Life Narratives, Common Language and Diverse Ways of Belonging

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Abstract: The article discusses my experiences of gradual immersion into the community of Polish migrants to Australia, which I joined while researching life writing of Polish post-war women migrants to Australia. I focus on how my assumptions concerning commonality of culture and language transformed during the preliminary stages of my research. I initially assumed that speaking the same language as the writers whose works I study, and their ethnic community, would position me as a person sharing *the same* cultural knowledge, and allow me *immediate* access to research participants. Yet, the language I considered to be the major marker of ethnic identity exhibited multiplicity instead of unity of experiences, positions and conceptual worlds. Instead, gender, which I had considered a fluid and unstable category highly context-dependent especially in the migration framework, proved to be an important element of interaction and communication between myself and my research participants. I have learnt that it is critical for research on diaspora, including diaspora's literary cultures, to account for other identity markers that include me as a researcher into some Polish community groups while excluding from others. I base my contribution on various kinds of materials, including field notes, fieldwork diaries and interviews with Polish writers as well as secondary literature on Poles and Australians of Polish extraction in Australia.

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1. Introduction

Upon arrival in Australia, my Polish nationality was imposed on me through the recurrent question "where are you from?" and I clearly understood what Val COLIC-PEISKER (2004, p.82) meant when she said that it was only in Australia that she finally succumbed to her "Croatianness" (see also RYAN, 2010). My Polish origins are not evident in my accent (so I was told), but I had this immediate feeling that people must see me as yet another member of the huge community of Polish migrants who have come to Australia in several waves since the end of the Second World War. I felt ambivalent about the question of my own national belonging even though I did not consider the possibility of renouncing it. This ambivalence came from the fact that I had never considered myself a migrant, but rather a person who "travels-between-countries-following-

professional-opportunities-and-personal-commitments" who does not have to stay in any of these places, despite possessing many transnational formal and informal points of attachment and thus responsibilities and loyalties. The unexpected necessity for self-reflection had complicated my research before it even properly commenced, as I found myself in an impossible situation: I did not want to be perceived as an outsider, but I also rejected being an insider—a migrant at a new home—and questioned the possibility of being a bit of both. Having my family and home in Australia provided a strong anchor in the country and justified my migrant status, but working at a Polish university and "temporarily" visiting Australian universities as a research fellow provided a different context that conditioned my stay in Australia. [1]

My research project conducted in Australia aimed to examine literary works and life narratives of Polish immigrants who migrated to Australia in several major waves: as displaced persons (DPs) after the Second World War, and as "Solidarity"[1] and post-communist migrants, arriving to Australia in the 1980s and 1990s. My interests center particularly on life writing which covers a broad range of narratives including diaries, memoirs and autobiographies, but also autobiographical fiction and novels, and all kinds of literary writing which includes a sort of a biographical statement.[2] I follow the assumption that literary, non-literary and "sub-literary" texts all constitute documents of historical discourse and are equally culturally meaningful (see e.g. GREENBLATT, 1980; VEESER, 1989). Thus, I consider biographies of authors and their migration trajectories in my analysis of their writings as important contexts within which their narratives should be approached. [2]

In this article I reflect on my gradual immersion into the community of Polish migrants to Australia, and on how I reviewed my assumptions concerning a commonality of culture and language during the preliminary stages of my research. I draw attention to the ways gender intersects with other categories of difference to produce heterogeneous identities. The analytical focus is placed on unstructured and informal interviews with Polish-Australian writers in Melbourne and Canberra. My research methods include also participant observation of Poles and Australians of Polish extraction in Australia, particularly, Polish political refugees I met during various community events, the leaders of Polish-Australian organizations, and migrants and their families with whom I participate in everyday activities and social events (e.g. playgroup, language school, Church, Polish club). I conducted unstructured and selective observations which I recorded in

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1   The group of "Solidarity migrants," taking its name after a Polish trade union that gave rise to anti-communist social movement, came to Australia in the wake of political unrest in the 1980s.

2   The life narratives examined during the early stages of my research, and referred to in this article, are collected in three volumes of memories and testimonies of Polish displaced people relocated to Australia: "Lest we Forget" (WIENCH & DROZD, 2004), "Polish Migrants' Stories" (WIENCH & DROZD, 2006) and "Wyrwane drzewa: *Wspomnienia Polek emigrantek*" [Uprooted Trees: Collection of Polish Women Memoirs] (AUSTRALIAN-POLISH COMMUNITY SERVICES, 2000). The first two volumes comprise the memories recorded by Monika WIENCH at the request of Polish community members in Melbourne. They were transcribed, translated and published as a part of research on ethnic communities in Australia. The third volume forms a collection of selected works submitted to the migrants' memories competition organized by the AUSTRALIAN-POLISH COMMUNITY SERVICES in Melbourne and published in 2000.

