. He nonchalantly explains the situation to an American officer, who is frantically trying to find out what happened, in these words: "Nothing. Nothing happened at all. You just shot a girl from our camp. Germans shot at us for six years, now you shoot at us, what's the difference?" This scene in *Wybor Opowiadania* (*Selections*), the 1959 Polish-language collection of Borowski's stories is a stunning depiction of murder: so soon after the end of World War II and in a place intended to offer safety and shelter to Holocaust survivors, Borowski's narrator offers a parallel between the allied liberators and Nazi perpetrators.

On the surface, Borowski's narrator seems to ascribe the crime to a case of mistaken identity: the soldier is not trained to recognize the young woman as a displaced person he is supposed to protect, while she does not recognize the soldier as her protector. On a deeper level, however, this tragic encounter has everything to do with multiple languages and the politics of cross-cultural communication. In U.S.-occupied Germany, the Jewish survivors and the American soldiers rarely interact; they don't speak the same language. There is also a clearly uneven power relationship between them that the narrator of Borowski's stories captures perfectly. The Jewish displaced

persons, the survivors of Nazi atrocities, continue to be the captives in the camp that is now overseen by U.S. guards with guns.

Barbara Vedder, the translator of This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen (1967) in which “The Battle of Grunwald” does not appear, explains that this edition was intended to contain only those stories that were directly related to Borowski’s survival of Nazi concentration camps.¹ Vedder’s politic explanation notwithstanding, this collection will forever be haunted for me by that excluded story, which was, in fact, so clearly inspired by Borowski’s concentration camp experiences. “The Battle of Grunwald” was perhaps deemed irrelevant for another, less obvious reason: in its all too uncomfortable parallels between German perpetrators and American liberators, it all too painfully disturbs conventional notions of Allied liberation, justice, and peace. Most importantly for my project, it extends the discussions of survivors’ lives beyond 1945 and the end of World War II.²

Borowski’s story invites us to think about the many postwar displacements experienced by European Jews. As a student in the Program in American Culture whose interdisciplinary training fine-tuned my reading of social and historical contexts in literature, I immediately wanted to read beyond the ending of Borowski’s story; to learn more about those survivors who made their lives in the U.S. following World War II. As a student and teacher of American literature, I wanted to read their stories to see what they themselves had to say about their new lives here, and what lessons their experiences

¹ Please see the preface to This Way, London: Cape, 1967.

² For discussions of survivors’ lives in DP camps in Germany in the first few years after the war, please see Atina Grossmann, Jews, Germans, and Allies: Close Encounters in Occupied Germany, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007; Zeev W. Mankowitz, Life Between Memory and Hope: The Survivors of the Holocaust in Occupied Germany, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

could provide for us today. In the process, I found that relatively little has been said about Holocaust survivors as newcomers to this country, or as people who had to live in and negotiate the daily complexities of cultural and linguistic translation.³ It seemed that by the end of the 20th Century, survivors were talked about in the popular media as if their homes, if not always here, were meant to be here.

One of the most interesting illustrations of this ‘assimilation’ of survivors into the American ethos of democratic freedom is Jeffrey Shandlers’ While America Watches: Televising the Holocaust (1999). Shandler found, for instance, that for the first twenty or so years after the war, survivors were rarely the subject of media representations and that when they were, the coverage focused on their new and happy lives in their adopted country. Beginning with the 1970s and the publication of books like Terrence Des Pres’s The Survivor: An Anatomy of Lives in the Death Camps (1976) and Dorothy Rabinowitz’s New Lives: Survivors of the Holocaust Living in America (1976), the focus shifted to the survivors’ determination in face of wartime persecution and their ability to

³ In Case Closed: Holocaust Survivors in Postwar America, Beth B. Cohen challenges the belief that survivors found happiness and opportunity in the U.S. (about 140,000 Jewish survivors emigrated to the U.S. from Europe between 1946 and 1954). Cohen explores the time before the Holocaust was widely discussed in the U.S. and before survivors had a revered place in American culture; she returns to a time when survivors were “refugees, DPs, New Americans, greeners, units, immigrants” (1). New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007. For socio-psychological analyses see Boaz Kahana, Zev Harel, and Eva Kahana, Holocaust Survivors and Immigrants: Late Life Adaptations, New York: Springer, 2005; for analysis of fictional representations of immigrant survivors in American literature, see Dorothy Seidman Bilik, Immigrant-Survivors: Post-Holocaust Consciousness in Recent Jewish American Fiction, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1981, Gilbert H. Muller, New Strangers in Paradise: The Immigrant Experience and Contemporary American Fiction, Lexington: University of Kentucky, 1999.

A number of scholars have analyzed memoirs authored by Holocaust survivors in the United States or considered Holocaust survivors as subjects of sociological inquiry. For literary analyses see Sidra De Koven Ezrahi’s By Words Alone: The Holocaust in Literature, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980; Alvin Rosenfeld’s A Double Dying: Reflections on Holocaust Literature, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980; James Young’s Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988. For sociological treatments see Dorothy Rabinowitz’s New Lives: Survivors of the Holocaust Living in America, New York: Knopf/Random House, 1976; William B. Helmreich’s Against All Odds: Holocaust Survivors and the Successful Lives They Made in America, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992.

start new families and communities in the U.S. Survivors were rarely, if ever, represented as struggling, like many of their immigrant predecessors, to find a place for themselves in their new country. When they were depicted as troubled and tormented, it was within their wartime past and not in their ‘translated’ present.

Eva Hoffman, a child of Holocaust survivors who was born in Poland in 1945, just as the war ended, has commented on the absence of accounts of immigrant struggle in texts about Holocaust survivors and their children. Writing many years after Borowski, Hoffman certainly understands that the massive violence at the root of her parents’ and other survivors’ displacement often occluded the stress of immigration. At the same time, she wants us to consider that “emigration is an enormous psychic upheaval under any circumstances.” In After Such Knowledge, her memoiristic meditation on Holocaust history and the ways in which we remember and represent it, Hoffman reminds us that the processes of uprooting and acculturation bring together a constellation of issues that “involves great, wholesale losses: of one’s familiar landscapes, friends, professional affiliations; but also of those less palpable but salient substances that constitute, to a large extent, one’s psychic home—of language, a webwork of cultural habits, ties with the past.”⁴ In my reading of this work, I was struck by Hoffman’s emphasis on the “less palpable but salient substances” of the processes of displacement, crossing, and arrival in the new culture that newcomers share all over the world.

The focus of this project and its title, “Finding Home in Babel,” echo Hoffman’s articulation of the material consequences of the “language, a webwork of cultural

⁴ After 79.

habits[and] ties with the past” for the immigrants who are Holocaust survivors. “Finding Home” explores the writings and lives of three writers uniquely positioned among languages—English, Polish, or Yiddish: Jadwiga Maurer, Irena Klepfisz, and Eva Hoffman.⁵ As Jewish women, Holocaust survivors, or children of Holocaust survivors, these authors’ prose and poetry are suspended between the past and the present—pre-war, wartime, and postwar, and stretched across multiple locations—Poland, Germany, Sweden, Canada, and the United States. This is why interpretations of their writings call for transnational models of analysis as ones that offer the most productive frameworks for these writers’ representations of identities in translation. When Maurer, Klepfisz, and Hoffman depict the life after the Holocaust for those who survived it, they emphasize the multiple cultural transitions and translations with which they have contended and on which they depend to tell the stories of uprooting, passage, and arrival.

Multiple languages are key to unlocking the complicated meanings of identities in translation that are at the heart of both literatures of immigration and of the Holocaust. As Hoffman’s, Klepfisz’s, and Maurer’s literary representations of their own or their families’ experiences during and after the *Shoah*⁶ illustrate, recollections of the Holocaust are produced in translation—in the shadow of the Tower of Babel—in the very moment

⁵ While they use multiple languages in their writings and in their lives, none of these secular Jewish authors has any connection to Hebrew or any desire to locate home and homeland in Israel. They understand Hebrew as the language of religion and/or Zionism. Thus, my project highlights their diasporic allegiances.

⁶ Unlike the Hebrew *Shoah* or the Yiddish *khurbn*, the *Holocaust* in English has unsettling connotations when it implies a Christian reading of the Jewish cataclysm. Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi writes that *hōlōkautōma* is a “Greek word for whole-burnt and is meant, presumably, to suggest the extent and even the ‘manner’ of the death of the Jews of Europe” and because the word “refers in the Septuagint to the ‘burnt offering’ in the Temple of Solomon, [it] raises problems through the sacrificial connotations that it attaches to the death of the Jews of Europe.” Neither *Shoah* nor *khurbn* have sacrificial connotations. The former refers to destruction of enormous proportions while the latter harks back to the destruction of the two Temples in Jerusalem. By *Words Alone* 2.

of their creation. Holocaust survivors, like many other immigrants, have struggled to narrate their lives in English, a language foreign to their past.

Hoffman, Klepfisz, and Maurer experienced linguistic and cultural identity translations that they have subsequently written into their prose and poetry. When they left Poland, they lost landscapes familiar to them as well as the comfort afforded them by their native languages. Their representations of identities in translation from and into English, Yiddish, or Polish illuminate immigrants' lived experiences. Their biographies provide rich contexts for analyses of identities across languages—for identities lost and recovered in translation.

We are so used to reading immigrant literatures in English that immigrant texts in other languages by authors in the U.S. are little explored and underappreciated even though they are crucial to grasping the full breadth of immigrant experience in America. For this reason, this project includes an analysis of an immigrant writer who, despite her prolific literary output and her half a century long residency in the U.S., has never written or published her fiction in English. Jadwiga Maurer, who publishes only in Polish, serves as a 'control group' of sorts for my project's other two subjects (Hoffman and Klepfisz) because my auxiliary aim was to see what immigrant writers say about identity formation when they describe it in languages other than English. My focus on Klepfisz provides an in-between linguistic identity because she writes in English while incorporating Yiddish. Klepfisz's prose and poetry are suffused with Yiddish, which gives intimate expression to an insider's knowledge of the history and culture of Ashkenazi Jews in Eastern Europe.

Many immigrant memoirs in the U.S. like Anzia Yeziarska's Red Ribbon on a White Horse (1950), Kyoko Mori's Polite Lies (1997), or Ilan Stavans' On Borrowed

Words (2001) reflect a sense of double alienation: they feel estranged from their native language selves at the same time as they are alienated by the native speakers they encounter, who, more often than not, raise their voices by an octave or two whenever they spy an immigrant in their midst. Whether these immigrant writers celebrate Americans' reception of them, as some of them did over a hundred years, or criticize it, as some have done more recently, they invariably explicate how a new language carries with it a new culture, which leads them to an acquisition of a new identity. While applied linguists note that identities are closely linked with the way individuals speak, they argue that speaking a new language entails taking on some of the markers of another cultural idiom.⁷ They explain that in acquiring American English, immigrants, in effect, acquire a new, non-native language self.

When several years ago I wrote a seminar paper on Eva Hoffman's 1989 Lost in Translation, I found myself meditating on precisely these aspects of her memoir, which traced the development of an English-language self. I was immediately drawn to Hoffman's perceptive analysis of language and identity and was even more captivated by how closely her adolescent immigrant experience matched my own story of displacement from Poland. What initially began as a personal exploration soon turned into a scholarly inquiry about the role of language in theorizing the complex meanings of cultural displacement. In the context of linguistic unmoorings and uneven power relations

⁷ For examples of discussions on language and identity in Applied Linguistics, see Susan J. Dicker, Languages in America: A Pluralist View, Clevedon: Multilingual Matters LDT, 1996; Patsy M. Lightbown and Nina Spada, How Languages are Learned, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999 (1993); Sandra Lee McKay and Cynthia Sau-Ling Wong, "Multiple Discourses, Multiple Identities: Investment and Agency in Second-Language Learning Among Chinese Adolescent Immigrant Students," Harvard Educational Review 66 (1996); Aneta Pavlenko, "Second Language Learning by Adults: Testimonies of Bilingual Writers," Issues in Applied Linguistics 9.1 (1998); and Bonny Norton-Peirce, "Social Identity, Investment, and Language Learning," TESOL Quarterly 29.1 (1995).

between non-native and native speakers that Hoffman described, I wondered how immigrants, like her parents who were Holocaust survivors, adjust in the U.S. when they believe themselves to be linguistic and cultural impostors.

As a comprehensive analysis of the immigrant English language self, this project takes into account the author's native language(s) identities as well as their pre-immigrant lives. After all, when these writers foreground the new identity, they do so in comparison to, or in contrast to, their pre-immigrant selves. This realization drove home for me (to play on this project's title) the importance of multilingualism or, as I metaphorically refer to it, of Babel, in understanding the multidimensionality of immigrant identity constructions. English language immigrant memoirs, novels, and poems can certainly be read and enjoyed without a familiarity with the writers' previous languages, but I believe that at least a rudimentary knowledge of them is essential to any full scholarly explication of how and why the original or native linguistic identities are referenced by immigrant writers in their descriptions of transition into English. Therefore, the languages to which I have ready access, Polish, Yiddish, and English, influenced my choice of subjects for this project. First, I wanted to know what immigrant writers say in English and in their native languages. Secondly, I wanted to know how they narrate their other languages' influence upon their writings in English. Finally, I wanted to argue for the inclusion of immigrant writings, whether in English or in their authors' native languages, in American literature.

The three authors featured in this project defy simple categorizations not only because they are multilingual and multi-ethnic, but also because their prose and poetry arise out of and belong to multiple national categories. Maurer is an American writer

who does not write in English and her short stories have been influenced by Polish, German, and American literature; Klepfisz writes in English suffused with Yiddish and has been influenced by Jewish American and Ashkenazi women writers; finally, Hoffman, who writes only in English emphasizes that all of her works simultaneously reflect and translate her Polish Jewish roots and identities.

“Finding Home in Babel” takes as its point of departure the linguistic and cultural constructions of East European immigrants in the United States. Its focus on gender and an interdisciplinary set of analytical tools shows that multilingual women authors like Maurer, Klepfisz, and Hoffman are at the forefront of practical formulations of gendered identities so eloquently theorized by the late feminist scholar Gloria Anzaldua. This project’s basic formulations arise from the intersections between American and Judaic Studies, but its analysis also significantly relies on and contributes to the interdisciplinary field of Women’s Studies and Immigration and Holocaust Studies. As it originates from and develops a transnational perspective on the study of language and immigrant and Holocaust survivor identities, it also enhances emergent discussions in the new International American Studies with its focus on locating authors simultaneously in their past homes and in their current adopted cultures and languages.

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- 1 “When the war broke out, we lived in a modern house on Sienkiewicza Street [in Kielce], near the railway station.” 64
- 2 “At night I realize that anyone I meet can denounce or even kill me. During the day I am just like any other girl in Kazimierz.” 67
- 3 “We were on Nowogrodzka, the street of the orphanage where I was placed [during the war].” 105
- 4 “The apartment building [in Lodz] where we had lived after the war.” 106
- 5 “I remember this Lodz apartment well and it felt incredible to be standing in the courtyard, to be actually there.” 106
- 6 “We also went to where my mother lived with my father on 52 Ogrodowa. But her building was gone, though the one next to it, No. 50, was there and my mother said it was exactly like the building she lived in.” 128
- 7 “The building where all of this happens, at Kazimierza Wielkiego 79, is situated on the periphery of the city.” 149
- 8 “Sundays, aside from being visiting days, are for strolling on the Planty, the broad, tree-lined park-boulevards, which used to form the border of the old city.” 149
- 9 “The city is full of history, though I don't experience it as that. To me, it's natural that a city should be very old, that it should have cave-like cafes with marble-topped tables, medieval church spires, and low, Baroque arcades.” 150
- 10 “My family goes to the synagogue only once a year, on the High Holidays. ... The synagogue ... has a Moorish façade with tiled mosaics and a portico with toylike, miniature arches.” 150

Chapter 1

Introduction

This is not the mass-marketed immigrant experience.
Adrienne Rich⁸

In the current age of globalization, people who crisscross borders increasingly profess allegiance to more than one culture, language, and nation. Many of these immigrants and migrants are multicultural, multiethnic, and multilingual; only some of them travel by choice or possess the passports and visas that allow them to cross borders legally. But in the United States, as Adrienne Rich writes it in What is Found There (1993), “the mass-marketed immigrant experience” still focuses on the story of the huddled masses or the wretched refuse who, upon disembarking in the ‘New World,’ changed their names, traded their traditional garb for modern American clothing, and, perhaps most importantly, became English-speaking ethnic Americans. Ellis Island, as the place of these immigrants’ arrival, dominates the American national imagination. As the site that processed over 12 million immigrants entering the U.S. between 1892 and 1924, the Ellis Island processing station, now the Ellis Island Immigration Museum, serves as the geographic center of the American foundational myth of immigrant passage and arrival. The traditional fixation on Ellis Island also focuses the national imagination almost exclusively on immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe who arrived there

⁸ Adrienne Rich, What is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics, New York: W.W. Norton, 1993: 139.

at the time.⁹

The realities of immigrant life are much more complex than our national mythology, bolstered by Oscar Handlin's famous motto that "immigrants were American history," suggests.¹⁰ As I began to consider the Ellis Island paradigm, it became increasingly clear that binary designations of origins and destinations, native and "second" languages, and of un-hyphenated and hyphenated identities reduce the complexity of people's geographic mobility and reduce the inherent complexity of cultural and linguistic translation.¹¹ These complications became particularly apparent when I examined recollections of immigration to the United States alongside their authors' pre-American lives and the often-tragic circumstances of their displacement, which reveal the often-contentious relationships between the writers' pre-immigrant languages and their acquired English.

The tensions between adapting to the present and remembering the past that are at the heart of these linguistic relationships are particularly resonant for Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe for whom the Holocaust is an absolute break with the past and a

⁹ The processes through which Eastern and Southern Europeans became white are beyond the scope of my project, and they have been well documented by historians and literary scholars. See Matthew Frye Jacobson, Barbarian Virtues: The United States Encounters Foreign Peoples at Home and Abroad, 1876-1917, New York: Hill & Wang, 2000 and Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001; David Roediger, Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class, New York: Verso, 1991; Mae Ngai, Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the making of Modern America, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004; Eric Goldstein, The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006.

¹⁰ Oscar Handlin, The Uprooted: The Epic Story of the Great Migrations that Made the American People, New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1951.

¹¹ Paul Spickard calls this "the Ellis Island paradigm" or "the immigrant assimilation model" (6) and adds that the task of newcomers was to emulate English-descended Americans. Almost All Aliens: Immigration, Race, and Colonialism in American History and Identity, New York: Routledge, 2007.

memory that insists on remaining present.¹² Thus, while taking into consideration the complex influences of the past on immigrant writers' autobiographical representations of identity formation, "Finding Home in Babel" explores the constructions and processes attending accounts of immigration, Holocaust survival, and multilingual authorship in the writings of Polish Jewish American writers: Jadwiga Maurer, Irena Klepfisz, and Eva Hoffman. When these authors describe their arrival in their adopted country – their new home – they depict lives that cannot be easily 'translated' into 'American' because the past continues to influence their lives in the 'New World.' The multilingual and multi-local crossroads of their lives and writings place them within a multilingual imaginary, a narrative space constructed in Polish, English, or Yiddish, and indelibly marked by their or their parents' experience of the Holocaust, the postwar spaces they traveled through in Germany, Sweden, Canada, and the U.S. and, finally, by their return journeys to Poland as mature writers and as tourists. Their texts, produced within these fluid spaces, reveal that, as Czeslaw Milosz, another immigrant writer, put it, "language is the only homeland."¹³ By tracing the linguistic transitions and cultural translations in their writings, this project examines their conceptualization of home and homeland and, following Milosz, argues that for them home rests at least as much in language as in geography. The claim of 'home in language' points to a cosmopolitan location where these three women profess multiple cultural and linguistic allegiances and their writings

¹² The contemporary and even the more recent accounts emphasize the overwhelmingly successful adaptation of survivors in America, but these newcomers tell a different story: for many years after they arrived in the U.S., they felt isolated, lonely, and alienated. Cohen, Case Closed 7.

¹³ Czeslaw Milosz, Poetry Reading at the M.L.A. Convention, 1998. Qtd. in Luz Maria Umpierre, "Unscrambling Allende's '*Dos palabras*': The Self, the Immigrant/Writer, and Social Justice," MELUS 27.4 (Winter 2002), 135.

can be read across more than one national or literary tradition.¹⁴ “Finding Home in Babel” thus proposes a fundamentally linguistic and transnational understanding of immigration that Maurer, Klepfisz, and Hoffman depict as interwoven with the history and memory of the Holocaust.

Language plays a central role for immigrant writers like Klepfisz, Hoffman, and Maurer who script naturalization into American citizenship in terms of English acquisition. Immigrant diasporas have important linguistic dimensions, and native languages – in many cases, multiple native languages – do not simply disappear upon arrival in a new location. In a country simultaneously as multilingual as the United States and aggressively monolingual in its politics and education, texts produced by immigrants reveal profound tensions between the pre-immigrant pasts and the immigrant present, and between native/original and American English language identities. Antonio Gramsci observed that “every language contains the elements of a conception of the world and of a culture.” Thus, Gramsci suggested, “we can access [from anyone’s language] the greater or lesser complexity of his conception of the world.”¹⁵ The fact that language is more than mere grammar, that it contains “a specific conception of the world,” is nowhere more apparent than in immigrant writings, like those by Hoffman, Klepfisz, and Maurer, which detail immigrant entries into both the United States and American English.

In my exploration of their largely autobiographical narratives, I analyze these authors’ gendered constructions of identity formation in which women play central roles

¹⁴ This is not to argue that these authors are ‘without borders’ as such a claim would obfuscate the role that nationalism and national borders continue to play in our (post)modern world.

¹⁵ Antonio Gramsci, Selection from the Prison Notebooks, edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, New York: International Publishers, 1971, 323.

by responding to the experience of the Holocaust and displacement. By focusing on women's lives, Maurer, Klepfisz, and Hoffman reflect and decipher the many threads of their own personal histories of the Holocaust and immigration. When they do so, they depict women as characters who link the tragedies of their past in Europe to the turmoil of immigrant life in the U.S., and who create, as well, textual spaces for their native language(s) in their acquired American English. All too often, survivors' writings "express the conviction that the details of their postwar lives belong to a completely different order of reality from what they experienced during the war."¹⁶ When they leave the details of their postwar lives out of the recollections of their wartime past, such writers structure narratives that imply closure. It is as if, when World War II ended, so did their ties to the past. In contrast, Hoffman, Klepfisz, and Maurer write about Holocaust survival and the life after. They create narratives of continuity that emphasize the degree to which the past anchors and structures immigrant identities.

These three writers' accounts constitute an inter-generational narrative of Holocaust survival and immigration. They occupy the same synchronic time; they are aware of the same postwar situations in Poland and the U.S. All three know Polish and English and Klepfisz knows Yiddish as well. But they occupy different diachronic spaces. Maurer was born before World War II, in 1930, in Kielce, Poland. She married an American and immigrated to the United States via Germany in 1956, when she was 26 years old. Klepfisz was born in the very midst of the conflict, in the Warsaw Ghetto in 1941. She emigrated from Poland with her mother, first to Sweden in 1946 and then to the U.S. in 1949. She was barely nine years old when they arrived in New York.

¹⁶ Jeremy D. Popkin, "Holocaust Memories, Historians' Memoirs: First-Person Narrative and the Memory of the Holocaust," *History & Memory* 15.1 (2003), 58.

Hoffman was born just as the war came to an end in 1945, in Krakow, Poland and arrived in Canada with her parents and younger sister in 1959 at the age of fourteen. These authors' differences of age and origin offer contrasting insights into the experience of immigration. More importantly, when their lives are considered alongside the historical context of the Holocaust, the generational differences between them gain an added dimension: Maurer recalls details of her prewar life in Kielce and her childhood during the war; Klepfisz's recollections of the war are murky and she has no memory of life in Poland before the war; Eva Hoffman, the youngest of the three, writes about the Holocaust through the prism of her parents' memories. As a result of these historically contingent generational differences, all three of these women engage in a variety of literal and metaphorical translations: between languages—English, Polish, or Yiddish; between the past and the present—prewar, wartime, and postwar; and between multiple locations—Poland, Germany, Sweden, Canada, and the United States. Such translational perspectives demonstrate the importance of linking pre- and postwar events with those of wartime in order to understand how immigrants and survivors experienced the events of their lives.

While Maurer's, Klepfisz's, and Hoffman's prose and poetry offer translational perspectives between the past and the present, their biographies and interviews with them show how displacement and translation have provided them with specific perspectives on identity, exile, and home. These three women represent situations in which immigrants from all over the world find themselves. For one, they are among strangers in the U.S., as Klepfisz notes in her eight-part poem "*Di rayze aheym/The Journey Home:*" "*In der fremd/among strangers/iz ir heym/is her home/ot do/right here/muz zi lebn/she must*

live.”¹⁷ But unlike immigrants who can at least theoretically re-visit their homes, for these women there is no ‘back home.’ The Holocaust permanently displaced them; their writings provide a perspective on the meaning of lives without homes. Like many other immigrant writers, these three authors discuss what it means to feel culturally and linguistically alien in their immigrant homes. At the same time, they emphasize the strangeness and even hostility of their native countries. In so doing, however, they do not depict perpetual homelessness. Instead, they root their identities in language and culture, rather than place. Their texts and languages, to play on George Steiner’s famous title, are their homelands.¹⁸ They structure home and homeland literally and metaphorically through language: Polish, Yiddish, or their adopted English, but not Poland or the United States or Israel. They reject nationalism, which had been profoundly undermined by their experiences of the Holocaust, anti-Semitism, and immigration, instead finding home in quintessentially anti-nationalist and cosmopolitan terms.¹⁹

In pointing to the instability of home as an essentialized location, Maurer, Klepfisz, and Hoffman remind us that, as Trinh Minh-ha puts it, “[h]ome and language tend to be taken for granted; like Mother or Woman, they are often naturalized and homogenized.”²⁰ Survivors’ and immigrants’ texts defamiliarize these ‘natural’ connections when they remind us that “home,” like “woman,” is a heterogeneous and

¹⁷ “*Di rayze aheym/The Journey Home*,” in *A Few Words in the Mother Tongue: Poems Selected and New (1971-1990)*, Portland: Eighth Mountain Press, 1990, 224.

¹⁸ George Steiner, “Our Homeland, the Text” (1985), in *No Passion Spent: Essays: 1978-1995*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996. See also Sidra Ezrahi DeKoven, *Booking Passage: Exile and Homecoming in the Modern Jewish Imagination*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.

¹⁹ In this rejection of nationalism, they are like the Yiddishists who did not seek a national homeland. Rather, they found a different kind of home in Yiddish in the different countries where they resided. See Anita Norich’s *Discovering Exile: Yiddish and Jewish American Culture during the Holocaust*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007.

²⁰ Trinh T. Minh-ha, *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, New York: Routledge, 1991, 14.

unstable reality, something that is always in the process of being constructed. When I link these heterogeneous notions of ‘home’ and ‘woman,’ I do so to acknowledge these authors’ lives in the U.S. as women who were displaced from their homes in Eastern Europe by the Holocaust.

Discussions of gender as a category of analysis in immigration studies and Holocaust studies target different concerns. The former field has attempted to include women’s experience in the otherwise male-dominated representations of immigration in the humanities and social sciences.²¹ The latter, as feminist historian Joan Ringelheim has argued, needs to include gender as a category of analysis because “no two individuals and no two Jews experienced what is called the Holocaust in quite the same way.”²² Ringelheim believes that inclusion of gender will take difference into account, and will not, as some critics fear, erase or universalize Jewish victims. Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer agree with Ringelheim’s perspective, emphasizing that “reading of gender constitute, at the very least, compensatory, reparative acts.”²³ Gender made no difference to the Nazi killing project; their goal was the murder of all Jewish men, women, and children. Thus, “if the Nazis degendered their victims,” ask Hirsch and Spitzer, “must we not make a point of considering the effects of gender?” These scholars are not interested

²¹ For some examples of the interventions made into the field, see Elizabeth Ewen, Immigrant Women in the Land of Dollars: Life and Culture on the Lower East Side, 1890-1925, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1985; Mary Dearborn, Pocahontas’s Daughters: Gender and Ethnicity in American Culture, New York: Oxford University Press, 1986 and Love in the Promised Land: The Story of Anzia Yezierska and John Dewey, New York: Free Press, 1988; Alice Kessler-Harris, In Pursuit of Equity: Women, Men, and the Quest for Economic Citizenship in 20th Century America, New York: Oxford University Press, 2001; Magdalena Zaborowska, How We Found America: Reading Gender through East European Immigrant Narratives, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995; Eithne Luibheid, Entry Denied: Controlling Sexuality at the Border, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002.

²² Joan Ringelheim, “The Holocaust: Taking Women into Account,” The Jewish Quarterly 39.3 Autumn 1992: 20.

²³ Hirsch and Spitzer, “Testimonial Objects” 357, emphasis mine.

in glorifying women as somehow ‘better’ at survival or suffering. Rather, they argue that while “Jewish survivors consciously see themselves as Jews who were persecuted,” they also “speak about themselves in a language that does not erase gender.”²⁴

One of the primary goals of this project to “learn how women talk about their experiences and how these experiences were independent of their personal stories.”²⁵ By bringing together Holocaust studies and immigration studies, I do not argue that the experience of the Holocaust was gendered, but that, like reactions to immigration, responses to the Holocaust are “inevitably gendered.”²⁶

Like Maurer, Klepfisz, and Hoffman, other female authors wrote about the Holocaust and immigration in Polish or Yiddish, long after they emigrated from Poland. Ida Fink, who continues to publish in Polish in Israel, and Chava Rosenfarb who publishes Yiddish-language texts in Canada, are good examples. However, my disciplinary location in American Literary and Cultural Studies prompted me to focus in my study on authors who write in and about the United States. As these authors also demonstrate, immigrants to America encounter a particularly complicated situation when their own experiences conflict with the omnipresent and foundational myth of national acceptance and integration. Furthermore, as Poland had been a departure point for Jewish immigrants to the U.S., the experiences of Polish Jews during and after the war have become paradigmatic for understanding the experience of the Holocaust and anti-Semitism in the 20th Century. At the same time, their experience of immigration adds

²⁴ Ringelheim, “The Holocaust: Taking Women into Account,” 21.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Judith R. Baskin, Women of the Word: Jewish Women and Jewish Writing, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994, 31.

another dimension to these stories, and is indispensable to understanding the complexities of literary works produced by the authors in this project.

1:

Triangulating Homes, Languages, and Genres

As Jewish emigrants from Poland and immigrants to the United States, Hoffman, Klepfisz, and Maurer reach across languages and cultures when their writing reflects multiple linguistic positions and identities.²⁷ They create what Susan Rubin Suleiman calls “Monuments in a Foreign Tongue” because they are, like other Holocaust survivors and immigrants, separated from their American readers by an “abyss” that “is doubled by the difference in language, which is of course also a difference in worlds.”²⁸ The literary representations of their own or their fictional protagonists’ experiences during and after the *Shoah* illustrate that recollections of the Holocaust in English are produced in translation—in the shadow of the Tower of Babel—in the very moment of their creation. After all, immigrant survivors’ texts always bear the markers of a translated idiom because they describe lives experienced elsewhere and in languages other than English.²⁹

These authors’ experiences of the Holocaust and displacement, and the consequent need for multiple languages and various acts of translation, parallel Jeffrey Shandler’s arguments about the geographic migrations of Yiddish speakers, especially

²⁷ A quick note on terminology: emigration means leaving one country for another while immigration connotes going to another country. The former places emphasis on the country of departure and the latter on the country of arrival.

²⁸ “Monuments in a Foreign Tongue: On Reading Holocaust Memoirs by Emigrants,” in Exile and Creativity: Signposts, Travelers, Outsiders, Backward Glances, ed. Susan Rubin Suleiman, Durham: Duke University Press, 1998: 402.

²⁹ Suleiman, “Monuments in a Foreign Tongue.”

their immigration to other countries after the Holocaust. “These developments,” Shandler argues, “have prompted the speech community to reconfigure its relationship to former notions of home often relying on language to compensate for geographical disorientation and displacement.”³⁰ Hoffman’s, Klepfisz’s, and Maurer’s reconfigurations of home as something apart from geographical locations similarly serve to compensate for displacement. At the same time, these authors rarely celebrate multiculturalism, even if they are aware of the possibilities that multiple identities offer in the modern world. They instead draw readers’ attention to joys, sorrows, and conflicts created at the crossroads of multiple cultures, languages, and identities.

Hoffman, Klepfisz, and Maurer redefine normative cultural values through their work as scholars, researchers, and authors. They work in the fields of literature, cultural and ethnic studies, as well as women’s and feminist studies. They write books, essays, short stories, and poems. For them, identity, exile, and home are the focus of texts that detail autobiographical and fictional Jewish lives during World War II in Poland and in its aftermath in the U.S. They represent Holocaust survival and the life after as a project of re-creation in the face of destruction, loss, and displacement.³¹ They construct immigrant-survivor characters who figure prominently as gendered individuals trying to make sense of their linguistically and culturally alien present, while struggling to make sense of their wartime past.

Klepfisz and Maurer survived the war by concealing their Jewish identities. Hoffman’s parents survived by hiding in the villages and forests of the Ukraine. Though Maurer and Klepfisz were children during the war and Hoffman did not experience it

³⁰ “Imagining Yiddishland: Language, Place and Memory,” *History & Memory* 15.1 (2003), 131.

³¹ Rich, *What is Found There*, 131.

directly, Jewish survival during World War II figures personally and prominently in their writings. They do not depict their own or others' (in Hoffman's case, her parents') ordeals as something to be resolved and 'worked through.' In turn, their works are not teleological. Instead, their texts strongly suggest that the wartime past continually constructs present reality and serves to anchor identity. As Goldie Morgentaler points out, those who survived the war and often their children are too complex to be categorized as "the walking wounded;" they are as diverse and different from each other during the war and in its aftermath as they were before 1939. Their stories of immigration, however, have much in common because "they are people who can never again live happily ever after—not in America, not in Canada, not in Europe, not even in Africa."³² Even while these authors' pasts cannot be resolved in favor of a happier future, their texts provide eloquent accounts of the many ways in which displacement and translation provide specific points of view on border crossing and the meaning of home. Their prose and poetry make it possible for them to integrate their past experienced in native language(s) with their immigrant present lived in American English.

Hoffman, Klepfisz, and Maurer couch their relationship to their birthplace, Poland, in remarkably similar terms. Maurer writes that Poland was her home even though she realized early in life that she was "a person apart" from the Catholic Poles around her: "I would always be the ugly, unloved Cinderella; Mother Poland's stepdaughter."³³ Klepfisz notes that Poland is "*undzer heym*, our home, no matter how

³² Morgentaler, "Land of the Postscript," 180.

³³ "A ja wole sama bez Jankiela" [I'd rather go it alone, without Jankiel], *Wiadomosci* 17 Oct. 1965: 2.

bitter the memories, how filled with disappointment and betrayal.”³⁴ Finally, in her memoir, Hoffman identifies Poland as the place that gave her “language, perceptions, sounds, the human kind,” at the same time she admits that she is “no patriot” because of her “marginality” as a Jew in Poland and the country’s “primitive, unpretty emotions.”³⁵ In their perceptions of their country of origin, these women are like other Jewish authors who write about their survival in Europe. They see Europe as “the inevitable point of origin, the site of whatever warm memories of home can be retrieved through the dark glass of time and loss.”³⁶ But unlike for Ahron Appelfeld, for these writers, “[t]he physical world of childhood” is not “a frozen, unchanging point of reference.”³⁷ In their writings, they often reflect upon the changes taking place in Poland and do so from the point of view of mature writers who travel there to confront their childhood memories within its contemporary situation. They acknowledge a linguistic and cultural allegiance to their country of origin, but it is an allegiance marked by unease and sadness. Like other Polish Jews after the Holocaust, they contend with enormous wartime destruction and with Polish anti-Semitism.

While describing Poland as both home and hostile territory, these authors use images of difference and impermanence in their depictions of the United States. In our interview, for example, Maurer called the U.S. a “five star hotel,” a place of comfortable residence but not a location that fosters cultural and linguistic belonging.³⁸ Klepfisz

³⁴ “*Oyf keyver oves: Poland, 1983*,” in *Dreams of an Insomniac*, 89.

³⁵ *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language*, New York: E.P Dutton, 1989, 74.

³⁶ Ezrahi, *Booking Passage*, 136.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Jadwiga Maurer, Personal Interview, July 27-29, 2006.

refers to it as *goles*, exile, and “a foreign land in which I speak a foreign tongue.”³⁹ And Hoffman’s life in Canada and the U.S., as her 1989 memoir, Lost in Translation attests, is indelibly marked by acts of cultural and linguistic translation that split her identity. In fact, Hoffman moved recently to Great Britain because, as she said in an interview for Rzeczpospolita (Res Publica), a Polish daily, she found that she did not feel fully at home in the U.S.; London, instead, offers her a place where she finally feels closer to something akin to ‘a real home,’ located, as it is, geographically and culturally between the U.S. and Poland.⁴⁰

Many Holocaust survivors found a home in Israel, but these three authors do not identify it as such. They hold different views of what Israel is and how it relates to Jewishness after the war. Klepfisz thoroughly assimilated Bundist principles. “Though I’m not a Zionist,” she writes, “I do feel that I am in *goles*/exile (the Yiddish version of the Hebrew *galut*), that I’ve lost my home, been torn from my roots—not the Bible and Israel, but *yidishkayt* and Eastern Europe.”⁴¹ Maurer thought of Israel as one of many immigrant destinations, but preferred the United States, while her parents continued to live in Munich, Germany because they felt too old to make yet another transition. And Hoffman says: “What is Israel to me or I to Israel? Not a place I know well or [to which I] feel a cultural affinity.”⁴² Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi observes that experiences of the

³⁹ “*Oyf keyver oves*,” 88-89.

⁴⁰ „*Miedzy Manhattanem a Krakowem*” [Between Manhattan and Krakow], Rzeczpospolita 22-23 Dec. 2001: 3.

⁴¹ “Bread and Candy: Songs of the Holocaust,” Bridges: A Journal for Jewish Feminists and our Friends, 2.2 (1991): 16. *Yidishkayt* is a term that refers to East European Yiddish language, culture, and history. In Discovering Exile, Norich describes *yidishkayt* (or what she calls Yiddishism) as a “modern substitute for both religion and political nationalism.” Even more broadly, Norich describes it as a “universe of ideas and behaviors, as all-encompassing as the competing systems of religion, Zionism, and socialism” (111).

⁴² After Such Knowledge, 248.

Holocaust “transcended national borders” and, as such, created “the possibility of a literature whose reference is both personal—indeed, irrevocably traumatic—and international at the same time.”⁴³ When they depict the many postwar displacements, Maurer, Klepfisz, and Hoffman likewise emphasize that they create their immigrant narratives within and about the transnational spaces of Holocaust survivors’ postwar lives.

That is why, for these writers, Poland used to be their home, but as survivors they can never return home, even when they travel to Poland. They “can’t go back/where [they] came from [because it] was/burned off the map,” as Melanie Kaye-Kantrowitz so powerfully put it.⁴⁴ When they travel to Poland, they do so, like Klepfisz, to pay respects to the dead: *oyf keyver oves*. Or, like Hoffman and Maurer, whose works have been published in Poland, they journey to be celebrated as émigré writers who either continue to create in Polish or write about Poland. For example, when Eva Hoffman was asked in an interview for *Rzeczpospolita* to identify her ‘country,’ she answered: “My home is the world, which is so international now. It’s a world of people who are spiritually and intellectually close to my heart. They live everywhere: ... in London, in America, in Krakow, and on *Nowy Swiat* [street] in Warsaw.” In her answer, Hoffman refused the nomenclature of national belonging and opted, instead, for cosmopolitanism where her languages, Polish and English, as well as her work as a writer, produce personal relationships and professional affiliations.

As much as they know that returning home is not an option, these writers are also aware of the long-standing pressure that newcomers to the U.S. accept the national

⁴³ Ezrahi, *By Words Alone*, 13.

⁴⁴ Epigraph, Irena Klepfisz, “Inhospitable Soil,” in *Dreams of an Insomniac*, 167.

rhetoric of hard work and success that undergirds many immigrant narratives. As Matthew Frye Jacobson points out in his discussion of the turn of the 20th century immigration, we may have defeated the overtly chauvinistic nativist rhetoric of that time, but “neither [its] processes nor [its] results are safely fossilized in a bygone epoch.”⁴⁵ But these authors know too, that in our post-Civil-Rights and post-ethnic particularist multicultural moment, they can critique the processes of assimilation in terms more overt than their predecessors. When Jadwiga Maurer continues to write her short stories in Polish, rather than in the English in which she is fluent, she quite literally signals her refusal to write in the language of assimilation. Klepfisz, likewise, does not write in the language of assimilation because when she uses Yiddish in her English language poetry and essays, she signals a refusal to assimilate into American monolingualism. Eva Hoffman writes in English and tempers the “strangeness” of the Old World through detailed descriptions of its language, people, and politics. In effect, she performs linguistic and cultural translations when she acts as a tour guide of sorts in books like Lost in Translation (1989) or Exit into History (1993).

My discussion of these three writers relies on biographical detail and interviews with them to foreground the intersections between their texts and their lived experiences. “Finding Home in Babel” explores the extent to which their experiences as Holocaust survivors, children of Holocaust survivors, and immigrants from Poland to the U.S. inform their work. Though this project does not argue for the importance of physical geography, it includes photographs of some of the places that have been important for

⁴⁵ Barbarian Virtues, 8.

these writers in Poland. These images help to contextualize the various locations in cities like Kielce, Krakow, Lodz, and Warsaw that Maurer, Klepfisz, and Hoffman describe in such specific detail that it is possible to use their texts as maps that lead to these sites. In several cases, they even offer specific street names and numbers as does Hoffman in Lost in Translation, where she gives the address of her childhood home in Krakow, or as does Maurer in “*Ulica Niecala*” (*Niecala Street*), a story that describes her home in Kielce. As a scholar aware of the importance of gender as a category of analysis, I integrate biography and photography into my literary explorations cautiously. I realize, as Adrienne Rich points out in her introduction to Irena Klepfisz’s collected poems, A Few Words in the Mother Tongue (1990), that writers who are not white males are sometimes perceived as ‘merely’ documentary writers when they rely on autobiographical detail, their creativity thus withheld from them. This occurs despite the fact that even memoirs in the strict sense of the word, like Hoffman’s 1989 Lost in Translation, transform and artistically organize the life experienced according to plot and purpose. There is, after all, no one-to-one relationship between lived experiences and autobiographical texts—the relationship between life and language is intimate and intense but not equivalent. Authors of memoirs and other forms of life writing are always in the process of “justifying their own perceptions, upholding their reputations, disputing accounts of others, settling scores, conveying cultural information, and inventing desirable futures.”⁴⁶ Thus, I hope to be quite clear in the chapters that follow that, even when writing autobiographically, these women are always artists who transform their experiences, crafting literary languages, personas, and situations. At the same time, I insist on

⁴⁶ Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001, 10.

biographical detail, because these women's art arises directly and unapologetically out of their lives' experiences. "A historical necessity has made her the kind of poet she is," Rich writes about Klepfisz, (and I would add Hoffman and Maurer), "neither a 'universal' nor a 'private' stance has been her luxury."⁴⁷

In Maurer's, Klepfisz's, and Hoffman's writings, autobiography also often functions at the level of history. When they realize that "history is necessarily selective" (as, of course, is autobiography), they rely on autobiography "to illuminate parts of that penumbra, and even to persuade historians that the spotlights of their discipline need to be redirected."⁴⁸ Consequently, by echoing Walter Benjamin's theses of history, this project aims to divine just how these three authors, by focusing on the apparently mundane and everyday, brush history "against the grain," revealing people, places, and events left out of the official historical record.⁴⁹ They show that "[a]utobiography is ... not merely source material for history; it is [also] an alternative way of narrating the past."⁵⁰ Perhaps literary scholar Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi describes immigrant survivor literature best when she observes that immigrant survivors who write about the Holocaust and the life "after" from an autobiographical perspective

superimpose creative control over the material, coupling the real and the inventive, experimenting with perception and the narrative voice while anchoring and validating the writing in reality. The reader occasionally senses two distinct voices in the works of the survivor writers—the voice of the immediate experience and the reflective voice, the youthful Holocaust-era point of view and the more comprehensive and meditative post-Shoah authorial intelligence.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Ezrahi, *By Words Alone*, 16.

⁴⁸ Popkin, "Holocaust Memories," 77-78.

⁴⁹ *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, New York: Schocken Books, 1968, 253-264.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Lillian S. Kremer, *Women's Holocaust Writing: Memory and Imagination*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999, 26.

Such a description accords with autobiography theory; in life writing, the author becomes both the observing subject and the object of investigation, remembrance, and contemplation.⁵²

In the chapters that follow, I describe Hoffman, Klepfisz, and Maurer as Polish and Jewish and American writers to acknowledge the historical necessities and circumstances that made them the writers that they are. These three identity positions are important as analytical prisms that emphasize their literary, historical, cultural, and linguistic influences and perspectives. As labels, identities provide important references for understanding physical and literary locations that help to constitute maps for organizing and representing their transnational and translational existence. All three identify Poland as their native country and they all speak autobiographically as Jews and as women. Their Jewishness informs their points of view; sometimes it serves as a link to their Polish identity and, at other times, given Poland's troubled history of anti-Semitism, as a point of contention. Finally, all of them have lived in the U.S. for the better part of their lives. Maurer has lived in California, Indiana, and Kansas since late 1956 and Klepfisz in New York since 1949. Hoffman, who first immigrated to Canada with her family in 1959, moved to the U.S. in 1963; she graduated from Rice University in 1967 and then, after a career at The New York Times Book Review, moved to Great Britain in 1992. Maurer's first person narrator traverses Poland, Germany, and the U.S. Klepfisz's autobiographical essays and poems are written from the point of view of a Polish-born Jewish feminist lesbian residing in New York. And Hoffman writes about Polish as her native language and Jewishness as a prism through which she perceives her

⁵² Smith and Watson, Reading Autobiography, 4.

country of origin because that identity has permanently scripted her as an outsider in the Polish nationalist discourse.

In my own writing, I also use the terms Jewish Poles, Polish Jews, non-Jewish Poles, and Catholic Poles for very specific reasons. Much of Polish nationalist discourse ‘sifted out’ (and often still does) Jews from Poles when it insistently avoided using the word Poles to apply to Poland’s Jewish citizens. Such rhetoric is obviously based on some notion of racial, national, or religious ‘purity’ in which neither the authors I discuss nor I are interested. Instead, my project aims to show how the authors I study script multiple ethnic and national identities as inseparable from one another and how both their country of origin and their immigrant destination script them as gendered and ethnic ‘outsiders.’

2:

Chapter Summaries

In order to provide the necessary contextual information, Chapter 2 offers an overview of the disciplinary intersections that inform the examination of these authors’ writings as multiethnic and multilingual American literature. I locate my readings of their prose and poetry between and among American, Judaic, Ethnic, Holocaust, and Translation Studies at the same time grounding such readings in feminist-inspired analyses of women’s literatures. Like other ethnic and immigrant female authors, Gloria Anzaldúa, Gish Jen, and Nechama Tec, to name a few, the writers I examine in this dissertation complicate clear-cut notions of ethnicity, nationality and the idea of English

as the American lingua franca. Their work is both about the Holocaust and about displacement and, in its use of Polish, Yiddish, and English, indicates the linguistic dimensions of transnational lives and literatures.

Detailed analyses of each of the three writers, beginning with a chapter on Jadwiga Maurer, followed by one on Irena Klepfisz, and, finally, by one on Eva Hoffman, form the analytical core of this project. The three author chapters draw upon interviews with these writers, which I provide in transcript form in the appendix titled “Conversations with Authors.” I interviewed Klepfisz in New York in September 2007 and Maurer in Kansas in July 2006; though I was unable to interview Hoffman, I use parts of her published Polish language interviews to provide access to her autobiographical voice and her self-representation in the country of her birth. The interviews foreground these authors’ own interpretations of their prose and poetry, which at times differ from my own. They are important to understanding fully the multidimensionality of these authors’ literary representations of language and identity in terms of their immigration to the United States. By examining their voices, we can begin to hear how these women understand their own lives’ stories and how they relate them as authors, immigrants, and Holocaust survivors or children of survivors.

When I interviewed her in July 2006, Jadwiga Maurer identified herself as a Polish émigré writer and as “an American writer who does not write in English.” She is not well known in the U.S., but her prose arises out of a multiplicity of influences and locations within American borders. Like the Polish Israeli short story writer Ida Fink, Maurer writes and publishes her creative fiction in Polish. In Chapter 3, “Jadwiga Maurer and American Literature without Translation,” I focus on three themes that recur

in all of her stories: temporality, identity, and language. Considered together, these three themes underscore the extent to which national and ethnic identities are not static, at the same time as they point to the instability of ‘home’ as a physical location. In fact, both through her use of Polish and her thematic preoccupations, Maurer is reminiscent of the Yiddish writers when she scripts home as a concept grounded in language.⁵³ Maurer finds Polish literature appealing as an academic and teacher of American students, while she reclaims home-in-language through her articles in the pages of *Wiadomosci*, a Polish émigré newspaper published in London between 1946 and 1981.

All of Maurer’s short stories are told from the same first person female perspective. Taken together, these stories constitute a sort of a *bildungsroman*, tracing the development of Maurer’s narrator as she grows from a young child in Poland and Slovakia during World War II into an adult in Germany and the United States. As she develops, however, one thing remains constant: her past as a Holocaust survivor. Much of postwar literature in Polish that responded to World War II and the Holocaust, like Tadeusz Borowski’s short stories, was “laconic” and written in a “straight-forward style that conveys a reality stripped bare of image.”⁵⁴ The literary style of Maurer’s short stories can be located within these particular conventions as she communicates the experiences of her narrator “in terms so concrete and unadorned that they cannot be construed as ‘emotional luxuries,’ which would betray the quality of ultimate confrontation.”⁵⁵ Like Borowski’s stories, in Maurer’s narratives “facts of behavior are

⁵³ For a detailed discussion of Yiddish writers in the U.S., see Norich’s *Discovering Exile*.

⁵⁴ Ezrahi, *By Words Alone*, 50.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 51.

presented with no outside moral or emotional alternative or corrective.”⁵⁶ They are not immigrant tales of the rags-to-riches variety and neither are they about the shedding of the Old World. Instead, they explore how the past that constructs and anchors identity, enables multi-local and multilingual allegiances in the ‘New World.’

Like Maurer, Irena Klepfisz emphasizes the continued influence of the past in Europe upon her immigrant life in the U.S. Chapter 4, “Irena Klepfisz and the Art of Translation” analyzes Klepfisz’s uses of Yiddish in her essays and poetry as a formulation and expression of her identity as a female Polish Jewish child Holocaust survivor who is, simultaneously and inextricably, a radical Jewish American feminist lesbian. In her poems and essays, Klepfisz identifies how language, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality circumscribe her life in the U.S. Despite the privileges that come with whiteness, she knows that she lives simultaneously at the center and on the periphery of American dominant culture: “yes, I’m part of the mainstream, but I also feel quite vulnerable—as a lesbian, as a Jew, as a naturalized citizen.”⁵⁷

What literary scholar Lawrence Langer calls a “permanent split” or a doubling of sorts whereby survivors’ lives remain irrevocably ruptured between the past and present emerges in Klepfisz’s representations as a meeting between official histories and personal memories. Refusing to remain “an eternal hostage to the past,” to once again use Langer’s terminology, her poems insist that her memories contribute to and recover spaces forgotten by history. In her use of Yiddish and her translation of Yiddish women writers into English, Klepfisz recovers for the present a heritage that she argues has gone

⁵⁶ Ibid., 52.

⁵⁷ Gary Pacernick, *Meaning and Memory: Interviews with Fourteen Jewish Poets*, Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2001, 244.

under-appreciated. This under-appreciation is far more than a semantic issue for Klepfisz. It is also strongly tied to cultural survival and memory as a tool of that survival in specifically feminist terms. For example, Klepfisz finds that the historical reality of Jewish life in pre-war Eastern Europe is reduced when translators and editors ignore women's Yiddish literary creativity. Klepfisz thus uses her skills as a Yiddish-to-English translator to offer a corrective to the male-dominated canon of Yiddish literature. Finally, when she uses her experience in the feminist and lesbian movements and her own life as a survivor and an immigrant, Klepfisz works to break down various inter- and intra-lingual barriers: those between the immigrant and the native born, between English and Yiddish, between speaking and silence, between Jewish survivors and their American contemporaries, between heteronormative and non-heteronormative models of femininity, and between working class and middle class women.

Like Maurer and Klepfisz, Eva Hoffman is a child of Holocaust survivors; unlike them, she has no memory of the war except for what has been passed down to her by her parents. In Hoffman's case, Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory is an especially useful tool of analysis. Hirsch defines postmemory as a response of the second generation—of the children of Holocaust survivors—to the trauma experienced by their parents. Hoffman admits that when she was writing Lost in Translation (1989), she began to recognize “the Holocaust strand of [her] history.”⁵⁸ Such gradual recognition conveys the sense in which her connection to the catastrophe was “mediated not through recollection but through representation, projection, and creation,” to use Hirsch's

⁵⁸ After Such Knowledge, x.

words.⁵⁹ The publishing road that led Hoffman to the realization of “postmemory” in After Such Knowledge (2004) has taken her from an immigrant memoir, Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language (1989), through a travelogue detailing her returns to Eastern Europe, Exit into History: A Journey Through the New Eastern Europe (1993), to Shtetl: The Life and Death of a Small Town and the World of Polish Jews (1997), which describes a small town in Poland as representative of Polish-Jewish relations.

