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To Joasia and Jason

In his almost canonical "Reflections on Exile,"¹ Edward Said stresses that the main difference between the eternal myth of the "exile" and exile as a 20th century phenomenon is the scale of the latter. Today, exile does not concern selected individuals (such as writers, artists, or intellectuals) but has become the fate of large social groups, often deprived not only of their own place but also of "tellable history." UNHCR reports that women and children – that is, precisely persons "deprived of tellable story"² – constitute between 75-80% of the world "migrant" population. For many, the process of settling down in the country of exile was preceded by tragic experiences of war, loss and humiliation, violence, torture, or rape.³ There is no doubt that male and female tales (or, in fact, histories) of exile differ significantly. The myth of the ex-

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- 1 E.W. Said "Reflections on Exile." *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge. 2002. 173-186.
- 2 Compare: "The World of Refugee Women: Some Facts." *Women's International Network News* Winter 2003. Vol. 29 issue 1. 84.
- 3 Compare: J. Langer "Introduction." *Crossing the Border: Voices of Refugee and Exiled Women*. Ed. J. Langer. Five Leaves Publications, Nottingham. 2002. 1-19.

<http://rcin.org.pl>

ile – whose presence in literature and culture is still strong – results from the image related to the male story, as it concerns mostly areas of social (intellectual) sphere that is governed by men in patriarchal culture. And while the category of exile lies at the base of the reflection on constructed, fluid identity, meeting the contemporary, postcolonial vision of the human being, several scholars emphasize that the exile/émigré experiences of women⁴ are much too often marginalized or unaddressed.⁵

What can we say about the post/war exile,⁶ or rather about its literary version, descriptions of émigré problems in the work of Polish writers whose texts are often based on personal experience? It is certainly different from the intellectual image of exile created by men (including figures as important to Polish émigré literature as Miłosz or Gombrowicz),⁷ although it is not only this difference that deserves an analysis. What is already interesting in itself, is the signaling of the field of topics encompassed by the émigré women literature and the “female” portrayal of problems faced daily by Poles (both men and women) who were scattered around the world after the war. Not exceptional creative individuals searching for identity⁸ in the cosmopolitan tradition of the “exile,” not writers who concentrate on themselves, as they care mostly about personal development⁹ and who are exceptional and fickle by nature, but precisely women whose gender constructs are built around their mother function, and as a result, ensure continuity (of giving birth and raising children.)

4 Compare: H. Ghorashi “When the Boundaries are Blurred” *European Journal of Women’s Studies* August 2005. Vol. 13 issue 3: 363. D. Kay “The Politics of Gender in Exile.” *Sociology* February 1988. Vol. 22 issue 1: 1-21.

5 The growing interest concerns mostly the so called Third World female exiles and emigrants from the last decades of the 20th century. As a result, those critical works on the situation of émigré women are of limited use for the material presented here.

6 This essay focuses on the work of female emigrant authors writing directly after WWII. I refer to them as the post/war generation to stress the importance of the war experience in identity formation.

7 I discussed the evolution of the category of exile in “Kategoria wygnania w anglojęzycznych dyskursach krytycznoliterackich” [The Category of Exile in Anglo-Saxon Critical Discourses] *Pisarz na emigracji. Mitologie, style, strategie przetrwania*. Ed. H. Gosk, A.S. Kowalczyk. Dom Wydawniczy Elipsa, Warszawa. 2005. 79-95.

8 I wrote about the postmigrant identity in “Tożsamość postmigracyjna – przypadek (między innymi) Czesława Miłosza” [Postmigrant identity – the case of (among others) Czesław Miłosz] *Przegląd Humanistyczny* 2005 No 4: 1-12.

9 J. Langner “Introduction.” 15.

In the introduction to the influential 1994 anthology, *Altogether Elsewhere*,¹⁰ Marc Robinson divided the exile's period in an interesting fashion.¹¹ He describes the complex process of exile (or emigration) as stages of an identity shift that can be summarized as a change from an "emigrant" into "immigrant." However, Jenifer Langner¹² notes that it is more difficult to apply categories resulting from such divisions to the work by women writers than to that of men. This can be explained by the traditional Western division of territory into the "public" male space and the "domestic" female" one, governed by different rules, as well as by the fact that the critical interest has focused so far largely on the male exile story. Several categories related to the "stages" of exile simply do not apply to the "domestic," private perspective, do not allow for a description of the processes taking place in an e/immigrant family and thus, make the experience non-existent for criticism. In fact, even in the "exile" texts by women,¹³ domestic perspective – as one that is "private" – was often viewed as unimportant and their authors presented themselves first and foremost as writers-intellectuals, that is within the frames of public sphere marked by masculinity. In the works of Polish émigré literature discussed in this essay, narrating characters represent not exceptional (creative) individuals, unique and focused on public zone activities, but the so called ordinary people shown mostly in their domestic, private space.

Let us also note that the "domestic" character of Polish émigré prose by women can be explained, among others, by the fact that in Poland, mostly due to the long period of lack of statehood, the private and public spheres were shaped in a particular way, differently than in the West. As Małgorzata Fidelis remarks, the place of the Polish woman (*Matka Polka*) was defined mostly by her national (that is social) functions and the gender divisions typical of

10 *Altogether Elsewhere: Writers on Exile*. Ed. M. Robinson. Faber and Faber, Boston-London. 1994.

11 Establishing what kind of exile one experiences and choosing an emigrant identity is the first stage. The second stage is a period of defining the new situation, forming and choosing loyalty toward the culture exited and entered. In the third stage, artists go through a period of doubt, loneliness, the established tasks appear to difficult and everyday reality far from familiar places, too hard and hopeless. The fourth stage is marked by finding one's home in language (in the sense of own identity) – whether it is the mother tongue, or the language acquired in the new country. The next stage involves slowly coming to terms with reality. The final one is also tied the question whether return is possible, when it becomes administratively allowed. This is because sometimes exile becomes a second nature, it prevents "putting down roots" while returns often result in disappointment.

