

Life without a Mother Tongue:
Memoirs and a Dissertation

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Unless otherwise acknowledged in the text, this sub-thesis
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Any mistakes remain, of course, my own.

LIFE WITHOUT A MOTHER TONGUE

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Sputnik

by

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This was a very unusual morning; I woke up early and jumped straight out of bed, although it was still dark outside. Every morning, to my mother's annoyance, I would stay in bed until the door opened and mother appeared, screaming at me: "Ewa! Get up or I will pull your blanket off," or, "if you do not get up now, I will pour ice cold water on you," or ... she had a whole collection of threats up her sleeves.

This morning, my mother would be deprived of making her usual threats.

Today I was meeting my dear friend Marusia for the first time in nearly one year.

Last time I saw her she was slim and small, just like me, her blond hair tied in two long plaits beside her red cheeks, above which sat two sparkling blue eyes. She was always ready for some mischief and a burst of laughter. Yes! Today my mother would be deprived of her creative linguistic morning exercise.

As I was getting dressed, I thought of the news of the year: the Russians had launched Sputnik nearly three months ago; the conquest of space had begun.

Everyone spoke about it. It was on the radio, it was written in the newspapers and it was shown in the cinemas. Adults discussed Sputnik and some were speculating how long it would take to go to the moon and if it was possible. Some were skeptical, saying that a machine is one thing, but no living thing can survive up there. One month ago, the dog Laika was sent into space and into the orbit inside Sputnik-2 but failed to return safely to earth because there was no plan to bring her back.

Those who were skeptical were pointing to Laika, but some were convinced that this was only the beginning, sooner or later it would happen and the conquest of the universe would begin. Jules Verne's book *From Earth to the Moon* sold out. At school we discussed with our teachers that ninety – seven years after the book was published, Verne's vision was becoming reality. Yes, it was the beginning of a new era. We started to dream of becoming astronauts, participants in the conquest of the universe.

I was excited to see Marusia after so long a time. I wanted to be the first to tell her the news about Sputnik and was wondering if she had heard something. She was coming for a short holiday from the Catholic Girls boarding school, and I remembered that the last time I had seen her she had told me that they did not listen to the radio or read newspapers at her school.

“So what are you doing to find out what's happened in the world?” I asked.

“We study catechism,” she responded.

“What else?”

“Polish, math’, cooking, sewing and ironing. Oh yes! We read poetry and the Bible.”

“Do you have gymnastics? Do you exercise?” I asked.

“No! No! But we do lots of exercise. We do gardening.”

“What are you doing for fun?”

“Making tricks and annoying the Nuns?” she laughed.

“But ... how?”

“Some of us hide or run away to the town centre,” she said, then added: “We also play ping-pong or tennis and we sing. I am in a choir and I want to learn to play the organ.” I was satisfied. They may not learn exactly what we did but it was not as bad as I had first thought. They did have fun and did not spend their days only in prayer.

The door opened at the usual time and mother stepped in. A look of astonishment appeared on her beautiful face. She saw me already dressed, my hair combed into plaits and my school bag sorted and ready to go. Smiling, she shook her head, and with slow steps approached me.

“Good ... good morning! Ewuniu! Come ... come, let’s have breakfast.” Putting her soft hand on my forehead, she asked in a concerned voice, “Are you all right?”

“I am fine, *mamusiu*, I am fine!” With dancing steps I twirled out of the room, straight into the large reception room and from there into the corridor. The cold air made me run towards our welcoming kitchen which was the centre of our lives. It was very large in proportion to the rest of our apartment, which was located in an old *kamiency*. Our apartment had one advantage in this *kamiency*, being on the ground floor. With the exception of the kitchen window, all the windows faced a small garden. This garden belonged to the industrial design office in the building across from ours. Through the windows we could see shrubs and small trees that in winter were covered in snow and icicles. The icicles hanging from the branches would glimmer in the late afternoon sun, creating a spectacle of rainbow colours on the trees. The garden was surrounded by a mysterious silence, but in spring and summer the garden would burst into constantly changing life of colours and shapes.

Outside the kitchen window was a large, L – shaped patio surrounded by a cobblestone driveway. A large oak tree was growing in the middle of the patio, surrounded by a big sandpit where we always played. In summer it gave us shade and a place to hide in between its thick branches. Under it we would build many castles and forts with canals. On occasion we’d fight and someone would get hurt. In the shorter part of the 'L' grew a big cherry tree that every summer was packed, to

our delight, with dark red, sweet and juicy cherries. We'd eat them until we were sick. We'd spit the stones at each other. We'd decorate our hair and hang bunches of cherries on our ears. And we'd take some as gifts to our mothers. We'd also stain our clothes and get punished.

I arrived in the kitchen, which was dominated by a large square table with a clear wooden surface. It sat near the large, at least one meter – high window. The table could easily seat twelve, to the left of the door stood a huge wood range with a large surface. A big kettle on top was always steaming, ready for a cup of tea, and a large water boiler for bath-time was always ready. The tap water only ran cold.

On the wall across the kitchen stood a big cupboard with four sets of drawers occupied by cutlery, plates, cups, drinking glasses and other kitchen utensils. A smaller cupboard against the wall next to the door was cluttered with our school things and table games. The other wall was covered by a big world map, under which hung a goblin carpet with a scene copied from the book *Thousand and One Nights* showing Ali Baba with arms stretched towards a rock probably saying “Open sesame!” to open the hidden cave door, the picture shows the forty thieves riding unaware, away into distance. Next to it stood two medium – size armchairs. Also one of my best drawings from last winter was hanging on the wall. It was an ice skating scene on the frozen lake in the Helenow Park.

In this kitchen we did our homework and played when it was raining or when it was too cold to play outside. In summer my visiting friends and I would walk in and out through the kitchen window, ignoring the doors and dropping the one and a half

metres to the ground.

To my parents' annoyance, my younger brother had just joined the company of window climbers to whose disappointment the fun was not always successful, as more than once my parents pulled us back before we reached the other side. Each time we promised never again to climb, but it was such a thrill not to be caught. This only happened in summer time. In winter the double windows were closed and the kitchen changed into a place of magic. The outside temperature dropped to twelve degrees below zero during the day, and at night the howling of the wind was accompanied by snow storms. Inside it was warm and cosy. Sometimes the temperature dropped down to thirty degrees below, and when this happened, schools were closed.

During that free time, my friends and their mothers would arrive. We would play while the mothers would make cakes or biscuits. Or they would teach us how to do embroidery and knitting. What I mostly loved was listening to the stories that the women would tell each other. Sometimes they would read out to us stories from Hans Christian Andersen. In those moments the kitchen would disappear and in its place a strange palace made of ice and snow would appear. At other times, mothers would read stories from the *Thousand and One Nights*, and palaces built in gold and emeralds would materialise. Sultans lived there with their harems, surrounded by gardens of exotic flowers and where magnificent white horses were flying in foreign skies. Above deserts with oases of palm trees, dates and orange trees with fruit so sweet that water would dribble from our lips. The horses were ridden by brave young princes, who would rescue beautiful princesses from the old and mean viziers.

Gold – feathered birds could speak our language and fountains could sing. Such was the magic of a story where everything was possible. Many times I would wake up next morning not knowing how and when I got to bed.

Christmas and the end of the year festivity were approaching and in six days my parents were hosting a dinner party for our friends. The kitchen was in full swing of food preparation, the aromas of fresh bread, cakes and biscuits mixed with the smells of yeast, cinnamon and vanilla. The smell of orange and apple peel, these put on top of the range to dry and to be used later as aromatic teas were invading our senses. But now, my senses were also invaded by the strong and rich smell of hot chocolate that was steaming from two cups on the table which I reached in a few long steps.

“Good morning, Wanda!” The old neighbour who lived in a one-room apartment in the attic above was busy rubbing lemon into the turkey that would hang between the double windows. Already a big chunk of spiced beef roast was hanging there. Before she could answer I started drinking this luxurious hot chocolate.

“Good morning, Ewuniu! And how are we this morning?” she asked me with a smile. I could only nod my head; when I opened my mouth into a smile, the hot chocolate started to dribble down my chin. My mother and brother walked in and as soon as we’d finished our unusually good breakfast and were about to leave for school, I asked my mother, “*Mamusiu*, can you please pick up Alek from school?”

“Why?”

“Marusia is back and I want to visit her after school. Please Mum! Please!” I begged

anxiously.

“Now I understand why you were up so early! So when you want, you can do this. I wish you could get up every morning on your own.” I interrupted her with a big smile and complimented her: “And stop hearing your lovely voice *mamusiu*, never!” She looked down to hide her smile. “I will pick him up, but make sure that you are home before dark.”

“I promise! Bye-bye ...”

I gave my mother a hug and dragged my brother out, holding his hand firmly until we reached the school. All the way to school my brother was pestering me, as always, with questions. I did not answer. I was too excited to see my friend Marusia.

After school, I ran all the way to Marusia's and when I arrived at her house I was all sweaty, with a red face. The door swung wide open before I was able to touch the door bell. Marusia smiled. Was this Marusia? She had changed since I had seen her last. Her hair was plaited in one single plait and her eyes still had that mischievous spark. Only one year older than me, but she was much taller now and had grown big breasts. I could see her swollen breasts poking out through her tight blue jumper that she wore with a tight black skirt. She left the buttons of her jumper from her neck down to her breasts open, and when she moved I could see half of her bare breasts. I wondered if she dressed like this in her school and what the nuns said about it.

“I saw you running.” She opened her arms to embrace me, and as we hugged she

started jumping. I followed her, jumping around as though in a dance, until we ran out of breath. Laughing and breathless, we walked straight into the kitchen to sit around the small table that was set with two cups and a steaming kettle. Marusia poured water into the cups and dropped in some dried apple skin. The comfortable aroma filled the small kitchen. She was talking all the time but I did not take notice of what she was saying. I could barely hear her voice, which sounded like it was coming to me from a distance. My head felt heavy. I wanted to pay attention to what Marusia was saying but the news about Sputnik occupied my thoughts.

As soon as I could find a space, I interrupted her and exclaimed:

“The Russians sent a Sputnik into the sky!”

“Sputnik? What is this?” she asked.

“What? You don't know? You don't know about this metal satellite that looks like a big soccer ball and has ... like a radio antenna. No! No! Many antennas. The Russians launched it into the sky, higher than any plane ever flew.”

“No! They did not!” she said.

“Yes, they did!” I said firmly. “Not once but twice. Recently they sent a dog called Laika into orbit.”

“It is all a lie,” said Marusia.

I felt hot and upset. My best friend Marusia was calling me a liar. My eyes started to burn and fill with tears.

“It was written in the newspapers,” I said hopefully.

Marusia was smiling and said benevolently, “*Ewuniu ... to jest komunistyczna propaganda,*” Ewuniu...this is communist propaganda, sounding more like an adult

than my friend.

“What has politics to do with the Sputnik?”

“Everything, don't you see their anti-God propaganda?”

“God...? What has God to do with Sputnik?”

“Think, Ewa, think. What is in Heaven? God is in Heaven! Not Sputnik!” She said it as a matter of fact.

“No! No! You are wrong ... he ... no ... they said ...” I stopped in the middle of my sentence, realising that I could not explain to Marusia why she was wrong.

I felt hot in my face and could feel sweat on the back of my neck. How could I tell her that not only did our newspapers comment on the Sputnik, but I also heard it on the radio, during the night, on the BBC London station? I couldn't tell this to my friend. It was a secret and Mum said no one can know this. My father listened to the BBC or Radio Free Europe from London every night, when he was home. He sat with his ears glued to the radio, covered with heavy blankets. This is how we also heard of the Rosenberg trial in the USA, about the couple who were accused of selling the nuclear bomb formula to the Russians. We also heard when Khrushchev started his de-Stalinization campaign.

A few weeks later, our Principal arrived in our classroom and took Stalin's photograph off the wall. It left a visible mark on the left side of Lenin, Marx and Engels. I asked him: “Why are you taking Stalin away?”

“The frame was broken,” he said.

“It isn't broken,” I replied, but he remained silent and gave me a strange look. Then after a short time, he smiled.

“Go to your seat, Ewa,” he said in a friendly voice.

I knew that he knew and he knew that I knew.

I always knew some news before others; they would only hear weeks later, if ever. Unofficial news circulated, but no one spoke about it. I wondered if others also listened to the BBC like my father, who, most nights, when not in Warsaw, would come into the bedroom and listen to the news, covered with blankets. At the same time, mother and I would listen to famous operas on the record player in the next room. The BBC was a family secret and I could not tell to anyone.

I still remember what happened with the last secret when Stasia came to play with me one afternoon.

“Hello Ewunia! Wake up, are you daydreaming? What's wrong? You said that I was wrong, but then you stopped. Why are you so red in your face? *Masz chłopaka!* You have a boyfriend! He told you! Is this the secret? Are you in love? What is it?” she asked, poking me gently on my arm.

“Nothing, there are no secrets!” I started to feel sick.

My best friend had just hurt my feelings by calling me a liar and associating me with some boy that did not exist. She was unaware and completely disregarded our conversation about Sputnik. She started talking about some delivery boy.

“I have to go to the bathroom,” I said. Once in the bathroom, I started to consider how I could convince my friend that the Sputnik story was real without revealing that we were listening to the BBC station at home.

I knew that, like most of our friends, she and her mum were anti-government, but everyone maintained a low profile. Politics were not discussed even between friends, with the exception of my father and his best friend Wlacek. Before the war they both joined the communist party together. During the war, his friend joined the partisans and father, after escaping the Warsaw Ghetto, went to join the Red Army but instead was sent to a Gulag in the Urals.

Wlacek was now a colonel and worked as an adjutant to Gomulka. Whenever Wlacek and his wife Jadwiga came for a visit, after a few glasses of vodka he and father would have very hot debates about politics. They could not help themselves. Jadwiga or Mum had to intervene. Sometimes they would kick their husbands' shins under the table. I saw it many times, because my brother and I would hide under the big table in our sitting room to play after dinner. Sometimes my mother interrupted their discussion and started to sing arias from famous operas. She was a soprano and had a beautiful voice. The men then had to stop arguing and listen to her. I don't think that even such a good friend as Wlacek knew about father's involvement with the BBC Free Europe, London.

The last time a secret was revealed, I was in the second grade and had invited my school friend Stasia to play one afternoon. We wanted to build a castle and I suggested that if we opened our big divan and covered the opening with a blanket it

could be a good castle. To our surprise inside the divan we found money. The bottom of the divan was filled with packets of banknotes. Stasia and I decided to change our game and played something different.

I found hidden chocolate, sultanas and nuts in the credenza and we started playing shop. Father had bought them on the black market. He told us that apparently fifty-eight containers had arrived in *Szczecin* from Caritas International in America loaded with chocolate and some with cocoa, others with cheese. These goods always showed up on the black market. But also, some medication was only available on the black market. Like penicillin, that two years before had saved my brother's and my lives after a diphtheria outbreak.

Mother was furious when she arrived and found us playing with the money. She sent Stasia home and I was told that this was a family secret and I should not talk about it.

A few days later, two men arrived in a car and took all of this money away in big suitcases.

One month after the money was removed I arrived home from school and found two policemen smoking outside our door. They stopped me from entering my home. I started crying and screaming: "Let me in! It is my home! Where are my mum and my brother! I want my mum!" Another policeman came out and, after a brief discussion with the others, took me inside our living room. What devastation! Our elegant tiled heater was smashed and a few wooden floorboards had been removed. The sofa bed stood open. The cabinet drawers had been pulled out and the contents were on the floor. Six of our acquaintances who had come for a visit at the wrong time were

sitting grim-faced and handcuffed between two policemen. My mother was cuddling my two-year-old brother. Both were crying. I ran and I cuddled my mother and brother without a word.