Three of Hoffman’s books, Lost in Translation [*Zagubione w Przekładzie* 1995], most prominently, have made their way ‘back’ to Poland via, ironically, translation into their author’s first language. Just as Hoffman translates her life experienced in Polish into American English in these books, then, their translation into Polish re-defines her experiences in their historically accurate Polish. In a 2001 interview in the Polish magazine *Przekroj* (The Cross-section), Hoffman describes the Polish language version of Lost in Translation: “In writing this book, I had to translate my Polish experiences into English. Then they were translated into Polish [not by Hoffman]. The existence of both language versions fuses my Polish and English-language lives.”⁶⁰ Given Hoffman’s literary and literal traveling life, I structure this chapter around a comparative analysis between Lost in Translation in English and Polish. I do so to argue that the differences between these two versions mirror Hoffman’s linguistically and culturally bifurcated immigrant identity.

⁵⁹ “Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory,” The Yale Journal of Criticism, 14.1 (2001): 9.

⁶⁰ “*Pamięć i czas* [Memory and Time],” 70.

In Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza (1987), the multiethnic and multilingual writer and scholar, Gloria Anzaldua, confesses that “if you really want to hurt me, talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity – I am my language.”⁶¹ Likewise, Anzaldua observes that languages are as inevitably gendered as their speakers.⁶² Languages like Spanish, Yiddish, and Polish have gender grammatically inscribed into nouns, verbs, and adjectives. Yiddish, in addition, has always been called *mame-loshn* or mother tongue. In a truly Anzalduan fashion, Irena Klepfisz draws our attention to this fact in one of her poems. In “*Etlekhe verter oyf mame loshn/A Few Words in the Mother Tongue*,” she lists nouns like “*di kurve, di yidene, di yente*,” which are grammatically gendered feminine by virtue of the feminine article “*di*.” While these words do not themselves carry positive connotations, by acting as a feminist translator, Klepfisz endows them with positive meaning. She explains, for instance, that though “*di kurve*” means “the whore,” it is so only because women were never allowed to “acknowledge [their] passion.” Similarly, even if “*di yidene*” and “*di yente*” traditionally imply overbearing and gossipy females, they also describe strong women who refuse to be “caught off guard.” In Borderlands/La Frontera, Anzaldua implicitly agrees with Klepfisz’s feminist analysis when she writes that “language is a male discourse.” Tellingly, Anzaldua follows this assertion with a fragment from Klepfisz’s “*Di rayze aheym/The Journey Home*:”

And our tongues have become
dry the wilderness has

⁶¹ Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza. San Francisco: Spinster/Aunt Lute, 1987, 81. Emphasis mine.

⁶² Anzaldua gives the example of the plural first person Spanish pronoun *nosotros*, which is grammatically masculine and which thus robs women of their “female being” as she put it. In protest, many Chicana feminists use the feminine inflected *nostotras*. Ibid., 76.

dried out our tongues and
we have forgotten speech.⁶³

The Holocaust and displacement have made tongues arid, and Klepfisz makes her metaphor even clearer in the poem's next two lines. When the poem's protagonist "looks out the window./All is present" because the speaker's past belongs to Yiddish and to reach it, she must reclaim it. From "*di mame*" (the mother) to "*der tate*" (the father), "*di bobbe*" (the grandmother), "*der zeyde*" (the grandfather), and "*vider amol*" (all over again), the protagonist traces her way in the poem through Yiddish and to the past, which she reclaims as the language of her secular Jewish history and identity. Like Klepfisz, Hoffman and Maurer also describe journeys through language, memory, and history and, like Klepfisz, they know that this is a journey without the hope of arrival. Accordingly, my exploration of these women's prose and poetry in "Finding Home in Babel" focuses on the means that they employ rather than on their all-too-elusive destinations.

⁶³ Ibid., 76.

Chapter 2
Borders, *Granice, Grenets, Fronteras*

Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary.

Gloria Anzaldua⁶⁴

One of the key texts in transnational feminist studies, Gloria Anzaldua's Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza focuses on the U.S./Mexico border and presents a complex vision of gendered Chicana identities. Anzaldua uses the 'borderland' as both the physical site of the border between two countries and as the metaphor through which she claims "all parts of her identity, even those that clash."⁶⁵ She structures the metaphorical space of the borderland as multilingual, multi-ethnic, and decidedly woman-centered. As much as her analysis focuses on the physical space between the United States and Mexico, the metaphorical space that she proposes encompasses all areas of cultural encounter where two or more traditions, ethnicities, or classes meet to challenge and influence each other. As a metaphor, the borderland signals a space of multiplicity and fluidity that resists definition.

Anzaldua's approach to the borderland allows for a different approach to a literary review of the scholarship that contextualizes my reading of Maurer's, Klepfisz's, and

⁶⁴ Borderlands/La Frontera, 25.

⁶⁵ Sonia Saldivar-Hull, "Introduction to the Second Edition," in Borderlands/La Frontera, 1999 (c1987): 5.

Hoffman's prose and poetry. On the one hand, this chapter integrates their borderland texts into the body of immigrant literature. On the other hand, it highlights the unique status of Holocaust survivors within the immigrant oeuvre: they suffered a double loss of home, and their status in the borderland is thus equally complex. Like all immigrants, Holocaust survivors are physically separated from the land of their birth and embedded in a foreign language and culture. In addition, however, there is an unbridgeable chronological rupture between them and their home; their homes have been destroyed and thus relegated exclusively to the realm of memory and, of course, of literature. Like Anzaldua, who defines the borderland as "vague and undetermined," immigrant survivors and their children, represented in this project by Maurer, Klepfisz, and Hoffman, treat the boundary between the present and the past, or between their lives in Poland and the U.S., as "unnatural," even false, when they assert that the cultural and linguistic "emotional residue" of their pre-immigrant lives forms and anchors their immigrant identities and authorial voices.

This chapter uses Anzaldua's concept of the borderland as a theoretical trope and an organizing principle that elucidates representations of pre-immigrant pasts and 'new' lives in the U.S. that Maurer, Klepfisz, and Hoffman write into their prose and poetry. These three women embrace all aspects of their identities, "even those that clash," and create cosmopolitan textual spaces that reflect their many identity positions.⁶⁶ The distinct contexts of their writings hinge upon these writings' interstitial location that

⁶⁶ "Introduction to the Second Edition." Saldivar-Hull talks about how Anzaldua embraces all aspects of her identity, even those, like her sexuality and ethnicities, which often clash. Though Anzaldua reserved her theoretical and analytical approach for the particularity of the contentious contact zones between the U.S. and Mexico, since the book's publication over twenty years ago, her innovative theoretical approaches have been employed in a variety of scholarly fields from Chican@ and Latin@ Studies to Feminist and Queer Studies to postcolonial studies, linguistics, and literary studies.

necessitates placing their interpretations across several academic fields: between history and literature, and among American, Judaic, Ethnic, Holocaust, and Translation Studies. This interdisciplinary location is informed by the work of scholars like Gloria Anzaldua, Werner Sollors, Lawrence Venuti, Hana Wirth-Nesher, and Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi. These scholars' theoretical approaches to Ethnic, Translation, Judaic, and Holocaust Studies have prompted me to interpret Maurer's, Klepfisz's, and Hoffman's work with attention to transnationalism, translation, and multilingualism. I do so to recognize and emphasize these works as located simultaneously within American literature and within the national and ethnic literatures from which their authors originate.⁶⁷

This chapter reviews the literature of the Holocaust and immigration and the questions of nationality and ethnicity that arise from the intersection between these literary traditions. It also relates immigration studies to the scholarship that considers the crucial role played by the acquisition of English in immigrant identity formation.

1:

Locating Dislocations

During the war, Klepfisz and Maurer were what historians have since labeled as "hidden children." They were not hidden physically, but had to disguise the fact that they were Jews, often from the very people who cared for them. Such children, as Bella Brodsky observes, were later overlooked in studies of the Holocaust because their

⁶⁷ Anzaldua, Borderlands/La Frontera; Sollors, Multilingual America; Wirth-Nesher, What is Jewish Literature; Overland, Not English Only.

experiences were eclipsed by their parents' suffering.⁶⁸ As Maurer told me, this situation was especially difficult for her during the 1960s when she was a budding writer. In her short story, "*Był sobie dziad i baba*" ("There Once was an Old Man and an Old Woman" 1970), Maurer's narrator mourns the passing of her parents and their contemporaries at the same time as she feels relieved to be able to tell her own story on her own terms, without their interference or control.⁶⁹ Both in her stories and in my interview with her, Maurer indicated a generational conflict where her recollections were to some extent monitored by her parents. For example, when she incorporated a real character into one of her stories about the smuggling of Polish Jews across the border into Slovakia, her father asked her not to publish it. He felt that her two earlier stories were not as problematic, but he was against the publication of "Wladek" because it was based on a person he knew and events he remembered. In fact, both of Maurer's parents were against her participation in the Polish Jewish dialogue in the pages of *Wiadomosci* (The News).⁷⁰ They felt that she was too young to get involved in the reconstruction of the contentious Polish Jewish past.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Brodsky, Bella, "Trauma Inherited, Trauma Reclaimed: Chamberet: Recollections from an Ordinary Childhood," *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, 14:1 (Spring 2001): 156.

⁶⁹ In *Sobowtory: Opowiadania Zebrane* [*Doppelgangers: Collected Stories*], Kielce: Scriptum, 2002: 117-136.

⁷⁰ *Wiadomosci* was one of the longest running Polish literary newspapers of the 20th century. Mieczyslaw Grydzewski and his friend Antoni Borman founded the paper in Warsaw in 1924. Until the outbreak of World War II, the publication was known as *Wiadomosci Literackie* (*The Literary News*) then changed its name to *Wiadomosci Polskie, Polityczne i Literackie* (*The Polish Political and Literary News*) in France until 1940 and in 1946 to simply *Wiadomosci* (the paper was published in London from 1940 to 1944 when it was briefly closed due to political pressure—it was seen as anti-Soviet). It resumed publication in 1946 in London and many of Poland's most notable émigré writers published in *Wiadomosci*. Grydzewski was the paper's editor until 1966, Michal Chmielowiec until 1974, and finally Stefania Kossowska until 1981. Mirosław Adam Supruniuk, "Trzy wcielenia *Wiadomosci*," Nicholas Copernicus University, Torun, Poland, http://www.bu.uni.torun.pl/archiwum_emigracji/Wia1.htm (accessed August 20, 2006).

⁷¹ Personal Interview, July 27-29 2006.

In her study of child survivors and children of survivors, Ellen Fine's conclusions help elucidate the similarities in perspective between Maurer and Klepfisz, who are themselves child survivors, and Hoffman who is a child of survivors. Fine claims that despite the difference between these two groups—the first trying to forget what they went through and the second trying to remember what they did not endure but heard about from their parents—both share much in common. All “hidden” children whose parents survived the war are also children of survivors. Fine considers “hidden children” to be those who lived on the Aryan side since “in order to survive, hidden children were obliged to adopt false names, new religions and new personalities” and at the same time, Fine acknowledges some differences within this category via Deborah Dwork's work Children with a Star: Jewish Youth in Nazi Europe (1991), because there is “a distinction between being in hiding and hidden and in hiding and visible.”⁷²

Maurer and Klepfisz were both “in hiding and visible;” for them it was not a question of concealing their physical presence, but of taking on a Christian identity. As a consequence, they “had to forget, to invent, to lie, to lead double lives. To survive, hidden children had to become someone else.”⁷³ This confusion often extended beyond the war when many survivors had to adapt to new languages and cultures upon their immigration, an experience that virtually all newcomer authors describe as profoundly dislocating. Klepfisz told me that when she arrived in New York in 1949 after having spent three years in Sweden, she felt confused and alienated; she resented having to learn yet another language. She stood out among the other children at school in her home

⁷² Dwork qtd. in Ellen S. Fine, “Intergenerational Memories: Hidden Children and the Second Generation,” in Remembering for the Future, eds. John K. Roth and Elisabeth Maxwell, vol. III, New York: Palgrave, 2001: 79.

⁷³ Ibid., 80.

made, “European” looking clothes and “just did not want to be there.”⁷⁴ Hoffman likewise describes displacement in Lost in Translation as so alienating that it engendered a formation of an entirely new, fragmented linguistic identity that did not feel as familiar as her Polish language self. Her memoir on the role of language in immigration is eerily similar to the experiences of children who lived on Aryan papers during the war and led double lives as dislocated observers who gave up their real names and never got used to the false ones. During the war, European Jews could be visible only as Christians. In its aftermath, many of them experienced profound cultural and linguistic dislocations that further splintered their already fragmented identities.

Child survivors like Maurer and Klepfisz articulate their family’s memories simultaneously as they translate their present. In so doing, they mend identities first splintered by ‘Aryan papers’ and later by immigration. Like other immigrant authors, they write about displacement, home, and language. Unlike immigrant authors who left their countries of origin in times of relative peace, they describe massive violence as the root cause of their displacement. Their own and their families’ survival during the war foregrounds hyphenated selves, racialized identities, and split tongues before they immigrated to the United States.

Maurer, Klepfisz, and Hoffman make a strong case for cosmopolitanism as their cultural, linguistic, and literary allegiances are multiple and transnational. Cosmopolitanism is predicated on the disavowal of differences structured as ‘natural’ upon which nationalisms rely, and these three writers emphasize that there is no “pure culture” when they “take cultural difference seriously, because they take the choices

⁷⁴ Personal Interview, 15 Sept. 2007.

individual people make seriously.”⁷⁵ They indicate, too, that ‘authenticity’ of identity, language, and home does not necessarily come from continuity, but often emerges out of uprooting, displacement, and change.

As literary scholars Bozena Shallcross and Halina Filipowicz point out, however, continuity still marks the discourse on home and homeland and they offer Polish literature as an example. National borders and physical geographies mark much of the Polish discourse on home even if many scholars and writers recognize the reduction inherent in this Romantic vision of a true Polishness.⁷⁶ Filipowicz finds, for example, that those who ascribe to cosmopolitan rather than national belonging are often scripted out of the ‘home’ as “internationalists” or “traitors:”

The emphasis on geographically bound notions of self and community, on native belonging, on at-homeness seems to preclude a discourse that would imagine other configurations of identity and community—a discourse that would loosen the hold of national origins on cultural allegiances and practices.⁷⁷

Such reductionist definitions of home in Eastern Europe have also served especially odious political goals. The Stalinist regime, for instance, used cosmopolitanism as a euphemism for disloyalty during its postwar anti-Semitic purges. Immediately following World War II, Joseph Stalin initiated a campaign to purge the Soviet Union of its “Western influences.” Those who supposedly “groveled before the West” like literary scholars who wrote about the influence of world literatures on Russian writers, were labeled “cosmopolitan” for their supposed disloyalty to Soviet culture. Though at first

⁷⁵ See Kwame Anthony Appiah’s *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*, New York: W.W. Norton, 2006, and “The Case for Contamination,” *The New York Times Magazine* 1 Jan. 2006: 30.

⁷⁶ Bozena Shallcross, “Home Truths: Towards a Definition of the Polish Home.” In *Framing the Polish Home: Postwar Cultural Constructions of Hearth, Nation, and Self*, ed. Bozena Shallcross, Athens: Ohio University Press, 2002: 3-4.

⁷⁷ “Home as Desire: The Popular Pleasures of Gender in Polish Emigré Drama,” in *Framing the Polish Home*, 295.

Stalin's campaign was not directed toward specific groups of people, by 1949, "the attacks on cosmopolitans (kosmopolity) acquired a markedly anti-Semitic character."⁷⁸ Thus began a practice of equating Jews and "rootless cosmopolitans," who, according to the political logic of the time, were not Russian patriots and had little or no allegiance to the Soviet Union because their "rootlessness" made them into slaves "of liberalism, formalism, and cosmopolitanism."⁷⁹ Legal citizenship was denied to Jews in Eastern Europe based on their supposed lack of roots and therefore lack of national loyalty. In such cases, cosmopolitanism was not celebrated as world citizenship, as we understand it now, but interpreted as lack of loyalty to one's country and rejected in favor of isolationism and parochialism.

Hoffman's parents wanted to leave Poland to escape postwar anti-Semitism and to seek a better life for their daughters. To acquire the necessary documents allowing them to immigrate to Canada, they had to 'volunteer' to renounce their Polish citizenship. The surrendering of their passports rendered them effectively 'rootless' in the eyes of the law—they left Poland without a citizenship of origin. In an interview with Harry Kreisler, Hoffman explained the complicated political situation in which her parents found themselves in Poland:

In 1956 the ban on emigration for Jews from Poland was lifted. This was quite exceptional. Poland had been a country from which you could not emigrate, so this was an exceptional moment. Much of the Jewish population took the opportunity of that moment to leave. It should be said that a lot of other people might have wanted to emigrate. Poland at that point was a war-ravaged,

⁷⁸ Konstantin Azadovskii and Boris Egorov, "From Anti-Westernism to Anti-Semitism: Stalin and the Impact of the 'Anti-Cosmopolitan' Campaigns on Soviet Culture," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 4.1 (2002): 74.

⁷⁹ Ibid. Stalin's campaign has current reverberations. During the first post-communist elections in Hungary, for example, right-wingers made "coded attacks on cosmopolitans" and daubed public buildings "with the Arrow Cross of fascism," Carroll Bogert, Rod Nordland, and Tom Mathews, "The Long Shadow," *Newsweek* 7 May 1990: 34.

impoverished country. So I would say that the reasons for emigration were various and certainly this sense that there were strong strains of anti-Semitism were among those reasons.⁸⁰

Hoffman's parents knew that communist Poland offered little by way of education or employment, especially for Polish Jews. Unlike Maurer and Klepfisz, who left in the first postwar year to seek refuge in Western Europe from the postwar anti-Semitic and political turmoils in Poland, Hoffman's family sought the more traditionally defined immigrant opportunities in North America.

2:

Immigrant literature ... with a difference

As the displacements that Maurer, Klepfisz, and Hoffman experienced illustrate, people cross national borders for a variety of reasons. Some leave behind economic difficulties, others seek physical safety, and yet others hope for freedom from censorship. Labels such as immigrant, refugee, or exile assigned by the United States government to those who cross its borders determine the legal possibilities and circumstances of a person's departure and arrival. An immigrant is usually someone who leaves home for economic reasons. Refugees are seeking physical safety or freedom from censorship. Exiles are ordered to leave their native countries. In effect, the American nomenclature of border crossing distinguishes between those people who want to leave in order to seek

⁸⁰ Hoffman was interviewed by Harry Kreisler at the University of California, Berkeley on October 5, 2000 as part of Conversations with History: Institute of International Studies. Transcript and streaming video of the interview can be found at <http://globetrotter.berkeley.edu/people/Hoffman/hoffman-con0.html>.

a ‘better’ life elsewhere from those who have to leave in order to escape immediate danger.⁸¹

To blur the lines drawn between these categories, I most often use the label ‘immigrant’ to describe Maurer, Klepfisz, and Hoffman after they left Poland, even if, by legal definition, their arrivals in the United States place them in multiple categories, including refugee, immigrant, and émigré. The term ‘immigrant’ also references these three authors as part of the long-standing American immigrant literary tradition. Regardless of the legal definition of departure and arrival, most newcomers who have published accounts of their journeys across borders share a similar sense of uprootedness and alienation. Even when they describe joyful arrivals and even happier lives in the U.S., immigrants, exiles, and refugees all emphasize a sense of communal, cultural, and linguistic loss.

The American mythology of immigrant transformation holds that crossing the U.S. border means the taking on of a new identity and erasure of the past that includes the culture and language of the native country. But as Anzaldua makes clear, crossing the border does not erase identity as much as it multiplies it. Immigrant writers reflect these multiplications of cultural and linguistic identities when they depict the difficulties inherent in adapting to the new environment while still holding on to the original language and culture. Such difficulties, as Maurer, Klepfisz, and Hoffman emphasize, illustrate the ways that displacement and translation provide ambivalent perspectives on border crossing. These authors tell us that they live and work in multiple languages and cultures, a fluid status that allows them to be fully present without surrendering their past.

⁸¹ All economic reasons are political too as Amitava Kumar observes in Passport Photos. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.

Their position between the past and the present, and among more than one language and culture, indicates that border crossing does not, as the myths suggest, take the traveler wholly from one side to the other.

The idea of a homeland as a particular nation-state with clearly defined, fortified, and controlled borders challenges writers who, like Maurer, Klepfisz, and Hoffman, are committed to cosmopolitan definitions of home. Certainly, these writers, unlike most immigrants, are legally and economically privileged; they possess the necessary passports and money to travel between Europe and the United States. But these authors' 'privilege' cannot go unqualified; although they possess the material means to physically 'go home,' they cannot return home even when they travel to the country of their birth. What Madeline Levine calls domicide—the complete destruction of the Jewish home during World War II⁸²—means that neither material nor legal privilege can get them home.

The lives described by Holocaust survivors intersect with those depicted in immigrant texts in the descriptions of departure from the 'Old World' and arrival in the U.S. But, as Hoffman observes, "the importance of emigration in the biographies of survivors and their children has been ... oddly underestimated" even while attention is paid to immigrant literature in American letters. The silence on the subject of the survivors' displaced lives in the U.S. has to do, at least partly, with the popularization of the history of the Holocaust in books, television series, and Hollywood films. As Hoffman and Klepfisz imply, newcomers who were Holocaust survivors were 'assimilated' into American culture, at least in theory, when they were labeled as

⁸² "Home Loss in Wartime Literature: A Typology of Images," in Framing the Polish Home. Levine's term obviously refers to more than the destruction of the physical home when it resonates with terms such as patricide and matricide and thus signifies complete destruction of home, family, and community.

‘survivors’ and embraced as avatars of American liberatory and altruistic war impulses.⁸³ ‘Survivor’ as a category first emerged in America in response to cultural and political changes; the Vietnam war and 1960s unrest brought revisions to the discourse of celebration and “ascending progress” and focused, instead, on “suffering and blocked progress ... for which the survivor became representative.”⁸⁴

Since the 1970s, such a popularization has meant an increased focus on the memorializations of America’s altruistic wartime spirit. The phrase ‘Holocaust survivor’ has been assimilated into American popular culture with few writing about the survivor/immigrants’ lives prior to the popularization of their testimonies. Instead, there have been general celebrations of America’s traditional immigrant myth, where newcomers, especially those who had suffered from persecution and violence, like Holocaust survivors, are welcomed with open arms. In this way, the immigrant survivor becomes an important post-war repository of the classic American immigrant success story. Maurer, Klepfisz, and Hoffman rarely see this as a positive turn of events. For them, these ‘open arms’ signify an enormous pressure for East European Jews to

⁸³ By 2004, ‘survivor’ had become such a taken-for-granted category that, in Larry David’s Curb Your Enthusiasm episode from March 7, 2004 titled “Survivor,” Sol, a Holocaust survivor, went head to head with a young American “survivor” of the popular CBS television show Survivor to see who went through more hardships.

⁸⁴ Michael Rothberg and Jared Stark, “After the Witness: A Report from the Twentieth Anniversary Conference of the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale,” History & Memory 15.1 (2003): 92. As Henry Greenspan observes, what better way to re-imagine America’s warmongering in Vietnam than with a throwback to World War II and the supposed interest of Americans in freeing European Jews from Hitler’s murderous designs? “An Immediate and Violent Impulse: Holocaust Survivor Testimony in the First Years after Liberation,” in Remembering for the Future, eds. John K. Roth and Elisabeth Maxwell, vol. III, New York: Palgrave, 2001.

It is also worth noting that ‘survivor’ in English connotes passivity and surrender whereas the Yiddish term *sheyres-hapleyte*, derived from the Hebrew *sherit hapleita*, signifies rebuilding, defiance, even hope. There is then an enormous gap between the cultural significations of the terms as used by English language and Yiddish or Hebrew language writers. See Anita Norich’s Discovering Exile. The term *sherit hapleita*, Norich writes, “is first used in Genesis 45:7, when Joseph reassures his brothers that, despite their sins, they will be delivered from famine and live on. The biblical association does not underscore the holiness of this saving but rather their incredible good fortune in having been saved, and, especially, their destined future” (101).

assimilate, without making room for their vast linguistic and cultural differences.

Immigrant survivors also challenge the basic American model of immigration as a movement between the native immigrant home and the immigrant destination: ‘home’ no longer exists and the immigrant often traverses more than a single national boundary. In their permanent state of displacement, survivors challenge American triumphant national narratives with the acute dissonance and disjunction of their post-Holocaust lives. For them, caught in the “limbo of atrocity,” America is a purgatory rather than a promised land.⁸⁵ They cannot be reborn in ‘America’ because of their wartime experiences and, at the same time, such a rebirth is rarely if ever possible for first generation immigrants. In fact, the only birth that many immigrant writers describe is that of a new, separate identity informed by the new language and culture around them. They often describe such an identity as artificial and in conflict with their native language selves. “Two languages (often more) and loyalties to a home country and to hosts,” as Doris Sommer observes about first generation immigrants and their multiple national, cultural, and linguistic allegiances, “can seem intolerable to patriots on either side of the border, and on both sides of a divided self.”⁸⁶ The “divided self” becomes apparent when in addition to writing from the perspective of displacement, immigrant survivors like Maurer and Klepfisz create their texts in English, Polish, or Yiddish, thus mirroring their multilingual lives. Even when they write in English, like Hoffman, immigrant survivors, in the very moment of writing, translate their pasts. For them, the process of textualizing lives is one of double translation: they simultaneously translate experience into text and into English.

⁸⁵ Lawrence Langer, The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975.

⁸⁶ Doris Sommer, “Introduction,” in Bilingual Games: Some Literary Investigations, ed. Doris Sommer, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002, 7.

A striking number of newcomers to America⁸⁷ published their stories of departure, passage, and arrival; already by the mid-19th century, we see the rise of a specific literary genre of immigrant autobiographical writings that self-consciously set out to relate the story of “becoming American.”⁸⁸ Early 20th Century stories like Jacob Riis’s The Making of an American (1901) and Edward Bok’s The Americanization of Edward Bok (1919) generally detailed the process of becoming better off financially and spiritually in the country that many of these immigrant writers dub “the Promised Land.” These narratives make coherent order out of disorganized experience by delineating how a previously ‘foreign’ life has been converted into a specifically American identity, most often characterized by individualism and self-sufficiency.⁸⁹ Precisely what an American identity entails is, of course, historically contingent. Most obviously, race, gender, and sexuality closed off access to such an identity for many immigrants.⁹⁰ In the late 19th and

⁸⁷ I am aware of the political implications of using the words ‘America’ or ‘American’ to indicate the U.S. and its cultures. There is obviously more to ‘America’ than the U.S. In continuing to use the word, I mirror Hoffman’s, Klepfisz’s, and Maurer’s as well as other immigrant writers’ use of it. America for many of them represents more of an idea than a geographical location delimited by borders. It is a concept grounded in certain promises like freedom, democracy, or diversity. More often than not, immigrants describe the failure of these promises, but they are nevertheless ideologically committed to them.

⁸⁸ See also Joseph Pickering’s Inquiries of an Emigrant. The Narrative of an English Farmer, who Traversed the United States of America, and the British Province of Canada, with a View to Settle as an Emigrant... (first published in 1831). Also early 20th Century immigrant memoirs like Mary Antin’s The Promised Land (1912) and Andrew Carnegie’s Autobiography of Andrew Carnegie (1920), and also novels authored by immigrant writers like Sui Sin Far’s Mrs. Spring Fragrance (1912), Abraham Cahan’s The Rise of David Levinsky (1917) and Anzia Yezierska’s Bread Givers (1925). Cahan serialized the Yiddish Yankel der yankee in the socialist newspaper Arbeiter Tseitung from October 1895 to January 1896 and then translated and published it as Yekl in English in 1896.

⁸⁹ Gordon Hutner, “Introduction,” Immigrant Voices: Twenty-Four Narratives on Becoming an American, New York: Signet Classics, 1999.

⁹⁰ That race was used as a category for restricting immigration to the U.S. comes as no surprise. We only have to look as far as the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, which was not repealed until the 1940s and U.S.’s alliance with China. Sexuality continues to restrict immigration. For instance, no immigrant whose same sex partner is a U.S. citizen can apply for an entry visa based on that relationship. But several immigration acts also focused on gender when, as early as 1875, the Page Law prohibited the importation of women for the purposes of prostitution. Subsequently, many single women and especially women from

early 20th century, certain immigrant groups were seen as so alien that they were able to corrupt the dominant Anglo-Saxon Protestant ethic with their ‘exotic’ or dangerously foreign folkways. At this time, Asian and Jewish immigrants were deemed the least assimilable and therefore the least acceptable of all immigrant groups.⁹¹ But the end of World War II and especially the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 60s, widened the scope of who was considered American. In turn, texts produced by newcomers to the U.S. in the last fifty or so years are no longer marked by an insistence on “a common history” and “a coherent society.”⁹² Novels like Paule Marshall’s Brown Girl, Brownstone (1959) and Gish Jen’s Typical American (1991), instead of focusing on sameness and similarity to the Anglo-Saxon society, describe the difficulty and even impossibility, of assimilation. They depict lives displaced from native languages and cultures and describe American culture not as open and welcoming but as racially oppressive and culturally stifling.

Unlike their early twentieth century predecessors, many postwar immigrant writers work within anti-nationalist and cosmopolitan literary frameworks. Though they still engage in literary nation-building, post-World War II immigrant narratives reconfigure the United States when they call for “a polyglot nation, transnational connections, and new forms of cultural authority.”⁹³ Werner Sollors observes, for instance, that Americanness is established within both immigrant and ethnic literature:

countries in Asia were deported for no other reason than their single status (and ‘inferior’ race), which deemed them automatically susceptible to sex work. Furthermore, with the Expatriation Act of 1907, any woman who was an American citizen but who married a foreign national lost her citizenship. This law was repealed by the Cable Act in 1932, but only for white women. Asian American women who married Asian immigrants continued to lose their American citizenship. See Pickard’s Almost All Aliens, 257-258.

⁹¹ Ngai, Impossible Subjects; Gordon Hutner, Immigrant Voices.

⁹² Hutner, Immigrant Voices, xvii.

⁹³ Muller, New Strangers, 3.

as newcomers and outsiders are socialized into the culture—a process which inevitably seems to revitalize the culture at the same time. Works of ethnic literature ... may thus be read not only as expressions of mediation between cultures but also as handbooks of socialization into the codes of Americanness.⁹⁴

In the post-Civil Rights moment, claiming one's unique ethnicity became acceptable and even encouraged. In this climate, "the new immigrant experience, steeped in alterity, cultural independence, and multivocal musings on identity," is at odds "with the univocal, assimilative, universalizing tendencies of the traditional national experience."⁹⁵ Such challenges are evident in the prose and poetry authored by Hoffman, Klepfisz, and Maurer because their writings critique their new country's history of racism and xenophobia and, as well, challenge American reliance on English as a force that coalesces and assimilates immigrants. They depict 'America' not as paradise but as displacement, where the Jewish female body is scripted out of the dominant Christian mainstream despite this culture's claims to a Judeo-Christian tradition.⁹⁶ Their depictions of post-Holocaust lives in the U.S. can be characterized by "dissonance and disjunctions," which clash with the earlier, more "triumphant national narratives" depicting assimilation into American culture and the culture's liberatory, welcoming spirit.⁹⁷

Sollors marks the specific moment when immigrant writers were allowed to openly criticize assimilation with the publication of Beyond the Melting Pot (1963) by Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan. Sollors claims that the book "paved the

⁹⁴ Werner Sollors, Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture, New York: Oxford University Press, 1986, 7.

⁹⁵ Muller, New Strangers, 23.

⁹⁶ See Chapter 6 of this project and Klepfisz's interview for her denunciation of American anti-Semitism even in the supposedly progressive circles like second wave feminist organizations. For a discussion of the Judeo-Christian tradition in this country, see Deborah Dash Moore's "Jewish GIs and the Creation of the Judeo-Christian Tradition" and Anita Norich's Discovering Exile, 78-80.

⁹⁷ Muller, New Strangers, 23.

way for the revival of American ethnic identification in the 1960s and 1970s when attacks on the melting pot became the battle cry of ‘unmeltable ethnics’ who admonished their audiences to pay attention to ethnicity and to give up the assimilationist hope that ethnicity was going to disappear.”⁹⁸ For first generation immigrants like Maurer, Klepfisz, and Hoffman, ethnicity is firmly grounded in their use of and reference to their first language(s), which, in turn, differentiate them from American born ethnics. As Klepfisz eloquently points out, her allegiance to Yiddish connects her to Eastern Europe and separates her from American Jews whom she certainly sees as ethnic, but who are, unlike her, native-born and often monolingual Americans.⁹⁹

Ethnic identity is often ambiguously employed in the U.S. All too often ethnicity, which Anzaldúa labels as a borderland identity too multiple to be essentialized, emerges as singular and capable of transformation.¹⁰⁰ This may well arise out of what historian Mae Ngai describes in Impossible Subjects (2004) as the term’s very mutability and instability because as “a nationality-based cultural identity,” it is “defined as capable of transformation and assimilation.”¹⁰¹ Unlike epidermal markers of race, which can rarely if ever be altered, ethnicity is based in cultural and linguistic affiliations and can, at least in theory, undergo change. In practice, however, such transformations are much more

⁹⁸ Sollors, Beyond Ethnicity, 20. It is important to note that Sollors’ work on ethnicity has been correctly criticized for its conflation of immigrant ethnic identities and American racial identities. He writes, for example, that “‘immigration’ focuses on the process of traversing space and leads to rather awkwardly forced discussions of people who came here as slaves or who were on the ‘American’ continent before ‘America’” (39). He thus in effect dismisses the discourse of immigration replacing it with ethnicity under which he subsumes race. While Sollors’ categories of consent and descent are useful in considering ethnicity in the U.S., they are severely limited, as Mary Waters has shown, when Americans of color are prohibited and inhibited by race and racism in ‘consenting’ to ethnicity. See Ethnic Options: Choosing Identities in America, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.

⁹⁹ See the introduction to this project where I quote from Klepfisz’s “Secular Jewish Identity: *Yidishkayt* in America.”

¹⁰⁰ See Mary C. Waters, Ethnic Options: Choosing Identities in America. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.

¹⁰¹ Ngai, Impossible Subjects, 7.

complex because they involve, among other things, linguistic markers such as accents which often brand their bearers as outsiders or newcomers to another cultural and linguistic context. Jewishness and Polishness in this project indicate Hoffman's, Klepfisz's, and Maurer's ethnicities. They are not religious; their ethnicities stem from their continued investment in Jewish history and culture that was located in Poland.¹⁰²

In this context, Anita Norich's reminder that 'Jewish culture' is not a useful category of analysis is particularly important. Considering 'Jewishness' as singular or unified generalizes and universalizes a phenomenon that was and continues to be multilocal, multilingual, and in-process. This is why, as Norich notes via David Biale's Cultures of the Jews (2002), 'Jewish cultures' is a more appropriate lens through which to examine how these varied and various cultures are differently situated "at different times, in contact with varying cultures, influencing and being influenced by them."¹⁰³ Similarly, Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin observe that "Jewishness ... is not national, not genealogical, not religious, but all of these in dialectical tension with one another."¹⁰⁴ Consequently, for Polish Jewish survivors and their children, ethnic identities arise out of borderland encounters between many languages and cultures, which constituted the Polish state prior to World War II. The most specific way to describe Maurer's,

¹⁰² I feel obliged to note that whereas 'Jewishness' denotes ethnicity in the U.S., it was defined in pre-war Poland in religious terms. Until the late 1940s, for example, there were no civic birth registries in Poland and all infants were registered according to their parents' religious affiliations (on paper if not in practice). I spoke about this with a civic official in Nowy Targ, Poland on March 12, 2007, who explained why my great-grandmother and grandmother have official and unofficial names: Maria and Marianna. My grandmother was born in 1925 and registered with the local priest upon her baptism. Her parents gave her the name Maria but the priest, without informing them, wrote down Marianna because Maria was reserved for the 'Holy Mother.' The priests who did this rarely felt compelled to inform their subjects especially those who, like both my great-grandmother and grandmother, were poor.

¹⁰³ Anita Norich, "Introduction," Jewish Literatures and Cultures: Context and Intertext, Anita Norich and Yaron Eliav, eds. (Brown Judaic Studies Series, forthcoming)

¹⁰⁴ Qtd. in Jutta Schamp, "Beyond Assimilation: Difference and Reconfiguration in the Works of Irena Klepfisz, Jyl Lynn Felman, and Rebecca Goldstein," Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik 47.3 (1999): 231.

Klepfisz's, and Hoffman's ethnicity is to say that they are Polish Jews. But because Poland was a site of anti-Semitic intimidations and violence, for these writers, like for Jerzy Kosinski, Jewishness as an ethnicity "includes political intimidation, war, the Holocaust, exile, the cruelties of history, the problematics of a thousand years of shared Christian and Jewish community, and the personal vicissitudes of art, immigration, and cultural displacement."¹⁰⁵ Whereas many Polish Jews renounced their 'Polishness' in response to the violence they encountered at the hands of their countrymen, Hoffman, Klepfisz, and Maurer, like Anzaldua, embrace even those aspects of their identities that contradict each other. Like James Baldwin's experience of racism coupled with his undeniable Americanness, these three writers know that their lives and experiences in Poland have at least partially made them the people and writers that they are. Baldwin describes his experience abroad in what was, in effect, his immigrant home in Paris:

I left America because I doubted my ability to survive the fury of the color problem here. (Sometimes I still do.) ... In my necessity to find the terms on which my experience could be related to that of others, Negroes and whites, writers and non-writers, I proved, to my astonishment, to be as American as any Texas G.I. And I found my experience was shared by every American writer I knew in Paris. Like me, they had been divorced from their origins, and it turned out to make very little difference that the origins of white Americans were European and mine were African—they were no more at home in Europe than I was.¹⁰⁶

This parallel between two very different types of displacements from very different linguistic, cultural, and racial milieus illustrates the extent to which the country of origin forms and informs responses to immigrant destinations.

¹⁰⁵ Gladsky, "Jerzy Kosinski," 150-51.

¹⁰⁶ James Baldwin, "The Discovery of What It Means To Be an American," in Collected Essays, New York: The Library of America, 1998, 137.

In this context, subsuming the analysis or teaching of immigrant writings under the broad category of American ethnic literature erases important differences between them.¹⁰⁷ For one, unlike texts authored by ethnic writers who were born and raised in the U.S., immigrant literature features invocations and memories of the country of origin as a measure for and/or against the United States.¹⁰⁸ When immigrant writers describe the U.S. they do so comparatively, often using their native countries as contexts for understanding their new homes. Moreover, immigrant writers also describe their acquisition of English within the framework of their native languages, which are closely linked to geographical locations outside of the U.S. Finally, they describe stories of passage into the U.S., which are absent in narratives authored by American ethnic writers. While an ethnic writer may describe growing up in a Spanish language household and then negotiating the public world of school in English as does Richard Rodriguez in Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez (1981), an immigrant ethnic writer, like Eva Hoffman, describes growing up, both in the public and private spheres, in Polish, and only upon her emigration from Poland, learning to negotiate the public world in English. Rodriguez's story is about the U.S. and his negotiation of the private and public spheres within in, which are marked and separated for him by his parents' Spanish and his public school's American English. Hoffman and other immigrant writers describes different national spaces and devote large parts of their recollections to the story of physical and cultural passage into the U.S., which often

¹⁰⁷ Sollors argues for a blurring of the lines between immigrant and ethnic literatures. Beyond Ethnicity

¹⁰⁸ See, for example, Mary Patrice Erdmans' study of Polish Americans in Michigan, The Grasinski Girls: The Choices They Had and the Choices They Made, Athens: Ohio State University Press, 2004.

emerges as a dramatic separation between the lives in which they felt linguistically comfortable and a new existence marked by linguistic and cultural alienation. Ethnic Studies scholar Cynthia Sau Ling Wong confirms that those who hail from other countries are drastically separated from those born in the U.S. through the former's "historically-situated voyage that transforms foreign nationals into American immigrants."¹⁰⁹ This historically situated voyage includes the acquisition of English and the formation of an American immigrant identity.

3:

Language and Identity

Cultural and Translation Studies provide an especially useful methodology in examinations of identity as rooted in language(s) and hence in intra-and inter-lingual translation. Cultural Studies is appealing to a scholar of immigrant and survivor narratives because it is characterized by a distrust "of the 'natural' links between national languages and national literatures."¹¹⁰ We have inherited this one-to-one-to-one relationship between nation, culture, and language from the nineteenth century and, as a consequence, "a writer writing in Polish is automatically subsumed under the rubric of Polish culture." Such an approach, Halina Filipowicz observes, "fails to take fluid, ambiguous, often contradictory concepts of community and of belonging (such as

¹⁰⁹ "Immigrant Autobiography: Some Questions of Definition and Approach," in Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader, eds. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998: 300.

¹¹⁰ Halina Filipowicz, "Taboo Topics in Polish and Polish/Jewish Cultural Studies," *Journal of the International Institute, The University of Michigan*, accessed 26 Sept. 2006, <http://www.umich.edu/%7Eiinet/journal/vol9no1/halina.html>,

Polish/Jewish identity) seriously.”¹¹¹ Because cultural studies, as Filipowicz reminds us, is about “the rules of inclusion and exclusion that guide” depictions of identity, it provides another productive framework for the analysis of the literature of the Holocaust and immigration in this project.

Texts authored by immigrants are sometimes understood as depicting ethnic “foreigners” who are unfamiliar with U.S. history, traditions, customs, and language. This is nowhere more apparent than in texts written in languages other than English. Such texts, even in our present moment with its emphasis on multiculturalism and diversity, receive scant scholarly attention in the U.S. In this case, English as American national language takes precedence over the authors’ location in the U.S. A comment about Jan Tomasz Gross’s *Neighbors* (2001) on the Princeton University Press web site illustrates well this prioritizing of English—in this case of English translation. The editors praise Gross’s “never before told story” despite the fact that it was told before, quite vividly, in a Polish documentary film directed by Agnieszka Arnold. Arnold worked on the project for four years prior to the film’s screening on Polish public television on April 3-4, 2001. In fact, Gross borrowed the title of his book from Arnold’s film – *Sasiedzi* (*Neighbors*). Arnold began work on the film in 1997 when Polish public television commissioned her to do a project about Polish Jewish relations. It was only with Gross’s publication in English that the controversy about non-Jewish Poles’ complicity in the destruction of Polish Jews began in the United States. Gross’s book was first published in Polish (2000) so, in fact, the story had been told before even by Gross himself, who is an American academic with roots in Poland. In the end, however,

¹¹¹ Ibid.

the multilingual and multicultural contexts of the publication of *Sasiedzi* were erased in the American marketing processes of this book.

Second language acquisition scholars note that language and identity are intimately linked because the former inevitably shapes the latter.¹¹² They explain that “we should keep in mind that an individual’s identity is closely linked with the way he or she speaks. It follows that when speaking a new language one is adopting some of the identity markers of another cultural group.”¹¹³ Linguistic scholar Susan J. Dicker likewise writes that “the norms and values of a culture are expressed through language” and this is most obvious when “word-for-word translation from one language to the other just doesn’t work.”¹¹⁴ Immigrants are particularly sensitive to this disjunction when in the process of acquiring new languages, they sense the manifold ways in which language structures their perceptions of the world. For this reason, as Doris Sommer notes, bilinguals are naturals at deconstruction. In *Bilingual Aesthetics* (2004), Sommer observes that theory is virtually second nature to bilinguals (and multilinguals) because they “extract abstraction from meaning” when they live in more than one linguistic milieu. In doing so, they are “literally distancing themselves from home and host rigidities.”¹¹⁵ Bilingualism “troubles the expectation that communication should be easy, and it upsets the desired coherence of romantic nationalism and ethnic essentialism.”¹¹⁶

In *After Babel* (1975), his seminal study of translation, George Steiner explains

¹¹² Dicker, *Languages in America*: 1.

¹¹³ Lightbown and Spada, *How Languages are Learned*: 56.

¹¹⁴ Dicker, *Languages in America*, 4.

¹¹⁵ Doris Sommer, *Bilingual Aesthetics: A New Sentimental Education*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2004, xix.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

that translation occurs even when only a single language is involved. Since each language constitutes a system of signs, when receiving any and all speech signals, the mind performs an act of translation. The complexity increases, as it does for all immigrants, when more than one language is involved in a communication act and, in turn, so does the conscious awareness of the process.¹¹⁷ Translation, Steiner observes, is present in all intra-lingual speech acts, but inter-lingual translation is a particularly intensified example of what is already monolingually present. Language and identity matter. The first language continues to exert its influence even after it ceases to be the primary vehicle of daily communication. In this context, multilingualism is a tall order especially when immigrants are forced to adopt another language. In other words, some, like Sommer, celebrate the wonder of multilingualism, but such celebrations often arise out of privilege. This is not the purview of immigration because of the pressures to adapt to a certain language and just as often a simultaneous pressure to forget the native tongue.

Relationships between language and identity, as Hana Wirth-Nesher notes, are one of the defining markers of immigrant literature: “language acquisition emerges as a central theme, not only in the actions and dialogues of the characters, but also in the registers and translation strategies of the narrator, and in the textual codes that mark inclusion and exclusion of a divided readership.”¹¹⁸ Wirth-Nesher also claims something

¹¹⁷ George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1975, 48.

¹¹⁸ “Traces of the Past: Multilingual Jewish American Writing,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Jewish American Literature*, eds. Michael P. Kramer and Hana Wirth-Nesher, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, 111. See also Shandler’s “Yiddishland,” where he identifies engagement with native languages as a discourse that both Jewish and non-Jewish immigrants and exiles engage in to replace the loss of a physically located home: Czeslaw Milosz calls Polish his “[f]aithful mother tongue” and his “native land” and Abraham Reisin writes: “Yiddish, my language, my tongue/.../You are my home in every place.” Shandler writes that Milosz like “Reisin celebrates the language as a portable homeland; the sound of Yiddish transforms the remotest geographical locus into familiar territory, an implicit

that echoes for immigrant writers like Hoffman and Klepfisz, who work in English, when she says that first generation Jewish American writers like Cynthia Ozick “are all translators in the broadest cultural sense” since English is their native language, but not “their only linguistic home.”¹¹⁹ Though English is not Hoffman’s or Klepfisz’s first language, their fluency in it has allowed them to narrate the processes of language internalization in English. Hoffman, for instance, was rooted in Polish enough to recognize the various ways in which English had to “invade” her psyche in order to become her second language; she then became fluent enough in English to be able to describe the process in detail.¹²⁰ Class also plays a role in language acquisition and use. Thus, Klepfisz had to negotiate not just English but also a variety of its class-related registers as did Hoffman who realizes that speech signifies class. These two women experienced downward socio-economic mobility in Canada and the U.S. and to reflect on the linguistic changes they experienced in English, they describe struggling to find the most appropriate ways to communicate in their newly acquired language.

Survivor and writer Paul Celan did not replace his native language upon his immigration to France. Even though like Maurer in the U.S., Celan was influenced by the French literary tradition, “his language is such a unique construct of deeply rooted idiom and neologism that he can hardly be considered a ‘displaced’ writer.”¹²¹ As Alvin Rosenfeld writes: ‘When all else had been taken from Paul Celan ... his language alone remained as a link to the past, and the poet lived in it as permanently and as securely as

Yiddishland.” Hoffman, Klepfisz, and Maurer mirror these writers’ sentiments when their texts and languages become a familiar locus of cultural expression. See also George Steiner’s “Our Homeland, the Text” (1985) in *No Passion Spent: Essays: 1978-1995*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996.

¹¹⁹ Wirth-Nesher, “Traces of the Past,” 115.

¹²⁰ Stanislaw Baranczak, *Breathing under Water and other East European Essays*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990, 226.

¹²¹ Ezrahi, *By Words Alone*, 143.

he ever did again in any physical landscape.”¹²² Celan continued to write in German in France; similarly, Maurer continues to write in Polish in the United States. Maurer’s use of Polish subverts monolingual assumptions, which link American national identity to a perceived or imagined “standard English”¹²³, at the same time as it remains a link to her past.

When Lawrence Langer analyzed Holocaust survivors’ videotaped testimonies, he concluded that they speak haltingly and that their descriptions often defy expression; on many aspects of their past they remain silent because they find no adequate way in which to describe their pain. Langer also represents oral testimony as “unmediated” and therefore superior to written or published memoirs and literary representations. In doing so, he ignores the extent to which language itself and also English as the survivors’ secondary or tertiary tongue mediates their recall of the past. In his analysis, aside from passing references to English as the survivors’ acquired language, Langer rarely discusses the role of linguistic competence in these silences or awkward phrases. In this context, David G. Roskies’ review of Holocaust Testimonies is particularly telling because Roskies writes that the subjects of these interviews were asked questions in English and answered them “with a heavy accent.”¹²⁴ English as a relatively foreign medium of communication even for those survivor immigrants who have lived in the U.S. for decades may indeed play a role in their haltingly related histories. It is, of course, entirely possible that they would have recounted their past with equal difficulty in their

¹²² Alvin Rosenfeld, Double Dying: Reflections on Holocaust Literature, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980, 143.

¹²³ Joshua Miller, “The Transamerican Trail to Cerca del Cielo,” in Bilingual Games: Some Literary Investigations, ed. Doris Sommer, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002: 125.

¹²⁴ David G. Roskies, “Through a Lens, Darkly,” Commentary 92.5 (Nov. 1991): 57.

native languages, but the impossibility of any narrative “smoothness” where an intimacy in a language is not a given needs to be taken into consideration. It is a mistake to assume that Holocaust survivors are so unsophisticated as to miss the cultural differences and “dividing lines” in English as their newly adopted tongue and between themselves and their American listeners. After all, those survivors who related their pasts in English in testimonial projects like Yale’s Fortunoff Archive or Steven Spielberg’s *Shoah* oral history project, were well aware that they were speaking English.

Given Hoffman’s, Klepfisz’s, and Maurer’s use of multiple languages as well as the Polish language secondary sources I rely on, translation figures prominently in my analysis as it helps me to identify how they relate their and their fictional protagonists’ histories. Lawrence Venuti warns against “domesticating” translations thereby making them appear as if they were composed in the same language in which they are read. I heed Venuti’s warning when I “foreignize” my translations of Polish leaving Polish place names in their original spelling, thereby indicating traces of “a translated idiom” to use Susan Rubin Suleiman’s term.¹²⁵ Suleiman argues that Holocaust narratives produced in English, French, Spanish, or other languages of the survivors’ exiled postwar lives, cannot be read without attention to their language of communication at the time of their experiences. Focusing on proper names as signals of the foreign, she writes: “No amount of glossing will assimilate the foreign proper name, nor is it translatable. It is the flag of the foreign—a stubborn kernel of otherness.”¹²⁶ To mirror this “kernel of otherness,” I

¹²⁵ Lawrence Venuti, *Scandals of Translation: Towards an Ethics of Difference*, New York: Routledge, 1998; Suleiman, “Monuments in a Foreign Tongue.”

¹²⁶ “Monuments in a Foreign Tongue,” 644. I make an exception for Oswiecim (Auschwitz in German) because the word and the place it denotes have become a trope of Holocaust history and memory

leave Polish place names in their original spelling. Finally, in another attempt to resist domesticating translation, I tend toward a literal rendering of fragments, passages, and titles in Polish or Yiddish even if the result sounds awkward and unidiomatic in American English.

American literature's monolingual assumptions have come under notable criticism in the past two decades with works like Werner Sollors' edited volume, Multilingual America: Transnationalism, Ethnicity, and the Languages of American Literature (1998), which explicitly calls for a reconsideration of literatures in languages other than English as an integral part of American literary history. "English only," as Orm Overland reminds us, leads to "less diversity and works against the multicultural project of American Studies."¹²⁷ Though multiple American ethnic cultures have been recognized by academic departments, the many languages used by these multicultural groups have been neglected and "have yet to be recognized as American by the American Studies community."¹²⁸ We cannot "talk convincingly about 'cultural diversity' without talking about language," as Sollors reminds us.¹²⁹ Even in the nativist and anti-immigrant moment immediately after World War I, American literature was not limited to or by English, but current U.S. literary historiographies have largely focused their critical attention on English-language sources and have ignored literatures produced in many others of America's multiple languages.¹³⁰

in the United States. Whereas Oswiecim is a Polish town near Krakow (it had a sizable Jewish population before world War II), Auschwitz has become synonymous with the German concentration camp.

¹²⁷ "Introduction: Redefining 'America' in American Studies," in Not English Only: Redefining 'America' in American Studies, ed. Orm Overland, Amsterdam: VU University Press, 2001, 3.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹²⁹ "Introduction," in Multilingual America, 4-5.

¹³⁰ See also Joshua Miller, Say Something American If You Dare: The Mixed Languages of U.S. Modernism. Oxford University Press, forthcoming.