12 J. Langner "Introduction."

13 M. Robinson's anthology of "canonical" texts includes the work of, among others, Mary McCarthy, Mary Antin, Marina Cwietajewa, Hannah Arendt, Madame de Staëo, Hilde Domin and Eva Hoffman.

Western middle class did not have a large impact on the Polish society.¹⁴ While the Victorian model assumed that woman exercises her influence on man at home through “loving care” and “moral advice,” and in this way also influences the social sphere reserved for men, in Poland both spheres – the public and the private – were connected by the shared involvement in the national cause. Moreover:

independent statehood was identified with family life, and political activity often was conducted at home and included women. In Western Europe, the spheres were distinct but mutually supportive: state protection of the private sphere served to maintain bourgeois social and economic order. In contrast, in Poland, the public realm, controlled by a hostile state, was perceived as alien, while the private sphere was a source of freedom and independence ... Polish household was a state unto itself, a bastion of resistance against political and cultural domination by partitioning powers. Elevation of the roles of women as mothers and ladies of the house had implications beyond literary meanings ... women presided over the spiritual Poland at home.¹⁵

In other words, for Polish women, and for émigré women in particular, “home” was a territory encompassing both the private and the social sphere.

Although, according to Robinson, defining the nature of exile is important for the emigrants during the first stage of identity formation, reflections on that issue are not a typical subject in women’s prose. The decisions to stay away from the home country seem almost entirely devoid of reflection and even when they are mentioned in literary texts, it is mostly an issue that men think and decide about. From the perspective of women’s prose it may seem that the Polish post/war emigrants are almost deprived of subjectivity in the sense of spatial choice and they are only subjected to political-historical events that move them from one place to another, while “objectification” of women can be further tied not only to their patriarchal submission to man (his history and decision) but also to the wartime experiences.

Critics writing about literary testimonies by exile women often emphasize that e/immigration is often preceded by traumatic events which significantly influences the situation (also the family situation) of women.¹⁶ And although

14 M. Fidelis “Participation in the Creative Work of the Nation.” *Journal of Women’s History*, 2001 No 1 (13), 108-125.

15 *Ibid.* 111.

16 J. Langner “Introduction.”

Polish literature seems to separate the subject of war and occupation from the subject of emigration, women's prose often goes back to previous experiences as they have impact on the situation of literary characters. Teresa, the narrator of *Gringa*, a novel cycle by Janina Surynowa-Wyczółkowska¹⁷ was victim of a gang rape; the husband of Mrs Dubielowa – one of the protagonists of Janina Kowalska's *Pogranicze* [Borderland] “got lost somewhere in the Sovietski Soyuz”¹⁸ – these two examples represent the most typical events of that kind.

However, traumatic experiences seem to be a norm for the generation of post/war emigration (a subject that is interesting as such, and often discussed, but too important to treat it only “peripherally,” perhaps also one bringing back memories that are too difficult?), hence it is their lack that becomes important to the characters. Teresa, the narrator of *Gringa*, translates the lack of those as “non-maturity” when she writes about her fiancé: “I have always had the impression that he is younger than I was. Younger by the war and difficult experience. He never suffered. And, by God, he certainly never went hungry.”¹⁹ In Maria Kuncewiczowa's *Tristan 46*, the eponymous protagonist whose mother spent the time of war in England while he is burdened with the experience of occupied Warsaw, observes “Mother and son, what does it even mean, when those years were so different for her and different for me.”²⁰ A few pages later, he adds:

I have never imagined to have such a young mother ... And so, there was trouble. Were she old and flat-chested like a mattress, maybe I would cried a little, spilled my guts, argued and settled down with her like a normal son. With things as they were, I just get huffy and either play a dandy or run away from her.²¹

The experience of war and occupation caused women to grow up and grow old much faster than their contemporaries who lived in safety. I purposefully quote the opinions of a young girl about her fiancé and of a child about his mother, as it is precisely the family zone that constitutes the territory where women writers move most frequently and with most aptness. In the situation

17 J. Surynowa – Wyczółkowska *Gringa*. Polska Fundacja Kulturalna, London. 1968.

18 J. Kowalska (A. Świdarska) *Pogranicze*. Instytut Literacki, Paryż. 1980. 43. [Unless indicated otherwise, all translations by AW for the purpose of this essay.]

19 J. Surynowa – Wyczółkowska *Gringa*. 95.

20 M. Kuncewiczowa *Tristan 46*. Czytelnik, Warszawa. 1968. 67.

21 *Ibid.* 73.

of exile, female protagonists of women's prose, regardless of the baggage of experience, attempt first and foremost to rebuild their domestic territory, by taking traditional positions of mothers and daughters. This happens regardless of the geographical territory they find themselves in.

Émigré women's prose depicts as territories of geographical "emigration" mostly England, South America (Argentina) and the United States (which does not mean that other countries, such as France or Canada are absent from it). England represents the "pioneer" period. Many years later, Janina Kowalska recalled:

Those were the early, postwar years, we turned from war refugees to political emigrants who made the choice not to go back to Poland – a period of camps and hostels the stories of which our slightly younger generations, born and raised in England, listen to with disbelief; we put down our roots here many years ago and have since become an accepted part of the landscape. Even the most xenophobic among the English would now never think of shouting *Poles go home!* – which was common in those earlier days.²²

Kowalska compares the situation of Poles in England in that period with the later attitude to other national (or, in fact, racial) minorities, adding:

Our place at the foot of the social ladder was long taken by the colored and today, the same xenophobe, recalling the days of old and gagged by the act on harmonious co-existence, lacks the courage to advise the black and brown newcomers to go away. If you remind him about the time when he did that to us, who are not so different, after all, from the natives, he will only draw a sad sigh...²³