field notes taken mostly *ex situ* in the form of descriptions of events and behaviors. I did not focus on selected activities, but I kept notes particularly on themes I was most interested in (i.e., how participants express their belonging, what culture they are attached to, how their attachment to Poland and Australia is manifested, what language they speak, how they communicate with their children, how they perceive their belonging to a community, etc.). Additionally, I kept more self-reflexive field notes, focusing on questions and concerns, my experiences and transforming points of view. I use my field notes as my data source. The aim of my participant observation was to gain a holistic understanding which would inform my approach to literary narratives and improve the quality of interpretation. Occasionally, I refer to the printed materials of Polish organizations (newsletters, chronicles, etc.) to gain a better understanding of migrant experience in a historical context. Although these engagements were not a core part of my research, they became very significant in shaping my approach to and understanding of the materials I intended to study. [3]

I start by presenting background information on Polish migrants to Australia and the complex sociocultural situation in the country which over the years has transformed from a mono- to multilingual society. I describe the earliest phase of my research: entering the field and initial interactions with Polish Australian communities. During this stage, I started to question my assumptions concerning language as a major marker of ethnic identity and gender as a category too unstable to provide a common ground. In the following sections I move on to discuss my experiences of meeting and interviewing three Polish-Australian women writers, which further altered my initial assumptions. I conclude by identifying major tensions which occurred during my research and which in various ways question insider-outsider dichotomy. [4]

2. Locating (Myself in) the Field

Migration of Poles to Australia had occurred in different historical and socio-political contexts, resulting in different migration trajectories and circumstances of adjusting to the new socio-cultural environment. Consequently, a heterogeneous community characterized by different skills and attitudes to language, different socio-economic status and different performance of gendered identities emerged. There were three major waves of Polish immigrants to Australia. The first cohort consisted mainly of displaced persons coming to Australia between the late 1940s and the early 1950s, under the mass migration scheme.[3] This was a relatively homogenous cohort which, within a decade, became a coherent migrant

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3   As a result between 1947 and 1954, the Poland-born population of Australia increased from 6,573 to 56,594 people. As the existing studies show, Polish DPs were different from other groups of DPs, as they were overrepresented by uneducated laborers, mostly from agrarian regions (SMOLICZ & HARRIS, 1984, p.60). However, the sources (questionnaires of International Refuge Organization) are not reliable and it can be assumed that DPs, when asked about their occupation and nationality, were giving information that would be more favorable in their situation (p.55). For example, on some of the International Refuge Organization lists all of the men were defined as "laborers" and all women as "domestic." The questionnaires were constructed using imprecise definitions (nationality, ethnicity, citizenship, country of last residence), sometimes Ukrainians born in Poland were classified as Ukrainians and sometimes as Poles, while German or Austrian wives of Polish DPs were considered Polish or stateless (pp.56-57).

community of complex structure and characterized by self-reliance and preservation of language and traditions, strong ties with their homeland and little interest in public affairs in Australia. The second wave, known as the "Solidarity migrants," came to Australia in the 1980-1990s due to economic and political unrest in Poland. They differed significantly from the previous cohort and this translates into their approach to language, identification with a broader community and the construction of the sense of belonging. Since they had spent their early adulthood in Poland, socialized in Polish and their Polish identities had not been threatened, after migration they were less concerned "about the potential attrition of language outside the home" (DROZDZEWSKI, 2013, p.71). They were usually tertiary-educated and highly qualified, often with good knowledge of English and willingness to embrace Australia as a second home and face all the challenges it required (e.g. changing professions, or undertaking further education). The third wave, referred to as the post-communist wave (LIPIŃSKA, 2002), came to Australia due to economic reasons, with largely unidentified national attachments, but also with the comforting awareness that they can always go back if their new life is not what they expected. The feeling of loss, usually associated with being transplanted into a culturally and linguistically alien context, is temporary and thus unthreatening. [5]

The changing social, cultural and historical factors in the country of origin and at the destination are recognized as crucial in how native language is maintained and practiced by immigrants (CLYNE, 1991; CONKLIN & LOURIE, 1983; FISHMAN, 1989, 1991; GAL, 1979; SECOMBE & ZAJDA, 1999). In a great number of publications on ethnic identity, Poles become an example of an ethno-linguistic community (e.g. OAKES, 2001; SEKOWSKA, 1994; SMOLICZ, 1981; VERDOODT, 1977) whose language has been sustaining the nation's identity "and vital powers of creativity" for centuries (SECOMBE & ZAJDA, 1999). In Australia, if Polish migrants wanted to maintain their native language and identity, they had to comply with the prevailing official rules if they also wanted to be accepted in this culturally and linguistically monistic society in order to secure the future of their families. The "White Australia Policy" (1901-1960s), shaping public attitudes and greatly restricting immigration, together with the assimilationist model of settlement, had significant implications for the "New Australians"—as they were officially called, or "Alien immigrants"—as they were known, and their approach towards native languages and cultures. Poles were among these non-British migrants who experienced the stigma attached to those speaking a language other than English. Linguistic rights were very limited and minority group members "were permitted to make use of their native tongues merely in a domestic situation and in the restricted area of ethnic clubs and possibly part-time, after-hours ethnic schools" (SMOLICZ, 1995, p.242). It was not until the late 1960s that the new approach towards migrants was implemented: the introduction of multicultural and multilingual policies resulted in the fact that languages other than English could officially co-exist and develop alongside

