Displaced Self: The Impact of Language-migration on Self-identity

by

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ABSTRACT

In this dissertation I explore the impact that language-migration has on Self-Identity. The thesis consists of two parts: a memoir *The Strangeness of Freedom*, and an exegesis. Each is intended to stand alone, but also to complement the other. In the memoir I draw on my personal recollections of my family’s migrations across five countries (Czechoslovakia, West Germany, USA and Australia) and into three languages (Czech, German and English) in order to convey my particular experience of language migration.

In the exegesis I analyse several memoirs written by other language migrants and examine what impact they believe migrating into a new language and culture had on their own Self-identity. I draw on postmodern and psychoanalytic theory to explore the nature of Self-Identity formation and why migrants, as well as non-migrants might experience a change in their Self-identity during the course of their lives. I attempt to tease out to what extent the change in Self-identity is a universal experience that results from living across time and moving from a known past into an unknown future, regardless of whether one physically migrates or not.

I found that while language-migrants tend to describe a more intense disruption of their Self-Identity, non-migrants also experience such a disruption in their sense of Self, simply by living in a rapidly changing world. I propose that while changing locations and languages clearly disrupts the continuity we presume life entails, it is in fact the passage of time that distances us from our known past, including our familiar Self, even if we never physically or linguistically migrate.
PART 1: CREATIVE WORK

The Strangeness of Freedom: A Memoir About Migration

“I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster, some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent. I miss them, but it wasn't a disaster.”

(Elizabeth Bishop, in One Art)
CHAPTER ONE

Czechoslovakia 1962-1968

"But staying is nowhere."

(Rainer Maria Rilke, in *Duino Elegies*)

Bratislava

Journeys rarely begin where one assumes they do. Often it is only later, when looking back over one's life, that our at times tortuous path through life becomes visible. I grew up in Czechoslovakia during the 1960s. You won't find Czechoslovakia on any map today - it no longer exists. But when I was a child, Czechoslovakia was still there and it was my home. My life appeared to be in order, everything seemed to be just as it should be.

My own story begins like this: I was born at eight thirty in the evening in a tiny Slovakian village, at the height of winter, when the snowflakes fell like feathers from the sky. I came out backwards and one week late. “You were defiant right from the start,” my mother liked to remind me for years afterwards. My mother was twenty-six and my father was twenty-eight, and I was their first child. During my first year of life, my parents did not have a home of their own and so my mother and I moved between her relatives in Slovakia and my father's relatives in Bohemia. My father lived alone in student accommodation while finishing his PhD in Bratislava.

The first thing I recall is the shape of bare trees, like black fingers, against the winter sky. That was because my grandmother Babka\(^1\) used to put me in my pram out in the yard in the middle of winter for a bit of airing, my mother told me years later. I don't remember much after that, except for sensations: a sweet warm taste filling my mouth (must have been milk), dancing of light and shadow above my head (perhaps sunshine filtering through the trees onto a white wall above my cot), shrill sounds in my ears (my

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\(^1\) Babka and the diminutive Babicka both mean grandmother.
grandmother was upset again), but once we moved to Bratislava memories flood in and I can easily remember myself back there in 1965.

I was three years old when we finally moved to a place of our own. Our flat was on the fifth floor of a long concrete block of apartments, in the understated socialist style, in a new suburb called Travniky. We were the very first occupants after it was built. Even today I can smell the newness of our flat, the way it was then. It was untouched, unstained by other occupants’ lives and smelt of parquetry wax, furniture polish, and soap. Gradually furniture was added: a floor to ceiling bookshelf, dining table, red couch. Our kitchen in Bratislava was white, all white and clean and sterile like a hospital ward: the ceiling, the appliances, of which there weren’t many, the tiles behind the stove that stood in a niche opposite the window. Next to the window was a tall built-in cupboard, painted in white with a silver handle, shaped like a rectangular “D”. The floor was covered in linoleum, also white with fine grey specks all over it, like a duck’s egg.

The kitchen was my mother’s place, one she both loved and hated, I realised when I was much older. I think she hated the way cooking and nurturing were the sign of her fall: that she too had become trapped in domesticity, like her own mother before her, which she had wanted to evade as she was growing up. That is why she studied and worked hard and even married another professional engineer. This had been her stellar rise: from small village life straight to the top in a professional career. And although stories like my mothers were portrayed as the norm under Communism, it was rare for women to actually work as mechanical engineers in Czechoslovakia, for even under Communism the most prestigious jobs, like engineering, were filled by men. Sometimes these conflicting realities of my mother’s life seemed to overwhelm her with a kind of vertigo, a breathlessness, as if her professional ascent had happened too fast for her to grow sufficiently accustomed to such dizzying heights.

I remember when I was five years old. I wore my wavy brown hair in pigtails with ladybird clips or sometimes tied back with red ribbons. I had been going to kindergarten every day since the age of three and felt almost grown up. Life
was moving along and there I was feeling as if I was on the brink of it, but it was life on the inside that I sensed the most.

My little brother Andrej, who was three, was sitting next to me on the couch. Our arms rested on the black tempered glass of the coffee table as we leafed through the encyclopaedia. We liked to look at photos of our favourite animals. I liked horses the best. Andrej wasn’t sure, but sometimes said that giraffes and lions looked nice. Through the open living room window I could hear the intermittent buzz of traffic as it ran past our flat five floors down. There wasn’t much traffic since few people owned cars in those days. In the evening I would be listening for the click of the key in the lock of our front door, followed by the soft bang of the door being shut. When I heard the striding footsteps on the parquetry floor in the hallway I knew that my father had come home from work. My brother Andrej and I ran squealing: “The horse is home! The horse is home!” and he bent down and caught us in mid-flight as we catapulted ourselves onto him. We laughed and he laughed back at us.

“We’ll play in a minute!” he told us and tried to get free to take his coat off and undo his tie but we were too impatient to wait for him and hung off both his legs. Dad grinned at us and told us to wait just a minute while he got changed. He shuffled down the hallway with us clutching his legs. He put on a tracksuit and then crouched down on all fours. My brother was the rider and sat astride on his back. He had to hang on because Dad took his role as a horse seriously and would buck now and again. Meanwhile I played the foal and huddled underneath Dad’s belly until it was my turn to ride on the horse’s back.

My mother looked in from the kitchen, wearing her apron and wielding a wooden spoon: "Don't make so much noise!" But she was grinning at us.

"Come and play with the horse," I yelled out to her at the top of my voice.

But she said she had no time for games right now. Someone had to make the dinner and obviously no one else would do it but her, so, could we at least keep down the noise please.

"Maminko, what's eating you! Why don't you give us your nice smile one more time?" Dad’s eyes twinkled mischievously. But Mum just poked her tongue out at him and retreated into her kitchen to finish making our dinner.
I had a thing about horses right from the start and was forever trying to convince my parents to buy me a pony. “We’ll put it on the small balcony, off the kitchen,” I told them. “I’ll use the elevator to get it out for exercise!”

My parents were not convinced. Father said that mother would have nowhere to put her bucket and mop if the pony was on the balcony. Mother said it was too expensive to keep a horse anywhere.

“Not a horse, just a pony,” I explained. “A very small pony won't eat much.”

Mother said no and that was that. Dad said maybe, that perhaps one day we would move to a place where I could have a horse.

One evening, when the light was beginning to fade with the setting sun, Dad put on Mozart’s *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* on the record-player. I sat on the couch next to him; the red woollen cover of the couch felt rough against my skin and my feet dangled above parquetry floor. Mum passed through on the way to the kitchen. She looked dour, serious, preoccupied, as if there was too much on her mind, to bear the effort of politeness. Dad was grinning, as he had just made a joke but Mum was not in the mood for joking, she told him over her shoulder, as she exited into her white room, the kitchen. I went to the window and pulled the curtains back, so that Dad could also see the pink glow that was beginning to spread across the sky in the West. Mum was clunking the pots, sometimes a bit too loudly for it to be accidental. There we were, Dad and I, sitting on the wine-red couch listening to Mozart. His eyes were closed and his smile was wide and untroubled, as he moved his head in time to the music. My eyes were wide-open: I didn’t want to miss a beat. I liked *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* because it sounded happy.

The following Sunday Dad took me for a walk in the forest. Mum was at home, looking after Andrej and cooking Sunday lunch. Dad told me about nature: how birds knew inside themselves where to migrate every winter; how the leaves went yellow in autumn and then brown before they finally died and fell to the ground, where worms broke them down to form humus that nourished the forest. Seen through my father's eyes the natural world came alive and I wanted to know more about it: where did the squirrels live? Did
they have houses like ours? Why don't they go away for the winter like the birds?

My father admitted that he didn’t know all the answers. "If you are interested, you will have to go to university to find out."

"What is that?" I wanted to know.

"It's a school for adults where you learn about all kinds of things depending on your interest." I was very interested.

"When can I go there? Can I learn about squirrels?"

"First you must learn to read and write at a regular school and then when you are older you can study anything you want at university."

"Did you go to a university?"

"Yes, and your mother too. We learned about machines, how machines work. It’s called Mechanical Engineering."

That didn't sound very interesting to me and I wondered why my parents liked such work. I certainly found living things more interesting, be they people or animals. I couldn’t wait to start school and counted down the days.