The attitudes to "Poles" as representatives of the "lower" national group is also mentioned in works the plots of which take place in America. In the "intellectually oriented novel of exile," Polish emigrants themselves often supported their politically oriented image, and this was tied – especially in the United States – to the lack of a sense of connection with the fellow countrymen, the uneducated, pre-war financially-motivated emigration.²⁴ Focus on the

22 J. Kowalska *Pogranicze*. 7.

23 *Ibid.*

24 Compare: H. Stephan "Introduction: The Last Exiles." *Living in Translation: Polish Writers in America*. Ed. H. Stephan. Rodopi, Amsterdam – New York, 2003.

political circumstances allowed the new emigrants to change their identity, to be included in a social group that – while still perceived as the “Others” – had an incomparably higher status in the West than the national emigrant diasporas. But the “female” story does not separate Polish economic emigrants, or rather, views them as “pioneers” struggling with the basic problems, as the older generation. In her work, Danuta Mostwin portrays the meetings of the older, “peasant” Polish emigrants and the Irish immigrants who looked down upon Poles. As a result, “otherness” of the new emigrants is viewed not only in the relation to Americans but also to “other” immigrant diasporas (mostly Irish). In a short story entitle “Stryjcio z Ameryki,”²⁵ even renting an apartment turns out to be a difficult task:

They only went to modest looking houses, usually guided by the “Room for rent” sign hung in the window or nailed to the door. Usually women answered the door. It was surprising, just how many of them there were, older women, tall and angular, with a piercing, probing gaze. “Where are you from?” they asked. Polacks? No, no, they withdrew, closing the door. Damn it, Kramarz’s companion cursed, that old witch, damn it!²⁶

Even after they finally manage to rent a room from a friend’s mother, and with his help, entering the house turns out to be difficult:

She didn’t say “Polaks” which would be insulting but used the normal, proper term: “Pools.” She then took a long time to explain something to Kramarz’s companion, laughing and gesturing ... As a result, Kramarz and his friend took off their undergarments and burned them ceremoniously in the backyard. Later, in a small storage room, they changed into new underpants bought by Peggy’s brother and only then were allowed across the threshold.²⁷

The “new,” post/war wave of immigrants coming to America was not received with open arms, either. Although the United States – unlike England – was a choice made by the Polish emigrants, a place they arrived to as a result of their own decision and not only “carried by a wave of historical events,” the reality awaiting them on the new continent was distant from a dream. First of all, however, the newcomers did not really feel that they were making a choice

25 D. Mostwin. “Stryjcio z Ameryki.” [Uncle from America] *Kultura* (Paryż) 1959. No 5 (139). 61-88.

26 *Ibid.* 69.

27 *Ibid.* 70.

but rather that they were forced to migrate. This is what Wiśniewski, protagonist of Danuta Mostwinowska's "Córki," [Daughters] thinks about "his" choice:

Wiśniewska sighed: To America! Where were they supposed to go back to? Poland? To ruins? He saw with his own eyes their house burning down, its walls collapsing. They stood there, looking at their flat disappearing. ... He didn't have the courage to return. It was fate that decided about everything, pushed him forward. First they walked with the crowd of uprising survivors, later on a westbound train... Was he supposed to go back where people were running away from? ... What to do? ... Longing or fear? Indecision? ... I don't want my children to go through similar nightmare. Two little fries, with smiles on their faces. He fed them, dressed them. Separated from the old and connected to the new. "Let's emigrate to America" encouraged Wiśniewska.²⁸

Work available to the new emigrants did not always meet their aspirations, plans and their European education (to be more precise, Polish education, earned in Poland or England). The problem is discussed in several stories by Danuta Mostwin, who is particularly sensitive to the issue of education among the Polish community in America.²⁹ What also reveals itself here is the difference between Poles and Americans in their approach to women's education and professional life. Wiśniewski, whose daughter paved the way to America for their family, recalls with embitterment:

She went to America all by herself, father Lipke said it was to university and what of that? She was a maid for 30 dollars a month. Had I known, I would have never let her go. And – he choked up – she saved up money and sent us parcels with things to Germany, and managed to save for our journey.³⁰

Coming to Poland to visit her daughter, Wanda Wernerowa, one of the protagonists in "Dwanaście lat"³¹ [Twelve years] cannot understand why her daughter Ewa, instead of working (as she would in the Polish model), takes care of the house and raises four children (realizing the postwar American model).

28 D. Mostwin "Córki." *Kultura* (Paryż) 1962 No 7 (177-8). 64.

29 Compare: D. Mostwin *Trzecia wartość*. Redakcja Wydawnictwa Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego, Lublin. 1995.

30 D. Mostwin "Córki." 65.

31 D. Mostwin "Dwanaście lat." *Ibid.* 77-132.

The trouble with finding work is not a gender-marked problem. Werne-
rowa does not understand the situation of the exiles, which allows the author
to reveal “typical” émigré issues.

The engineer ... smiled sadly... “I have changed,” he said, “These
days I smell of “szrympy.”
“Szrympy?”
“You see, a friend of mine founded a factory of those tiny crabs –
shrimps. I help him, working
literally in a fridge, processing “szrympy.” ...
“You don’t work as an engineer?”
He smiled at her with amusement.³²

Mostwin often points out that those who did manage to find work fitting their
profession, were not always eager to help out the newcomers. For instance,
professor X from “Pierwszy krok”³³ [First step]:

“Yes, I remember. How can I be of help?”
He spread his hands.
“I don’t have any opportunities, everyone here is trying on their
own” ...
“Go away now” he seemed to be saying “Can’t you see that all of that is
past? Do you think that the Polish Edinburgh and New York somehow
overlap on the map?”
“But you should keep trying!” he said.
A friendly smile, his hands spread in a helpless gesture. No word
of advice or guidance.³⁴

Sławek, a graduate of Boston University, is another example: during his visit
at Mr and Mrs Żuławscy’s “lanczeneta” (eatery), he thinks “I do like those
people... but I really can’t help them. Help? They don’t need my help. They
are the ones that should be helping me. I am their representative in higher
social circles.”³⁵ The only thing they have in common is an understanding
that appears between women regarding the fact that not everyone has the

³² Ibid. 91.