English (SMOLICZ, 1995).[4] Australian multiculturalism and its multilingual policies[5] greatly "benefited those immigrant groups which settled in Australia over 1980s and 1990s" (SMOLICZ & SECOMBE, 2003, p.12). [6]

This complicated cultural and political situation produced narratives developed by post-war migrants in which they scrutinize experiences of living between languages and cultures more than early twentieth century immigrant authors (BESEMERES, 2002, pp.275-279; BESEMERES & WIERZBICKA, 2007). Language that "emerges" from their narratives is not simply a vehicle of communication, but implies additional, metalinguistic meaning: it often discloses insecurity, impotence, artificiality of experience savored in one language and recorded in another (see ARTHUR, 1988, p.122). Encouraged by the great number of anthologies of multicultural writing published in the 1980s, the Polish-Australian writers of that period more willingly expressed their appreciation of two cultures, writing predominantly in Polish and emphasizing in their works hope, openness and a growing awareness of the opportunities. The increased criticism of multiculturalism, perceived during the John Howard government (1996-2007) as a dangerous trend discriminating against ordinary Australians and threatening cultural unity,[6] seems to have encouraged more interest in preserving and maintaining one's heritage, even though as a component of Australian identity. At the same time, the desire to publish and be read outside a narrow Polish community resulted in the growing trend of publishing in English (e.g. Liliana RYDZYŃSKA, 1982) and the marginalization of those writing in Polish (e.g. Krystyna JACKIEWICZ, 2006). [7]

This sign that national ties are loosening seems to support MARKOWSKI's observation (2009, pp.86, 88) that Polish migrants appear "ready to embrace the uniform national identity of the host community." His survey proved that "even though nearly 80 per cent of our survey respondents were Poland-born, 44 per cent of them described their national identity as 'Australian' or 'Australian-Polish' rather than 'Polish' or 'Polish-Australian'" (p.88). Interestingly, MARKOWSKI's survey also revealed that "regardless of their *actual*, as opposed to *stated*, command of the Polish language, Polish migrants appear to be very *confident* about their Polish language proficiency" (p.85) which may reflect the tradition of ascribing great importance to language as a marker of national identity, a sort of innate obligation to Poland (MORAWSKA, 2004, p.1382). [8]

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4   There were some more practical results of multiculturalism pursued as a social policy by Professor Jerzy ZUBRZYCKI, a Polish-born Australian sociologist, widely regarded as the "Father of Australian Multiculturalism," for example, government support for teaching community languages or Commonwealth funding for ethnic schools (SECOMBE & ZAJDA, 1999, see also AUSTRALIAN ADVISORY COUNCIL ON LANGUAGES AND MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION, 1990; CLYNE, 1991; LO BIANCO, 1987). In South Australia, Polish was introduced as a community language and counted towards university entrance in 1977 (together with Latvian and preceded by Italian, Dutch, Hebrew, Ukrainian, Lithuanian and Greek).

5   For the complex relationship between multiculturalism and multilingualism, see CLYNE (1991, 1997), CLYNE and KIPP (1997, 1998), SECOMBE and ZAJDA (1999); SMOLICZ (1981).

6   With the change of federal government, measures in support for multiculturalism were reintroduced. The Labour Government of Kevin RUDD (2007-2010) established a new National Multicultural Advisory Council.

My positionality, as I saw it at the beginning of my work in Australia, seemed perfectly suited for the research I had planned: an academic with a background in literary and cultural studies, supported by authoritative institutions and with access to numerous resources and, most importantly, a native speaker of a language used by the authors of texts under investigation. I assumed that speaking the same language would position me in the situation of a person sharing the same cultural knowledge, and thus having immediate access to research participants and materials. I presumed that being a woman would help me understand the subtleties of everyday life of my research participants as a professional, wife or mother. I assumed that migrant women narrate themselves as active agents and exploit their power to act and to represent; I also expected that migration is a transforming experience that brings, according to BURRELL (2008, p.71), a "potential for gendered change." In other words, I considered gender to be a fluid category depending on context, including migration trajectory, age and social status, etc. (see e.g. GAL, 1994; OCHS, 1992; WINTER & PAUWELS, 2005; WOOLARD, 1997). On the contrary, I perceived language as a sole fixed category that would guarantee my productive participation in a community. I must emphasize that since my research has been restricted to examining narrative models and specifically literary expressions, I did not intend to investigate gender relations in real life, nor engage with women's migration stories through the lens of my own gender identity. [9]