I felt safe with my family. We lived in an old city; my parents took me to the ballet, theatre, concerts, and to an ice hockey game. Under Communism, culture was available to everyone. We went on holidays to Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, and in the winter of 1968 we went skiing in the Tatra Mountains. What I remember about our life then is the sense of time standing still. Our life felt as regular as breathing and I thought it would never end.

It must be the nature of all children to see their parents in a perfect light and aspire to become like them, at least up to a certain age. To me both my parents were perfect adults and I looked up to them. I liked being with my parents. I knew that that my parents both loved me. All mothers and fathers loved their children and they also loved each other, there was no doubt about that. I was sure of it, just as I was certain that we lived in Bratislava on the 5th floor or that nights were always black. But sometimes I felt edgy and didn’t know why. On the outside I seemed glad that I had my mother and father, that we all lived together in our flat in Bratislava but on the inside I was watching. Nothing escaped my radar: my mother’s passing moods, the nice way she dressed, the way she worried about us; my father’s overwhelming joyfulness,
the way he taunted his wife, his playfulness with my brother and me. Once I
overheard my mother talking to Pani Radova who lived down the hall. She told
Pani Radova that my brother was the easiest child to look after but that I was
just trouble, that I was more my father's daughter. I wondered what the trouble
was that I caused her, but I didn’t ask because I wasn’t meant to be listening to
adult conversations.

I had to watch carefully. I also knew that while my mother was smaller
than Dad physically, her anger was much bigger than his. Everything could
appear to be running smoothly, and suddenly bang, the anger was out - my
mother’s anger. When she got into a sour mood she wouldn’t talk much, except
to tell me what not to do, or that I’d made her get mad again. I wanted to be
taken seriously, not yelled at, or diminished in any way and so I wouldn’t just
hang my head, the way cowards did in fairytales – I yelled right back at her as
if my life depended on it. Sometimes she said more to me in the middle of a
rage. She told me once that I was the worst child there ever was and how she
had expected having children would be fun, but it wasn’t, not at all, but only
because we were bad and not like other, normal children. She said ‘normal’ as
if she wanted to underline that word especially. I feared then, that there must
be something terribly wrong with me.

I felt responsible for my mother’s unhappiness and didn’t want to make
her feel sad. But I couldn’t figure out how to make her happy either, for
everything I did seemed to upset her. I didn’t realise then that perhaps she
wasn’t yelling at me so much as she was yelling for herself.

That is how I remember it now, looking back, but it wasn’t always like
that. Sometimes my mother didn't interrupt me. She let me dress up in her hats
and high-heel shoes, took photos of me for our photo-album, and allowed me to
watch her develop photos in the bathroom/darkroom. She also read stories to
us every night: the Czech version of Arthur Ransom’s *Swallows and Amazons
(Lastovicky a Amazonky)*, Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland (Alenka v Kraji
Divu)* and Karel Capek's *Dasenka*, all of which I loved.

Sometimes I thought that after my mother yelled at us she seemed more
alive. It was as if her anger had built up inside her and for some reason she was
compelled to vent her exasperation at somebody, anybody who happened to be
around. Perhaps we deserved it for making such a mess of her life, the way our
presence had derailed her from her career. I did not realize then that she was trying to conquer her grief by force of will. Neither did I know until much later how much my father also resented his career being stunted by the realities of domestic life. For a long time it was only my mother's resentment that openly seeped out, while my father kept his resentment inside and always smiled.

The Broken Path

My parents met at university on the basketball field. Was it love at first sight? Years later I asked them about it. My mother said: "No, your father played a foul on court and absolutely infuriated me!" My father also said: "No, your mother seemed too small to be playing basketball, but then I realised she was good, she was fast, and I became interested. I wanted to find out who this girl really was."

In fact, my mother almost didn't make it to university at all. Her hopes of getting a higher education were frustrated by the Communist party, which would not allow her a place at any university, for 'class' and 'political profile' reasons, as they called it. After the 1948 Communist takeover of Czechoslovakia, my grandparents had been branded as 'bourgeois' and therefore anti-Communist simply because my grandfather had owned a car repair shop and had refused to join the Communist party. His working class origins did not protect him and his mechanics shop was liquidated by the party soon afterwards. This had repercussions for the whole family: my grandfather couldn't find work and my mother and her brother Rudo had little hope of continuing their education after high school. Under the Communist regime, students’ class background and their parents’ political activities were more important than ability or results in the admissions exam in determining who was admitted to university. Not surprisingly, it was the children of loyal party members who got the best places at university and the best jobs afterwards.

Eventually, through the contacts of a family acquaintance who knew someone high-up in the party, my mother was able to go to the university in Liberec, where she studied Mechanical Engineering. There her situation remained remarkable even under Communism, for she was the only woman in her engineering class. I have a black and white photo of my mother sitting in a
lecture at university. Dressed in a white shirt, she was sitting in the front row surrounded by young men in black suits and ties. Her lips were narrowed into a tight grin and she looked happy. The blackboard towered above her, covered in tiny white letters and numbers.

I have another photo of my parents in a university play. My mother was wearing a flowing white dress in her role as a ghostly apparition and my father was in a devil's costume in a performance of the Czech play by Jan Drda, *Hradky z Certem* ('Games with the Devil'). I loved looking at these photos, especially the one of my dad as the devil, in his dark green loden suit, little horns sticking out of his hat, false bushy eyebrows, a tail and some tufts of black hair poking out of his shirt. There certainly was a devilish side to my father's fun, just as my mother seemed to be haunted by something in life.

Perhaps engineering had not been my mother’s first choice but by the time I was born she was planning to start her PhD and embark on a career. My mother never did fit the stereotype of the Western middleclass housewife confined to a suburban home, at least not while we lived in Bratislava. Of course, under Communism all women had to work fulltime. It was the law. But my mother also didn’t want to end up like her mother, bound to a village life.

**Czechs, Slovaks, and Communists**

Identity is defined by reference to the 'other', by how one differs from someone else. This applies equally to individuals as to societies. Self-definition inherently involves a condemnation of the other, of the qualities that stand opposed to our own. The ‘other’ is seen as the barbarian, while we ourselves remain civilised. It is the result of the ancient duality of 'Greek vs. Barbarian' being passed down the centuries, changing in content while maintaining its form: Christian vs. pagan, science vs. myth, rationality vs. emotion, Czech vs. Slovak.

My father is Czech and my mother Slovak. The history of Czechoslovakia is not straightforward. Czechoslovakia did not exist as a single unified nation until 1918, when the Austro-Hungarian Empire fell apart after the First World War. Bohemia, as the Czechs call their land, had been occupied
for 300 years by the Hapsburg monarchy and Slovakia had been ruled by the Magyars for over a thousand years. But since the end of the First World War, Czechs had been the dominant nation in Czechoslovakia. My parents embodied this split in their own country: they were worlds apart even though they lived together in one place. When we lived in Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia, my father's Czechhood was never under threat and did not have to be openly defended. For instance, I never heard my father speak Slovak to anyone, but my mother had learned to speak fluently in Czech. My father was proud of being Czech and liked to recount the ways Czechs were superior to the Slovaks. He explained how Czechs were more rational because the Enlightenment had come as far as Prague but had not penetrated further East into Slovakia. My mother seemed ambivalent about her Slovak origins and I had the feeling she would have preferred to shed them, although I could not figure out why for a long time. Then I came to realise that being called a Slovak in Czechoslovakia was a form of judgement, one that implied deep and unchangeable flaws; of having a peasant’s character, being sentimental and uncivilized – a Barbarian.

Disagreement continues today about Czech and Slovak identity, amongst politicians and ordinary people. One version draws on biological metaphors, that Czechs and Slovaks evolved from the same roots and that the national division imposed from outside was just a temporary aberration - over time Czechs and Slovaks would naturally unite again. The other version is coloured by myth: that Czechs and Slovaks are two different kinds of people who were never meant to live together and it was the formation of a united Czechoslovakia in 1918 that had been the aberration. The first version may sound more rational, but by overemphasising evolution it overlooks ruptures and differences. Historically the Slovaks resented the Czechs telling them how best to run their lives and Czechs took umbrage at having to ‘rescue’ Slovakia, a place that to them always seemed backward. Under Communism such issues of national identity became irrelevant, at least officially.

Czechoslovakia had been the last country to be swallowed up by Communism in 1948 and Stalinism survived longer there than anywhere else. In East Germany anti-Communist rioting took place in 1948 and in 1956 there were riots in Poland and Hungary after Krushchev made his speech about the abuses
of Stalin's regime. Russians violently repressed these uprisings. Throughout all this Czechoslovakia remained loyal and stable. The largest statue of Stalin stood in Prague. But the people were not satisfied.

Freedom is hard to recognize at the best of times and often you don't know you have it until it is gone, like breathing. Under Communism you couldn’t travel beyond the Iron Curtain, nor could you voice any disagreement with the government and since Communism fostered a single party state you couldn’t vote someone else in to do a better job. For both my parents, life under Communism had become more unbearable than the personal differences between them. They didn't want to stay at home anymore – they longed for freedom, for self-determination, for a life unrestrained by the dictates and hierarchies they had to live under for much of their lives. Of course, they may have found freedom at home eventually, since lies and deceptions make shaky foundations and make things fall apart, given enough time. But, my parents also realised that rather than wait for change to come, sometimes it helps to move and leave un-freedom behind. Life rarely takes care of itself unless we take care of ourselves at the same time.