³³ D. Mostwin “Pierwszy krok.” Ibid. 146-156.

³⁴ Ibid. 148.

³⁵ D. Mostwin “‘Lanczeneta’ przy Alei Północnej” [Eatery at Northern Avenue] *Kultura* (Paryż)
1959. No 12 (146). 56.

opportunity to “raise themselves above the rest” by obtaining education. When Sławek asks Boga:

“What about you? Have you considered finishing school?”

Boga grows angry. Here we go. They’ll all be getting at her any minute now. Father will say: “Well, she missed her chance. She should have studied when she could...”

“Not everyone can graduate” Dr Młodecka suddenly comes to her rescue “you can see for yourself that she’s supporting her parents. You look so pale, dear...”

Boga’s eyes fill up with tears of gratitude and humiliation.

“The children...” she defends herself feebly ...

Dr Młodecka’s face is broad and white, her eyes follow Boga. She seems to be saying: “Look how they torment this poor girl...” And Boga feels nice.³⁶

It is worth pointing out that higher education is not reserved for men only in the world described by women’s émigré prose, although in the postwar period even educated Americans rarely worked after getting married. Furthermore, family (and children in particular) are an obstacle on the way to obtaining American education not only for women, but for men, too – for instance, for Boga’s husband, Andrzej. In the cited examples, as well as in many other texts, university education is connected to the possibility of social promotion through professional work and is a value that women are culturally as entitled to as men are, even though one difficult to achieve in the émigré reality. We should add that, contrary to their Western European contemporaries, as Małgorzata Fidelis notes, since the 1980s, Polish women have viewed education as an important contribution not only to their own well-being but also to the well-being of the entire society. In the Polish historical conditions, daughters’ education was regarded as the best kind of dowry and, at the same time, preparation for the role of lady of the house. The example of Maria Skłodowska – Curie proves that education was not an “obstacle” to marriage and motherhood.

Regardless of education and ambitions, Polish newcomers to American cities often found their themselves in poorer or “ethnic” neighborhoods that were difficult to get out of – as was the case of the protagonists of “Lanczeneta’ przy Alei Północnej” [Eatery at Northern Avenue] by Danuta Mostwin.

³⁶ Ibid. 54-55.

They were simply thrown here. Żuławski got his first job as a night teller. Money put aside in England was beginning to disappear and had to be invested as soon as possible. They were mostly looking for a way to protect the savings and ensure even a modest income. They knew nothing, the city seemed alien, the world hostile, people – inaccessible. Żułąwska could cook, so they bought a restaurant at Northern Avenue and.. got stuck.³⁷

It is worth noting that the decision to open a restaurant was based on the “domestic” skills of the woman.

American world surrounding the Polish immigrants baffled them with its complicated national and racial relations that they did not always understand and that located them usually only slightly above the “colored” – which was another thing they did not understand. For the young female protagonist of Mostwin’s “Pierwszy krok,” [First step] the first encounter with this particular issue was a surprise:

“But are you aware of the fact” he said “that it is a *mixed neighborhood?*” he looked at my face probingly, waiting for reaction.

But I didn’t know what a mixed neighborhood was and so my look gave him no reply.

“I have colored patients” he whispered with shame, as if trying to explain himself “and some of them...”

“I don’t mind” I interrupted.

I didn’t know I was touching an actual problem. I raised it lightly and without apprehension. ... I looked at the doctor’s face and became alarmed. He didn’t believe me.³⁸

For many Poles, emigration was their first encounter with the “colored,” and the first opportunity to reflect on the “other.” The narrator of “Pierwszy krok” describes it as follows:

Walking down the street I looked at the Blacks passing me by. I don’t know them. Is their suffering different ... Maybe they hate me for being white? What kind of person is he really, that man with shiny skin, thick lips and moist and bulging eyes?³⁹

37 *Ibid.* 37.

38 D. Mostwin “Pierwszy krok.” 150.

39 *Ibid.* 39.

Black Americans, because they stand for the entire “colored” world of North America described by the female Polish writers of postwar emigration, are recalled mostly to show American otherness (lack of racism) of Poles who were indistinguishable, after all, from the [white] Americans by their looks. At the same time, their reflection on the “Blacks” reveals to the contemporary readers the naivety of the new emigrants and their colonial thinking.⁴⁰ Interestingly, a different image of Poles (also as “others”) is presented by Janina Surynowa – Wyczółkowska in *Gringa* whose plot takes place in Argentina. This is undoubtedly related to the fact that they are “visibly different from the natives,” as Janina Kowalska would say, or – to be more precise – to their fairer skin tone, since – as it is typical of a colonial society – “each man aspiring to join the social elite wants to white his offspring and marries a white skinned woman.”⁴¹ One should add that the protagonist of the book is a young, single daughter of a rather affluent father. However, her physical otherness also entails the cultural one, behaviors that differ from the norm established for married women by the Latino culture. This must lead to a conflict with other women in a country where, as Teresa says years later, “widows do not remarry.” Even her closest friend, an independent weaver of artistic rugs, cannot understand Teresa’s cultural otherness, accusing her of consciously seducing men:

Here, you dance only with your own husband and walk by the hand only with your own husband. What is it with you. What drives you, when you flirt and seduce like that? I sometimes curse, when I look at you, this grace and charm of yours, this wit, this humor, this elegance you wear your cheap fur coat with, and those slacks on those long legs.⁴²

Those words, uttered in the novel by an Argentinean, describe the kind of femininity that is familiar to Polish women, different not only from the Argentinean model but also from the Anglo-American one, which, too, was a source of many misunderstandings.