Father was on his way to Warsaw. Upon his arrival in Warsaw, father was arrested at the train station. All of those innocent people who had come to visit us were also arrested and spent three months in jail, until the court date. I was told by a neighbour that they were charged for stealing government property and selling it on the black market in Poznan. But my mum told me that this money belonged to a secret organisation that helped smuggle people who were in danger out of Poland, mainly Jews. My father was asked only to take care of the money for a while.

The police lacked evidence as they had not found any money in our apartment and the main witness was Stasia's mother, who had never visited our house. I don't know all the details, but the judge dismissed this case for lack of evidence and an unreliable witness. The six of our acquaintances and my father who were arrested were set free.

After this incident, Stasia and I stopped seeing each other after school. Life also changed. My mother changed. She became withdrawn. She became mentally ill and had to be taken to hospital against her will. The doctor said that she suffered from manic depression. This was a sad time and it took Mum a long time to recover. She stayed five months in hospital. It was a difficult time for all of us; my brother and I missed her so much. Once I went to visit her in hospital and she did not recognise me. For some time now her episodes recurred once yearly. Lately she had been so

well that I forgot all about it, glad to have our mother back. Telling family secret could send my father back to jail and mum back to hospital no I could not do this to my family and endanger mother's health, not even for my good friend Marusia.

But Marusia ... She had been my friend for a long time and we had always told each other small secrets. How could I hide the truth from her? I felt that if I told her about the BBC station I would betray my family, and if I remained silent I would betray my friend. In the end, my family won.

On my return from the bathroom, Marusia asked, "What took you so long? Are you sick? You look pale."

"Not any more. Would you like to go ice skating?"

"It's too cold, perhaps tomorrow. I have to tell you something, if you promise not to tell anyone." She put her index finger against her lips and said, "You know, it is a secret." I started coughing, another secret. This was too much. Marusia passed me a glass of water. Slowly I calmed down and had to stay a bit longer, listening to her.

She was telling me about some boy who was delivering food to the convent and the boarding school. Apparently all the girls in the boarding school were in love with him, but he only had eyes for her.

"How do you know?" I asked. "Did he tell you so?" She looked at me angrily and added, "I just know! I can feel it!"

"But Marusiu ..."

She interrupted me and raised her voice. "Stop calling me Marusiu! I am called

Maria now!” I was thinking she had changed since she went to this boarding school.

It was getting dark. I jumped to my feet and said, “I have to go! See you some other day, Maru ... Maria!” I ran all the way home and arrived hot and sweaty, with the knowledge that I had not betrayed my family, but a strong feeling that I may have lost a friend. “Hurry up! Ewa, dinner is served!” Mother was calling.

“No! I am sick!” I ran to my room, which I shared with my brother, screaming all the way. “I hate Sputnik! I hate Marusia! I hate the Nuns! I hate the World!” Screaming in my despair, blinded by tears, I banged into a chair before disappearing into my room. Banging my fists against the bed, I cried myself into a stupor. All this wouldn't have happened but if not for the Sputnik. Sputnik was starting to diminish in value and I was starting to doubt if it was worth starving for it until morning and decided to join my mother and brother in the kitchen.

I walked into the cold corridor that connected different rooms. On the left, a big two-winged door opened to reveal two other small doors that opened to smaller rooms. One was a store room with a small bed where Wanda sometimes slept when my parents went out. The other room was used as a pantry. In this pantry, Mother stored jars of preserves. One night we were woken up by an explosion; one of mother's bottled tomato sauces she had prepared for winter had exploded. That night ended with lots of laughter and no one wanted to go to bed. In the end we all had hot milk with honey.

Every summer and autumn mother made preserves. Sometimes she was joined by her friends, or Wanda, who came to help. Under the corridor was a cellar, which could be accessed by a set of stairs that were attached to the door that was cut in the corridor's floor and hidden under a long rug. We stored our coal, potatoes, carrots, onion and anything else we needed for winter there. In summer, this was the coolest place, and we stored butter, eggs and any other foods there.

Focusing my attention back to the corridor, the wall between the store room and the entry door were a long narrow mirror and some large hooks on which we'd hang our coats, scarves or hats. To the right, a door led to the bathroom. Between this door and the kitchen, the wall was occupied by a large shelf full of books. On the lower shelves were kids' books: our Jules Verne and Christian Andersen collections; selections of *Thousand and One Nights*: the adventures of Sinbad the Sailor, Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves, Aladdin and the Magic Lamp; Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, among others; Henry Sienkiewicz's epic *In Desert and Wilderness*, and on the upper shelves his *Trilogy*, *The Teutonic Knights* and *Quo Vadis*; and history and geography books, dictionaries and encyclopaedias. The upper shelves were occupied by classic literature, which mum also liked: Balzac, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Hugo, Zola, Dickens, Alexander Pushkin, Adam Mickiewicz's *Pan Tadeusz* and many more books were on those upper shelves, that I, couldn't reach or see in the semi-darkness.

There was this new thick book written in Russian that father had brought home two weekends ago. It was entitled *The Nuremberg Trials*. I had looked at its many pictures, showing all these corpses of people killed by the Nazis and all the

devastation the Germans inflicted. This book was a record of the last war and the trials of many war criminals. Between the pages I found some pictures of my father standing next to his parents' bones and some men with shovels. Dad told me that his parents refused to leave their bed and the German soldiers shot them in it. Their Polish neighbours buried them outside their house under the patio. Father took their bones and buried them properly in the Jewish cemetery. After looking at these pictures and also partially reading some pages, I got scared and could not sleep and never again open that book.

I stopped next to these shelves, thinking of my father who was in Warsaw and how much I missed him. He had got a job as the advising director of a government run textile factory that had gone bankrupt. Since my father had joined this factory, the production had increased to its maximum potential and the factory was on its way to full recovery. Mum said that father was rewarded for his achievement and dedication. He was busy and we saw him only on weekends. I sighed. He would arrive home in three days. It was always fun when he was here. He would take us to the Helenow Park *na-spacer* and explain things. He also would teach me Russian. I was the best in my class and could read and write in Russian. My mum taught me only some Russian songs, though she never spoke Russian with us, only accented Polish.

Father also played a memory game with me that consisted of remembering names of all Nobel Prize laureates, the year and subject they received it for. He always tested me. He would point to year such and such, and I had to tell him who was awarded and what for. If I remembered two years in a row, he would give me some sweets as a prize. I decided I'd better look at the list next day and learn some more before he

arrives.

I came into the kitchen before dinner was finished and Mum served me a bowl of soup. Wanda was also at the table, having dinner with us.

“How was your outing, Ewa?” asked Mum.

“Good ...no... not ... not really! Marus ... Maria doesn't believe me that Sputnik exists. She says only God is in the sky! That no Sputnik can go into Heaven and come back.”

“And you, what do you think, Ewuniu?” asked Wanda.

“I believe in Sputnik and that there is no God in the sky! Why would anyone lie about it, and twice, and Laika. No, this can't be a lie. Maria, *ona jest glupia!* Yes, she is silly. That is all.”

“Maria’? Why are you calling Marusia Maria?” Mum asked.

“She told me that I should call her Maria from now on!” Again tears came into my eyes. Mother cuddled me. Mother's big hugs were comforting.

“Don't worry! All will be fine. Eat, eat your dinner!”

How it was supposed to be fine I did not know.

At school a new surprise! Instead of our usual history lesson we had maths, not that I minded. *Pan Kwiatek* was a good teacher and his lessons were interesting and funny. Today he was teaching us geometry, about how to measure a triangle. He explained that Hipparchus, who was a Greek, did the first calculation and named it trig ... trigo-no-metry ... I asked if they needed this kind of calculation for Sputnik and

everyone laughed except *Pan Kwiatek*.

“Not directly, but astronomy uses it,” he said.

I was satisfied and the other pupils stopped laughing.

By lunchtime someone had started circulating gossip that our history teacher was pregnant by our Russian teacher and they may not come back after the New Year. I liked them and I liked history and Russian. This was our last day at school before Christmas and I was sad to think I might not see them again.

When I got home I had a surprise. Marusia was waiting for me. She came to invite me to the cinema. On the way she said, “I have mum's lipstick.”

“What is it for?”

“So we will look older and they will let us in.”

“You think it will work? And what is the movie?”

“*To Kanal, film wojnowy*, a war film the *Canal*. They will let us in! Do not worry!” she said firmly. She looked at me with a smile and repeated, “Do not worry!” I did worry. I started to imagine us being arrested by the police and taken home. Who knows what punishment I would receive?

At the cinema we first went into the ladies'. Marusia, with an expert hand, applied lipstick to my lips and a bit to my cheeks. Then she applied it to her face. We stayed in the toilet until just before the movie started. She bought the tickets at the last minute and we snuck in.

Before the film started, there was a short film, *Ostatnie wiadomosci*, last news, showing the dog Laika inside Sputnik 2 again shortly before she died. The reporter's voice was saying that Laika was doing well in the orbit and that there was no plan to bring her back to earth. They also showed the first Sputnik.

The reporter said something about future improvements but I looked at Marusia. She was biting her nails and I could see in the darkness that she looked tense. I smiled, reached for her other hand and squeezed it gently.

How I Got There

by

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“So what are you planning to do, Eva?”

“What do you mean?”

“Your children have to eat, and you too, unless you plan to leave them orphans.”

My friend Marta and I were standing in my small kitchen next to the table. The house we were living in was small, standing in the middle of a large garden, which was situated in one of the *barrios* of Buenos Aires.

“I really don't know what to do and I'm running out of money.”

“Did you ask your husband? He has an obligation to pay alimony for the children.”

“Obligations ... Marta! Did you say ‘obligations’?” I burst out laughing hysterically.

“No! He doesn't know what that word means. Even less will it occur to him that his children need to eat. His needs are his priority. I do not expect anything from him and don't think I want anything. I just want him out of my life.”

“Did you tell your family in Europe?”

“Yes! I wrote to my mother and she wrote back.”

“What did she say?” asked Marta.

“I asked her if I can come back home with my daughters and ...”

“And what...? What did she say? What?”

“She said ... she said, what for? I will bring the shame of a divorce to the family, but she also wrote that she sent some money, which I expect will arrive soon.”

After I said it, I felt lighter. My mother's rejection was heavy on my shoulders and I

was wondering how much of it was my father's doing rather than hers.

“Good that your mother is sending money, it may help for a while,” said Marta.

“My father never agreed with my marriage and now he is blaming me for the separation.”

I started reflecting that, in reality, since my family had left Poland and become illegal refugees who didn't know where they belonged; my father had blamed me for every tragedy or disaster that happened in the universe. One year later we had become temporary residents, but things didn't improve. My parents didn't even notice that I had grown and changed into a rebel teenager.

I became critical of my parents, confrontational, when I realized that they were just like me, humans, with their ups and downs. Father and I spoke little to each other. He changed and became an isolated tyrant in his own home, suspicious of everyone, and insecure. First he forbade me to speak Polish in public, believing that people in Vienna did not like Poles, then, he didn't know if he wanted to be a traditional, religious or secular Jew. He was becoming more and more of a hermit, blaming the entire world, including us, for everything that happened to him, although this only happened after he returned home from work. During working hours, my father started to build up a new, successful textile factory, and when in public he was very polite and pleasant.

At home he became a wild beast, violent towards my younger brother and me. Once I went to the police to show them my bruises. They brought me back home. Father claimed he had to discipline us, and after they left he hit me again for going to the

police. He saw it as a betrayal. The exile had changed him so much that I would dream of being back in Poland where my life had been less complicated. He did not trust my non-Jewish friends and forbade them to visit me.

“They are all fascists and their parents are Nazis!” he would scream.

“No! They are not! You are *Mishigene*, yes you are mad. They were babies when the war ended. Why did you come here if you’re not happy?” I would scream back at him. “I did it to give you and your brother a better life. What happened during the war can’t be forgotten!” He was nearly crying.

“The war finished fourteen years ago,” I would scream back and run out of the room.

Later, when I joined the *Hashomer Hatzair*, a Socialist Zionist Youths Organization, I would sometimes scream and provoke him.

“Why are we not going to Israel? Why! There are no Nazis there! Why?”

He would not answer. If Mother was around he would not hit me. He also was mistrustful of my Jewish friends, who according to him were new-wave hooligans.

At first The Beatles and Bob Dylan were forbidden, and then if he found a record it would end up broken in the rubbish bin. Fewer and fewer friends were visiting us and Mother was becoming more and more withdrawn. Her manic depressive episodes became more frequent. Again he blamed my brother and me for what happened to her. Because I was older, he expected that I should understand the effect the war had on my parents, but he failed to notice that it also had a big effect on us.

He sent us to an academy to study English; I refused, as I needed German in order to go back to school to complete my education and make new friends. He was insistent,

as he was hoping to emigrate to Canada or Australia, which never happened because my parents decided to stay in Austria in the end.

Although by then the war had finished sixteen years earlier, for us it was never over. We were reminded of it at every possible occasion. No, we were not the boomer generation. We were the survivors' generation, and in those dark and oppressive days, at the age of nineteen, the opportunity for me to leave and move on arose. I left for Israel, where I met my future husband. Marriage seemed a new beginning, but I was wrong.

Less than six years later in Argentina, we separated. I was left with two beautiful kids to care for, in a country that I hardly knew and with no profession, no family of my own and not many friends except for Marta.

"Hey! Are you still here?" Marta asked, adding, "I came to make a proposition."

"What?" I asked.

"Work!" she said, and went to the fridge. "I need some milk in my tea. Do you have some?" Before I managed to respond she had opened the empty fridge. Without a word she closed the door.

"I was planning to go and buy some." I said it in a faint voice. She waved her hand in a gesture of dismissal. "Don't worry!" After a few moments of silence she added,

"You know that Carlos's mother Veronica is not well. She is dying, as matter of fact."

"No, I didn't, I am so sorry. She is such a fine lady."

"Yes, she is, but now you may not recognize her. She survived a massive stroke one week ago and has been unconscious since then. The doctors told us to be prepared for the worst." Marta sighed.

"And where do I and the work fit in?" I interrupted impatiently.

“In the hospital they don't have many nurses and we were rotating to take care of her. We go and sit with her. She has a tracheotomy that helps her to breathe. We wet her lips with cool water, as they dry very easily. Move her onto her other side. And when her tracheal tube gets blocked by phlegm we suction it and clean it up. We are getting tired and were wondering if you could help out. Of course we would pay you well. Could you please take care of Veronica a few nights per week?” This sounded better than anything I could expect in my situation.

“We will pay you two thousand pesos per night,” she added.

This was not a fortune, but with three nights a week I could feed my kids, pay a babysitter and part of my rent. It was more than I could earn in any laborer job, unskilled as I was. It would also give me respite, time to look for a more permanent job. “I accept!” I said with a big smile.

“Good, let's take the girls to my place for the night. They can sleep at my place until you find someone to take care of them while you are at work.” Marta was already calling my girls before I had a chance to answer. “Doris! Lily! Would you like to come to my place for a sleepover?”

“Yes, Auntie Marta. Mum, are you ready? Come on! Let's go!” I started laughing. The girls were adapting quickly to a new situation and were trying to take care of me. “Come, Paula!” she said to her daughter. “Doris and Lily will come later.” And she turned to my girls. “Do not forget to bring your toothbrushes, pajamas and a change of clothes.”

“Yes auntie!” The girls liked Marta and loved to visit her big house where they could run and play with Paula.

We arrived at Marta's house at around seven. Carlos was there and was playing chess

with Paula. I thought to myself that my girls would never remember playing games with their father. He was never home, and if he was, he was either asleep or angry after an unsuccessful night gambling. Sometimes he would win. Then he would be generous and bring presents and give me money. Two days later, he would demand it back. I would have spent it by then to buy food and he would call me a “stupid bitch” for spending it and rush out of the house slamming doors. Lately he had started hitting me. I demanded separation, which he refused until I found out that he had had a lover for the last two years and she was six months pregnant.