**Trapped by Politics**

At the age of six people aren't usually interested in politics. To me life seemed just fine regardless of who was running our country. We lived in our little flat, visited my grandparents Dedko and Babka, and I went with my parents to see *Cinderella* at the ballet, *The Seven Ravens* at the theatre, and the children’s movie *Kolo* at the cinema. My parents' and relatives' sentiments filtered down to me, however, and I became familiar with their expletives: ‘hnusny komunisti’ (‘filthy Communists’) and ‘ruske prasata’ (‘Russian pigs’). So, I knew that my family did not like the Communists, although I was not sure how I would recognize one myself. A Communist seemed to lack distinct markings and could be found everywhere, even amongst friends, or so people said. Thus one had to be careful what one said and to whom, not knowing who might be spying for the Communist Party.

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2 Dedko means grandfather.
My father always said that Communism was like a religion. To become a follower you had to believe religiously, along the lines of ‘you can’t see it but believe it anyway’. “Fortunately,” he used to add, “lies have an almost-ness about them, which makes truth appear more clearly defined, if only one dared to take a closer look at what is actually said.” But people preferred not to see for themselves and believed what the Communist government told them. My parents did look and all they saw was the multitude of ways in which our life was restricted in Czechoslovakia.

Of course my parents could have made things easier for themselves if they'd joined the Communist Party. Plenty of Czechs and Slovaks joined the party even though they had no faith in it, for such a move entailed benefits: better pay, advancement on the job, good university positions for their children, travel opportunities to the west. My parents, however, lacked the repertoire of deviousness, the kind of two-facedness that would have allowed them to weave their way through the dense tapestry of Communist Party intrigue. They were not good at suffering through boring party meetings, nor at cheering on command. They did not believe in Communism, did not have faith that it would lead to a better world for anyone. They had seen too many good people being locked away, even exterminated during the 1950s for daring to speak their mind.

Then, at the beginning of 1968, the political situation suddenly changed as the more liberal politician, Alexander Dubcek, was elected as first secretary and began to implement new reforms in line with his slogan ‘socialism with a human face’. He ended censorship and allowed western influences into the country. Suddenly journalists openly criticised the hardline doctrine and demanded change; previously banned writers like Hrabal and Skvorecky were allowed to publish their books again; women wore mini-skirts; and jazz was played in public places. People were hopeful that this thawing of hardline Communism, the Prague Spring, was here to stay. The big question remained: how long before Communist Czechoslovakia would finally collapse? While hope can be a catalyst for change, sometimes hope is as deceitful as despair.
Indecisions

During the summer holidays of August 1968 I stayed with my grandmother Babicka Tomasova, my father's mother, in the town of Chocen 150km northeast of Prague. The 21st of August 1968 had been a hot day. By the afternoon storm clouds were brewing over the horizon and thunder was rumbling in the distance. Babicka was in the kitchen listening to the radio while she prepared dinner. I was in the living room when the first secretary’s unexpected radio address suddenly came on. "Friends, I think these will soon be the last words you hear from us," the first secretary, Alexander Dubcek, said out on the radio, sounding grave. "Friends we all believe, I ask you urgently, believe that healthy thinking must win - you hear the shooting." Then the radio went dead, right at the moment when, I later found out, the Soviet troops invaded the Prague Radio headquarters.

“Oh this is terrible, terrible!' I heard my grandmother Babicka begin to moan from the kitchen. 'There will be another war!”

I felt uneasy. I had never heard Babicka cry before. Being only six I could not picture a war nor understand what it might mean and was all the more scared because of my ignorance. Clearly, I thought to myself, a war must be the worst thing in the world if merely the thought of it could upset Babicka that much.

For the rest of the day everyone kept talking about the Russian invasion and I could not get it out of my mind. I kept seeing hordes of bad men clutching guns, lurking in the forest that surrounded the town. It was like the time in kindergarten when I heard about a little boy who had drowned in a drain while playing on a building site he wasn’t allowed to play in. For weeks afterwards I could see his little body, floating face down in murky-brown water, alone and dead. I felt the same vague dread now: something had gone badly wrong but I had no idea what it was or what would happen next.

Two days later, on the 23rd of August 1968, my father arrived to take me home to Bratislava by train. The trains were now up and running after a countrywide shut-down for two days during the Soviet invasion. I studied Dad

3 A note about Czech names: all female surnames end with -ova. Thus if Jan Tomas marries, his wife will be known as Suzana Tomasova.
4 These are Dubcek’s actual words (see www.centraleurope.com/special/spring68/overview.php).
carefully as soon as he walked through the door at my grandmother's place. He looked completely calm and confident despite my grandmother's ongoing lamentations that filled me with dread. In Dad’s presence my own unease immediately dissipated. If he was not worried then I didn’t need to be either.

Dad said that it would be all right, that things were still looking up and we had to stay hopeful. After breakfast we said goodbye to Babicka and then walked to Chocen railway station through the park. The chestnut trees formed a canopy above our heads while the sun shining through their leaves threw intricate shadows beneath our feet. We changed trains in Brno railway station. The platforms were in rows under a huge glass roof that was rust-stained and grimy and the concrete on the platforms was cracked and uneven underfoot after years of neglect. My father was tired and as soon as we boarded the fast train he fell asleep. I looked out at the fields, brown and furrowed after the harvest. I wanted Dad to keep talking to me, to tell me things I could understand. I prodded him whenever his snoring got too loud or his mouth gaped open too much because I hated the other passengers staring. But I couldn’t keep him awake this time.

In the early afternoon, the train rolled into Bratislava station, which was newer than the one in Brno. When the train came to a stop, my bag and I were lifted onto the platform. My Dad held my hand as we walked to the bus stop. In his other hand, he carried my little red bag and his beige trench coat. He was normally a fast walker but he slowed down his usual pace just for me. The air was oppressive in the afternoon heat. Another storm was brewing behind the gathering clouds.

We took the bus to Travniky and walked from the bus stop to our flat. Mounds of earth, where pipes were being laid, lined the footpath. We looked up to the fifth floor to see if we could spot Mother in the kitchen window. I thought I saw her shape but wasn’t sure. When we get to the car park in front of our block of flats, Dad pointed out a sign to me, freshly painted in large white letters. It said 'Russians go home,' he explained with a hint of excitement in his voice and again I was reminded that something important was brewing.

My mother gave us homemade lemonade and 'bublina' - a fruitcake she made with fresh redcurrants and strawberries picked from our small garden plot on the outskirts of Bratislava. She opened the windows hoping for a cross
breeze to cool the inside of our flat. We sat on the balcony and my parents talked about Russian planes.

"Andrej couldn't sleep last night - the constant back and forth of those jets kept him awake," she said to Dad. I asked about the big war, the one Babicka told me about. Was this a war like then?

"No, nothing like that," Dad said with firmness in his voice. "Everything will turn out fine. And there is still time for us," he added mysteriously but he wouldn’t say any more than that because mother gave him one of her looks that signalled ‘enough said Jozef!’ without her having to say a word. Later, after Andrej and I had gone to bed, I heard them talking in the living room. Mother said that our new President Dubcek was finished, that the hardliners wouldn’t let him get away with anything after this. Dad told her not to be so pessimistic and that maybe something could still be done. Then they started their familiar argument about my mum being too pessimistic, which she always said was not true and that the real problem was my dad not being realistic enough. Uneasily I drifted off to sleep.

During the night jets roared overhead and kept us awake. More Warsaw troops were flown in to support the Soviet military invasion, I heard my parents say the next morning. Fresh graffiti in Russian and Slovak was painted all over the concrete pathways and walls of our housing development. From our kitchen balcony we could see several signs painted in enormous white letters in the car park behind our flat. One said: SOVIETS GO HOME!" and the other: "DEATH TO THE BETRAYERS OF THE CZECHOSLOVAK NATION!"

Over breakfast, Dad explained that the signs were written in the Russian Cyrillic alphabet, which was different from our Roman letters. Mum said she was glad that the compulsory Russian she and Dad had to learn at school had finally come in handy.

**Decisions**

Years later, I found out that for one whole week at the end of August 1968 Czechoslovakia had no government. The first secretary, Dubcek, was flown to Moscow for interrogation and a new first secretary had not been re-instated by
the Communist Party. Throughout this time the underground broadcasts continued, with the radio announcers urging Czech and Slovak citizens to employ passive resistance by avoiding violence and engaging soldiers in conversation, telling them to go home. The announcers also told the citizens to remove all street names, house numbers and highway signs, so that the only signs that remained all over Czechoslovakia were the signs pointing back to Moscow. Our radio stayed on all day as my parents listened to the underground broadcasts, but for me life just went on as before.

One evening I heard Mother say to Dad, “We have to make a decision. The Russians are in and if we leave it any longer we won't get out. Perhaps we won't get another chance like this.”

"Don't worry so much, you always make mountains out of molehills!" Dad told her in between reading the newspaper.

"You are just so irresponsible! As if everything involved only you. What about me and the children? We need to make a decision before the Communists close the borders again."