Marriage was of particular importance to the generation of post/war émigré women. Describing Crowley (or, in fact, English hostels and refugee camps), Kowalska categorizes women by their marital status: there are wives (and mothers), four single girls and one spinster. A relationship between a Polish girl and an English man is viewed negatively by the “crowleyan”

40 Compare: E.Said *Orientalism*. Vintage, New York. 1979.

41 J. Surynowa – Wyczółkowska *Gringa*. 66.

42 J. Surynowa – Wyczółkowska *Jesień Gringi*. Polska Fundacja Kulturalna, London. 1976. 157.

Polish women. Polish men are attractive to English women but the latter do not fulfill the role of “wife.” While this is not a subject discussed separately by the émigré women writers, it may be worthwhile to quote an observation by Janina Kowalska, who believed that young Poles from the military camps for foreign soldiers:

were eager to marry and quickly latched onto whatever passed through their hands, even though everyone knows that quality goods rarely jump off the shelves on their own. They clicked their heels and kissed hands, which was new and exciting... No wonder that girls were crazy about them... But in the final reckoning that came with the end of the war, there were those among the newlyweds that gossiped about one another, wondering where on earth this or that managed to dig out their precious. Everyone knows that a woman needs to know about borsch and pierogi, laundry, cleaning and babies.⁴³

In the context of emigration, matrimonial talents of Polish men are a separate, and a very interesting, subject that nonetheless remains beyond the scope of this essay. But when it comes to female roles, Polish women seem to clearly prefer and highly value traditional, patriarchal domestic roles that the English women were beginning to leave behind, moving into the (more) public zone. In Kowalska’s narrative, the “public” sphere recalled in the context of English women is far from its feminist version and encompasses – almost mockingly – mostly shops, pubs and streets. Remarks on the “Scottish wife” in Mostwinowa’s “‘Lanczeneta’...” are similar in that regard. Although there is no doubt that cultural differences (or, to be more precise, the differences in the gender constructions of femininity) did not allow Polish women to accept the “other” ones as wives of Poles, jealousy and competition should not be completely excluded either, especially as the foreigners took away the men that Polish émigré women viewed as “their” potential husbands. This could be also be explained by the fact that Polish female protagonists and narrators became more lenient in their judgments only later, toward their “American” daughters in law and – interestingly – it seems that it was easier for the mothers to accept Anglo-American marriages of their sons rather than daughters, especially when the first grandchildren were still awaited.

The son of general’s wife married a girl from *upper middle class*. She called general’s wife *mother* and tried to learn Polish despite the fact that no one

43 *ibid.* 98.

really expected it from her. The moment she entered the room, conversations would immediately switch to English ...

"I like her" thought general's wife "but I feel tired. I like her" she confessed to her friends "she is so calm and at boyish the same time. She marches with long steps, unaware of the need for dalliance, and in her eyes there is so much thoughtful sweetness."

When she was alone, she cried. Why can't I love her fully?⁴⁴

Let us go back to Małgorzata Fidelis's remarks on the division of space (private and public sphere) and their gendered allocation. Fidelis notes that

Western European women eventually derived their claims to participation in the public sphere from the powers granted them in the private realm. They transgressed the boundary between the spheres by bringing private issues to the public agenda.⁴⁵

But the fact that Polish public institutions belonged for a long time to foreign aggressors and represented their interest (also cultural interest) resulted in an isolation of Polish women from the public sphere; the interwar period was too short to allow for significant changes in this respect. Besides, due to their participation in the "national cause," they did not feel this isolation and did not consider the domestic sphere a purely private one. As a result, they did not understand the need to move their own ("female") affairs into the social sphere – which is what the first (pre) feminist attitudes relied on – but at the same time, they did not understand the patriarchal, complete isolation of the domestic zone. Thus, they viewed negatively the actions of "foreign" women (both patriarchally dominated Argentineans and the "emancipated" English or American women), which is particularly visible in the case of their roles as mothers.

In the post/war women's prose, the role of a wife is directly tied to the role of a mother who is responsible for creating a home and nurturing Polishness for the next generation. Raising children "in exile" – that is, dealing with social and own "expectations" – is perhaps the most important subject related to emigration in the women's prose. The pressure of patriotic tradition was so strong that it led to defining the house as a territory of "Polishness," regardless of the husband's nationality. This is why non-Polish women could never fulfill the hope vested in the Polish mother figure, *Matka-Polka*. Meanwhile,

44 D. Mostwin "Córki." 68.

45 M. Fidelis "Participation in the Creative Work of the Nation." 111.

a “good” husband is one that allows to create (and physically build) a Polish home, like Jose Maria in *Gringa*, who

believes that ... children owe to their mother not only their fair hair and white complexion, but also the European thought and heritage of Polish independence. Jose is building a house in the city center under the illusion that it is a Polish house, and so the building has a steep red roof. A porch with little columns. A façade. The shutters have heart-shaped openings carved out.

Thujas imitate firs around our Polish house. Patio imitates the verandah. Hallway imitates the inner court. Swimming pool imitates the pond. And the garage – carriage house and stables.⁴⁶

It is clear both to the protagonists of *Gringa* and to other literary characters that Polishness is not restricted to language. But when the question of children and their national upbringing comes into view, it is mostly language that is the problem. This may be connected to the identification of nationality with language as an element or “mark” that clearly distinguishes the Poles from other nationalities. Let us recall again Robinson’s observation that exile increases the value of language as a connection between the old and the new world. This concerns not only creative artists, as language, being one of the elements of identity, is also the key medium of communication enabling contacts with other people. Loneliness is, according to the critic, the exile’s greatest fear.

Several observations on the linguistically determined change of national consciousness (and identity) contained in *Lost in Translation*,⁴⁷ an English bestseller by the Polish born Ewa Hoffman, were expressed already several decades ago in the work of Polish émigré women writers. But before the protagonists of stories and novels face the problem of their children’s language, the notice it in themselves (and in other adults). Teresa, the narrator of *Gringa*, already as an unmarried young woman realizes to her surprise that she automatically inserts Spanish words when she speaks:

Suddenly I realized that I have grown attached to that town in cordillera and that in my mind I call its smell “perfume” and its freshness “frescura.” Because it was more convenient and easier to think of it this way (not in Polish).