I confronted him ten days ago.

“You leave or I will contact the authorities and denounce you and her. What is her name?” He did not answer. “She must have a name and, as I said, I will denounce you both for adultery.” He went white. I could see he was struggling to take it in and I would not give him time.

“You know that under current law it means six to twelve years jail.”

I did not feel anger, only a deep, deep sadness, which I covered with a smile.

“*Perra!*” he screamed.

“Me? After all, I am your legal wife, as you claimed when you raped me only one month ago,” I reminded him in a quiet voice. “Meanwhile, your lover was already five months pregnant.”

“Do not speak Hebrew, speak only Spanish with me, do you hear me!” he screamed and added, “I will kill you!”

“As you wish,” I responded to his surprise in fluent Spanish. “It would be easier for everyone if you would just leave and take care of her. In the end, she is having your child very soon. She will need you!”

After I said it I felt ice cold, terrified at my own audacity. I had to force myself not to

shiver. He turned and ran out, slamming the door, as usual, but then it was for the last time.

Yes! I had made bad choices. My father would never have left us hungry and he was not a gambler. My father also never raised his voice at my mother. Even during her manic depressive episodes, which made her difficult to live with, father was especially kind and patient with her. I remember times when he was pressing fresh oranges, collecting the juice in a bottle and taking it to hospital or to her room, trying to give her some to drink.

“Kochana moja, please my love, have some. It is good for you, full of vitamin C.

You need it to get stronger, please darling,” he pleaded.

Unknowingly, this image of my father and the image of my father before we left Poland, gave me strength to break away from an unsuccessful and violent marriage. I drew away from the past and looked at my friend Marta. She was serving dinner and I offered to help set the table. During dinner we explained to my daughters that I would spend the night in the hospital, and why, and shortly after dinner they went to bed.

Marta and I, we left, walking towards the very old and rundown local hospital. On the way Marta explained what my tasks were. I had to assist the nurses taking care of Veronica and ensure that Veronica was comfortable, as much as that was possible.

Carlos' sister Fabiana was waiting for us. She gave us a short account of her mother's state. “No major change. I wonder if she is in pain. The prognosis according to one of the doctors was that she may not recover. The others say that it is difficult to

know, as a few patients do recover. No one seems to know or have time to explain and every day there are different doctors on shift. We may have to move her to a private hospital.”

I could see how very distressed she was and I promised to take good care of her mother. Marta departed with Fabiana and I was left with Veronica in the large women’s ward. Quickly I looked around and assessed the place. Two large rooms lined on both sides with old iron beds. I calculated some fifty-eight, perhaps more sick women. One ward was general surgery and the other was gynecological surgery, and in between was the nurse’s office space. This was an open space from which the nurses could see and easily access the patients.

I looked at Veronica; she had changed and looked like a wax doll. Her skin was a transparent yellowish white. Her eyes were surrounded by big dark circles and there were two dark lines on each side of her mouth. I took her hand and started stroking it, feeling absolutely inadequate and realising that if she woke up I would not know what to do. I noticed that her tracheal tube was filling with phlegm. I started to suction the secretion out with a special machine that was driven by an electric motor which attached to a vacuum pump. At the hospital I heard it was called the aspirator.

I finished cleaning Veronica with a piece of gauze and wet her lips with an ice block. After a while I noticed that her urine collection bag was full and her saline solution bag nearly empty. I went to find a nurse but both were busy attending to patients. In the office I found a middle-aged woman wearing a nursing uniform.

I introduced myself. “Good evening, I am Eva. I am looking after Veronica and she needs new saline solution and a new urine bag.”

She was very fat and short. I had to look down at her, even with the high heels she was wearing, she looked magnificent. Big black eyes in a beautiful face, surrounded by raven black long hair that fell in gentle waves down her shoulders. Never before had I seen hair so thick and shiny. It covered partially her enormous breasts. She wore bright red lipstick and greenish blue eye shadow. Every so often she would blink her long eyelashes in a flirtatious kind of way. She was wearing long gold earrings with glass the same colour as her eyeshade, a big smile appear on her face, showing her magnificent teeth.

“I am Alicia,” she said, adding, “I am the head nurse of this hospital,” already moving, preparing the saline solution. Incredibly agile for her stature, in a few minutes she was on her way to attend to Veronica. As she was doing so, she was explaining what she was doing and why, like a teacher. She showed me how to empty the urine bag and where I could find the new one.

“Just in case the nurses are busy, you can do it yourself.” She added, “Always wash your hands before and after changing the bags. First, you close the catheter with long artery forceps, and then remove and replace the urine collection bag with a new one. Ask a nurse if Veronica needs any specimen collected for a test before you empty the bag.”

I was listening and absorbing all the information and everything that happened around me, learning fast. I was grateful to Alicia for spending the time with me. I had assumed that she must be very busy, and she was. The rest of the night was uneventful. Around three o'clock in the morning, one of the nurses brought me a cup of tea and checked Veronica's pulse and blood pressure. Around five o'clock I started

to wash Veronica. One of the nurses helped to change Veronica's bed and she also administered her medication through the saline solution. I offered to help the two nurses with the patient's hygiene and wondered how they managed to attend to fifty-eight sick women, many of them unable to move on their own. By the end of the shift I was tired and glad to go home.

I slept until late afternoon and before going back to hospital, went to Marta's house, to see the girls. They were playing hide and seek with Paula in the garden. On my arrival Marta called them in.

"Mami! Mami! Can we stay again tonight for a sleepover?"

"Of course, darlings, come give Mama a hug." Zoom, they were out in the garden again. Turning towards Marta I said: *"I am glad they are happy here but I have to find a permanent sitter,"* and sighed.

"Don't worry! You will find one. For now, I need some clothes for Doris. Lily can share Paula's clothes as they are the same size. How was your first night?"

"Thanks, fine! Veronica was stable when I left. I learned some new skills last night and met Alicia, the head nurse."

"She is a monument!" exclaimed Marta and added, *"I could not say if she belongs to the hospital or the hospital belongs to her. I remember when I was a small child; she was there and looked just the same. She has beautiful manners that never change.*

Other nurses say that she is an excellent nurse and very respected by the doctors. She got an award last year for thirty years' service and excellence."

"She was very kind to me, but also, as much I could observe, to the patients."

"Are you staying for dinner?" asked Marta.

"No, thank you! I better go home to get ready for work and sort some clothes for the girls."

“It is getting late. Carlos can pick you up and drop you at the hospital on his daily visit, let’s say at eight?”

“That would be great!”

I was relieved that things were looking brighter for the moment. Marta was a good friend.

At the hospital, I went through the casualty ward, which was packed with patients, nurses, doctors and the families of the sick, waiting anxiously. Some were asked to wait in the waiting room and to donate blood. The place was noisy. Patients screamed in pain. The place smelled of blood mixed with the smell of urine and antiseptics.

Someone yelled, “Another ambulance has arrived!”

One of the nurses in the ward explained that there had been a big car crash.

“This will be a long and busy night!” she said.

Around two a.m., Alicia the head nurse arrived and came to see how Veronica was doing. She invited me to the nurses’ office for a cup of tea. Once there, she asked me who I was, if I had other jobs, and more personal questions.

“Are you married?”

“Yes and no,” I answered.

“Where are you from?”

My accent told her that I was foreign. I did not mind, I was used to it, and I was asked that question in many different places and times.

“This is the fifth language that I speak; I taught myself at home. I am a fluent reader and I have good writing skills,” I told her.

“Have you ever considered becoming a nurse?” she asked.

“Once I thought to study nursing but before I started to consider it seriously I got married. Now, I don’t know how I could. I have to work to feed two children. No, I don’t think I can.” I fell silent.

“All the more reason for you to get a profession,” Alicia responded calmly, and added, “We start training nurses in two months’ time. You could apply. The classes run in the mornings. Meanwhile you can work at night.”

”And what do I do with my children? I have to sleep some time!”

She smiled at me and said, “You don’t have many choices, and believe me, you are not the only one in that situation.”

I heard some sarcasm in her voice; I felt embarrassed and started laughing nervously. For the next ten days, Alicia would come every night, and each time she would teach me where things were in the ward and she would observe how I was managing with Veronica.

On the tenth day, Veronica’s health deteriorated and she died early that afternoon. I was very sad for Carlos, who lost his mother, but also for Veronica as she was relatively young, in her late fifties. I also felt sad that I had lost my job. Though Mother’s cheque had arrived and I had some money set aside, I knew that I needed to find a new job quickly.

Two days after Veronica’s funeral, around nine o’clock, as I was putting the girls to sleep, an ambulance arrived at my house. My next-door neighbor Dolores ran to my place, thinking that something had happened to us, but the ambulance driver said Alicia had sent him to pick me up as there was some emergency at the hospital.

“I don’t understand what I can do. And I don’t have a baby sitter.”

Dolores said, “Don’t worry. I will stay with the girls. Just wait a few minutes.” She rushed to her house. A few minutes later she brought back her three younger children and extra blankets. I had five minutes to change my clothes and say goodnight to the kids. I thanked Dolores and was off in the ambulance. The driver could not explain what the emergency was. I thought it was lucky that Dolores was available or perhaps she was lucky, because she could spend a quiet night, away from her alcoholic husband.

As I was walking towards the head nurse’s office, Alicia called from behind me. “There you are. Come quickly! Come, I have to be in the operating theatre in five minutes. We have an emergency operation that probably will take the whole night. I have to scrub in.” She sighed.

We were standing in front of the door leading to the same wards in which, only few nights before, I was looking after Veronica. As we entered, I noticed that it was full but I could see no nurse. Alicia went straight to the nurses’ office. On the long table lay a communication book and a doctor’s instruction book. She pointed to the books and the medication cupboard.

“You will find all the instructions in these two books. The medications and all the vital signs measurement equipment is on this trolley, as well a white gown. Good luck! I have to go now. Sorry, but I have no one that can work here.” And out she was before I had time to respond or say anything.

“She must be kidding.” But she was not! Neither Alicia nor anyone else came back through the door.

A patient called me from one of the beds next to the office. “*Por favor, enfermera,*

puedo tener un vaso de agua?”

Enfermera... had she called me nurse? What was I supposed to do? I had to give her water; there was no one else here.

My thoughts were flashing through my brain at the speed of light, while like an automaton I walked to the sink, washed a glass and filled it with cold water.

The woman looked at me gratefully. She needed my help to lift and hold her head.

She drank a sip and wanted more. I warned her, “Drink slowly, please,” and gave her another sip. “I will come back later and give you more.”

She nodded in agreement; she was too weak to speak.

Back in the office, I opened the communication book and found the last entry. I looked over the three pages of instructions and closed it. It would need hours to be read. I opened the doctor’s instruction book, one page per patient. There were instructions on how often to administer medications and the exact doses, for vital signs checkups and how often two of the patients needed intravenous injections, a few more intramuscular. I started sweating, a cold sweat, dribbling down my spine. How could she ... Alicia, how could you? I was furious but then I looked up. On both sides, sixty very sick women and no one to take care of them, only me, ignorant me.

I went to the trolley and slowly put on the white gown. The instruction book showed that all of them needed blood pressure, pulse and temperature checks. Temperature and pulse was easy. I had checked my girls’ pulse and temperature so many times, but I had no idea how to check blood pressure. I started to reflect on why doctors and nurses used auriculars. They must hear something. I decided to try and listen to a

patient and see what happened. I approached the woman whose bed was next to the office.

“How are you tonight, Juanita?” I asked her, reaching for her oral medicine and placing it on her bedside table.

“Thank you, I am fine. Better than yesterday!” she replied.

“I will now check your blood pressure.”

I put a thermometer under her tongue and adjusted the blood pressure cuff around her arm. Before pumping to apply pressure, I put the stethoscope under the cuff and listened to the pulse, as it had been done to me many times. I heard a pulsing and I started to pump the cuff, stopping when I noticed that the pulsing stopped and the reading on the monitor showed 180. I still did not understand what was happening. As I started to relieve the pressure, the monitor reading dropped to 120. I suddenly heard the pulse pumping again, and after the reading on the monitor dropped to 70, it stopped again. This must be the blood pressure: one hundred twenty maximum over seventy minimum, I thought in excitement. I decided to do it again and again it gave me the same reading. I wrote it down, together with temperature and pulse, and moved to the next patient. I looked at the time and realized that administering intravenous and intra-muscular injections and checking their vital signs at the same time would take too long. Instead I decided to distribute the medication first, followed by vital signs checks. I arrived at the patient who needed an intravenous injection and, without hesitation, went to do exactly what I remembered had been done to me.

I put a tourniquet on the arm above the elbow and cleaned the area with an antiseptic swab. Luckily she had very good veins. I pushed a drop of medication from the

syringe through the needle to remove the air and proceeded to puncture the patient's arm, straight into the vein. I slowly injected the medication, pulled out the needle and put pressure on the spot with a swab. Until then, I did not notice that heavy drops of sweat were rolling down my face.

"Can you please hold this and put pressure here?" I asked the patient.

She nodded in agreement and said, "What good hands you have. I didn't even notice when you did the injection."

"Thank you!" I sighed in relief, and I went to the other patient who needed an intravenous injection.

Only after I performed my first intramuscular injection and was complimented by the patient did I start to relax and smile.

I finished applying and distributing all the medication before I resumed vital signs checks, writing them down. By then it was past two o'clock in the morning and I had worked nonstop since ten o'clock the previous evening.

In the Gynecological ward I approached patient number forty-eight. She looked very young and her skin was yellowish white; it reminded me of Veronica's skin before she died. The young woman's name was Ana and she seemed to be asleep. I touched her wrist and tried to feel her pulse but could not find it. Her hand was cold and sweaty. I was applying the blood pressure monitor cuff to her arm when she opened her eyes and smiled at me. "How are you, Ana?"

She did not respond. I tried to find her pulse again and could not. Pumping up the blood pressure cuff, I noticed that the monitor registered a maximum pressure of

forty and no minimum. I tried again and again, but her pulse was very weak. Ana started to speak and I noticed that she spoke to someone else and she sounded incoherent.

This is not good, I thought, as I reached the door. In a few steps I had crossed the corridor to the casualty and approached the first doctor I saw.

“I have a patient in the ward that has no pulse and no blood pressure!” I said.

“Is she dead?” he asked.

“No! But—” I had to run behind him. In the ward I directed him to the patient’s bed.

He tried to find her pulse and blood pressure, and then went straight to the bell situated on the nurse’s office wall that I hadn’t noticed before.

“Please, what is your name?”

“Eva,” I responded quickly.

“Please, Eva, I need a glucose infusion and ten mls of intravenous Efortil.”

Before he finished his request, six doctors and three nurses from other wards arrived and started to attend to the patient, who had now lost consciousness. An anesthetist arrived and gave some orders to the theatre nurse, who followed him. They all moved fast and knew what to look for. I became an observer.

The patient was taken to the operating theatre within a short time, but before they all left the doctor I first approached in casualty addressed me.

“Thank you, Eva, for acting so quickly. With any luck she may live.”

She did! I found this out the next day. Meanwhile, I returned to pick up where I had left off and started to change the fifty–nine bed linens and wash the patients who

could not do so themselves. I finished the last at seven, when the new shift started and the four nurses arrived to relieve me from my duty. But before I left, I sat with one of them. Her name was Susana, and she asked me to write down a nurse's report in the communication book that I never managed to read.

After I wrote this report I left and walked straight to the head nurse's office. Alicia was there, also writing some report. She stopped when I walked in, raised her head and a big smile appeared on her big face.