What were my parents up to? I had no idea that they were planning to defect to the West. I did know that Dad had received a scholarship - the *Alexander von Humboldt Stiftung* - at the University of Karlsruhe in West Germany and that he’d be taking it up sometime during the autumn of 1968. I didn’t know that he had to postpone this placement to Germany once before, in 1967. At that time the Czechoslovak secret police, called the STB, got wind of him owning illegal books. Dad’s friend Milos, a philosopher who worked at the archive in Prague, had been caught at the border trying to defect to the West and during an STB interrogation he divulged that he’d left a box of books at our flat. At 6 am the following morning my father looked through the peephole in our front door, straight into the blank eyes of a secret policeman. The STB searched our flat and found Hitler's *Mein Kampf* and Orwell's *Animal Farm* amongst the books that Milos had stolen from the archive. Later they interrogated Dad under a bright light at their head office. They said they would cause trouble unless my mother and father cooperated with the STB. To make sure Dad got the gist, the STB agent spelled out the conditions: he would not be able to take up his scholarship in Germany unless he agreed to report on his
colleagues at the Technical University in Bratislava. Since collaboration had never been one of my dad's strongest skills he had to refuse their offer. Many years later he explained to me that he could easily let the scholarship go but he could never be drawn into the shady dealings of the STB. "Once they suck you in, you're done for and I couldn't have lived with myself after that."

Following this incident, Dad was demoted within the research group he'd headed at the Technical University. He could only teach under supervision, for fear that as a non-Communist party member he might say things that could corrupt his students' carefully tended socialist minds. It took another twelve months before an opportunity for defection presented itself again.

Then in early 1968 a different STB agent phoned Dad out of the blue and wanted to meet him. Dad said, "Fine, as long as it’s not in your office like last time!" So they met at the pub over a beer. This STB agent uncharacteristically told my father that things were changing in the government and soon he would get a chance to go to Germany. Sure enough, by the middle of the year my dad was granted a visa to the West to start his post-doctoral work in Karlsruhe. Dad never did figure out why this agent confided in him.

By the time the Soviets invaded Czechoslovakia, Dad knew that unless he moved straight away he might not get another chance to leave. He collected his documents, his visa, the signed permissions from the head of the department and the Communist Party. He left on the first of September, a month before we did, on the 10 o'clock train to Vienna and from there on the fast train to Karlsruhe. I remember him telling me, "Next time we meet will be in Karlsruhe!"

"Maybe," Mother said. "If its not too late for us to get our exit visas".

"You've got to be positive," Dad the eternal optimist laughed at her. "If it's meant to be, it will turn out fine". Mother just frowned.

I started school in the first week of September 1968. Dad had left for Germany a few days before and there were no more jets waking us at night or tanks blocking the streets, although the Soviets were still occupying Czechoslovakia. To me everything seemed normal. I had been waiting all summer for my first school day. In the morning Mum helped me select the clothes I would wear: a
black pleated skirt, red jumper, white sock and red shoes. Mother walked me to my primary school, which was only two blocks from our flat, on her way to work. I held Mum’s hand and felt very mature with my brand-new red school backpack that contained my new tools: a schoolbook, a notebook, plain and colored pencils, and an eraser. Outside there was a chill in the air - autumn had come early.

I liked my teacher, Pani Horvatova; she had golden hair pinned up in a bun and blue eyes that smiled at the class. She looked what I imagined a princess would look like from the fairytales my parents read to me at home. We had to copy things out of our first grade book: circles, triangles and squares, wavy lines in coloured pencils. Pani Hovatova stamped our workbooks with red ladybird stamps. I got four ladybirds for most of my work. Once I got only one and a half ladybirds, because I had rubbed out a mistake so hard that the page ended up with a hole in it. I felt devastated and tried doubly hard from then on to make sure I stayed on my path towards university.

In my second week at school, some kids from the Pioneer group visited our class. I liked the red scarves they tied around their necks. They talked about the marches Pioneers went on and sang a couple of Pioneer songs for us. Back home, I told my mother that I wanted to join the Pioneers because I wanted to wear a red scarf and sing their songs. She raised her eyebrows and said, "Absolutely not! They're just little Communists who’ll fill your head with useless slogans!"

**Across the Iron Curtain**

People rarely ever asked me how it was when I left Czechoslovakia, what it was like to leave my home. I guess they suppose it was so long ago that I may not remember or that it really didn’t matter to me any more. Maybe it was my own fault they never asked. Maybe I acted too glib whenever I sensed someone was about to broach that topic, and I quickly hid behind a quick succession of facts: how we defected to West Germany, how my parents had always wanted to leave, how moving had naturally changed our life for the better. Perhaps there were just too many unspeakable feelings associated with that time to even begin to voice them, and perhaps others sensed that too.
Over the years, I gathered snippets of information about the time before we defected to the West, the days following August 21st, which marked the end of the Prague Spring and the beginning of the Soviet occupation in Czechoslovakia. My father told me recently that it was true that the radio announcers in effect ran the country for one week at the end of August during the Soviet invasion. But the attempt to liberate our country failed in the end. The Communist hardliners took charge again and nothing really changed, except for those who fled. We were part of the 15,000 Czechs and Slovaks who defected to the West in 1968. My mother remembers trying to get the right documents for us, the visas and official signatures, which would allow us to travel to West Germany. She travelled to Prague by train and pleaded with the Germans at the consulate, but by then they were no longer granting visas by then. The Austrians were more lenient. She joined the snaking line outside their embassy, and after several hours of waiting, left with the right documents.

She flew back to Bratislava to save time. The Slovak delegation was flying on the same plane, after their failed attempt to find an agreement with the Soviet delegates from Moscow and end the occupation. At the airport, Soviet soldiers had set up camp and their tents and lorries spilled out over the tarmac. Air-traffic control was still down as the Soviet invasion dragged on. A man sitting next to my mother joked with her: "Do you realise that if the Russians wanted to, they could solve half their problem by shooting this plane and the Slovak delegation down?" She was not amused and was glad when the plane finally landed in Bratislava.

My father phoned from Karlsruhe and told Mum to leave straight away, even if she didn’t have the German visas yet. My grandparents came to stay with us and my grandmother Babka helped my mother pack. We would take just two suitcases with only enough clothes to make it look as if we were going on a two-week holiday, which was the time we had been granted on our visas. Mum and Babka sewed money into the hem of my brother's pants and hid money inside a half-empty tube of toothpaste, which in those days could be unrolled at one end. I chose one doll to take with me, my doll Barbara, not realizing that I would never see any of my other toys again.
We boarded the train at Bratislava station on September the 11th, 1968, three weeks after the Soviet invasion. Our documents allowed us to go at least as far as Vienna, but not to Germany. My grandmother Babka’s face was streaked with tears and grandfather Dedko stared blankly into space. I did not know that we would never return to Bratislava again and that this trip was not a two week holiday to visit my dad. My mother could not risk telling us that we were defecting for good, just in case we said something to someone - "little children can't help themselves telling people everything", my mother explained later. That is why I didn't look at anything properly before we left, the way someone leaving forever would have done. I didn’t experience what my mother and father must have felt: a sense of being homesick in advance for this life and this place.

At the Austrian border the guard checked our exit visas and said, “Have a good rest of your life!” My mother was convinced that he knew we weren't intending to come back. As soon as we crossed the border, Communism fell away, but not the worry my mother would have felt.

We arrived in Vienna by mid-morning. It took less than an hour to get there from Bratislava, yet it seemed a world away. As my mother was lifting down our two cases, I was looking out the window, checking things out, when suddenly I spotted my father standing right outside our carriage, looking about, obviously searching for us. He was wearing his trench coat and his short-cropped hair stood up, as it always did, like the bristles on a porcupine. Later that day we found out how my father's colleague, Herr Flögel, told Dad that it wouldn’t be right to let one’s wife arrive with two children in a strange city. Since my father did not have a driver's licence, Herr Flögel offered to drive him the 1000km from Karlsruhe to Vienna on the Autobahn. They got up at 2 am and drove all night to meet us at the train station by 10 am in the morning.

The only memories I have of Austria are a set of wide marble steps leading to an official building, perhaps the West German consulate where my mother spent a lot of time trying to get our German visa. I also remember the red candy dispensers, where you put 5 Pfennig into the slot and turned the dial to get some bubble gum. I’d never seen anything like it in Czechoslovakia. Of the drive to Karlsruhe I only remember stopping at a Raststätte (a freeway restaurant)
on the Autobahn, where my parents had coffee and Andrej and I ate cake. The coffee was served with the milk on the side, in little chocolate cups, which Andrej and I got to eat after my parents used the milk up. Dad told to Herr Flögel and Mum in German: “It’s true, as someone once said, that those who defect don’t necessarily have the strongest minds, but they had the weakest stomachs. The mind can rationalize anything, but the stomach can only take so much!” He told us about life in West Germany: how there was democracy in the food even, in the size of the portions, the choice of vegetables, as if it was our right to have all this and more.
CHAPTER TWO

Germany 1968-1970

“Home is a place we have to leave in order to grow up, to become ourselves.”