46 J. Surynowa – Wyczółkowska *Gringa*. 224.

47 E. Hoffman. *Lost in Translation: Life in a New Language*. William Heineman Ltd. London. 1979.

“You’re getting uprooted, Teresa” I think to myself as I walk to the bus.⁴⁸

The problem of language is, in fact, neither new, nor tied exclusively to emigration, something that Teresa, daughter of a Polish woman and a German Czech, is made aware of during a conversation with her father:

I start yelling that “negocio,” “asunto” or “comercio” are out of the question, because we are “muy feliz.” “Dichoza.”

“You mean ‘happy’” he corrected. “Make up your mind, Terenia, as to the language you are going to use. As a child I would get spanked for mixing Czech and German words like that.

“For two years I’ve only used “castellano” I reply “sometimes English, and I’m not even aware that I forget Polish words.”

“Yes” he interrupted “Uprooting comes unnoticed, and gradually.”⁴⁹

The difference between the linguistic situation of the father and the daughter is another subject deserving a separate study, one can only note here that linguistic purity demanded from children in their native countries (for instance during partitions or among national minorities) meant preserving national identity, sovereignty, cultural continuity. Meanwhile, Teresa thinks of Buenos Aires (capital city of her country of residence): “future capital of my Argentinean children,”⁵⁰ and remains aware of the inevitability of assimilation processes, as well as of the national difference between her and her “Argentinean” children.

Little children described in women émigré prose are usually taught “Polishness” – they go to Polish kindergartens, sing Polish songs, recite poems and wear folk costumes. But first and foremost, they are taught the language and this is usually a conscious decision made by the parents. This is perfectly captured by Zofia Romaniczowa in *Baśka i Barbara*, a novel describing the process of raising a daughter in a French speaking environment.

Today I offered Basia the moon. And I could have given her *la lune*.

Frankly, it was other people who pointed it out. We thought that was a non-issue.

How come? You teach Polish to your child? You isolate her from the environment... You restrict her opportunities... Breed issues into her.

48 J. Surynowa – Wyczółkowska *Gringa*. 137.

49 *Ibid.* 141.

50 *Ibid.* 137.

As if we were in a position to make a choice. To bequeath her what we ourselves have inherited or to disown her. What would make her happier?⁵¹

Romanowiczowa explains the motivation behind the “decision” to keep speaking Polish at home:

A strange world around us. Our house like a shell on the surface of ocean. Are we to drill a hole in its bottom to let it drown, to let our house disappear? So that, when you return, in a couple of years, from some school, from some trip, our daughter Barbara, you start slow down on the stairs thinking that there’s a couple of strangers waiting for you inside? And is that what’s supposed to be good for her? She will catch that other language anyway, from the kids in the playground, from people in the streets, from the shop assistant, from the air. We will not try to stop it, we won’t close her eyes, on the contrary. This city, that is hospitable to us, is her childhood city.

But first, she needs to have a home. One where all of us feel at home. Us – and her.⁵²

Baśka i Barbara describes only the first years of the child’s life and the parents’ decisions regarding raising the daughter are not yet verified by the influence exercised on Baśka by peers and the culture of their country even by changing her name, stressing the final syllable of “Barbara.” Before this happens, there appear questions similar to those in Mostwin’s “Lanczeneta’ przy Alei Północnej”:

“Dear Lord, please give health to my mummy, daddy, granny and grandpa and allow us to return to Poland...”

“Mummy” Marek turns around “What does it mean ‘allow us to return’?”

“To return” Boga explains “like you and Pawełek come home from kindergarten.”

“But I can’t go back!”

“And why can’t you?”

“I’ve never been there, mummy, I’ve never been to that Poland.”⁵³

51 Z. Romanowiczowa *Baśka i Barbara* [Baśka and Barbara] Libella, Paryż. 1956. 51.

52 Ibid.

53 D. Mostwin “Lanczeneta...” 60.

Answering the question of their already adult children about the decision regarding language they should raise their own children in, Jose Maria, Gringa's husband, says:

There is no certainty or guarantee for the parents in that regard. Children do what they want to. First they want a colorful ball. Then a floating swan for the pool. Then you have to give them a bank account, a car. They want. They demand. They ask. ... They can't be persuaded or compelled. So whether they are going to speak this or other language, it is not because we taught them, but because Bibi kindly decides she wants to speak Spanish, Antek – English and Barbarita Polish.⁵⁴

Let us note that women's literature did not manage provide a clear and consistent answer to the question why continuing to use Polish should be important to the émigré children. Were they supposed to return to Poland? Were they, as a result, closer to their parents? Or, perhaps, the teaching of Polish allowed the women (mothers) to locate themselves within the tradition of *Matka Polka* that fights for preserving the nation despite resurfacing doubts? Żuławska, one of the characters in "Lanczeneta'...", is not an exception when she thinks:

And that constant struggle to maintain the language! That tragic fight, lost like the unyielding little flame of the disappearing underground. What weapons are to be used? Who is going to help? Żuławska thinks: "His mother taught him: *dzień dobry, kiełbasa, mam cię w d...* Oh, I, too, don't give a s... about all of this."⁵⁵

While not providing a straight answer to the question of potential advantages, several literary works by women show conflicts resulting from this fight, conflicts that resurface later, when the children begin to form their identities – often opposing their parents.