"How could you? How dare you?" I screamed.

"Calm down," she said. "I had no choice. Either I called you in or I had sixty patients with no nurse, and in the end you did well. I was right in choosing you."

"But there were nurses. Three arrived to attend the dying woman."

"Yes, yes!" she said impatiently. "One that was busy in the men's ward, one who was in the obstetrics ward and also attending the delivery suite, and one in the orthopedic ward. This is not Europe! They left their wards to help you out. You were not the only one by yourself."

"They are nurses!" I replied.

"And what are you, Eva? What do you want to be? The course starts in two months, so what are you planning to do?"

I did not reply.

She pushed some forms across the desk and said, "Take them home, fill them out, sign them and bring them back tonight. Go, go to sleep now."

She sighed, and I only noticed then that she looked tired and had lost some of her glamour.

“I’m sorry! You must have had an infernal night yourself,” I said.

Alicia stays silent looking at me in a friendly way.

“What I do not understand is why this hospital is so understaffed. And so badly run down,” I said.

“This is politics,” she answered.

“What have politics got to do with the hospital?” I asked.

“Oh, don’t tell me you are so naïve! Since independence from the Spanish, this country has been governed by military powers. You may ask, how come? The elite funded, bought and bribed military power for themselves. They don’t care about the country; they are only interested in using our natural resources to generate wealth that ends in their personal accounts overseas. They need the military to protect them and the military needs their money to buy more weapons to build their power.

The rest is just illusions: *la Banderra*, *la Patria*, and *Fotonovelas* where the rich fall in love with the poor and rescue them from the misery of slums. Look at the roofs of the slums’ huts. There are more TV antennas than beds.

Dreams do distract us from reality. Oh yes! We have elected governments sometimes, but for some reason they do not last too long. Sometimes they are removed by a bloody coup-d’état and the next day we wake up to a new military government.” She started laughing. Her body was shaking and her face was red.

“I know this, but I have been to very good hospitals in the city,” I said.

“Private?” she asked.

“Ye...e..s,” I responded with some hesitation.

“Yes, you see, this is the problem. This is another illusion; even the rich lack the understanding that when any of them will have a car crash, they will end in the

nearest hospital. Not in their luxurious, private hospital two hundred kilometres away, but in this old rundown place. We train our nurses, but they move on to the private hospitals where they are better paid. This is a chronic condition, and this is why. Do you understand?”

I did not reply and must have looked apprehensive; because Alicia said calmly, “Go to bed. You need sleep, go!”

I left and started walking fast in the direction of to the bus station. Yes, it had been also a long night for Alicia, but for me it had been unforgettable.

Catch the Paper

by

©Eva d'Ews Thomson

“Catch!” shouted Erina.

Something white fluttered in the air and in an elegant motion landed at my feet.

A piece of a fine, white, writing paper, that was lying now uselessly on the floor.

At the same time Erina was bending over in a fit of laughter, holding her hands against her tummy, two red spots appearing on her usually pale cheeks. I could not understand what this fuss was all about. In one instance of surprise or clumsiness I let the sheet of paper fall to the floor.

“Why? Why...why did you do this?” I asked my neighbor Erina, who since I'd moved into this small apartment block, had become my friend. This building of six apartments was situated by the sea in a new suburb south of Haifa, called Ein Ha Yam. All neighbours, we formed some kind of social club, taking care of each other's kids, inviting each other for dinner parties or afternoon tea.

From where I stood, I could see the sea water through the window. Usually intense blue, today it was gray with dense fog rising above the high waves, one of those miserable rainy weekends. My daughters were doing their homework and Erina had invited me for afternoon tea, her kids had gone with their father to visit their grandmother. Unlike the other neighbours Erina was a special friend. She lived in the apartment below and she watched my girls when I was at work, making sure they were safe. Only minutes earlier, when she threw the piece of paper at me, we had

discussed the possibility of me obtaining a divorce.

Two years before, I had arrived in Israel with my nine and ten year old daughters. Returning to the same place where twelve years earlier I had met and married my husband, while living in a Kibbutz in the North of the country. I was sent there by the Army as part of my training to attend Hebrew classes in an *Ulpan*. My husband was part of a working volunteers group.

Now after eight years of living separately I saw the opportunity to finalize this chapter of my life and move on. My husband's country, Argentina, where he now lived, was strongly Catholic and didn't have divorce laws.

Erina stopped laughing and arching her eyebrows responded with a question.

“Why? You ask me why? Is it possible that you do not know how it works?”

“What do you mean? What does throwing a piece of paper at me have to do with my divorce?”

Her cheeks were red and she was staring at me with her black eyes wide open.

Slowly her stare changed into an expression of disbelief at my ignorance. She shook her head and started to instruct me:

“You have to learn how to catch this piece of paper as if your life depended on it. Do you understand me?” she added, “If you fail to catch that paper this will be the sign that God disapproves of your *get*, do you understand?” I nodded my head without a word and conviction.

“The document,” she continued to explain slowly, “will be written by the hand of a high Rabbi and his hand is guided by God. If the sacred paper falls on the floor, this will be the sign that God disapproves of the divorce. No one will ever give you a *get*, do you understand?”

Without a word, I bent down and picked up the paper and passed it back to Erina. For the next hour we played *catch the paper*, laughing a lot at my clumsiness. In the following weeks, whenever we met we repeated this game until I became an expert in paper catching. Two months later I arrived at the house of *Hasidic Law*. The Rabbinat Court of Haifa was a gray building located in the lower part of the city called Hadar. Hadar was built in a mixture of spacious Arabic and Ottoman buildings, interspersed with earlier Bauhaus.

The large dark brown wooden doors of the Rabbinat opened straight into the reception and information desk, behind which half a dozen busy clerics gave instructions or directions. From there, I was sent to the application office in the mezzanine, where I had to file the divorce application forms. I climbed a set of narrow, gray stone, spiral stairs in between walls of white painted brick.

The stairs lacked proper illumination and the white walls carried a thick dirty strip of sweat, left by hundreds of hands. This did little to disperse my feelings of claustrophobia. The architecture of the stairs was similar to the old military fort, the one in Akko or in Nimrod, only narrower. Half way up, the stairs opened on the right side straight into the office. Again a small room painted in white was divided by a heavy dark desk. Behind the desk stood dark wooden shelves loaded with files and in

between them nearly invisible stood a door that, I assumed, was the access to the archive rooms. After I filled out the application form and paid the application fee, a personal file for divorce request was created. Again I was sent up those unfriendly spiral stairs to the first floor, where the usual white painted long corridor greeted me.

This one used as a waiting room. It was lined with small white doors without handles. A French-style window, with iron frames and again painted in white at the end of corridor, was the only decoration or distraction in this hostile looking place. In between the doors stood wooden benches and some chairs, mostly occupied by somber-looking people.

Hesitantly, I took a seat and joined the rest of the waiting desperadoes. No one spoke and every so often a door opened. A voice called a name, someone would jump to their feet and rush toward the open door disappearing inside. Others who were waiting looked distressed and anxious, fearing they would miss their turn by mishearing their names.

When this happened, they would bang on the doors in the hope that a door keeper would appear again and they would not miss their turn. Some were lucky and were let in, while others after a while would give up and walk away, swearing with clenched fists. The lucky ones who some time later appeared through the mysterious doors, walked fast, silently toward the exit. Others appeared with red faces, looking angry. Rarely did anyone smile in this place.

On one occasion, a tall man who I assumed was in his forties, grabbed the door keeper by the shirt.

“*Ben zona!* I will kill you!” He was screaming and swearing at him. “Mister please... calm down! Please... or we will call the police,” pleaded the court employee. The big man fell silent, bent his head and walked quickly along the corridor, disappearing behind the exit door. In the following six months I would observe many similar scenes, some less, others more explosive. But on that first day, I spent the next two hours in silence waiting anxiously, fearful to miss my turn. By the time my name was called, I was the only one left in the hall. I checked my watch. It was three forty five and closing time was four. Did they expect me to discuss my divorce in fifteen minutes?

They did!

My first impression of the courtroom was that of a theater. Never before was I in a court room but I knew many theaters and some looked like this room which was occupied by rows of wooden benches and a stage elevated one meter high above the floor on which I stood.

On the stage stood a long table covered by a black cloth behind which sat three men. In the middle the High Rabbi; he was small; his complexion was swarthy with a tint of yellow. Dressed in a black caftan and a round hat made from black material and brown fur, from under which two small and very black eyes were staring at me. Those eyes were so black that I could not distinguish the pupil from the iris. Set in this small haggard face was a big hawkish nose. His face was covered by a thin black and white striped beard and by side locks falling from under his hat. He looked like a Sephardic Jew, probably from Yemen.

After a few seconds that seemed like hours to me, without a word and with the flip of his hand he dismissed me and turned away from me. Bending towards the Rabbi to his left he murmured something into his ear. I was forced to look up at the stage, feeling insignificant. The Rabbi in question was wearing a gray suit that must have seen better times and a large gray hat. He looked like a Chicago gangster out of a Hollywood movie, except for the side locks which were almost hidden behind his ears under his hat. His name was Aron Blum.

I started to worry, thinking that perhaps my outfit was not decent enough. I had put a lot of effort into my appearance before I had left my home. I wore a long skirt and a long sleeved shirt, instead of the usual jeans and t-shirt.

Perhaps it was my lipstick, I thought, when Aron Blum, who was performing duties of a court official, addressed me in a friendly way.

“Please take a seat,” he pointed with his hand towards the wooden bench.

After I sat down, they all started to confer in whispers, ignoring my presence. On the right side of the High Rabbi sat another Rabbi who, unlike the others, was dressed in an elegant, modern dark blue suit. Underneath the jacket he wore a white shirt. His orange coloured hair was cut short, his beard trimmed and his locks pushed behind his ears were hardly noticeable. He was wearing a skullcap. His appearance was elegant and tidy and most of the time he would say no word, but he looked at me always in a friendly manner and calmly, he also did this when he addressed me. He did not look like a rabbi. He looked more like a character in one of Dostoevsky’s novels or Chekhov’s plays or stories: a Russian banker or aristocrat. Behind him sat the scribe, a young fellow who was wearing too a skullcap, on a bald scalp except for

two long black locks falling from above his ears. Moving silently, always looking at the floor, his role was writing down everything that was said in this room.

After a while Aron Blum asked me:

“*At Yehudija?*”

“Of course! Yes! I am Jewish!” I answered.

“Can you prove it?”

“What do you mean?”

“We need someone who knows you since you were born and can confirm that you were born to Jewish parents.”

“I was born during the war and my father was killed and...”

I stopped and looked defiantly at the High Rabbi, straight into his eyes. “*Giveret!* Can you please answer!” called Aron Blum.

I was clenching my fists and slowly starting to say:

“How...how dare you question my Jewishness?”

I had got this far. Abruptly, Aron Blum interrupted me in Yiddish.

“*Shush! Shush Frau, seitz ruhig... Du wilst a Get?... Seitz ruhig duse is nur ein vorfahren*”. [“Calm down woman, calm down...you want your divorce? You stay calm this is just a process”.]

“Is it?” I interrupted. “This interrogation sounds like an inquisition or the Nazis...” the last part of the sentence I said in a murmur and in a loud voice I added.

“If I wasn’t a Jew I could not have married as a Jew under a *hupe* but I did marry,

here in this country, under your Rabbinate, and I married a Jew. If you thought that I was not a Jew then my marriage is illegal and I don't need a divorce, correct? What about my children and our passports? Are we not citizens? Are we not Israelis?"

The silence that followed was interrupted by the Rabbi who looked like the Dostoyevsky character and was the second in charge after the High Rabbi. His name was Haim Shapiro but they all called him Rabbi Shapiro. He smiled at me before addressing the others.

"The woman is right. She was married under Hassidic Law, and legally we cannot question this."

The High Rabbi turned towards the scribe and told him to stop writing.

Aron Blum pulled me by my sleeve saying:

"You must go now *Giveret*, we are closing now."

"What about my *get*?" I asked.

"As soon as it arrives signed by your husband we will call you."

"What if he doesn't sign?"

"It may be more complicated but do not worry." He reassured me and added: "Do not forget! You must find someone who can testify that you are a Jew."

I left apprehensive, thinking that I might never get a divorce. It was out of my hands, it depended solely on my husband and on the rabbis, as there was no other jurisdiction where I could apply for a divorce. I walked slowly down through the streets of Hadar, reflecting on what had happened back in court and what it meant and how it could affect my future and that of my children.

I knew that my mother wasn't born a Jew but she had converted and officially become one. Why was this rabbi questioning my identity? He did not know how I felt when I was called *zydowska swinja* at school by children who I thought were my friends. How I felt when holding my little brother's bleeding head when he was four. Wounded by a stone thrown at him by an older boy, the little brat, himself only eight, was laughing and called my brother a dirty Jew.

What does the High Rabbi know about my terror the night three Polish hooligans tried to invade our home during a wave of anti-Semitism in Lodz. They were attacking only Jews and killing whole families. I never forgot the screams of my terrified mother and of my brave father who confronted them with an ax. Luckily some of our Polish neighbors in the flats above made lots of noise and after someone screamed: *Polycja!* The attackers left running.

I remember I was told by my father and mother that I was a Jew and I never questioned this. My father was a Jew—he lost all eleven members of his family in the holocaust. I always was a Jew and proudly carried my fears and the weight of rejection and anti-Semitism it on my shoulders.

My parents were not religious and, like most of our Jewish friends, they would light a candle only during the *Yom Kippur* celebration. They did this in memory of their families killed during the Second World War. Most of my father's family died in Treblinka and my mother's in the Red Army on the way to Berlin. I was only ten when mother in one of her episodes of depression was scared of the doctors and nurses, believing they were hiding Nazi uniforms under white coats.

“Run! Run! My child! They are going to kill you! Run...” she would scream. I didn’t understand then: the nightmares she wanted to protect me from. What does this Rabbi know? He only cares about this Law that is so very ancient, rigid and intolerant. His reality had nothing to do with the modern way of life; soon I was back in the real world, forgetting all about the rabbis and their conflicting Laws. I cooked dinner for my kids and finished some chores before going to bed.

Next morning my daughters and I left on the same bus. The trip was short. I watched through the window Lily, who had started her last year of primary school and had only to travel one bus stop. Soon she was waving and running through the entry of the school compound. Two stations further was Doris's school. She had started her first year of high school, and next year Lily would join her, both schools were located conveniently between our home and my work. In my role as nurse and midwife I worked in a Hospital situated between the lower parts of Carmel and Hadar.

I watched Doris through the window wave before she was swallowed by a group of kids. All the boys looked the same, but some girls were wearing scarves. This was an experimental school, the only one of its kind in this country. Palestinians and Jewish children were sharing their ideas and their views of the world. The bus was moving and my last glimpse was of running, pushing and smiling kids. It was a good school run by dedicated Jewish and Arab teachers.

One month later my mother arrived for a short visit and three days after her arrival Aron Blum rang late in the afternoon.

“Come tomorrow and do not forget you must bring a witness who has known you since birth.”

“I told you that this is impossible. The only people who could testify are either dead or alive overseas, I do not know where. I could ask my mother, perhaps she knows. She is here for a visit and...” He interrupted, “Bring her with you tomorrow.” He sighed: “She will have to do.”

That evening I told my mother what Aron Blum had told me and asked her:

“Please mum can you come? I need you to come.” Her response was evasive and I noticed that she was tense.

“Why do they want to talk with me? It is not me who is getting divorced!”

“Look mum, it's just a procedure. They only want to establish that I am Jewish. Apparently they request everyone to bring a witness and you are the only witness who has known me since I was born. Please *mamusiu* do not make it more difficult.”