Anzaldua's La Frontera goes a long way in getting us away from the rigid linguistic boundaries drawn around American literature. Her book is about multiple identities that the borderland makes apparent as it convincingly argues that these identities can be accurately reflected only through more than one linguistic idiom. Like Anzaldua's multivalent expressions of Chicana identities, Jadwiga Maurer's Polish language oeuvre transgresses cultural, linguistic, and disciplinary borders. The analysis of the three writers who are the subject of this project opens with Maurer because her use of Polish, like Anzaldua's of Spanish, works most overtly against English-only as the sole descriptor of American literature. The Polish of Maurer's short stories links her to her pre-immigrant past, makes apparent the transnationalism of her literary output, and emphasizes the multilingual aspects of wartime survival and immigration. Hers is American immigrant literature without translation.

Chapter 3

Jadwiga Maurer's American Literature without Translation¹³¹

I understood a number of simple and bitter truths early in my life. I would never be a girl scout. I would probably never attend public schools. I would not go to summer camp. When I grew up, I would not have the same opportunities as other women. In a word, for this homeland, I would always remain the ugly, unloved Cinderella, a stepdaughter.

Jadwiga Maurer¹³²

For Jadwiga Maurer, who grew up Jewish in Poland and was dislocated by World War II and lived in Slovakia, Germany, and now resides in the U.S., there was no possibility of being at home in the country of her birth, no matter her mastery of the Polish language. The cover of her latest and most comprehensive collection of short stories, *Sobowtory: Opowiadania Zebrane (Doppelgangers: Collected Stories, 2002)*, published in the country of her birth, attests to her many geographical and linguistic (dis)locations. On that cover, a picture of an uprooted daisy, a resilient and common Polish wildflower, suggests Maurer's link to Poland. The shadow cast by the daisy,

¹³¹ Many thanks to Magdalena Zaborowska for pointing me in the direction of Jadwiga Maurer's stories. I am grateful to Jadwiga herself who warmly welcomed me in her home, and also generously read the first, very messy draft of this chapter. She offered invaluable insight, suggestions, and corrections.

¹³² Jadwiga Maurer, "I'd rather go it alone, without Jankiel." Unless otherwise noted, all translations from the Polish are mine. A literal translation of the noun "*ojczyzna*" would read "Fatherland." I use "homeland" and its variations for two reasons: "*ojczyzna*" is gendered feminine in Polish, which disappears entirely when the noun "father" comes into play and "fatherland" has unsettling Nazi connotations, which are absent in the Polish "*ojczyzna*."

points to the collection's title and Maurer's multiple and transnational identities. The Star of David, pictured below the shadow, indicates her Jewish identity.¹³³ In symbolizing Maurer's multiple locations, the daisy's exposed roots also reference her uprooting and her authorial position on a national and ethnic literary cusp as an émigré Polish Jewish American scholar and author.

Familiar to generations of students as a Slavic Studies scholar, Jadwiga Maurer is not well known in the United States as a fiction writer; except for her short story “*Zebrak*” (“The Beggar”), none of her works have been translated into English. But as a Polish Jewish writer who has resided in the United States for over fifty years, yet who still uses Polish as the language of her fiction, Maurer's oeuvre emerges as emblematic of home and displacement; her stories have circulated in Poland, Israel, Great Britain, France, and the United States.¹³⁴ To date, Maurer has published three collections of short stories: *Liga Ocalalych* (*The League of the Rescued*—1970), *Podroz na Wybrzeze Dalmacji* (*Journey to the Dalmatian Coast*—1982), and *Sobowtory: Opowiadania Zebrane* (*Doppelgangers: Collected Stories*—2002). Before appearing in these collections, her short stories were published in the London-based Polish-language émigré literary paper *Wiadomosci* (*The News*), one of the longest running Polish language literary papers of the 20th century. *Wiadomosci* was an inherent part of Polonia's printed culture and a space where those like Maurer, who left Poland after World War II, formed

¹³³ I interviewed *Doppelgangers*' editor, Jerzy Daniel, and the cover's designer, Malgorzata Bielecka in Kielce, Poland in March 2007 and they confirmed that these were, indeed, their intentions.

¹³⁴ Maurer has also published short stories in Polish language literary journals such as the Tel-Aviv based *Kontury* (*Contours*), the Paris based *Kultura* (*Culture*), the Krakow based *Tygodnik Powszechny* (*The Weekly*), and the Chicago based *2b*.

a discursive transnational immigrant community.¹³⁵ In an interview with the Polish historian Regina Renz, Maurer explained that this publication played a key role in her career: “Writing for *Wiadomosci* quite literally changed my life. I continued to be an American scholar of Slavic Studies, but I debuted as a Polish writer. *Wiadomosci* functioned as a homeland for me because through its pages, I entered more deeply into Polish culture.”¹³⁶ Thus, Maurer found a space of cultural and linguistic belonging in the pages of *Wiadomosci*, which, at least in part, compensated for her displacement from Poland.

Maurer’s life as a scholar in the United States and her work as a writer for *Wiadomosci* illustrate that transnational authors and academics are not only familiar with multiple languages, cultures, and countries, but also negotiate political agendas. For Maurer, whose texts engage a range of topics excised from the public discourse in Cold War Poland, *Wiadomosci* was a safe space for uncensored authorship. In fact, due to the communist government’s travel restrictions on Polish citizens and its constant surveillance and censorship, Maurer, who left her homeland in 1946, did not return until 1994. As she told me, she did not wish to go back until the communist government, which had so efficiently controlled all aspects of public life, had disappeared.¹³⁷ In such a context, *Wiadomosci* provided a welcome forum for authors like Maurer who wanted to discuss topics that were controversial in communist Poland. One such topic was the ambivalent role of non-Jewish Poles during the Holocaust. Many articles published in

¹³⁵ The explanation of the complexities of what “Polonia” means are outside of the scope of this chapter. I use this term broadly to refer to diverse Polish diasporic communities across the world.

¹³⁶ “*Jadwiga Maurer—pisarka i uczona z polskim rodowodem* (Jadwiga Maurer-Writer and Scholar of Polish Descent),” Krakow: Sympozjum Biografistyki Polonijnej, 2000: 216.

¹³⁷ Personal Interview, July 27-29, 2006.

Wiadomosci between 1946 and 1981 openly acknowledged both German culpability and Polish anti-Semitism before, during, and after World War II. A number of these pieces created heated and controversial debates, which offered a rare forum for the kinds of dialogues that were prohibited in communist Poland where the public media extensively discussed the German assault on Poland, but routinely ignored the culpability of Catholic Poles in the destruction of their Jewish countrymen.

In the following pages, I discuss a number of examples from Maurer's biography and short stories that highlight the transnational components of her life and work. In so doing, I show that expressive cultural forms produced by immigrants, such as Maurer's short stories, reconfigure locations of belonging from physically bound territories to spaces circumscribed by languages. I locate Maurer in Polish, but not in Poland, where, as she recalled in the 1965 *Wiadomosci* article about Polish anti-Semitism, a fragment of which I chose as an epigraph for this chapter, she grew up as the "lesser daughter," an "ugly Cinderella."

In all of Maurer's short stories, the Polish Jewish American diaspora emerges as distinctly multi-local and multilingual: a hybrid of nationalities, ethnicities, languages, and places. Maurer's overarching themes are wartime survival in Poland and Slovakia, postwar life in Germany, and immigration and adult life in the United States. These themes, along with her use of Polish, illustrate the importance of transnationalism, translation, and multilingualism to understanding narratives of survival and displacement produced in the United States. East European Holocaust survivors, like many immigrants before them, have struggled to narrate their lives in English, a language foreign to their

wartime experiences. In my readings of Maurer's life and stories, I locate her authorship within a multilingual imaginary, a narrative space constructed in Polish but also influenced by German and English, the languages of her multiple displacements. This space is indelibly marked by Maurer's survival during the Holocaust, the postwar geographic spaces she crisscrossed in Germany and the U.S. and, finally, her return journeys to Poland as a mature writer. Maurer's position as a transnational author alongside the literary constructions of identity that emerge throughout her accounts of the Holocaust and immigration, reveals how her "step-daughter" oeuvre re-vision cultural belonging as a space where home and homeland rest in language and not in geography.

I focus my close readings on ten of Maurer's twenty-five stories to represent the temporal, geographical, and thematic cross-section of her writings.¹³⁸ My selections span the period of Maurer's literary output in *Wiadomosci*, where Maurer published her first story, "Spacery z Baska," ("Walks with Baska") in 1965, and the three collections of her short stories published in 1970, 1982, and 2002. The stories I have selected offer an overview of this writer's national settings: Poland, Slovakia, Germany, and the U.S. Thus positioned and located, these stories provide descriptions of Jewish lives during World War II and its aftermath across the immigrant span of the Old and New Worlds. They include dialogues that take place in Polish, German, and English (the latter two languages are rendered in Polish but are recognizable in context when they take place between the narrator and her German and English speaking interlocutors), so they also emphasize the multilingual aspects of wartime survival and immigration. In my analyses, I focus on three aspects of lives in translation that Maurer renders and that recur in all of

¹³⁸ Due to the length constraints of this chapter, I do not focus on all of her stories, but the ten that I introduce represent well the themes that reappear in all of them.

her stories: temporality, identity, and language. These three aspects elicit and make apparent the main thematic foci of my project: the gendered, ethnic, and linguistic dimensions of literary representations of survival, displacement, and migration.

All of Maurer's short stories are told from the same first-person Polish Jewish female immigrant perspective.¹³⁹ This narrator remains unnamed in each story – an everywoman who survives the war. Taken together, these stories constitute a sort of a *bildungsroman*, because Maurer's narrator grows from a young child, who is hiding from Nazi persecution during World War II in Poland and Slovakia, into an adult in Germany and in the United States. Inasmuch as she grows and develops, one thing remains constant in her tri-partite, Polish-Jewish-American life story: her past as a Holocaust survivor. The Holocaust also frames the transnational education to which the narrator/protagonist responds.

The language and themes of Maurer's short stories make her work difficult to categorize. They are written in Polish in the United States by and about an immigrant who makes her life in the U.S., but they are not the conventional immigrant tales of the rags-to-riches variety precisely because of her narrator's experience during the Holocaust. When I interviewed Maurer in July 2006, she identified herself as a Polish émigré writer. In doing so, she harkened back to a literary tradition dating to the 19th century when Poland was partitioned by the Prussian, Russian, and Austro-Hungarian empires. The Polish émigré tradition emerged in this period with a number of famous expatriates like Adam Mickiewicz, about whom Maurer has published an important study: *Of a Foreign Mother Born: Adam Mickiewicz's Ties with the World of Jews*

¹³⁹ Unless otherwise noted, Maurer's biographical information comes from my interview with her.

(1990).¹⁴⁰ Some of the tradition's most notable writers are Joseph Conrad who wrote in English in Great Britain, Julian Tuwim, Czeslaw Milosz, and Jerzy Kosinski who wrote in Polish in the United States, and Ida Fink, who writes in Polish in Israel. Yet, at the same time as Maurer is a part of this long Polish émigré literary tradition, her location in the U.S., as well as her immediate family who, as she told me, "are all Americans," also identify her as an American immigrant writer. Maurer is, as she put it, "an American writer who doesn't write in English."

Multilingual texts like Maurer's short stories in Polish have been omitted from most considerations of American literary history, even though they are undoubtedly part of American literature. As Werner Sollors argues, such multilingual narratives force us to reconceptualize our notions of national literary history, as they challenge the reliance of American letters on English-only for their categorization.¹⁴¹ Given recent transnational turns in American Studies, it becomes clear that works like Maurer's form a rich and still largely untapped resource for American literary scholars. A reconceptualization of American letters that includes literatures in languages other than English illustrates that immigrants like Maurer are part of a multilingual ethnic America and not "the wider Anglo-American-defined community" into which they were supposed to assimilate.¹⁴² As such, immigrants' multilingual writings provide a broader view of the multidimensional constructions of American ethnic identities.

¹⁴⁰ *Z matki obcej: Powiazania Adama Mickiewicza ze swiatem Zydow* (Of a Foreign Mother Born: Adam Mickiewicz's Ties with the World of the Jews), Londyn: Polska Fundacja Kulturalna, 1990.

¹⁴¹ Sollors, "After the Culture Wars" in *Multilingual America*, 1-13.

¹⁴² Spickard describes how the German immigrants' continued use of German in 18th-19th Century Pennsylvania constituted a German America in part due to their bilingualism, which in no way threatened the existence of the U.S. as a cultural entity. In the late 20th Century, multilingualisms are often presented in political terms as threats to American national unity. *Almost All Aliens* 104.

1:

From Kielce to Kansas



Photograph 1: “When the war broke out, we lived in a modern house on Sienkiewicza Street [in Kielce], near the railway station.”

Maurer was born on September 24, 1930 in Kielce, Poland in a Jewish family who survived World War II under forged Catholic documents. She immigrated to Germany in 1946 and from Germany, where she lived and studied, to the United States in 1956. A recently retired professor of Polish Studies, she has taught at the University of California, Berkeley, the University of Indiana, and the University of Kansas. Polish historian Regina Renz writes that Maurer “has a double, or maybe even a triple biography. She is Polish and Jewish, and also part of the American university establishment and Polish émigré literature.”¹⁴³ In her short stories, Maurer triangulates among her own identity positions when she represents her first person narrator as a Polish Jewish female who lives displaced in the United States.

¹⁴³ Renz, “Jadwiga Maurer,” 216.

Maurer was born in what was by then independent Poland but her parents, Anna and Baruch Graubard, hailed from the Austrian-controlled territories of Eastern and Western Galicia.¹⁴⁴ Maurer's mother was the first woman to graduate from the public gymnasium in Chrzanow and received a degree in Polish Philology from the Jagiellonian University in Krakow and then became a teacher of Polish in the city of Kielce. Her father attended a gymnasium and university in Lvov and received a History degree in Vienna. He taught Polish, Hebrew, and geography at a Jewish gymnasium in Kielce. Both of her parents came from religious Jewish homes, but they were not religious themselves. The first religion Maurer formally encountered was Catholicism during World War II when, at thirteen, she began to attend church regularly in Krakow's Kazimierz district, which, ironically, used to be a Jewish section of the city before the war.¹⁴⁵ Maurer reflects this dramatic change of locations—from being Jewish in Kielce to Catholic in Krakow—in the figure of her narrator. "She is no longer the person," Maurer told me about the narrator, "that she was in pre-war Kielce about which she cannot reminisce."¹⁴⁶

Like the narrator of her stories, Maurer had to lead a life that in no way resembled her pre-war childhood in Kielce. She had a new Catholic persona and a new name, Jadwiga Grabowska, that replaced her pre-war Jewish identity of Jadwiga Graubard; in

¹⁴⁴ There were a total of three partitions of Poland: 1772, 1793, and 1795. Poland's territories were divided and re-divided between Russia, Prussia, and Austria. Poland gained independence with the end of World War I and then lost it again to the political, economic, and social influence of the Soviet Union in 1946.

¹⁴⁵ About one quarter of Krakow's population, around 70,000 Jews, lived in Kazimierz before World War II. Only 5,000 were left after the Holocaust. Today, while only about 200 Jewish residents are registered in the local community, the area is a commercial tourist trap—"Jewish" restaurants, cafes, and stores filled with kitschy souvenirs crowd Kazimierz's streets. Jane Perlez, "A Section of Cracow Restores its Jewish Past," *The New York Times* September 14, 1997: TR3.

¹⁴⁶ Personal Interview.

one city she was Jewish and in the other she pretended to be a Catholic. Maurer led a double life marked by constant danger of discovery: “At night I realize that anyone I meet can denounce or even kill me. During the day, I am just like any other girl in Kazimierz.”¹⁴⁷ This move from a Jewish home in Kielce to a Catholic life in Krakow constitutes Maurer’s first displacement and identity translation.

In his afterward to Doppelgangers, Jerzy Daniel notes that Maurer admitted to forgetting much about her family’s journeys prior to their arrival in Kazimierz, which she marks as the beginning of her wartime childhood and, in effect, the beginning of her Catholic education. In her writing, Maurer acknowledges the difficulty of obtaining “Aryan papers” testifying to the family’s Catholic birth and antecedents, but repeatedly notes in her stories that the maintenance of the imposed and precariously protective identity was even more difficult. During the German occupation of Poland, every individual, including children, had to carry German approved identity papers. Louis Begley, author of the novel Wartime Lies (1991) about a boy who lives on “Aryan papers” in wartime in Poland describes them in this way:

This bizarre and shameful expression [“Aryan papers”] was in much use in [wartime] Poland. It referred to shedding one's Jewish identity and escaping death through the acquisition and use of baptismal certificates and other identity papers establishing a new identity as a Roman Catholic Pole, therefore an Aryan, albeit of an inferior sort. Living "on Aryan papers" required money, not just to buy the papers but also to exist quietly on the periphery of Polish society without working and to buy off blackmailers.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁷ “Kazimierz” in Doppelgangers 5. As Daniel explains in the Afterward to Doppelgangers, this story is a combination of two of Maurer’s other stories published in Kontury in 2002 as “Kazimierz” and in Wiadomosci in 1965 as “Spacery z Baska.” The combination of these two stories creates a longer narrative about the narrator’s life in Krakow during the war. It comes at the beginning of Doppelgangers as Maurer’s description of the narrator at her youngest age.

¹⁴⁸ Louis Begley, “Who the Novelist Really Is,” New York Times Aug. 16, 1992: A1.

Maurer confirms that those living on “Aryan papers” like her family were more afraid of their neighbors than the Germans since the latter could not readily recognize them on the street. It was their neighbors, acquaintances, and sometimes even friends who could denounce them.

She explained in our interview that the “business” of blackmail was widespread and that those who denounced Jews were often the same people who denounced non-Jewish Poles for anti-German activities. Maurer pointed out that wartime blackmailers



Photograph 2: “At night I realize that anyone I meet can denounce or even kill me. During the day I am just like any other girl in Kazimierz.”

were often not simply anti-Semites bent on Jewish destruction, but greedy opportunists who would exploit anyone they could find for financial profit.¹⁴⁹ Maurer writes her own fear and anxiety of living on Aryan papers into the narrator of her stories when she describes how she has to constantly labor to behave just like everybody else, to blend in, and remain beyond suspicion, especially to her non-Jewish friends and neighbors. Many scholars identify those who lived on Aryan papers as “hidden,” but Maurer is quite clear

¹⁴⁹ Phone Interview, July 22, 2006.

that she lived out in the open by passing as a Christian.¹⁵⁰ She sees her precarious wartime predicament as quite different from those who had to physically hide.

Maurer told me that soon after the war, those who lived through the horrors were distinguished according to the way they survived. First, those living on Aryan papers and underground organizations were seen as living more or less out in the open. Then there were those people who physically hid, often in horrible conditions in places like attics and cellars. Finally, there were those who survived concentration camps. Though Maurer does not engage in any sort of a hierarchy of suffering, she is keen on making these distinctions so that Holocaust survival is not perceived as some sort of a generalized or uniform phenomenon.¹⁵¹ She knows that when she survived by passing as a Christian, she lived on the periphery of the catastrophe. In “Biskup” (“The Bishop,” 1970), for example, Maurer once again writes her own experiences into her stories. Here, she describes her narrator’s strolls through the Slovakian countryside while German trains carrying Hungarian Jews to Auschwitz pass by almost within reach.¹⁵² In this way, her life during the war accords with Saul Friedlander’s account of his own ‘hidden’ identity when he lived as a Christian child in a convent: “I had lived on the edges of the catastrophe; a distance—impassable, perhaps— separated me from those who had been directly caught up in the tide of events, and despite all my efforts, I remained, in my own eyes, not so much a victim as—a spectator.”¹⁵³ And, as Eva Hoffman has written, those who lived on Aryan papers, like Jadwiga Maurer and Irena Klepfisz, “were very lucky”

¹⁵⁰ See, for example, Jane Marks, The Hidden Children: The Secret Survivors of the Holocaust, New York: Ballantine Books, 1993.

¹⁵¹ “*Kazda historia jest inna* [Every Story is Different],” Przegląd Polski [The Polish Review] 22 April 2005: 11.

¹⁵² In Doppelgangers 42-59.

¹⁵³ Qtd. in Popkin, “Holocaust Memories,” 56.

because they were “hounded only by fear of discovery rather than by physical torments and indignities.”¹⁵⁴

Before the Graubards made their way to Slovakia, they lived for a year under their assumed surname of Grabowski in Krakow’s Kazimierz district, which, by 1943, had already been emptied of its original Jewish residents whom the Germans sent to their deaths. Non-Jewish Poles whom the Germans had relocated from other parts of the city now occupied its vacant houses. Constantly in danger of discovery or denunciation, Maurer’s parents sought help from *Zegota*, an underground organization helping Polish Jews.¹⁵⁵ The family wanted to cross to Slovakia and get to Hungary, which was part of the Axis, but was not yet occupied by Germany. For that reason, Hungary was still considered a haven, especially in comparison to occupied Poland. Their dangerous journey, begun in 1944, ended abruptly in Slovakia when Germany officially occupied Hungary. They lived in Slovakia until the arrival of the Soviet troops in January of 1945.

When the war ended, the Grabowski/Graubard family returned to Krakow where Maurer’s mother remained, while Jadwiga, fifteen years old at the time, traveled to Gdansk with her father who began working for a labor newspaper *Robotnik Morski* (The Seafaring Worker). Though her father became a socialist after the war, he was not a communist sympathizer and the prospect of Poland as a Soviet satellite propelled the family’s departure.¹⁵⁶ In 1946, Jadwiga and her parents made yet another journey that ended in Munich, Germany, where Jadwiga finished gymnasium and graduated from the

¹⁵⁴ Hoffman, After Such Knowledge, 44.

¹⁵⁵ *Zegota* was The Council for Aid to Jews in Occupied Poland.

¹⁵⁶ Maurer told me that even though the Kielce pogrom did not influence their departure directly, in an ironic twist of fate, it ‘opened’ the borders for Polish Jews. Her family left because Poland was quickly becoming a Soviet satellite.

University of Munich in 1956 with a doctoral degree in Slavic Languages. She chose Slavic Studies partly to continue her family's humanistic tradition, and partly to protest the choices made by many of her Polish Jewish friends who opted for more "practical" subjects like medicine or engineering that might lead to successful careers after emigration. In 1956, after Maurer married Warren R. Maurer, an American from Pennsylvania who was in Germany on a scholarship from the University of Chicago, she moved to the United States. She then worked as Assistant Professor of Slavic Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, while her husband completed his doctoral degree. Maurer began teaching Polish Studies at the University of Kansas in 1970. She has two children, Elizabeth and Stephen, who are academics and researchers at the University of Chicago and the University of California, Berkeley. Maurer lives in Lawrence with her husband where they celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary in July 2006.

2:

Autobiography in Fiction

In her short stories, Maurer goes beyond dual categories of ethnic and national identity. She "writes about a triple consciousness with which she lives as a Pole, a Jew, and an American."¹⁵⁷ In doing so, she creates a "wrinkle in American immigrant fiction" by complicating the before and after duality of immigrant literary conventions.¹⁵⁸ She reconfigures the conventional expectations of immigrant conflicts: where there is expectation of conflict—in reconciling her post-Holocaust Polish Jewish identity—there

¹⁵⁷ Daniel, "Afterward," *Doppelgangers*, 390.

¹⁵⁸ I borrow this phrase from Gladsky's essay, "Jerzy Kosinski: A Polish Immigrant," 140-41.

is harmony, while where there is an expectation of harmony—immigration to the United States and creation of a new and successful life as traditional models of immigration would have it—she indicates conflict. Like Eva Hoffman and Irena Klepfisz, Maurer complicates the processes of immigration to the U.S. by critiquing American reactions to the newcomers like her narrator. As early as the 1960s, her characters protest American insistence on looking towards the future, especially when Holocaust survivors are encouraged to forget what happened to them and embrace the ‘New World’ for its promises of a better life and a brighter future. In many of her stories, these promises go largely unfulfilled because they depend on the character’s ability to forget the past. But despite “the mandate that [survivors] were given to forget about the past and focus on the future, the loss they had so recently experienced, indeed were still experiencing, was too great to stifle.”¹⁵⁹ Maurer’s narrator cannot simply let go, saying: “our past is important. Closing our eyes and pretending that we’re just average mortals doesn’t change a thing.”¹⁶⁰ At the same time, Maurer never represents this refusal “to get over” the past as an “Old World” malady. She neither pathologizes nor pities the survivors but, rather, brings to light their multidimensional humanity by describing the mundane minutiae of their everyday lives.

Many readers and critics have read Maurer the author into her fictional narrator because the two have much in common, including living on “Aryan papers” in Poland and Slovakia, refugee life in Munich, and immigrant life in the United States. Many of

¹⁵⁹ As Cohen argues, “the imperative to communicate [the past] found expression in numerous ways and shows that survivors [in the U.S.] were not silent. ... Together, survivors, indeed, spoke about their past and soon created the first Holocaust commemorations in the United States” (6). *Case Closed*.

¹⁶⁰ “*Antyjojczyzna*” [The Anti-Homeland], in *Podroz na Wybrzeze Dalmacji* (*Journey to the Dalmatian Coast*). Londyn: Oficyna Poetow i Malarzy, 1982, 39.

her short stories are, indeed, based on actual events and people, but Maurer insists on their fictitiousness. She does not see much sense in looking for a one-to-one relationship between her life and her prose because “everything is filtered through our own minds, through our unique feelings and memory.”¹⁶¹ Like many other survivor narratives, Maurer’s stories represent a “partial escape from the haunting memory of real persons into the safety of a ‘fiction,’ which safeguards anonymity.”¹⁶²

Maurer’s stories provide detailed maps of the same narrator’s wartime locations and her post-Holocaust psychological and physical (dis)locations. In tracing the narrator through her multiple geographical displacements, Maurer describes a child survivor who has no choice but to leave the country of her birth, which she barely knows before the war or recognizes in its aftermath. Many of her characters are victims of the Holocaust and, simultaneously, agents of their fate in response to the destruction. As a Holocaust survivor and as the author of these stories, Maurer herself responds by writing about “the few of us who survived.”¹⁶³ In doing so, she echoes other survivors who have published sustained records of their lives in order to respond to the *Shoah*. Maurer is not alone in making “a contribution to history,” but her stories are unusual in their attention to the memories of the Jewish catastrophe in the context of her narrator’s exile in Germany and eventual immigration to the United States.¹⁶⁴ Maurer indicates that the wartime past does, indeed, belong to her narrator’s immigrant present.

¹⁶¹ Maurer qtd. in Renz, “Jadwiga Maurer,” 219.

¹⁶² Ezrahi, *By Words Alone*, 26-28.

¹⁶³ Qtd. in *ibid.*, 376.

¹⁶⁴ In his “Afterword” to *Doppelgangers*, Daniel notes that in the story “*Miejsce ktorego nie bylo na Mapie*,” (“A Place that did not Exist on a Map”), Maurer’s narrator describes a DP camp that is to be dismantled. The place is not recorded on any map, “an unnoticed episode in Bavaria and in the history of this country as if it never existed in the first place” (178). Maurer’s narrator then admits to a German friend that she “would like to chronicle places not marked on maps and events not recorded by history” (184).

3:

Triangulating Home(lands)

Poland and Germany are often the settings of Maurer's short stories, and the United States, or "Ameryka" as her characters refer to it, is either the survivors' desired immigrant destination or already the location of their displaced lives. Her stories are populated by characters who have lived through the Holocaust – *survived* it as American English would have it. The category of Holocaust survivor often works to erase individual status of newcomers to the United States and, as Maurer suggested in our interview, generalizes different experiences into a single category. As immigrants, refugees, or displaced persons, Jewish survivors confronted anti-Semitism already in the European Displaced Persons camps at the hands of their American liberators, and often entered the U.S. under legal difficulties. But since the 1970s, the popularization of "Holocaust survival" in books, TV series, and Hollywood films has muted these instances of anti-Semitism in favor of celebratory representations of America's altruistic wartime spirit.¹⁶⁵

Maurer uses geography as a literary device that complicates American assumptions about survivors' postwar lives. Her stories imply that the past is a function of place and not time.¹⁶⁶ She designates Poland as the past "homeland," Germany as

¹⁶⁵ See Alan Mintz, Popular Culture and the Shaping of Holocaust Memory in America, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001; Peter Novick, The Holocaust in American Life, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999; Hilene Flanzbaum, ed., The Americanization of the Holocaust, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999.

¹⁶⁶ Many thanks to Anita Norich for helping me to name Maurer's use of place and time.

Poland's anathema, and the U.S. as a future location of material "creature comforts," which should not be underestimated, but which often prove illusory for the immigrant survivor. In stories like "The Anti-Homeland" (1968) and "The Conspiracy" (1970), for instance, Maurer juxtaposes the seemingly rational lives of those who set off on successful careers in the U.S with what at first glance may appear as the narrator's pathological need for attention while she is living in Germany and, in "The Homeland" (1977), she links the narrator's language and rootedness to Poland.¹⁶⁷ There is no simple before and after order to Maurer's stories and she complicates times and places when she insists that the past is always in the present. I interpret Maurer's 'dissonant' storytelling in two ways. First, as a gesture which makes it difficult for readers to identify with the stories' characters. Second, as an immigrant critique of the American liberatory discourse. Maurer's narrator refuses to escape the past and sees any such attempts by others as a denial of selfhood. In this context, the dissonant temporality of her stories works against linear expectations of immigrant success in America.

Poland and Germany are directly affected by the Holocaust. The former is the place of wartime Jewish suffering and survival and Maurer identifies the latter as a refugee location where the narrator, through her very presence there, wants to exact revenge. Jerzy Daniel commented on Maurer's scripting of Germany as a postwar refuge for Jewish survivors. Daniel surmised that, after all, these were the very same people who created the hell that so few survived. But, as Maurer explained in our interview, when East European Jews traveled westward, they were not going to Germany per se, since the territory they entered was under American control:

¹⁶⁷ I use "*Spisek*," ("The Conspiracy") as published in *Sobowtory (Doppelgangers)*.

First of all, there was no Germany. It was the American sphere of influence. I mean it was all divided. Secondly, in the American sphere there were hundreds of thousands of people of various nationalities, not only Polish Jews or Jews of other nations, Hungarian or something, but also Ukrainians and Poles.¹⁶⁸

Maurer's stories do not depict some of the more typical transitions between the Old and the New World, which have included the shedding of tradition and a re-birth in America. Such stories are usually narrated in a linear progression leading the immigrant character to material and/or educational success as a freshly minted American. But as immigrant texts, which evoke the memory of the Holocaust, stories like Maurer's "The Conspiracy" and "The Anti-Homeland" offer evocative examples of the dialogic relationship between the past, present, and future and its subversion of the "New World" promises.

In "The Conspiracy," Maurer contrasts the narrator's present life in Munich with that of another survivor who immigrated to the United States. Halina, a successful doctor, returns to Munich to testify at a Nazi criminal trial. According to the narrator's reasoning, Halina leads an illusory life because she believes that the past and the present can be separated. She moved to the United States to escape her past and returned to Germany to testify at a war crimes trial. The narrator wonders what Halina can possibly "testify about the masters of our life and death after a quarter of a century."¹⁶⁹ The narrator criticizes Halina for naively believing that her presence will in any way affect the trial's outcome. And through this implicit critique of postwar justice, Maurer shows that "the claims of the law to redress the crimes of the Nazis often prove feeble next to the terrible forces which had been unleashed."¹⁷⁰ In fact, in "The Conspiracy," Maurer, like Tadeusz Borowski, represents the application of conventional justice to the enormity of

¹⁶⁸ Personal Interview.

¹⁶⁹ "Spisek [The Conspiracy]," 221.

¹⁷⁰ Ezrahi, *By Words Alone*, 36.

the Nazi murderous agenda “as a mockery of the pretense of justice.”¹⁷¹ Instead of advocating any sort of a conventional justice, the narrator asserts only one solution, however unsatisfactory, for survivors’ post-Holocaust lives—living in Germany. She explains to Halina that the United States is not a place where they belong because “a person wants to be exactly where there are witnesses or even perpetrators of what happened to him. He wants to live where everyone points fingers at him.”¹⁷²

Rather than an example of “survivor pathology,” Maurer’s scripting of this apparent need for attention can be read as a political gesture. The narrator’s very presence in Munich serves to remind Germans of their wartime past. She is there neither to aid national post-war healing (i.e.: she refuses to be a witness in war crimes trials) nor to participate in the national post-war economic miracle financed by the United States. The past anchors the narrator’s identity in the present moment, while an escape from it, as Maurer writes, sends Halina on a futile flight away from the past and into a ‘brighter’ immigrant future.

In “The Anti-Homeland,” the narrator’s protests against immigration to the ‘remote’ United States expressed in her critique of Halina gain an explicitly gendered dimension. The narrator visits friends in Detroit and reflects upon their lives as survivors and immigrants. She realizes, for instance, that her friend Tosia now refuses to talk about the war. In response to Tosia’s refusal, the narrator concludes that speaking about the past “is not becoming ... in America.”¹⁷³ This silence is anathema to the narrator’s own

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² “Spisek [The Conspiracy],” 226.

¹⁷³ “Antyjojczyzna [The Anti-Homeland],” 29.

desire to “remind, repeat, and renew.”¹⁷⁴ Her insistence on remembering the past distinguishes the narrator from Tosia who privileges newness over history and amnesia over memory. The two women respond differently. Tosia spoke about her past when she was in Munich, but is unable or unwilling to do so in Detroit. Tosia and her husband are financially better off than the narrator, but they have paid for their material comfort with silence.

Hoping that a relationship will end what they see as the narrator’s ‘pathological’ present in Munich, Tosia and Janek set her up on a nice American date. The narrator’s date, Bob, takes her out to dinner and comments on how well Tosia and her husband adjusted to life “after all [they] went through.” She finds Bob’s comparison of Holocaust trauma to surviving child abuse laughable and offensive, but instead of responding to him, she thinks about her German colleague Haller, who similarly, though from a different perspective, failed to understand her. If Bob advises forgetting and looking toward the future, the narrator knows that Germans like Haller seek her out as a palliative for their unsettled consciences. In their self-absorbed need to reconcile the immediate wartime past with the present West German ‘economic miracle,’ they repeatedly request that she participate in German reconciliation efforts. They seek her out because, as a young female, she is a priori vulnerable and approachable.

As she recalls Haller, the narrator wishes that she had never come to the U.S. in the first place. Bob becomes a stand-in for clichéd American attitudes to the Holocaust as she tells Janek and Tosia that he “cares nothing about our past and thinks of us as just any other of his friends.” In contrast to Americans like Bob, Germans like Haller

¹⁷⁴ “Kazimierz,” epigraph, in *Doppelgangers*, 5.

“haven’t forgotten who we are,” the narrator tells Tosia. “They can’t bear us, they hate us, they feel guilty ... they don’t get over us.” In disbelief at her preference for German attitudes over American ones, Tosia asks, “and that pleases you?” Maurer’s narrator replies, “of course not. It doesn’t please me. It keeps me alive.”¹⁷⁵ Thus for the narrator, the past must be almost palpably felt or at least successfully imagined in the present. She cannot embrace a life in the Detroit suburbs because she sees it as a façade to escape the past.

Maurer ends “The Anti-Homeland” with a political statement implicitly commenting on Holocaust survivors’ exile and immigration to the U.S. When Tosia’s husband takes her to the airport for her return flight to Munich, she shouts from the check-in line: “I’m going back to my anti-homeland!”¹⁷⁶ Germany resounds powerfully as an anti-homeland for Jewish refugees. Maurer emphasizes the role of the Holocaust in shaping the state of German affairs when the narrator wants to remain a visible reminder of its wartime past. Simply put, as Maurer told me, her narrator wants revenge; she wants to live in Germany in order to remind the Germans of their crimes despite their country’s postwar rhetoric of success.

As the very title of “The Homeland” suggests, the narrator’s native country is Poland. Though the story comes at the end of Journey to the Dalmatian Coast, the narrator remembers herself as a young high school student—a Polish Jewish Holocaust survivor in a city on the Baltic Coast.¹⁷⁷ This story would come at the beginning of a

¹⁷⁵ “The Anti-Homeland,” 39.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 40.

¹⁷⁷ “The Anti-Homeland” is the second story in Journey to the Dalmatian Coast while “The Homeland” appears as second to last. Both are “book-ended” by stories set in the United States thereby emphasizing Maurer’s and her narrator’s location there.

conventional American immigrant trajectory of Maurer's narrator. It takes places prior to her narrator's relocation to Germany and eventual move to the United States; it is a story set in the country of origin—the homeland. But prior to the publication of Doppelgangers, Maurer's stories were not organized chronologically. Jerzy Daniel arranged Maurer's stories from The League of the Rescued, The Journey to the Dalmatian Coast, and other selections from various émigré newspapers and magazines into a more or less coherent narrative according to the stories' internal time and not the dates of their publication.¹⁷⁸ Such an order, which Maurer never intended though she did not protest Daniel's decision, supports a more linear appearance to her stories. It also suggests a seamless trajectory of leaving behind the “Old World” of Poland and Germany and emerging in the United States as a newly born American, which never happens for Maurer's narrator.

Maurer identifies Poland as the narrator's native country in “The Homeland” and, at the same time, critiques Polish nationalism and anti-Semitism. When she scripts the narrator's departure from Poland as loss of a homeland, Maurer is interested in neither nationalism nor patriotism. Rather, she is invested in notions of rootedness, language, and their links to Holocaust survival and immigration. The first postwar year described in “The Homeland,” for instance, is exhilarating in its promises of new beginnings. “There was no more fear,” the narrator muses, “I survived. If someone had told me then that there were still diseases, accidents, unfortunate coincidences, and even death in the

¹⁷⁸ Polish reviewers of Doppelgangers note the collection's appearance as a novel. See, for example, Dariusz Nowacki, “*Pojedyncze wobec zbiorowego*” (“Single versus the Collective”), Nowe Książki (New Books) 3 (2003): 44-45.

world, I would have certainly laughed out loud.”¹⁷⁹ Living in Gdansk with her father who is always away giving lectures for the peasants now forming the backbone of communist agriculture, and attending school where she is the star pupil, Maurer’s young narrator’s naiveté is tempered by the political events unfolding around her. As a young Polish lieutenant tells her, “everything is becoming a fiction in Poland.”¹⁸⁰ The supposed communist brotherhood quickly turns into one of these fictions. Maurer’s narrator, for example, is not the only Polish Jewish student in the gymnasium, but fears her friend’s Joasia’s revelations. Joasia, apparently unaware or unafraid of Polish anti-Semitism, reveals “everything about her recent past.”¹⁸¹ Fearing for her safety in this first postwar year marked by the murder of Jewish survivors in Kielce¹⁸², the narrator wants to keep her own identity a secret. Experienced through her wartime performance as a Catholic on the “Aryan side,” the narrator feels confident that she can hide her Jewish identity from non-Jewish Poles the way she hid it during the war.

But despite her fears, she is not ready to leave Poland. When her parents decide that the family must, the narrator recalls their departure with sadness:

Since the decision to leave was made, nothing made me happy anymore. In fact, nothing ever made me happy again. In everything, in the grandest joy, in the biggest triumph, there was always bitterness. I had had a homeland for that one postwar year. And I already knew that a person without a homeland is not entirely human and cannot equal others.¹⁸³

Despite the instances of Polish anti-Semitism and the communist stories of brotherhood she encounters, the narrator longs for a homeland that she came to know only as a child.

¹⁷⁹ “The Homeland,” in *Doppelgangers*, 94.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 102.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 99.

¹⁸² The Kielce Pogrom (1946): one of the bloodiest but not the only postwar eruptions of violence by Catholics against Jews returning home to the city of Kielce. Thirty seven Jewish survivors were murdered by their Catholic countrymen.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 103.

But this is not blind love and her narrator acknowledges its limitations and shortcomings, as does Maurer herself when she recognizes her childhood in Poland as a sort of a tale of the rejected and unloved stepdaughter. In Lost in Translation, Eva Hoffman writes that Poland “lives within [her] with a primacy that is a form of love. ... It has fed [her] language, perceptions, sounds, the human kind.”¹⁸⁴ In this very same sense, Poland is the place where Maurer’s narrator has learned to name the world around her. Like Hoffman and other immigrants, for Maurer’s narrator, the departure from the homeland is a point where the present begins to be marked by translation; first into German and then English. For Maurer, however, her autobiographical fiction does not engage in translation of her past, experienced in Polish, into English, the language of her present. From the start, her work is written in the language of her pre-immigrant past. Paradoxically, even if not written in the English of her immigrant present, her on-going use of Polish functions to connect her fiction to American literature because it signals her presence in the United States as that of a displaced Polish Holocaust survivor.

As for German that the narrator and her Jewish friends use in Munich, Maurer effectively mutes its presence by having it function as the language of study. It is the language, as Maurer told me, in which they “waited for a better or a different future.”¹⁸⁵ Thus, while German is a relatively inactive instrument used to pass the time away, Polish is active when the young Jewish refugees in Munich use it to talk about the war, their present in allied-controlled Germany, and their plans for the future.

If Poland is the homeland and Germany the anti-homeland, then what does America offer? This is a crucial question given that Maurer wrote all of her stories while

¹⁸⁴ Hoffman, Lost, 74.

¹⁸⁵ Personal Interview.

living in the United States. In “The Anti-Homeland,” Maurer’s narrator finds nothing of value in the U.S. and refuses to share her friends’ immigrant fate, however comfortable and safe it might appear. But in many of Maurer’s other stories, the narrator does, in fact, live in the United States. In all of these stories, Maurer reconfigures an important immigrant narrative convention because she refrains from describing any details of the narrator’s arrival in the U.S. The story of passage to America has been a recognizable feature of many immigrant accounts from Abraham Cahan’s The Rise of David Levinsky (1917) to Bharati Mukherjee’s more contemporary Jasmine (1989).¹⁸⁶ In many of these accounts, detailed descriptions of the journey to the “New World” signify a major turning point in the characters’ lives.

The very absence of this conventional representation of immigrant experience suggests Maurer’s resistance to the story of rebirth in the New World. Thus, all the while the narrator protests immigration, she suddenly finds herself in the United States where, because of its remoteness from the war in Europe, her past becomes irrelevant. The stories set in the U.S. still have the same first person narrator, who recalls some of the details from her past in Poland and Germany, but there is no story that would fill in the details of the narrator’s immigration to the U.S. As Maurer told me, her stories were never meant to provide a seamless trajectory of the narrator’s life on the two continents because they are “kind of fragments from the life of this protagonist.”¹⁸⁷ Through these fragments, Maurer triangulates between three national locations and this back-and-forth

¹⁸⁶ Even when the story of passage to America is not explicitly foregrounded, it is usually referenced as it is in Anzia Yezierska’s Bread Givers, for example. Yezierska’s novel begins in the U.S., but we get glimpses of the Smolinskys’ journey when the family talks about how Father refused to bring with them anything but his books. We also know why they left Eastern Europe when Mother tells stories about bribing Russian officials to prevent Father’s conscription into the Czarist Army.

¹⁸⁷ Personal Interview.

movement, which undergirds the narrator's multiple displacements, renders nationalism futile, makes assimilation impossible, and confirms the constant need for linguistic and cultural translation.

4:

Of an Alien Mother¹⁸⁸

Poland as the homeland of Jewish Holocaust survivors has become contentious in the context of ongoing controversies about Polish complicity during World War II and anti-Semitism in its aftermath. For instance, the publication of Gross's Neighbors in Poland in 2000 and in the United States in 2001, set off a heated debate about the role of non-Jewish Poles in the destruction of their Jewish countrymen.¹⁸⁹ Likewise, Gross's most recent work, Fear: Anti-Semitism in Poland after Auschwitz (2006), interrogates violent postwar instances of anti-Semitism like the Kielce pogrom of 1946.¹⁹⁰ But Maurer easily reconciles her narrator's insistence on her rootedness in Poland and she is not interested in abstractions or metaphysics. "The narrator knows that it's not so good to be Jewish in Poland," she told me,

a lot of people know this and don't feel it's right, but what are they going to do? Nothing. I mean, they do things but nothing much has come out of it. It doesn't seem so difficult to reconcile [Polishness and Jewishness] because the narrator doesn't personally feel that she lacks something because she's Jewish. And she doesn't think of herself as Polish or Jewish but as a person in a particular situation and I think that most people look at themselves like that.¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁸ This refers to the title of Maurer's *Z matki obcej* [Of a Foreign Mother Born].

¹⁸⁹ *Sasiedzi: Historia zaglady zydowskiego miasteczka*, Sejny, Poland: Fundacja Pogranicze, 2000 and Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.

¹⁹⁰ Jan T. Gross, Fear: Anti-Semitism in Poland after Auschwitz New York: Random House, 2006.

¹⁹¹ Personal Interview.

Maurer also told me that she holds a “traditional, old-fashioned view” of homeland because she believes that larger communities linked with geographical countries constitute it. She sees her own and her narrator’s uprooting from Poland as a homelessness because the communities they live in are no longer a cultural and a linguistic given. At the same time, Maurer recognizes the crucial role that the native language plays as “a safe place,” but sees this as more limited than a physical and communal location of belonging. Language as home is, according to her, a rather abstract notion: “language can be a homeland and so can literature . . . and that’s what [Julian] Tuwim said, Polishness the homeland, but no one ever said that it is the same thing as an actual homeland.”¹⁹²

After Maurer left her “actual homeland” of Poland, she had to undergo various processes of cultural and linguistic translations. She has written some of these transformations into her fictional narrator’s life. Maurer maintains that Poland is unquestionably her own and her narrator’s homeland while the United States is forever “a five star hotel”—a place in which a weary traveler rests comfortably. In her stories, then, Maurer both comments on and elaborates her own and her narrator’s multiple identities and their simultaneous, but problematic ‘stepdaughter’ rootedness in Poland.

In the context of multiply and complexly situated identities, Maurer’s story “Szkola” (“The School,” 1965), offers a poignant critique of Polish history and ritualized memory in the context of her narrator’s Polish Jewish identity.¹⁹³ It illustrates that Maurer is far from idealistic or naïve in designating Poland as her homeland. The stories’

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ I use the edition of “The School” published in *Doppelgangers*, 16-28.

narrator, like Eva Hoffman, “accepted the world around” with a “basic self-assurance” of a child while possessing a strong “sense of [her] Jewish identity.”¹⁹⁴ “The School” begins in wartime Krakow where, as a little girl, the narrator lives with her parents using “Aryan papers.” She attends the public school there, goes to church every Sunday, and, by all appearances, is just an average Catholic child. Growing up in wartime Poland requires of the young narrator a virtually schizophrenic duality. She is constantly concerned with the peril of her own and her parents’ existence at the same time as she contends with “normal” predicaments like adolescent crushes and teenage friendships.

Maurer explicitly comments on Polish anti-Semitism when her narrator recalls how she moved her Polish teacher to tears when she performed a fragment of Henryk Sienkiewicz’s patriotic Trilogy (1884-1888).¹⁹⁵ German authorities strictly prohibited the teaching of Polish literature and Maurer scripts this recital as a patriotic act, which makes her teacher weep openly. But when she recalls her recital, the narrator comments on Professor Piaskowska’s open anti-Semitism, teaching her pupils about Jews as an “alien body” in Poland. Though Piaskowska qualifies her statements by calling what the Germans are doing “a crime,” she is clearly in favor of purging the nation of its “impurities.” The narrator sees Piaskowska’s anti-Semitism as the most dangerous because in “criticizing” the Germans, she feels patriotic and absolves herself of any participation in the crimes, implicitly approving of their outcome. As a young girl, the narrator meditates on her teacher’s sentiments and cannot figure out “how we came to such a misunderstanding, that I felt a part of her world, but she talked about me as an

¹⁹⁴ See the Polish interviews with Eva Hoffman in Chapter 6.

¹⁹⁵ Henryk Sienkiewicz (1846-1916) wrote historical novels. The Trilogy consists of With Fire and Sword (1884), The Deluge (1886), and Pan Wolodyjowski (1888).

alien body.”¹⁹⁶ But Maurer’s young narrator refuses to abdicate the Polish part of her identity and, as an adult, wishes that Piaskowska had known the irony of exactly “whom she had to thank for that moment of sentimental nationalism.”¹⁹⁷ In noting the exclusion of Jews as well as those who helped them from the Polish canon of heroes, the narrator asks: “Is it right that in the Polish tradition of resistance and fighting, there is no room for these people? They put their heads down in heroic glory, but did so alone. Is it right that they passed away alone and those who remained passed away from memory while still alive?”¹⁹⁸ Clearly recalling *Zegota*, the Polish organization that helped her own family escape Krakow, Maurer’s narrator concludes that Jewish victims of the Holocaust in Poland were forgotten because of anti-Semitism and those who helped them were forgotten because such aid found no national support.

In “The School,” Maurer’s use of Polish and her representation of the narrator as inseparably Polish and Jewish, despite being rejected by the country to which she pronounces allegiance, speak to the postwar national Polish consciousness. Her use of Polish in writing her stories and her narrator’s patriotic recital bring to mind another Holocaust survivor’s use of German. In “*Todesfuge*” (“The Death Fuge”), Paul Celan’s use of German and the pronoun “we” as well as his parallels between Biblical figures and German literary characters call Germans to account for their wartime culpability.¹⁹⁹ Similarly to Celan’s use of German, Maurer’s use of Polish and her direct critique of Polish wartime anti-Semitism call into account Poles’ culpability in the Holocaust. There

¹⁹⁶ “The School,” 18.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁹⁹ John Festiner, “Translating Paul Celan’s ‘Todesfuge’: Rhythm and Repetition as Metaphor,” in Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the Final Solution, ed. Saul Friedlander, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992: 240-258.

is no mistake that the Germans destroyed Eastern European Jewry, but it is also clear that Maurer refuses to repudiate her Polishness precisely by refusing to let Poles “off the hook.” By using Piaskowska as a stand in for Polish responses to the Holocaust, her work calls Poles to account for their actions long before Gross’s book sparked a debate about it in Poland and the United States.

As early as the mid-1960s, Maurer questioned Polish Jewish relations and challenged long-standing notions of Polish wartime heroism. Popular wisdom in Poland still blames the lack of discussion about Polish Jewish relations on pre-1989 communist insistence that there were no distinctly ethnic victims of Hitler’s murderous agenda, but all were Polish citizens and workers slated for slaughter by a genocidal capitalist regime. But there was hardly any debate about Polish wartime culpability even after the anti-Semitic purges of the 1950s and late 1960s, when the majority of Polish Jews who survived the Holocaust were displaced.

Maurer’s stories set in the United States add another dimension to her complexly narrated identity constructions. While in Poland, Holocaust survivors like Maurer’s protagonist negotiate Polishness and Jewishness as markers of national, ethnic, or religious belonging; in the U.S. they become further marked by their immigrant status. In stories like “*Polska Idealna*” (“Ideal Poland,” 1970), Maurer describes how East European survivors’ wartime past, which becomes irrelevant in the U.S., constructs the immigrant Polish Jewish American identity. In “Ideal Poland,” there are three categories of newcomers from Poland: Jewish refugees who left immediately after the war, visiting scholars from the People’s Republic of Poland, and Jewish exiles who left because of the 1968 anti-Semitic purges.

In this story, the narrator, who is a refugee in Germany and then an immigrant in the United States, meets a middle-aged couple who represent Poland's newest, post-1968 exiles.²⁰⁰ The couple simultaneously disarms and angers the narrator with "their enthusiasm of new immigrants."²⁰¹ She is disarmed because she can still remember the UNRRA²⁰² times of looking forward to a promising immigrant future, but at the same time knows, through her own experiences, the illusory nature of those promises. She wants to "inject them with the knowledge of years spent wandering aimlessly, years of illusions, speaking foreign languages like a parrot. Constantly trying to enter an alien society."²⁰³ And though she realizes the impossibility of actually hiring the man to do a series of lectures at the university's East European Studies Institute, propelled by a sense of guilt and a certain desire to protect them from inevitable immigrant turmoil, she offers to try to do so anyway.

The narrator's co-immigrant guilt is exacerbated when she sees the place where the new immigrants live. Their apartment bespeaks their utterly marginal position in the 'New World.' Reeking of cabbage and soap, the building is decrepit and their apartment filled with junk. Everything about their situation appears familiar, but when she attempts to remember what the future looked like from the perspective of departure and loss, she can no longer access her once naive immigrant innocence and hope. She now identifies with Zahler, another long-term refugee immigrant scholar, for example, because they

²⁰⁰ "Polska idealna [Ideal Poland]," in *Doppelgangers*, 289-310.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 291.

²⁰² The United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), founded in 1943, provided aid to European countries after World War II ended. UNRRA repatriated millions of refugees and organized displaced persons camps in Germany, Italy, and Austria for about a million people who were unwilling or unable to be repatriated. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum web site (May 10, 2006). <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/article.php?lang=en&ModuleId=10005685>

²⁰³ "Ideal Poland," 291.

both speak Polish and because they were both “Hitler’s victims.” She does not feel the same bond with the newly arrived couple.²⁰⁴ Though they speak Polish and, as Polish Jews, were also Hitler’s victims, their immigrant innocence distances them from her. She is angered and disarmed by their enthusiastic belief that nothing but good can come out of their departure from Poland. What unites these newest exiles is their innocence and confidence that America is the promised haven. Zahler and the narrator, on the other hand, are united by their familiarity with the myths of the New World.

