

Author Interview by Harry Kreisler

Kreisler: Eva, welcome to Berkeley.

Hoffman: Thank you.

Kreisler: Tell us about your parents' immigration to Canada when you were thirteen. How did it impact your life?



Eva Hoffman's parents in the early 1950s.

Hoffman: I would say this was the formative experience of my life, from which much of my writing and other things followed. First of all, I should say that the immigration took place at a particular time and in particular political circumstances. It was in 1959, so not in the worst Stalinist years, but still during the Cold War years. So the assumption was that we would never go back.

Kreisler: To Poland?

Hoffman: To Poland.

It was not my decision to emigrate. I was having what I considered a happy and satisfactory childhood and young adolescence. So for me there was a great sense of rupture about it. And, also, at that time, the differences between Eastern Europe and the West, the differences between Cracow, where I grew up, and Vancouver, where we came to, were enormous, so the sense of culture shock was enormous. There was a real sense of shock and perhaps something like a cultural trauma in those first stages of immigration.

Kreisler: You write a lot about your parents. I'm curious as to how they shaped your character. In asking that question, I want to quote something you say in your book, *Exit Into History*: "Parents often pass on to their offspring not what they are but how ideally they imagine themselves."



Eva Hoffman with her parents, shortly after the war.

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Hoffman: When I was born my parents had just emerged from the war and from the Holocaust, and there was a double sense, within their character but also within Poland as a whole, of a very recent tragedy. At the same time, there was a sense that my parents had a tremendous will to live, a tremendous life energy and joie de vivre, which I imbibed from them. They were also largely self-educated but great readers. They certainly passed on a very natural, very intimate love of books, of reading, to me.

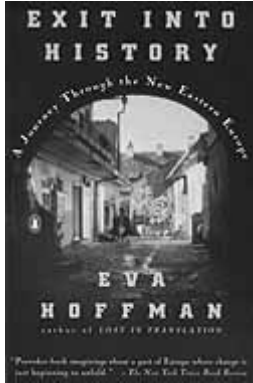
As for their ideal sense, I don't know whether they had an ideal sense of themselves, and that, in itself, was interesting. They did not have what the English call any "side" to them. They did not have any sort of affectation. I felt that I saw human nature in a very intimate way in them and in its many facets, including the life energy that I talked about and also the sense of suffering that was a very powerful pull on them after the war. So I can say I never had a strong sense of a generation gap that I found [in others] when I came to America. I felt there was a great deal of intimacy and that they didn't camouflage certain things or have Puritanical ideas of selfhood that I needed to rebel against later.

Kreisler: It's important to tell our audience here that you and your parents were both Polish and Jewish.

Hoffman: Yes.

Kreisler: Your family was emigrating because of the hostility to Jews emerging during this phase of Communist rule in Poland. Did they leave Poland with a greater ambivalence than you about the Polish part of their identity?

Hoffman: Yes. They had a much stronger sense of Jewish identity than I did. They came from a small town, from a shtetl, in the Ukraine, in the part of the Ukraine which was Polish before the war and then reverted to Soviet hands. My parents had a very strong sense of Jewish identity and a sense of Polish anti-Semitism. In 1956 the ban on emigration for Jews from Poland was lifted. This was quite exceptional. Poland had been a country from which you could not emigrate, so this was an exceptional moment. Much of the Jewish population took the opportunity of that moment to leave. It should be said that a lot of other people might have wanted to emigrate. Poland at that point was a war-ravaged, impoverished country. So I would say that the reasons for emigration were various and certainly this sense that there were strong strains of anti-Semitism were among those reasons. I was very much formed within Polish culture.



Kreisler: You mentioned the importance of reading in your family, and one of the many beautiful passages in your book is a description of the visits of you and your mother to the library to check out books. So very early, the world of books and writing became very important to you.

Hoffman: Absolutely, yes. We were not a household which had its own library. But, indeed, my mother took me to the libraries regularly. And this particular library was a little bit like a magic cave. It was in one of the old Renaissance Cracow buildings and went inward through a long darkening corridor. I had a sense that these wonderful, magical objects were being brought out for me, and I would take them home and read them quite voraciously.

(Berkeley.edu)

Reviews

"Eva Hoffman learned what it was like to carve out a space inside a new linguistic universe. This memoir tells the story of how one more immigrant came to love her adoptive country (and its slangy, elastic, exuberant language)." – *Peter Conrad nytimes.com*

"Although she works within a familiar genre here, Hoffman's is a penetrating, lyrical memoir that casts a wide net as it joins vivid anecdotes and vigorous philosophical insights on Old World Cracow and Ivy League America; Polish anti-Semitism; the degradations suffered by immigrants; Hoffman's cultural nostalgia, self-analysis and intellectual passion; and the atrophy of her Polish from disuse and her own disabling inarticulateness in English as a newcomer. Linguistic dispossession, she explains, "is close to the dispossession of one's self." As Hoffman savors the cadences and nuances of her adopted language, she remains ever conscious of assimilation's perils: "But how does one bend toward another culture without falling over, how does one strike an elastic balance between rigidity and self-effacement?" – *Publisher's Weekly Review*

Lost in Translation is a moving memoir that takes the specific experience of the exile and humanizes it to such a degree that it becomes relevant to the lives of a wider group of readers.-- *Amazon.com*

Further Reading

The Secret: a novel by Eva Hoffman

Displaced persons: growing up American after the Holocaust by Joseph Berger

Maus: a survivor's tale:--my father bleeds history (mid 1930s to Winter 1944) by Art Spiegelman

The Promised Land by Mary Antin

After Long Silence: a memoir by Helen Fremont