“All right! All right! I will go and answer a few questions. You know I want you to get your divorce. It is time for you to re-marry.”

I wasn't thinking so far ahead, just wanted my divorce. After eight years of living alone I wanted to be in total control of my girls' and my life, independent from my ex-husband's whims.

“Thanks! It's just a formality,” I said, this time without conviction and started to wonder why the rabbis were so insistent. Did they do this to everyone who asked for a divorce? There were no such requirements were present when we applied for the

marriage ceremony. I had known that my father was my step-dad since I was nearly twelve, when a neighbour told me with a malicious smile, after she and my mother fell out. “Look in your mother’s small leather suitcase. You may find your father’s photos,” *Pani Kasia* added.

This little brown crocodile leather suitcase was a no go zone for us kids.

It took weeks before the opportunity arrived to open this suitcase. My parents left for the theater and we kids were sent early to bed. After my brother was asleep I sneaked into the dining room that was in semi darkness, lit only partially by the street lamp. Even in absolute darkness I would have found that suitcase. It was in the lowest part of the large dining dresser, pushed well back. I pulled it out and holding it pressed against my chest I ran to the toilet. Luckily our babysitter was busy in the kitchen and did not notice my excursion.

I opened mother’s Pandora’s Box to reveal a pile of letters, photos and a small black purse made of satin. At the bottom was a small note book: mum’s diary written in Russian and a few loose letters written in Russian, but also some in Polish and French. I put those aside and started flipping through my mother’s diary. On one page she had written to someone how much she missed this person. The other page described my progress and development as a baby.

On another page she described the horrific bombing of Magdeburg: the fire and the heat and how the Germans pushed the prisoners onto the bridges to die in the next raid. She also wrote about mothers walking like living ghosts grieving for their children, children grieving for their mothers. This was horrific and scary.

Pushing this diary and pile of letters to one side of the suitcase I started looking at the photos. I pulled perhaps the third photo out of the pile when a good looking face of a man in his late twenties or perhaps early thirties drew my attention. His eyes were looking at me and I felt as if I was looking at my reflection in a mirror. Those were my eyes. I knew then this was my father, but who was he? I heard movement in the kitchen, and as quietly and quickly as possible I closed this little suitcase and went into the dining room putting it back in its usual place.

Back in my bed, my heart was pounding so fast that breathing was difficult. I started to cry. What now? What shall I do? If I tell my mum she will know that I opened her suitcase and will be angry. If I tell my father he may stop loving me and also get angry. My biological father, the man in that photo, where was he? Many days later when my father was away in Warsaw I asked my mother if father was my real father. She laughed at me.

“Of course Zelik is your father and he loves you, you silly girl.”

“But, *mamusiu!* Bozena’s mother, *Pani Kasia* told me so.” “*Oh swolocz!*” she swore to my surprise.

“Ewuniu, do not believe her! Don’t listen to this bad, bad person do you hear me?” and she pulled me into a big hug and gave me many kisses.

“Yes! *Kochana mamusiu*, yes! Dear mum I promise never again to listen to what *Pani Kasia* has to say.”

Then I made a decision, that I should only believe my mother and stop worrying about it, but mother's suitcase haunted me.

Once when I was a teenager my mother started telling me what happened during the War and how she ended up in a forced labour camp in Germany. She was very young, a teenager herself, when she was picked up by the Gestapo. I could see that talking about her experience during the War was difficult. She would stop sometimes and get lost in the past. During these sessions I tried to talk with my mother and drop in questions about my biological father but she would quickly change the subject. Only once she murmured to herself, “I still miss him and...” she looked around scared, as if worrying that someone could have heard her. I did, but pretended not to and for the first time I felt sorry for my step-father, and also for my mum.

Years later, I needed a passport and wrote to my mother to send my birth certificate to me. It took many months but finally it arrived. I was confronted with the fact that I was living with an incomplete picture of my identity. My birth certificate was issued in East Germany, by a registry office in South-Magdeburg. It confirmed the date of my birth. But it was not the same family name and place that was written on my school certificate. On my school certificate the family name was that of my step-father and the place of birth was in Kiev, whereas my birth certificate showed that I was registered under my mother’s maiden name and I was born in East Germany. Only the date of my birth and my first name and mother’s maiden name were the same.

I knew by then that many who had survived the war in Germany did not always survive the aftermath in their own countries. Many Ukrainians and Russians were deported to Siberia. My aunt was permitted to stay for only twenty-four hours in one town until she married and changed her name. This happened to many others. Stalin

did not trust those who had survived German camps.

My step-father survived the Warsaw Ghetto uprising and escaped to the East to join the Red Army. Instead he was sent to a Gulag somewhere in the Urals. Many Jews who tried to escape to the East were either killed by the advancing Germans or sent to Siberia by the Russian authorities. Many perished there too. Some of our friends who survived the war lost their children, parents and partners. There was such a chaos after the war! It was easy to change and adopt different identities and many did. My mother thought that all of her family was dead, after a search by the Red Cross gave negative results. It took another ten years before she found out that three members of her family had survived. But at that time, less than two years after the war, she resigned herself to the fact that they had perished. She had no reason to return to the place where her mother and other family members died of starvation during Stalin's purge of the Ukraine.

By then mother had already met Zelik. He was deeply in love with her. They married, and he became my father. The only father I knew when growing up.

Many years later, in Argentina, when visiting, my mother told me who my biological father was. By then I was already separated from my husband and a mother of two. She then told me that he was a Frenchman from Lyon, and he was killed by the Germans only hours before liberation by the allied forces. My mother distracted me from my reflective journey into my past with a cup of coffee.

“You never told me if my real father was a Jew?”

She did not answer immediately, only looked at me for a long time. I felt a sense of nervous anticipation, but her response disappointed me.

“Why do you insist? I told you all I know and I don't want to talk or remember the past. Perhaps one day.”

I saw pain in her face. I got up from my chair and embraced her.

“It's late. Let's go to bed. Good night!”

“Good night! Yes! Yes! I love you!” she whispered in my ear and then in a loud voice, “Good night!” and she left the room. It took me a long time to fall asleep that night. Next morning I rang my work place and requested a change of shift. My mother and I arrived at midday at the Rabbinate and we ran straight into Aron Blum as he was leaving the archives office. He was carrying a pile of folders with both hands.

“There you are!” he exclaimed. “Come! Quickly! Come, come we are late!”

Then with a smile he addressed my mother, to my surprise in perfect German.

“*Guten Tag liebe Frau, wie geht es Ihnen?* How long are you intending to stay in our country?” he asked friendly. I started to relax, taking this as a good sign. But then as we arrived in the Court room the interrogation started.

“Can you please tell us your full name, where you were born and your maiden name?” Aron Blum translated from Hebrew to German the High Rabbi's questions. My mother's response was quick and firm, but after saying her maiden name, the High Rabbi interrupted before she could finish her sentence and there were daggers in his voice. “*Ze schem Yehudi?*” Is this a Jewish name?

“Yes! It is a Jewish name but not always,” responded Aron Blum. And for a while they discussed in Hebrew the fact that the name is sometimes Jewish and sometimes not, rudely ignoring my mother who was standing there without understanding what they were saying.

I approached my mum and started to direct her to the seat when Aron Blum stopped us and asked in German:

“*Sind sie eine Judin?* Are you Jewish?”

“Of course I am!” My mother responded firmly.

“So you were born a Jew and your mother was a Jew?” This time my mother hesitated before responding. The room was silent and everyone looked at her, the four men and me. Finally she straightened her back and responded proudly.

“No! I was not, but I converted to Judaism shortly after the war when I married Zelik, who is a Jew.”

The High Rabbi raised his eyebrows and addressed Aron Blum not my mother.

“Ask her in what year she converted and how?”

“I went to *Mikhve* in 1946.”

“Hm...! Did her daughter convert too at the same time? Did she also go to *Mikhve*?” asked the High Rabbi in Hebrew, and again Aron Blum translated.

“No...she was still a toddler...a...” she trailed off, realizing that she may have made a mistake. My mother went silent.

“Who was the father of her daughter?” he asked again.

Aron Blum shook his head before looking at my mother and translated the High

Rabbi's request. My mother looked at him with an expression of surprise and started murmuring something incoherent, and then she asked.

"What is the meaning of such an impertinent question?"

"We need to know in order to establish her Jewishness. Please answer the question."

Aron Blum pleaded.

This time she did not answer immediately. She looked straight at the white wall. Her eyes were blank and looked at some point lost in time and space.

No one moved. The only noise that I could hear was the fast pumping of my heart. My thoughts were spinning in many different directions at the same time. My whole existence was at stake. Who was I? My identity was in question and the horrifying thought was 'do I have one'? How do I know what is the truth, will I ever know?

And now here in Haifa, in this Rabbinat, I was waiting with the Rabbis for mother to answer. She took one step forwards and in a firm voice said:

"His name was David Oppenheimer. He was a Jew." I knew immediately that she was lying and probably everyone else thought so. Aron Blum addressed her:

"Thank you, you can go now." And to me he said, "She is a good mother, she loves you. Go now and I will contact you about the *get* as soon it arrives."

I moved in silence. Once in the street, my mother stretched out her arms to embrace me but I moved a step away. I was angry at her, at the Rabbis, at my fathers, one for being dead, one for concealing the truth. Why did she lie? There was no need for it.

“Mum! Why did you lie?” I asked.

“I just wanted to help when I realized my mistake not to take you into *Mikhve!*”

“Yes, it was a mistake!”

“But how could I know? No one told me.”

“I’m not religious, so it doesn't matter.” I tried to soften my voice. I was always trying not to upset her. But it did matter. It was not only about me. It was also about my children. Did she realize that it would matter to them?

Shortly after we got home, the girls arrived from school with their absolutely irresistibly beautiful smiles and convinced their grandmother to take them across the highway to the beach. She agreed and within minutes they were ready to go. They left and I started to cook dinner and get ready for my night shift.

The following week was school break and I would take my leave. We all went visiting friends in Tel-Aviv.

Two months after mother left, Aron Blum called.

“Bring your children tomorrow. The High Rabbi wants to meet them.”

“What for? Why must my children be involved with the divorce process?” I could not stop myself when I added “and expose them to this nightmare of the High Rabbi.” He started laughing and said, “Do not worry! Do not worry! It is just a formality... see you tomorrow at ten, *Shalom!*” He hung up before I could answer.

The girls did not mind coming. On the contrary, they would miss school and found

this all amusing. They were curious. On the way to the Rabbinat the girls and I were silent. They sat one seat in front of me. Both were very good looking with their father's big dark brown eyes. Doris had blond hair and Lily's was brown. Doris was extroverted and would always find something interesting to talk about but not today, today she was very quiet. Lily had always been a quiet type, a very good listener and observant. Both were good students and I was very proud of them. As we arrived at the Rabbinat, Aron Blum was waiting.

He was very friendly to the girls and asked them about their school. But when Doris mentioned which school she attended he stopped talking to them.

He looked at me and said, "Tell your girls only to give short answers and only when asked." This didn't sound good. I already regretted bringing them with me.

Once in the courtroom, the High Rabbi asked my daughters to approach him and without any warning asked. "Would you like to be Jewish?"

My daughters unanimously answered:

"We are! We do not have to be..."

I jumped up quick.

"How dare you... how!"

I shouted to my daughters, "Girls out! Go out now! Wait for me outside... now!"

My daughters quickly exited the Court Room. I waited until the door closed behind

them.

“How could you? What gives you the right to confuse those two girls, who have been through a lot. They already had to deal with too many issues at a very early age. They don’t need more problems in their lives.”

“Calm down. We are here to help you.”

“How...”

“You convert and there will be no problems and you will get your *get*.” he assured me.

“And what am I supposed to do?”

“Attend *Mikhve*, cook kosher food and stop working on Shabbat.”

“Are you planning to give me an apartment with two kitchens and pay my wages?”

I asked quietly. “Do you believe that one can change identity like a new dress? The fact that I am not religious does not make me a bad Jew or a bad person, and who will take care of you, if *has ve halila*, God forbid, you should have a heart attack on Shabbat?” I asked gently.

“There are enough *goim* to work on Sabbath,” he answered.

“Do you trust them?”

“What do you mean?”

“Would you trust a *goi* to do a good job on your heart? Would you?”

Rabi Shapiro intervened before he could answer.

“The *Giveret* has a point; no one can change in one day. She needs to have conviction that this is the right thing for her.” He turned to me saying, “I invite you and your

children to have dinner in my home. Perhaps it will help you to see how we live and what it means to me and my wife. My children are not different from yours.”

I was shocked. He didn't try to persuade me. He offered to share his reality and that of his family. I did not expect this kindness and generosity. I was touched.

“I accept your offer but you understand I must work and need to arrange a time when I do not have night shift. I also have to discuss this with my children.” He nodded his head.

“I will ring you in a few days.”

The High Rabbi interrupted.

“Here, sign this paper,” and he passed the form to Aron Blum.

“What is it for?”

“Your *get* has arrived and to process it we need you to sign that you are considering conversion.”

“But...”

“No but! You sign or no *get*!”

This was final. I looked at the document and signed.

My daughters were smiling as I came out and said that they were “relieved to leave this place”. Once on the street they started asking me what happened after they left the court room. Then Doris dropped the question.

“Mum, do you believe in God?”

“No, but some people do. Why do you ask?”

“Because all the kids study religion and we are the only ones who do not and I thought that maybe...”

“Maybe you should? I think that it is always good to learn about what others believe and to make up your own mind on the matter.”

“What if we decide that we do believe? How would you feel?”

I had to be careful what I said. “Belief is personal and it should not interfere between us but I believe that you are too young to make such a decision and should read more about religion before you make up your mind up. As long as you don't ask me to stay home and stop working on Shabbat...” The three of us burst into laughter.

Five days after this conversation I was called to Lily's school. I had to leave my work and rush in a taxi to school. On my arrival I was sent straight to the principal's office and as I stepped into the room I found myself inside a Kafkaesque scene. There was my red faced daughter cornered by some eight teachers and all of them talking to her at the same time. I coughed loudly and they all went silent. One of the teachers said, “Lily is refusing to study *The Torah*.”

“So? Was this so important that you could not send home a note instead of dragging me from my work?” I asked.

“Study *The Torah* is part of the school curriculum,” and he turned to address my daughter. “You will not pass your grade without it!”

“My mum told me that this is a democratic country and I can choose if I want to study religion or not!” Lily screamed.

The teachers talked to each other ignoring Lily and me. I could not hear what they

were saying but I thought someone said “communist”. Trying to stop this escalating madness and help my girl I said to Lily in a loud voice: “I am sorry darling, I did not explain to you that in this democratic country the majority of its citizens decided that religion should be taught in schools.” I didn’t know if this was the truth or not but it made everyone calm down. One of the teachers said to Lily. “Look Lily, *The Torah* is our history and this is why you should study it.”

“No it is not!” Lily cried out. “Israel’s history is only thirty years old. *The Torah* is a mythology!”

One of the teachers murmured... “Interesting way to look at this,” and in a loud voice she said, “Precisely, it is like studying mythology Lily.”

Finally Lily accepted defeat. She agreed to study *The Torah* and I felt as if I had betrayed her. In the end she enjoyed studying *The Torah* and, even more the ancient Hebrew language.

Aron Blum rang me two months later and told me that I should come the following day for the *get*. This was just in time, as I was taking a new position in a hospital in the north of the country. That evening, Doris and I practiced the Catch the Paper game for two hours.

Since I had told Erina that the Rabbis were questioning my Jewishness and wanted me to convert, she and the other neighbours excluded us from their club. They all continued to be very polite when we run into them on the stairs and only one very young couple would treat us as they always did. They would invite me for a coffee

and my girls to sleep over when I was on the night shift. We stayed in touch after I moved to the North.