3. In the Community: Questioning Common Grounds

I brought my assumptions about national belonging and language into a politically and socially complex environment, around 2011, when a *new* Multicultural Policy was introduced by the Australian Government, emphasizing the rights and liberties of Australians of all backgrounds "to celebrate, practise and maintain their cultural heritage, traditions and language within the law and free from discrimination" (DEPARTMENT OF IMMIGRATION AND CITIZENSHIP, 2011, p.6). The environment which I entered fostered my confidence of finding a "common language" with Polish migrants. [10]

I first approached Polish organizations and associations in Australia, contacted individuals who were actively involved in Polish communities or interested in Polish heritage in Australia: artists, academics, teachers, librarians, ethnic media journalists and biographers. I arranged numerous meetings in Canberra, Sydney and Melbourne, looking for texts unknown, unavailable and unpublished, but also learning about Polish life in Australia and migrant experience in general. The majority of people I initially approached belonged to the post-war generation of migrants, coming to Australia as DPs in the early 1950s or soon after the mass migration scheme ended. This was a relatively homogenous cohort who became a coherent migrant community of complex structure and characterized by self-reliance and preservation of language and traditions, strong ties with their homeland and little interest in public affairs in Australia. Though English classes were first offered in hostels in 1947, and a year later the Australian Migrant

Education Program commenced, Polish DPs spoke little English, learning mostly "on the job" or by gradual exposure to the Australian community.[7] [11]

Contrary to my expectations, speaking the same language did not save me from being treated with certain suspicion. This initial distrust, as I understand it, may have come from generational differences and the awareness that their very unique migration trajectory and painful war experiences may not be understood by those who came to Australia in completely different circumstances. Always polite and welcoming, when asked in an undirected conversation about their own past, they would often reach for some representative detail of their difficult experiences, something they identify with yet can easily tell about to a stranger (e.g. that they wanted to be as far as possible from Russians, or that they journey was long, leading through various countries and transition centers). [12]

Intended as a conduit of access to Polish ethnic writers and their works, these encounters became a valuable but disturbing experience that shaped how I later approached the authors and began to think of their works. One of such very personal, yet accidental, encounters with an elderly woman at the beginning of my research had, as I later understood, a significant impact on my self-reflexivity and understanding of the notion of "re-living the past" I often come across in migrant literature of the 1950s and 1960s. [13]

I ran into Zofia in the foyer of a restaurant in Canberra with my 4-year-old son in tow. Before spontaneously telling me the story of her arrival in Australia and her failed attempt to return home after the war, she positioned me as a mother of "a lucky boy." When asked why she thought he was so lucky, she replied that thanks to his Aryan look, blonde hair and light eyes, he could have been taken for a German child during the war and saved—like she was. [14]

The story that unfolded during our conversation had provided a sort of an introduction to the series of written narratives and memoirs of post-war women migrants I later examined. In both cases, talking to Zofia and reading the migrant stories, a common language turned out to be insufficient for me to become an immediate insider. Although we spoke the same language, our interaction seemed strange to me, reminding me not only about the generation and experience gaps between us, but also that I will always be an outsider to people whose memories of a traumatic past can be triggered by what seems to me to be a trivial detail, like my son's blonde hair. This encounter brought to my attention that not only do I examine their experiences from the outside but also, and more importantly, only when I *choose* to do so. While in real life it was my role as a mother through which I got unexpectedly engaged with migrants' life narratives, in the case of written accounts it was the challenged conventional gender roles that came to the fore in my understanding of migration (WILLIAMS, 2014). Yet, in the

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7 As far as I know, there has been no study done to examine gender as a major category of difference in the context of speaking Polish or acquiring new language skills in Australia. However, there are numerous examples found in post-war narratives which identify challenges non-English speaking migrants, especially females, faced (see e.g. JURGENSEN, 1981). Also, for gender as one of the socio-demographic factors affecting language maintenance in Australia, see LEUNER (2008).

real situation as well as in the examined stories, language does play a significant part. It enables this initial rapport prompted by the expectations of familiarity and common ground, though it is never an "undifferentiated medium" (TEMPLE & KOTERBA, 2009). I met Zofia in a restaurant when she approached me after hearing me speaking Polish to my son and, as she later confessed, after hearing —with great amazement—a little boy answering in perfect Polish (which is not a common sight in Australia). Language comes back as the focus of attention in the examined life narratives in which the authors repeatedly stress the significance of teaching Polish language and culture to their younger colleagues in refugee and migrant camps, and maintaining language continuity in their families. [15]

It is through my involvement in one of the Polish ethnic schools that I established most of my relationships with younger migrants who arrived in Australia in the 1980-1990s. Men scarcely participate in the life of the ethnic school and its various events. It is women who take active roles in this environment. These women (mothers and teachers) embrace traditional views of themselves: their role is to maintain national values in times of national "crisis" (here, emigration), vigilantly guarding proper language use, romanticizing Polish culture, devoting their time, attention and resources to ensure that their children have full access to Polish customs and traditions (BURRELL, 2008). This traditional role of a woman as a mother, educator and guardian of traditions, values and language, is not necessarily in opposition to being practical, independent and cosmopolitan outside of these educational structures. Outside of the school context, their attachment to Polish language is more symbolic, as they often choose the language that best suits their life and work environment on utilitarian grounds, and even decide to speak English at home (out of convenience or necessity, if they bring up their children with English-speaking partners). It shows how identity markers can change their significance and how migrants can self-select their ethnicity accordingly. [16]