As far removed as the narrator feels from the new exiles’ naiveté, she finds even less in common with Sampson, another of the Institute’s leading scholars, who represents the American attitude towards the newly arrived immigrants. Immediately sensing that she needs a favor, for example, Sampson refuses, even before the narrator asks that the Institute hire the new arrival to do a series of lectures. “People always exaggerate ... especially the refugees,” Sampson tells her, as he lists a variety of banal excuses of the Cold War variety for his refusal to help the couple.²⁰⁵ They could be spies, he asserts, and, moreover, good relations with the East must be preserved for the sake of the American academy. Maurer’s narrator acknowledges that this is exactly what Americans must have said about people like her—the earlier generation of immigrant survivors. She sees, once again, the irrelevance of her past to those firmly rooted in American reality. Though the narrator is no longer able to see life from the perspective of departure and loss, she still recalls the New World promise as a once lived reality of the unequivocal joy of “times when emigration alone, the prospect of escape, a journey somewhere far

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 293.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 299.

away, was a goal in itself and no one ever thought to ask what would happen later.”²⁰⁶ In the end, there is nothing she can do for the newly arrived couple despite her desire to save them from the illusory promises of the ‘New World.’

Like Klepfisz and Hoffman, Maurer parallels the ‘New World’ with Germany and Poland when she points out how American racism links it with anti-Semitism in Europe. Thus, the identities of Poland, Germany, and the United States are linked through the manner in which their ethnic and racial rhetoric marginalizes those whose appearance or origins do not comport with the dominant national mythology. In the title story of Journey to the Dalmatian Coast, Maurer concludes that “appearance is a terrible thing” when she describes her narrator’s meditation on her new countryman, African American poet Langston Hughes.²⁰⁷ In this story’s epigraph, Maurer asks, quoting Hughes, “what happens to a dream deferred, does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?” Maurer leaves the epigraph in its English original and sends her narrator on a futile journey through a small Midwestern town, to find the home where Langston Hughes lived. But there are no traces of the poet’s existence anywhere in the town. Similarly to the Jews of Poland whose homes were destroyed by the Germans or repossessed by Catholic Poles, Hughes’ home is gone. Her guide from City Hall informs her that no one paid attention to people like Langston Hughes. “Appearance,” the narrator muses in response, “appearance. Skin color, eye color and features condemning for whatever reason to an inescapable fate. For the first time since the war, I realized the irrevocability of that sentence.”²⁰⁸ Evocatively, the narrator comes to this realization after years of passing as a Christian in German-

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 301.

²⁰⁷ “Journey to the Dalmatian Coast,” 117.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

occupied Poland and Slovakia. While an immigrant in a small midwestern town, she implicitly draws a parallel between the fates suffered by African Americans and European Jews—both peoples condemned for their supposed racial differences. Each group is inescapably scripted into their respective national narrative as an “alien body.” Hence, without diminishing the enormity of the Holocaust or the tragic fallout of transatlantic slavery, Maurer suggests links between American racism and European anti-Semitism.

In creating a eugenically based hierarchy of races with “Aryan” groups like Germans themselves at the top and Jews at the very bottom, Nazi policies often reflected much of American eugenic research published in the first quarter of the twentieth century.²⁰⁹ Similarly to Nazi driven racial thinking in Germany, American eugenicists placed peoples of color like African Americans and often similarly racialized Jews of Eastern Europe at the bottom of racial hierarchies. Both German scientists and their American colleagues believed that Caucasians were racially and culturally superior. In drawing a connection between Langston Hughes’ life in a racist society and her narrator’s life in Europe, Maurer points to these similarities of racial thinking on the two continents. Like Klepfisz, Maurer interprets racism in global terms where socially constructed

²⁰⁹ American eugenicists linked low intelligence and feeble-mindedness to class, ethnicity, and/or race. After intelligence tests were administered to American soldiers during World War I, the Harvard psychologist, Robert M. Yerkes, argued that “the darker peoples of southern Europe and the Slavs of eastern Europe are less intelligent than the fair peoples of western and northern Europe” while the “Negro lies at the bottom of the scale.” See Henry Friedlander, The Origins of Nazi Genocide: From Euthanasia to the Final Solution. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995: 5-6. See also, Eric L. Goldstein, The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006; Stefan Kuhl, The Nazi Connection: Eugenics, American Racism, and German National Socialism, New York: Oxford University Press, 1994; Stephen Jay Gould, The Mismeasure of Man, New York: W.W. Norton, 1981.

notions of undesirable appearance and culture are utilized by nation-states to oppress and even murder those who are deemed objectionable.

5:

Of an Alien Tongue²¹⁰

Maurer writes in Polish because, as she so poetically put it in a Polish-language interview and then told me in person, Polish is the language of her soul.²¹¹ She connects it with feelings and memories. She writes fiction in Polish because it reminds her of the novels she read in childhood. It is the language of her past. She told me that she felt more comfortable lecturing in English, for example, because that has been her experience as an American academic. But when it comes to the “psyche”—to expressing feelings and describing memories—she feels more at ease in Polish. Maurer can still read and write German but speaking it now is difficult for her. She calls German her “middle” language, which exists somewhere between her native proficiency in Polish and her acquired fluency in English. Let me emphasize though, that Maurer is no linguistic purist. She is simply very practical about her language use. She does not idealize or romanticize Polish when she describes it as “the language of her soul,” but notes its importance as her literary language. As the native language, Polish is the first language to give her what Hoffman called “perception, sound, [and] the human kind.”²¹²

²¹⁰ I once again refer to the title of Maurer’s *Of a Foreign Mother Born*.

²¹¹ Marek Maciagowski, “W skrawku ojczyzny [In a Trace of Homeland],” *Slowo Ludu*, on-line, <http://www.slowoludu.com.pl/gazeta/codzienna/2002/XI/29/11.pdf>, accessed August 20, 2006.

²¹² Hoffman, *Lost* 74.

In Maurer's only short story translated into English, "The Beggar" ("Zebrak," 1994 and 1997), the narrator returns from the United States to visit her mother in Munich. The story, as anyone familiar with translation theory would expect, reads quite differently in Polish and English. For example, the narrator points to the title character's last name: "He had a beautiful surname, Koniecpolski, one of those names the Russians in Kielce would bestow on the Jews just to spite the Poles."²¹³ A Polish speaker recognizes that the surname is a combination of two words: "koniec"—"the end" and "Polska," which can either refer to "Poland" or "Polish." In this way, the name signals the end of a country and its language. Kielce and Eastern Poland, the narrator explains, were under Russian control for all of the 19th and part of the 20th centuries. The region was colonized by czarist authorities who often bestowed such names on impoverished Jewish subjects to belittle Polish nationalism.

But the full richness of Maurer's irony is inaccessible in English translation. This particular example of a literary identity in translation helps to underscore the extent to which other immigrant writers—those translated into English—have had to struggle to retain control over their texts in translation. A native of Maurer's homeland, Isaac Bashevis Singer, is a prime example of this linguistic struggle. As literary scholar Anita Norich has noted, Singer controlled the translation of his works from the Yiddish. He often presumed a lack of knowledge about Eastern Europe on the part of his American readers and, in effect, re-wrote his texts in English. Frequently working with editors who did not know Yiddish, he revised them so extensively that he could claim them as second

²¹³ "The Beggar," trans. Daniel Sargent, *2b* 2:1/2 (1994): 120.

originals.²¹⁴ Maurer, on the other hand, told me that she has never considered translating herself: “Just because I speak both English and Polish doesn’t make me a good translator.” Despite her fluency, she also said that she has not written in English because the process of doing so seems too much like translating herself.

Maurer’s use of Polish also signals a proximity to the events of the war that English, which “was not spoken in the concentrationary universe, and was therefore never tainted by the Holocaust vocabulary,” cannot claim.²¹⁵ Maurer describes her narrator’s past without having to translate it into English. She also does not mute her narrator’s desire for revenge in Germany the way that Elie Wiesel, for example, silenced his rage in *Le Nuit*. As Naomi Seidman has shown, Wiesel’s famous account of concentration camp survival, *Night*, published in French in 1958 and then translated into English in 1960, avoids alienating a Christian audience by erasing moments of “Jewish rage” and creating a work marked by silence and mystery in the face of inhuman suffering. In contrast, in his first memoir, written in Yiddish, *Di velt hot geshvigen* or *The World Kept Silent* (1956), Wiesel rails against a world that passively witnessed their destruction. When writing in Yiddish for an Eastern European Jewish audience, Wiesel points an outraged finger at everyone, from the perpetrators to those who stood by, including the Allied powers. Reading his work in French or its English translation erases Eliezer Wiesel’s position as a refugee and immigrant living in Paris. In his place, we

²¹⁴ Anita Norich, “Isaac Bashevis Singer in America: The Translation Problem,” *Judaism* 44.2 (Spring 1995): 208-218.

²¹⁵ Ezrahi, *By Words Alone* 12.

receive a mediated Elie Wiesel, his anger muted and tempered, ironically, with Francois Mauriac's Christian imagery of suffering.²¹⁶

In contrast, Maurer calls to account both Holocaust perpetrators and bystanders in many of her stories. The Germans are an obvious example in stories like "The Anti-Homeland" and "The Conspiracy," but so are Poles and Americans in "The Homeland" and "Ideal Poland," among others. In her native Polish, unlike Wiesel in French, Maurer does not mute her narrator's instances of anger and her desire for revenge. But Maurer's short stories appeared mainly in *Wiadomosci*, which published articles about the lives of Polish writers abroad. *Wiadomosci* offered a forum for open dialogue, which was prohibited in communist Poland. Since the paper existed on the periphery, in the transnational shadows of the Polish and the American mainstreams, and it was financially dependent on private funding and subscriptions, *Wiadomosci*'s publishing climate was more open to many conversations, political or literary, than was the general climate of the 1950s when Wiesel published his memoir.

In 1965, for instance, Maurer participated in a conversation in *Wiadomosci* about Polish-Jewish relations during World War II.²¹⁷ She openly criticized those voices that advocated historical revisionism in favor of a wartime past where Catholic and Jewish

²¹⁶ All of the information about Wiesel's memoirs comes from Naomi Seidman's article "Elie Wiesel and the Scandal of Jewish Rage," *Jewish Social Studies* 3.1 (Fall 1996): 1-21. Seidman's analysis also reveals how Wiesel, under Mauriac's influence, changed his narrative in French not only to accommodate post-World War II Christian sensibilities but also to avoid feeding into the anti-Semitic notion that Jews, unlike Christians, are unable to forgive past wrongs.

²¹⁷ See Janina Surynowa-Wyczolkowska, "Dialog czy monolog?" ("Dialogue or Monologue?"), *Wiadomosci*, June, 20 1965: 4; Jadwiga Maurer, "W odpowiedzi Janinie Surynowej-Wyczolkowskiej: A ja wole sama, bez Jankiela" ("In Answer to Janina Surynowa-Wyczolkowska: I'd rather go it alone, without Jankiel"), *Wiadomosci*, October 17, 1965: 6; Jozef Wulf, "Dialog polsko-zydowski" ("Polish-Jewish Dialogue"), *Wiadomosci*, March 21, 1965: 3; Jadwiga Maurer, Andrzej Wolodkowicz, Michal K. Pawlikowski, Bogdan Zaporowski, "Kropki nad 'i' w dialogu polsko-zydowskim" ("The Dots over the 'i' in the Polish-Jewish Dialogue"), 8- April, 10 1965: 3.

Poles worked together for a free Poland with only a few criminal exceptions. Such a debate could not have taken place in Poland at the time because the communist authorities strictly prohibited public conversations about Catholic-Jewish relations during the war. According to the political dogma of the time, there were no divisions between the people of Poland during the war because they were all workers who suffered under Germany's capitalist oppression. As Seidman argues about Wiesel's Night, politics of translation followed the general political climate of the 1950s because of the post-World War II geopolitical realignment; namely, West Germany as an avowed ally in the fight against the Communist bloc. In contrast, as Maurer told me, she was always encouraged to address difficult and controversial issues, no matter the geopolitical climate, by her Polish mentors at the University of California, Berkeley and by the founder and long-time editor of Wiadomosci, Polish Jewish journalist Mieczyslaw Grydzewski.

Because "The Beggar" is the only one of Maurer's stories translated into English, her use of Polish, "an alien tongue" in terms of recent American literary history, casts her as a Polish writer. But, as Werner Sollors emphasizes, the dominance of English as the language of American letters is a fairly recent phenomenon.²¹⁸ Were Maurer publishing in English, like Hoffman or Klepfisz, she would be without a doubt considered an American writer. In relying on their own autobiographies, Hoffman, Klepfisz, and Maurer write about Poland and the United States, about the Holocaust and immigration. While Hoffman and Klepfisz describe their lives in English translation, Maurer's Polish reflects the inseparability of the ethnic/national/cultural/linguistic persona of her first person narrator. Maurer rejects singular representations of identity when she positions

²¹⁸ Sollors, "Introduction," Multilingual America: 1-13.

her narrator's identities multi-locally and emphasizes their hybridity. Like many other American ethnic women authors, Tina de Rosa, Gish Jen, and Gloria Anzaldua (to name but three), Maurer complicates clear cut notions of ethnicity and nationality both in her life's journeys and in her 'traveling' writing.

Similar to her narrator's multiple identities, the settings of Maurer's stories shift between Poland, Germany, and the United States. But unlike her narrator, who in many of the stories unsuccessfully searches for a home and a homeland, in her use of her first language, Maurer finds or, rather, recovers a Polish home she knew for a brief time. As much as she is interested in a geographically situated nation, as she told me, such a place exists only in the pages of her short stories and in her narrator's mind and musings. As her writings indicate, Maurer is invested in a homeland that rests along the lines of George Steiner's cosmopolitan vision—in language and not in geography.²¹⁹ In her long engagement with the Polish literary émigré community, Maurer locates her autobiographical fiction in the transnational spaces marked by cultural and linguistic affiliations and not by physical territory. As a refugee in Germany and an immigrant in the United States, Maurer's 'composite' character of a Holocaust survivor foregrounds Jewish identity after the Holocaust at the same time as it integrates her Polish past, German present, and American future to indicate the complexity and multi-dimensionality of survivors' lives. Far from offering chronological or straightforward narratives of survival, displacement, and rebirth in the "New World," Maurer's oeuvre illustrates that America as the mythical immigrant destination provides the immigrant survivor with no answers to her tortured past. Her short stories are anti-teleological

²¹⁹ See George Steiner's "Our Homeland, the Text."

because any possibility of a resolution is undermined by her narrator's rejection of religion, communism, nationalism, and, most profoundly by her experiences during the Holocaust.

Chapter 4

Irena Klepfisz and the Art of Yiddish

Whether to Spanish-speaking or Chinese-speaking
or Yiddish-speaking children, the message is
monotonously the same: Change your name.
Americanize. Forget the past. Forget your people.
Irena Klepfisz²²⁰

In the 1986 essay “Secular Jewish Identity: *Yidishkayt* in America,” Irena Klepfisz reflects on the American English names imposed upon Chinese, Yiddish, and Spanish speaking children and explicitly references her own experience as a Polish-, Yiddish-, and Swedish-speaking immigrant in the U.S. When she was thirteen years old, Klepfisz stood before a judge who was about to grant her U.S. citizenship. Before he signed the necessary documents, the judge made a peculiar request. “Why don’t you change your name?” he asked, “be a real American and change it to Irene.”²²¹ She did not want to do it, but at first acquiesced to her mother who, without having her own American citizenship, was understandably afraid of a high-ranking official. For the judge, the difference of a vowel in Klepfisz’s first name made the difference between a “real” American and an American on paper. For Klepfisz, the difference in a vowel made the difference between the familiar and familial ‘Irena’ and the alien ‘Irene.’ As it turned out, however, Klepfisz did not change her name. Her mother had already signed

²²⁰ “Secular Jewish Identity,” 159.

²²¹ Personal Interview.

the necessary citizenship documents, and so the judge's suggestion came too late. But as if reflecting on almost losing her familiar name, Klepfisz commented years after this incident on the crucial links between language and lived experience: "words attach themselves to our most intimate experiences. When you move into a new language, you lose that intimacy, and it's a tremendous trauma."²²²

The loss of linguistic intimacy began, as Klepfisz told me, when, at the young age of eight, she traveled with her mother from Sweden to live in New York. Though Sweden was already their first location outside of Poland, she did not feel as alienated there as she did upon her arrival in the U.S. "I was the only Jew in the school [in Sweden] and they treated me wonderfully," Klepfisz remembers, "it was a big shock, in fact, coming here because I was treated so badly."²²³ She was among many Jewish American children, but as an immigrant, she had little in common with them. She recalls that even her homemade dresses (her mother could not afford store bought clothes) made her stand out among her classmates. Klepfisz also began a journey into English, her fourth language, and recalls her reluctance to learn it:

I think I really did not want to learn another language. ... English was always and remained and I would even say now remains to some degree problematic. I still get stuck and this is really true. I can correct my students' papers but sometimes in my own writing I get really stuck about where the adverb goes. ... There are still things about English that I don't know.²²⁴

The linguistic and cultural unmooring the story of her name-change symbolizes continues. This does not mean that Klepfisz is not fluent in English. In fact, the references she describes to the errors she makes in English are the ones made by

²²² Qtd. in Dara Horn, "The Luck of the Yiddish," Forward Feb 28, 2003: 11.

²²³ Personal Interview.

²²⁴ Ibid.

Americans everyday (as she illustrates: “is it tired always or always tired?”). Klepfisz has lived in the U.S. for almost sixty years, but her discomfort with and in English emphasizes the extent to which she continues to see and represent herself as a cultural and linguistic outsider here.

Like Jadwiga Maurer in her short stories, in her poetry and prose, Klepfisz recalls and represents the many decades of alienation that geographical, linguistic, and cultural displacement wrought upon her life. Klepfisz’s position in the borderland spaces of English, Yiddish, Polish, and Swedish, as Adrienne Rich argues, identifies her as a member of a new generation of poets. These poets never had the privilege of “an uninterrupted culture; “ instead they have a “relationship to more than one culture, nonassimilating in spirit and therefore living amid contradictions” in a state of “constant ... self-creation.”²²⁵ Klepfisz is part of this new stream because “beginning with almost total disintegrative loss—of family, community, culture, country and language—she has taken up the task of recreating herself as a Jew, woman, and writer, by facing and learning to articulate that destruction.”²²⁶ For many of these “borderland” poets like Gloria Anzaldua, literature and literacy were not always a given, but for Klepfisz, who was born in the Warsaw Ghetto in 1941, less than a year after it was established by the Germans, survival itself was uncertain.²²⁷ Klepfisz was born into a war-torn and displaced world that foreclosed any possibility of linguistic, cultural, or even familial continuity.

²²⁵ Adrienne Rich, “Introduction,” in Irena Klepfisz’s A Few Words in the Mother Tongue, 13.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, 14.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*

For this reason and unlike the postmodern proponents of discontinuous and splintered identities, Klepfisz desires cultural wholeness: “a self experienced as whole, able to live and to speak openly about the inner truths of her experience as a Jewish [immigrant] lesbian.”²²⁸ Because of this amplified marginalization, her poetry and essays explore the more painful side of multiplicities of options and cultures that we have come to celebrate in the United States. Klepfisz seeks to construct continuity against the odds of her marginalized position both in the Old World and in the New. When she reflects on the total destruction of family and homeland in “Solitary Acts,” for example, Klepfisz searches for just such continuity in her desire for an undisrupted ancestry: “I have been a dreamer dreaming/of a perfect garden of a family tree/whose branches spread through centuries/of an orderly cemetery with no gravestones/missing.”²²⁹

Like Hoffman and Maurer, Klepfisz locates home not in a physical location, but in language and culture. In Klepfisz’s case, this location is *yidishkayt* or the prewar secular Yiddish language and culture of Eastern Europe and particularly Poland, where she was born and spent the first four years of her life. “I always felt,” Klepfisz told me, “that if I was in exile at all, it was from Poland.”²³⁰ But when she speaks about the past and her birth in Poland and immigration to the U.S., Klepfisz identifies neither of these countries as enduring locations of belonging because, as she explains in the introduction to her essay, “*Oyf keyver oves: Poland, 1983*,” as nations, the two countries exist for her on two opposite ends of the spectrum:

²²⁸ Monica Bachmann, “Split Worlds and Intersecting Metaphors: Representations of Jewish and Lesbian Identity in the Works of Irena Klepfisz,” Connections and Collisions: Identities in Contemporary Jewish-American Women’s Writing, ed. Lois E. Rubin, Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005: 204.

²²⁹ Klepfisz, “Solitary Acts,” 210.

²³⁰ Personal Interview.

Poland remains *undzer heym*, our home, no matter how bitter the memories, how filled with disappointment and betrayal. *Amerike iz goles*. America is exile, a foreign land in which I speak a foreign tongue. But I will never live in Poland. I do not want to, though I do not see an end to the mourning.”²³¹

Like Maurer and Hoffman, she identifies Poland both as home and hostile territory. In turn, in her poetry and essays, Klepfisz re-articulates and historicizes the East European *yidishkayt* that provides her with cultural and linguistic points of reference. Most importantly, her work writes a re-visioned history of *yidishkayt* into American literature.

In her work, Klepfisz imagines and creates a homeland—a nation without geographical territory—through her recovery of Yiddish, translation of Yiddish writers, and a reformulation of Yiddish language and literature through women’s writings, which, as she argues, have been largely ignored by critics. Klepfisz writes into her prose and poetry a multi-local and multilingual secular Jewishness that answers her needs as a feminist lesbian in the United States. Thus, feminist theoretical formulations of intersectionality serve as a particularly productive framework of analysis for Klepfisz’s literary output because they foreground the simultaneity of her gendered accounts of immigration, Holocaust survival, and bilingual authorship.

I focus my close readings in this chapter on seven of Klepfisz’s poems and six of her essays and speeches that most fully represent the bilingual, thematic, and generic cross-section of her writings. My selections span the period of Klepfisz’s literary output from 1971 and her earliest poems, “Searching for My Father’s Body” and “The Widow and Daughter,” to her essays and speeches published in the 1990 collection Dreams of an

²³¹ “*Oyf keyver oves*,” 88-89.

Insomniac: Jewish Feminist Essays, Speeches, and Diatribes.²³² These selections explore Klepfisz's position as an immigrant/survivor Jewish feminist lesbian, which locates her on the margins of the Christian-dominated, patriarchal, and heterosexist American culture.

In the aptly titled essay "Resisting and Surviving America," Klepfisz writes that she creates as much out of a "Jewish consciousness" as she does out of a "lesbian/feminist consciousness" and she knows that such an intersectional perspective is "alienated. Threatened. Un-American. Individual. Defiant."²³³ Through her defiant literary stance, Klepfisz seeks to break down various barriers: between speaking and silence, between Jewish survivors and their American contemporaries, between Yiddish and English, and between immigrants and native-born Americans. Like Maurer, she insists that the past cannot be left behind in favor of a happier future, at the same time as she finds solace in her ability to recover that which history leaves out. Klepfisz speaks from an immigrant and an ethnic perspective, from the vantage point of dislocation rather than belonging as she foregrounds the gendered, ethnic, and translational dimensions of survival and displacement. Thus variously positioned, her perspectives align her with other feminist lesbian authors like Adrienne Rich, Gloria Anzaldua, and Audre Lorde. For these women, whose marginalizations are differently multiplied by ethnicity, race, and sexuality, poetry is a "revelatory distillation of experience, not the sterile word play

²³² Klepfisz also co-edited The Tribe of Dina: A Jewish Women's Anthology with Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz, Boston: Beacon Press, 1989 and Jewish Women's Call for Peace: A Handbook for Jewish Women on the Israeli/Palestinian Conflict with Rita Falbel and Donna Nevel, Ithaca: Firebrand Books, 1990. Since 1990, Klepfisz has published the play Bread and Candy: Songs of the Holocaust in Bridges (1991) and articles such as "*Di mames, dos loshn*/The mothers, the language" also in Bridges (1994). For the past six years, in addition to her position as Adjunct Associate Professor at Barnard College, Klepfisz has been teaching English Language and Literature courses at Bedford Hills, a maximum security women's prison outside of New York.

²³³ In Dreams of an Insomniac, 68-69.

that, too often, the white fathers distorted the word poetry to mean – in order to cover a desperate wish for imagination without insight.”²³⁴ These authors insist that for them poetry is political and often the only means of action.²³⁵

1:

Borderlands of Uncertain Existence



Photograph 3: "We were on Nowogrodzka, the street of the orphanage where I was placed [during the war]."

Irena Klepfisz was born in 1941 in the Warsaw Ghetto. Her father, Michal Klepfisz, was a figure who has become something of a culture hero: a resistance fighter in the Ghetto Uprising who died heroically when he jumped in front a German machine gun to save his friends. After Irena was smuggled out of the ghetto, she first lived in a Catholic orphanage on Nowogrodzka Street for a year and later with her mother until the war ended. Both of them, like Jadwiga Maurer’s family, had ‘Aryan papers’ falsely asserting their Christianity. They were in hiding and visible, ‘passing’ in full view.

²³⁴ *Sister Outsider: Essays & Speeches by Audre Lorde*, Berkeley: The Crossing Press, 1984, 37.

²³⁵ *Ibid.* These women authors were making political statements through their prose and poetry as a way to protest what they saw, especially during the 1970s and 1980s, as a continued over-emphasis on white male writers.



Photograph 4: "The apartment building [in Lodz] where we had lived after the war."



Photograph 5: "I remember this Lodz apartment well and it felt incredible to be standing in the courtyard, to be actually there."

When the war ended, Klepfisz, who was almost five years old at the time, lived with her mother in Lodz. There, they shared a small, crowded apartment with other survivors. This is when she first heard Yiddish spoken and recalls this time as wonderfully communal and filled with familial warmth. In 1946, they sought refuge in Sweden. There, like in Lodz, they lived in a multi-family home with other Jewish refugees. Klepfisz attended a Swedish elementary school outside of Stockholm. She

remembers that she read, wrote, and prayed in Swedish.²³⁶ Like Germany for Maurer, Sweden was for Klepfisz and her mother a place of waiting. Her mother's initial plan was to immigrate to Australia to join her brother and sister who lived in Melbourne. In 1949, they left for Australia via New York. Once in the U.S., however, their plans changed rather suddenly when Klepfisz's aunt Fela, the only surviving relative on her father's side who had already settled here, convinced them that they would be better off if they stayed in America.

Klepfisz grew up in poverty in New York among a tight knit group of *di lebn geblibene*, survivors, who lived among a larger Jewish American working class community. Growing up and into American English, Klepfisz also took her community's Bundist principles for granted, including approaching Yiddish as an important component of her Eastern European Jewish past.²³⁷ Since she had not learned about the Bund or its ideology in Eastern Europe where the movement was born and developed, Klepfisz notes that she learned a "Jewish politics which was uprooted" from its original home and transplanted to the United States.²³⁸ Her acquisition of Yiddish, which had been likewise transplanted, was similar to her ideological education. In this particular ethnic environment or *di yidishe svive*, she heard Yiddish everywhere. There were Yiddish newspapers, radio shows, and schools.

²³⁶ Klepfisz told me that though she was fluent in Swedish when she arrived in New York, she soon forgot it because there was no one with whom she could speak it.

²³⁷ The Jewish Labor Bund was founded in 1897; a socialist movement that swept the Jewish working classes, especially in Russia and Poland. The Bund supported Yiddish as the language of Eastern European Jews. Bundist immigrants in the U.S. were key in organizing trade unions like the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers. YIVO on-line archives. Accessed Aug. 20, 2007. http://www.yivo.org/digital_exhibitions/index.php?mcid=76&oid=10.

²³⁸ "Secular Jewish Identity," 148.

Klepfisz was only four years old when World War II ended, barely six when she left Poland with her mother, and only eight when they left Sweden for the U.S. A mere child, she did not have “first-hand knowledge” of the war, rather, she learned of it after she came to America in 1949, when she “absorbed the full horror and insanity of the camps and ghettos.”²³⁹ Then, she became a cognitively conscious immigrant and survivor in the U.S. Here, she learned from the adult survivors in her community, including her mother, about the extent of the destruction and the pain of geographic, cultural, and linguistic dislocation. When she attended the Workmen’s Circle Yiddish School in the Bronx, she learned about Yiddish literature, which gave her the tools to cope with this overwhelming knowledge of the war. Klepfisz emphasizes the importance of the political in learning Yiddish: “As I grew older, I learned the full breadth of Yiddish literature, but this early introduction with its inherent political vision became as powerful an influence in my life as did the war.”²⁴⁰ She admits that the Bundist, Yiddish-speaking community of her childhood felt comfortable and familiar while the adopted country was just the opposite:

the American world ... was only a source of pain, a place where I was completely alienated, different, the greenhorn, the survivor. *Di yidishe velt* [the Jewish or Yiddish world] was where intellectual arguments took place, where I received a sense of identity, of history, of the struggles of the world.²⁴¹

Klepfisz credits her education in Yiddish language and literature with giving her the tools to cope with the “total physical and emotional knowledge of the war,” while she felt that

²³⁹ Ibid.

²⁴⁰ Ibid., 62.

²⁴¹ Ibid. Yiddish indicates both the language and the people. This is rather difficult to reflect in English, which differentiates between Jewish and Yiddish, which Yiddish does not.

“the American world” marked her as an outsider and a stranger.²⁴² She told me that her early education in American English was not stimulating because it lacked the political and intellectual content that she found in Yiddish.

Klepfisz told me that as much as she appreciates her early education in Yiddish, she also feels that, as a teenager, she had to lead two separate, English- and Yiddish-speaking, lives. There was not even an inkling of multiculturalism when she attended public schools in the early 1950s. In fact, despite a large population of Jewish students and teachers in her school, many of whom heard or spoke Yiddish at home, her school was dominated by English and Christianity, erasing ethnic difference: “I was in a school that was maybe ninety eight percent Jewish and we did Christmas and Easter plays. We did nothing that was Jewish in public school. Nothing. We had some Jewish teachers, but most of them were not Jewish.”²⁴³ Her Jewish education took place five days a week after school and on the weekends, when she attended Yiddish-language and literature classes at the Bundist-run Workmen’s Circle. This is where Klepfisz got what she identifies as the intellectual and political content that the American English courses and school activities lacked entirely until she went to college and graduate school. But this separateness of the Yiddish and English worlds also meant that it took her a long time to realize the importance of Yiddish in her work.

Though she continued to be uncomfortable in English as an undergraduate student at City College in New York, Klepfisz was determined to major in English language and literature. Despite being encouraged by Max Weinreich, the well-known Yiddish scholar

²⁴² “Resisting and Surviving America,” 61. Klepfisz told me that, in step with the socialist principles of the Bund, she studied, for example, Yiddish proletarian poetry by writers like Avrom Reisin, Morris Rosenfeld, and H. Leyvik.

²⁴³ Personal Interview.

and her mentor, to pursue a degree in Yiddish, Klepfisz insisted on an English degree. She told me that she wanted to figure out “how to fit in” in her new immigrant home. She subsequently pursued her education in English literature at the University of Chicago where she received a Ph.D. in 1970. The topic of her dissertation was the gender-bending (at least in name) British writer George Eliot who also authored the Zionist and philo-Semitic novel Daniel Deronda. Eliot’s works seemed, at the time, far removed from any of Klepfisz’s own life experiences. Klepfisz told me that it was only decades later that she realized that her choice to trace the “relationship of the individual to historical events” in Eliot’s work was, in fact, motivated by a desire to find out more about the experiences of her own life and the languages in which she could tell it.

After she defended her dissertation, Klepfisz returned to New York where she worked at Brooklyn College until 1973. She began to write and publish at the same time as she decided to become public about her sexuality. “It all converged,” as she also told me about coming out, joining the feminist movement, and doing readings of her poems in women’s bookstores all over New York. Since that time, Klepfisz has published four collections of poems, Periods of Stress (1977), Keeper of Accounts (1982) Different Enclosures (1985), A Few Words in the Mother Tongue: Poems Selected and New (1990), and a collection of essays, Dreams of an Insomniac: Jewish Feminist Essays, Speeches, and Diatribes (1990). Currently, Klepfisz is an Adjunct Associate Professor of Women’s Studies at Columbia University where she teaches courses on Jewish women’s history and literature. She lives in New York with Judy, her partner of thirty years.

2:

Women Writing Home

Like Maurer's and Hoffman's writings, Klepfisz's works address her gendered ethnic identity and sense of belonging. She reconstitutes the loss of home and language through a feminist genealogy rooted in Eastern Europe with its long history of Yiddish literature and culture. The 'nation' to which Klepfisz professes primary allegiance is not a territory defined by borders. Instead, she locates her roots in *yidishkayt*, the Yiddish language, culture, and history that flourished in Eastern Europe for centuries up to World War II. As Klepfisz explains in "*Di mames/dos loshn*" (the mothers/the language) she is in "goles/exile (the Yiddish version of the Hebrew *galut*)" not from Israel but from "*yidishkayt* and Eastern Europe."²⁴⁴ On the one hand, she reconfigures nationality on specifically cultural terms because, as a Bundist, she had been taught "that Jews did not need a separate Jewish state."²⁴⁵ This historical background, however, does not adequately explain the complexity of Klepfisz's identity. Rather, she reconfigures her displacement by claiming an extended and multi-generational international family of Jewish women writers and thinkers. By locating herself within this larger community of women, Klepfisz finds a space of shared experience as well as linguistic, cultural, or historic continuity. Such spaces offer her intellectual and emotional support and a sense of belonging that no bounded territory ever has. Within this transnational community, Klepfisz sees herself as a spokesperson for unrecognized and unappreciated Yiddish women writers. By translating their works and bringing them to a wider audience, she

²⁴⁴ "*Di mames, dos loshn*/The Mothers, the Language: Feminism, *Yidishkayt*, and the Politics of Memory," *Bridges: A Journal for Jewish Feminists and Our Friends* 4.1 (1994): 16.

²⁴⁵ "Yom Hashoah, Yom Yerushalayim: A Meditation," in *Dreams of an Insomniac*, 119.

repairs what she sees as a sexist and heterosexist focus on male authors within the Yiddish literary tradition.

In contrast to the constant process of writing and translating, acts that embed her in what I term the “aterritorial homeland,” Klepfisz makes clear that the places in which she once lived or now occupies cannot offer her community-based continuity. For instance, Klepfisz labels a section consisting of three poems “Inhospitable Soil,” referring to both the European and American continents. In “Solitary Acts,” Poland terrifies her with its history of anti-Semitism: that country cleansed of our people’s blood/intones the litany of old complaints/Gina they hate us still.”²⁴⁶ In the multi-part “*Bashert*,” the U.S. is “just a spot where it seemed safe to go to escape certain dangers” and where she was pushed to live by “certain dangers;” it is not a place that pulled her toward it with its promises.²⁴⁷ Both countries are “inhospitable soil,” where “women who struggled to survive in Europe [are also the] women who struggle to survive here [in the U.S.].”²⁴⁸ For Klepfisz, the people who struggle to survive in these two “inhospitable soils” are explicitly women; these are the women who make up her aterritorial homeland.

Even when she describes the U.S. as home or as a space of dwelling, she does so with an array of qualifications. Like Poland, she describes it as a place with a long history of oppression, which she experiences first-hand as a Jewish feminist lesbian. In fact, as Klepfisz explains in an interview conducted fifteen years after the publication of “*Bashert*” (pre-destined):

²⁴⁶ 202.

²⁴⁷ Rich, What is Found There 138; “Klepfisz, “*Bashert*” in Keeper of Accounts, Watertown: Persephone Press, Inc., 1982, 84.

²⁴⁸ “Forging a Women’s Link in di goldene keyt: Some Possibilities for Jewish American Poetry,” in Dreams of an Insomniac, 170.

There's a whole tradition of immigrants, Jewish and non-Jewish, looking at America in a certain way—as a hope and a promise fulfilled. I don't look at it that way. I view it as a place where a lot of people have been ripped off. They don't have full liberties; they don't have economic opportunities. I think I would even write a harsher section right now if I were to rework that poem.²⁴⁹

Klepfisz recognizes the U.S. as her present physical home, but refuses to translate such belonging into patriotism or nationalism.

In “*Bashert*,” her life in Poland and the U.S. symbolically come together when the poem's autobiographical speaker, like Klepfisz, nears her thirtieth birthday, the age at which her father was murdered. At this moment, she confesses in the poem, she feels “equidistant from the two land masses.” She is in-between and without roots on either of the continents. Poland is the place of her birth, the location where the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising took place and where her father was murdered: “this is the heritage of one continent.” A white woman teaching English to people of color is “the heritage of the other continent.” Klepfisz realizes that “safety ... is only/temporary” as she writes that “no place guarantees it to anyone forever. I have stayed/because there is no other place to go. In my muscles, my flesh, my/bone, I balance the heritages, the histories of two continents.”²⁵⁰

Klepfisz's poetry and essays directly challenge the “troubles” she sees in America, especially when they speak from her marginal position “as a racial/ethnic, lesbian outsider and a perpetual citizen of the borderlands.”²⁵¹ For example, “they're always curious,” one of Klepfisz's poems that specifically addresses the marginalization of gay women, bristles with resentment towards the intolerance of the American

²⁴⁹ In Pacernick, *Meaning and Memory*, 243.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 196-97.

²⁵¹ Whitehead, *The Feminist Poetry Movement*, 147.

mainstream. Klepfisz uses the second person pronoun “you” instead of her usual first person “I” to mirror the heterosexist rendering of lesbians as ‘unnatural,’ as well as to enter into conversation with other gay women who are similarly constructed as ‘other.’ In the poem’s sexually explicit second stanza, Klepfisz does not hide her anger at this culture’s prurient ‘curiosity:’

but more they’re curious about what you do when the urge
is on & if you use a coke bottle or some psychedelic dildo
or electric vibrator or just the good old finger or whole
hand & do you mannippullaaatttte yourself into a clit
orgasm or just kind of keep digging away at yourself & if
you mind it & when you have affairs doesn’t it hurt when it’s
over & it certainly must be lonely to go back to the old finger.

This prurient gaze, humiliating and objectifying the lesbian body, evokes the “sterile wordplay” of the white male writers whom Audre Lorde condemns. Klepfisz’s complex identity allows her to participate in two distinct women—centered communities. This passage, written in the explicitly sexualized language of radical American feminism, locates her within the American feminist community of writers like Rich, Anzaldua, and Lorde. At the same time, Klepfisz maintains an equally strong sense of belonging to her community of Yiddish women writers. For her, there is no conflict between these worlds, which constitute her true home.

3:

Language and Identity

Even as Klepfisz calls her reclamation of Yiddish a homecoming, she recognizes that she cannot “take back Yiddish uncritically.” For her, there is no simple stepping

“back into the language of [her] childhood” because “you can’t just go home again without a question.”²⁵² What keeps cultures alive is change and not a frozen adherence to what is inevitably an imagined and static past. No one recognizes this better than Klepfisz herself.

In her refusal to “take back Yiddish uncritically,” Klepfisz makes gender and sexuality visible in her bilingual poetry; her focus on multilingualism, gender, and sexuality locate her alongside Anzaldua in the multicultural spaces of the borderlands and genre-bending writings by politically engaged feminist and lesbian writers. It was, in fact, Anzaldua who first motivated Klepfisz to use Yiddish as a poetic medium. “One of the things that Gloria made me realize,” Klepfisz told me, “was that [Yiddish] was part of my linguistic history.”²⁵³ She also said that she was stunned by this realization of having “totally moved around” Yiddish especially given the part of her life spent in Yiddish: “I had done the *shule* [Yiddish school], then the *mitl shule* [middle school], and then I did a postdoc at YIVO during the mid-1970s, and I had taught Yiddish for three summers at Columbia. I had done all this stuff and I thought how bizarre it was that it never even seeped in.”²⁵⁴ With this realization, came her desire to use Yiddish in her English-language poetry to reconcile the two parts of her immigrant existence that had up to that point remained separate. “I wanted to see,” Klepfisz writes, “if I could reflect in my writing the two linguistic and cultural worlds [Yiddish and English] to which I was committed.”²⁵⁵ Drawing on her experience of presenting multilingual poetry along with Anzaldua, Klepfisz found that “if Yiddish is to survive, the Yiddish world must include

²⁵² In Pacernick, *Meaning and Memory* 245.

²⁵³ Personal Interview.

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

²⁵⁵ “Secular Jewish Identity,” 163.

those who care about the culture, whose property it is; it can no longer limit itself and define itself by language alone.”²⁵⁶

By focusing on women writers, Klepfisz draws readers’ attention to the contrast between the gendering of Yiddish as *di mame loshn* (the mother tongue) and the Yiddish literary tradition, *di goldene keyt* (the golden chain), which has been dominated by male writers. In fact, the first poem where Klepfisz used Yiddish in English, “*Etlekhe verter oyf mame-loshn/A Few Words in the Mother Tongue*,” offers a symbolic corrective to what Klepfisz sees as a dismissal of women writers that occurs when Yiddish is feminized as the mother tongue and relegated to the domestic sphere while Yiddish literature continues to be masculinized through critical and scholarly emphasis on male writers. The poem reconnects the missing links in *di goldene keyt*, which, as Klepfisz explains, was passed on to her as “strictly male.”²⁵⁷ In contrast, in “*Etlekhe verter*” women are the ones who do “everything to keep/*yidishkayt* alive.”²⁵⁸ While it may not be unusual to construct women as ‘culture bearers,’ Klepfisz does so by reconfiguring the convention that naturalizes the links between women, home (or hearth), and culture. She reformulates the very manner in which women have been culturally and linguistically

²⁵⁶ Ibid. 161. Adrienne Rich points out that writers like Klepfisz and Anzaldua use languages differently than some of their ‘multilingual’ predecessors. Neither Klepfisz nor Anzaldua were the first to use more than one language in prose or poetry written in English. Beginning in the 1920s, for example, high modernists like Ezra Pound or T.S. Eliot employed other languages, as well. The modernists, however, used them as aesthetic and not political devices. For instance, when Pound used Chinese and Eliot ancient Greek and Latin, they often did so to create a distance between their readers and their erudite creations. Pound did not know Chinese. He exoticized and essentialized it. See the chapter titled “The Invention of China” in Hugh Kenner’s *The Pound Era*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971. See Adrienne Rich’s introduction to *A Few Words*: Klepfisz writes “a bilingual poetry, incorporating languages other than English, and patois, not [as an] allusion to Western high culture, as in Modernist poetics of the twenties and after but because bilingualism is both created by the experience of being migrant, immigrant, displaced, and expressive of the divisions as well as the resources of difference” (21).

²⁵⁷ “Forging a Woman’s Link in *di goldene keyt*: Some Possibilities for Jewish American Poetry,” 172.

²⁵⁸ “*Etlekhe verter oyf mame loshn*,” in *A Few Words*, 225.

categorized by first using the feminine noun in Yiddish, then offering its conventional English equivalent, and finally adding her own feminist interpretive reformulation:

Di kurve the whore
a woman who acknowledges her passions

Di yidene the Jewess the Jewish woman
ignorant overbearing
Let's face it: every woman is one

di yente the gossip the busybody
who knows what's what
and is never caught off guard

di lezbianke the one with
a roommate though we never used
the word²⁵⁹

The poem ends with seven stanzas in Yiddish, where Klepfisz uses the same words she already explained in the poem's previous part, but without the feminine article "*di*:" *kurve/yidene/yente/lezbianke/vaybl* (whore/Jewess/gossip/lesbian/wife). The poem works on multiple linguistic levels: Yiddish and English, equivalents and interpretations. Most importantly, Klepfisz engages in feminist translation by re-translating and re-interpreting the traditionally taboo (*di lezbianke*) or derogatory (*di yente*) as positive and empowering.

Another way in which Klepfisz narrates the complexity of gendered cultural continuity is by drawing attention to multiple, unstable, and fluid identities as sources of danger and conflict. Klepfisz makes this abundantly clear in "Fradel Shtok," a poem based on the title character's experience as a transplanted East European Yiddish author who attempts to write in English. The real Fradel Shtok was born in Galicia in 1890 and immigrated to the U.S. in 1907. After publishing in New York in Yiddish, she published her first novel in English, For Musicians Only (1927). Soon after its publication, she was

²⁵⁹ Ibid., 225.

institutionalized for mental illness and died in a sanatorium in 1930. As much as in the poem Klepfisz mirrors some of the experiences of the real Shtok, she is much more interested in using Shtok's life to represent various negotiations between languages and homes. Klepfisz represents Shtok's world of Yiddish as comfortable and familiar and the transition into English as covering "the distance ... between two sounds."²⁶⁰ The American world of English is dangerous because in this seemingly short distance, linguistic equivalents become an illusion of semantic congruity.

In the poem, Shtok has to approximate the meaning between Yiddish and English equivalents: "You write *gas*/and street echoes back /No resonance."²⁶¹ While *gas* in Yiddish and *street* in English are equivalent, the latter offers "no resonance" for the title character when, as a newly acquired language, it lacks the familiar connotations of her native Yiddish. This mirrors Klepfisz's own linguistic attempts at locating home: "Think of it," she writes, "*heym* and home the meaning/the same of course exactly/but the shift in vowel was the ocean/in which I drowned."²⁶² The word 'home' in English does not have, as Eva Hoffman writes about her own early forays into the language, the same "accumulated associations" or "the radiating haze of connotation," that it possesses, in Hoffman's case in Polish, and in Shtok's in Yiddish.²⁶³ Like for Hoffman, for Klepfisz and Shtok, the poem's speaker, "words float in an uncertain space. They come up from a part in [the] brain in which labels may be manufactured but which has no connection to ... instincts, quick reactions, or

²⁶⁰ In *A Few*, 228.

²⁶¹ Ibid.

²⁶² Ibid.

²⁶³ Hoffman, *Lost*, 108.

knowledge.”²⁶⁴ Even when only “a shift in vowel” differentiates two words, as it did for Klepfisz between Irena and Irene, the word “home” in English does not conjure up the same associations as the Yiddish “*heym*” because the latter speaks to Shtok’s native language identity, which is imbued with memories, emotions, and attachments.

Klepfisz intimates these connections between language and Shtok’s identity as a woman writer with the poem’s epigraph where she quotes Czeslaw Milosz’s famous creed that “language is the only homeland.” Klepfisz thus equates Shtok’s loss of Yiddish with homelessness. It is, of course, not a literal homelessness. According to Klepfisz, the confusion amounts to a linguistic homelessness: “You try to keep track of the difference/like *got* and *god* or *hoyz* and *house*/but they blur and you start using/alley when you mean *gesele* or *avenue*/when it's a *bulevar*.”²⁶⁵ The words in Yiddish and English that Klepfisz uses to express Shtok’s confusion are not coincidentally those associated with the home and its surroundings, places that are usually the most familiar in one’s mental landscape. Klepfisz describes Shtok’s loss of belonging as a result of immigration to begin with (the poem opens with a brief description of Shtok’s life), but the poem ends by emphasizing that it is not geographic but linguistic displacement that proves most devastating. Klepfisz ends the poem by equating the loss of language with madness. The Shtok of her poem finds herself locked away in a sanatorium: “Come in- Come in!/I understood it was/a welcome. *A dank! A dank!*/I said till I heard the lock/snap behind me.”²⁶⁶ In this sequence, Shtok is grateful when she can finally understand the words in English, but only “till” the door locks behind her. Once again, as

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

²⁶⁵ “Fradel Shtok,” 228.

²⁶⁶ Ibid.

with *gas/street* and *heyim/home*, the semblance of linguistic competence, Shtok understands the invitation of “come in,” betrays her.

The poem’s sentiment about the power of language(s) to make or break Shtok’s sanity is very much in line with the Yiddish poet’s Kadya Molodowsky’s depiction of Yiddish as the only suitable medium through which to express East European Jewish life.²⁶⁷ In an essay about Jewish women authors who wrote in Yiddish, Klepfisz discusses Molodowsky’s fears that American culture would destroy Yiddish because it was assimilative, morally corrupt, and commercialized.²⁶⁸ In fact, Molodowsky wrote that “the tragedy which is woven into the Yiddish language is impossible to render in another language.”²⁶⁹ While Klepfisz does not agree with Molodowsky’s construction of Yiddish as a language unlike any other, thus resisting linguistic essentialism, she represents Shtok’s loss of cultural moorings and sense of self by explaining how English permanently distances her from Yiddish and locks her away from herself.

Even though Klepfisz admires Molodowsky’s resolve to foster and preserve Yiddish, she soberly counters what she sees as Molodowsky’s sentimentalization of it as the “mother tongue:” “Yiddish is almost exclusively associated with the pre-war shtetlekh of Eastern Europe which are depicted as poor, but content in their piety, timeless and untouched by 20th century history or politics, living a peaceful existence which is disrupted only by anti-Semites during pogroms.”²⁷⁰ Klepfisz does not see a one-to-one relationship between language and identity. Yiddish, just like any other language,

²⁶⁷ Kadya Molodowsky (1894-1975): Yiddish poet and prose writer who was born in Bereza Kartuska, Belorussia and immigrated first to Warsaw, Poland in 1921 and then to the U.S. in 1935. In 1943, Molodowsky co-founded and became the editor of *Svive* (the environment), the New York based Yiddish language literary journal.

²⁶⁸ Klepfisz, “*Di mames, dos loshn*” 34.

²⁶⁹ Qtd. in *ibid.* 35.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 38.

must be learned and not somehow miraculously imbibed. She refuses to represent it as carrying a mystical Jewish legacy unconnected to grammar or syntax and thus emphasizes its constructedness as a system of signs at the same time as she affirms her own ability to learn and re-learn it in the United States. According to her project of cultural preservation, Yiddish fluency alone cannot substitute for the knowledge of East European Jewish history, politics, and literature; it offers a way to access that past and a tool to represent that past in prose and poetry.

Alongside her concern for Yiddish as crucial to the maintenance of secular Jewish identity, Klepfisz is critical of the perception of Yiddish in the United States. She realizes, as does Jeffrey Shandler, that in the postwar period Yiddish became “an exercise in memory culture,” but she refuses to submit it to such a sentence.²⁷¹ “What is funnier than a Yiddish accent?” Klepfisz asks, “Yiddish is, after all, nothing more than a bunch of words like *kvetsch*, *shpil*, *mishigas*, *shnorer*, *shayster*, *shlep*, *yidene*. What’s to teach? What’s to learn?”²⁷² Another dimension of this postwar reconfiguration and mythologizing of Yiddish is that some Jewish American students expect to acquire it easily because they have romanticized it as a ‘natural’ Jewish language. Klepfisz has found, for instance, that students are sometimes surprised when she asks that they conjugate verbs since “they think that somehow Yiddish will ‘come back to them,’ like a mystical experience and make them whole.”²⁷³

This example of the mythologizing of Yiddish is especially important since some of Klepfisz’s writings could be easily (mis)interpreted as a promotion of a language

²⁷¹ Shandler, “Imagining Yiddishland,” 135.

²⁷² Klepfisz, “Secular Jewish Identity,” 156.

²⁷³ “The Distance Between Us,” 38.

uniquely capable of rendering certain aspects of Jewish culture (like the untranslatable “tragedy woven into the Yiddish language” to once again quote Molodowsky). But Klepfisz’s advocacy of Yiddish is much more complex. She is adamant that

Yiddish is a language, not a religion officiated by a few, elite Yiddish priests. It is marked by 1,000 years of Ashkenazi history in Europe and it is quite special. But it is not the only legitimate or authentic language of Jewish expression.²⁷⁴

She acknowledges Ladino but also the ‘alien’ languages of Primo Levi (Italian) and Nelly Sachs (German). Klepfisz is aware of the multilingualism of Jewish expression and belies Molodowsky’s claims to uniqueness when she writes that “Jewish tragedies—and joys, for that matter—can be and have been expressed in the non-Jewish languages in which they were experienced. We should be turning to Yiddish to enrich our lives, rather than feeling inferior or inauthentic because we do not know it.”²⁷⁵ Klepfisz believes that Yiddish is important for secular Jewish identity in America, but she also realizes that language alone does not define Jewishness. Like scholars Hana Wirth-Nesher and Anita Norich, Klepfisz is not in favor of reducing ‘Jewishness’ to language use since that is not “a self-evident criterion.” Were we, as Wirth-Nesher writes, “to confine Jewish literature to specific languages, such as Yiddish, Hebrew, and Ladino to name a few obvious candidates, where would we place Kafka? Primo Levi? Elie Wiesel? Saul Bellow? Nelly Sachs? Paul Celan?”²⁷⁶

Klepfisz’s linguistic progression from Polish to Swedish to Yiddish and English reflects the historic circumstances wrought by the Holocaust and by exile. She learned

²⁷⁴ Ibid.

²⁷⁵ Ibid., 39.

²⁷⁶ Hana Wirth-Nesher, “Defining the Indefinable: What is Jewish Literature?” in What is Jewish Literature? ed. Hana Wirth-Nesher, Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1994: 4.