I arrived at the Court one hour early feeling nervous and tense. I tried to relax by walking the long corridor from one end to the other. Like the girl in Andersen's story *The Red Shoes* I could not stop. A group of four people arrived and everyone sat quietly, except me. The scribe appeared and called my name.

Inside the Court room, apart from the four Rabbis, there were a woman and two men who were sitting on the back bench. As I approached the stage Aron Blum told me to stand two meters away. The High Rabbi passed a paper to the scribe, who shouted "Catch!" and simultaneously threw the paper at me.

Like a cat I stretched my body and caught the paper. The scribe went back to his desk. I was holding the paper firmly and was told by Aron Blum to hold it against my left breast and to walk with it towards the door. He walked beside me and opened the door. I had stepped outside when he called me back. We approached the stage and he took the paper from my hands.

God did not oppose...I was divorced!

I had to wait for the divorce documents to be finalized and signed by the Rabbis. After Aron Blum passed them to me and I put them in my handbag, only then I looked at the High Rabbi and asked him.

"How could you have permitted such a sacred document, a paper with words from

God, to be thrown into the hands of a Gentile? Isn't it a sin?"

I did not wait for his answer.

I approached the door. The woman, who was sitting next to it when I arrived, stopped me. "Congratulations. How long have you had to wait for your divorce?"

"Eight years"

"*O Elohim!* I thought two were eternity!" She screamed out.

I did not respond and slowly closed the door behind me.

EXEGESIS: LIFE WITHOUT A MOTHER TONGUE

Introduction:

In this exegesis, I examine three memoirs which explore the changes that have occurred in a person's life as a result of changing lands, tongues and culture. My own experience begins, like so many others, in the upheavals generated by the Second World War. Here there are quite a few authors who tell stories of survival, of being displaced and moving countries, of having to learn new languages and what they gained but also what they lost. There is also enough autobiographical literature on the multilingual experience to have led to a significant body of secondary literature in fields such as literary and women's studies, linguistics, anthropology, sociology and psychology. All of these fields have looked at the 'migrant' experience through autobiographical and memoir writing, an experience that although not unique is always personal. Autobiographies or memoirs are the stories of a life as seen from the inside and so are also stories told in one language, usually in the author's 'mother tongue', sometimes in a borrowed language. Sometimes the author has lived in a series of countries and learned several different languages. This is my case, to the point where no language can be said to be my 'mother tongue'.

I must pause here to say that a mother tongue is defined by the dictionary as the language first learned by a person, their native language, usually their parent's language¹. Here we are also looking at the emotional connections between language and self-expression, where the mother tongue is the language in which one feels most at home, which is not necessarily 'mother tongue'.

¹ *The Macquarie Dictionary: Revised Third Edition* (p.1246) Australia's National Dictionary, 2001

Texts on migration and displacement cover a wide range of countries and periods. I have focused on the Polish-English and Spanish-English experiences, using in particular Eva Hoffman's *Lost in Translation*,² which describes her childhood in Krakow, Poland, and her migration at the age of thirteen to Canada, and Ariel Dorfman's book *Heading South Looking North*,³ in which he describes a bilingual journey between Spanish and English. Hoffman reflects on the troubles of making a new linguistic home, while Dorfman has to decide which of his two languages is his real 'mother tongue' perhaps Spanish, perhaps English, or perhaps both.

I have also drawn on Polish-Australians Mary Besemeres and Anna Wierzbicka,⁴ the Polish-Canadian Eva Karpinski.⁵ I have also used Aneta Pavlenko,⁶ (Russian and English) and Lea Ramsdell's account of autobiographical writing by the author Gloria Anzaldua, who as a mestiza believes she is both Spanish and English.⁷ I have focused on these texts because they have been written in the last thirty years and because they are about countries and languages which have relevance to my own experience.

Authors such as Hoffman, Dorfman and Anzaldua have had to learn new languages, learned to compromise and to adapt or assimilate into different cultures. Some of the authors had to learn to deal with rejection based on racial, cultural or linguistic discrimination and stereotypes, as pointed out by Karpinsky.⁸

Although many migrants who wrote memoirs mention that, as time passed, they made new friends and started to feel at home. Some never felt complete after losing or

² Hoffman, Eva, *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language*, 1989

³ Dorfman, Ariel, *Heading South, Looking North: Bilingual Journey*, 2008

⁴ Besemeres, Mary, *Translating One's Self* (2002), *Different Languages, Different Emotions? Perspectives from Autobiographical Literature* (2004), Besemeres, Mary & Anna Wierzbicka, *Translating Lives: Living with Two Languages and Cultures*, 2010, Wierzbicka, Anna, *Preface: Bilingual Lives, Bilingual Experience*, 2010

⁵ Karpinski, Eva, *Borrowed Tongues: Life Writing, Migration and Translation*, 2012

⁶ Pavlenko, Aneta, *Stop Doing That, Ja Komu Skazala!: Language Choice and Emotions in Parent-Child Communication*, 2010

⁷ Ramsdell, Lea, *Language and Identity Politics*, 2004

⁸ Karpinski (p.112) 2012

leaving their families and friends and losing connection to their homeland and mother tongue. Their mother tongue starts to fade away and new sounds take over. As Eva Hoffman says in *Lost in Translation*, she prefers the Cracow Ewa, but she can't be her as she is losing track of her.⁹ "Her" is the self she was in Cracow, the self which is being replaced as her Polish fades with time. In addition, when migrants return to their home country they find that the mother tongue, in its original place, has moved forward developed and changed. They experience a deeper loss, something at the essence of their being. In Hoffman's case, this occurred when she was an adolescent.

Further on, migrant's access to and development of the language is cut off a certain stage as the Argentinean author Julio Cortazar, who spent half of his life exiled in Paris, commented in a televised interview that:

*Los exiliados que retornen a su país de origen (...) hablaran un lenguaje diferente al del grueso de la población que quedo en su país de origen.*¹⁰

[The exiles who return to their country of origin speak a language different to the majority of the population which stayed in the country of origin].

In some cases second generation immigrants create a new language, which then has to find a place to develop. Lea Ramsdell in her article: *Language and Identity Politics: The Linguistic Autobiographies of Latinos in the United States* discusses Richard Rodriguez, Ariel Dorfman, and Gloria Anzaldua's autobiographies. The last mentioned author centers on this aspect, in particular the development of new language Chicano, using Anzaldua's experience with this language, a mixture of formal and informal Spanish and English. Ramsdell points that, "the acquisition of

⁹ Hoffman, Eva, 1989

¹⁰ Aruj, Roberto & Estela González, *El retorno de los hijos del exilio: Una nueva comunidad de inmigrantes*, (p. 12) 2008

languages is equated to the acquisition of selfhood.”¹¹ While Rodriguez and Dorfman choose between the Spanish and English as they struggle with their personal identities. Anzaldua on the other hand mixes both Spanish and English in her writing without translation, claiming that as “mestiza” she is both Spanish and English.¹² In effect she is trying to claim a new social identity based on her personal refusal to choose between what are, for her, simply aspects of a complete fusion.

Certainly, there are also less personal motives. Some authors write their memoir or autobiography in a borrowed language because they need to share their experience with a wider audience. An autobiography or memoir can be written for a particular purpose, and the choice of language depends on what purpose one has in mind when writing. For many, the choice of English is in order to reach a wider audience.

Many authors choose to write in a language which is not their mother tongue, often the language of foreign rule; African or Asian authors write in English or French. More interestingly, there are those who choose to adopt a new literary language. Joseph Conrad, who was fluent in French, Russian, and Polish and studied Latin, chose to write in English, which according to his biographers he taught himself at twenty one. Ian Watt wrote that Conrad was asked by reporters why was it that he chose English as his literary language to which Conrad responded, “It was I who was adopted by the genius of the language.”¹³ Vladimir Nabokov wrote in English after migrating to the United States, while Solzhenitsyn stayed with Russian. Ariel Dorfman, in his bilingual journey, rejects Spanish, his mother tongue and adopts English in United States. Later in life he switches back to Spanish, and then again

¹¹ Lea Ramsdell, in *Language and Identity Politics*, (p. 174) 2004

¹² Lea Ramsdell, in *Language and Identity Politics*: (p. 176) 2004

¹³ Watt, Ian, *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century*, 1979,

back to English.¹⁴ Now he uses both depending on his need. (See the chapter below: *Ariel Dorfman: mother tongue and identity*).

For whatever reasons, when bilingual or multilingual authors choose to write in a host language, they all claim that their writing is more structured. What this means is that they hesitate when expressing their innermost feelings in the second language, which they overcome not by literalism but by looking for the deeper meaning in their mother tongue. The search to convey the exact shade of meaning often takes the writer into the use of more formal or non-idiomatic language. I will look at a discussion of this by Wierzbicka below, but simple greetings are perhaps a good example. In Russian novels, people are often addressed by their name and patronymic (“my dear Mikhail Fedorovich”), which conveys friendship but not intimacy. The literal translation simply tells the English reader that this is another culture. The French “ma chérie” is literally “my dear”, used only intimately; but one can be called “darling” or “love” by any English shopkeeper or Australian country waitress. As direct translation does not convey all the original meanings, the writer is forced to pay more attention to how sentences and semantic context can be used.

Interestingly no one seems to raise the question: is it possible to have a narrative of the self that does not originate in a mother tongue? This question focuses on people who for whatever reasons were deprived of the experience of their mother’s tongue. Here the definition of “mother tongue,” is one’s first language or native language, the language that links us to our ethnicity and culture. Mary Besemeres,¹⁵ Eva Karpinski, Anna Wierzbicka and Bill Bryson,¹⁶ all mention the importance of a mother tongue.

¹⁴ Dorfman, 1999

¹⁵ Besemeres, 2004

¹⁶ Bryson, Bill, 2008

Which, they say also represents, “*heimat*” and cultural belonging. Mother tongue, homeland, identity and belonging are all connected. I will explore this further as it is claimed that, “different languages are linked with different ways of thinking and different ways of feeling”.¹⁷

I wonder how Alexander Pushkin felt and which was his mother tongue: French or Russian? Which defined his ethnicity and culture: his mother, an aristocrat in the Czar’s court who spoke only French and visited him on occasion, or that of the serf who sang to him every day and told him fairy tales in Russian? Pushkin wrote some poetry in French, but all his greatest work, and all the plays and poems expressive of his deepest feelings, are in Russian. It is, however, a Russian full of French expressions.¹⁸

What of a multilingual person who is also a migrant or a refugee or exile and who doesn’t feel that they have a mother tongue? They have many different expressions from many tongues but does it mean that they can choose to write in any language?

The core of this thesis comprises three short stories; each of them is an memoir, snapshots of lifelong moments, where language, culture and migration came together. In the exegesis I compare my three short memoirs with other similar works.

This Introduction is followed by a Literature Review that consists of a chapter of theory and comparative analysis focusing on Hoffman, Dorfman and my three memoirs.

¹⁷ Wierzbicka, 2010

¹⁸ Feinstein, Elaine, Pushkin A Biography (pp. 17, 26-27, 110) 1998

I will analyze my three stories for historical and linguistic influences that derive from different cultures, with a view to identify how those differences are expressed and how they are depicted in other literatures. As culture is temporal, historical and local, an appropriate analogy would be a “stream of discourse” as culture is not static, and it has different currents, and this is an exercise in interpretive reconstruction. For example, one might contrast Eva Hoffman’s first chapter *Paradise in Lost in Translation* with my story *Sputnik* but also to Ariel Dorfman’s autobiography,¹⁹ comparing his and Hoffman’s relation to language.

The concluding chapter will summarize and outline the issue of writing autobiography/memoirs without a mother tongue and its implication. This thesis addresses the following questions: How does writing one’s own life in a borrowed tongue affect the narrative? How much of the mother tongue can one use? What indeed, is one’s “mother tongue”, when a language may not have been used for many years, or its use is restricted to a small number of activities or, as Cortazar noted above, cut off from development in its native land? Can a writer come to have a new mother tongue? And finally: How does one come to belong?

¹⁹ Dorfman (2008)

LITERATURE REVIEW:

The Essence of Self Translation: theory and genre

The genre of autobiography is broad and has been discussed by many critics and theorists over the past two hundred years. “Autobiography is the history of its author but autobiography in itself has a history which is part of the author’s history,” wrote Philippe Lejeune.²⁰

What Lejeune meant is that autobiography is the history of who ‘I’ was, and also of who ‘I’ is. Autobiography encapsulates the author’s history and its own history, which is revealed through textual styles and linguistic expressions that are in constant change, as Pascal noted in *Pensees*: “Merely according to reason, nothing is just itself, everything shifts with time.”²¹

Critics such as Frank Kermode,²² Lale Demirturk,²³ Susanna Egan,²⁴ Leigh Gilmore,²⁵ Mary Besemeres,²⁶ Ana Wierzbicka,²⁷ Eva C. Karpinski,²⁸ Lea Ramsdell,²⁹ and Aneta Pavlenko,³⁰ among many others, brought to the debate the paradigm of migration, “self” representations or “life writing.” Together they found that authors who write in second or third tongues find idiomatic constraints and difficulties with linguistic and cultural expressions from host to mother tongue and from mother tongue to host.

²⁰ Lejeune, Philippe, *Autobiographie Pacté* (p.4) 1977

²¹ B. Pascal, *Pensées*, (p.17) 1995

²² Kermode, Frank, 1980

²³ Demirturk, Lale, E., Asst. Prof. Dr., *Immigrant Women’s Autobiographies : A Distinct Sub-Genre of American Autobiography*, 1988

²⁴ Egan, Susanna, 1994

²⁵ Gilmore, Leigh, 1994 & 2001

²⁶ Besemeres, Mary, 1998, 2002, 2004

²⁷ Wierzbicka, Ana and Mary Besemeres, 2010

²⁸ Karpinski, Eva C., 2012,

²⁹ Ramsdell, Lea, 2004

³⁰ Pavlenko, Aneta, 2001, 2003

Since the early 1980s there also has been a feminist critique of autobiography that according to critics such as Marlene Kadar, have challenged the patriarchal law of autobiographical genre,³¹ which suggested that only men had public lives. For women, it would have been indecent to break the “silence code” and expose their and their partners’ private lives.

This was followed a decade later by a similar view expressed by Gilmore, though her view is that rather than post – modernism accommodating autobiography, autobiography has incorporated post – modernist techniques and critiques as an increasingly trans – disciplinary critical practice.³² She was followed by Karpinski, who in the first chapter of her book *Migrations of Theories* quotes a question she found scribbled on the margin of a library book by an anonymous writer: “Why does everything have to be translation?”³³

Karpinski concludes that, “Despite the accelerated movements of people across the globe we have far from exhausted the possibilities of translation–learning to translate and learning from translation.”³⁴ The need for translation is an imperative, as long as it is about “choice” and “exchange,” and not about “imposition” or “domination”.

But according to Karpinski, this kind of desire seems difficult if not impossible, and she points to “historically persisting inequalities,” new conflicts, globalisation, illegal immigrants, farmers evicted by transnational corporations, new cosmopolitan elites both financial and intellectual, and new racial definitions. Translations, she says, are “often willfully mistranslated”.³⁵

³¹ Kadar, Marlene, *Essays on Life Writing: From Genre to Critical Practice* 1992

³² Gilmore, Leigh, Kathleen Ashley, Gerald Peters, *Autobiography & Postmodernism* (p.3) 1994

³³ Karpinski, Eva C., *Borrowed Tongues: Life Writing, Migrating and Translation* (p.1) 2012

³⁴ Karpinski (p.1) 2012

³⁵ Ibid

The practice of life narratives often makes migrants feel, especially when they are told so by others, that they are living and writing in “borrowed tongues.”³⁶ Karpinski specifically points to narratives written in English by American and Canadian migrants, but why “borrowed tongues”? Is there an institution dedicated to lending tongues? “Borrowing” implies “debt,” and who is in debt to whom? It seems paradoxical that after imperialistic linguistic impositions and economic exploitation, the survivors of colonialism feel that they are in debt.