(Michael Ignatieff, in The Needs of Strangers)

The Distress of Freedom

We arrived in Karlsruhe, West Germany, on a late afternoon in October 1968. Shrouds of cloud gathered on the horizon and obscured the almost setting sun. Elm and chestnut trees lined the bigger streets, with their bare branches pointed towards the sky like crooked fingers. Herr Flögel drove us through the town in a loop, along Kaiser Straße and onto the Zirkel, taking us past the castle shaped like an elaborate wedding cake.

“The castle is at the centre of Karlsruhe,” Herr Flögel explained, “with the streets radiating outwards like spokes on a wheel.”

He turned up Willy Brandt Straße and down the Adenauerring. Formal gardens, a delicate wrought iron fence, woods, an evergreen, flashed by like improbably images out of a picture book. A fine drizzle began to seep from the sky as we arrived back in the town centre.

For the next month we stayed with Dad’s new boss, Herr Benz, in an imposing stone house with dormer windows and a copper roof, right in the centre of the old town. The Benz family occupied the whole house, all three storeys of it. There was a formal dining room, an everyday dining room, several sitting rooms, too many bedrooms to count, a kitchen that took up half of one of the floors, as well as a dim library lined from floor to ceiling with shelves full of leather-bound books. We had the whole attic to ourselves during the weeks it took my parents to find a place for us to rent. The room we slept in had a sloping ceiling with an attic window that overlooked a copper clad roof. At night, I lay in bed and listened to the raindrops play an arrhythmic tune during an autumn storm. In one corner of our room stood a four-storey dolls' house; it belonged to
the boss’s daughters. I’d never seen as many rooms, such elegantly carved furniture, miniature silver cutlery or dainty china plates, as these German dolls had at their disposal. The little doll’s house my dad had built for me in Bratislava, he’d hammered together in one afternoon. Mum used to tease him about his rickety construction, the way it swayed and rattled whenever anyone came near it but which I still loved in a way that one loves the ugly, lame or disregarded, for the beauty behind their superficial flaws.

Mum home-schooled me at first, according to the study outline my teacher in Bratislava had given her, but after a couple of weeks the German school board found out about me and informed us that I had to attend a German school by law. I was enrolled in an inner city school, in a red brick building hundreds of years old, with a concrete playground, two chestnut trees, and a low crosshatched paling fence. The first day my new class sang a German song for me as a greeting and the teacher asked if I could sing a Czechoslovak song in return. Their words slid through my head like water, and yet I knew exactly what they meant. I stood in front of a class of strangers and sang a song that I had learned in kindergarten in Bratislava. I don’t think I have ever felt as self-assured or carefree as I did then.

Everything around me pulsed with significance. Everything seemed noteworthy. People wore colourful clothes in distinct designs; the array of merchandise was daunting; one could buy more than just one style of shoe or coat or cheese. For my parents and the other Czechoslovaks who had defected to Germany, having so many alternatives to choose from was terrifying. Under Communism, where lack of variety and the fact that non-conformity was considered a crime worse than ordinary lawlessness, deprived them all of the ability to make choices on their own behalf.

Dad told us how soon after he arrived in Karlsruhe he walked into a shoe store, and in less than five minutes he felt so overwhelmed that he walked out empty-handed. Choice was unknown under Communism. In Bratislava you walked into a shoe store and they either had your size in a particular style and colour, or they didn’t. You had no choice but to buy the brown shoes regardless of wanting black ones and even if a shoe shop didn’t carry your size, many
people bought a pair anyway, to pass on to a family member whom they’d fit, or to trade them with someone for a size that would fit them.

"It was simpler that way", my dad told me years later. “You didn’t have to waste your time thinking about such trivial everyday things. In the West people are forced to constantly think about everything: what brand of milk to buy, what kind of bread – white or brown or with sesame-seeds... It gives me a headache just thinking about it!” Germans called it ‘die Qual der Wahl’ (the torture of choice), but for Dad, choice was ultimately a sign of freedom and he was willing to suffer a few headaches for it.

Some Czechs were less willing to compromise. They became overwhelmed by their new-found freedom and returned home from the West, precisely because they could not cope with all the choices they had to make: small choices, like selecting the colour of a shirt or a holiday destination, were as distressing as the bigger ones, such as what to do with the rest of your life. Dad laughed at them behind their backs for naively believing they could have it all, that life in the democratic West should be easy without them having to exert themselves. They didn’t realize that even freedom isn’t perfect.

Dad said that in leaving home some people realized how safe the familiar really was. Even familiar oppression could become reassuring because at least you could tell yourself you knew what to expect. Of course, no one ever actually knows what will happen next. History has plenty of examples of sudden wars, invasions, or epidemics, changing the course of people’s lives when they least expected it. Dad didn’t see unpredictability as a problem. He liked an open-ended life and knew how to make uncertainty sound exciting. My mother was different. She preferred to plan more carefully, in order to avoid the unexpected and prevent painful surprises invading her life.

I don’t recall the circumstances when my parents finally told us that we wouldn’t be going home to Bratislava after all. I don’t recall them ever talking about it. Perhaps they never did say anything outright to us, not because they were careless or neglectful, but because they simply did not know themselves what we would do next. They must have continued to hope that the face of Communism could still change and the Czechoslovak border might open up again, and so we stayed on in Karlsruhe. Dad did his postdoctoral research at the university and
Mum stayed at home with my brother while I went to school and yet all the while I kept thinking, when are we finally going home?

**Distress**

One evening in late November my father came home from work and told us excitedly: “the spies have tracked us down finally! I wondered how long it would take them.” He said that an East German sounding man had visited him and had asked him strange questions.

“How do you know he was East-German?” my mother interrupted him.

“Oh it is obvious,” my dad said with a wave of his hand, as if to brush off any other inappropriate questions. “He knocked on my door and said can I talk to you for a minute. I said, sure, thinking he must be another engineer. Then he said he had heard we’d defected from Czechoslovakia and did I like it here? If I was interested I could earn extra money on the side, reporting on how things are in Karlsruhe. He said to think it over and he would get back to me. He acted all mysterious but I knew exactly what he was up to and so I told him to go to hell! I told him I had left Czechoslovakia precisely to get away from ‘nebbishes’ like him and if he ever shows his ugly snout again I’ll report him to the police!”

“But how did you know he was East–German!” Mum insisted. “I bet you don’t really know the difference.”

“That’s not the point, for goodness sake. The point is that this man is a spy and he asked me to collaborate. What I can’t understand is why anyone would want to become a spy in the first place. Perhaps ambition squeezes certain people into corners and twists their judgement.”

Mother gave Dad a beguiling smile, “You still haven’t answered my question though!”

“Oh, you’re impossible!” Dad gave up and grinned.

By early December Dad found a place to rent. It was a house with a garden in a village called Bullach, just ten minutes out of town. It sounded wonderful to us. But there was just one hitch, not so much for Dad but for Mum: we had to share the house with another Czech family. Mum hated the idea vehemently but Dad could not see what the problem was. Mum simply did not want to share her
bathroom, livingroom and kitchen with complete strangers, no matter where they were from, whereas Dad was happy to. Mum wanted her own home while Dad thought she would want company as much as he did. The problem solved itself when my parents discovered there was no other suitable property for rent and so we moved to Bullach, a village ten kilometres out of town, just before Christmas in 1968.

I had to change schools again, the third time since leaving Czechoslovakia. A friend drove my parents and me to the new school in Bullach. We drove along a country road past furrowed fields beneath a grey-streaked December sky. There were patches of ice on the road and funeral weather seemed to follow us. When we got to the new school I refused get out of the car - something in me would not yield this time. I didn’t know I felt this way when we set out but by the time we arrived I was certain that I didn’t want to move to a new school again. Nothing my parents said to me after we’d parked out front would make me change my mind. I was not going to get out of the car. No amount of bribing, no cajoling, no threats would make me budge.

Then Dad got out and went into the school. Mother hissed at me under her breath from the front seat: “All the children will laugh at you for making such a scene. You’re such a bad and disobedient child!” I tasted salty tears in my mouth and everything looked blurred. A thought flashed through my mind: perhaps Dad will change his mind and we’ll just drive home again? Dad returned with another man dressed in a dark-brown suit who smiled at me. I saw the school building behind him with a life-size horse painted in red and brown on the wall. I liked horses but there was no turning back now: I had gone too far and felt compelled to finish off what I had started. It was a matter of pride. At the same time I thought that this school might be all right after all and so I did not kick quite as hard when the three of them carried me inside.

My father found a university student who would talk with me in German a couple of afternoons per week. She took me for walks down Banwaldallee across the railway line to the village centre. The trees were bare, and a cold wind blew through my hair. She pointed to things and called them by their German name: ‘der Zug’, ‘die Eisenbahn’, ‘die Schranke’. I imitated her reluctantly, hating the sound of my own voice. The fear that I could never learn to speak her language
rendered me voiceless at times. As I struggled to contain my shame, the commonest details of life around me began to stand out: the long shadows in the low winter sun, the crumpled leaves lying in the gutter, the peeling brown paint on someone’s fence.

Despite the shame that filled me every time I opened my mouth, by January I could speak German more or less fluently. This meant I no longer had to go on those irksome walks with the student and I was glad.