In the context of the Polish Language School where I volunteered to teach, I have myself become a bastion of Polish heritage, encumbered with parents' hopes to teach their children, who can hardly speak our "common" language, about Polish history and culture during our Friday evening classes. Yet, my identification with the Polish ethnic minority in Australia included many different markers of identity other than language. Social class positions mattered in my relations with second generation migrants: younger, intellectual workers, who often express their feelings of sympathy and compassion for my situation, since being a Fellow at the university and conducting research does not account for a real job in their view (see similar experience in COLIC-PEISKER, 2004, pp.87-88). In their case, however, the stage of life and gender become particularly important social divisions as these are mostly young mothers who meet regularly when they come with their children to the Polish "playgroup" or ethnic school. Our parental-maternal circumstances created much stronger bonds than the Polish language which, although generally considered as one of the main reasons for our meetings, is not even spoken fluently by all the participants, nor in practice perceived as an important skill our children should master. [17]

All these different relations helped me realize the role of self-reflection and researcher's positionality (KÖTTIG, CHAITIN, LINSTROTH & ROSENTHAL, 2009). I started to create a narrative of my own migration experience, although I still did not consider myself a migrant. To some extent, it resulted from the fact that none of these groups within the Polish-Australian community seemed to take notice of my explanations that I am in Australia "*temporally* on leave from my work in Poland" (which was the fact in spite of my established family life in Australia). This sincere ignorance shows how strong the tradition of perceiving Australia as a permanent residence destination is, especially among migrants from Central-Eastern Europe, even in period of growing numbers of mobile job seekers. Yet, it also shows that participant observation is itself a complex process in which an observer may learn more about her/himself, and in which new boundaries between self and other are (re)drawn, while intellectual bias such as the reliance on fixed markers of identity, may—as it did in my case—become a starting point *sine qua non*. [18]

DWYER and BUCKLE (2009, p.56) noticed that being an insider does not necessarily make them "a better or worse researcher," but rather "a different type of researcher." Indeed, my experiences seem to confirm this feeling of being a different type of researcher, although most often I felt as neither an insider nor an outsider. A common language did not provide me with an "insider monopoly on the production of knowledge" (STANFIELD, 1994, p.176), though I do realize that speaking the same language allowed me to be a "partial insider" and gave me a great advantage of being accepted (even though sometimes on the basis of incomplete understanding on both sides). Yet, since the community of Polish Australians is so diverse it never embraced me as "one of us," simply because there are many small groups of "us," drawn together by different forces such as migration trajectory, political activism, age, social position or profession. I do belong to some of these groups but not to others, sometimes language becomes our common link and sometimes it does not. Actually, language is a "lock pick," it literally opens doors for me and helps me start on some sort of common ground, which implies some degree of trust, openness and, predominantly, the *assumption* of understanding (see DWYER & BUCKLE, 2009, p.58). [19]

4. In The Field: Shifting Linguistic and Gendered Positions

My position "in-between" or rather "among" various contexts and life scenes, came to the fore once I ventured on the task of literary research. Chronologically, it progressed in parallel to my involvement in the Polish community in Australia through which I discovered the rich cultural life of immigrants, including their literary works unavailable in the mainstream literary market, and some even unpublished. Apart from broad contextual information, I was often given valuable directions concerning the texts or authors I was looking for. I was able to browse through old community documents, chronicles, newsletters dispersed in private homes or examine letters, poems or longer manuscripts kept in private collections. Reading through various forms of life writing, and additional printed materials I often encountered accidentally, gave me a better understanding of migrants' perspectives in relation to the concepts of home, diaspora, nationhood,

citizenship, their disposition to assimilate to the "Australian way of life" or assert their cultural distinctiveness. It facilitated a more nuanced consideration of the ambiguities of migrant experience, tensions between national and transnational attachments, and intimate experiences such as fear, hope and aspiration. Ultimately, it reduced the distance between me and community members. Despite some ambivalent experiences in the community, I still relied on language as a major marker of ethnic identity and a crucial link between me and my research participants when approaching the migrant women authors of Polish descent. During preliminary stages of my research, I would instinctively identify and center on the writers writing in Polish, often for readers in Poland, approaching them as if in isolation from their Australian contexts. [20]

I met Ewa, an author of biography, short stories, poems as well as literary criticism, for the first time at a conference, where she approached me as she was interested in my presentation. She introduced herself in English which was not surprising as we were standing with a group of other English-speakers. Once I learnt who she was, I asked for an interview. We exchanged several simple sentences in English and though we did have some problems understanding each other, I did not think much of it, as it was a very noisy corridor with people emerging from conference rooms for a break. The next day I received a short email from her in Polish: she suggested a date and place, and stressed her excitement about having an opportunity to speak Polish. The language of her email seemed old-fashioned to me and I interpreted this as resulting from her age and the long time spent outside of Poland. [21]