Polish to survive the war, reclaimed Yiddish as *di mame-loshn*, acquired Swedish as a refugee and English as an immigrant. Unlike Maurer who came from a Polonized family where she would not have learned Yiddish, Klepfisz comes from a tradition firmly rooted in Yiddish, which was revived only after the war, in Lodz, Poland and New York, the United States, where she learned it along with the Bundist ideology:

Because I was born during the war and my mother and I were passing as Poles, Polish became my first language. I began hearing Yiddish only later in Lodz, though in the first kindergarten I attended, I began to write Polish. In 1946, my mother and I immigrated to Sweden, where we lived for the next three years. I attended school and learned to read, write, and speak Swedish. At home I continued speaking Polish though I heard and understood the Yiddish of the other DPs living in our communal house. And then we came to America.²⁷⁷

Klepfisz's self-described linguistic *mélange* echoes Maurer's journeys from Polish and into German and English. It also suggests to what extent many immigrants, like these two women, experience and learn multiple languages before they ever set foot in the U.S. For children immigrants like Klepfisz, unlike for Maurer and those who were already adults when they made their new lives here, this process also illustrates the cognitive differences that children or teenagers who make their lives in yet another language have to confront.

When Klepfisz describes her childhood acquisition of English, she comments on just such a cognitive discomfort. This process is especially poignant for children and teenagers because at the time of their emigration they are not yet comfortably rooted in their first language(s) at the same time as they have not yet acquired the second or third language enough to communicate in it. This linguistic discomfort creates a vacuum of sorts where English has not yet become familiar while the first language(s) have already

²⁷⁷ "Secular Jewish Identity," 144.

begun to atrophy. Klepfisz describes this in “Secular Jewish Identity: *Yidishkayt* in America:”

I realize now that until the age of sixteen or seventeen, I really had no language in which I was completely rooted. Limited to our three-room apartment, my Polish did not develop, and by my mid-teens was childish and ungrammatical. English seemed alien and lacked both intellectual and emotional resonance.²⁷⁸

Hoffman similarly recalls that while her Polish began to atrophy during the first few years of her life in Canada, she had not yet acquired enough English to describe her present reality. Their linguistic in-betweenness amounted to deep-set feelings of alienation and confusion.

Klepfisz’s conscious forging of bilingual poetry enters into dialogue *di mame-loshn*, Yiddish, and her immigrant tongue, English, so as to “bring[] those worlds together” thus making them coherent.²⁷⁹ In effect, Klepfisz reconnects different parts of her linguistic and cultural existence. Yiddish is the language through which she forges intimate connections to the past, but keeping with her insistence that it is a language like any other and not a metaphysically “Jewish something,” Klepfisz “does not drop cozy, familiar Yiddish phrases, as a kind of a Jewish seasoning” because her “bilingualism ... is created by the experience of being immigrant, displaced, exiled.”²⁸⁰ Through her unsentimental use of Yiddish, Klepfisz seeks to forestall what Anita Norich describes as a superficial “expression of the urge to return home, to places that have been utterly devastated.”²⁸¹ At the same time, Yiddish is of primary importance to the way she

²⁷⁸ 148.

²⁷⁹ Personal Interview.

²⁸⁰ Ronit Lentin, “Resisting and Surviving America’: The Use of Languages as Gendered Subversion in the Work of American Jewish Poet Irena Klepfisz,” *Teanga: Journal of the Irish Association for Applied Linguistics* 12(Fall 1992): 69.

²⁸¹ “Translating as a Feminist: Reconceiving Anna Margolin – A Response from Anita Norich.” *Prooftexts: A Journal of Jewish Literary History* 20 (2000): 216.

defines herself. When she felt that she was losing a connection to Yiddish, she knew that she was beginning to assimilate.

3:

Re-visioning Identity and Belonging

By way of connecting her recovery of Yiddish language and history, Klepfisz rarely uses the English word ‘Holocaust,’ preferring instead the Yiddish *der khurbn* because, “unlike the term Holocaust, it resonate[s] with *yidische geshikhte*, Jewish history, linking the events of World War II with *der ershter un tsveyter khurbn*, the First and Second Destruction (of the Temple).”²⁸² Klepfisz acknowledges the centrality of *der khurbn* in her life and the life of Jews all over the world, but refuses to make it the defining marker of contemporary Jewish American identity. She critiques the use of the Holocaust as a marker of Jewish identity because doing so obfuscates over 1000 years of Jewish history in Europe and represents Judaism as a religion of suffering and martyrdom.²⁸³ She is very clear about her own position rooted in the politics and history of the Bund in Eastern Europe and finds it disturbing that some American Jews limit their concept of Jewish history to 1939-1945 and “place the Holocaust at the center of their Jewishness, relying on their parents’ experience to legitimize themselves, look to Jewish victimization and anti-Semites to define and shape their identity.”²⁸⁴

²⁸² “Secular Jewish Identity,” 145.

²⁸³ For similar critiques, see Mintz, Popular Culture and the Shaping of Holocaust Memory in America; Novick, The Holocaust in American Life; Flanzbaum, The Americanization of the Holocaust.

²⁸⁴ Klepfisz, “Khaloymes/Dreams in Progress: Culture, Politics, and Jewish Identity,” in Dreams of an Insomniac, 203-04.

Instead, Klepfisz advocates a secular Jewish identity rooted in the long history of pre-war Jewish life:

We will guarantee another generation a Jewish future if we educate ourselves about the history of Jews, ancient and modern, about Jewish literature—probably in translation from Ladino, Yiddish, Hebrew and all the languages in which secular Jews and observant Jews wrote. We need to know how Jews were politically active in other societies, how they fought for the general as well as for their own good. This knowledge will help establish a secular Jewish calendar of Jewish traditional, historical, and cultural dates around which we can structure our lives and will become the content for the Jewish secularism we want to preserve.²⁸⁵

In this way, Klepfisz locates expressions and representations of her identity in the interstices of history and memory. As she tells us in two of her earliest poems, “Searching for My Father’s Body” and “The Widow and Daughter,” her family’s story can be told only in fragments: from bits and pieces in history books, memories, and stories.

When the same speaker of these two poems attempts to learn about her past from history alone, she realizes the futility of such an endeavor. The narrator concludes with a rather bitter assessment when she observes that history “depends on who you knew,/or rather who knew of you.”²⁸⁶ In such a situation, memories provide the only access to absences in the historical record. The speaker thus relies on her mother’s recollections to describe her father’s “ordinary life” instead of his “extraordinary death” written as such into history books, which never note, for example, that he was a discus thrower before the war.²⁸⁷ In “The Widow and Daughter,” Klepfisz once again juxtaposes history and

²⁸⁵ Ibid., 206.

²⁸⁶ Klepfisz, “Searching for My Father’s Body,” in *A Few Words*, 29.

²⁸⁷ *Doyres Bundistn (Generations of Bundists)*, *Redagirt fun* (edited by) Yankev Sholem Hertz, *Nyu York: Undzer Tsayt Farlag*, 1956. The entry about Klepfisz’s father, Michal Klepfisz, authored by

memory when she begins the poem with an epigraph from *Doyres Bundistn*, which speaks about Rose, the widow, and Irena, her daughter, who survived the war and live in New York. While this is the extent of the information provided in the book, Klepfisz fills in the gaps when she describes her mother as an average girl in Poland who liked love songs and “knew the first part of [Adam Mickiewicz’s epic poem] *Pan Tadeusz* by heart.”²⁸⁸

“The Widow and Daughter” describes Klepfisz’s parents’ life together before her mother knew “that he might die” and before she became a “survivor.”²⁸⁹ The poem’s trajectory takes the readers from the peacetime of their prewar apartment in Poland, to her own birth in the Warsaw Ghetto, to their apartment in exile where they live together in the shadow of her father’s faded photograph and his almost palpable presence. In the poem, the speaker remembers the history left out of the official record. She talks about how her parents met, her mother’s favorite song, her father’s work, her own birth, her mother’s widowhood, and survival of the mother and daughter: “the Aryan side/she became a maid/and was polishing silver for them/while the ghetto burned” and “and finally New York/she became a dressmaker/and did alterations.”²⁹⁰ At the poem’s conclusion, the past is inextricable from the present when the widow and her daughter sit “down to eat” and “taste his ashes.”²⁹¹ History and memory intersect in “Searching for

Yankev Hertz, is in volume 2 (*tsveyter band*) of *Doyres* (pages 359-365). This is where the information Klepfisz uses in the epigraph is located.

²⁸⁸ *Pan Tadeusz* is an epic poem by one of the most notable and patriotic Polish poets, Adam Mickiewicz. Almost since its very publication in 1834, every generation of Polish schoolchildren had to learn at least a small part of the poem by heart.

²⁸⁹ Klepfisz, “The Widow and Daughter,” in *A Few Words* 36.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 38.

my Father's Body" and "The Widow and Daughter." History alone is incapable of describing Klepfisz's ordinary life, which the war permanently disrupted.



Photograph 6: "We also went to where my mother lived with my father on 52 Ogrodowa. But her building was gone, though the one next to it, No. 50, was there and my mother said it was exactly like the building she lived in."

The multi-part "*Bashert*" (pre-destined) is another of her poems that relies on memory to fill the gaps left empty by official records and historical texts. In this poem, the speaker asserts her position as the "keeper of accounts," which also served as the title to her 1982 collection where "*Bashert*" was originally published. The speaker becomes a "keeper of accounts" because she scrupulously records "ordinary lives," which historians overlook so often. In yet another poem, "*Solitary Acts*," dedicated to her aunt Gina, her father's sister who died during the war, Klepfisz adds a further dimension to the "keeper of accounts" when she asserts that "history seems/a gaping absence at best a shadow/longing for some greater/definition" and continues to say that her aunt's "distant grave ... reminds [her] prods [her] to shape that shadow."²⁹² As an artist, Klepfisz offers her poems as part of history when she writes into them a record "of accounts" like her and her mother's wartime survival:

The woman with the red hair has also stopped and turned. She is

²⁹² Klepfisz, "*Solitary Acts*," in *A Few Words* 203.

grotesque, bloated with hunger, almost savage in her rags. She and my mother move towards each other. Cautiously, deliberately, they probe past the hunger, the swollen flesh, the infected skin, the rags. Slowly, they begin to piece five years of encrusted history. And slowly, there is perception and recognition.

In the wilderness of occupied Poland, in this vast emptiness
Where no one can be trusted, my mother has suddenly, bizarrely,
Met one of my father's teachers. A family friend. Another Jew.²⁹³

Klepfisz describes this meeting in such detail because, as she indicates further on in the poem, they survived in large part with the help of this woman who, later the same day, sent them a package of food. When she recalls her father's heroic death in "Searching for my Father's Body," Klepfisz acknowledges that such accounts are the stuff of history books. These same books, she implicitly argues, are much less inclined to include stories like their chance encounter with a friend, even if that friend ended up saving their life.

Another part of Klepfisz's memory/history project through which she continues to explain the multi-dimensional aspects of her survivor and immigrant identities is her challenge to the very American notion of survival, which, since the 1970s imagines survivors as either "celebrants and heroes" or as "ghosts and wrecks."²⁹⁴ Klepfisz subscribes to neither of these diagnoses; survivors in her poetry, including herself, are, like the ones in Jadwiga Maurer's short stories and Eva Hoffman's recollections— multidimensional human beings. In Klepfisz's representations, survival is not sacred, singular or static and "the survivor isn't an artifact."²⁹⁵ She knows first-hand that survivors were displaced and that "the ripple effects of the Holocaust were felt in their

²⁹³ Klepfisz, "Bashert," in *A Few Words*, 188.

²⁹⁴ Henry Greenspan, "Imagining Survivors: Testimony and the Rise of Holocaust Consciousness," in Hilene Flanzbaum, ed., *The Americanization of the Holocaust*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999: 59.

²⁹⁵ Rich, *What is Found There*, 141.

new lives taking shape in America.”²⁹⁶

Equal to her adamant refusal to root her identity in the history of the Holocaust is Klepfisz’s critique of the commercialization and sensationalization of the Holocaust. She sees it as an utter denial of that which actually happened, which she describes as

an event that [did not] end in 1945—at least not for the survivors. . . . But for those who are survivors, the Holocaust can never be transformed into history and will always remain simply *der khurbn* (the destruction). . . . for survivors, *der khurbn* will remain an individual, personal experience. It permanently changed and shaped our lives.²⁹⁷

In thus commenting on the presence of the past, Klepfisz connects her poetry and prose to that of other survivors who continually comment, as does Jadwiga Maurer’s narrator, that “our past is important. Closing our eyes and pretending that we’re just average mortals doesn’t change a thing.”²⁹⁸ Klepfisz once again notes the chasm separating her and other survivors from their American contemporaries when she asks: “How can I say to people that for the survivors with whom I grew up the Holocaust never ended?”²⁹⁹ In contrast to the presence of the past in the survivors’ lives, Klepfisz writes that Americans are “simply fed up with what Jews feel.” She argues that because the Holocaust has been evoked and used in popular culture so often, “the word has lost almost all meaning. And the fault lies with both non-Jews and Jews. It lies with the ‘American way of life,’ with the process of Americanization, with American Big Business, with commercialism, with posing, with artificial feelings.”³⁰⁰ Her arguments indicate that the Holocaust—both its history and memory—has been appropriated by the American mainstream, which has

²⁹⁶ Peterson, *Against Amnesia*, 126-27.

²⁹⁷ “Resisting and Surviving America,” 65 and “Yom Hashoah,” 132-33.

²⁹⁸ “*Antyojczyzna*” (“The Anti-Homeland”), 39.

²⁹⁹ Klepfisz, “Resisting and Surviving America,” 65.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 63-64.

created, out of incomprehensible and incoherent events and massive death, a coherent and comprehensible commodity: “I am, I repeat, convinced that people are turned off of the Holocaust because it has been commercialized, metaphored out of reality, glamorized, been severed from the historical fact.” She is fed up with the way the Holocaust has been taken out of the Jewish context and is casually mentioned in reference to other events in order to “reflect sensitivity, a largeness of heart.”³⁰¹

In the context of her critique of American commodification of the Holocaust, Klepfisz emphasizes that survivors, as much as they have been ‘naturalized’ and incorporated into American mythology of freedom and liberation, are, after all, immigrants. They are new to this country and often reflect the behavior of their immigrant, pre-World War II predecessors who sometimes submitted to the culture around them so that they would appear less ‘foreign’ and more assimilable. The writer Anzia Yezierska, for instance, agreed and even promoted a story about her rise from rags to riches as a myth of a sweatshop Cinderella when she accepted a movie contract in Hollywood in the 1920s. Immigrant survivors are likewise not exempt from the pressures of assimilation and adapt to American culture, as Klepfisz observes, by learning “to package, to adopt Big Business techniques, to market.”³⁰² Art Spiegelman similarly commented that survivors “are often reduced to feeling grateful that anyone is interested in their story, they’re relieved simply to have the burden of telling lifted from them.”³⁰³ “Survival,” he said, “mustn’t be seen in terms of divine retribution or martyrology.”³⁰⁴

³⁰¹ Ibid., 64.

³⁰² Ibid., 66.

³⁰³ James Hoberman, “Schindler’s List: Myth, Movie, and Memory,” The Village Voice 39.13 (March 29, 1994): 30.

³⁰⁴ Ibid., 27.

Popular American representations of survivors in fact martyrologize or Christianize Jewish survivors, which is something that Klepfisz finds particularly distasteful because of what she sees as America's already "homogenizing, Christian mainstream" that also threatens her existence as an immigrant lesbian.³⁰⁵

4:

Art and Activism

When Klepfisz writes about Holocaust survival, she represents what many critics and scholars have deemed to be unrepresentable or unspeakable. But she does so as if with Theodor Adorno's precepts in mind. In Notes to Literature (1958), Adorno writes that literature must

be such that it does not surrender to cynicism merely by existing after Auschwitz. It is the situation of literature itself and not simply one's relation to it that is paradoxical. The abundance of real suffering permits no forgetting. ... that suffering ... *demands the continued existence of the very art it forbids*; hardly anywhere else does suffering still find its own voice, a consolation that does not immediately betray it.³⁰⁶

When Adorno thus reformulates his oft-repeated statement that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric," he argues for a new way to approach art in view of the horrific destruction of Jewish life in Eastern Europe. In calling for an art that does not offer refuge from the realities of suffering, Adorno judges cultural expression from the perspective of its engagement with realities of contemporary violence. In fact, for

³⁰⁵ "Jewish Lesbians, the Jewish Community, Jewish Survival," Dreams of an Insomniac, 78.

³⁰⁶ Theodor Adorno, Notes to Literature, trans. Shierry Weber Nichol森, New York: Columbia University Press, 1991: 88, emphasis mine.

Adorno literature, and art in general, has value only when it gives voice to suffering.³⁰⁷

This is precisely how Klepfisz's poetry can be located because her art finds "its own [bilingual] voice" with "a consolation that does not immediately betray it."³⁰⁸ When she finds it on terms that do not offer consolation, Klepfisz offers eloquent and perceptive cultural critiques captured from the point of view of an immigrant survivor who views the culture around her from the outside in. From this vantage point, Klepfisz exposes a wide range of oppressions ranging from racism to linguistic assimilation to sexism and homophobia.

In her avowal to expose and fight injustice wherever she sees it, Klepfisz writes into her poetry a clearly political vision of the injustice still perpetrated on "the Land of the Free" when she draws parallels between different groups of people like European Jews and African Americans. Klepfisz believes that she has learned from the catastrophe: "I know what the history of *der khurbn* and what many survivors taught me, taught all of us: silence about any form of injustice is wrong."³⁰⁹ When Klepfisz writes about the United States she often employs the Holocaust as an example of atrocity and oppression to which this country has never been immune. In "*Bashert*," for instance, the "landscape [that] might suggest a blasted Jewish ghetto in an Eastern European city [turns out to be] a black ghetto surrounding an elite American university."³¹⁰ After all, as she asks, "has not America exterminated others, those it deemed undesirable or those in its way?" The Holocaust, Klepfisz writes, "has been a source of infinite lessons to me," which she then uses to recognize and create an awareness of the "present dangers in

³⁰⁷ Ezrahi, *By Words Alone*.

³⁰⁸ Rich, "Introduction," in *A Few Words*, 22.

³⁰⁹ Klepfisz, "Yom Hashoah," 135.

³¹⁰ See also Lentin, "Resisting and Surviving," 67.

America” posed by poverty, racism, anti-Semitism, and homophobia.³¹¹ Like Hoffman who believes that the mere “injunctions to ‘remember,’ repeated frequently and hypnotically enough, can become precisely a summons not to make the effort of thought, not to consider what we are remembering or how difficult such a feat really is,” Klepfisz also understands them as ways to avoid dealing with “present dangers.”³¹² Instead, she writes what I term “poetry of change,” which accords with other American feminist visions like that of Audre Lorde who writes that feminist “poems formulate the implications of ourselves, what we feel within and dare make real (or bring action into accordance with), our fears, our hopes, our most cherished terrors.”³¹³

When Klepfisz speaks about race and immigration, her work resonates with that of other thinkers, in particular with W.E.B. DuBois whose post-World War II protests against racism arose partially out of a response to the German destruction of Jewish life in Europe. Prior to World War II, DuBois saw the problems of the 20th Century in terms of the differences between African Americans and the American white mainstream. His notion of the color line, as he explains in The Souls of Black Folk (1903), had to do with how outward differences in skin color were assigned immutable characteristics that determined one’s position in American society. In a little known 1952 article in the New York-based socialist monthly Jewish Life, “The Negro and the Warsaw Ghetto,” DuBois reflected upon his journey to Warsaw and reconfigured his previous conceptualization of race relations. He no longer viewed it as a problem of the color line “between African-

³¹¹ Klepfisz, “Anti-Semitism in the Lesbian/Feminist Movement,” in Dreams of an Insomniac, 56.

³¹² Hoffman, After 176.

³¹³ Sister Outsider 39.

American subjects and dominant culture” but as an “expression of particular relationships between minority and majority culture and between victimization and survival.”³¹⁴

Instead of perceiving oppression and discrimination as rooted in epidermal markers of difference, DuBois began to see it “not even solely [as] a matter of color and physical and racial characteristics. ... [T]he race problem ... was a matter of cultural patterns, perverted teaching and human hate and prejudice, which reached all sorts of people and caused endless evil to all men.”³¹⁵ Moreover, like Adorno who in Notes to Literature made the distinction between committed and engaged art as opposed to art for art’s sake, DuBois propagated the idea of art as political engagement in his 1926 essay, “Criteria of Negro Art.” While Adorno was reacting specifically to the atrocities of the Holocaust in making artists responsible for the world around them, DuBois compelled artists to use their art in the struggle against American racism.

DuBois’s reformulation of the color line and Klepfisz’s engaged poetry bridge the continental gap between Jewish death and destruction in Europe and African American slavery and death in the United States. Both of them interpret oppression and genocide in global terms where race and ethnicity are social and pseudo-scientific constructs, which are utilized by nation-states (though in very different national and temporal contexts) to oppress and murder those who are deemed undesirable. Both of them agree that artists play an important role in engaging their art to make oppression and discrimination visible and thereby to propagate change. In this context, DuBois’ reformulation of his earlier political vision of racism helps to illuminate Klepfisz’s own contextualization of multiple

³¹⁴ Rothberg, “W.E.B. DuBois in Warsaw,” 185-86. For the text of DuBois’ article, see The Oxford W.E.B. DuBois Reader, ed. Eric J. Sundquist, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 469-473.

³¹⁵ Qtd. *ibid.*, 172.

oppressions that she sees daily taking place in the United States, which she connects to the Jewish suffering in Europe by using the phrase “the Holocaust without smoke.” In “*Bashert*,” Klepfisz writes:

I see now the present dangers, the dangers of the void, of the/American hollowness in which I walk calmly day and night as I/continue my life. I begin to see the incessant grinding down of/lines for stamps, for jobs, for a bed to sleep in, of a death stretched/imperceptibly over a lifetime. I begin to understand the ingenuity/of it. The invisibility. The Holocaust without smoke.”³¹⁶

Like DuBois, Klepfisz does not see oppression as the ‘property’ of any single group and believes that multiple oppressions require a joint effort of minority groups. While she draws important lessons about oppression from the history of the Holocaust, she credits her political consciousness, which sensitized her to others’ suffering, with secular *yidishkayt*.

Secular Jewishness as evinced by Bundist ideology was especially sensitive to the persecution and suffering of “ordinary people:” “I learned that *dos lebn fun poshete mentshn*, lives of ordinary people, *iz tayer*, were precious, that they needed both protection against the powerful and greedy.”³¹⁷ Klepfisz anchors her responses to oppression in her own experience and gestures once again to what she means by lessons of the Holocaust when she argues that many Jews in America have been unable to absorb what happened:

They’ve mistakenly thought that to transcend means to forget the past, that to think about the present is to abandon the past. That too is a painful mistake, a grave mistake for Jews in America, because it’s [sic] kept many of them from universalizing their experience, from joining with others who have experienced oppression—not perhaps an exact duplication of Jewish oppression, but nevertheless oppression. ... they don’t learn from experience or from history.³¹⁸

³¹⁶ Klepfisz, “*Bashert*,” *A Few Words* 193.

³¹⁷ “Jewish Lesbians,” 72.

³¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 66.

In some of her poems, Klepfisz depicts America as not that different from the Poland she left behind in 1946. In “Solitary Acts,” Upstate New York with its “church/its cemetery the bare expectant earth/of my garden all remind me of that/other soil on which I grew.”³¹⁹ Geography makes a difference only insofar as it locates her on a different continent, but she finds that location alone cannot guarantee safety because all “those “who lived/and died unnoticed beyond the grasp of history” also “die today.”³²⁰ She escaped “certain dangers,” but countless others are still victimized.

When Irena Klepfisz writes openly about the many oppressions of the contemporary world, from the Holocaust to American racism, she speaks from what is, in feminist terms, an intersectional perspective. When she speaks as a multilingual immigrant Jewish feminist lesbian, she works to give voice to those whom history has forgotten. In her focus on language and culture, she protests the violence wrought by assimilation, which silences those who have been scripted out of American myths of national of origin.³²¹ Both out of personal experience and public concern, Klepfisz insists on a cosmopolitan and anti-nationalist perspective, on an aterritorial homeland that emerges as multi-local, multilingual, and women-centered.

³¹⁹ 206.

³²⁰ Ibid., 205.

³²¹ “Secular Jewish Identity,” 159.

Chapter 5

Eva Hoffman and the Polish Perspective

The main reason ... for this memoir is of course the need to bridge the sheer distance in time and place between my life today and my life then.

Edward Said³²²

Like Edward Said, Eva Hoffman links her present life with the past when she describes her childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood in her critically acclaimed memoir, Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language. Unlike Said, whose memoir focuses on bridging the gap between the past and the present, Hoffman's recollections focus on bridging the gap between the Polish of her formative childhood years and the English of her adolescence and adulthood. Hoffman's main reason for writing Lost in Translation is "the sheer distance" between languages, Polish and English, but also Yiddish, the language of her parents' life before World War II. Consequently, she creates a narrative ordered by languages—a semiotic memoir³²³ whose main goal is not the usual autobiographical closing of a temporal gap, but a bridging of different linguistic identities. Like Jadwiga Maurer's short stories and Irena Klepfisz's poems and essays,

³²² Out of Place: A Memoir, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999, 5.

³²³ Baranczak credits Hoffman with an innovative examination of "a mind's transition from one language system to another." Though he acknowledges a number of other perspectives through which she analyzes her experiences (cultural, social, sentimental, etc.), Baranczak sees language as central to Hoffman's narrative and argues that it "calls for a new generic category ... a 'semiotic memoir'." Breathing Under Water, 224.

Hoffman's writings point to displacement as a double-edged sword: it is a source of professional inspiration for writers, but it is at the root of often irreparable personal loss and turmoil.

Beginning with Lost in Translation, Hoffman sets up patterns of intercultural and interlinguistic analyses that have at their core representations of her trifocal Polish Jewish American perspective that reappears in her travelogue, Exit into History: A Journey through the New Eastern Europe, and in her meditation upon the history and memory of the Holocaust, After Such Knowledge: Memory, History, and the Legacy of the Holocaust.³²⁴ These three books demonstrate that a uniform or continuous linguistic and cultural existence is not a viable option for those who are culturally, linguistically, and geographically displaced, especially when that displacement was wrought by massive violence coupled with the hostility of the native country. Thus, through her detailed attention to various translations of identity, Hoffman's writings assert multiple, malleable, and situational identities that broaden the notions of national belonging and acculturation by augmenting their definitions of identity from singular and static to multiple and fluid.

In the context of multiple languages and identities, Lost in Translation, Exit into History, and After Such Knowledge form a triptych of linguistic and cultural memoirs that foregrounds Poland as the place where Hoffman learned to "name the world around her." At the same time, these three books trace the processes through which displacement

³²⁴ Given the space constraints of this chapter, I am not analyzing Hoffman's 1997 Shtetl, but it is worth noting that Hoffman also wrote this book to inform and guide her American readers. In a Polish language on-line chat, she told her interlocutors that one of the reasons for writing Shtetl was her desire to improve Jewish American knowledge of Polish-Jewish relations. "I wanted to fight some of the oversimplified stereotypes," she said, "which were created and bolstered by the sheer distance between Poland and the U.S. and by the Cold War." "Eva Hoffman—Conversation," accessed November, 22 2006, <http://rozmowy.onet.pl/artykul.html?ITEM=1057176&OS=37470>.

has made Hoffman into an interlingual and intercultural translator between Polish and English and Poland and the U.S. In this triptych, Hoffman translates and tempers the ‘strangeness’ of Poland, Polish, and Polish Jewish relations for her English-speaking readers.

At the heart of this chapter and amidst the analysis of these three books rests a comparative reading of Hoffman’s Lost in Translation in its English original and in its Polish translation. Such a structure foregrounds Hoffman’s acquisition of English as a teenager, which she represents as especially troubling to her immigrant experience. Though language learning by adolescents and adults has been traditionally considered challenging because of decreased language absorption abilities, it is not the inability to memorize language quickly or unconsciously but rather the “departure from oneself” that is for Hoffman the “ultimately terrifying experience.”³²⁵ The topic of Hoffman’s Lost in Translation is the terrifying departure from the native language identity, while her attempts at the recovery of the departed self are at the heart of Exit into History and After Such Knowledge.

Hoffman’s inter-linguistic and intercultural perspectives get us beyond the more typical autobiographical accounts when they “bridge the sheer distance” between Polish and English and between her American location and the New Eastern Europe. Like Maurer and Klepfisz, Hoffman refuses the nomenclature of national belonging and opts, instead, for aterritoriality where her languages, Polish and English, as well as her work as a writer, produce personal relationships and professional affiliations across Europe and North America.

³²⁵ Aneta Pavlenko, “Second Language Learning by Adults: Testimonies of Bilingual Writers,” Issues in Applied Linguistics 9.1 (1998): 5.

In Lost in Translation, Hoffman traces a linguistic journey into English, while in Exit into History, she narrates her travels throughout Eastern Europe in 1990 and 1991. At its most overt, then, her travelogue focuses on the political and economic changes rapidly taking place in Eastern Europe between 1989 and 1992. On a deeper level, more important for Hoffman's departed self, the book is preoccupied with her desire to return to Poland to confront the childhood fantasies and memories that she wrote into Lost in Translation with the reality of "Eastern Europe before it disappeared."³²⁶ Finally, after these travels are done, Hoffman delves into a public exploration of the history and memory of the Holocaust as well as a personal recovery of the departed immigrant self in After Such Knowledge. Hoffman finds such a recovery necessary because the vicissitudes of her emigration from Poland delayed a "direct confrontation with the Holocaust inheritance."³²⁷

Hoffman's memoirs and travelogues introduce American readers to the cultural and linguistic travails of a Polish Jewish female immigrant in North America in the second half of the 20th Century. They describe Hoffman's linguistic navigations in English and her attempts at holding on to her quickly atrophying Polish. Hoffman depicts her experiences in Canada and the U.S. as those of an immigrant intent on adopting and performing an American identity because she realizes that without it, she will remain an outsider. Hoffman disavows assimilation, but admits that at least a partial falling into the adopted culture is obligatory when the alternative is a permanent linguistic and cultural limbo:

³²⁶ Exit into History: A Journey Through the New Eastern Europe. New York: Viking, 1993, x.

³²⁷ After Such Knowledge, 77.

The soul can shrivel from an excess of critical distance, and if I don't want to remain in arid internal exile for the rest of my life, I have to find a way to lose my alienation without losing my self. But how does one bend toward another culture without falling over, how does one strike an elastic balance between rigidity and self-effacement?³²⁸

The memoiristic triptych in this chapter tells Hoffman's story as that of a balancing act that enables her to enter the language and culture of her immigrant home(s) without surrendering her past. Hoffman accomplishes this by reconfiguring the immigrant-as-outsider who has much to learn in her new home into the immigrant-as-authority who has much to teach her new compatriots.

1:

Lost in the New World

If we assume, as do applied linguists, that language is “the place where our sense of ourselves, our subjectivity, is constructed,” then in many ways, and especially in Hoffman's emphasis on conscious linguistic and cultural translations, Lost in Translation can be counted among textual translations: in translating her life, as in translating a text, Hoffman reveals taken-for-granted dominant cultural values to be situational and not at all universal.³²⁹ Hoffman certainly points to ways in which “language [...] determines the way its speakers perceive and apprehend reality” but in order to avoid alienating her intended North American audience, Hoffman also ‘domesticates’ her critique by simultaneously constructing a narrative of reconciliation with what she perceives to be

³²⁸ Lost 209.

³²⁹ Bonny Norton Peirce, “Social Identity, Investment, and Language Learning,” TESOL Quarterly 29.1 (1995): 15; and Lawrence Venuti's Scandals of Translation.

her American self—Eva.³³⁰ In other words, just as Hoffman critiques American culture and subverts traditional assimilationist trajectories, she also depicts her reconciliation with America and American English. “Despite my resistance, or perhaps through its very act,” she writes in Lost in Translation, “I’ve become a partial American, a sort of resident alien.” Earlier on, however, she makes more of an emphatic declaration of discomfort: “This goddamn place is my home now, and sometimes I’m taken aback by how comfortable I feel in its tart, overheated, insecure, well-meaning, expansive atmosphere.”³³¹ Through both of these assertions, Hoffman indicates an ambiguity which characterizes Lost in Translation: a sense of belonging in not belonging or a realization that a complete transition into an American psyche and environment is not possible, that the best Hoffman can hope for is some sort of a psychological comfort: “the year has assumed an understandable sequence within which I play the variations of a professional New York life.”³³² As is the case with translation in general, then, Hoffman’s works are an instrument of immigrant survival.³³³

When Hoffman acts as an interlingual translator and an intercultural authority, she domesticates Poland and Polish for her American English readers.³³⁴ The verb ‘to

³³⁰ Leon and Rebeca Grinberg, Psychoanalytic Perspectives on Migration and Exile, trans. Nancy Festinger, Yale: Yale University Press, 1989, 99. I compare again the work performed by Hoffman’s memoir to textual translations. Hoffman’s written life, like translations that Venuti examines in Scandals of Translation, surely “engages readers in domestic terms” made a bit less familiar by her constant travels between Poland and the U.S. and, through such encounters, are made “fascinating,” 5.

³³¹ Lost 221 and 164.

³³² Ibid. 278.

³³³ In A Marriage Made in Heaven: The Sexual Politics of Hebrew and Yiddish, Naomi Seidman observes that though translations are often seen as “wrongheaded endeavor[s],” they are, in their very existence, a means of survival for the texts themselves, obviously, but also for the people, places, and languages they describe (21). Berkely: University of California Press, 1997.

³³⁴ In Scandals of Translation, Lawrence Venuti argues that all works of translation inevitably domesticate the original text when they render it in a different language, which, to a large extent erases its foreignness and makes it palatable to a new audience. No translation is capable of avoiding this but those that “work best,” as Venuti observes, “the most powerful in recreating cultural values and the most

domesticate' comes from the Latin *domus* for house or home and resonates in Polish where *dom* is a word that refers to both home and house. Translation scholar Lawrence Venuti advises against textual domestication and prefers what he terms "foreignization," whereby translations bear some markers of the original language and make visible the work performed by the translator. Venuti's proscription is meant for strictly textual translations, but in the case of immigrant writings like Hoffman's, which are already translational, I argue that domestication is necessary. In fact, domestication in immigrant-authored texts is a deliberate act of locating home in foreign soil and making the immigrant's past comprehensive to a new linguistic and cultural audience.

When Hoffman identifies Poland as the home from which she was displaced upon immigration to Canada in 1959, she, like Jadwiga Maurer and Irena Klepfisz, qualifies her relationship to the country of her birth because of Polish nationalist discourse, which scripted Jews out of national belonging. She feels a sense of belonging to Polish, but she is more hesitant about belonging to Poland: "No, I'm no patriot, nor was I ever allowed to be. And yet, the country of my childhood lives within me with a primacy that is a form of love."³³⁵ In fact, Hoffman explains that physical places matter less for writers in exile because such writers create their own, textual worlds to augment those they lost and found in displacement.³³⁶ These homes are both lost and found because even if native or first homes and languages are physically left behind, immigrant locations are found, where the 'old' cultures and languages are fostered alongside the 'newly' acquired ones.

responsible in accounting for that power, usually engage readers in domestic terms that have been defamiliarized to some extent, made fascinating by a revisionary encounter with a foreign text," 5.

³³⁵ *Lost*, 74.

³³⁶ Diana Kuprel and Marek Kusiba, „Nie chce zyc w wedrowce [I don't Want to Wander],” *Akcent*, interview, Accessed Nov. 22, 2006, http://free.art.pl/akcent_pismo/pliki/siec/hoffman.html

Many immigrant writers, Hoffman among them, describe attempts at mending between what is left behind and what is found—between the ‘old’ and the ‘new’—with varying degrees of success.

Lost in Translation is divided into three sections according to Hoffman’s conceptualization of these varying degrees of success and comfort in North America: “Paradise,” “Exile,” and “The New World.” When she describes her immigration to Canada and the U.S., Hoffman reverses the conventional immigrant passages described by writers like Mary Antin or Anzia Yezierska. Instead of designating the Old World as a place of misery one longs to escape and perceiving the New as the “Promised Land,” Hoffman dubs the first section on Poland “Paradise.”³³⁷ Ewa, like her Biblical namesake, is cast out of Eden and the family departs from Poland when the communist government allows Polish Jews to apply for exit visas. In looking towards her life in Canada, Hoffman sees her life in Vancouver as “an enormous, cold blankness – a darkening, an erasure, of the imagination, as if a camera eye has snapped shot, or as if a heavy curtain has been pulled over, the future.”³³⁸ This description, filled with fear and halting in its use of commas, as if to indicate a difficulty in speaking, points to a kind of limbo Hoffman enters when she navigates her new life and sees Canadians as “a different

³³⁷ In “Pictures of a Displaced Girlhood,” Marianne Hirsch considers Hoffman’s dubbing of Poland as “Paradise” highly problematic. She cannot understand how Hoffman could describe a country where most of her family perished in the Holocaust and which has been torn asunder by anti-Semitism with so much love and devotion. But Hoffman is a child of thirteen at time of her emigration and by her own admission in Lost in Translation, she may have felt entirely differently had she been, like her parents, an adult at the time of departure. Displacements: Cultural Identities in Question, ed. Angelika Bammer, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994.

³³⁸ Lost 4.

species from anyone [she's] met in Poland," and finds that "Polish words slip off of them without sticking."³³⁹

The more internal division of Lost in Translation's falls between Hoffman's native language self, Ewa, and her American English identity, Eva. Hoffman sets up a seemingly simple binary relationship between the two languages, Polish and English, and the two selves corresponding to them, even though she debunks myths of unified and static identities throughout the memoir. Still, the complexity of her narrative, rich in deconstructions of the many selves played out both in the Old and the New Worlds, contradicts the binary division. Instead Hoffman undermines the binary, which appears as a narrative gesture designed to point out the unbridgeable depth between her life in Poland and North America. This split of Hoffman's identity is most strongly suggested by Hoffman's narrative forays into cultural linguistics. It is here that Hoffman most acutely identifies a double perspective, which leads to an almost schizophrenic, linguistically split and scattered personality, each commenting on the existence of the other. This personality split extends to Hoffman's Jewish and Polish gendered body, which she no longer recognizes upon emigration, and which she has trouble articulating.

Hoffman begins her immigrant journey in Vancouver at thirteen, hardly able to assert nationality, ethnicity, or language in a place that immediately seeks to transform her. In trying to fit in as a teenager, she simultaneously attempts to find a sense of belonging as a young immigrant woman; she molds her language, behavior, and body to suit the cultural precepts with which she is presented. Based on her age, gender, and position as an outsider, she is selected as a kind of a pet project for a set of benefactresses

³³⁹ Ibid. 108.

who, not satisfied with merely handing her free clothes, find inadequacies in her femininity. Hoffman's attention to physical or bodily inscriptions of language leads her to discuss gender in terms of cross-cultural ideals of femininity. Linked to her childhood in Poland, these images closely reflect the women she saw growing up. For Ewa, *Pani* (Mrs.) Orlovska, for instance, is the epitome of womanhood, a female role model, "a kind of female authority" Hoffman admires and which she "recognize[s] in many vivacious and strong-minded women around" her.³⁴⁰

Her Polish femininity does not parallel Canadian images of women. Hoffman finds that though she was considered a "pretty young girl" in Poland, in Canada she has "emerged as less attractive, less graceful, less desirable."³⁴¹ What Hoffman identifies as alienation, becomes physically inscribed in her flesh as she is shaved, plucked, curled, moisturized, and packed into crinolines and high-heeled shoes. In consequence, she sees her "chest recede inward so that [she doesn't] take up too much space – mannerisms of a marginal, off-centered person who wants both to be taken in and to fend off the threatening others."³⁴² With her confidence thus challenged, Hoffman admits that she finds all of these Canadian adolescent rituals a "comedown from [her] fantasies of an adventurous feminine destiny."³⁴³ Hoffman thus gestures to Poland as the place she navigated linguistically and physically. She uses her Polish identity as a reference point in the process of narrating the translation of her identity into Canadian cultural precepts.

³⁴⁰ Ibid., 47.

³⁴¹ Ibid., 109. Also see Zaborowska's discussion of gender and immigration in Lost in Translation in How We Found America.

³⁴² Lost, 110.

³⁴³ Ibid., 131.

After all, as with textual translations, such endeavors cannot be undertaken without an existence of a “source” text.³⁴⁴

Hoffman’s narrative is thus largely preoccupied with her source, Ewa, who must be translated into her target, Eva. “Because I have to choose something, I finally choose English,” she writes, “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.”³⁴⁵ Hoffman’s transition into English was obligatory; without it and along with her quickly atrophying Polish, she would have been relegated to a linguistic limbo. For a short while, in fact, like Klepfisz, Hoffman became suspended in just such a limbo when she lost a connection to Polish before she had access to English: “I have no interior language, and without it, interior images – those images through which we assimilate the external world, through which we take it in, love it, make it our own – become blurred too.”³⁴⁶ Unlike children and adolescents, adults are rarely at risk for losing their first language even if it becomes suffused with secondary linguistic traits because their native languages are solidly situated in their cognitive development.

When Hoffman describes her childhood in Poland, she provides detailed accounts of the old Krakow streets and buildings and gives us the address of the house where she grew up. Her descriptions of the city’s physical landscape are so detailed as to suggest that she belonged to Krakow and Polish, rather than the country at large. Despite her romance with Krakow and Polish, however, Hoffman does not idealize her past even

³⁴⁴ In translation studies, source text refers to the original that gets translated into the target language.

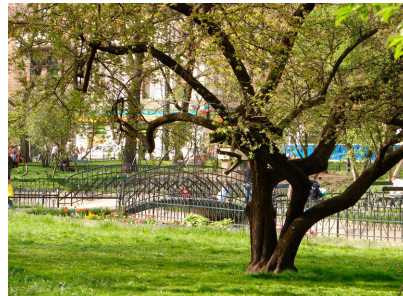
³⁴⁵ Lost 118.

³⁴⁶ Lost 107.

when she calls the Polish section of her book “Paradise.” Rather, she first wants to subvert Americans’ assumptions about communist Poland by insisting that it was not a dreary location of communist oppression (a prevalent Western perception during the Cold War). At the same time, she wants to show the extent to which displacement crystallizes the past as she repeatedly notes in her writings and interviews: “the exilic perspective tends to freeze one's image of the homeland in a mythic realm, a ‘space of projections and fantasies.’”³⁴⁷



Photograph 7: “The building where all of this happens, at Kazimierza Wielkiego 79, is situated on the periphery of the city.”



Photograph 8: "Sundays, aside from being visiting days, are for strolling on the Planty, the broad, tree-lined park-boulevards, which used to form the border of the old city."

³⁴⁷ “The New Nomads.” In Letters of Transit: Reflections on Exile, Identity, Language, and Loss, ed. Andre Aciman, New York: New Press, 1999, 52.



Photograph 9: "The city is full of history, though I don't experience it as that. To me, it's natural that a city should be very old, that it should have cave-like cafes with marble-topped tables, medieval church spires, and low, Baroque arcades."



Photograph 10: "My family goes to the synagogue only once a year, on the High Holidays. ... The synagogue ... has a Moorish façade with tiled mosaics and a portico with toylike, miniature arches."

In the context of Hoffman's descriptions of Krakow filled with magically winding streets and mysterious gothic buildings, the bleakness of the Canadian landscape that she describes in equal detail, strikes an especially discordant note. One of the root causes of this bleak description lies in the "careless baptism" that Hoffman and her younger sister, Alina, undergo in Vancouver immediately after their arrival.³⁴⁸ When they enter their new school accompanied by their parents' English-speaking friend, they are re-named so

³⁴⁸ For examples of name changes in immigrant or ethnic memoirs, see Mary Antin's The Promised Land, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1912. and Richard Rodriguez's Hunger for Memory: The education of Richard Rodriguez, Boston: D.R. Godine, 1981.

as to ease English speakers' pronunciation of their names. Ewa becomes a closely related Eva, while Alina a more distant Eileen. The baptism is enacted on more than just the sisters' Polish-language selves. As Hoffman recalls earlier in her story, aside from her parents, her entire family perished in the Holocaust and not a single photograph of those who died survived the war. Both Alina, who is named after their mother's sister, and Hoffman herself, who carries her paternal and maternal grandmothers' names (Ewa Alfreda), are physical reminders of persons whose very image, but not memory, has been destroyed. The "careless baptism" erases the sisters' Polish and Jewish linguistic and familial identities and, by implication, Christianizes them, thus making them "strangers" to themselves.³⁴⁹

Hoffman's fellow East European immigrant Marianne Hirsch closely identifies with the immigrant-adolescent experience, and asks an important question:

Was my discomfort and Hoffman's the result of our cultural displacement or was it due to a chronological transition that teenage culture and the demands of adult femininity have made inherently and deeply unnatural for even the most comfortable indigenous American girl?³⁵⁰

Both age and gender no doubt play a role in linguistic and cultural displacement and, as Hirsch points out, it is difficult, if not impossible, to discern which is more complicit. But Hoffman certainly feels the vicissitudes of displacement more acutely precisely because they are exacerbated by adolescent and feminine insecurities. For Hirsch and Hoffman, adolescence refracts immigration and vice versa: "my own and Hoffman's process of unlearning and learning, of resisting and assimilating was a double one which must have been doubly difficult to negotiate. It must have left us doubly displaced and

³⁴⁹ Lost 105-06.

³⁵⁰ Hirsch, "Pictures," 74. Hirsch immigrated to the U.S. when she was almost thirteen.

dispossessed, doubly at risk, perhaps doubly resistant to assimilation.”³⁵¹

Hoffman knows that had she been an adult upon her emigration, she would have had an entirely different relationship to the place of her birth: “perhaps the abstract issues of a collective identity would have developed an intimate logic that would have propelled me outward; perhaps. But for now, I hardly have an identity, except the most powerful one of first, private loves.”³⁵² It is not Poland, which is the object of her devotion, but its language through which she had acquired “perceptions, sounds, the human kind” and which gave her “the colors and the furrows of reality.”³⁵³ “Paradise” as the title of her section describing Poland, and as she explained in an interview, refers to childhood as a country of sorts where she felt at one with the surrounding world, before adulthood or, in her case, immigration, could tear it asunder.³⁵⁴

Mary Antin, who wrote her immigrant memoir almost a hundred years ago and with whom Hoffman identifies in Lost in Translation, confirmed the importance of age when she confessed that she “was at a most impressionable age” and that this “was in that period when even normal children, undisturbed in their customary environment, begin to explore their own hearts, and endeavor to account for themselves and their world.”³⁵⁵ Psychologists corroborate these painful effects of migration when they note that the processes are more traumatic for children than adults. They argue that the problems associated with immigration must be perceived through the particular phase of a child’s developmental age because the child “has not participated in the decision to leave [and

³⁵¹ Ibid. 75.

³⁵² Lost 88.

³⁵³ Ibid. 74.

³⁵⁴ Katarzyna Zimmerer, “*Pamięć i czas* [Memory and Time],” (An Interview with Eva Hoffman), Przekroj 30 (2001).

³⁵⁵ The Promised Land, xxi. Antin was thirteen when her family emigrated from Russia.

though] the family may act as a shock absorber of new stimuli, the adults closest to the child are themselves unsettled by the same migration.”³⁵⁶ This observation certainly accords with Hoffman’s resentment at having to emigrate. As a child, she could not even begin to fathom what opportunities Canada could possibly offer that she had not already found in Poland.

2:

Lost... and Found in Polish

Even in some of the more recent interviews published in Poland and the U.S., Hoffman continues to be ambivalent about her emigration from Poland, especially when she wonders, as she does in her memoir, about what her life might have been like had she stayed there:

If I had a life in Poland, it would have perhaps been less peaceful. Maybe I would have become a pianist. Would I have been happier? Probably. But this painful process was necessary. And, on the other hand, it has had its benefits. That is, I began to write, got a deeper knowledge, a wider perspective on the world. But had it been left up to me, I have no idea what I would have chosen.³⁵⁷

She also references this ‘backward’ glance or what she calls her “spectral autobiography” in Exit into History: “Every immigrant has a second, spectral autobiography, and in my revision of my own history I would have stayed in Poland long enough to become involved in the oppositional politics of my generation.”³⁵⁸ Hoffman’s spectral desire to participate in communist opposition is informed by the political

³⁵⁶ Grinberg, Psychoanalytic Perspectives, 113.

³⁵⁷ Lost, 120.

³⁵⁸ Exit, 41.

idealism with which she grew up in Krakow where her parents taught her about the shortcomings of the Soviet-imposed communist government. She can never know, of course, what her life would have been like had she stayed in Poland, but a look at Lost in Translation in the Polish provides a glimpse of Hoffman's representations of identity rendered in the language to which she professes allegiance and in which she imagines her spectral autobiography. In fact, a comparison between Lost in Translation (1989) and Zagubione w przekladzie (1995) yields several substantial differences in how Hoffman's immigrant identity fragmented along slightly different lines. By reading the immigrant narrative that travels back to the old world, we can learn more about lives in between languages and cultures. A look at the Polish translation of Hoffman's memoir does not reveal her hidden spectral autobiography since she had not participated in its translation process. Rather, it confirms the necessity of considering the effects of the opposite of what Walter Benjamin names as the haunting of translations by their originals.³⁵⁹ In terms of translations of English-language immigrant texts into their authors' first languages, it is the translation that haunts the original.

Hoffman has said that Michal Ronikier's translation of her memoir identifies the full circle that her life in print has taken; the Polish language identity that she so painstakingly explains in the English, travels back into the Polish via translation.³⁶⁰ As

³⁵⁹ Illuminations.

³⁶⁰ "Memory and Time," Przekroj. See also, Michal Oklot's review of Hoffman's first and, up to this point, only novel, The Secret: A Fable for Our Time (2001) [Tajemnica: Przypowieść na nasze czasy], which was translated and published in Polish in 2002. Oklot read the novel in both English and Polish and preferred the translation to the original: "The book also gets 'lost in translation.' I don't think it is especially important because the translation can neither help nor harm it. But there is at least one argument to read the book in Polish. Its translator doesn't really feel the English or American culture and so many of the clichés that she doesn't understand are either mistranslated or left out and that actually makes the book a bit more original." "Zycie seksualne klonow [The Sexual Life of Clones]," Przegląd Polski [Polish Review] on-line. Accessed Nov. 22, 2006.

anyone familiar with translation knows well, renditions of texts into other languages inevitably involve interpretations, changes, even elisions. But the translation of American immigrant memoirs from the English, in which they were written, and into the author's native language, proves particularly challenging. This is because the native language, which is 'strange' and unfamiliar to the English readers and must therefore be explained, is no longer so when it travels back into the author's native tongue. This is the case with *Zagubione w przekladzie* where the Polish is not the 'strange' and unfamiliar idiom that must be explicated. Instead, English emerges as foreign. This sounds like an obvious linguistic transformation, but the point of Hoffman's memoir was to show English language readers how alien her Polish immigrant self felt in the 'New World.' In the English original, Hoffman shows that her native language self was entirely alien to her new countrymen, while her newly acquired English identity, informed by the new language, its grammar, and cultural concepts, continued to be uncomfortable for her. In Ronikier's rendition, however, something both predictable and complicated happens; the fact that the book now reads in the native tongue of its author makes her acquired, accented English more familiar to Hoffman's narrator while her immigrant Polish self appears less alien to the North Americans that she describes.

Some of Ronikier's changes are inevitable and expected; after all, no text can be wholly transposed from one language into another. As Hoffman herself observes: "translation is so much more than the semantic transposition from one language to another in that every word carries clusters of cultural associations."³⁶¹ Other changes were clearly a result of Ronikier's conscious decisions and they have had a direct impact

³⁶¹ "Como conversazione" 262.

on Hoffman's textual persona in Polish. When Ronikier leaves out Hoffman's explanations of Polish words and phrases, for example, he erases the distance that Hoffman had to travel in order to make her Polish immigrant identity coherent to her English speaking readers.

The first example is rather humorous and offers an instance where Hoffman's unfamiliarity with the American English idiom is mirrored by the memoir's translator. This case foregrounds both the author and the translator as outsiders to American culture. In the original, Hoffman describes some of her college mates at Rice University whose behavior struck her as odd. One of them "speaks in tongues" and regularly submits herself to severe physical punishment at the hands of her religious mentor. In the Polish translation, this character becomes comic when she turns into a "young polyglot" who submits every weekend "to a leather strap beating" for no apparent reason. While slightly crazy, she is also linguistically gifted.³⁶² In the English original, this young woman strikes Hoffman as very odd precisely because Hoffman is unfamiliar with Christian fundamentalist practices implied by 'speaking in tongues' and corporal punishment. In the Polish translation, the girl is just plain odd when her strange behavior is no longer ascribed to the fundamentalist Christian dogma, which tolerates and even encourages such behavior.

Furthermore, Ronikier chose to leave out many of the explanations of Polish that Hoffman engaged in for her American English readers. Polish readers thus lose the extent to which Hoffman had to translate the Polish linguistic and cultural context for her American readers. Even the very title of her memoir becomes less explanatory when the

³⁶² Eva Hoffman, *Zagubione w przekładzie*, trans. Michal Ronikier, Londyn: Aneks, 1995: 171.

subtitle, “A Life in a New Language,” is omitted. Thus, Polish readers cannot know, as do their English-speaking counterparts, that there is no equivalent for the Polish “Pani” in English. In the original, Hoffman writes that her mother’s best friend is “Pani Ruta” and goes on to explain that “*Pani* means something like Madame.”³⁶³ In Polish, this brief explanation is missing. Ronikier simply writes that her mother’s best friend is “Pani Ruta.”³⁶⁴ Without the “Pani” explanation, Polish readers lose some of the extent to which Hoffman has to explicate even the most mundane Polish words and phrases.