Karpinski goes further and also points to the “linkage of economic dependence” in relation to women writing in the “male dominated discourses” that points also to “debt.” She stresses:

Life in a borrowed tongue can also describe a general mode of being in the world for women writing under the conditions of patriarchy and using the master’s tools – man-made languages and male – dominated discourses – to dismantle the master’s house.³⁷

This is a big statement, as since Homeric times and beyond, “underlying hegemonic discourses” have been in power around the globe, more obviously in some places than others. Also in his book *Mimesis*, Auerbach explore of how western literature for 2500 years interpreted reality, highlights how many works clearly mimic past and present societies that are still strongly patriarchal.³⁸

Karpinski’s point really only relates to the last century, when writing in the genre of autobiography started to shift away from the male – dominated perspective towards a genre of “immigrant women’s life writing” developed and adopted by cultural

³⁶ Ibid (pp.1-2) 2012

³⁷Ibid (p.2) 2012

³⁸ Auerbach, Erich, *Mimesis*, 2003

studies. However, she acknowledges that to map out different practices of linguistic and cultural translations she uses Roman Jakobson's classic paradigm of translation:

Only with a qualification that language and culture are not stable entities with fixed boundaries but rather categories that are already plural and divided within, leaking and contaminated, open to flux and fusion.³⁹

This suggests a close interrelationship between critical theory, philosophy and sociology – again, Pascal's point that “nothing is just itself,” everything is part of something else.

The reason for mentioning *Mimesis* is that it provides a foundation for understanding the increasingly multilayered realities of literature, including autobiography. This foundation can be applied, for example, to the many – layered autobiography of Ariel Dorfman, whose personal narrative is portraying external, public and factual life, entwined with the internal reality of a man in conflict with survivor's guilt. In the following chapters I will specifically focus my analysis on Dorfman's bilingual experience.

My direct and personal reference is intentional: I cannot discuss “self” or analyse stories that are expressing “self” or constructing “self representation” without personal reflection. I accept Kadar's “women's personal narratives”⁴⁰ and Karpinski's suggestion that:

³⁹ Karpinski (p.7) 2012

⁴⁰ Kadar (p.6) 1992

The philosophical and political rethinking of autobiography and translation is related to the postmodern anti – essentialist shifting of such categories as subjectivity and language, which are no longer viewed as stable elements in the process of linguistic and cultural meaning transfer.⁴¹

Therefore the use of subjectivity in textual analysis of one’s “life writing” is not only permitted but required. Karpinski suggests that “personal criticism advocates bringing the critic’s own autobiographic experience into analysis of other texts.”⁴² The French poet/philosopher Paul Valery also commented that, “Every theory is the fragment of an autobiography”.⁴³ This is in the same vein as Karpinski’s anti-essentialism, noting that ideas are not easily separable from their authors.

My own method relates to constructionist epistemology, which is a theory that knowledge is not only acquired but produced; invented and, constructed; it therefore permits the reconstruction of memory.⁴⁴ The sum of the first thirty – five years of my life: a refugee, three times an exile, a displaced person and a product of war. This gives me a particular perspective into the life of other refugees. It is a life of constant linguistic change, translation, interpretation and socio – cultural adaptation.

⁴¹ Karpinski (p.7) 2012

⁴² Ibid (p.15) 2012

⁴³ Gilmore, Leigh cited (Paul Valery, French poet and philosopher 1871-1945), at the beginning of her book *The Limits of Autobiography* (p.1) 2001, and I borrowed it.

⁴⁴ Mautner, Thomas, *The Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy*,(p.123 & 199) 2005

Ariel Dorfman: *Mother tongue and identity*

Ariel Dorfman's personal narrative starts boldly: "I should not be here to tell this story. It's that simple: there is a day in my past, a day many years ago in Santiago de Chile, when I should have died and did not."⁴⁵ From the start he structures his bilingual trajectory around an event that had a strong impact on him and "his personal and political project in writing".⁴⁶ Here Dorfman is reconstructing the tragic events of September 11, 1973, in Chile, and his personal sense of survivor's guilt. Dorfman, unknowing of what the morrow would bring, exchanged shifts with his friend Claudio, who lost his life on that day. Dorfman describes his last phone conversation with Claudio on the previous evening, September 10, at La Moneda (the Presidential Palace), where Claudio reassures him that "everything will be all right".⁴⁷

I am ready to believe in a miracle. Not that we've got that much time to talk tonight. Claudio has work to do and I have a vociferous son demanding a story. When we say goodbye, nothing whispers that this is the last time we will ever speak to each other.⁴⁸

On September 11, 1973, "La Junta," the rebel military forces under the command of Augusto Pinochet, assaulted the Presidential Palace. The democratically-elected President, Salvador Allende, and his staff – as well hundreds of Chileans – were killed on that day, as were thousands more in the aftermath of the coup d'état.

Dorfman, who worked at that time in La Moneda, wanted to believe that Chile was different to the rest of Latin America and that democracy and reason would prevail.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Dorfman, Ariel (p.3) 1999

⁴⁶ Ramsdell, Lea (176) 2004

⁴⁷ Ibid (pp.6-10)

⁴⁸ Ibid (pp. 9-10)

⁴⁹ In 1973, with the exception of Costa Rica and Mexico, the rest of Latin America was governed under Military or Civil Dictatorship) (sic.)

At the same time Dorfman was preparing what he might have to say to his son if the situation changed and they had to leave, to leave the country that Dorfman had learned to love, and whose official language he had chosen as his mother tongue. Or did the language choose him, a long time ago in another place?

From there Dorfman takes his reader on a journey through a bilingual existence, relating his search for cultural belonging. He is born on the 6 of June 1942, in Buenos Aires, Argentina. When he was five year old, his parents moved to the United States and became fugitive.

Five years old Dorfman abandoned his mother tongue, Spanish, for a new language, English, and for ten years he spoke only this language, but as an adolescent he and his parents exile again, this time to Chile. After an hard emotional struggle, he again changed to Spanish and adopted back his original mother tongue until the 11th September 1973, when Dorfman, his wife and son, escaped to Buenos Aires and, soon, after, took refuge via Holland in the United States.

Dorfman describes how his parents emigrated from Russia and Moldavia as small children with their parents to Argentina. His mother and her family, who became refugees on escaping the pogroms of Kishinev (today the capital of Moldavia) abandoned Yiddish, their mother tongue, at an early age for Spanish. This is now Dorfman's mother tongue: the tongue he heard for the first time the moment his lungs filled with air and he cried.

Spanish was there at the beginning of my body or perhaps where my body ended and the world began, coaxing that body into life as only a lover can, convincing me slowly, sound by sound, that life was worth living.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Ibid (pp.12-13)

Dorfman points to the embodied nature of the language, the language that became his after he imagined it, seducing him lovingly, and “coaxing his body into life.” He suggests that the language existed before he was born, that it was the language that made him feel that life was worth living. Dorfman is poetic about Spanish, the romantic language that was there prior to him, seducing his parents, pulsing with life. Dorfman’s autobiography not only reveals his sensitivity, awareness and romanticism, but also it is ‘multilayered’, encapsulating many other aspects of his life, public and personal, about which he is reflective and philosophical.

[E]verything can be named and therefore, in theory, at least in desire, the world belongs to us. That if we cannot own the world; nobody can stop us from imagining everything in it, everything it can be, and everything it ever was.⁵¹

The book reveals his search for a place or community where he can feel he belongs. His need to belong is an imperative. The external language could only be expressed through his strong sense of ‘others’ who are nurturing his existence.⁵²

In his family, Dorfman belonged to a new generation born in Buenos Aires and was the first who was born into Spanish, the language which his parents adopted and in which they met and fell in love. “I was conceived in Spanish,” writes Dorfman, “literally imagined into being by that language, flirted, courted and coupled into existence by my parents in a Spanish that had not been there at their birth.”⁵³

“In a Spanish that had not been at their birth” suggests that their Spanish, although fluent was spoken with a foreign accent. The next page shows Argentinean children

⁵¹ Ibid (pp. 12-13)

⁵² Ibid (p.279)

⁵³ Ibid (p. 14)

mocking his mother: “You talk funny because you’re a Jew.”⁵⁴ One can believe that there is some kind of irony here: in order to feel safe and secure, Dorfman’s mother abandons her mother tongue for Spanish, only to be mocked for her accent.

In Dorfman’s case, the biggest irony for his mother is that Spanish becomes her child’s mother tongue, and not her mother tongue. Dorfman, however, makes an important point that ‘mother tongue’ is not always what it seems. Under differing circumstances, there can either be a choice to make or no other options available, as he explains:

I am being unfair to Spanish – and also, therefore to English. Languages do not only expand through conquest: they also grow by offering a safe haven to those who come to them in danger ... some place far less safe than a mother’s womb ... forced to flee their native land.⁵⁵

Here Dorfman points to women’s vulnerability and more so that of pregnant women’s. He describes how two generations of his own female family members had to escape pogroms, wars and revolutions. Further, Dorfman shows how Spanish, like English, expanded and absorbed other tongues, and how he fought against both:

English was ready to do to me what Spanish itself had done to others so many times during its evolution, what it had done, in fact, to my own parents, wrench them from the arms of their original language.⁵⁶

His conflicting views about bilingual experiences are not just personal but generational, beginning with his grandparents on his father’s side, who escaped the pogroms of Odessa in Russia and fled to Buenos Aires with their children. Similarly,

⁵⁴ Ibid (p. 16)

⁵⁵ Ibid (p. 13)

⁵⁶ Ibid (p. 13)

his grandparents on his mother's side escaped Kishinev in Moldavia and fled to Buenos Aires. Years later, Dorfman's parents would escape political persecution in Buenos Aires and would flee to the United States with little Dorfman.

The United States promised Dorfman that, in return for his loyalty, this country would never abandon him. "Bereft of the past and a language that told me who I was, what else was I to do? I became an American."⁵⁷

Ten years later, Dorfman's parents were again forced into moving into exile to Chile, after the FBI started to investigate his father's and grandparents past communist affiliation.

By the time I disembarked in Chile, English had become the efficient instrument of my intimacy, the inner kingdom I could control ... by the way in which I affected and shaped that language permanently. Spanish and history had different plans for me.⁵⁸

Years later, Dorfman finally reconciled his relationship to the Spanish language and accepted his bilingual existence, discovering its usefulness for having both when he would see himself, his wife and son, (a fourth generation), escape into exile again.

For Dorfman language is not just a tool for oral and written communication. For him it is an epistemological system that encapsulates knowledge and holds stories that go back to his beginnings and before; stories both inside and outside him.

Dorfman's unique history and personal needs moved him outwards towards the 'other', for to Dorfman language only makes sense if expressed when addressing

⁵⁷ Ibid (p. 50)

⁵⁸ Ibid (p.86)

‘other’.

Then my mother and father are gone ... I am alone ... I realise then, as I realise now, that life can snap like a twig. I realise this in Spanish ... the only adults I see are nurses and doctors. They speak to me in a language I don't know. A language that I will later learn is called English. In what language do I respond? In what language can I respond? ... Only English. "I don't understand," my mother says that I said – and from that moment onward ... adamantly refused to speak a word in the tongue I had been born into. I did not speak another word of Spanish for ten years.⁵⁹

To a five – year – old Dorfman, his mother is also the ‘other’ to whom he cannot speak. He doesn't have a language, he is not translating. Many children who become migrants or exiles with their parents quickly abandon their mother tongues for the language of the host country. Since children interact and communicate with each other they learn the new language in a short time. Sometimes the grandchildren of immigrant generations choose to study their grandparents' tongue, sometimes they don't.⁶⁰ Dorfman concludes, “that the fear of death inevitably leads to exile”⁶¹ and exile has a paramount influence on language. No one can argue that, yet exile can also be due to famine, unemployment and consequent exploitation. During the so-called “Age of Mass Migration” (1850 –1950), the movement of people from Northern Europe, Spain and Italy across the Atlantic, reached 50 to 60 million.⁶² This figure does not include Eastern Europe, where many Jewish families left their birthplace to escape pogroms and political upheavals. Dorfman's family was one of them.⁶³ Generations later, Dorfman, his wife and his son traveled into exile, first to Europe and then to the United States, where he is still living with his family now.

⁵⁹ Ibid (pp. 28-29)

⁶⁰ Martin, Mario, Daniel, Proyecto: “*Lengua Española en Australia 1994*”, [Project: “*Spanish Language in Australia 1994*”]1988

⁶¹ Ibid (p.10)

⁶² Irial, Glynn, Florence, *EGO European History “Emigration across the Atlantic*, 2011

⁶³ Irial, Glynn, Florence, *EGO European History “Emigration across the Atlantic*, 2011

Eva Hoffman: *Translation and cultural identity*

Eva Hoffman, in her autobiographic account *Lost in Translation*, also internalised her mother tongue. Her bodily experience with the Polish and English languages is more subtle and implicit. Whenever in her internalised translation from Polish to English or from English to Polish she finds an obstacle, she will seek the word, where it originated, and for an association in her mind.

[t] The word back to its source, to the feeling from which it springs... anyway, the translation does not work. I don't know how Penny feels when she talks about envy. The word hangs in a Platonic stratosphere, a vague prototype of all envy, so large, so all – encompassing that it might crush me – as might disappointment or happiness.⁶⁴

Hoffman writes that her aim is “...to translate not from English to Polish but from the word back to its source, to the feeling from which it sprang”, but when she tries this in her new language, English, she finds that words “in their naked state are...among the least satisfactory play objects”. By “naked state” she means the absence of “colors, striations, nuances”, the “loss of a living connection”.⁶⁵

What is this living connection? Words connect by association, to other words and to places, objects, feelings, memories. Anyone looking at a map of Poland can see a dot with a name next to it: ‘Cracow’. For someone who has never visited Cracow or read about it, who does not know anyone from Cracow, it's just a dot and a name, not much different from Bourke, NSW or Des Moines, Iowa.

For Hoffman, Cracow means the places, the people and the life she lived there, her

⁶⁴ Hoffman, (p. 107) 1998

⁶⁵ Ibid, (p.107) 1989

street, her house, school, piano teacher, her friends, and the feeling of loss when she reflects back on her childhood from exile. Without these memories, Cracow or any other word is just a dot.

Apart from Polish, Hoffman has another language. She can play music, a universal language, which is also very personal. In the first and second chapters *Paradise* and *Exile*, she writes about her talent and the power of music.

Musicians in Poland have sacred beast status; great pianists or violinists are endowed with the glitter of stardom and the prestige of high art. [...] *Pani* [Mrs.] Orlovska, who is a trained musician herself, pronounces that I have talent. My teacher seems to think so too, and my “Talent” gradually begins to take on a sort of existence of its own; it becomes almost an objective entity – something that belongs to me but that is also outside of me, [...] “You’re only a child but God gave you a golden apple, *Pani* Orlovska tells me;” [...] “you have a duty. It’s a sin to waste a gift”⁶⁶.

This talent will also open the doors of influential people in Canada who will help her to pursue a career as a pianist⁶⁷ (later she abandoned her musical career for creative writing and academia).

Hoffman wrote an autobiography from the point of view of a migrant woman from Poland, first as a child in Poland than teenager in Canada and later in the United States where she trained and was awarded a PhD in English and English Literature.

Mary Besemeres noted, that Hoffman, “reflects on immigrant experience explicitly in terms of a movement back and forth between two possible selves, associated with two distinct cultural and linguistic lives models.