Looking back I can see the pattern I followed in learning German. First I was silent, almost mute. I merely watched everything that was going on around me. I was in awe hearing the sounds the German kids made as if that was the most natural thing for anyone to do with their voice. To me it sounded all the same, like someone saying nahnahnahnahnah really fast. But after a while the surface babble loosened and I began to hear a rhythm and intonation that had escaped me before; it was like deciphering a song. Later when I had built up enough confidence I tried out what I had observed, sensed and felt: I began to imitate. It was like a game everyone else had been playing and of which I only gradually discovered the rules. Speaking is a performance in many ways. Words allow you to proclaim to others ‘this is who I am’. Entering a foreign language allows you to leave the sidelines and take part in the show.

My first language, Czech, was tactile. The instant I spoke the word ‘leto’ (summer) I felt warmth envelop me, but saying ‘summer’ in German made me feel nothing at all. The foreign words felt wooden and distant and did not evoke feelings in me, while the Czech language referred to the world itself as if the world had been made to fit the language. Over time, of course, German would also acquire personal associations for me, but it always took time. For language to be a living thing it must become personal, it must feel as if it was mine, it must refer to my world.

My parents learned to speak German differently. They tried to re-create German by translating each word from Czech and applying the rules of grammar to thread words into phrases. My parents said things like ‘das Sonne’ or ‘die Bett’, getting the German articles wrong without realising the dissonance their words create for native speakers, like scratching the blackboard with fingernails. In Czech ‘sun’ is neuter, but in German it is feminine; ‘bed’ in turn is feminine in Czech, but neuter in German. And so it is not just the language that sounds
strange – the whole world becomes unfamiliar and even the ‘sun’ does not seem to be the same sun in the new language. There’s more at stake than meets the eye in learning a new language and no amount of memorizing words alone will do. The world has to be re-discovered. Old certainties about the nature of things and ideas have to be given up or loosened. Some language learners cannot enter the new landscape that the foreign words make up, as this involves giving up too much. They would have to give up too many certainties about themselves and their familiar world. In translating from Czech to German the speaker remains apart, merely involved in rearranging words like bricks in a wall. A rigid and unwielding structure results, which forms a wall between the foreigners and natives, and German never becomes their language because they are not able to inhabit it.

Living against the Stream
In the new year of 1969 Dad took time off to take me to the doctor for a routine vaccination. Afterwards we went to Herte, the department store, where Dad let me choose a doll to replace the ones that I had to leave behind in Bratislava. I chose a little doll with short blond hair and blue eyes that opened and shut. I named her Barbara, the name I gave to almost every one of my dolls. We walked through a park behind the store and Dad told me things he said I should know about life. I was his audience, too young to fully understand his meanings but somehow I sensed the importance behind all that he said.

"You know that only dead fish swim with the current all the time?"
"Why?" I asked.

“It pays to exert yourself in life and go against the stream, some of the time.” Dad’s eyes gave a mischievous twinkle. “Unless you take a look upstream you'll never be able to know what you’re missing. You don’t want to lead a blind life floating along and believing only what you’re told to believe. It's always much better to figure things out for yourself.” I held Dad’s hand as we walked through the park trying to keep pace with his long stride. Dad always made life seem like fun, even if his version required effort.
I became a problem child in the months after we arrived, with temper tantrums and the knack of getting under my mother's skin. I remember fighting with my mother and her screaming at me for being too noisy and what would our neighbours think. Both of us ended up beside ourselves with rage against each other. She wanted me to be quiet, to leave her alone, and I wanted to be with her all the time. Her approach did not work; I would not, could not be ordered to be calm. All I knew was the tension I sensed in and around me, as if life was being sucked out of me and I felt a desperate panic of being in danger of losing the mother I thought I knew. I felt terrible about hating someone I really loved. My only consolation was that at least when she screamed I knew she had not forgotten me.

My parents took me to a paediatrician who specialised in behavioural problems. I don’t remember this visit at all. The outcome of this meeting has two different versions. My mother told me for years afterwards that even the paediatrician thought I was an impossible child. It wasn't until many years later that I heard the other version from my father. He told me how the paediatrician had explained that I was a sensitive child and like all sensitive people, my nerve-endings seemed to stick out of my skin, making me more perceptive of my surroundings while also making me more vulnerable to change. I was distraught by our move to Germany and my misbehaviour was an expression of my distress, a protest against separation from all that I had known, rather than just a wilful need to hurt someone.

My father grasped my consternation and had more empathy for me after that but my mother did not agree with the paediatrician’s explanation. I think she needed to believe that I was the one with the bad temperament and the cause of the trouble between us, for then all she needed to do to fix things was to focus her energies on reforming me. Of course I had no idea about what fearful decisions and worrying thoughts must have preoccupied her during this time, how she too had no peace, no recourse, no way of calming herself, except to try and calm everything around her, including me.

Looking back I suspect my mother worried more about the kind of mother she was rather than what her mothering might do to us. Her main agenda was not to be like her own mother, not to repeat the kind of mistakes that brought about much misery for her when she was a child. My mother, therefore, had to think
always more of herself than of us, not because she was mean or insensitive, but precisely because she wanted the best for us. It seemed to her the only way to ensure that she would not repeat her mother's mistakes.

Looking Further West
On the 20th of July 1969 we watched the moon landing. I remember the hushed silence as the hazy images of Armstrong setting foot on the moon appeared on our black and white television screen. “We’re living in the middle of history,” Dad said.

Later in the evening, when the dark was as thick as velvet, we stood in the garden and looked at the sky. There was the faint glow of the the stars - each one in its rightful place – and the silvery moon. Dad said it was especially good that the Americans got to the moon before the Russians because it proved the Americans’ superiority and by extension that democracy was better than Communism. That made him very happy.

At the end of August in 1969 we had to move again. We’d just got back from our holiday to Italy and found out that our house was going to be torn down to make room for a freeway. This had not been our plan. In between packing Dad placed a rickety ladder against the gnarled trunks of the plum and cherry trees, which were weighed down by fruit, and picked the last of their crop as they were going to be cut down.

We moved to the neighbouring village, Grötzingen, and rented a two bedroom attic flat in Weingartner Straße, above a grocery store. I had to go to a new school in grade two, it was the fourth school in just over a year. This time I must have been resigned to my fate, for I changed schools without a fight. My new teacher, Fräulein Burmeister, was myopic and spinsterish and intimidated me. She never smiled that I recall. The children spoke in a strong dialect whenever the teacher was out of earshot, saying ‘Adieu’ for good-bye and other words that confused me because they were not High German. I lacked the words to manage smoothly and was too timid to talk in my own way to anyone. I hated sounding so wide-eyed and although I envied the locals their normal lives, the way nothing surprised them, I felt I had nothing in common with them. When I
think back to this time of my life, I cannot recall a single face, not even that of my friend Franziska.

In Grötzingen, I appeared to have recovered on the outside because I was quieter and more amenable, but on the inside I felt in disarray. At night I cried into my pillow without making a noise as memories washed through me and I re-imagined scenes from our life in Czechoslovakia. The images had become so real to me that I could leaf through them like pages in a book. There was a picture of a wall of black clouds massing in the sky, then my cousins and I crowding under a coarse blanket in Uncle Honza’s wheelbarrow before he wheeled us through the park trying to outrun the approaching storm. Pictures of cobblestone streets with a dusting of snow, a delicately wraught iron gate outside a castle, a slice of apple strudel out of grandmother’s oven, grandfather drinking beer after working in the garden. I felt I had to keep my memories alive because I hoped we would go home soon. My remembering had to do with where I was heading as much as it did with where I had come from.

Dad’s Alexander von Humboldt scholarship was going to run out by the middle of 1970 and he had to find paid work. There were several options but none of them were in Karlsruhe; in fact none were in Germany or even in Europe. Dad was offered a teaching job as an associate professor in Mechanical Engineering at the University of Florida, in Gainesville. His other job offer was from one of the state Universities in New Jersey. In March Dad flew to the United States for interviews and quickly decided that he’d much prefer to live in Florida because of the climate. Of course he was comparing Florida at its best and New Jersey at its worst. Gainesville in early spring was delightful: it wasn’t humid yet and the temperature was mild, around 70°F. New Jersey, on the other hand, was generally miserable and damp in early spring, after the snow thawed and the sky was constantly grey. Things were completely different by June. In Florida, the humidity became stifling and the heat swelled the land, whereas in New Jersey the sun smiled on the land and white clouds skittered across a pale blue sky. Unknowingly, Dad came home confident that this time he had found the place where we could settle down and start over again.
CHAPTER THREE

America 1970-1971

“I still had a lot to learn, and more than anything, to unlearn.”

(Octavio Paz, in *Itinerary: An Intellectual Journey*)

Searching for Freedom in America

In August 1970, we took the bus to Luxemburg and flew with *Loftleidir Icelandic Airlines*, via Reykjavik, to New York City. Arriving in America must have seemed like an outrage to my parents: the way the city spread out before them as if nothing had happened. The people in the streets went about their lives free from the fears that still flowed in my parents’ veins: about how to begin all over again when the past would not lie still no matter how far away we moved away. Like most migrants, my parents hoped that a jet aircraft could outfly the shadows of their life. Andrey and I were not burdened by these thoughts. Being young, we still lived in the present and could still believe that our parents knew exactly what they were doing.