Similarly, when Hoffman describes her “ciocia Bronia,” a woman who is not a blood relative but who has become a part of their family in Krakow, she writes in English that “*Ciocia* means ‘Auntie’” but once again Ronikier leaves out this brief linguistic interlude.³⁶⁵ He does this with a number of geographical place names and Krakow landmarks as well. In English, Hoffman describes Florianska Gate as “a familiar arch in Cracow, which used to function as a gateway to the old city,” which Ronikier leaves out.³⁶⁶ While in English, Katowice is “another city,” in Polish it is simply Katowice.³⁶⁷ Such changes, while seemingly innocuous, create a narrative where Hoffman engages in fewer and less involved explanations of Polish, Poland, and its landscape. Paradoxically, then, the translation naturalizes the Polish content, which Hoffman herself works so diligently to make coherent to her readers in English. What Hoffman ‘foreignizes’ by drawing American readers’ attention to the Polish difference, the Polish translation ‘domesticates.’ Ronikier makes Polish culture and language appear more familiar to

³⁶³ *Lost* 17.

³⁶⁴ *Zagubione* 20.

³⁶⁵ *Lost* 20, *Zagubione* 23.

³⁶⁶ *Lost* 49.

³⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

North Americans. Hoffman's narrator, in turn, appears not to have to travel as far in Polish to make herself understood to her English-speaking readership.

While the above omissions render Hoffman's narrator more comfortable in North America, Roniker's corrections of some of the factual errors Hoffman makes in the English improve the narrator's memory of Polish history. This transforms the narrator—her recall of the past is more reliable and she is more patriotic since she appears to be very invested in the history of Poland. For instance, Hoffman discusses history lessons from elementary school where her teachers emphasized that royals criticized in official communist histories were, in fact, great Polish patriots. In English, she writes: “[T]hat king ... he was a great Polish patriot, he installed a decent sanitation system and brought Italian architects to build some of the most beautiful buildings in Europe. His wife, Queen Jadwiga, was so religious and good to the poor that she was considered a saint.”³⁶⁸ Roniker's translation is more historically accurate: “That king ... was in fact a great patriot. Another king brought Italian architects to build some of the most beautiful buildings in Europe. Queen Jadwiga was so religious and good to the poor that she was considered a saint.”³⁶⁹ Thus, while in English the same king did a number of good deeds for his country and had a pious wife, in Polish the Queen appears independently and two kings are mentioned, neither one of whom installed a sanitation system. Another example of Hoffman's corrected historical recall concerns a later period of Polish history.

When she reflects upon her 1977 trip to Poland, Hoffman mentions the bygone “Gierek

³⁶⁸ Ibid., 62.

³⁶⁹ *Zagubione* 63. Queen Jadwiga and her husband King Wladyslaw Jagiello were monarchs in the 14th Century, Italian architects were brought to Poland during the Renaissance. Either Hoffman does not recall the details of her elementary school lessons or the teacher provided the wrong information. Either way, in Polish, unlike in English, she recalls the correct details.

period,” referring to one of the United Polish Workers’ Party First Secretaries.³⁷⁰ But Gierek was Secretary from 1970 to 1980 and thus actually in office during Hoffman’s visit. Ronikier recognizes that she means Gierek’s predecessor and corrects her when he writes about “the Gomulka period.”³⁷¹ Hoffman’s historical recall is certainly not entirely accurate, but as recent theories of life writing indicate, such imperfectability of human memory is one of the very fundamentals of autobiographies. Polish readers, however, have no opportunity to gauge the full breadth of her memory’s fallibility.

Ronikier’s decisions motivated by Polish political correctness as well as his personal concerns are even more ideologically driven. While what is lost and gained in translation in the above examples has to do with Hoffman’s immigrant identity and her links to Poland, the examples below can only be structured in terms of loss. For example, when Hoffman recalls reading historical novels by the Polish writer Henryk Sienkiewicz, “the laureate of Polish nationalism,” Ronikier describes him in less severely political terms when he writes that he was “the laureate of Polish patriotic literature.”³⁷² When Hoffman emphasizes anti-Semitism and says that she is no Polish patriot because, as a Polish Jew, she was “never allowed to be” one, Ronikier transforms the sense of her realization into temporal terms: “I am not a patriot because I never had an opportunity to be one.”³⁷³ While Hoffman’s original statement places emphasis on prohibition, Ronikier emphasizes time as if Hoffman was not in Poland long enough to become part of the nationalist ethos. This results in an elision of the overt presence of anti-Semitism in Poland and in Hoffman’s life.

³⁷⁰ *Lost* 237.

³⁷¹ *Zagubione* 235.

³⁷² *Lost* 27, *Zagubione* 30. Emphases mine.

³⁷³ *Lost* 74.

Perhaps Ronikier's most radical decision is his omission of an entire paragraph from the English original. This particular instance illustrates the dangers inherent in translations of contemporary nonfiction, and illustrates well the phrase "scandal of translation" coined by Lawrence Venuti, who applied it to describe, for example, uncritical uses of translations in literature courses. I apply his phrase more specifically here to describe Ronikier's rendering of a famous Krakow family. In "Paradise," the section of her memoir concerned with Poland, Hoffman depicts a close friendship between her family and the Orłowskis who are their neighbors. She structures an even more personal relationship with her readers by going beyond the intimate details of her own life and into the Orłowskis' troubled familial situation. The Orłowskis play an important role in Hoffman's memoir because the two families were close before the Wydras departed for Canada. In order to reveal the full dynamics of their household, Hoffman describes the odd way in which the husband and wife relate to each other: "*Pani Orłowska's* position changes subtly in the presence of her husband, as does the atmosphere of the whole household. ... [*Pani Orłowska*] is clearly on the defensive."³⁷⁴ Then Hoffman proceeds to describe in close detail the Orłowski marriage:

Dr. Orłowski has a permanent mistress, 'a painted blonde,' whom he supports in some nearby apartment and who is practically his second wife. 'I don't know why she puts up with it,' my mother adds. Such arrangements are common enough in Poland, and tacitly understood by all parties. But in *Pani Orłowska's* case, the situation doesn't accord with her dignity; it throws some odd light on her, on what she might be as a woman, rather than as an impressive personage.³⁷⁵

³⁷⁴ Ibid., 46.

³⁷⁵ Ibid., 46-47.

This paragraph is absent in the Polish translation. Ronikier is unfaithful as far as Hoffman's text is concerned; possibly to protect the family's privacy and shield them from gossip.

This omission is a twofold scandal: Dr. Orłowski's behavior is scandalous to begin with and Ronikier's decision to leave out the information about it constitutes another.³⁷⁶ It is entirely possible that Ronikier is a friend of the Orłowski family and therefore feels a sense of responsibility towards them. Ronikier was a part of Krakow's artistic scene for decades and may have come in contact with, for example, Robert Orłowski, the couple's son.³⁷⁷ A clue to their relationship comes when Ronikier corrects Hoffman's statement that Robert became a well-known music critic in Krakow. Ronikier knows that Robert became a well-known painter.³⁷⁸ The suggestion of such a personal connection between translator and subjects of the translation illustrates clearly that translators are never neutral devices of linguistic transference and that they wield enormous power over original texts despite their invisibility. Moreover, it emphasizes the challenges that contemporary immigrant memoirs pose when they are returned via translation into their native countries.

While "Polishness" as Hoffman said in an interview, "accompanied the first thirteen years of [her] life," she had to translate it into English when she described her childhood in Lost in Translation, which Ronikier then translated back into Polish.³⁷⁹ This textual circle of an immigrant journey emphasizes the need of multiple languages and

³⁷⁶ See Venuti's Scandals of Translation.

³⁷⁷ I wanted to interview Ronikier about his translation (he also translated Hoffman's Shtetl), but he has become impossible to contact as a result of a scandal in which he has been personally involved. It turns out that Ronikier took advantage of his position in Krakow's literary scene and regularly reported on its activities to Polish communist authorities prior to 1989.

³⁷⁸ Lost 47, Zagubione 49.

³⁷⁹ "Memory and Time."

translation as key to completing the “internal integration” of immigrant split linguistic selves. “The existence of both versions,” Hoffman emphasized, “unites my Polish and English selves.”³⁸⁰ As a consequence of Roniker’s decisions and relationships, the narrator is more reliable in Zagubione w przekładzie and appears less alien in her American surroundings. Roniker’s translation cuts short the long journey that Hoffman describes undertaking in order to make herself coherent in her new immigrant home.

3:

Survival and Displacement

Hoffman’s long and arduous journey into American English in Lost in Translation rarely detours from her descriptions of linguistic and cultural alienation. It is not until After Such Knowledge that Hoffman fully explicates the extent to which she was affected by her perceptions of her parents’ wartime survival. For a long time, she was unable to unravel the Holocaust thread of her history from the loneliness and alienation wrought upon her by emigration from Poland.

When Hoffman admits in After Such Knowledge that the process of immigration and the losses inherent in it “masked for a while the Holocaust strand of [her] history, and pushed many other concerns and aspects of identity into the background,”³⁸¹ she echoes what she emphasized in Lost in Translation when she described her birth into a war-torn world. Unlike her parents, who survived the Holocaust as adults and who had full knowledge of what the world was like before the catastrophe, Hoffman has no other

³⁸⁰ Ibid.

³⁸¹ After, 99.

reality to which to refer. "All of us," she writes, "born in those first years [after the war] came into a torn, ravaged world."³⁸² Robert Birnbaum describes After Such Knowledge as a sort of "culmination" and Hoffman agrees with his assessment, although she maintains that this was not intentional:

I didn't set out for this to be cathartic. But I think it has given me a sense of closure. ... there is a sense of completion about it. Now, I certainly could not have written it before Lost in Translation. And one reason I could not have written it [was] because the problem of being an immigrant covered over the problem of being a child of survivors. It was the kind of foreground problematic, and it took me a long time to arrive at these earlier problems and issues.³⁸³

Living in translation and cultural losses masked certain aspects of her identity, which Hoffman describes recovering in After Such Knowledge. She identifies the cultural phenomenon of the 'Second Generation' as one of the factors that helped her to recognize the 'Holocaust strand' of her history and recover it in After Such Knowledge:

It [second generation] situated it [After Such Knowledge] in a certain kind of a cultural conversation. Absolutely. For a long time my parents did not think of themselves as survivors. I certainly did not think of myself as a child of survivors. So it [the Second Generation] dictated a certain kind of cultural discourse that provoked me into addressing that. ... [The book] is acknowledging that it has a great meaning and a great weight and at the same time trying to demystify the notion of being of the Second Generation, simultaneously.

But like Maurer, Hoffman identifies her point of view as different from that of her American contemporaries because it is, inevitably, structured and influenced by her emigration from Poland: "My experience was perhaps different from a lot of people who were very Americanized and who viewed this whole history from a very American perspective."³⁸⁴ Thus, like in Lost in Translation, in After Such Knowledge, both Poland

³⁸² Ibid., 4.

³⁸³ "Author of After Such Knowledge converses with Robert Birnbaum," Identity Theory accessed May 8, 2007 <http://www.identitytheory.com/interviews/birnbaum157.php>.

³⁸⁴ Ibid.

as her one-time-home and the U.S. as her immigrant destination are equally important to Hoffman's project of self-recovery.

To begin with, Hoffman realizes that the thinking about trauma and memory in this country developed in particular social and cultural circumstances when, in the mid-to-late-1980s, there was a preoccupation with repressed memory and childhood sexual abuse:

This happened at exactly the same moment. We became fixated on questions of memory and the reliability of memory. And of course it came also with a tremendous explosion in the therapeutic culture and the very legitimate interest in questions of trauma after Vietnam. And with this was a tremendous emphasis on victimology, both personal victimization and collective victimization as well.

Like Klepfisz, Hoffman sees the development of 'survivorship' as an identity category in cultural terms when she describes how her own parents viewed their situation:

My parents, for instance, didn't see themselves as 'survivors'—even though they lived through the Holocaust--it is not a term they would have used. They began using it a little bit very late on, because it was in the air. But initially, and for quite a long time, they understood their circumstances in quite particular terms and textures.

Hoffman complicates this development because she realizes its ambivalence for survivors:

I suspect that having the public recognition of the events and the experiences was far more important than having it for the identities. With these identities, we begin to talk about things that are too reified, too solidified, too uniformly defined. And there is a danger that people--relying too heavily on this constructed identity--may begin to lose their immediate, personal relationship to their experience by relying on categories.³⁸⁵

³⁸⁵ Michael Bronski, "Parsing the Rhetoric of Memory," Publisher's Weekly 251.3 (Jan 19, 2004): 50-51.

The category brings public attention to the survivors' at the same time as it comes dangerously close to reducing their identities to what Goldie Morgentaler, among others, calls the "walking wounded."³⁸⁶

Many of Hoffman's musings about her relationship to her survivor-immigrant parents falls in line with what Marianne Hirsch has theorized as "postmemory." Hirsch coined the term to denote "the response of the second generation to the trauma of the first."³⁸⁷ She explains that those in the second generation—the children of Holocaust survivors born after the war—realize that their memory "consists not of events but of representations."³⁸⁸

The term "postmemory" is meant to convey its temporal and qualitative difference from survivor memory, its secondary, or second-generation memory quality, its basis in displacement, its vicariousness and belatedness. Postmemory is a powerful form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through representation, projection, and creation—often based on silence rather than speech, on the invisible rather than the visible. That is not, of course, to say that survivor memory itself is unmediated, but that it is more directly—chronologically—connected to the past.³⁸⁹

Hoffman describes knowledge of the war and her parents' suffering in it as her "first knowledge" and something, which she had identified as inescapably her own and belonging to her "inner world."³⁹⁰ At the same time, she knows well that despite the "memory" component of "postmemory" the wartime experiences she recalls are not her

³⁸⁶ See Terrence Des Pres, *The Survivor: An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1976; Morgentaler, "Land of the Postscript."

³⁸⁷ Marianne Hirsch, "Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory." *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 14.1 (2001): 8.

³⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 8-9.

³⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

³⁹⁰ *After* 6.

own and that, no matter how closely the children of survivors identify with their parents' war-torn lives, these are neither their own experiences nor their own memories.³⁹¹

Such "paradoxes of indirect knowledge" as Hoffman labels what is, in effect, postmemory, "haunt many ... who came after."³⁹² Hoffman emphasizes this point many times over as if to respond to the contemporary cultural moment where "trauma" is used to describes even the lives of those who did not experience atrocity first-hand.³⁹³ She writes elsewhere, for instance, that

it is important to remember: we grew up not with the Holocaust, but with its aftermath; or rather, with that aftermath as it was lived in our parents' psyches. Our first consciousness of the *Shoah* was transmitted to us through the immediacies and intimacies of the family and through means that were bodily, palpable, densely affective.³⁹⁴

When Hoffman deconstructs the cultural and historical underpinnings of "trauma," she does so in order to show how arbitrarily it has sometimes been ascribed to those perceived as "victims" of atrocity. "The legacy they [parents] passed on," she writes, "was not a processed, mastered past, but the splintered signs of acute suffering, of grief and loss. Such things, in our contemporary parlance, have come to be called trauma."³⁹⁵ Though her parents fell victim to atrocity and emerged from it "with external as well as internal traces" she and her contemporaries had not experienced it first-hand.³⁹⁶ She writes, for instance, that while Holocaust survivors write about their experiences "*from*

³⁹¹ See Ernst Van Alphen, "Second Generation Testimony, Transmission of Trauma, and Postmemory," *Poetics Today* 27.2 (1997). Ernst van Alphen, like Hoffman, notes that the discourse of transmission implicit in postmemory needs to be problematized because it implies continuity (475).

³⁹² *Ibid.*, 25.

³⁹³ Amy Hungerford, "Memorizing Memory," *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 14.1 (2001): 67-92.

³⁹⁴ *After* 33.

³⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 34.

³⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 35.

memory,” their children’s texts like Hoffman’s After Such Knowledge, are “*about* memory.”³⁹⁷

Being part of the second generation meant that children of immigrant survivors like Hoffman often found themselves at a loss; the isolation and fear of a strange language and culture were multiplied by their parents’ wartime traumas. As an adolescent, Hoffman was attempting to fit into the new world around her and trying to resolve both immigrant and adolescent dramas. At the same time, her parents’ situation or, rather, her own perception of it, made her feel responsible for them: “How to abandon parents who had been so abandoned? And how to explain to parents who were already disoriented the new rules obtaining in the New World, and one’s own newly acquired rights to the pursuit of fun, if not yet adult happiness?”³⁹⁸ The adolescent response that Hoffman describes in Lost in Translation and After Such Knowledge was to take on a parental role and feel the weight of responsibility that she could not, at the time, articulate.

She described, for instance, being scared and scarred by her parents’ helplessness and by feeling obligated “to take charge, to get [them] out of this quagmire.”³⁹⁹ As the older sibling, she also recalls feeling responsible for Alina: “Altogether, Alinka seems to be striving for a normal American adolescence. The only trouble is that none of us knows what that’s supposed to be, and my sister pains us with her capacity for change, with becoming so different from what she was.”⁴⁰⁰ Ewa’s linguistic and cultural

³⁹⁷ Ibid., 188.

³⁹⁸ Ibid., 89.

³⁹⁹ Lost 112.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid. 144.

confusion extends to her family and in this switch of parental roles, she admits that “everything is getting all mixed up.”⁴⁰¹

In After Such Knowledge, Hoffman describes a specific situation where the reversal of roles between parent and child became quite dramatic.⁴⁰² A few months after their arrival in Canada, Hoffman’s mother was accused of trying to take something from the local grocery store. She did not know how to explain herself to the clerk. When her mother was called to court, Hoffman, then fourteen, was asked to be her mother’s character witness. Hoffman found herself utterly befuddled by the court proceedings, understanding little English at the time, but certainly none of the legalese. What became even more disconcerting was that her father, “who had been so fearless was now stricken with fear—of deportation, prison, not ever being able to work again.”⁴⁰³ As Hoffman finally notes, she had to, suddenly and for the first time, reassure her parents. In effect, she became their caretaker. Hoffman goes on to explain that in some cases, such situations become quite extreme:

The children, overwhelmed by the weight of their responsibility, subjugate their own needs to those of the parents, taking care of them, making their elders’ continued survival their first task and mission, existing through them and for them in life-sapping reversals of normal parent-child scenarios, in self-renouncing submission.⁴⁰⁴

Once again, in these difficult situations, it is impossible to say whether the needs of the parents were created by their wartime experiences or by immigration. It is certain, however, that both have to be taken into consideration. Like Hoffman’s parents, many

⁴⁰¹ Ibid. 145.

⁴⁰² Many immigrant writers describe having to feel more grown up than their parents because, unlike them, they quickly learned how to linguistically and culturally navigate the “New World.” See, for example, Gish Jen’s Mona in the Promised Land (1996), Paule Marshall’s Brown Girl, Brownstones (1959), and Sigrid Nunez’s A Feather on the Breath of God (1995).

⁴⁰³ After 91.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid., 96.

immigrant survivors may have been more certain about their opinions and decisions in their home countries, but the new culture overwhelmed them and the dangers they had faced during the war exacerbated it. In Poland, Hoffman writes, her parents “might have met with aggressive anti-Semitism; but no one would have doubted their accounts [of survival during the war], or have been unduly surprised by them. There, such accounts were not tales from another planet. But in Canada they were.”⁴⁰⁵ She remembers, for instance, that a Canadian Jewish friend of her mother’s “asked ... in confidence, whether the concentration camps really had been as bad as all that, or whether people were exaggerating.”⁴⁰⁶ From the removed Canadian perspective, it mattered little, or not at all, that Hoffman’s mother survived the war in hiding and not in a concentration camp.

Hoffman further elaborates on the precarious situation of survivors as immigrant to North America when she emphasizes that all Holocaust survivors came from different cultural and linguistic milieus than the ones in which they found themselves after emigrating from Eastern Europe. She writes, for instance, that survivors spoke about their experiences to each other but were often reluctant to do so among strangers “who had not lived through similar things” partly because “this was before the culture of confession,” but mainly because many of them hailed from places that “did not believe in the healthful benefits of telling all or, indeed, in parting the curtains of one’s window too wide.”⁴⁰⁷ Moreover, most of the survivors hailed from countries where “the very idea of ‘the talking cure’ was as foreign as it might be to the villagers of Cambodia or

⁴⁰⁵ After 83.

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁷ After, 47.

Rwanda.”⁴⁰⁸ Indeed, “most of them did not come from a psychologically savvy generation, or from psychologically savvy subcultures” and “the whole business of bearing your soul to a paid stranger simply added humiliation on top of all the others they had undergone.”⁴⁰⁹ Finally, “[n]arrative, as much as we believe in its curative powers these days—isn’t always salvational. Making a ‘story’ out of extremity—or wanting such a story—sometimes offers false and facile consolations.”⁴¹⁰

Hoffman similarly deconstructs the phrase ‘second generation’ as a sociological phenomenon, to which she did not readily subscribe because, like the term ‘survivor,’ it reduced her multidimensionality to a single identity. When she was growing up, her parents were not ‘survivors,’ but “people who had undergone extremity and were now living another stage of their lives. Their very human condition did not appear ... as a condition, nor did it seem susceptible to being parsed into diagnostic categories.”⁴¹¹ She balks at reductive labels, then, because she recognizes that identities are neither static nor singular but, at the same time, she acknowledges that it gave her answers to long-searched questions: “[t]he phrase ‘second-generation’ provided a sort of illumination, and a sort of relief.”⁴¹² Hoffman clearly borrows from Benedict Anderson’s concept of the “imagined community” to describe children of Holocaust survivors because

the reference points through which we communicate and recognize each other have to do with our location in the dark topography of the *Shoah* and with the stages of a long and difficult reckoning—with our parents’ past and its deep impact on us; with our obligations to that past, and the conclusions we can derive from it for the present.⁴¹³

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid., 51.

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid.

⁴¹⁰ Ibid., 173.

⁴¹¹ *After* 57.

⁴¹² Ibid., 27.

⁴¹³ Ibid., 28-29.

Likewise, “[s]urvivors of the Holocaust rarely thought of themselves as ‘survivors’ until the term became routine, and an honorific,” and had its “salutary” effects when it helped “people crystallize their experience and honor them.”⁴¹⁴ Hoffman is nothing but compassionate when it comes to immigrant survivors like her parents, but she is also aware, as is Klepfisz, that survival does not make anyone an authority, that “‘victimhood’ is neither an essential quality or condition nor a guarantee of moral purity.”⁴¹⁵ Finally, Hoffman, again like Klepfisz, speaks against a Christianization of survivors when she writes that “to deserve our sympathy or help, the victims of atrocity do not have to be especially virtuous, nor saintly—nor should such virtue be expected of them. Persecution is not a character-improving process, and collective suffering cannot assure collective merit.”⁴¹⁶ This is very much unlike the Christian martyrology imposed upon Jewish survivors by people like Francois Mauriac who, in his foreword to Elie Wiesel’s Night, makes Jewish victims like Wiesel into other-worldly, Christ-like figures.⁴¹⁷

Like Irena Klepfisz for whom *der khrubn* is “a source of infinite lessons,” Hoffman admits that she can and, indeed, feels compelled to make the catastrophe relevant to the suffering and indignities she witnesses in the contemporary world.⁴¹⁸ And like Klepfisz, Hoffman also “feels that a personal legacy of the Holocaust inspires a feeling for justice.”⁴¹⁹ Hoffman’s thinking about World War II grew out of her parents’ speaking about it and the Polish post-war landscape in which she grew up: “The issues

⁴¹⁴ Ibid., 172.

⁴¹⁵ Ibid., 99.

⁴¹⁶ Ibid., 276.

⁴¹⁷ Francois Mauriac, “Foreword,” in Elie Wiesel’s Night, trans. Stella Rodway, New York: Hill and Wang, 1960; Naomi Seidman’s “The Scandal of Jewish Rage.”

⁴¹⁸ “Anti-Semitism,” 56.

⁴¹⁹ After, 253.

that matter to me are often the ones that grow out of the war and the Holocaust; much of my elaborated vision of the world was forged from the bleakly dramatic post-Holocaust topography.”⁴²⁰

4:

Mediating Difference

Hoffman sets up representations of her multivalent perspectives as a trifocal Polish Jewish American vision, which she uses to form and inform her writing about Polish Jewish relations and about American perceptions of Poland and Eastern Europe. She foregrounds her mediating perspectives in Exit into History, the middle component of the textual triptych I examine. Hoffman wrote Exit as a result of two different trips in 1990 and 1991 through Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria. Her goal was to describe the “New” Eastern Europe as the region began to go through political and economic changes. In the process of doing so, Hoffman reveals much about her own emigration from Poland.

On one of her many post-1989 return visits to Poland, for example, Hoffman found herself in Tykocin, a small town in Eastern Poland, where she traveled with her friend, the late Agnieszka Osiecka, one of Poland’s prominent poets and songwriters. To her surprise, Hoffman saw her name along Osiecka’s on the evening’s program:

“Eva Hoffman from America,” it says, as if that were enough of a claim to fame. I try to protest—I am utterly unprepared for this—and point out that I am wearing

⁴²⁰ Ibid., 104.

sneakers and a T-shirt that has seen better days, but Agnieszka says briskly, “You’re American, you’re allowed to do anything you want.”⁴²¹

The audience welcomes Hoffman with open arms as a Polish-speaking expert on the United States. People ask her about race and racism in the U.S., about drug use, and about the difficulty of publishing books there.⁴²² In this instance, Hoffman’s Polish audience calls upon her expertise in American English and culture.

As much as Hoffman describes being treated and even received as an American as her performance in Tykocin suggests, she is also, to some degree, a cultural insider and a skilled cultural critic in Poland. She is, in effect, both inside and outside of the culture; both its observer and its participant.⁴²³ ““I tell you,”” she hears from a receptionist in a Warsaw hotel, for instance, “I’m sometimes ashamed of what these foreigners see when they come here.”⁴²⁴ By default, Hoffman is not, in this case, a foreigner. But when she travels outside of Poland, she is inevitably perceived as an American despite her avowal that Eastern Europe was her home. When she needs translation services, for instance, which is never the case in Poland, she is often met with people who simply want to swindle her: “I feel faintly insulted, both by being placed in the role of a rich gullible Westerner, and by the alacrity with which this man is willing to exploit his country’s new modishness,” she says of someone in the Associated Press office in Prague.⁴²⁵

In Exit into History, Hoffman uses an important literary image to describe her multiple identity positions. Recalling Thomas Mann’s Death in Venice (1924), she

⁴²¹ Exit, 109.

⁴²² Ibid., 110.

⁴²³ In America, she is also both observer and participant. At a party, for example, where she is having a really good time, she confesses that “there’s no denying that out of a corner of my mind I’m observing what’s going on from a slight observer’s distance” (Exit 388).

⁴²⁴ Ibid., 113.

⁴²⁵ Ibid., 125.

describes the risk of “disintegration” inherent in approaching “Otherness” that Mann wrote into Aschenbach’s meeting with Tadzio. But Hoffman’s is a rendezvous with a difference: in meeting with what for Westerners is “Otherness,” she, of course, approaches her own notion of home: “in my travels, for all their hardships, I’m pursuing the essence of the familiar—though that too, after long separation, can become oddly elusive.”⁴²⁶ It becomes especially so when Hoffman pursues the familiar not only in Poland but in the other four countries she visits. She identifies Poland as home through the fantasies she had created after emigrating and the rest of the region is home only nominally, in that it shared Poland’s communist fate and Soviet influence.

The multiple identities that Hoffman represents in her texts are interrelated and simultaneous, and she identifies some differences between them: “In my acquired repertory of American thinking,” she writes, “it’s never too late, and this is not a phrase I like to admit to my consciousness.”⁴²⁷ In other instances, she admits to “Polish prejudices” as when she is disappointed with too pragmatic a view of social and political changes since a man she meets in Prague simply seeks out opportunities, both in the old and in the new systems, to save his own skin. When she meets with a particularly bureaucratic receptionist in a travel agency in Prague, for example, she identifies her own view as that of other Westerners who, when fed up with the impossibility of resolving even the most seemingly simple issues like purchasing a train ticket, get frustrated and rage at what they perceive as outmoded remnants of a communist system. But, tellingly, she voices her rage not in her fluent English but “in [her] unimperial Polish,” shouting at

⁴²⁶ Ibid., 78.

⁴²⁷ Ibid., 130.

the clerk: “Nothing has really changed! You deserve everything you’ve had!”⁴²⁸ Thus, the content of her contempt might have a distinctly Western attitude, but its language is ‘unadulterated’ Eastern Europe.

In her journeys through Eastern Europe, Hoffman might remind readers of 19th Century characters out of E.M. Forster’s novels who traveled through Italy armed with their Baedekers. Instead of a Baedeker, Hoffman uses Fodor’s Guide to Europe and relies on native informants and, outside of Poland, translators, to gather information about the systemic changes taking place in these countries. And though she represents her own point of reference as that of a cosmopolitan Eastern European, she often appears to exoticize and essentialize the cultures and peoples she encounters much the same way that Forrester’s characters do in his novels. When traveling gets rough in Romania, for instance, she seems to echo Forster’s 19th Century female characters: “Perhaps the unease has been that this Gypsy wandering is no business for a nice, middle-class woman; that it’s defeminizing to put oneself in such rough, ill-decorated conditions.”⁴²⁹ On another occasion, when she bargains with someone in Romania, she concludes that the “instinct” to do so is “atavistic” and “undoubtedly [it is] springing from the depths of Eastern Europe.”⁴³⁰ She expresses sentiments that both distance and differentiate her from her Eastern European home and place her firmly within it. This sort of in-betweenness inherent in her narrative perspective has to do with her desire to make her observations as familiar to her American readers as possible. She over-dramatically observes, for

⁴²⁸ Ibid., 188.

⁴²⁹ Ibid. 282.

⁴³⁰ Ibid., 271.

example, that “for a Pole to lose his pessimism is to lose his honor.”⁴³¹ She also collapses the region when she writes that “Poland—and by extension, Eastern Europe—remained for me an idealized landscape of the mind.”⁴³² She says that “for the sake of simplicity and convenience,” she refers to “‘Eastern Europe’ most of the time,” although she clearly realizes that “one of the myths imposed on Eastern Europe in the last forty-five years, and quickly abolished by recent events, was the myth of uniformity.”⁴³³ There is an interesting dialectic between these myths of a generalized Eastern European culture and her desire to dispel them by representing their various national, linguistic, ethnic, political, and social components. As much as these countries are different, then, there are, as Hoffman asserts, “certain kinds of stories [which] recurred in each country, and ... mirrored each country’s history and situation.”⁴³⁴

When Hoffman meets a few foreigners in Poland, including a number of American journalists, she is surprised by her own defensiveness when they complain about “what an impossible, dreary place Poland is.” Hoffman feels “defensive” and “surprisingly implicated” as if they criticized her. She similarly cannot understand an American who argues that “Poles aren’t smarter ... because they have an unhealthy diet.” “It doesn’t seem to bother her,” Hoffman observes, “that she has hardly talked to anybody Polish.”⁴³⁵ In a similar manner, Hoffman describes a discussion having to do with Polish Jews. While she feels odd unease when she confronts American prejudices in

⁴³¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁴³² *Ibid.*, ix.

⁴³³ *Ibid.*, xiii.

⁴³⁴ *Ibid.*, xv.

⁴³⁵ *Ibid.*, 55.

Poland, she is also on the defensive when it comes to non-Jewish Poles and their attitudes: “On this matter,” she confesses, “I have my Historical Obligations.”⁴³⁶

As the example of Hoffman’s “Historical Obligations” suggests, like Klepfisz and Maurer, she too feels that “the Polish and Jewish [and American] parts of [her] history, [her] identity—[her] loyalties—refuse either to separate or to reconcile.”⁴³⁷ Her narrative self observes and participates in the languages and cultures she encounters in Europe and North America. In fact, for the last twenty years, Hoffman has made her living by writing about the languages, cultures, and countries on these two continents. In these texts, from Lost in Translation to After Such Knowledge, Hoffman repeatedly emphasizes that while displacement is “productive for a writer or an intellectual,” it is “rather uncomfortable in everyday life.”⁴³⁸

⁴³⁶ Ibid., 98.

⁴³⁷ Ibid., 101.

⁴³⁸ „*Jak przetłumaczyć siebie* [How to Translate Yourself],” Przekroj [The Crossection] 2302 (1989).

Chapter 6

Conclusion

English-speaking ability is felt to be an index of cognitive maturity, sophistication, degree of Americanization, and general personal worthiness and immigrant status and limited English proficiency are considered states of deficiency and backwardness.⁴³⁹

Sandra Lee McKay and Cynthia Wong

I was born, I have lived, and I have been made over.
Mary Antin⁴⁴⁰

In The Promised Land (1912), the multilingual immigrant author Mary Antin describes her arrival and adjustment period in the United States as a “second infancy,” even though she arrived here long after she had acquired her “faculties” and “some bits of experience,” long after, in short, she had become a cognitively resourceful and outspoken child.⁴⁴¹ Having been immediately upon her arrival in Boston “corrected, admonished, and laughed at” for her lack of English language ability and familiarity with American ways and mores by friends and strangers alike, Antin describes in her memoir a rebirth of sorts wherein she attempted to become a person who could linguistically and culturally navigate her new country.⁴⁴²

Antin’s sentiments are familiar to me. As someone who left Poland for the

⁴³⁹ “Multiple Discourse, Multiple identities: Investment and Agency in Second-Language Learning among Chinese Adolescent Immigrant Students,” Harvard Educational Review 66(1996): 582.

⁴⁴⁰ The Promised Land 1.

⁴⁴¹ 144.

⁴⁴² *Ibid.*, 143.

United States as an adolescent, I felt immediately infantilized and out of place upon my arrival in Southern California in 1985. The importance of American English language acquisition at that point in my own immigrant story sheds some light on the conclusion to this project. Like Hoffman, I was a monolingual Polish speaker. And like her, I was thrown headlong into learning English as a second language while in high school. Years later, I found myself studying Yiddish at the University of Michigan and then at YIVO in New York City. My linguistic journey in Yiddish proved much less emotionally treacherous than in English because I had taken it upon myself as an intellectual and scholarly endeavor; I wanted access to one more language in which immigrants to the U.S. have described their experiences. Unlike American English, Yiddish has never been for me an “index of cognitive maturity, sophistication, degree of Americanization, and general personal worthiness,” as McKay and Wong remark in the epigraph that I have selected for this conclusion. As a language in which I conducted research, Yiddish was a welcome respite from the pressures of my immigrant adaptations. I learned it just as Klepfisz prescribes it should be studied: not as a ‘natural’ Jewish language, but as a system of signs that, like any other language, requires acquisition of grammar, vocabulary, and syntax. For immigrants, in contrast, no matter how educated they may be, learning the language of the dominant culture is loaded with emotion; it entails confronting that culture’s value systems along with their judgment of the newcomer.

At one point or another, many immigrants, especially those who, like Hoffman and Klepfisz, come to America as children or adolescents, feel inferior and become marked for life because of their lack of linguistic ability or due to their accented and/or ungrammatical English. Many of them believe that they are forever illegitimate English

speakers, both because the monolingual dominant culture tells them so and because they themselves internalize its impossible-to-achieve standards. Many immigrants, even once they have achieved linguistic proficiency, or become published writers, often feel insecure, as if they were linguistic and gendered impostors in the Promised Land. When I began to attend La Habra High School in southern California – that home of impeccable bodies and accents – I felt not only out of place, but also somehow body-tongue-tied. As an awkward teenager with disproportionately elongated limbs, and so burdened with multiple hours of English as a Second Language classes that I was not sure what my name was to begin with, I fit perfectly Hoffman’s description of the multiply confused, dislocated, and fragmented immigrant. Only in hindsight, having acquired yet another language and written a dissertation, I realize that in this Babel of languages and cultures, I fit only in my many immigrant “misfittings.”⁴⁴³

The idea of culturally and linguistically fitting in or belonging is one of the key features of immigrant memoirs and novels. Out of the three writers examined in this project, Klepfisz and Hoffman most overtly describe some of these fundamentally unsettling experiences. Maurer is unusually silent on this topic and her narrator rarely speaks of feeling discomfited by her surroundings even if she describes being utterly baffled by the behavior of the monolingual speakers around her. This is in large part due to the fact that while Hoffman and Klepfisz entered American elementary schools and high schools, Maurer’s narrator (and Maurer herself) is already a professional adult by the time of her passage and arrival, which gives her the opportunity to act more as an

⁴⁴³ See Hoffman’s Lost in Translation, Zaborowska’s discussion of it in How We Found America and the preface to Zaborowska’s Erotics of Exile: James Baldwin’s Turkish Decade, forthcoming, Duke University Press.

observer of than as a participant in the culture around her. Unlike Hoffman and Klepfisz, who describe immigrant, linguistic, and growing pains as interrelated and inseparable, Maurer is an adult and is thus better equipped to successfully resist, or silence, the linguistic markings with which these younger writers contended.

Fitting in has, of course, much to do with the very physical ability of the tongue to proficiently replicate the sounds of English. But for female immigrants, as Klepfisz and Hoffman tell us, it also has much to do with physically appearing to replicate the dominant models of femininity, a process that young immigrant women are expected to embrace in the course of their cultural assimilation. In Lost in Translation, Hoffman describes years of gendered performances where, both in Canada and in the U.S., she attempted to become recognizably feminine in the North American vein by means of shaved legs, painted lips, high heels, and crinolines. Klepfisz remembers her homemade dresses, which made her stand out in her American school even when her mother imitated the styles of dresses the other teens were wearing. And when she became open about her sexuality in the 1970s, she felt ostracized by the Jewish community as well as the American mainstream.

All the while both Klepfisz and Hoffman struggle with American precepts of belonging, they contend with their past in Poland in terms of places they miss or feel connected to and displaced from. Hoffman feels literally fused to her past in Krakow, which, in light of her immigrant dilemmas, she idealizes. At the same time, she is privy to her parents' nighttime screams and cries; in their precarious financial and cultural situation in Canada, they continue to be plagued by the trauma they experienced when they hid from the Nazis in the Ukraine. Klepfisz recalls how she could not let go of her

memories of the communal warmth in postwar Poland and Sweden, while later she lived with her mother alone in a cramped New York apartment.

A recent article in The New York Times describes a new archive being organized by YIVO. This new collection consists of countless refugee files from a Jewish American resettlement agency in New York that handled the cases of Jewish arrivals from Eastern Europe during the 1950s. The files show that many of the “refugees walked a gauntlet of resistance and distrust: disapproval of their lack of English and need for health care, threats of deportation, and agency rules shaped by a suspicion of freeloading.”⁴⁴⁴ Contrary to our contemporary belief that Jewish survivors were welcomed with open arms upon their arrival in the Promised Land, these files tell a less mythical and a more consistently realistic American story of arrival: these immigrants, like their predecessors at the turn of the twentieth century and their much maligned ‘illegal’ twenty first century counterparts, were met with distrust, suspicion, and distaste. Consider the unemployed father of three who was afraid that he would be deported for seeking public assistance and who told his caseworker that “he was more concerned and more disturbed now than he had ever been in the Warsaw Ghetto.”⁴⁴⁵ Or Mark Kanal, who gave up his first American job when his boss would not allow him to take Saturdays off of work: “To come to a democratic country like America and not be able to practice your religion there the way you feel you should didn’t feel right to me.”⁴⁴⁶ As immigrants and not yet survivors, these European Jews were not seen as amazing heroes, who survived unspeakable horrors, as they are now, but were instead viewed with

⁴⁴⁴ Nina Bernstein, “Land of Opportunity Offered Little at First,” The New York Times 9 March 2008: 26.

⁴⁴⁵ Qtd. in *ibid.*

⁴⁴⁶ Qtd. in *ibid.*

hostility as “human debris” or, alternatively, were patronized and pitied as “unfortunate victims who had to be resocialized.”⁴⁴⁷ Like Maurer, Klepfisz, and Hoffman’s parents, these survivor immigrants were expected to forget the past, reinvent the present, and look forward to the future.

That is why, as I hope this project has shown, survivors or their children who have written about their displacement must be read in the context of complex and nuanced histories, languages, and narrative patterns. In the framework of this project, the archive being now amassed by YIVO offers unparalleled opportunities for scholars to begin to tell more intricate stories of the transitions made by immigrant survivors after the end of the war.⁴⁴⁸ The collection’s material invites further revision of the mythical dimensions of America as a country of happy and well-adjusted newcomers. It compels the realization that we need to make sense of the individual experiences of these immigrant survivors who spent countless hours trying to convince resettlement organizations that they were worthy of assistance, that they were aspiring citizens, and fully-fledged human beings.

At the outset of this project, I suggested that Jadwiga Maurer’s, Irena Klepfisz’s, and Eva Hoffman’s literary representations of immigrant lives in the United States bring us closer to understanding how Americans, like the soldiers in Tadeusz Borowski’s “The Battle of Grunwald,” are simultaneously the survivors’ allies and enemies. In this complicated context, the hostility of Americans’ towards the newcomers does not mean that women like Maurer, Klepfisz, or Hoffman could not or did not find a place for themselves in their new country. Nor do the many opportunities that they found in North

⁴⁴⁷ Atina Grossmann, qtd. in *ibid.*

⁴⁴⁸ Like the stories that Beth Cohen analyzes in Case Closed.

America tell us that their lives here were no longer burdened by the past in Europe or their translated, immigrant present. These authors' responses to the historical circumstances of their displacement have much in common, but the specific contours of their immigrant present are related to their different ages and identity positions. Maurer's life and stories show that those who write in languages other than English are scripted out of American literature. As a radical Jewish feminist lesbian, Klepfisz is scripted out of the patriarchal and Christian-dominated American mainstream. Finally, Hoffman, who is the best known out of these three writers, finds that the only solution to her linguistic conundrums lies in London, her cultural and geographic middle ground.

As the chapters in this project illustrate, the fields of immigration and Holocaust Studies can be, indeed should be, interrogated as analogous literary traditions, so that we can better understand responses to violence and displacement, which affect millions of people in our contemporary, globalized world. These fields focus on texts authored by individuals who, from the start, have to write about their past in multi-layered translation. Furthermore, as Maurer's, Klepfisz's, and Hoffman's prose and poetry suggest, Holocaust survivors write about their experience of immigration in terms that are similar to those of their predecessors. Like Mary Antin at the turn of the 20th Century, they talk about the challenges of learning English, their inability to fit in, or the dissonance between their lives in Europe and in North America. Unlike some of these earlier immigrants, however, they are invested in a complex critique of their new homes and their stories do not describe Americanization. They are not re-made in the New World. Instead, their writings construct a variety of aterritorial allegiances that allow them to fully live in their translated present without surrendering their past.

Appendix

JADWIGA MAURER

When I met Jadwiga Maurer at her home in Lawrence, Kansas in July 2006, I asked her about many of the themes and issues that I examined in the chapter about her short stories, which was very roughly sketched out at the time. We spoke about her first person narrator, the locations of her stories, as well as the similarities between her own life and the life of her narrator. Before we began our formal interview, Maurer asked whether I wanted to interview her in English or Polish. As it happens, my first question concerned her language preference. She left the choice up to me, saying something, I think, rather revealing: “Well, when we speak Polish, it just seems so natural and we never even tried it in English...” “Natural.” The word speaks volumes. And, indeed, I did feel more comfortable speaking with her in Polish. Especially since, when we could not find certain phrases or terms in Polish, we easily switched to English. We repeatedly engaged in that time-honored immigrant practice of code switching. Immigrants often learn words and phrases in one language without knowing their equivalents in the other. That is, once we become fluent in our acquired language, English, we learn English from English and not from Polish. I indicate the times when we code switched in italics.

Maurer and I are separated by different generations, not to mention life experiences, but as immigrant women in the United States, we connected through language. That connection should not be underestimated and I emphasize it here because our interview took place in Polish, which is the language of her prose. It was only later that I had to translate the words of her stories and our interview into the English of my academic life. And, as Maurer likes to point out, translation has its pitfalls. She told me

that most of the Polish language works she has read in English were poorly translated. Their translators, as she insists, often failed to capture a certain mood or atmosphere or the author's intentions. The last, as Maurer knows well, is notoriously difficult to accomplish since translation involves interpretation almost as much as it does bilingual ability. She nevertheless calls these translations awkward and carelessly executed. As she correctly points out, translation takes a particular kind of a talent and not only a fluent knowledge of more than one language.⁴⁴⁹

At some points, it was tempting to ask other questions, but I simply did not wish to interrupt Maurer. For example, when she began talking about herself and not the narrator, thus belying her protests against the narrator being identified with her, I felt that pointing that out to her would be counter-productive and disruptive. At other times, I did not pursue a topic when it seemed clear to me that Jadwiga did not care for the direction our conversation was taking. In order to redress some of the absences, I contacted Jadwiga via email to ask her more questions. She was gracious enough to continue our correspondence and expressed interest in and support of my project. Because we had had a few conversations over the telephone prior to my arrival in Lawrence, the interview begins sort of in media res when we continue talking about the narrator who is the protagonist of all of Maurer's stories

⁴⁴⁹ In a letter to Michal Chmielowiec, *Wiadomosci*'s editor from 1966 to 1974, Maurer acknowledged that translators often correct or edit originals. She finds such interference inappropriate. Oct. 16, 1969. Nicholas Copernicus University Emigration Archive. Torun, Poland.

Jadwiga Maurer: I focused a variety of views, perceptions, and tendencies in the figure of my narrator. What makes her different from the author is the fact that she is always alone and even rather lonely in some moments. She doesn't have a support system. This is the case because she does not feel that [the U.S.] is her home. She is, in effect, homeless. In the beginning, if we did this chronologically, when she is still in Poland then maybe it is there, but one way or another she is still very young. In fact, she is still with her parents, but later it all becomes a very lonely journey for her. And if you ask me, for example, why I got rid of anyone since I, the author, lived with my parents and they had enormous influence on me and still do and I still refer to what they said and their memories and so on. Why did I get rid of the narrator's parents? I can't tell you why because I don't know, but I suspect it was because that protagonist, the narrator, talks only on her own behalf. She is alone and she came out of the war alone. Even though she was there with her parents. And I get the impression that she speaks and wants to speak only for herself. Perhaps she thinks that she is unique or maybe she thinks that everyone who survived in a similar manner or just survived has similar feelings. I don't know. I couldn't resolve this even if I wanted to because I simply don't know. Some things, when one is writing, just come all by themselves. They come and go. And she changes very little in all those years. Just as she was in Poland, she is in California.

JP: Why is she never named? Why do we never know her first or last name?

JM: I don't know [laughs]. I simply don't know. I only noticed this myself just a few days ago. Maybe when I spoke with you, I noticed that this person has no name. And so that, I think, would confirm this idea of mine that this was supposed to be someone symbolic. Someone imagined by the author. That this kind of a person should be like

her. But I really never did give her a name, which is really strange [laughs]. She really has no name. It's difficult for me to figure this out. As you know, in Kafka, for instance, where he writes about "K" there are whole novels like that in which the protagonist is identified by only this one letter, which is his initial, or isn't—whatever the case might be—but I never consciously thought about this. It just really came out like that. You're right. From the very first story, "Spacery z Baska," Baska⁴⁵⁰ has a name and the narrator does not. Maybe it is like that because, not later though, but at first she changed radically. She has no name because she is no longer the same person she was when she lived in pre-war Kielce about which she cannot reminisce. So maybe that's how it all started. I don't know. This needs analysis.

JP: I noticed that in at least one of the stories, in "Antyojczyzna" ["The Anti-Homeland"] for instance, the narrator travels to the United States and then returns to Munich because she doesn't want to live in the U.S. She protests against it, in effect, but then we have stories where the narrator does, in fact, live in the U.S.

JM: That's because all of the decisions about moving and relocating here and there are somehow hidden. They don't really exist in the life of the narrator. That is, everyone emigrates and in one of the stories she sees herself as the only person out of the group who remains in Munich. Well, there's also Heniek. It seems to me that the narrator simply yields to the fact that you have to emigrate. I can't explain it any other way. Such were the lives of those people that they almost all, even those who were against it, who didn't want to emigrate, even those who led very comfortable lives in Munich, had factories, stores, etc., left in the end. It seems to me that no one analyzed these decisions.

⁴⁵⁰ Baska: diminutive of the name Barbara.

The narrator, for example, moves from Berkeley in California to Indiana. Everywhere she goes, and that's how it often is in real life, not only in literature, she is not certain whether she made a good decision or not, but she decided to move because she has a family, a husband, and so on.⁴⁵¹ That's how it works in life too. That's why I never felt a need to get at the reasons for her emigration from Germany. No need and no desire. And anyway, everyone, well maybe except for farmers, who live off of the land, moves around a lot. In Europe after the war people simply moved around. And the whole thing about leaving Poland—they didn't really talk about this in Poland. They almost never wrote about it. It was a taboo subject. Not entirely taboo, but almost. Why? For one, no one wanted to admit that such huge waves of people were leaving Poland because that wouldn't look good. Secondly, these were political decisions because of the Soviet Union and because they wanted to be in the West, and the Zionists wanted to have a state of their own in Palestine, etc. All of these were rather unpopular topics in the official press. [Jerzy] Daniel, for example, wrote something along the lines of how could the narrator possibly go to Germany—to the tormentors? He wrote something about how could these people go to Germany, to their tormentors. He didn't understand, I could have explained it to him, but I didn't notice it at the time and he didn't understand that it wasn't like that. First of all, there was no Germany. It was the American sphere of influence. I mean it was all divided. Secondly, in the American sphere there were hundreds of thousands of people of various nationalities, not only Polish Jews or Jews of other nations, Hungarian or something, but also Ukrainians and Poles. Most of them

⁴⁵¹ Maurer almost seamlessly went from talking about her stories' narrator to talking about herself. This is understandable given the many instances where she wrote her own experiences into the story of her protagonist.

were Russian, Ukrainian, Polish, those who survived labor and concentration camps, those who came out of the Russian army who were and are, if they're still alive, deserters [laughs], etc. etc. Daniel didn't understand that. It wasn't so important, but I noticed it and someone else also wrote about it. Because how in the world did they go from Poland to Germany and immediately after the war to boot? Daniel doesn't know what it was called. That all these Jews said they were going to Palestine. Do you understand? But that wasn't entirely true, just talk. People used it to leave and some Poles also left in this way because the Polish government quietly agreed to it, to let them leave for this reason, on the same trains. And so AK [Armia Krajowa, The Home Army]⁴⁵² members left, some people whose lives were in danger, and they had no documents, but they were let through at the border because they were in that Zionist, Jewish transport. Those were different times and it's difficult to explain. My protagonist's immigration is not as clear. I don't even talk about it in my stories as if I accepted that [laughs] this person would be... Probably it happened because I wanted to write something about Berkeley and it probably happened that I didn't even realize, were it a novel I'd have to, I should have, maybe I wouldn't have to, but I should have written something about it. But because these were short stories, episodes from her life, I didn't take the time to describe it. I think everyone knows why she left. It needs no explanation because all those people left in the end. Why? Not because they wanted to leave, but because they left Poland with the intention of going on from Germany. Sometimes it took them a few or even several years.

⁴⁵² Armia Krajowa/The Home Army was the dominant (and anti-communist) resistance organization in World War II Poland.

JP: This issue of the narrator's departure interested me in the context of "Antyjojczyzna" where she leaves for the U.S. and when she arrives there, she simply cannot see herself living there. She cannot see herself here, but she sees a life for herself in Germany.

JM: Yes, but that was sort of out of revenge [laughs].

JP: So it is out of revenge. That's what I wanted to ask you about.

JM: I think I know the reason for it and it's because when the author wrote about it, about the "anti-homeland," she had no idea that someone could interpret it like that. That the narrator didn't want to leave for America or something like that. It seems to me that it's not there because the author is interested in how she feels in Germany and not about how she feels in the States. So it seems to me that that decision [to return to Germany] is completely separate from what she feels about the U.S. The narrator wants to be different from all those who left because she believes that this chase for a normal, quote unquote, life, is silly.

JP: Why?

JM: Because she thinks that those who survived will never be like those who were never in the war, and that's why she never focuses on how to assimilate in other countries. She concentrates on what these Germans feel and how they see her. Of course that's pure conjecture because they feel nothing [laughs]. Well, not entirely a fantasy because in reality they constantly recall various things. Recently, for example, a book came out about Wermacht, die Wermacht, about soldiers, and in this book there is evidence that ordinary soldiers also took part in the killings. There was this thing where the Germans said that no, no, only the SS, only that or this person did. But as my father always said,

only millions can murder millions. I get the impression that my narrator understood this from that point of view and not that she will have to somehow assimilate in America. It is a different sort of a problem for her. That's how I understand it although I never really thought about it. This is a kind of contrast: in Germany, it seems to her, and that could all have been a fantasy, but this is how she understands it, that when people see her in Germany and when they only ask her something on the subject, it is a very immediate topic and very dangerous for them and they don't feel right about it. And so it doesn't have to be in America that she feels different, but really anywhere except for Germany life would be completely different for her. Utterly different. But I have to add that everything here is exaggerated, emphasized, because people don't really live like that, on the precipice [laughs] and it is emphasized in the story in order to present a certain thesis, that's all.

JP: What does life in America mean for her?

JM: Her life in America is just an ordinary life. It can be really good although it doesn't have to be. And what she feels in Germany is her own conjecture and someone in her place can say that they don't want to feel any satisfaction.