Conflicts with children are mostly portrayed as conflicts with daughters. Protagonists and narrators of post/war émigré prose are not yet aware that their problems with children are a result of a broader phenomenon that feminist criticism will later refer to as "mother – daughter relationships." They believe that the conflicts originate in the struggle to preserve Polishness, because frequently it is Polishness that becomes an obstacle for the children in

54 J. Surynowa – Wyczółkowska *Jesień Gringi*. 193.

55 D. Mostwin "Lanczeneta'..." 48.

finding their place in their “own” country where they feel, at least to a certain degree, as “strangers.” Exile – in its female version – is no longer only a gap between “self” and the country of origin, as Said identifies it, but also between one’s own cultural identity and that of one’s children. This means that in mixed marriages children “learn culture” mostly from the father’s ancestors (as, for instance, Barbarita, Gringa’s daughter) or from their peers, and do not always look fondly upon the mother’s national culture:

“Oh!” Barbarita screams “You are a horrible Gringa!”
 Here we are, standing in front of each other. Similar to each other. We both have fair hair and sweet, colorful, striped dresses. We both move the tips of our noses.”
 “And you are Gringa too” I say firmly “Because you are my daughter.”
 Angry look from under the tousled fringe: “I am ashamed to be a Gringa’s daughter. *Córka de una Polaca*” she shouts.
 I look at my child with terror, just as my mother must have looked at me.
 “The greatest harm in our lives comes from our children” I thought. “From the hands with bitten nails and stained fingers.”
 “I would prefer” Baśka yells “to be Argentinean, like father. *Una pura cepa*.”⁵⁶

An understanding with the mother – or rather, realizing the mechanisms governing the conflicts between generations – takes place only after one becomes a parent. And even though the question of national difference in the example above is of no importance, pre-feminist consciousness does not allow the émigré writers to notice the “supra-national” character of the problem.

Conflicts with daughters (on the surface) do not have to be directly related to Polishness, they can also include the question of, for instance, independence, often expressed as a marriage to an American, which – according to parents – inevitably entails “uprooting.” This concerns both the “linguistic” and the gendered construction of femininity, although the linguistic changes were the easiest to describe. In “*Córki*,” Mostwin writes:

Daughter left first, she married a friend from college, an American. It was not a single departure, but one that happened as if through several consecutive gates, doors, passages. Not a goodbye, or separation, or a single stroke, a single turning of the door key – but a continuous withdrawal, a constant jarring sound of the key. Each time she seemed more distant, her Polish was tinged with American accent. More and more often she

56 J. Surynowa – Wyczółkowska *Gringa*, 215.

would pause in the middle of a sentence, looking for the right word. General's wife listened to the American twitter of her grandchildren with effort.⁵⁷

In the same short story, the problems of parents with their maturing daughters boil down to finding them Polish husbands. The journey from Germany to America became a necessity when "Oleńka finished high school and started to be interested in boys. What if she marries a German?" Meanwhile, in the United States, they worry that "Oleńka says she'll marry an American, a Jew, a Protestant, and just leave..."⁵⁸

The daughters in question – Oleńka and Grażyna – belong to the group that Ruben G. Rumbault refers to as "1.5 generation,"⁵⁹ one including the children of emigrants who, changing their country of residence, were old enough to remember their culture of origin and (more or less) consciously enter the culture of the new country, but at the same time young enough to join peer groups in the new country and tie their social identity to them. As a result, they can easily move between both cultures, although émigré writers also depict their difficulties with finding a place in both. In contrast to the "first generation," immigrants belonging to this group are not characterized by the impulse for "self-justification" fueling the exile vision of their parents.⁶⁰ In the situations described by émigré writers, children born abroad (or too young to remember their native country) also display several features of the "1.5 generation." Instead of memories of Poland we have memories / fantasies of Polishness (related mostly to childhood and family home) created by the patriotic émigré tale. For this generation, Polishness of the public space is found in the émigré, Polish diasporas, often governed by their own laws and characterized by their own dynamics. Their image presented in the women's prose is often rather negative – for instance in Kowalska's *Pogranicze* or Mostwinowa's "Córki."

What is left, then – as was the case of teaching language to the children – is the question whether literary texts contain a reflection on the motivation and validity of imposing Polishness on children, especially as assimilation processes take place earlier than in the second generation. Maintaining national

57 D. Mostwin "Córki." 67.

58 Ibid. 65.

59 R.G. Rumbault "Self and Circumstance: Journeys and Visions of Exile." *The Dispossessed: An Anatomy of Exile*. Ed. P.I. Rose. University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst and Boston. 2005. 331-357.

60 Ibid. 332.

identity is a matter so obvious for the literary protagonists, that they often do not even mention it. Let us also note that “Polishness” of postwar emigration is paused at a certain historical moment – the moment of exile – which means that it differs from the “native” identity evolving under the influence of new reality, and so – unaware of that fact – émigré families may only convey a Polish variety of migrant identity to their children. Furthermore, their only verbally formulated motivation is the need to be able to communicate with their grandchildren. This, however, depends also on the nationality of their sons and daughters-in-law.

And yet, marriage to a Pole, theoretically granting the preservation of Polishness, is not presented as a happy end. Even children born to Polish parents, who understand Polish, address them in English, which seems outrageous only to grandma who exclaims “son of a man who sacrificed so much for Poland speaks ENGLISH in his own house!”⁶¹ Later “generations” of emigrants differ from the war exiles, their history is different from the one of those who never knew the everyday life of The People’s Republic. When Barbarita (Gringa’s daughter) informs her mother about her engagement to a Pole who was forced to emigrate in 1968 (due to the wave of antisemitism in the People’s Republic), it is not easy for an understanding between the son and mother in law to begin to form.

Suddenly Barbarita decides to lay her cards on the table and asks:

“So? If there is no anti-Semitism in Poland, then why are you afraid, Riccardo, that mamita, despite all the *amistad* (friendship) that she has for you, may be unhappy about our *matrimonio*? (marriage)”

The worse has been said. Duplicity of the situation hits me on the head. The bitterness of those Polish words mixed out of nervousness with Spanish makes me choke up. “Damn it” I curse in my thoughts, as I did in the old days.⁶²

Different generations of emigrants represent different worlds and different problems, and many works (especially the “American” stories by Mostwin) reveal the lack of understanding between the Polish emigrants and the “native” Poles. A comparison to the remark by Marc Robinson on the exile impossibility to return home automatically comes to mind. In case of female, “domestic” vision it is an analogous although yet unnamed problem of creating a migrant

61 D. Mostwin. “Dwanaście lat.” [Twelve years] 111.

62 J. Surynowa – Wyczółkowska *Jesień Gringi*. 65.

identity differing from the one created by the fellow countrymen who remained in the home country and the one created by emigrants from other generations.