⁶⁶ Ibid (pp.67-68-69)

⁶⁷ Ibid (p.152)

Embracing the model of the adopted country, for Hoffman, means following a forward and outward personal trajectory”.⁶⁸ Here Besemeres points out that Hoffman in “embracing the model of the adopted country” moves away from personal identity (her Polish intimate identity). She embraces her new social identity which permits her to identify with the larger group (her Canadian and North American friends) and starts a new construct of knowledge and ideas and a new construct of self.

Besemeres goes further, claiming that feeling is so personal that there cannot be a verbal translation, “another significant area represented in texts is the extent to which nonverbal means of expressing feelings translate, or fail to”.⁶⁹

Wierzbicka, by contrast thinks that, “[S]emantic differences associated with different vocabularies are objective and can be compared...objectively by means of the ...universal human concepts.” However, she questions, “How can one compare human emotional experiences which in contrast to the meanings of words are inherently subjective?”⁷⁰ For example love, happiness or morality.

In *Lost in Translation*, Hoffman, internalises the effect that changing between her mother’s tongue and her host tongue had on her and, further, she explores her relation to the new environment and culture; identity can have many different aspects based on beliefs, cultural attachments, personal experiences and capacity to translate.

“Translation is something far more complex than just the replacing of one word by another”.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Besemeres (p.38) 2002

⁶⁹ Ibid (p.140) 2004

⁷⁰ Wierzbicka (p. 95) 2010

⁷¹ Eriksson, Anna, Identity, Language and Culture in Eva Hoffman’s *Lost in Translation* (p.13) 2009

As mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, at times Hoffman translates “the word back to its source to the feeling from which it springs.”⁷² For her the experience is bodily. The bodily experience that she describes is in contrast to Dorfman’s bodily experience. Hers is the language being born from inside out. Here the metaphor is Hoffman giving life to her “child language”, whereas for Dorfman the metaphor is the power of language; language that seduces him lovingly like a mother “coaxing his body into life”. He cannot separate “mother – language – mother” they form a strong bond to the point that “Ariel’s mother Spanish” becomes a unity from which he draws strength, “convincing me slowly sound by sound, that life was worth living”.⁷³ In relation to language, one is the giver, the other the receiver.

Both these authors are distinguishing between the formal meaning of words and their emotional freight. A mother tongue carries with it all the feelings, connections and memories that come with the mother – child relationship. But Hoffman at the end of her book says that as the new language has entered her body, it has incorporated itself “in the softest tissues of my being”. “Darling” I say to my lover, “my dear,” and the words are filled and brimming with the emotions of my desire.”⁷⁴ Finally she can acknowledge that: “The language of this is sufficient. I am here now”.⁷⁵

She has arrived home.

⁷² Hoffman (p.107) 1998

⁷³ Dorfman (pp.12-13)1999

⁷⁴ Hoffman (p. 245) 1989

⁷⁵ Ibid (p.280)

Discussion of my stories: *Sputnik, How I Got There, and Catch the Paper*

My stories reflect on the nature of the connection between language and memory, and particularly on what happens when the connections are spread across many languages. Hoffman was born in Poland in 1945. I was born one year earlier, in 1944, but by the time I arrived in Poland at the beginning of 1946 I had already been exposed to the many different languages spoken in the Labour Camp in Germany and in the Displaced People Camp (DPC) in France. Those were extraordinary circumstances, as wars are, and for those who survived it was a long trip back home. For others there was no home to go back to and they migrated to places where they could make a new home and learn a new language. For some exiles like me, war and its aftermaths meant many languages and an ongoing exodus before finding a place they could call home.

My mother decided to leave the displaced people camp, in Lyon after four and a half years of being a prisoner and slave in a German Forced Labor Camp. My father was killed by the Germans, hours before liberation by allied forces. She had no one except me, a toddler, and a Polish couple whom she befriended in Lyon, who offered support during their journey to Poland. They also affirmed that Poland would never fall under Stalin's rule. My mother lost her mother and two other family members from hunger during Stalin's purge of the Ukraine in 1932–3, and she heard about Stalin sending anyone who survived the Germans to Siberia. Mother and I arrived in Lodz in February 1946 and shortly afterwards she befriended her neighbour, Zelik, who became my father. But this is my mother's story.

1957 was the year of Sputnik. The story *Sputnik* is a first person narrative. The use

of dialogue between the protagonist and other characters shows how the protagonist and other character respond to different situations. The first person narration reveals what Ewa keeps to herself, and what she talks about with her friend Marusia. I have used dialogue in a similar way across all three stories. It is part of a multilayered style; multilayered as many different events happened in a single day or during the same year. Memories fractioned by time make connections by words, associations and sounds, as Hoffman pointed above.

The news that a satellite (Sputnik) had been launched by the Soviet Union was an experience of a different magnitude from one person to another. Most of the population received the news with surprise and went on with their jobs; some were skeptical, “saying that no living thing can survive up there” (p.1). One month later the dog Laika was launched into space and this brought more controversy as Laika did not return to Earth. At the same time, the idea of a living creature in space started something new. Jules Verne was discussed in school and his book *From Earth to the Moon* was sold out: “Yes, it was the beginning of a new era” (p.1). “Sputnik” here is not just “Sputnik” the satellite. The word has become an element in the association of memories. “Sputnik” is the word that encapsulates all other words of this story or as I mentioned before, Hoffman wrote about something similar in her book, “The word hangs in a Platonic stratosphere ...so large, so all – encompassing.”⁷⁶

The *Sputnik* story encompasses Ewa’s childhood told from the perspective of a thirteen year old child, a Pioneer girl, proud of Russian achievements, as the child of a Russian mother and a disillusioned communist father, distrustful of the establishment.

⁷⁶ Hoffman (p. 107) 1998

This story is about living in Poland in one special historical moment, the story implies that Polish is spoken at home. However, that Polish of my mother, was Russian accented, and father's Polish had a Yiddish accent, although they both spoke Polish fluently.

Ewa, the protagonist in the story, quickly introduces her mother. The story depicts a warm relationship between them. They like to play little games of "hide and seek" or "give and take" with each other. Father works in Warsaw, coming home every weekend. The reader gets some glimpses of him. He is a dedicated husband and spends time with his children.

Out of Father's family of thirteen, only two survived the war – himself and his brother. He knows the value of family, although his parents threw him out of home after he joined the communist party. His parents were religious Jews living in Starachowice. Father moved from Starachowice to Warsaw and after the German invasion he tried to join the Red Army but instead was sent to a camp in the Urals, where he improved the Russian that he had learned before the war.

He takes Ewa and her younger brother to Helenow Park for a strolls teaching Ewa Russian and memory games about general knowledge (p.11). Ewa shows a great sense of belonging that is represented by her loyalty to her family (pp. 11-12). This great sense of belonging that Ewa feels as a child is that of her home and family. The text shows a happy and busy childhood. (p. 2)

The language in the story *Sputnik* is plain and polite. Integrated into text are Polish expressions, mostly diminutives such as "Ewuniu". This is perhaps one of the

reasons that, later in life, adapting the name “Ewa” to new spellings and translations and the transition to new sounds was less confronting to Eva than to other authors. Examples include Hoffman and her sister⁷⁷ and also Dorfman (he made the decision to change his name a few times, from Vladimir to Edward before finally adopting Ariel).⁷⁸

While getting dressed for school Ewa reflects on the impact that the Sputnik and later Laika made on the Polish society, how opinions were divided, some believed, and others did not. Ewa is eager to tell the news to her friend Marusia, who has arrived from a Catholic boarding school for a short winter holiday. (pp. 9-10)

On the next few pages the reader is introduced to the apartment and its surroundings, where a complex of four apartment blocks is shown, the common sand pit and small garden. It is a warm and secure home of the well – off middle class if compared to the Polish post war standard of living in 1946 – 1958, (pp.3-4-6).

She is excited to see her friend who once told her that she had no access to newspapers or radio at the nuns school, and therefore she could not read or listen to the news, (p.1) after a noisy greeting Ewa drops the news.

“The Russians have sent a Sputnik into the sky!”

She has to explain what a Sputnik was. “...like a big soccer ball...like a radio ... many antennas.”

“No! They did not!” Says Marusia. (p. 6).

⁷⁷ Hoffman (p.105)

⁷⁸ Dorfman(p.103)

The atmosphere of peaceful life is interrupted when Marusia says this big NO. Marusia didn't believe the news and when Ewa mentioned "newspapers," her immediate response was not exactly what Ewa expected.

"Ewuniu...this is communist propaganda." (p.6)

This sentence stayed with me for fifty – seven-years; it was as powerful as it was out of context. Both girls were living in a communist country but each belonged to a different cultural ideology. Ewa at home was a secular Jew and outside at school she was a "Pioneer", proud and happy of Russian achievements (and sometimes in the play-ground she was a "dirty Jew"). As the story reveals, Ewa is faced with a serious dilemma: to hide the secret of the BBC from her friend, she feels is a betrayal, but to disclose the secret would endanger her family. In the end family wins and she sadly believes she is losing her friend, but a few days later Marusia invited Ewa to the cinema where the newsreel showed the heroic dog Laika inside the Sputnik before being launched into space (pp.22-23).

For a few days the word Sputnik lost its grandeur, but never its significance. Its significance is that it holds together the chain of my memory related to Poland and its language. Ideally, the language of early childhood would be unspoiled by politics and adult dramas, but the reality is far more complicated. Ewa's memories are stained by occasional outbreaks of anti-Semitism, sickness and secrets outside the home. But in the story Ewa doesn't stay for too long with these memories and focuses on her friend Marusia and the Sputnik. Ewa is portraying a happy life at home; she remembers good family friends, some of whom were Jews, others not.

The following story is about Eva, a young woman and mother, who tries to make

amends to survive in a new culture and a new language. To change countries and languages is a particular challenge for a woman, who is a mother to two small children and whose family lives on a different continent nearly twelve thousand kilometers across Atlantic. It was particularly difficult to deal with issues such as divorce and financial survival in a country without a divorce law. *How I Got There* depicts these struggles. The text again starts with dialogue that I take as my style of writing, letting characters show what they are doing, rather than telling.

The conversation between Marta and Eva is held in Spanish. Eva has to learn Spanish in order to communicate with others in Argentina, and shows a resolute Marta who offers immediate solutions and friendship in the difficult time the protagonist has to confront. (p.22) A sense of loss pervades the early pages of the story, as the protagonist explores her past. Her memory takes her many years back looking into her parents' home in Vienna, the place where her family found refuge after escaping a wave of discrimination in 1957– 59 in Poland (when the ban on emigration was lifted only for Jews). (pp.23-24) Hoffman questions this in the chapter *Paradise* of her book *Lost in Translation*. She asks:

“What are the ceremonies for such departures...that are neither entirely chosen nor entirely forced, and that are chosen and forced at the same time?...”⁷⁹

In Vienna after one year in hiding the protagonist and her family become official refugees. The child – father relationship is deteriorating and it is not a happy home. Father tells his family not to speak Polish in public and imposes a rigid discipline. (pp. 24-25)

⁷⁹ Hoffman, (p. 83) 1998

Later Eva reveals an episode a few days previously when confronting her partner and his refusals to talk to her in Hebrew: the language they have communicated from the day they married, and had two children. He has Spanish, his mother tongue, but for Ewa it is a fifth tongue that she has to learn on her own from books she hides under the bed (pp.26-27). The story shows how Eva adapts to her new situation through a job her friend Marta finds for her. And she can explore and test out her linguistic abilities. The protagonist changes from unreceptive placidity to a vivacious and full of life woman. (pp.26-27) Marta explains what kind of job she had in mind, and offers to help with taking care of the girls.

From there on the action in the story progresses, Eva's job at the hospital is to assist to care for Carlos' mother, Veronica. She meets Alicia, the head nurse, who plays an important role in Eva's future decision to become a nurse. (p.30) Her first night in the hospital in her role as a nurse and the events that unfold, which form part of daily hospital routine, the fight between life and death is a routine which is still strange to Eva. (p.31)

Spanish became the language that I would have adopted as my mother tongue if life and "*la Junta*" under the command of General Jorge R. Videla in Buenos Aires, 1976 had not had other plans for me, (similar to Dorfman is "*la Junta*" of Augusto Pinochet).

Catch the Paper starts with a casual call, "Catch!" during a conversation between protagonist/narrator and a friend (p.39). This piece of paper in Eva's eyes is part of a metaphor and superstition; nevertheless it is the legal process that the protagonist will be subject to in order to obtain a divorce. Israel does not have civil marriage or

divorce; those matters are dealt with by the religious authorities. After eight years of separation, Eva wanted finally to be divorced and move on in life. Argentina, officially a Catholic country, didn't have a divorce law at all. (p.39)

This is a story of negotiation with the religious authorities and an ancient legal system in a language that the protagonist has learned in five months from attending lessons at the *Ulpan*. This language was limited and rusty after nine years of speaking only Spanish. My friend Erina, who threw the paper, was claiming that to obtain a divorce depended on my ability to catch a divorce paper and that it was serious. Erina wondered at my lack of knowledge about the process; according to her everyone knew that a divorce paper is a word from God and if it falls to the floor it is considered a sign of God's disapproval of the divorce. (p.40)

I thought that knowing how to catch the paper would solve all my problems but I was wrong.

When the procedure started I was confronted with a bigger challenge, to my identity, to my Jewishness; a problem that was never really resolved until after I left Israel. (p.60). However, the Rabbis had done nothing wrong. They only proceeded according to their laws.

For a secular Jew, happily married to an Australian *goy* for the last thirty three years, living in this generous country, Australia, and speaking this new language, English, I now believe it not to be a problem.

Conclusion:

This thesis is trying to answer the main question: can people who for many reasons do not feel they have a mother tongue have a narrative? I have looked at different theories on the importance of the mother tongue and researched various authors who commented on the difficulty of writing in a new language. Others point to the difficulty of translating the deepest feelings. Mary Besemeres noted Eva Hoffman's remark that, "My mother says I'm becoming "English". This hurts me, because I know she means I'm becoming cold."⁸⁰ Hoffman shows the growing emotional gap between her mother and herself as she moves away from Polish to English.

Karpinski, who studied the autobiographic narratives of migrant women, wrote that in everyday life, at home or at work, they communicated in a language that was not their mother tongue, whereas when writing autobiographical narratives in English their mother tongue was constantly present.⁸¹

This would indicate that there is a pattern of recurrence of expressions among authors whose mother tongue is not English, expressions from the mother tongue which appear when writing in a borrowed tongue or translating autobiographical narratives into English by authors whose mother tongue is not English. I found this interesting to explore, as in my own multilingual experience I do this often when I write or think about the past, tending to switch to the language of the place and people where my thoughts took me. Sometimes this is good and at other times the interference complicates what I was doing in another tongue.

⁸⁰ Hofman (p. 146) 1989

⁸¹ Karpinski (p.2) 2012

What of the multilingual person who is also a migrant, a refugee or an exile, and who doesn't feel that they have a mother tongue? They have many different expressions from many tongues but does it mean that they can choose to write in any language? Which language is their real mother – the lost one of their childhood or the adopted one they speak every day? Perhaps it is the one they use to express love.

For Dorfman, Spanish was his lover, lost and rediscovered but he could not separate from English, so he uses both. Hoffman arrives home in English when she uses it to her lover. English adopted Conrad, and Pushkin adopted Russian. Polish was the language of home and warmth in the time of Sputnik; remembering childhood is remembering a Polish language that is like a butterfly in a garden- often lost but reappearing again and again in a dance movement, each time revealing a few more words. But it has been overtaken for me by the Spanish I learned to talk to my daughters and the English I talk to my son and grandchildren. Once Russian, German and Hebrew were good friends, but now they have grown distant. One can, it seems, have many linguistic mothers.

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