JP: For the narrator, Polish is the language of her homeland and she often mourns its loss. English is the language of emigration. What about German?

JM: She didn't choose German but was somewhat close to it since Poland was under the partitions and the Austrian partition left behind it a lot of traces, but she doesn't know German. It is a language in which she and her friends studied and waited for a better or a different future. It was of course a necessity in Germany. You have to remember that in

the beginning she couldn't leave Germany. You couldn't travel around the world then. You couldn't get visas at first, so in order to get an education, she had to learn German.

JP: In “Area Code 415,” you wrote about Jewish identity and then you told me over the phone that what I write about it in my chapter, that you could never stop being Jewish, wasn't really a correct interpretation.

JM: Yes, because it is more on the mystical side than what you wrote. First, look at the context of when she says it. She is sort of making fun of her friend and disagrees with her saying that she only invites “real” Jews over for holiday celebrations. You have to consider how the American context of religious practice is different than the European. In Europe, when you were born into a certain religion and even if you had nothing to do with it later, it was always there somewhere in some documents. And you had to say, when someone asked, that was the etiquette, what your religion was even if you weren't practicing at all.

JP: How important are places to you and your prose?

JM: I often forget dates, for instance, but places and situations stay with me. But what, if any meaning that has, I don't know. Let critics figure it out [laughs]. Perhaps a painting emerges out of these stories, an image that you can look at. This might be especially interesting for people familiar with these places, but these places have also, of course, changed over time. Like Berkeley. Although Berkeley probably a lot less than many of these other places.

JP: So, I wonder whether the geography of your stories, this detailed mapping of places, has anything to do with the fact that you moved so many times prior to settling in Lawrence. Do you think there is a relationship here?

JM: Probably. That's possible. For example, the story "A Place not Noted on Maps" is based, although far from real events, on a real place and event. This might be related to what you are asking. In that story, the narrator wants the place to be mapped and described and not left alone as some anonymous field. This story is based in reality since there were DP camps in Germany for a long time. That was also not talked about in Poland so people don't know about it. And not far from Munich there was just such a camp called Fohrenwald.⁴⁵³ I think it really wasn't on any map. But the whole episode is a combination of different things. What I wrote about a girl who lived there is pure fiction. There was this girl there, but she didn't look like the one in the story and had an entirely different past than the one I described. She's still alive and lives in America. I saw her once, maybe ten years ago. She lived in this camp with her parents. Younger people always tried to get out of there to Munich to attend university or something like that. So older people lived there who didn't have a chance of earning a living in Munich because that was difficult. Or they just simply had no strength or health to get out of there. It still existed back in the 1950s. That's not talked about. It's a definite absence just like the mass emigration from Germany to America when Americans allotted 100000 visas in the 1950s. It had been incredibly difficult to get a visa before that and later they just sort of lay on the streets. And then they gave out another 100000 visas so that pretty much everyone could leave unless they had a lung disease, like tuberculosis, then they

⁴⁵³ Fohrenwald was a Jewish Displaced Persons camp that functioned from September 1945 to February 1957 (longer than any other in Germany). The camp had its own administrative unit, political parties, police, law courts, religious institutions, newspapers, etc. For a detailed discussion of the camp's history, see chapter titled "Fohrenwald" in Waiting for Hope: Jewish Displaced Persons in Post-World War II Germany by Angelika Konigseder and Juliane Wetzel, trans. John A. Broadwin, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2001: 95-166.

wouldn't let you in [or if you were accused of being a communist]. But then they started letting these people in too, slowly. And people simply don't know about any of this.

JP: You mention in your stories that in the student association in Munich there were mostly men. There were very few women. Or when Germans ask her [the narrator] to be a part of reconciliation efforts but they ask none of the men.

JM: Let me first talk about that reconciliation organization because it's actually based on a real group although I don't refer to it with its real name. These were simply male organizations. They were organizations in Germany that came out of the so-called *yugendbewegung* [youth movement] and these were well known and very active. Their members were only or mostly men so this is not some psychological invention but, let's say, the real reality. As for the life of the narrator, that's a different thing altogether. The context for her life is something that was happening not only in Germany but in other countries too where women were not accepted into student organizations especially into organizations that were almost paramilitary. The narrator being a woman of course plays a role here because as a woman she sees and feels things differently. Also, it is only when the narrator is in Germany that any sort of an emancipation of women begins.

JP: I would like to ask you about émigré literature about which we spoke over the telephone yesterday.

JM: The names of people I mentioned were not necessarily the people who defined émigré literature. I only mentioned these names off hand. I wanted to give you names of some of the best-known authors from before the war. But there is a relationship to a certain tradition, there really was no interruption in it despite the war. New authors took up for the old, let's say. For example, Tadeusz Nowakowski, who I don't think published

before the war, but already wrote some things. Those born in 1918 or 1920, even 1922. They referenced pre-war literature. The poetry and prose of *Skamander*.⁴⁵⁴ They set the tone. At least in the beginning. This is also my link to Polish literature.

JP: Was this tradition dominated by men? Were the best-known authors men?

JM: No. There were Jasnorzewska Pawlikowska, Hermina Naglerowa, other than creative writers, there was the publicist Maria Czapska. There were women. It was similar to the situation in pre-war Poland. As many women as there were there then, there were more men of course, men dominated in literature, but it was like that in music too, and in painting, etc. Later, the last editor of London's *Wiadomosci* was Stefania Kossowska. [Mieczysław] Grydzewski supposedly left her *Wiadomosci* in his will. It would be difficult to talk about some kind of conscious discrimination—it simply was like that and it was similar to the 1920s in Poland.

JP: Do you see yourself as part of this tradition? I don't know how to say this in Polish... *Were you writing in response to this tradition, alongside it, or against it? How do you see your literature fitting within that émigré tradition?*

JM: *You mean the tradition of émigré literature as such?*

JP: Yes. *Of Polish émigré literature as such. So when you first began...*

JM: I don't think I ever wrote anything against of any of these traditions. I was sometimes considered sharpened-tongued and a little ironic but I'm not aware that I was a person who was considered swimming against the tide. I don't know. Possibly I continued in some respects the tradition of the "20-lecie," the 20 years between the wars,

⁴⁵⁴ *Skamander*: a group of Polish poets who experimented with poetic form so as to better reflect modern life. The group was founded in Warsaw in 1918 by poets like Julian Tuwim, Jan Lechon, and Antoni Slonimski. They took their name and the name of their monthly publication from a river of ancient Troy.

because that's what I knew. That was the literature of my parents' generation. So, it's possible, I don't know. I liked and admired some of those writers and I didn't particularly care for others but that's normal. At any rate, my answer is that I'm not aware myself and even if I thought about it, I couldn't come to any decisive conclusions.

JP: How? That is, you just said that you continued the tradition you were familiar with from before the war—the literature of the 20 years between the wars.

JM: I read mostly from that period and it was available in libraries. The university library in Munich had everything. And when the Free Europe radio station opened, my mother got us permission to borrow books from there [the station had a library]. So, I feel that that was closest to me, but it was a diverse literature, as you probably know.

JP: I would like to ask you about literary categories. Yesterday we spoke about Jewish American literature a bit. You talk about yourself as a Polish writer. Would you agree?

JM: Yes.

JP: You also mentioned that you are an American writer, but an American writer who does not write in English. Is that accurate?

JM: Yes, yes. It is certain that living here in America for this long and having an American family has influenced me and influences me still. There is no doubt that living among these people, in the American environment, working at these universities among students and colleagues makes a difference.

JP: I'd like to talk to you about this. About these different categories. What do you think about categories like Jewish American literature.

JM: I don't know what Jewish American literature is. Does it mean that the writer is Jewish or of Jewish descent? Or does it mean that it's only about Jews in America? It's difficult for me... I think it should be difficult for anyone to categorize.

JP: How do you see your own work in terms of categories? You were not included in Polin, for example, as one of the Jewish female writers from Eastern Europe.

JM: Well, I'm not a Jewish writer from Eastern Europe. Most importantly because I don't write in Yiddish. I don't only write about Jewish topics. After all, you could say that Jews have kind of appropriated the topic of the Holocaust. That's fine. But there were many other writers who were not Jewish and who wrote about it from the perspective of witnesses. It seems to me that here we think that you'd have to perish in the Holocaust in order to be really able to write about it. I don't know. It's difficult for me to say. Take Henryk Grynberg for example. He thinks that he is THE Holocaust writer and everyone else should stay away. I don't think this way at all. I believe that this is a human issue and that others can write about it too. On the other hand, Grynberg complains that people call him a Jewish writer and that he is a Polish writer. And I agree that he is a Polish writer. He writes in Polish and in the traditions of Polish literature. In contrast, I don't think that Joseph Conrad was a Polish writer. He wrote in English about things that weren't related to Poland. He was a Pole but that's all. But there are those who want to call him a Polish writer. I don't see anything Polish in his work. In my opinion, he was not a Polish writer because he didn't write about Polish topics or not even ones close to Poland and he wrote in English. So why? Because he was born a Pole that makes him a Polish writer? I don't think so.

JP: So these categories depend on the topics and the languages the writer uses?

JM: Traditionally, this always depended on language, but then it became not as clear, as everything else in our time. And that's good. Nothing is so easy as to be 100% classifiable one way or the other. I also think that such questions will never be definitely resolved. Some people argue and argue, but I think that the matter of language is very important. It's difficult, for example, to call an author who writes in Yiddish, a Polish writer, right? Even if he writes about Poland and Polish topics, Polish Jews. You can't get away from this unless you loosen these categories a bit, which is happening in the U.S. where there are so many different nationalities. Here, we talk about Polish American, German American, or Jewish American literature. This is acceptable here.

JP: When we spoke on the phone, you said that various people urged you to write.

Who?

JM: Oh, everyone! The legendary editor of *Wiadomosci*, [Mieczyslaw] Grydzewski. A friend of mine who was actually older than my parents, Michal Pawlikowski. He was a lecturer of Polish and Russian at Berkeley. When I arrived at Berkeley, I wasn't even 30 years old so he sort of took me under his wing and befriended me and always urged me to write. Other Poles, too. Especially those of my parents' generation. I would occasionally say something or there was a discussion and they would tell me to describe it and that it needed to be published. Why? I don't know exactly. I suppose they thought that I had something important to say.

JP: What did they want you to write about?

JM: Probably about what had happened during the war in general, not only to the Jews. In that first year at Berkeley, very few people knew that I was, as they said then, a Pole of

Jewish descent. I wrote an article about Przybyszewski⁴⁵⁵ and they all really liked it. Grydzewski published it right away even though the word was that *Wiadomosci* didn't publish anything unless they knew the author or unless it was someone who was already well known. I never experienced anything like this with *Wiadomosci*. So, all of the Poles who read that little article about Przybyszewski talked to me about writing more. And anyway, I have to tell you that all things considered, they were afraid that, that is the Polish intelligentsia I knew in Berkeley, they were afraid that there wouldn't be any "new blood" [laughs]. That, you know, that when they die, there won't be anyone to replace them. And that made sense in a way because there were really no new people coming from Poland, not at all. It wasn't until a bit later that it all opened up. I always had their support. Of course there were no resources then, you know, no money among that wave of emigration, no fellowships. Grydzewski paid a bit, but I was a professor at Berkeley and I didn't really need anything. But it was impossible to just live off of writing, to be an émigré writer, that was impossible. You had to have a job to support yourself. So, that was that.

JP: When did you publish your first story? The first collection came out in 1970?

JM: Yes. When I left Berkeley, I was a professor at Indiana for three years, from 1965 to 1968. Right before I left Berkeley, in 1965, I published two short stories, or episodes as I thought of them then, since I was thinking about a novel, which I never wrote. These were "Spacerz z Baska" and "Szkola" and they're both, in effect, about the same thing—about the life in Kazimierz [during the war]. And also "Wladek." The first two [stories] were in *Wiadomosci* but I didn't publish the third, "Wladek," until many years later, not

⁴⁵⁵ Stanislaw Przybyszewski (1868-1927), playwright, essayist, and poet.

long ago, in fact. That was because my father didn't really like the idea. He said that there was too much truth in it. The other two he considered to be literary fiction even though he knew the title character, Baska. But "Wladek" he thought to be part of history, that it was more of a document about this man who was so important in WRN [*Wolnosc, Rownosc, Niepodleglosc*]. This was an [socialist] organization called Freedom, Equality, and Independence. There was some historical documentation on Wladek although I couldn't tell you right now where to look for it. His last name was Wojcik. My father was against me publishing it because he thought that... Today people don't think like this. They just fictionalize history and that's that, but then, in the 1960s, some people still opposed it. And he, Wladek, he was still alive.

JP: Your father was against you publishing "Wladek" because the title character was still alive? Or was it because such issues were simply not talked about then?

JM: Well yes, in Poland at that time such topics were taboo. So I don't really know. A similar thing happened with my article called "I'd rather go it alone, without Jankiel." It was a very similar situation because my parents thought that I shouldn't get involved in the Polish-Jewish dialogue. They thought I was too young and that it was the older generation who should write about it. So, I sort of backed out, but I let Pawlikowski read it. And Grydzewski wrote to Pawlikowski that the article absolutely had to appear and asked him to convince me to publish it. So I wrote to my parents that if Grydzewski himself believed that (he was quite a figure among the emigrant community, later even a legend) that I should send it to him after all. And the same thing happened with "Wladek" but I didn't send it right away and it sat in my desk drawer for years.

JP: Have you ever considered writing an autobiography?

JM: No, never. I don't find it at all appealing. Perhaps it seems to me that autobiography is somehow a less important form of writing. I don't know. Besides, writing about myself in such detail just doesn't attract me. I'm not embarrassed or ashamed or anything like that. Autobiography just doesn't appeal to me.

JP: I am interested in the internal chronology of the stories especially because they are told from the same first person perspective. In Doppelgangers [Jerzy] Daniel organized them chronologically. You didn't write them like that, right?

JM: No, not at all.

JP: Daniel writes that when they are organized like that, they come together as a novel, right?

JM: Everyone says that it's a novel, not only Daniel. I don't have a strong opinion about that because I wrote them at different points in time, not at all chronologically, as you know. Daniel has some of these dates in the collection. Most of the time, I wrote them with *Wiadomosci* in mind. I always thought about a book of some kind, though I didn't have any precise plans as to how it would turn out. When some topic came me, I just wrote. That's why I never attempted to create any sort of a connection between this story or that. So, they're sort of different parts taken out of some kind of a whole. It's really difficult for me to say because I really don't know what I wanted to do with them. In the beginning, it seemed to me that it would be a novel but then I knew that it might be a series, which could be published in a single volume, that's true, as a whole. But it wasn't like I sat down, and that's clearly evident in the stories, and wanted to write a novel or something longer.

JP: What attracted you to the short story?

JM: These are kind of fragments from the life of this protagonist, which lead her through life. This is not a novel in which the fates of various people are linked and they need to be properly sorted out and have some uniform action. It apparently didn't suit me or it seemed just too much for me.

JP: Is the short story, which is more fragmentary, as you said, related to the topic of the stories themselves? With World War II or postwar emigration? Is the form that your narration took more appropriate to those themes?

JM: Maybe in my rendition of it [laughs]. I realize that I chose that form because it more appropriately suited my goals and intentions. It seems to me that since it was an emigrant community, I could have published a book, but maybe I knew, subconsciously, that the stories would be published in either *Wiadomości* or *Kultura*. A book is a much greater project with bigger ideas, bigger plans and intentions. I can't really put it in proper perspective now. Maybe we shouldn't just think of it as a matter of the market. Well, maybe there's something of it there, but I knew or suspected that Grydzewski and then Chmielowiec, and then Kossowska,⁴⁵⁶ would take the stories and publish them, often even on the first page, which was an honor with them [laughs]. There were people who urged me to write a book or to publish the stories as a collection. The League of the Rescued was published by Sokolowski. But he really did a sloppy job. I don't even want to say too much about it now, but there were lots and lots of errors in it. *Wiadomości* took it as a point of honor that everything they published was free of errors. Sokolowski

⁴⁵⁶ Editors of *Wiadomości*.

made a mess out of it although people told me that it didn't bother them. But anyway, Daniel did a tremendous job because he organized it all and added dates and everything.

JP: I'd like to ask you about language, identity, and translation in the context of your stories and your life. I'd like to begin with the only of your stories translated into English, "The Beggar." Why this story? Did you select it for translation?

JM: I wanted to publish it because it wasn't as old as some of the others and Bozena Shallcross suggested a student she had who was a good translator. I agreed.

JP: Why aren't any more of your stories translated into English?

JM: I never tried to have them translated.

JP: Why not?

JM: Mainly because the translations from the Polish I've seen weren't well done. I didn't like them. They didn't convey the author's intentions and situations. They were awkwardly executed. I remember reading some of them and not liking them.

JP: Have you considered translating them yourself?

JM: Perhaps momentarily, but it seems to me that it's better when someone other than the author does it. Someone who has the talent and the skills for it. I take this very seriously and not like some people who think that if you know English then [you can translate].

It's not the same thing. This is easy to explain to a critic or a writer, but it's difficult to convince an ordinary, let's say, person. That's why I hesitated. I was approached a few times but I wasn't enthusiastic about it. In a word, it's not entirely my fault that there aren't any more translations, but it's partly so because to get anything done, you've got to take a role in the process. It rarely happens just on its own although [it did] when Jerzy Daniel contacted me about publishing a collection of my stories, but things like that

happen very rarely. I didn't want to try to get any other stories published because I didn't like the translations of Polish literature that I saw. I can't say right now which ones exactly because I don't remember.

JP: Have you ever considered writing fiction in English?

JM: No. I haven't thought about it at all. I thought about composing something in Polish and then perhaps writing it in English but I never actually sat down to it. I think that it would be too much like translating. I was asked the same questions about not translating Of a Foreign Mother Born. I really believe that translation is, as you said before, a talent all its own. Just because I wrote it, doesn't mean that I can translate it even if I know English well. It is difficult to translate the more lyrical parts even of prose like in Andrzejewski's or Milosz's work.

JP: The Polish of your stories is very contemporary and very much alive. When you write in Polish , do you write in *a certain idiom of Polish*?

JM: No.

JP: So, you write in the Polish that you know, that you use in your life?

JM: Yes, that's what I know. I read a lot in Polish, not to educate myself, but just to read. I am constantly being influenced by what I read although I'd be hard pressed to say which ones exactly. I like some writers more than others. I think that a living connection with a language can be maintained by writing in only one language. I'd venture to say that a lot of people who, like me, know more than one or two or three languages simply choose one of them and then it really is difficult to change it. Though there are people who write in both Polish and English. It also depends on what you write. For the so-

called creative writing, I really think that one needs to choose a single language that one feels most comfortable in and stick with it. It's really difficult to change it later.

JP: Do you feel more comfortable in Polish when it comes to creative writing?

JM: Yes, especially now when I've written a lot, relatively speaking. I wouldn't want to switch to another language now.

JP: You said that Polish is linked with your soul, with spirituality almost, that you feel it somewhere deeper...

JM: Yes, that's true. Especially when it comes to lyrical things, memories, or descriptions of journeys. Like when you asked me about how the narrator travels a lot, not because she wants to necessarily, but because she has to. These things I think come out better in Polish for me. They are connected with the past and the books I read then.

JP: I'd like to talk about your own departure for the U.S.

JM: My departure was quite simple. I married an American.

JP: Where did you meet? At the university?

JM: In Germany. He was a student. Warren was a student and got drafted into the army later because he wanted to return to Germany. They sent him, but that was his business, he could have gotten out of it because students could, he had already gotten two deferments.

We got married in Fulda, in Germany.

JP: When? How long had you known each other before you got married?

JM: Almost three years. Only he was in America for a period of that time and so when he came back, when we decided to get married, he was stationed in Fulda. He was in military intelligence because he knew German from college [laughs], but that was enough. And they lived wonderfully well, these soldiers, they had their own house.

They lived in luxury. I suspect that when they were civilians, they didn't have such comfortable lives.

JP: When did you arrive in the U.S. with Warren? Was it right after the wedding?

JM: Yes, well it has been fifty years. In 1956.

JP: I'd like to ask you about Slovakia and your life there during the war in the convent. You were there without your parents, right? Can you tell me how you got there?

JM: The school was in a very elegant convent. I was under the care of a priest, Father Maurycy. His name was Henryk Przybylowski. He was Polish and when we escaped to Slovakia, my father simply approached him and told him about our situation although he didn't tell him that we were Jewish, of course. I mean, there were Poles in the transport we took across the border, who were also going to Hungary. And so that monk, Father Maurycy, took us under his wing. He got us all of the necessary documents and a place to live.

JP: You stayed with the nuns at the boarding school?

JM: No, I did stay with my parents for some time, and then I also lived with these two sisters that I describe in one of my stories. I think that their names were Magdalena and Maria. I don't remember which story that's in where I recall how a Slovakian officer dated one of them but didn't want to get married. That's true, more or less, but it's difficult to remember every last detail. Wait, Magdalena and Marta, yes, I think that's it. So, these were two young girls, in their twenties, who lived together. Their father was at one time a cook in the convent, and they were orphans and so the convent took care of them. Father Maurycy put me up with them.

JP: You mentioned that your parents were in Preszow...

JM: Yes, for a little while, but they didn't have all of their documents in order so they went to Bratislava. It was somehow easier to get by in a large city. And they got in touch with someone there, I don't know who, and they were there for a time and then they returned to Preszow. We didn't live together, but we lived in the same town.

JP: You remained in Preszow until the end of the war, right?

JM: We were there not until the end of the war, but until the arrival of the Soviet army. Until the 18th of January, 1945, I think. Then we went by truck with Russian officers who took money to transport people wherever they wanted to go. We went to Krakow and returned to our old apartment, where we lived during the war. And we lived there for a while. My father started working but he didn't want to go back to teaching. He was asked to head a high school in Wieliczka, but didn't want to do it. And it was then in Krakow that he was a socialist but he didn't belong to the party. PPS⁴⁵⁷ was really strong then. He was offered a job in Gdansk and it seemed to him, although I don't want to speak for him, but I think that it seemed to him that this would be different type of work, that it would be something new, because he was also readying himself for a new life in Poland. No one really wanted to, I mean I don't know if no one, Zionists yes, but in general those people who lived through the war, assimilated Jews, had no intention of leaving Poland. It was only when they realized that Poland would be in the Soviet sphere of influence that they got scared, that they would always, forever, have to live in that part of the world under the Soviet influence. There was [also] tremendous anti-Semitism especially among the populace. The same populace that didn't behave so admirably

⁴⁵⁷ Polska Partia Socjalistyczna (The Polish Socialist Party) founded in Paris in 1892 and split in 1948.

during the war, was just as anti-Semitic [after it], which is no surprise. At the same time, there was this great fear that Poland would be in this bloc, that the world would be divided into two, into these huge spheres-Eastern and Western and no one wanted this. People were returning from being adrift in the Soviet Union and no one wanted to go back there or live there. This was a very important factor.

JP: How was the decision to leave Poland made? Do you remember?

JM: It was mainly made because my father's sister, who survived the war with her family thanks to my mother, you could say, because my mother got them documents and so on... They were also in Krakow during the war and then left for Germany from Krakow. And they were constantly urging us, they wrote that we should leave for the West. And also the threat of that, maybe a bit the threat of anti-Semitism although no one ever mentioned this in my family, but perhaps it was also a factor. So, it was the threat that Poland would be in the Soviet bloc and our family's urging that we leave. And all of that put together probably got us to leave. Many people were leaving.

JP: What was the experience like for you as a young girl in Munich?

JM: I wrote about this in one of my stories. About how there seemed to be this pane of glass between the narrator and the German students. I had friends and it was how I describe my narrator who had friends who wanted to be friends with me partly because they were curious about other people and somehow I don't know, it's difficult to explain this process. In general I learned fast because as you know children learn fast especially when they hear the language everywhere.

JP: Did you feel any trepidation about becoming friends with young Germans?

JM: No, not at all, because at that time we really looked down on the Germans. Pretty much everyone who came to this American territory after the war from the East was really disdainful of them. By the time I came to the university, things were slightly different. I spoke German and this first postwar phase was over, but I also went to that cafeteria I describe in the stories. And these were these circles that were very different from each other, but very political and influenced by what happened during the war.

JP: Did you personally experience any of these German reconciliation efforts with Jews in Munich that you talk about in some of the stories?

JM: Yes, definitely. Pretty much everything I describe in what I called “The Double Life” is at least partly true. Even that professor, Koch, he was a real professor of veterinary science. His real name was Koch and he was all enthusiastic about these reconciliations. He really was, as some Poles say, “simple” [laughs].

JP: When you were in Krakow during the war, you left for Hungary, on this dangerous journey across the border. What made your parents decide to leave Krakow?

JM: It’s one of these stories that is somewhat humorous. I mean the situation wasn’t funny but it was sort of humorous in a Gombrowicz⁴⁵⁸ kind of way. My parents always wanted to go to Hungary. Not always, but for a while already. There were all these rumors, and my mother had friends in, at that time it was called “the conspiracy,” and there was talk among these different underground groups that Poles had it really good in Hungary, that it was like an entirely different life. So my parents thought about going

⁴⁵⁸ Gombrowicz (1904-1969): novelist and dramatist who lived and wrote in exile.

there. And then when they met Wladek, it turned out that *Zegota*⁴⁵⁹ ran these transports to Hungary. And Zegota and those other underground groups kept all of this a secret because they were afraid that too many people would want to leave. So my parents knew these people from Lvov whom they were helping a little. These people, they were simple people, who got documents with the help of a man my father knew, maybe they even paid him something, but I don't know... Their daughter Marysia, I never knew her though I recall that she was kind of plump and blond... a young girl. She worked in a German restaurant, in a bar, and there she met some German, an SS officer, and they had some kind of an affair. One day, my mother was home, I don't know where my father was, but he was somewhere near by, I was at school, someone rang the doorbell. She opened the door and saw an SS officer in uniform and got really scared. He asked about us and my mother told him to go to the third floor and we lived on the second floor. He went upstairs and my mother left the house. She had no idea what was going on but naturally saw danger. My father came to get me at school and said that my mom was sick, but I immediately realized that it was something else. As it turned out, when the SS came for Marysia's parents, she knew that her family owed my parents something and she sent that SS officer [to warn them]. She calculated that when he talked to my parents then he would tell them that her family was taken and if he didn't, then we would run away anyway when we saw him. That's how she figured. And she was right. After the war it turned out that it was a false alarm and that no one denounced us, but we ran away because that's how it looked. That's how it was. It's difficult to say whether that was good or not because no one could know what would come out of a situation like that.

⁴⁵⁹ Zegota was The Council for Aid to Jews in Occupied Poland.

Marysia was afraid that her parents would denounce everyone they knew. These were times when people didn't really think about whether something made sense or not, whether something was logical or not. If they did, they would have known that the SS never showed up alone, they always came in pairs. An SS officer never came by himself to arrest someone. Never. But no one thought like that then. There were other situations like this, which I don't remember now. These different misleading signs, but people ran because they didn't know what to think.

JP: Do your children speak Polish?

JM: No, they only know a few words.

JP: So when they were little you spoke with them in English?

JM: Yes.

JP: So they've never read any of your stories?

JM: No, and neither has Warren.

JP: Have they seen that one story that's been translated into English?

JM: Yes, I think so.

JP: Have you discussed your work in Polish with your children or with Warren?

JM: Yes. I always talked to them about it, whenever they wanted to. But they are... My son graduated from Harvard Law School and Political Science and he's interested in literature but not so much that he would go to great lengths, Elizabeth too.

JP: I'd like to ask you about your return trips to Poland. What made you decide to go, how long did you stay, where exactly did you go?

JM: Why did I go? Well, I had every intention of going to Poland the entire time, you could say, ever since you could travel there freely but I just somehow couldn't get it

together and then everyone started in on me that I should go. Halina Filipowicz and some other people that I know. So I finally decided to go and Halina was behind me going to Poznan, she is from Poznan, and I gave a few lectures there and they welcomed me very warmly and then I went to Warsaw and Krakow. I also gave a lecture in Warsaw at the Adam Mickiewicz Society at the University there. I was in Poland for almost a month. In Krakow and in Warsaw. And the second time I went unexpectedly in November of the following year. Or maybe it was earlier, yes, it was in May and in November, Andrzej Zulawski invited me to appear in his television program. That was the second time. And on the third trip I went to Kielce.

JP: When Doppelgangers was published?

JM: Yes, but I was going anyway because the Academy there invited me and so Jerzy Daniel turned up. I can't remember the order in which it all happened, but my sponsors were Regina Renz and Jerzy Daniel. He had that publishing house, Scriptum, that he still manages and Regina took care of all of those lectures and dinners at the Academy. It was all a very beautiful welcome.

JP: Earlier you mentioned that it was difficult to travel to Poland. Was that the only reason that you did not go to Poland for so long? Were there reasons why you didn't go until 1994?

JM: No, there were no other reasons. That was the only one. I didn't want to go when that whole communist government, which governed so officially, was still in charge. But then when it stopped to matter so much, lots of people began to urge me to go. It wasn't a protest on my part or anything. I just didn't want to go.

JP: I'd like to ask you about an interview I read with you. The interviewer asked you about homeland. He asked whether it was difficult to live without a homeland and you replied that it was very difficult. This interested me because you also have at least two stories where you talk about homelands. It's in the titles – "The Homeland" and "The Anti-Homeland." What does homeland mean to you?

JM: I think that for me it comes from an old-fashioned view where homeland is a larger kind of a community and this usually means a country or a nation or a culture. Some people are really invested in this notion and some really don't care at all.

JP: What about you?

JM: I am like my narrator in this respect. My narrator is envious of people who have a homeland and are rooted in their own traditions. And they don't have to think at all about leaving or staying or whether it will change. They simply don't know anything else. I think that this is how the narrator and the author both understand this idea.

JP: Do you and your narrator live with a sense of being uprooted?

JM: Yes, uprooting. It is also a homelessness on some level because the home as in homeland is about something larger, made up of individuals and groups. All of that makes up a homeland. If that homeland has some kind of conscientious government [laughs] that governs justly... But if it is oppressive, then you have to get rid of such a homeland and then you end up with a void, an emptiness. I don't know how many people think about this. I only started when I wrote about homeland. Well and Mickiewicz did write "Oh Lithuania, my homeland," so I guess there's something to it.

JP: You've lived in the U.S. for over fifty years. Is America your homeland?

JM: Yes, but it's not the same thing. Anything can be patched up [laughs] but it cannot be entirely substituted because there are usually these periods in one's life when you have that homeland and then you lose it. Kuncewiczowa⁴⁶⁰ also writes about this in... what is it called... her most important piece that has that character named Roza in it and she's a pianist. She writes in there that she grew up in Russia and that it was never like Poland and she wanted to somehow enter it later but it was never the same thing. You have to be a part of a homeland at a certain age because at a later time it's too late, it's somehow awkward. Oh yeah, the book is called Cudzoziemka [The Stranger]. It's a really good title. So in that "stranger," perhaps it's not explained explicitly but everyone will understand that this woman, Roza, was a stranger at many different times and on different levels her entire life.

JP: Do you feel like a stranger since leaving Poland?

JM: No, I don't feel like a stranger exactly but I know what Kuncewiczowa is talking about. But there are also pluses because when you look at things a little from the outside then you can see them differently. I don't remember what she talks about exactly but it's about how she is a stranger in everything.

JP: Your narrator said something like this in "The Homeland" when her parents decided to leave Poland and the narrator reflected on their departure and said that a person without a homeland somehow loses their humanity.

JM: Yes, they lose a certain something of what a person should have or might have or perhaps we made up that that's how it should be. Yes, a person loses something because they no longer have a homeland and I believe this wholeheartedly. But it is very similar

⁴⁶⁰ Maria Kuncewiczowa (1899-1989): novelist, essayist, playwright, best known for her portrayal of women's psychology and role conflicts.

to when someone has no feeling for literature and I think that means a loss of something. And she can say as much as she wants that she doesn't need to have it but it's a loss of something that other people have and the same thing can be said of other things in life, about creativity and art.

JP: Can language, as Milosz said, serve as a homeland?

JM: Yes, and Tuwim also said this about Polishness and different people said it in Poland, perhaps a little differently than Milosz. But it really isn't the same thing. It can't be the same thing because this idea about language is rather abstract. It can work to make one feel better like some kind of a safe place but it's not the same thing. I mean language can be a homeland and so can literature and the Polish word, if I can call it that, there is a homeland and that's what Tuwim said, Polishness the homeland, but no one ever said that it is the same thing as an actual homeland.

JP: What role does German play in your life and in the life of your narrator?

JM: I have to say that when it comes to German I gave my narrator my own role and my own development in German. When I came to Munich I didn't know German at all. My parents knew it very well because they had lived under the Austrian partition. In general, the Jewish intelligentsia and Polish aristocrats knew German especially under the Austrian and Prussian partitions. But they didn't raise their children in it. I mean, they got rid of German because of patriotism. I went to school in Slovakia and then in Gdansk but German gymnasiums were on a higher level because they had them all during the war and there was nothing like that in Poland at that time [during the war]. I wanted to finish school very quickly as did everyone else because everyone wanted to leave. I have to digress a bit because life there was very strange. I mean when I look at people who are

called refugees nowadays, I want to laugh because we were there all alone. We were these orphans and there were like 100,000 or 200,000 orphans. And here they are somewhat taken care of. Anyway, when it comes to German I have to say that I learned almost through osmosis. Perhaps not very quickly but people were rather tolerant because there were lots of us like that. I learned it well because I could read and write and speak, of course. And then, when I was at the university, it was almost like it was my own language. But one thing might be interesting for a psychologist or a linguist and that's that this language was for me, like Hebrew is probably for religious Jews, that they didn't really know this language or they knew it in writing only. German now remains only sort of in my memories. I can speak with someone but it's often difficult to find words. German is almost kind of hidden. I think I read about this somewhere that when a third language comes then the second language, the middle language, is most vulnerable to being forgotten. So when it comes to being active in German, it somehow kind of slinks off.

JP: You used this metaphor that I really liked, of the hotel and now I can't stop thinking of the U.S. as a hotel. Poland as a homeland and the U.S. as a hotel.

JM: Yes. I think that there are some of these important things missing that you aren't even aware of everyday but sometimes, when you think of how someone out there has a real homeland, which may also not be so true...

JP: Some sort of an idealized notion of it, right?

JM: Yes, I'm certain that idealizing is a part of it.

JP: How do we reconcile Poland as a homeland for this young narrator with the existence of Polish anti-Semitism?

JM: Very easily. The narrator tried out life when she lived on Aryan papers during the war and then after the war too. And she knows that it's not so good to be Jewish in Poland and that there is anti-Semitism, but this could just as well be a Pole who is aware of this, a lot of people know this and don't feel it's right, but what are they to do? Nothing. I mean they do things but nothing much has come out of it. It doesn't seem so difficult to reconcile because the narrator doesn't personally feel this, that she doesn't have something because she's Jewish. And she doesn't think of herself as Polish or Jewish but as a person in a particular situation and I think that most people look at themselves like that. That they are in such and such situation and that this doesn't have to have any specific characteristics because here we'd get into stereotypes in effect that someone is a Pole and someone else is only an American because people all are different.

IRENA KLEPFISZ

I met with Irena Klepfisz in her office at Barnard College in New York City on Saturday, September 15, 2007. We spoke about her immigration to the U.S. via Sweden and about her work as a writer, scholar, and teacher. We spoke in English although Klepfisz used a few words and phrases in Yiddish. At one point, she also began to speak Polish, somewhat haltingly, but quite proficiently. At some level, then, our conversation took place in (and in reference to) three languages.

Klepfisz was the youngest of the three writers in this project upon her immigration to the U.S. For this reason, and even as much as her journey into English was, and in some ways continues to be, difficult, she now identifies it as home: “I can’t imagine thinking or feeling in any other language at this point, which doesn’t mean that I don’t have emotional feelings in Polish or Yiddish.” These linguistic affinities also reflect Klepfisz’s current perception of cultures and cultural belonging, which can best be described as hybrid. When she first wrote her bilingual poems, she saw it as an integration between the worlds that had been, up to that point, wholly separate. At this point, she is equally invested in representing the integration and mixing of cultures in her essays and poems. She told me that when she wrote “*Di yerushe*” (the heritage), she was interested in showing how change, as much as continuity, informs cultural belonging. “I’ve become much more interested,” she told me, “in trying to find bleeding and porous boundaries.”

Our interview lasted for more than three hours and given the diversity of topics we covered, it was necessary to shorten the length of the transcript in this chapter. I

further edited it by eliminating pauses and unnecessary repetitions. I did so to emphasize the content of Klepfisz's answers, which, when I transcribed it, was somewhat obscured by frequent pauses, hesitations, and repetitions. For instance, when Klepfisz said, "It was kids in the neighborhood and I think also... I mean I think... ahm... I went through... I went through, who knows if I ever recovered from it," I rendered it as, "It was kids in the neighborhood. I went through, who knows if I ever recovered from it." My renditions did not change the meaning of Klepfisz's answers. Rather, they transformed our interview from the spoken to the written word thus making it reader-friendly.

We began our conversation by looking at a few photographs that I brought with me of the places in Poland that Irena describes in her poetry and essays.

Irena Klepfisz: This is Zeromskiego 18 [in Lodz]. When I went [to Poland] with my mother in 1983 it was the only time I went there. It was a one and a half room apartment. You walked in and the kitchen was right here and then you walked into the room, the oven, the white brick oven was here, and there was a large room and a glass door with a small little room. My crib was there and my mother slept in there and all kinds of people were sleeping on the floor. It was just makeshift. I was four or five. It's really my first vivid memory. Before that it's pretty murky. It was very warm and we ate a lot of *pyzy*⁴⁶¹ and we had soup and I got a lot of attention. One of the things that I'm also very determined to do next summer is to return to Sweden. I feel like I put it off for too long. My mother went in the 1960s, but I've never gone. I already researched it a little bit and I found out that the train station burned down in 1981. We left in 1949 so it's a long time ago, but I remember it very vividly. I could walk from the train station to the house and the school if you put me down there right now. We were about 25 minutes from Stockholm. A friend of mine was just in Stockholm and she thinks that it has been absorbed into suburbia. At the time it was so rural. I went to school on skis (the school was about a mile away). For all I know the school has been torn down. There might not be anything there, including the house.

JP: You lived outside of Stockholm from 1946 to 1949, right?

IK: Yes. I went to Swedish schools through almost second grade. I read, I wrote, I prayed [in Swedish]. I was the only Jew in the school and they treated me wonderfully. It was a big shock, in fact, coming here because I was treated so badly. Lodz and Sweden were, by contrast of the war years, I suppose, which I don't really remember,

⁴⁶¹ Potato dumplings.

really wonderfully communal, warm, very focused on the children of which there were very few. Both Lodz, where we lived in this apartment with lots of people, and Sweden which was a house with four or five families, were very communal. All of that disappeared when we came to the States. I lived with my mother in a one-bedroom apartment, which we shared with someone who was living in the bedroom. My mother was sewing at home and she was not well. I did not want to leave Sweden. I was very happy. I had to face a new language here. I did not know a word [of English]. I forgot Swedish right away because I had nobody to speak with. My mother and her friends never learned it because they knew that they weren't going to stay. I think that I went into a real dive and I was very very unhappy.

JP: Were you the only immigrant in your school in New York?

IK: Yes, and the kids were not kind. This country is not kind to immigrants. This was, ironically, an almost entirely Jewish neighborhood. We lived in the Amalgamated⁴⁶² which at the time was really very working class and union, mostly ILGWU⁴⁶³, but also people who were printers, construction workers, carpenters, etc. Nobody had a lot of money. We felt we had a little bit less than other people, but nobody had very much to begin with. They lived sort of working class lives. I was the only immigrant. In Sweden, I was the only Jew and immigrant and I was treated well. I loved my teachers. I loved my fellow students. I remember when they first taught me how to ski without poles. They just included me in lots of things. I was dressed like a European in Sweden. I suppose it wasn't such a big switch from Poland, but here being dressed like a European

⁴⁶² Reference to cooperative housing and labor unions like the Amalgamated Clothing Workers and the Amalgamated Meat Cutters Union.

⁴⁶³ International Ladies Garment Workers Union.

was very different. My mother insisted on making all my clothes because she couldn't afford to buy me stuff. That went on for years and years and we had huge fights about it because I wanted to wear what the other girls were wearing. She would want me to wear that sometimes too but she would make it and, of course, it was never like the store bought stuff. The community sort of re-emerged for me in the Amalgamated but that took time and the fact was that I was really living alone with my mother in a way that I hadn't been all those years. She very intensely focused on me and I was very intensely focused on her so that was hard.

JP: How was the decision to leave Sweden made?

IK: It was a waiting place to try to get to other places. We were not coming to the United States either. We were heading for Australia, because my mother's brother and sister were in Melbourne and when we got here, the only living relative on my father's side, my aunt Fela, convinced my mother that she would do better if she stayed. We stayed with her [in New York]. We had a visa for seven or eight days and we were supposed to go to California and then, if you can imagine, take a boat to Australia. So we got a lawyer and that was changed and we stayed. We decided to stay. Other people first went to Canada from Sweden and then they came down to the States. Some people were in England, so that community sort of reconstituted itself and included American born Bundists, European born Bundists who got in before the war, and included some of the survivors and so it was a very warm community that I valued a lot.

JP: How did you become a poet, a scholar, a teacher?

IK: I was not a great student. I was an underachiever. I think a lot of it was psychological. I really did not want to learn another language. I didn't want to be here.

English was always, and I would even say still remains to some degree problematic for me. I still get stuck. I can correct my students' papers but sometimes in my own writing I get really stuck about where the adverb goes. I don't know if it's always tired or tired always. There are still things about English that I don't know. It was my worst subject in high school. I was in honors classes, but I was kicked out of honors English in my senior year. This was very traumatic for me. My mother had always encouraged me to read and I had read for years. I didn't know what I was reading. I'd just pick up things and read. Even when I was younger, I was always trying to write something. I was always trying to write a story of some sort.

JP: In English?

IK: Yes. There was nothing else [but English] I could write in because Yiddish was never that fluent. I forgot Swedish and Polish never developed but English was really stunted. My grammar was terrible. I had sentence fragments. I didn't understand the language, but I started appreciating the literature. So I was kicked out of English. They were going to do Shakespeare and I really wanted to do that. I begged the teacher to let me stay. So she said that I could stay, but my assignment was to write fifty little bios of Greek and Roman goddesses over the summer. I had to do Roman and Greek mythology. If I did that I could come back into honors English. A week after I came back from summer camp I sat up all night and did all these biographies and I went back to Mrs. Wessel, I remember her name, and I said "here, I want in the class." I was very determined and she let me back in. The only thing that happened that year that was sort of interesting was that we had an essay contest. It was an anonymous contest. The judges weren't supposed to know who wrote them. I decided to participate in it and they

picked my essay. It was very interesting that without my name on it, I wrote a winning essay after all these flunkings. Well, they went to the person they thought wrote it. She said “no, that’s not mine.” So finally, I went to them and told them that it was mine and they were very surprised. But to me it was sort of interesting that I could pull that off anonymously. I had already started writing really very bad poetry, really bad poetry. One summer I met Chana Bloch. She’s a translator of Amichai.⁴⁶⁴ She has won prizes for her translations and her own poetry. Well, at the time, there was this Yiddish camp, camp Boiberik, and Chana was a counselor there and I was playing the piano for the dance counselor.⁴⁶⁵ Chana was running poetry, too. We talked a lot. She was the first person that I spoke to about poetry. I was sort of in awe of her. She was a year ahead of me and already in college and I was still in high school. We got back in touch about 25 years later when we were both poets and became good friends. I was determined to be an English major. This was very difficult because I had such a poor English record in high school and every counselor advised me against it. I was very good in math. I was on the math team. My mother wanted me to be like my father. She wanted me to be an engineer, but I wasn’t interested. Though I liked math and was good at sciences, I desperately wanted to do English, mainly because of the literature. It wasn’t so much for the writing, but for the reading. Conferences and aptitude tests all said I shouldn’t do it,

⁴⁶⁴ For Bloch’s poems, see, for example, [The Past Keeps Changing: Poems](#), (unknown publishers), 1992; [Mrs. Dumpty](#), University of Wisconsin Press, 1998; for Bloch’s translation, see, for example, [Open Closed Open: Poems](#) by Yehuda Amichai, translated from the Hebrew by Chana Bloch and Chana Kronfeld. Orlando: Harcourt, 2006.

⁴⁶⁵ Camp Boiberik: a secular Yiddish culture camp, which existed from 1923 to 1979 near Rhinebeck, New York. It was a part of the Sholem Aleichem Folk Institute, a non-political Yiddish cultural organization with its center in New York and Sholem Aleichem Folk shuln (schools) in a number of states in the US. Camp Boiberik Home Page, accessed January 18, 2008. <http://boiberik.media.mit.edu/history.html>.

but I was very stubborn. Even in college and in graduate school, I had tremendous trouble writing. Especially scholarly work. I had a lot of trouble writing formal essays.

JP: Do you mean using academic language?

IK: Well, in those days, we weren't so academic, but we did use "one" or "we." There had to be that little bit of distance. I discovered the process of explicating a text and it was very exciting to me. I just loved doing it. It still remains my favorite thing to do. So, I got literally double grades. I would get these "F"s for the writing because I used sentence fragments and poor organization. But at least they recognized, particularly one teacher, that a brain was working there. And on the side, I was writing. I didn't let anybody see it. It wasn't judged. Nobody told me it was terrible. I am still very secretive about my writing. People get angry with me because when they ask me whether I'm writing, I won't answer. I won't answer anything about my writing, about anything that's going on now. I'll talk about the past, but I will not say whether I am writing or not. I think it is partly because it took me a very long time to show anything to anybody. I was never a workshop poet. I was not interested in other people's views on it. It was about the last thing I wanted. I figured if they'll like it, they'll like it. If they don't like it, I don't mind it. Now for my prose, I'll go for feedback anytime. If I write an essay, I will show it to people and I'll ask for their feedback, but if I'll write a poem, I'm not interested. So, it was very hard. College was all about papers and I was an English major. I did get into the honors program and I also organized, with a couple of other friends, Yiddish courses with Max Weinreich.⁴⁶⁶ He was in the German Department. There was not a single course in Yiddish. It's just horrible when you think about it. I did

⁴⁶⁶ Well-known Yiddish scholar and teacher who worked as a professor of linguistics, German, and Yiddish at Columbia.

individual honors with him. So I got honors in Yiddish and English when I graduated. He really liked me because I treated Yiddish literature like I treated English literature. It was a text and I read it and interpreted it. I didn't think about it being good for the Jews and all of this other junk. He very badly wanted me to go into Yiddish literature. That's not what I wanted to do. For a lot of reasons. I wanted to try to figure out how to fit in. It was also complicated because my friend Elza, who I've written about, committed suicide.⁴⁶⁷ It's a funny realization that I probably should have had about thirty years ago, but it occurred to me about two or three years ago; if Elza had lived I probably would not have been a poet. I don't think I could have competed with her. I was so in awe of her. She was just everything I wasn't. She was articulate. Elza came here [from Poland] and she became a valedictorian of her class in Pittskill high school three years after she arrived. She was translating Latin poetry, she went to Cornell, she had her stories published, she was beautiful. I was this totally maladjusted, total misfit and she had a much harder life than I did. It was very tough after she died. I think I wrote really obsessively about her and about the Holocaust when I was in Chicago. I went to Chicago right after she died. I was in Europe when she committed suicide in 1963 and then I went to Chicago. My big aim then was to stop writing and find another topic. That's why it's sort of ironic to me that everyone reads my Holocaust poems now. That's what I've been running away from. I hated graduate school, I hated Chicago, but I had one really wonderful teacher who sort of mentored me, Stuart Tave.⁴⁶⁸ I quit graduate school at one

⁴⁶⁷ See, for example, section 2 of Klepfisz's poem, "Bashert," titled "Chicago, 1964: I am walking home alone at midnight" (in A Few Words in the Mother Tongue, 190-193) and, as well, Klepfisz's essay titled "Forging a Women's Link in *di goldene keyt*: Some Possibilities for Jewish American Poetry" (in Dreams of an Insomniac, 167-174).

⁴⁶⁸ Stuart Tave retired from the English Department at the University of Chicago in 1993.

point. I went to my last class. My last class was with Wayne Booth. He did a lot of stuff on rhetoric and he was very big at one point and a sort of neo-Aristotelian. My last quarter there he had a special seminar for ten people, which was hard to get into. It was about American rhetoric or fiction or something like that. I wrote my [final] paper on George Eliot's The Mill on the Floss. I wrote about the narrator of the Floss. This was around, let's see, I'd say it was around 1966. It was the beginning of the Second Wave [of feminism], but I was not really into it and I didn't know very much about it. I wrote about this narrator in The Mill on the Floss and referred to her as 'her' and 'she' just using logic. On the first page of this paper, Booth crossed out every 's' and said George Eliot's narrators were too intellectual to be women. I got a B+ on the paper, which was a failure. It was my last quarter of a course taken. This wasn't even a feminist statement. It was just sort of, she is a woman, she's using first person, I don't assume she's putting on a pantsuit and a tuxedo to write this. Booth was very influential and he told a close friend of mine that he didn't think I would do well [in graduate school] because I had too much adrenaline.

JP: What does that mean?

IK: I suppose that I wasn't distanced enough to be a good critic. And I quit. I just walked out. I said, "I don't know what this is about, I don't think I can do it." I went to teach at the University of Illinois. I didn't really know what to do. I worked in a remedial program and that's where I started learning grammar. Then a year later, the chair called me via Stuart Tave and said, "you know Irena, we'll give you a fellowship if you come back." I really sat hard thinking about it and the money did seduce me. I thought that I would never have another chance where they would offer me money to do

it. I went back and I did my orals and I wrote my dissertation on George Eliot.⁴⁶⁹ I wrote about George Eliot's uses of history and the influence of history on the individual, which only literally decades later amuses me because it was so unconscious. I had no clue it meant anything [laughs]. It's about the relationship of the individual to historical events. I was totally oblivious. It was very difficult to get a job in those days because the job market had totally collapsed. I had one interview and I got the job and it was here at Brooklyn College but that ended after four years. That was in 1973. I've never had a full time teaching job since. I decided I was going to get unemployment and do my first book. I went up to Montauk and I put together my first book.⁴⁷⁰ I was also coming out then. It all converged at the same time. I had had a very brief affair in New York before I left and so basically going to Montauk was trying to figure out what I was doing. When I came back to the city, I was committed to being out and I joined a women's poetry group. We were all writers and all coming out, and we were mutually supportive and competitive and all kinds of things. I started doing public readings, which was very difficult for me. I was pathologically shy. I went to graduate school barely speaking. It was a trauma just to be called on. It was very difficult for me to meet new people and very difficult to get through social dinners. But from that point on I got bolder. I was just getting more out, literally getting out, and being more social. I also started being more public with my work. We formed a little publishing company, we got an imprint, and basically published the books ourselves.⁴⁷¹ We each paid for our own book but we made it look like a publishing company by using the same imprint. It was all part of the

⁴⁶⁹ The Uses of History in George Eliot's Fiction: A Study of "Romola" and its Place in George Eliot's Development. University of Chicago, 1970.

⁴⁷⁰ Periods of Stress: Poems, New York: Out & Out Books, 1975.

⁴⁷¹ Out & Out Books.

political movement. There was a movement, there were newspapers, places to review, bookstores were willing to carry this stuff. Now with Borders and Barnes & Noble, it's just hopeless, but at that time, there were six or seven women's bookstores in New York City. It's hard to imagine. So you could really get distribution, and there were networks, and there were women's papers and so you could be selling books in Colorado, Austin, or San Francisco.

JP: Is this how you got into the feminist movement?

IK: Yes. And then we started the magazine Conditions.⁴⁷² Then slowly, don't ask me how, probably because of the Holocaust poems, I just became a [professional] Jew. I never thought of myself in those terms. If you took the whole body of my work, everything I've written about, I bet that only about forty percent is really Jewish-focused. I've written a lot about being gay, work, about the Palestinian Israeli conflict and not only Jews write about Israel—although they're maybe obsessed with it. Partly because of that and because I entered the left strand of the lesbian feminist movement—I was really shlepped in because I was not interested in these political sort of issues. I was raised as a Bundist. Israel was not part of my landscape. I did go to Israel right after college. I worked on a kibbutz. It was not a great experience. I didn't like the way they talked about European Jews in 1963. This was still before the Eichmann trial [sic].⁴⁷³ I didn't like the way they talked about it. I didn't like the way they were condescending about it when they talked about how they all went like sheep to the slaughter. They thought I was living under the worst anti-Semitic oppression by living in the diaspora in America. I just

⁴⁷² Klepfisz was co-founder and co-editor of Conditions (1976-1981).