However, difficulties began to surface at the beginning of our meeting simply because there was a lack of *any* language we could easily and comfortably communicate in. Having left Poland as a young girl due to ethnic tensions that her family suffered, Ewa moved to Austria, then South America, then—convinced she was a Jew—to Israel and finally, when she discovered she was not really Jewish, to Australia. She speaks fluent Spanish, yet neither her English—spoken with a strong accent—nor Polish—given limited vocabulary—allowed us to get fully involved in a dialogue that we both had looked forward to. Though it was with nostalgia and excitement that she tried to recollect her memories from Lodz, a Polish city in which she had grown up and where I had lived for several years, our conversation turned out to be focused on language itself: on finding right words and explaining nuances of words meaning while switching between languages. This very friendly meeting, during which I helplessly tried to locate her works within the context of her several homelands, was an illuminating experience for me, challenging not only my assumption about our "common" language as the main link between us, the marker of our shared identity, but also the very category of national belonging. During our subsequent meetings and discussions she expressed a conviction that her own research and creative journey should focus more on identifying her mother tongue and cultural belonging. She has never been interested in getting involved in any Polish organizations or community activities. Instead, she has been pursuing these aims writing a MA thesis at an Australian university. [22]

Yet, language did not provide a common ground for our interactions; we discovered more common features through our gender roles: as a mother and grandmother of children of similar ages. With a sort of relief and without concern for language, we focused on exchanging experiences of raising children in culturally and linguistically different environments, comparing day care possibilities and challenges in different countries we lived in, and organizing our future playground activities with our children/grandchildren. Intriguingly, I am not sure what language we spoke once we discovered our common grounds, but I do find this lack of awareness quite characteristic. [23]

This first interview made me aware of the problems I may encounter looking for commonalities among Polish migrants, especially if I take for granted that we speak Polish. With great excitement and curiosity, I was looking forward to meeting an established writer and educator, who is known for her provocative writing (published only in English), her interest in playing with language, as well as critical discussions that her works had triggered; yet, I did not know what to expect from the meeting. Ania became known in the 1980s, emerging as an ethnic writer—as she was immediately categorized by Australian literary establishment very much interested, at that time, in multicultural literature— though it was never an obvious category for her. She completed her education in Australia, never visited Poland after emigration, was never involved in Polish communities in Australia, and never published in Polish. Yet, her interested in Polish culture, her natural familiarity with Polish folk tales, children's games and nursery rhymes, her experience of Polish school system as well as political regime, ease and informality in referring to culturally significant signs and images, undeniably constituted the knowledge of an insider. Interestingly, both language and gender feature in her works as important markers of contested identity. Repetition and fragmentation are characteristic features of her writing style, which challenge certainties of language and expose its ambiguities. This linguistic alienation, understood not only as living among people speaking different language, but also as the awareness of untranslatability and linguistic relativity, intersects in her texts with gender roles often mocked or depicted as a narrator's disguise. Together they seek "to break normative and restrictive codes of being and challenge the ideologies of power and authority, whether of gender, nationality, status or language" (WILDE, HOOTON & ANDREWS, 1994). [24]

To my surprise Ania spoke to me in flawless Polish, but felt very insecure and uncertain about it. She considered her language archaic and outdated, a temporary space with lots of obstacles, traps and limitations. I had an impression she enjoyed speaking Polish and she even stressed that it was refreshing and inspiring. It was also, perhaps like a subversive language of her writings, a space for experimentation, destabilizing conventions and testing the rules. Our meeting was fascinating for me, however, language was not our common space. Quite early in our conversation, I gave up asking questions I had drafted concerning her writing and language games. Our discussions became much more private, comfortable and natural, once we moved on to talk about our personal experiences as professionals, teachers and women. When I asked her about categories literary studies impose on writers, she replied:

A: Literary studies specialize in categorizing [people] (...)

A: Years ago I received a letter asking whether I was a lesbian or hermaphrodite ...

K: [laughing] Seriously?! (...)

A: Why it was important for my writing, I do not know, and I never replied to this letter. (...) But it was always this question: are you married or not? Why would I answer such questions?!

K: I know! And are you also asked whether you have children? I'm always asked that, often in the professional academic context as if it had anything to do with my work.

A: (...) That is why in the play I'm writing now I have a beard and moustache ... (...) But I have to tell you—Ms ..., I'm sorry...[8]

K: Please, call me by name.

A: Yes, let's do that! Well, look, I had this dream ... [Ania tells me her dream]

K: Literature has always been very political ...