Women nonetheless seem to come to terms with émigré reality more easily than men. The latter are often unable – from the perspective of women’s prose – to get rid of the titles no longer matching the external world, such as “chairman,” “colonel,” “general,” “major” – the functions of soldiers, guerillas or patriots. They can play those roles only in the “domestic” space or in émigré societies and organizations. Consequently, they close themselves off in diasporas that allow them to retain their pre-war gender identity (of patriots fighting for independent Poland). Let it also be added that émigré social life was characterized by a narrowing of the public space, by keeping to small groups based on direct ties. In the temporal sense, “social” life of the emigrants is characterized by living in a local time (which is typical for traditional societies), or, to be more precise, by living in an identity-forming history of one’s own (and at the same time, shared) war and occupation experiences. From the perspective of the country of residence, members of Polish exile diasporas found themselves on the margins of social space. No wonder, then, that the model proved unattractive for the next generation that embraced the culture of the new country as their own. In a discussion with “wujcio” (uncle), a Monte Casino veteran, Niato, Gringa’s son says:

You would like to close me forever in the Polish ghetto, uncle, and I can’t be a stranger in my father’s country! Please, understand! I am proud of my mum’s origins ... but I can’t listen all the time to the stories of aunt Fafa beaten up by the Gestapo ... or of you fighting at Monte Casino. Please, understand, *Dios mio*, I have obligations to the country I was born in.⁶³

In Mostwin’s “Córki,” Grażyna critically views the émigré social space. She does not share her father’s delight in the émigré ball:

“Ball” she laughed “Ball! You call that a ball. A dance of skeletons. You think I am having fun here? That I want to belong here? You think I will let some general’s wife play the matchmaker, that I care about some general? I want to live a normal life.⁶⁴

In both instances, the young generation firmly rejects imposed social roles during conversations with men who find their own identity in that space.

63 Ibid. 193.

64 D. Mostwin “Córki.” 77.

And while the female characters are almost always shown in the domestic space and in the related functions of wife and mother, it is women who find it easier to accept the “double landscape,” to use Skvorecky’s term.⁶⁵ Going back to Robinson’s remark, one could actually posit that it is easier for women to construct loyalty toward both cultures – their own (the culture of exit) and that of their children (the culture of the country of residence). Gender-assigned categories of private and public space become blurred in the émigré world. Men can “display” their “social” identity only in the domestic sphere while women are tied to the social sphere (of the country of residence) through children.

Women – literary characters in the works by émigré authors – experience deep and painful loneliness. Let us not forget that postcolonialism sees in exile not only the ethos of a creator but also human tragedies behind it, as exile means – according to Said – first and foremost, loneliness, lack of belonging, alienation – not a lack of identity or a cosmopolitan identity but a constant sense of one’s own otherness, dissonance with the surrounding culture and customs. Emigration deprives the exiles of the dignity related to the sense of belonging, of certainty resulting from stability in place and time.⁶⁶ According to Robinson, all émigré artists go through a period of doubt and loneliness and although, with time, they get used to the new reality, they are always accompanied by a sense of alienation. For women, loneliness of exile is a loneliness within the family. It is experienced deeply even by characters such as Teresa (*Gringa*) or Boga (“Lanczeneta”) who are surrounded by large, multi-generational families. As a result of cultural differences between parents and children, domestic space is no longer a place where women, turning with time from mothers to grandmothers, can fulfill themselves by playing the roles assigned to them by the patriotically oriented patriarchal Polish tradition. And in the émigré conditions, the house was often the only space given to women, just as family roles – of wife and mother – were the only identity. This is why over almost 25 years of marriage (and with four adult children) Teresa, from Surynowa-Wyczółkowska’s novel, regrets abandoning her academic aspirations.

Everyone ... laid the so called “intellectual hopes” on me. And indeed, I devoured academic books, flew to conferences at Sorbonne and wanted to study art history.

65 O. Overland. “Visions of Home. Exiles and Immigrants.” *The Dispossessed* ... 7.

66 See: E.W. Said *Culture and Imperialism*. Vintage Books, New York. 1994. 326-336.

It is simply beyond belief that it all ended up with cosmetology, pots, cribs and English lessons.

I was discovering within myself old regrets. In the final account of life, I have found myself on the side of the defeated. ... My only consolation was that if I was derailed, then it was not by my own fault. ... It was the war that derailed thousands of emigrants. But could that really be a consolation? Of course not. It was just – reality, one difficult to come to terms with.⁶⁷

Thwarted plans, unfulfilled ambitions, blurred spaces – domestic and public – as well as “archaic” identity, and – first and foremost – acute loneliness are the balance of the post/war exile women’s prose. Determined by the consciousness of the “pre-feminist” generation, the work by female Polish émigré writers reveals the multilayered character of otherness faced by the post/war e/immigrants. Different from (Polish and other) men, from (women, but also men belonging to) the cultures of arrival, from other immigrants, from Poles (male and female) in the old country, from the Black Americans, Indians, Metis... Different from their own parents but also from their children, still unaware that many of their daily challenges are shared by women of other races and nationalities, and not even seeking a connection with them, émigré women writers created in their works a history of those who were traditionally deprived of a “tellable story.” Further chapters were added by the next generations of emigrants – chapters including disintegration of exile homes, professional problems, alcohol and drug addictions. But that is another subject for a separate analysis.

Translation: Anna Warso

67 J. Surynowa – Wyczołkowska *Jesień Gringji*, 152.