⁴⁷³ The trial took place in 1961 and Adolf Eichmann was executed in 1962, so Klepfisz made a mistake when she told me that the conversations she heard in Israel about East European Jews took place before his was tried.

wasn't a Zionist. I wasn't anti-Zionist. In fact, I didn't really even know all the arguments. I mean I was anti-Zionist in the Bundist, in the original Bundist sense, which was that Jews didn't need a homeland, but I was not anti-Zionist in the sense that let's dismantle it now. I was really a pre-1948 anti-Zionist. I was dragged into all of this and I was really totally ignorant. I did not know anything about Israel and the Palestinians. I knew that there was displacement and my friend [...] ⁴⁷⁴ told me stories about it. [...] had told me stories about Arab displacement, but they were these individual little stories. I never really thought of it in any large way. And I was really forced to learn. The lesbian anthology, Nice Jewish Girls, came out in 1982. ⁴⁷⁵ It came out a month before Israel's invasion of Lebanon, which was followed by the massacre of Southern Shatila. The whole thing was just a nightmare. So, I got sort of dragged into it. It's not where I wanted to go necessarily. I really resented the amount of time that the focus on Israel absorbed. I felt that people should be working on Yiddish culture here. The two state solution seemed perfectly fair to me. Arabs seemed really human. One of the best things that the Bund ever gave me in terms of what I got from my mom's friends was that they were never romantic about the Jews. The Bund never romanticized the Jews. They recognized that there were criminal elements in the Jewish population. They knew that there was prostitution. All those stories they told me about the war: there were good Jews and there were bad Jews. There were Jewish policemen. Saying that Israel was doing terrible things was not a horrible breakthrough for me. I really thought that that

⁴⁷⁴ Irena asked me to leave out her friend's name so that she can remain anonymous because she is mentioned, under a different name, in her poem "67 Remembered."

⁴⁷⁵ Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology, ed. Evelyn Torton Beck, Watertown: Persephone Press, 1982. Klepfisz contributed two of her poems ("*Bashert*" and "perspectives on the second world war") and two of her essays ("Anti-Semitism in the Lesbian/Feminist Movement" and "Resisting and Surviving America") to the volume.

was a great gift to me. More than almost any politics, I think that that was a major thing for me. I got sucked into a lot of that and, despite myself, I kind of became a professional Jew.

JP: What does that mean to you? When you refer to yourself as a professional Jew? How did you become a professional Jew?

IK: It was gradual. I think one of the things that happened to me in my work when I look at it a little bit historically, is that the work that's not about the Jewish stuff lost the audience. There was a feminist movement and there were people who were teaching women's poetry, which they still do, it's not that it's disappeared, but at the time, that started entering the mainstream more, so the bookstores started disappearing, and they got absorbed by these larger places. You still have women's centers and so on, but it's not quite what it was. When I published something in a feminist journal like Sinister Wisdom or when I published in Off Our Backs or something, I knew right away that an audience saw it. But when that dried up, what didn't dry up was the Jewish stuff. I think with the publication in the 1990s of The Tribe of Dina, I became sort of, I don't know, an authority, an expert, a spokesperson.⁴⁷⁶ I don't even know what I was. I experienced a lot of homophobia in the Jewish community and institutions but when that died down a bit, after the two books came out, the essays and the collected poems,⁴⁷⁷ I got endless invitations by Jewish institutions. I would often be brought to campus, where people remarked that my audiences were extremely mixed. The English department would come and the gay and lesbian alliance would come and the women's center would come and

⁴⁷⁶ The Tribe of Dina: Jewish Women's Anthology, eds. Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz and Irena Klepfisz, Boston: Beacon Press, 1990.

⁴⁷⁷ Collected poems: A Few Words in the Mother Tongue/Etlekhe verter oyf mame-losh; collected essays: Dreams of an Insomniac. Both came out in 1990.

then Jewish Studies. It was always a very mixed audience. But I think increasingly, the primary people who continued to invite me were Jewish. I feel that's been put on me rather than something that I'd been either seeking or wanting to continue. I find it sometimes confining. I don't know how to say it. For example, the last six years I've been teaching in a prison, which has nothing to do with... *gornisht mit gornisht* [absolutely nothing]. This is the first semester that I haven't taught in six years. I've been teaching every semester for the last six years at Bedford Hills. It's a maximum security prison. I teach English. I usually spent one full day there. So, my life is, I don't know, some people would see, Jews always want to put everything into Jewish terms so they would say, you're doing Jewish work, I can just hear it [laughs]. This is *tikkun olam* [perfecting the world], and I do consider it to some degree a *mitzvah* [a good deed] that I'm doing this, but on the other hand, I also feel that it's doing something for me. One of the things it does for me, for example, is that I've been able to teach world literature. In the last six years, I was able to teach Melville, Kafka, Chekov, Gorky, and Alice Walker and Toni Morrison, not just Jews. It's an important part of my life. I'm not crazy about being a professional Jew, partly because I don't feel I'm in sync with Jews to begin with. I think it's both the circumstances and maybe it's also age, maybe it's also burn-out, but I am really angry about Israel. I mean, an atrocity has been committed there that's going to take generations to undo. I'm just so angry, so frustrated. I don't know what to be optimistic about. In many ways, I am an optimistic person. I sort of bounce back. I am willing to bounce back pretty quickly. But it's styming me, it's just styming me.

JP: Can we talk about your journey in Yiddish? When you were a child, you heard Yiddish in Lodz because you obviously couldn't learn Yiddish during the war.

IK: Well, people were speaking Yiddish there and in Sweden. It was all a mixture of Polish and Yiddish. And so I did hear it and understand it although I couldn't speak it. I may have been able to sing a couple of songs, but I really didn't speak it and it was only when we came here, where there were these Workmen's Circles, *Arbeter Ring Shules* [Workmen's Circle Schools] that my mother sent me to. She felt that I should be going and I did. I went to *shule* five days a week after school for one hour and then she sent me to *Mitl Shule*, which was the Yiddish high school. The Yiddish high school was on weekends. So, I was going to school seven days a week for four years, which I think is just *meshuge* [crazy]. My mother said to me a while back, "aren't you glad that you learned it?" And I told her, "you know, everybody deserves a day off, even kids" [laughs]. I had good friends there and I liked it. In many ways, I liked it better than English school. One of the things that happened with me was that there was an enormous amount of pressure among my mother's friends and the Amalgamated for me to speak Yiddish but I always felt very inhibited. It didn't feel natural. I was having enough trouble with English. She got a lot of pressure to speak to me in Yiddish [at home], which she wouldn't do.

JP: She got pressure from the community to speak to you in Yiddish? She spoke with you in Polish, right?

IK: Yes. Some of my mother's friends, who spoke Polish, never spoke it again after the war. They spoke Yiddish and that was it. So, my mother continued [with Polish], and I think it's one of the good things she did for me. God knows what would have happened if she had switched languages on me at that point. I always felt extremely inferior with

Yiddish. I never spoke it at home. People think that it was my *mame-loshn* [mother tongue] and they go into this whole unrealistic thing. Untrue, totally not true.

JP: You do call it your *mame-loshn* now, right?

IK: I call it *mame-loshn* because that's what it's called but it wasn't my *mame-loshn*. And what I liked about it, what I took away from it, was certainly the musicality of the poetry, which was a very limited poetry, the proletarian work. I didn't really study, I don't know, Glatshetyn. We learned Avrom Reisin, Morris Rosenfeld, Leyvik.⁴⁷⁸ It was very specific. I can recite some of that even now. We learned it by heart, which was really nice because you sort of internalized it. And then in college, like I said, I ended up going to Rochelle, who was in my *Mitl Shule* class, and saying, "let's organize a course." We went to Weinreich and we organized a seminar and then later I studied with him individually. There was only one other person and we met with him privately for a year. I think I had a lot of mixed feelings about being public about it. I mean public about being Jewish. In my English honors, I remember going back and forth about whether I was going to write a thesis on Malamud or Roth or if I was going to write on Herman Melville. I chose Melville. I think part of the reason I chose him was because I could not really picture myself publicly talking about Jewish stuff. I just couldn't. I think I was afraid. It was a self-consciousness about being Jewish. It was a kind of self-consciousness and a mixture of fear because I went through a period when I was really afraid of being on Jewish lists. And in Chicago, I didn't really do very much. I loved Yiddish, I loved the Yiddish literature, but it wasn't the direction I was going and frankly, if I had not lost my job at LIU, I do not think I would have done it. Well, maybe I would

⁴⁷⁸ Klepfisz is making a distinction between Yiddish proletarian poetry and the modernist poetry of authors like Yakev Glatshetyn. The Yiddish programs she attended in New York focused on the former.

have because two things happened. I lost my job and I started looking for work and Hannah Fryshdorf⁴⁷⁹ who was the secretary at YIVO then gave me a job and I worked on the first, the very first process of organizing what later became Image Before My Eyes.⁴⁸⁰ I worked with Lucjan Dobroszycki⁴⁸¹ on the captions for photographs, just for the archives, not for the show. They gave me a job—I needed a job. I had just gotten my PhD. I was out of a job. I felt very depressed. I was coming out and I had to be closeted.

JP: You had to be closeted in the Jewish community? At YIVO?

IK: Yes, at YIVO. So, what happened was that in some ways my Yiddish got reactivated. I was looking for another career. That, ultimately, did not work out. And I left for... I don't even want to get into it. It was pretty awful, but I decided and some of it, a lot of it, most of it, had to do with homophobia. About six years later, I basically turned my back on it and I just said, I'm leaving. I put all of my energies back into the women's movement, but because of the obsession with identity in the movement, I got sucked right back in. So, I came back into Yiddish again because of people like Gloria [Anzaldua] who were already doing all these things about language of origin, community of origin... I was one of the few Jewish people around who... a lot of them were very disaffected and were not used to saying or even admitting that they were Jewish, and I

⁴⁷⁹ Hannah Fryshdorf was the Assistant Director of YIVO (Jewish Scientific Institute) from the late 1970s until her death in 1990. Fryshdorf was a fighter in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. She immigrated to the United States via Sweden after the war.

⁴⁸⁰ Lucjan Dobroszycki and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Image Before My Eyes: A Photographic History of Jewish Life in Poland, 1864-1939, New York: Schocken Books, 1977.

⁴⁸¹ Lucjan Dobroszycki (1925-1995): historian and author of Image Before My Eyes, Survivors of the Holocaust in Poland: A Portrait Based on Jewish Community Records, 1944-1947 (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1994), and The Chronicle of the Lodz Ghetto, 1941-1944 (trans. Richard Lourie and Joachim Neugroschel, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), among others. Dobroszycki survived the Holocaust in Poland where he became a historian after the war. He immigrated to the United States via Israel in 1969.

always admitted I was Jewish. It was never something I was ashamed of. I might have been afraid, but I would have never denied it. So, people started looking to me in a way. And then the Yiddish... Gloria [Anzaldua] pushed me a little bit. I thought about it and frankly...

JP: When did you become friends with Gloria Anzaldua?

IK: I think we met when we started working together after the publication of Nice Jewish Girls, maybe in 1982 or 1983. I got a job for three summers teaching in Santa Cruz where they had a women's writing workshop. They brought in three teachers, and Gloria was one, I was one, and I don't remember the other one. So we knew of each other probably because she published in Conditions and I think we had even corresponded, but we had never met. We lived in a suite together and we became friends. We did that for three summers. I think it [using Yiddish] was very much an intellectual experiment. I always find it funny that there are some people who think that I'm a Yiddish poet because what I've struggled with is to be an English poet. That's been my major struggle. It's also so naïve, I mean what I do is not Yiddish poetry. Some people's threshold for Yiddish is so so low that it looks like I'm a Yiddish poet, which is just laughable. In the beginning, the first thing I did was "*Etlekhe verter*" ["A Few Words"]. That was the very first poem I ever did [using Yiddish in English], and it sort of fell together, it was kind of fun. I remember I was just very excited about the work and it's fun to read. It's not so much fun when you look at it on the page, but it's fun to read out loud. Though I had already written "*Bashert*," which was interesting because I really could not find an English equivalent for *bashert*, so I felt forced to use the word *bashert*. I simply had no other word. I don't know what I think about the other poems, like "*Di rayze aheym*" (the

journey home). I don't know if they work. They're too intellectualized. Some people really like them but I don't know if I do. I wasn't going to include it in The Tribe of Dina, but I was convinced to do it. One of the things that Gloria made me realize was that this was part of my linguistic history and that, in some ways, I had managed to totally move around it [laughs]. Particularly when I thought about how much time I had spent on it. I had done the *shule*, then the *mitl shule*, and then I did a postdoc at YIVO during the mid-1970s, and I had taught Yiddish for three summers at Columbia. I had done all of this stuff and I thought how bizarre it was that it never even seeped in.

JP: So, you were living separately in Yiddish and English?

IK: Totally. It was very bizarre when I thought about it, but it was also a product of my upbringing. I thought the real failure of the Yiddish community like the *shule* and the other groups, was that they they acted like it was separate. When I went to public school in the 1950s, there was no multiculturalism. I was in a school that was maybe 98% Jewish and we did Christmas and Easter plays. We did nothing that was Jewish in public school. Nothing. We had some Jewish teachers, but most of them were not Jewish. And then we went to *shule* and they never acknowledged that we went to public school. I really feel like they were these parallel universes. I don't know whether that's partly an explanation, but they never set out to integrate. But I think it's also the fact that I never felt completely comfortable in Yiddish. To some degree it always remained alien to me. I mean, there are a lot of people who come up to me and go: "oh, it just reminds me of the sounds in my house. I didn't understand it, but it makes me feel so warm."

JP: *Heymish*... [home-like]

IK: Yes, *heymish*. Well, we spoke Polish in my house. I heard Yiddish a lot when people came over. In fact, I feel that most of the intellectual content that I heard growing up was all in Yiddish. It was interesting that even though I couldn't speak Yiddish, English did not have the intellectual content. I never heard any really good intellectual conversations in English. Maybe not until I got to graduate school. It was Yiddish that had the political arguments, and everything, literature, whatever. Somehow it always seemed very separate to me. I think that it would be interesting to think about what it meant and why I didn't use it. I could only use Yiddish in a fragmented form. I'm not interested in writing a Yiddish poem. It's too hard to write one in English [laughs] for me to write one in Yiddish. I'm never going to do it. I just don't have the capacity.

JP: You didn't feel natural in Yiddish and you also didn't feel natural in English.

Was Polish the natural kind of language?

IK: No, nothing was.

JP: Nothing?

IK: No, and it took a very long time. I think that was one of the reasons I was so bad in English. That's why it remained such a problem for me for so long. My Polish never developed. I never read in Polish. My mother now has Polish aides and I break my teeth on it. *Pani mowi po polsku, tak?* [Do you speak Polish?]

JP: *Tak*. [yes]

IK: *Jak ja mowie to jest tak okropnie bo ja nie mam slowa. Ja musze mowic cos delikatne jak one maja z nia mowic, cos z nia zrobic, ja nie moge mowic, to jest...* [it's so awful when I speak it because I lack the words. When I have to speak to them, I do so carefully, because I can't really speak it]

JP: *Brakuje slow?* [you can't find the words?]

IK: *Zupelnie!* [completely] And, in fact, she's had a couple of these emergencies now, and I'm actually upset because they don't know English. I want people to be able to talk to the EMS people. To at least tell them what happened.

JP: Your mother really lives in Polish.

IK: She loves it! She loves it and feels very comfortable in it. She loves Polish culture. She still recites her Mickiewicz poems.⁴⁸² She's unbelievable. The other night I was playing a video for her and they started playing the barcarole [Irena hums it]. She started singing it in Polish. I couldn't believe it! She probably hadn't heard it in 80 years! She started singing "*kochac nie wolno... zapomniec nie mozna...*" [you cannot love and you cannot forget]. I couldn't believe it! She's taught me practically all the Polish songs she knows and this one I had never heard before. She loves Polish culture, she loves Polish, she's a real reader. So, I was uncomfortable [with English] for a long time. I think it was only when I started refining my poetry and when I started writing essays, sort of trying to write the English sentence in different ways, and that didn't happen until I was in my forties [laughs]. The whole thing with English and my insistence on sort of cracking it was agony. It was humiliating to be corrected grammatically in graduate school. It was terrible. I couldn't get it.

JP: I wanted to ask you about your name. You never changed it to Irene. In this context, I would also like to know what you think about the relationship between language and identity.

⁴⁸² Adam Mickiewicz (1798-1855): one of the most celebrated Polish poets.

IK: My name was almost changed at one point. I was getting my citizenship before my mother for some reason. We were getting it separately, which was unusual. I don't know why. I was 13. I was a freshman in high school. And we went in front of the judge to have the papers signed. And he actually said, "why don't you change your... Be a real American and change it to Irene." And I turned to my mother and I said I didn't want to do it. I don't really remember my feelings, but I just didn't want to do it. I wanted to keep my name. But my mother was very scared that they wouldn't give me the citizenship. So she said "do it." There was a small tiff between us and I finally caved in and I agreed. But the judge realized that we had already signed the papers. So, it was too late [smiles]. As for language and identity... One of the things I've been thinking about is the degree to which I have shed my immigrant identity. I was 66 this year and it occurred to me that in some ways I do not feel like an immigrant anymore. I definitely do not feel like an immigrant, but I do feel like an outsider in many ways. I don't know whether that's just a different version of being an immigrant. I feel that I've somehow made peace with this environment and that I'm not at war with it anymore. I feel that I'm not fighting it anymore. I'm here. I'm part of it. I might not be happy with a lot of things and I might feel outside of certain things, but I don't feel like I just got off the boat, which is how I felt for a very, very, very long time. I feel more integrated in some ways, but I don't know when it happened. I think part of it also is that I have really become almost allergic to things Holocaust. I'm so upset, disgusted, and repelled with how it's used and what people do with it and sort of the excuses of it. I want to distance myself from it. I mean I always wanted to. I had to do a lot of therapy and work about the role that it had played in my life. So, I don't mean it in that kind of distancing. In

general, I feel that something has gone so wrong with all of this. I'm still digesting it in some ways. I'm trying to figure out what my relationship is to it in a way that I didn't ten years ago. It's really a relatively new feeling and phenomenon. I think it's the mixture with Israel and the way Americans commemorate the Holocaust. The sense of victimhood and the sort of embracing of victimhood. It feels both wrong and alien. It's almost celebrating victimhood. I can't totally explain it. I feel like I've partly detached myself from it in a way that I wasn't ten years ago. I just think that we've reached such a bad point about all of this and maybe it's not really different than anything else that's going on, but my sense of wanting to embrace it is just not there. I just feel that there has been a kind of betrayal of the victims of the Holocaust, of the people who died. I shudder at all the stuff that's done in their name, that's said in their name, and for them. I feel like I've taken a step back from it and partly, I think, I took a step back because I really need to figure out what my relationship to it is now. I don't know how to tell you how it's changed, but it's going on in my head right now. It's so bizarre that somebody with my history, and everything that I've done and the Yiddish and the peace work and everything and then the American Jewish Committee writes about me as basically a self-hating Jew. They have these lists, and I'm on them and there is just something really wrong with that.

JP: Are you on these lists because of your stance on Israel?

IK: Yes. There's just something very nutty about it. Somebody asked me if I felt bad and I said, "no, I'd feel bad if I wasn't on the list" [laughs]. All my friends are on the list and I want to be on it, too. I don't think Yiddish formed my identity. The culture of Yiddish formed my identity and I think there is a difference. It's not just the language.

The language is just the medium. The Yiddish medium passed on to me was very very valuable. Certain political things, like I talked about before, being able to look at Jews in a kind of unromantic way but still in a very loving and committed way. I think that was very very important. I think what they didn't do, and maybe they couldn't because they were traumatized or they didn't think it through. What they really didn't do was to show us how to maintain that culture and be integrated into American society. That was never really shown to us. At least not to my generation. A lot of us couldn't do it and I think it'd be interesting to know why some could and some couldn't. Some of it had to do with what was going on in the home as well. I think that my generation, when I was growing up in the 1950s and 60s and going to school, there was no multiculturalism. In fact, it was just the opposite. You had to clear everything up when you went to public school. I think the Jews that I was taught by in the Yiddish *svive* [environment] didn't really know either and a lot of them weren't integrated. They were living in their own Yiddish world. I think for the later generation it might have become a little bit easier to integrate—not to have that self-conscious feeling that I had. Now Yiddish is sort of in, it's sort of cool, but that wasn't true in the 1950s. I always considered myself a Bundist. There is nothing in contradiction with my life that I learned from the Bund. But I feel that the community made it very difficult for me by its demands, by insisting that I speak Yiddish, by making me self-conscious, by making me feel that somehow I was so inadequate in this, that I didn't want to talk. I still don't really want to talk. I would read, I would translate, but I didn't really want to talk. I think that was a disservice and that was sort of an injury that I never quite got over. I have to say though, when I think about Yiddish now, and this is something that's just a very slow realization, it has to do also with my mother and how

she wouldn't speak Yiddish with me, but almost the entire group that we came here with has died. Virtually everyone. I've sort of watched them in the last ten to fifteen years vanish. There are other worlds, but they're not my world. It's one of those things where I think it's a question of me moving on and being able to move forward into a different kind of Yiddish context, which I haven't done yet. I did it a little bit.

JP: Perhaps this plays a role in this culture and the misuses of the Holocaust.

IK: There is a dedication stone here at Riverside Drive, and I think it's one of the first, if not the first memorial. It's just a plaque and it's right on Riverside Drive and 83rd or 86th Street and I think it says "To the Warsaw Ghetto." At this point it's the only thing I do on April 19th.⁴⁸³ It's very simple. We come, there are a couple of things in Yiddish, they have little kids who come from the local school and they bring their little essays. No big fanfare, no choirs, no politicians. That's what I do. I haven't gone near a Holocaust ceremony in I don't know how long. Well, I do. The last time was when I spoke about the Palestinians [laughs]. They didn't want me to talk again. I didn't really talk about the Palestinians. It's in one of my speeches actually. It's in one of the essays when I talk about Anne Frank and I say "but things are going on and we can't mourn in a vacuum."⁴⁸⁴ Did I get it for that! It was in 1988 and it was the forty fifth anniversary. Maybe that's one of the reasons why I feel so distanced.

JP: I interpreted your bilingual poetry as a new medium, which helps you to bridge your linguistic lives. Has it played a role in your integration?

⁴⁸³ The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising began on April 19th, 1943.

⁴⁸⁴ See "The Forty-Fifth Anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising: April 19, 1988" published in Dreams of an Insomniac (132-135).

IK: I think that may be true. I think that there was a kind of integration though in some cases it was kind of rough. It was a real shock when Gloria [Anzaldúa] said to me “how come you don’t do this?” It was such a shocking question because it had never ever occurred to me. When I really looked at it I thought well, gee, this has really taken up a lot of my life and why isn’t it there. So, in some ways, I think it’s probably true what you’re saying, that it was a way towards trying to bring those worlds together. Right now, I don’t know. When I wrote “*Di yerushe*” [“The Inheritance”] that parable about borsht, I was trying to tell a *bobe mayse* [literally, a grandmother’s tale], through a real *bobe mayse*, and I was playing with that. I have also become very interested in thinking more and talking more about getting away from the purity of Judaism. Gloria and I were talking about this because I once went to a talk that she gave. She talked about her background, about being Chicana and so on, and she kept getting students asking, “what exactly are you?” Categories are very important and I try to break out of them with my students where they think something is very Jewish, but 200 years ago it wasn’t so Jewish. In fact, 250 years ago they excommunicated these people [laughs]. You think they’re ‘it’ right now but they weren’t so ‘it’ 250 years ago. I’ve become much more interested in trying to find bleeding and porous boundaries. Borsht is not Jewish when you think about it historically. I remember going to restaurants and eating the Polish borsht, which was not kosher. Not that my mother ever made a kosher borsht. I think it’s important to have boundaries because otherwise you just sort of bleed into nothingness, but I also think that you have to know when they’re not healthy. It’s very difficult to tell when they’re healthy and good for you and when they’re not. When I think about my own life, I think about the Poles who helped save us during the war, and I know about the

complicated history of the Poles during the war so it's not like I'm naïve, but Poles did save us. Or I think about Gloria talking to me about Yiddish. Jews really need the interaction with non-Jews. My partner of almost thirty years is not Jewish and people thought that somebody like me, and I don't know what that even means, the Holocaust, Yiddish, I don't know, not having a Jewish partner... It's like writing poetry. It's always good to have form, but you don't want to be totally inhibited by form. I very often do something formal and usually burst out of it, but it's a very good exercise to try to stay in form and then to see where it gets in the way. Then, in fact, you enrich it by breaking the form or maybe even enrich the form by breaking the form. I feel, actually, much less aware of borders than I used to and maybe that's also a thing about age because I just care less. You get more *chutzpedik* [cheeky courage] and I could care less...

JP: I would like to talk to you a bit more about your first trip to Poland in 1983 and later trips as well.

IK: I went at least two times if not three. I went once when I was hired by the American Jewish Congress to be a resource person on one of these American roots tours. What I didn't really realize, which I should have, was that it was really a Holocaust tour. That was around 1987. We went to Bucharest and Budapest and I got to go to Cracow because I hadn't gone to Cracow with my mother, so I went to Auschwitz. I also went to Warsaw to see Marek [Edelman].⁴⁸⁵ But it wasn't the thing for me. They wanted me to do it again, they really liked me, but I just didn't like it very much. I didn't like going from memorial to memorial... We were in Auschwitz and it was so difficult and then we had to go on to something else. The other trip was in 1997, which was the 100th anniversary

⁴⁸⁵ Marek Edelman was one of the leaders of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. He was friends with Irena's father, Michal.

of the Bund, the founding of the Bund, so there was a gala in Warsaw in which I participated. There was another trip when I went inside the orphanage. I went and talked to the director and saw the inside of it. I looked at the chapel where I prayed and I just could not remember it. I only remember the outside. One of the things about Poland that I'd like to do is I'd like to see a little bit of where my mother had fun. I'd like to go to Zakopane.⁴⁸⁶ My mother always talked about Zakopane. I'd love to see that because it was part of her life. My mother met my father when they were skiing. It's nothing to do with the war, with the ghettos. One of the things I was really struck by when I went with my mother in 1983 was how beautiful the countryside is in Poland. Utterly beautiful. It's a beautiful country. And I was sort of unprepared for that. I always felt that if I was in exile at all, it was from Poland, rather than from Israel. My roots in the Yiddish culture that I grew up in are in Poland. So far, I've never had any desire to go to Germany, but Poland is different. Maybe because that is where my roots are. I loved the Jewish cemetery in Warsaw. I just loved it. I just felt home [sic]. The Jewish cemetery in Warsaw felt like home. I've always had this very strong attachment, though I don't remember her, to my aunt Gina, my father's sister who's buried in that other cemetery.⁴⁸⁷ There's always this remnant, a little thread...

JP: A large part of what I'm trying to figure out is about home and homeland. In the context of this quotation that you use as an epigraph in "Fradel Shtok"...

IK: "Language is the only homeland."

⁴⁸⁶ A skiing resort town in the Tatry Mountains in the south of Poland.

⁴⁸⁷ Gina Klepfisz was active in the Jewish resistance in Warsaw. She is buried in the Christian cemetery. Jewish funerals were prohibited by the German authorities during the war.

JP: ...I wonder what your view of this is and what is homeland for you. Where is home? Country? Language? History?

IK: English would be my home if I were physically displaced right now. I can't imagine thinking or feeling in any other language at this point, which doesn't mean that I don't have emotional feelings in Polish or Yiddish. When I start talking to my mother in Polish or listen to a CD, for example. I was listening to Wolf Krakowski who has a CD called "Transmigrations." It's a wonderful CD. I hadn't heard it in a really really long time. He has some Holocaust songs, he has also "*Warshe mayn du vest vider zayn a yidishe shtot fun amol*," (my Warsaw, you will once again be a Jewish city) and he has a tango by Kaczerginski.⁴⁸⁸ It's interesting how jolting it was to hear it. I don't know if I could ever write in another language. I feel that I've mastered English and that has been fairly recent, even though I still hesitate about certain things, but I feel like I know what I'm doing in English in a way that I didn't for a long time. That's really a big deal in terms of being able to think and being able to communicate with others. That's why I laugh when people say that I'm a Yiddish writer. That's just so ridiculous. You know, when I was in graduate school, Chicago was so conservative. I don't know what it's like now, but then they were all Aristotelians. Everything was 18th Century. Everything had to be structured. What do I know from Dryden and Pope? It just means nothing, really nothing. It was so alien. It was almost another language to me. I could not fathom it. I think it would be easier right now because I'm smarter and more sophisticated and everything else and I do feel that I certainly entered this language. When I listened to the [Krakowski] CD, it was like a memory jog. It was as if I had been coming out of

⁴⁸⁸ Shmaryahu (Shmerke) Kaczerginski (1908-1954): poet and partisan who was active in the Vilna Ghetto resistance. He was a composer and a collector of Yiddish songs.

amnesia and I had forgotten something that was always there in some kind of a strange way. So, perhaps I haven't bridged the divide...

JP: I wanted to ask you, to wrap up, who or what inspires you. Are there any artists, writers, who are really important to you?

IK: I have to say that listening to this [Krakowski] CD really inspired me. It really triggered something that I was sort of mulling. I'm very interested in, for example, the German writer, W.G. Sebald. He wrote three short stories. A really interesting story called "The Emigrants" and the other one is "Austerlitz." Also a really interesting book called On The Natural History of Violence, which is an essay book about Germans and the German response to the war. About German guilt and about Germans' being unable to talk about their own kind of pain that they experienced during the war because they're not allowed to. He talked a lot about America in World War II. In the last two days with my ipod, I also read or I heard, somebody read a short story by John Cheever called "The Union." It's a 1000 word story. It's one of the most extraordinary stories I have ever read. I was just blown away by it! I never read John Cheever. It was almost a prose poem. I think that things that inspire me are things that make me think about, selfishly, my own writing. There were a couple of books that I read in the last two years that influenced me profoundly. One was Marilyn Robinson's Gilead. It's the first religious novel that I've read that I really sort of understood and it's about three generations in a family of black preachers, and it's about the anti-slavery movement and John Brown. It's written in short sections and they're just beautifully evocative. Also Ian McEwan, who wrote Saturday and Atonement. Saturday was a really, to me, extraordinary novel about

faith and responsibility. Wonderfully written! Now I've read other stuff of his that I really hated and so it was a big shock [laughs] that I really liked it.

EVA HOFFMAN

Though I was unable to interview Hoffman personally, I still wanted to provide interview information about her immigrant experience and writings. In order to do so, I looked to Polish newspapers and magazines where I found five interviews conducted with Hoffman between 1989 and 2006. These interviews are important on at least two levels; her authorial and autobiographical persona in Polish is little known in the U.S. Thus, a glimpse of it remedies, in at least a small way, the American monolingual reality.⁴⁸⁹ Hoffman's words in Polish that I translate into English offer, perhaps not a window, but certainly a chink in a window, on another language and culture. They also make apparent the extent to which we miss out on an important dimension of an immigrant author's work when we consider it only in English.⁴⁹⁰

Among the writers examined in this project, Eva Hoffman has had the longest and most consistent education in a single language. Until her arrival in a Canadian high school in 1959, she spoke Polish at home and in public, in school and on the playground. She also heard Yiddish at home but only when her parents wanted to keep something secret from their daughters. They never taught Hoffman and her sister Yiddish,

⁴⁸⁹ Fewer than 3% of literary books published in the U.S. each year are translated from foreign languages compared to about 25-45% in every other country. And, of the 3%, many are retractions of the so-called classics. Jonathan Safran Foer, *The New York Times*, Jan. 16, 2005. This colossal difference between translations in the U.S. and elsewhere in the world, reminds me of just how little American readers are familiar with literatures outside their English-language borders. Despite American celebrations of multiculturalism, we really are kidding ourselves when we leave languages and translated texts out of our diversity equations. We not only insist on monolingualism, but are, in fact, proud of it.

⁴⁹⁰ The selected fragments are organized thematically and come from the following sources: „*Jak przetłumaczyc siebie* [How to Translate Yourself],” *Przekroj* [The Crossection] 2302 (1989); „*Nie chce zyc w wedrowce* [I don't Want to Wander],” *Akcent* [Accent], 1998 interview, accessed Nov. 22, 2006, http://free.art.pl/akcent_pismo/pliki/siec/hoffman.html; „*Pamiec i czas* [Memory and Time],” *Przekroj* [The Crossection] 30 (2001); „*Miedzy Manhattanem a Krakowem* [Between Manhattan and Krakow],” *Rzeczpospolita* 22-23 Dec. 2001; “Eva Hoffman—rozmowa [Eva Hoffman: A Conversation],” Onet.pl online chat, accessed Nov. 22, 2006. <http://rozmowy.onet.pl/artukul.html?ITEM=1057176&OS=37470>; “Ocalanie pamieci: wywiad z Eva Hoffman [Saving Memory: an Interview with Eva Hoffman],” Piotr Litka, *Midrasz*, 1:57 (2002). I footnoted each of the questions to indicate its source.

preferring instead that they linguistically assimilate to their Polish surroundings. This was not a matter of shame or fear on their part. As Hoffman recalls in one of the interviews from which I quote, her parents taught her to be proud of being Jewish. Like Maurer, Hoffman sees Polish as the language of her 'soul' as she explains that her memory preserved or "crystallized" Polish. Her Polish, however, did not develop past her elementary school education and though she reads in Polish frequently, she would have trouble using it to write.

I gathered especially those parts of Hoffman's Polish-language interviews that deal with language and identity, so as to show how Hoffman represents herself in Polish, a language to which she professes lasting allegiance. The following interview fragments emphasize to what extent Hoffman is asked to explain 'Americanness' to Poles, while she is asked to explain 'Polishness' to Americans. This discursive difference emphasizes how Hoffman tempers the strangeness of her linguistic identities in the Polish and the American cultural milieus. In other words, Hoffman's Polish language self is assumed to be familiar to her Polish interlocutors and they are interested in the explanations of her American English self.

The translation of your memoir, Lost in Translation, was published in Poland in 1995. What do you think about reading your own memories written down in English and then translated into Polish, your native language?⁴⁹¹

Eva Hoffman: Luckily, it was translated by Michal Ronikier who has an excellent ear for linguistic nuances. I cannot deny though that I felt rather strange while reading it in Polish. I am certain that it was an important experience and a sort of completion of my internal integration. Polishness accompanied the first thirteen years of my life. I didn't only speak Polish, but thought and dreamed in it. After that, after immigrating to Canada in 1959, my life wrote itself into my soul in English. When I was writing the book, I had to translate my Polish life into English. And now, they have been translated back into Polish. The existence of both versions unites my Polish and English language selves.

You left a few 'magic' words in it [Lost in Translation] in Polish like 'pani' in reference to your favorite teacher in Krakow. You did not translate it to Mrs...⁴⁹²

There are things, which simply defy translation because they exist in terms of culture, associations, and human relations. Not long ago after I returned from one of my visits to Krakow, for example, I realized how that city formed my sense of space and proportion. Everything mysterious and unusual for me is there, in the vicinity of the *Planty*.

I read Lost in Translation in both English and Polish. In the section titled „Paradise,” in the English original, the atmosphere of Polish you created seemed as if you were writing in Polish to begin with. Did you have notes, diaries, or did your childhood memory preserve it all so well?⁴⁹³

⁴⁹¹ “Memory and Time,” *Przekroj*.

⁴⁹² “Between Manhattan and Krakow,” *Rzeczpospolita*.

⁴⁹³ „I don't Want to Wander,” *Akcent*.

No, I had no diaries. My memory did really „preserve” it—that’s a wonderful way to describe it. I put away that period of my life into the far reaches of my memory. It was very important for me to preserve it intact because I had no one who knew that period of my life, I had to maintain it myself, preserve it, hide it inside, I couldn’t lose it. Besides, when you emigrate, then the part of your life from which you leave closes itself and isn’t modified later on or augmented with new experiences and sensations. It crystallizes.

On page 118 of the Polish translation of Lost in Translation, we read: „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.” This is a dramatic confession. Did you have to make a choice between Polish and English? Why not use both?⁴⁹⁴

No, I had to choose. For a number of reasons. Most importantly, I had no peers who spoke Polish. If I wanted to have any kind of a life in that city, in that new society, I had to switch to English. We didn’t live among Polish speakers because we arrived between two large waves of immigration. And I was also young enough to want to adapt and not live in an immigrant ghetto. The only way to accomplish this was to carry myself over, to move into English.

You are one of the few writers for whom Polish was the first language but who successfully write in English (like Conrad). How do you maintain your Polish? Do you ever read in Polish?⁴⁹⁵

⁴⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁵ “Eva Hoffman: A Conversation,” Onet.pl.

Yes, I do, often. Perhaps even more often than in English. That's why my passive Polish is very good, but my active Polish gets weaker and weaker simply because I don't use it very often.

You were asked at a lecture, „who is Eva Hoffman?” and you replied that she is a hybrid “formed by accumulations.”⁴⁹⁶

It seems to me that we worry too much about identity. There was a notion once that if there's such a thing as identity then there's only one, single category that can be described collectively. That's not the case, of course. The problem with identity is that we all emerge from some first culture and it seems to me that we really simplify it all too much: “I'm native Canadian. I am a woman. I am a Jew.” And somehow we lose in these assertions a sense of individuality and a sense of our own multidimensionality.

You describe your childhood in Krakow in „Paradise.” What is your relationship to that city now?⁴⁹⁷

I like Krakow very much. It is a beautiful city but it isn't my city anymore although every return here is very emotional for me. I have this surreal sense that this city doesn't even exist, that it's a figment of my imagination. Then I am always somewhat surprised that what I remembered from childhood when I lived here is actually real. But „Paradise” really refers to the land of my childhood where I had a sense of full and complete oneness with the world around me. Life as happy as mine was possible in Poland even though in the 40s and 50s Poland was rather poor and life was difficult.

⁴⁹⁶ „I don't Want to Wander,” *Akcent*.

⁴⁹⁷ “Memory and Time,” *Przekroj*.

You speak of a oneness with the surrounding world, but in your case that didn't really exist. You were a little Jewish girl, surrounded by Polish friends, who during the morning prayers got up as a sign of respect but didn't pray...⁴⁹⁸

I didn't have a sense of being torn then. When I was a child, I accepted the world around me. I had very basic self-assurance. I also had a sense of my Jewish identity. I owe this to my parents who taught me that being Jewish is not something to be ashamed of. Just the opposite—that it was something to be proud of.

Your memoir is full of very dramatic words like „inevitable” or „forever.” Already in the second sentence you write: „I feel that my life is ending.” And then, „I am thirteen years old, and we are emigrating. It's a notion of such crushing, definitive finality that to me it might as well mean the end of the world.”⁴⁹⁹

Well, I really did feel at the time that this emigration was final. And in some sense it was: we lost our Polish citizenship and my parents were leaving with a feeling that they absolutely never wanted to return. It seems to me that my choice of English and the giving up of Polish was some sort of an attempt to come to terms with all of this. I felt like emigration violated me. But because there was no turning back, I had to cross over somehow to the new life.

Was the writing of Lost in Translation supposed to liberate you from the immigrant complex and the adaptation process to the U.S. where after a dramatic struggle you found your own place in society and success?⁵⁰⁰

⁴⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁹ “I don't Want to Wander,” *Akcent*.

⁵⁰⁰ “How to Translate Yourself,” *Przekroj*.

Yes, on a certain level I was attempting to ‘translate’ my identity and its transformations, the loss of the first language—although not entirely so since we are speaking Polish—and the entry into a new language that I use on a daily basis and which I use to write, and that I even think in now. But that was a long process and for a while I thought in both English and Polish. In my memoir, I wanted to explain all of this to my American friends and, as well, all those who are interested in this topic. Immigration was an obsession of mine for years. Judging by the reactions of readers and critics, I think I made a few perceptive observations.

What were your parents like after emigrating from Poland?⁵⁰¹

They changed. They lived under a lot of pressure in a completely alien world. They were totally lost. There was a lot of tension between them and between them and us. It took them a lot longer to learn English. I was older than my sister and it was my responsibility to explain the world to them. We reversed roles.

You had to grow up very quickly. You had to resolve problems too difficult for someone your age. Has the sadness that was in your home remained with you?⁵⁰²

Unfortunately, yes. I constantly hope that it will not remain with me for the rest of my life. The sadness was already there in Krakow, but it was different than in Canada.

There was also disorientation and hopelessness in the Canadian sadness.

Which immigrant experiences were most important for you?⁵⁰³

I am not the only one who has experienced it, and everyone has individual reactions. The first phase, soon after arrival, consists of complete disorientation after leaving behind

⁵⁰¹ “Between Manhattan and Krakow,” *Rzeczpospolita*.

⁵⁰² Ibid.

⁵⁰³ “How to Translate Yourself,” *Przekroj*.

familiar cultural and social networks. I felt humiliated because I didn't know how to do anything and couldn't speak to anyone either. It entails becoming an idiot for some time. Later, when you learn the language and become familiar with the local customs, the process of uprooting from the first language and culture begins and, as well, the process of adaptation to the new conditions. This is never a straight line process and sometimes, when you think that you have already made it to the other side, suddenly you find yourself back where you started. I knew a Hungarian woman in Texas who said she was completely assimilated and happy, she had a rich husband and all, and then, years later, she suddenly broke down under the weight of unexpected nostalgia.

Is it easy to assimilate in the U.S.?⁵⁰⁴

I began in Canada and then, of course, in the U.S. where I studied and where I remained. I think that adaptation goes along rather quickly there because Americans are friendly to immigrants. After all, immigrants made that country. I would like to dispel the myth of easy assimilation, however, because it depends on a lot of factors like assimilation of the new language into the psyche. I am not at all certain that first generation immigrants can ever fully assimilate. This can be very productive for a writer or intellectual, but proves rather uncomfortable in everyday life. All in all, it is very important that an immigrant make connections with a few people who can be trusted and who understand him/her. That's how it all begins.

Why did you leave Canada and America for London nine years ago?⁵⁰⁵

It was a return to Europe. Getting used to American culture was very interesting and shaped me in many ways, but I didn't have a sense of home there. At some point, the

⁵⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁵ "Between Manhattan and Krakow," *Rzeczpospolita*.

tension I felt, which was so productive for me in America, was no longer so. I wanted to be somewhere where I would feel more at home and, paradoxically, I feel like that in England. It's closer to something... that is deeply familiar. London is a sort of middle point for me between Manhattan and Krakow.

Is it true that we create when we are either very happy or deeply unhappy?⁵⁰⁶

During the early part of my life, I was intensely happy and then intensely unhappy. My creativity was born out of the contrast between these two states, out of feeling unfulfilled. I am convinced that absolute happiness is not possible.

And this from an immigrant...⁵⁰⁷

My parents' experiences left profound traces in my psyche. My father could easily face critical situations, but everyday life was very difficult for him. In some sense, I am like him.

The notion of 'home' is very important in your work. You write [in Lost in Translation]: "I will make sure that you [narrator speaking to herself] feel at home in the new world." And the same goes for language: the writer, Eva Hoffman, wants to feel at home in English.⁵⁰⁸

Yes, that's how I feel.

The problem of place disappears: it doesn't matter whether you're in New York or in Krakow or in London.⁵⁰⁹

⁵⁰⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁸ "I don't Want to Wander," *Akcent*.

⁵⁰⁹ Ibid.

Yes, that's true, it matters much less. What matters is that a writer creates his/her own world. I say a bit jokingly that my home is between the Upper West Side and W3 in London. And also in language and in work.

Journeys appear in your work as a motto, which is, really, the opposite of wandering, because the latter suggests an endless search...⁵¹⁰

I don't want the life of a wanderer. And that's what I also meant in Lost in Translation. I wanted to have a sense of some kind of a psychological foundation or at least of fixity of myself in myself. I wanted to have a sense of a stable place that I could simply, in the end, call home.

Please finish this sentence: 'My country is...'⁵¹¹

My home is the world, which is so international now. It's a world of people who are spiritually and intellectually close to my heart. They live everywhere: here, in London, in America, in Krakow, and in *Nowy Swiat* in Warsaw.

Judging by the observations you make in Lost in Translation, American literature ascribes such issues [sense of identity] to American society at large...⁵¹²

Yes, there is a sense of isolation, loneliness, and alienation, difficulty of communicating with others, even in large groups, or, rather, especially in large groups. In the optimistic image of rugged American individuals who are so open and welcoming, that dark side of individualism is somewhat embarrassing. These are people who are, metaphorically or even literally speaking, homeless because this problem is not only economic but also

⁵¹⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹¹ "Between Manhattan and Krakow," *Rzeczpospolita*. The interviewer poses this questions using the Polish word 'kraj' (equivalent is country), but Hoffman answers using the word 'dom' (home). She ignores the issue of national belonging that her interviewer makes explicit by using 'country.'

⁵¹² "How to Translate Yourself," *Przekroj*.

psychological. They feel degraded because they mean nothing to themselves or others. Identity begins to disappear.

You write on this topic in the memoir: „Many of my American friends feel that they don’t have enough identity. They often feel worthless or don’t even know how they feel. Identity is a number one national problem.”⁵¹³

Exactly. The situation is entirely different with my Polish friends who don’t spend so much time on self-analysis. Introspection doesn’t take up a lot of their time. Large and small everyday dramas usually take precedence and the outside world is more important than whatever is going on on the inside. There are, of course, exceptions to this rule. I can summarize it like this: most Americans worry about who they are while most Poles worry about who the others are. Though American analysis of self has positive connotations. It can lead to a creative rationalization and strengthening of personality.

How would you describe Americans’ psychological profile?⁵¹⁴

Many of my friends constantly want something new. They perhaps even want to be someone else, so they join different groups to escape polite indifference and prescribed social behaviors, the constant „I’m fine,” which is a polite but trite courtesy which, at the same time, signifies a cool distance. That’s why psychoanalysis is so popular in the U.S. The psychoanalyst comes to substitute close friends and even family members and you can tell him your deepest secrets and complain about the world without fearing that you’ll be laughed at as a weakling.

And what about the traditional American myths like the Wild West, the hard „self-made man” who will succeed if he only works hard?⁵¹⁵

⁵¹³ Ibid.

⁵¹⁴ Ibid.

The „hard man,” like in Hemingway’s books, has disappeared from American literature. The myth of success is still around, but it is devoid of its old strength. There’s a new posture, which we could call „quiet desperation,” a silent surrender and despair.

What about the Poles? What do they look like from your immigrant perspective?⁵¹⁶

... I met Poles here who blame their problems on outside forces of history and politics, which shouldn’t be ignored. They have a good sense of the proportion between what can be accomplished and what is exaggerated. And they have had to endure a lot. They also have a lot of energy, which Americans already began to lack. I would say that Poles have an appetite for life and that can help them get out of trouble.

What mistakes do our countrymen make when they arrive in the U.S. for a variety of reasons, to make money, to get a better job, to join family?⁵¹⁷

They often mechanically carry over their experiences from Poland to the new country, they don’t want to understand the American specificity. No one bothers to take care of anyone here [in the U.S.]. You have to fight long and hard to achieve even a modicum of success or even daily stability while getting used to rigid rules of the game. Meanwhile Poles who come to the U.S. often have unrealistic expectations. They think that they deserve preferential treatment, that everything can be taken care of as long as you have the right connections. They tend to explain every shortcoming by lack of connections and by looking for some mysterious intrigues. They take everything personally and, unfortunately, really like to gossip about others. They are surprised that they have to

⁵¹⁵ Ibid.

⁵¹⁶ Ibid.

⁵¹⁷ Ibid.

work so hard and that there are so few days off and shorter vacations. Aside from all of that, they're very nice, of course.

You wrote a history of Polish Jews, Shtetl, which is a very smart and interesting book. Did you ever visit the shtetl where your parents were born?⁵¹⁸

My sister and I went there two years ago. I was in touch with a Ukrainian historian who couldn't locate it, but then we finally found someone who knew where it was. And only because he was a soccer coach and had very detailed maps. We made it to the town and literally ten minutes after our arrival, we spoke with a Ukrainian woman who knew my father and his brothers. Half an hour later I met another of my father's peers who also knew him. All of this was wonderful and really exceeded our expectations. We also met a man who was related to the family that saved my parents.

There is anti-Semitism everywhere, not only in Poland. What do you think is specific about Polish anti-Semitism?⁵¹⁹

There were three million Jews in Poland before the war who felt relatively safe here. Until I found out about Jedwabne, I didn't think that anti-Semitism in Poland was more extreme than anywhere else. Just the opposite. In fact, I thought that this was a country that took Jews in, that a presence of such a large minority was no accident, that it was because of tolerance. We know so much about Polish anti-Semitism because Poland was home to many Jews for centuries, which also means that for Poles Jews are that most important of "Others." Such relations create inevitable conflicts. Of course, manifestations of Polish anti-Semitism were often horrible. But we really need to

⁵¹⁸ "Between Manhattan and Krakow," *Rzeczpospolita*.

⁵¹⁹ Ibid.

understand extreme explosions like those in Jedwabne because they repeat themselves all over the world.

In your introduction to Shtetl, you wrote that the inspiration for it came from Marian Marzynski's documentary film with the same title...⁵²⁰

The film certainly inspired me in the beginning of my work, but I wanted to write an essay about Polish-Jewish history for a long time. It was a very important topic for me, personally, and, as I realized at the start of this project, for the Western reader as well. A lot of the stereotypical myths, judgements, and opinions about Polish Jewish relations existed in the West and were, in fact, reflected in the popular consciousness of Polish and Jewish immigrants. Often: ignorance. I believe that foregrounding the knowledge of it was very important. I wanted to remind readers of some of the events in Polish Jewish history so that this history could be seen in a new light. One of the common misconceptions in the West had to do with a view of Poland as thoroughly soaked with anti-Semitism. I knew that I was touching upon a very contentious topic; it is surrounded by a lot of simplifications and strong emotions. ... The main danger is that we often begin to remember very formulaically. We gather a safe combination of facts that we then use in our lives. And now, there is another, additional phenomenon and I'm thinking here of what we could call the Americanization of memory. This is really what dictates a lot of the cultural discourse in the West. And from the American distance, reduction and abstraction are really rather easy. In America, there is a virtual obsession with the Holocaust, which is dangerous so far as it is an obsession from a distance. So, first and foremost, there is an Americanization of memory. Because of this, schematic or

⁵²⁰ "Saving Memory: an Interview with Eva Hoffman," *Midrasz*.

formulaic approaches to human relations during the Holocaust are very dangerous. This can be very dishonest and unjust.

A few years ago, Lucy Dawidowicz called Marek Edelman crazy after he said that he made a conscious choice to remain in Poland. Is this a common attitude among American Jews?⁵²¹

No, I wouldn't say that it's common, but there are lots of misunderstandings. And somehow surprise as if this meant that they were saying that spending your life in Poland was just like spending your life in Germany. I fight such attitudes. I believe that Poland is a place of rich Jewish history and culture. And for someone like Marek Edelman it is, of course, a place of very personal associations and memories and, of course, of enormous tragedy. So, such a choice can certainly be made.

What do you think about the continuing discussions in Poland that began with the publication of Gross' Neighbors?⁵²²

I don't really know the details, but I think that the discussion is serious and important although there are extreme voices, too. On the one hand, they're anti-Semitic manifestations and, on the other, they are an expression of distrust and dislike towards the Poles. I think though that these manifestations are needed because only in this way can we confront them. In a calm and quiet conversation we can sometimes change someone's point of view and this wouldn't be possible if the views were hidden. The conversation started by Gross' book not only about Jedwabne but also about Polish attitude towards the murder of Jews has to continue no matter how painful or difficult it might be. We have to finally normalize Polish Jewish relations. ... I wrote Shtetl also

⁵²¹ "Eva Hoffman: A Conversation," Onet.pl.

⁵²² "Memory and Time," *Przekroj*.

because I wanted to correct some of the common and one-sided opinions about Poles and some of the unjust Polish stereotypes. A major part of Holocaust memory was shaped in immigration, cut off from the place where the tragedy took place. As a result, that memory has been simplified and Americanized. This was caused by a basic lack of knowledge about the state of things in Poland during World War II. Luckily, now in the U.S., there is a very lively and self-critical discussion on this topic. Obviously, we also know that there were a lot of simplifications, silences, and injustices on the Polish side, so it is really good that a discussion is taking place also in Poland. Both of these debates give us hope that that dramatic period of our common history will finally be presented in a more complex and therefore objective manner.

There's lots of talk about a new subject of study—the Holocaust. Is it necessary to carve it out as a separate subject, apart from history lessons in schools, for example?⁵²³

Yes, I believe it is. Holocaust is an unprecedented event or a historical event of which we now have other examples. Cambodia or Rwanda, for example. So, I think it is very important as a subject of study so that we can understand not only the Jewish tragedy but also the reasons and psychological elements of such events. And that's a very important job for us.

You are now at work on a book about the second generation of Holocaust survivors.⁵²⁴

I don't really know yet what shape it'll take. I will certainly write about memory because it is we, the second generation of survivors, who have to pass it on to the next

⁵²³ "Eva Hoffman: A Conversation," Onet.pl.

⁵²⁴ "Memory and Time," *Przekroj*. This is a reference to *After Such Knowledge* (2004).

generations. Often though, we received our knowledge about it from the people who survived as a sort of mythology so it was difficult for us to understand it historically. I have trouble with that myself. When my mother told me about her experiences during the Holocaust I was so young that I received it as part of my own biography. It is sometimes difficult for me to separate them.

Aren't you afraid of a book that is so painfully close to you?⁵²⁵

I am scared [laughs]. I realize that this isn't easy. But difficult experiences are a good subject for a writer. It's possible that I will discover unhealed wounds in the process. I know that this will be difficult for me but it's important for the pain to serve a purpose. The problem of second generation isn't only important for children of Jews who survived the Holocaust but everyone whose parents survived a collective tragedy like people from the former Yugoslavia or Rwanda.

⁵²⁵ Ibid.

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