A: Oh, yes. And so is feminism (...). My work was published at the time when women's writing became important (...), otherwise maybe they would not want to publish such (...) writing as mine. [25]

I did not expect that "talking gender" would construct a familiar space for our interaction as knowing Ania's work, I considered it a rather unreliable common ground. The performance of gender in Ania's writing, saturated with feminist and psychoanalytic theories, and prompting analysis of *écriture féminine* as theorized by Julia KRISTEVA (1984 [1974]), Hélène CIXOUS (1976) and Luce IRIGARAY (1985), seemed to me very interesting in the literary and philosophical sense, but detached and ambiguous in terms of real life experience. However, once translated into ordinary life language through the examples from Ania's life and her roles as a sister, daughter, schoolgirl, female academic teacher and professional writer, her construction and understanding of gender became quite familiar to me. Her refusal of various socially constructed roles, which finds expression in her disruptive writing style and inquisitive analysis of constraints inscribed in gender roles, turned out to be a more significant experience that we share than language. During our next meeting, on the occasion of her book launch, I listened to her reciting her most recent texts in English and felt an insider of this artistic project. Later I got involved in a very short but meaningful performance she spontaneously initiated for her English-speaking audience. She wanted us to speak Polish to each other, saying whatever we wanted but in Polish, even random words that did not make any sense, and I found it quite challenging. [26]

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8   The interview was conducted in Polish and thus the speaker uses an honorific form used in Polish to refer to a woman in a formal situation ("Pani"). It can be considered equivalent to the English "Ms." or "Madam," or "you," which however sounds awkward in English if not followed by a name. The original reads as follows:

A: Muszę powiedzieć ci—"Pani," przepraszam ...

K: Proszę mów mi na "ty."

A: No to możemy sobie na ty!

For the discussion on the ways to convey the tone of the interview and other concerns relating to translation from Polish, see TEMPLE and KOTERBA (2009).

The third writer I interviewed is a poet and biographer, who came to Australia in the early 1990s. Bogna writes only in Polish and displays a great sensitivity towards language, its subtleties and undertones. She authored several highly praised collections of poems published in Poland for Polish readers. At the same time, her knowledge about Polish writing in Australia is incomparable as is her contribution to the culture of Polish-Australian diaspora. Devoted to preserving Polish heritage in Australia, for years she has been saving Polish language texts from oblivion. Undoubtedly, from the very first moment language turned out to be our common ground, together with other typical migrants' concerns related to language: unease about functioning within an entirely English-speaking environment, distress about witnessing deterioration of language among fellow migrants, and worry about our own children's choice of language. Common language and literary interests provided the most important context for our interaction during the interview and many consecutive meetings: our different age was entirely irrelevant, while gender was significant to the extent that it enabled us to easier express and understand certain emotional tensions and anxieties resulting from living away from home. [27]

Although consistent with my initial expectations of the commonality of language, the meeting with Bogna expanded my growing understanding of the multiplicity of linguistic positions. It was she who introduced me to life writing of another female writer, a Polish Holocaust survivor who migrated to Australia in 1949, Maria LEWITT. I read one of her autobiographical novels ("No Snow in December," 1985), juxtaposing the author's transforming attitude towards language and migration with Bogna's much disciplined approach. Not asked directly about it, Bogna told me about the significance and persistence of writing in her native language:

> "You know, language, Polish language is most important for me in my life. (...) I like to play with language, I like it, it is such a pleasure. These linguistic nuances, you can never have it in English (...). But the time of migration (...) is its enemy." [28]

LEWITT also directly deals with the problems of living in Australia as a non-English-speaking newcomer, yet in her narrative she illustrates an entirely different position to Bogna's. Initially, LEWITT struggles to accept the Anglicization of the names of her husband and son: "I had to learn how to associate all my feelings with their new, foreign-sounding names" (1985, p.56), and laments that their sons "showed little appreciation for the beauty of the Polish language" (p.140). Nevertheless, she decides to write in English, although at first it made her feel "like a painter who was colour-blind" (quoted by ARTHUR, 1988, p.122). The choice of her "writing" language is quite symptomatic: she chooses English rather than native Polish to mark a new beginning for her and her family, but also for those willing to overcome prejudices and undertake "an open exchange of ideas" (LEWITT, 1982, p.6). She accepts English rather than her mother tongue, to be a common language of war survivors to which she includes the next generation as well. Curiously, it seems to be her role as a mother that helps her make this difficult choice and "appreciate Australia more fully" (LEWITT, 1985, p.130), since it is there that she can secure a peaceful life for her

children and so "it was easy to accept that these vast beaches, this dense bush would be part of Joe's and Michael's lives" (p.141). [29]

The example of Polish migration to Australia (just like to others countries, see RYAN, 2010), shows how migrants coming in particular waves differ in many respects, including attitudes to Poland and a new home, social adjustment and acculturation strategies, the formation of ethnic-identity and gender roles. It also shows inter-ethnic differences resulting from, among other things, different experiences of migration, and challenges understanding of ethically-defined gender at the intersection of immigrant identities. This heterogeneity is represented also in the approach to language and culture, linguistic skills and aspirations, and attitudes towards maintenance of the mother tongue. It discloses itself through various social divisions which become meaningful in different contexts, and actually dismisses language as the main category upon which the relation between its members is established (see SHINOZAKI, 2012). Interacting with a very diverse group of Polish migrants convinced me that social positioning, understood both structurally and also as a process, i.e. a "set of practices, actions and meanings" (p.1811; see also ANTHIAS, 2008, p.15), significantly influences my interaction with community members, as well as my reception of their works. [30]