We spent one night downtown at a cheap hotel. The sounds of a New York August night poured through the open window: car horns, sirens, and the hum of neon from the hotel sign. In the evening we took the elevator to the top of the Empire State Building and viewed the skyscraper landscape of the city that never sleeps.

The next day we travelled to Gainesville, in northern Florida, our final destination. Stepping off the plane and into a humid August afternoon, I felt as if my face was struck with a hot, damp towel. The tarmac blazed and sweated and a fata morgana of spilt water glittered in the sun. The flat Florida landscape stretched out around the airport, without any hills to obstruct the view. Some of the vegetation looked like oversized versions of pot plants I’d seen inside European hot-houses. The trees towered above all the manmade structures, softening the sameness of the malls, the giant advertising signs, and
the tacky roadside motels with their kidney-shaped swimming pools. On first impression, there seemed to be just three colours in nature here: green trees, blue sky, and white sand - as if there was only one type of tree, one type of sky and one type of soil in this place. After we settled into life in Gainesville we realized there was much more to the landscape, the way it changed with the seasons, which were subtle and arrived by stealth. There were the different tones of brown, of the reeds lining the swamps and the grass during the summer; the different blues of the inland lakes, the Gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic Ocean; the grey shades of the Spanish Moss that hung from the trees and in spring the whole landscape bloomed with wildflowers.

Driving into town we saw advertising signs as large as movie screens alongside the freeways. Shopping centres lined the main streets that gave way to suburban areas made up of single story bungalows with lawns out front. Most houses had no fences and we soon discovered that no one was perturbed when strangers took a short cut through someone’s backyard. We also learnt soon enough that alligators lived freely in the swamps around town and rumour had it that sometimes they even strayed into people’s backyards and menaced small children and pets.

We moved into the house the faculty found for us near the corner of University and NW 34th Street. It was air-conditioned, partly furnished, and had a large backyard with a lawn and green acorn trees almost a hundred feet tall. There were three bedrooms, a bathroom, and a small living-dining-kitchen area. The house was furnished with hand-me-downs from the other professors: an old rattan couch with matching side tables, a Formica table with four plastic chairs, green plastic plates with yellow grapes painted on one side. My parents built a bookshelf out of bricks and planks. They bought an old chest of drawers at the Palatka flea-market, which my mother painted red for me. This was the biggest house we’d ever lived in, bigger than the one in Germany. Andrej and I each had our own room and we had a backyard to play in, yet decades later after I went back to visit Gainesville, I realised how tiny the house really was.

Neighbours dropped by to introduce themselves and to see what we might need. They would return the next day with extra pots and pans, towels, and plastic plates. They also brought food to welcome us to their
neighbourhood. We were surprised by their kindness towards strangers like us. Mrs. Freals later explained to Mum that it’s just the way southerners are; they like to be hospitable towards everyone.

On our first weekend in Gainesville, Dad bought an Oriole-red Pontiac with a white roof. The next day we drove sixty miles East through Palatka, past St. Augustine to Crescent beach. People parked their cars right on the beach and as close to the water as they dared. Some were too daring for their own good. There they’d be, splashing around in the Atlantic Ocean, oblivious to the tide coming in, until their car unexpectedly appeared bobbing in the waves alongside them - and there was absolutely nothing they could do to get it back.

Lying on the beach I looked up and was astounded by the immensely blue sky, without a wisp of cloud to mar it. Before me stretched the beach as white as snow all the way to the sea-green Atlantic. Florida seemed the closest thing to paradise to us but Mother said it was too hot for her. Dad teased her: “Kamilko, I like the way you sizzle in the sun!”

Mum said not to be so ridiculous and got her book out. Andrej ran yelping into the ocean kicking up white sand behind him. “Watch the waves!” Mum called after him and then ducked inside the car to get out of the sun, an Agatha Christie book and an English Dictionary in hand. Dad stuck his head through the open window. “You can’t sit in the car! Come and play with us in the great Atlantic Ocean!” Before Mum had a chance to reply he’d run off, racing me to the water.

On the way home we drove up to the town of St. Augustine, with its narrow alleys winding between tightly packed colonial houses that sagged with age, and the Castillio Fort made of a compacted stone full of tiny seashells. Except for the fast-food restaurants we might as well have been in Spain. Dad picked up a pamphlet at the tourist office so he could brush up on the local history. He read to us as we walked around the fort, about how Florida was discovered by the Spanish on March 27th, 1513. It was named ‘Florida’, which means ‘abundant flowers’, because when the Spaniard first arrived it was springtime and the wildflowers would have been in full bloom. St. Augustine was built in 1565 and became the first European settlement in all of North America. The English attacked it and Sir Francis Drake burned it down in
1586, and in 1821, because the Spanish Empire was in debt and in decline, Florida was sold to the United States of America. We went back to St. Augustine many times during the year we lived in Florida. For us, it was a snippet of ‘real’ history, in a place that seemed to lack a past and disdained the old.

**School in America**

School went back on the first Monday in September, just before the hurricane season started. I was eight years old and in grade three; Andrej was six and starting in grade one, at Littlewood Elementary School. Monday morning at eight o’clock Mum woke us up. I put on my blue dress with the red and blue striped collar Mum had sewn for me in Germany, brushed my hair as best I could, and put on my sandals.

“You have to hurry. Dad will drop Andrej and you at school on his way to work,” Mum called from the kitchen where she was making breakfast.

“I can’t find my hairclips!” I wanted to pin back my hair and make it look neat.

“It doesn’t matter, your hair looks fine. Just hurry up and have your breakfast or you’ll be late and then what will your teacher think!”

I was worried about today; how I would survive at the American school. I wanted to look my best at least, but it seemed a hopeless cause. When I looked in the mirror I saw the gap between my upper front teeth and my unruly hair that stuck out from my head whichever way it pleased. If only Mum hadn’t cut it so short before we’d moved to America.

Dad drove us to school in the new Pontiac along suburban side-streets without footpaths – the local people preferred to drive rather than walk everywhere. The backs of my legs were slick with sweat and stuck to the vinyl of the car seat. I silently worried that the new kids wouldn’t like me. Dad seemed to read my mind and said there was no need to worry, that Andrej and I would learn English in no time because kids still had flexible brains and weren’t set in their ways yet, the way adults are. I hoped he was right, but I also sensed that I wouldn’t have many worry-free moments for a long time to come.
Dad parked the car and walked us to our classrooms. “I’ll pick you up at 3pm,” he said and drove to work. My teacher was Mrs. Finlayson. She was young and enthusiastic and wore her blond hair in a bob. Dad had asked me weeks before I started school what kind of teacher I would like. I said I wanted her to be blond and nice. Dad talked to the principal to see what could be done. He wanted there to be at least one thing I could look forward to in my new school. And that is how I ended up in Mrs. Finlayson’s grade three class for the year.

Mrs. Finlayson introduced me to the class as ‘Kathy Tomas’, the English version of my real name. I didn’t understand anything else she said. All I saw were mobs of eyes staring at me. Then we all had to stand up and face a little American flag that was attached above the blackboard, next to the ‘A’ of the alphabet that ran the length of the side wall. I had no idea what was going on. I imitated everyone by placing my right hand over my heart and stood in silence as everyone started to recite the strange sounds that flowed over me like water: “I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America …” Much later Dad explained that Americans pledge their allegiance to the flag to celebrate being American. Somehow, I never was able to memorize the pledge beyond the first sentence and always just mimed the rest. Perhaps I was never really meant to become an American.

Everything at Littlewood Elementary School seemed unusual to me. Rather than sitting at long tables each student had their own desk with a top that opened where you stored your books, we wrote with pencils rather than fountain pens and ate our lunch in the lunchroom with all the other kids. I’d never seen, yet alone used, a lunchbox before because in Germany school finished by lunchtime and you ate your meals at home. What was most unusual though, was the presence of black students. They were as quiet as I was a lot of the time and kept to themselves in and out of the classroom. I noticed the black children didn’t mix with the white kids and wondered about the nature of their fears. Dad explained that until the year I started school in 1970, black children could only go to all-black schools downtown. In other parts of the USA black and white kids had been going to the same schools for years. Dad said that the
The segregation of black and white schoolchildren was judged to be wrong way back in 1954 by the supreme court, but in the southern states, like Florida, the white parents didn’t want their schools to change and they delayed desegregation for as long as they could.

**Weightless Words**

Without knowing any English, I became mute again for a while. Mrs. Finlayson was patient. She did not push me to talk but waited until I was ready. My palms felt sweaty, my breath was shallow whenever I sat in class – I was waiting for something to happen, for something to change. Waiting was familiar to me. Ever since leaving Czechoslovakia, when we left all our familiar reference points behind, I had existed on the edge, shut out by a wall of indecipherable sounds that separated me from the everyday life that others continued to live. For me life stood still, while for others it just kept going on.

English words felt wooden and distant at first and didn’t evoke any emotions in me. Eventually, just as with learning German, the English sounds around me began to loosen up, to form a landscape of words and rhythms. After psyching myself for weeks, I suddenly took a leap of faith and tried to speak on my own. Mrs. Finlayson got me to recite the alphabet in English to her after school. I could only sing it in English the way I heard it sung on the television programme *Sesame Street*. She laughed and said I was doing great.