My encounters with the Polish-Australian writers show that linguistic erosion at the community level does not necessarily translate into a lack of awareness of the individual's ethnic identity and cultural orientation. Already in the 1980s EDWARDS (1984, p.290) argued that "a continuity of identity is not necessarily dependent upon communicative language retention" and that "minority groups can continue to attach a symbolic value even though they no longer speak the language themselves." Interestingly, though the significance of Polish language for Polish migrants round the world seems unquestionable, the process, observed for example by Joanna LUSTANSKI (2009, p.40) on Polish immigrants in Canada, of "transition from the ethno-linguistic to the ethno-cultural orientation" could provide a new perspective to view Poles in Australia and revise earlier research (SMOLICZ, 1995; see also BARTOL-JAROSINSKA, 1994; COHEN, 1990). [31]

5. Conclusion: Professional Insiders and Migrant Outsiders

A common language obviously helped me start my research on some sort of common ground that I shared with the Polish migrants in Australia, resulting in some degree of trust, openness and, predominantly, the *assumption* of understanding (see DWYER & BUCKLE, 2009, p.58). Yet it did not provide me with an "insider monopoly on the production of knowledge" (STANFIELD, 1994, p.176). Moreover, the initial feeling of commonality could not be sustained only by the fact that we spoke the same language. Indeed, our different experiences and migration trajectories meant that we did not share the same language, the same approach towards or expectations regarding language, as I demonstrated earlier on. In my access to the field, and during some of the conversations, Polish remained a kind of *lingua franca* in the sense that it enabled us basic

understandings despite all imperfections, forgotten words, outdated formulations, etc. At the same time, though, each of my conversation partners used and approached Polish in its multiplicity which resulted from their—and mine— different life trajectories, language learning and maintenance contexts. In this sense, different sociocultural understandings and assumptions with regard to language would often mark my outsider rather than insider status. [32]

These experiences made me verify my initial assumption about the common language: not so much to rebut its "autotelic significance" (SMOLICZ, 1999, p.29), but to account for the complexities of living with multiple languages, the problems with language maintenance, awareness and competence and—most importantly—other identity markers that include me as a researcher into some Polish community groups and exclude me from others. On the other hand, my research shows the power of ideologies around native language and "speech communities" that made me presume Polish would make me an insider of a group of immigrants in Australia; it shows that native language is a site of ideological battles. [33]

Gender turned out to be one of those identity markers which proved a major connection between myself and research participants, often mobilized to—using McELHINNY's terms (2007, p.3)—undergird other social relations. In this sense, instead of a "speech community," we often established a "women community." However, gender does not display uniformity and consistency, and its expressions may change depending on the situation one is in; one may comply with conventional or stereotypical expectations of particular gender roles, but may also challenge the rules of cultural gender assignment. [34]

Thus in different situations different identity markers were activated and different tensions were at work. The female writers, perhaps because of their profession as well as very specific situation of an interview focused on their writing, proved to be very self-aware and sensitive about language and/or gender, rather than other categories of self-identification. Ewa focused on looking for a mother tongue she could identify with, while Ania emphasized her refusal of being categorized either as a migrant or as a "local," and her general suspicion towards creating clear-cut categories of belonging, grouping and differentiating. [35]

Talking to women often considered "professional insiders" as authors writing about their lived experiences of migration (or "performing" their migration experience and/or ethnicity[9]), sheds light on the constant shifts in our positioning: sometimes it was our professional background of working with language, literary styles and genres, and sometimes our private experiences of being a woman and mother that shaped the dynamics of our interactions. It also became clear to me that imposing the position of "professional insiders" or, as Gayatri SPIVAK (1988) identified, the "native informants," on minority writers might result in projecting upon them a simplified (and unwanted) role of a witness or a spokesperson of an

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9   See, for example, a literary hoax of Helen DARVILLE aka DEMIDENKO widely commented in Australia (e.g. GUNEW, 1996).

ethnic group, and question the meaning of such a role as well as writers' creative potential (see GUNEW, 1996). [36]

The distinction between these different and changing positions is crucial in understanding the multidimensional nature of insider-outsider relationship. Hence the distinction between how women writers deal with language (and gender) as professionals and private individuals must be taken into account. Other women I established a relationship with, also showed a multiplicity of positions, from performing traditional gender roles and being protective of Polish language as a core element of their cultural heritage, to approaching migration and integration in a very pragmatic way (see MORAWSKA, 2004, p.1384). As a result, I also had to shift from my professional to private roles: from being a researcher seeking contacts via Polish community groups to Polish authors, to being a mother involved in various social activities with other mothers, and being a teacher often engaging with the same women and their children, yet in a different, professional context. [37]

Acknowledgments

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