It probably took Andrej and me less than three months to start expressing ourselves confidently in English. My parents were surprised by the suddenness of it, the way we went from being virtually mute to making ourselves understood in almost perfect American English. Mum thought it was akin to a miracle. I wasn’t surprised at all. While I may have looked as if I was doing nothing, I had actually been working very hard taking in everything I heard, saw and felt.

At home my family continued to speak Czech. Czech was our private language and was the connection to our past. We all started to substitute some English words or phrases that either had no equivalent in Czech or that expressed a meaning particularly well: ‘supermarket’, ‘okay’, ‘easy does it’, ‘lunchbox’,
‘call you up’, ‘that’s right’. This is how we built up our own family language that we speak to this day.

Mum found English difficult, despite going to English classes during the week. Dad teased her and said was because her stubbornness hardened her brain. She frowned at him and wasn’t amused. While she could easily explain how sentences ought to be constructed, whenever she tried to speak, her words and sentences sounded somehow stunted. She never did manage to sound American either. I think she feared that other people thought that because she expressed her thoughts imperfectly in English people would think her thoughts were imperfect. Dad, who also rarely got the pronunciation right, didn’t seem to care what anyone thought of his broken English. Looking back, the problem for my parents was the same as when they learned German: they tried to translate themselves from Czech into each foreign language, word by word. They studied the rules and definitions trying to pin the new language down, as if words just had fixed meanings, and language had predictable grammar. They tried to wield words like implements, hammering them into sentences with precision and efficiency, but language is a living, breathing thing that cannot be fixed permanently into any shape. You have to feel your way into a new language, paying attention to the undertones, be willing to improvise, and even make a spectacle of yourself at times. You can’t treat a language merely as a lexicon. It takes courage or perhaps a childlike faith to believe you won’t fall apart by immersing yourself into a foreign tongue.

The Hidden Life

Mum didn’t drive, so Dad drove all of us to Winn Dixie to do the weekly shopping after he came home from work. The selection of food was amazing at this supermarket, but Mum said she was disappointed by the quality of American bread and cheese. The white *Wonderbread* was truly unpalatable, although Andrej and I loved squishing whole slices into tiny pellets before eating them. The cheese came in one variety: orange brick-shaped cheddar. Where Americans excelled however was in the selection of breakfast cereal: cornflakes, coco-pops, rice-crispies, fruit-loops, and many other types lined the shelves of one whole isle.
The black girl at Winn Dixie packed our groceries in oversized brown paper bags. She had unruly hair which she had obviously tried to tame by ruthlessly brushing it, but only succeeded in creating the appearance of even greater unmanageability. I studied her hair, which stood out sideways in electrified rebellion. She smiled at me and said ‘how are you all doing today?’

“Fine thank you.” I ducked behind Mum and hoped the girl didn’t think I was staring at her. Her hair reminded me of mine and I had learned that brushing won’t straighten it – it’ll just make it stick out and look like you’re wearing a helmet on your head. I wanted to tell her this and let her know that it’s ok to let it curl naturally but why should she believe me, for I didn’t believe it myself and still longed to have straight and preferably blond hair that could fly in the wind, the way I imagined everyone else’s hair did.

Florida life seemed to suit Dad, at least socially. He was having a ball socializing with the faculty, something all his colleagues did not just for fun but also to get ahead and get their tenure. Dad loved the cocktail parties, the barbeques and the formal dinners. He told stories and humorous anecdotes about life in Czechoslovakia. There was one unfunny joke that had freely circulated in Czechoslovakia just before we defected, which Dad particularly liked to tell: how the Communists claimed they had to erect the Iron Curtain, with its minefields and fences along the western border, in order to protect the Czechoslovak citizens from an imminent capitalist invasion from the West. “Those who believed it,” Dad always explained, “stayed behind. Those like us who weren’t easily fooled moved to the West.”

My parents went out a lot and the Millikans’ teenage daughter Christine often came over to babysit. She read Roald Dahl’s *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and E.B. White’s *Charlotte’s Web* to us before putting us to bed. Mum dressed up, put pink lipstick on and wore her shiny necklace made from blue rhinestones that she had bought in Bratislava. Her gaze seemed sharpened by anxiety. Dad laughed a lot and teased Mum about being too serious. Late at night after they came home, I drifted in and out of sleep. One night my parents’ loud whispering drifted across the bedroom wall and woke me up for good. Mum sounded angry with Dad. She said he talked too much at the party, all night as usual. Dad said in his most rational tone that she was just too sensitive
and took things too personally. I lay in bed, with the dark as thick as velvet all around me. All he did, I heard Dad whisper to Mum, was try to have a bit of fun, and there was no harm in that. She whispered furiously back at him, part of her still trying not to wake us up, that she was sick and tired of him making fun of her in front of everyone. I didn’t know what I was supposed to do. I lay very still and felt my heart pounding. Eventually I fell asleep and by the morning the night seemed like a dream.

In America, I became terrified of my parents dying and was filled with visions of my brother and me being abandoned. I suspected even then that my parents believed that, like all children, I was too self-centred to be capable of looking at the world around me unless they brought things to my attention by their enthusiasm or coercion. My parents would have been surprised and troubled if they had known how their own worries, that they and others around me tried to conceal, were revealed to me by the smallest gestures and unspoken hints in their remarks.

Not all nights filled me with dread. On some nights I was instead flooded with nostalgia - especially when Dad played one of his favourite records, Antonin Dvorak’s *New World Symphony*. Dad had told me about Dvorak, the most famous Czech composer who lived in America during the last century for a few years and wrote the *New World Symphony* in New York City. Dad pointed out the musical themes and explained how some tunes evoked the Czech landscape, while others recalled the traditional Czech dances that are part of village life. Dad said that Dvorak had been terribly homesick while he lived in America, so homesick in fact that after three years he packed his bags and returned home to Czechoslovakia. Dvorak’s symphony always made me cry quietly into my pillow, for I too still hoped we would return to Czechoslovakia.

I suspected that my parents also missed their ‘home’. Dad said that in America the individual had to fit in, had to have the right image, and say polite things and make everyone feel good about themselves. This attitude seemed foreign to my parents. Of course, in Europe people had to get along as well, that is what living in any society required from us, but at least in Europe you could go about it grudgingly if you wanted to. Europeans seemed less inclined to believe that life had to feel good all the time, as most Americans did. To my
mother this smacked of pretentiousness and sounded like a big lie. She couldn’t be convinced to fake happiness when so much in her life gave her no joy. The other role that did not sit well with her was that of the hostess-housewife, which defined so many American women of the time. In Czechoslovakia my mother had worked full-time and found it impossible to squeeze herself into the domestic role wholeheartedly. In America, Mum didn’t want to go back to her PhD in engineering until she improved her English. She therefore became a full-time housewife and did give domesticity a good try – she sewed clothes for us, cleaned, and tested American recipes such as chilli bean stew, pumpkin and apple pie - but she did not want domesticity to define her or be what others judged her by.

By the New Year my parents were talking about going back to Europe, that perhaps the freedom in America wasn’t as they had expected it would be. Starting from scratch the possibilities for a better life had seemed endless. Of course, if we had stayed we might have got used to all the differences, to all the things that stood out sharply and made America seem unfamiliar to us. The question was, did we really want to get used to speaking in English, to eating white bread, to plastic Christmas trees, or to heat in winter? The answer came sooner than we thought. In the spring of 1971, when Dad was offered a job in the research department at the Volkswagen Factory in Wolfsburg, he and Mum did not hesitate to pack up again and return to West Germany. I too was happy to move closer to Czechoslovakia in the hope that once the Soviets finally left Czechoslovakia the borders would open up again and we could return home.
“There is as much difference between us and ourselves as between us and others.”

(Michel de Montaigne, in The Complete Essays)

Our Life on the Move
At the beginning of August 1971, we moved back to West Germany. I was nine. Boxes of books, clothes and toys were packed and shipped across the Atlantic to a town called Wolfsburg, in northern Germany. Dad had left ahead of us to start work in the research department of the Volkswagen Factory. There, along with other mechanical engineers, he tested Volkswagen cars that were crashed repeatedly against a wall at different speeds. He observed the resultant damage and tried to figure out how to make cars safer by changing their design.

Wolfsburg was a mid-size town in the state of Niedersachsen. The state stretched from the Mid-German highlands in the south all the way north to the Baltic Sea. The landscape surrounding Wolfsburg was a fertile plain with undulating hills, forests and the sandy heath-land of the Lüneburger Heide. The north Germans saw themselves as different and distinct from the Germans who lived in the south. Stereotypes abounded and we got to hear them soon enough after we arrived. We were told that the southerners were terribly materialistic and obsessed with making money. They were also superstitious and not serious enough about life. Dad laughed and said, “Aren’t people funny? Down south in Karlsruhe people were just as convinced that it was the northerners who were flawed, because they were too serious about life and stingy with their emotions! It seems to me you can’t win no matter where you live!”

As far as I was concerned Germans were Germans no matter where they lived. They were all extremely lucky in my eyes, because they spoke fluent German whereas I did not. After one year in America speaking only English I couldn’t speak German anymore, although I still did understand quite a bit. Part
of my problem was that I had lost my German vocabulary. But my biggest problem was that I had lost confidence in myself. Not being able to speak, express myself, I felt myself fading, like an image in a photograph left outside for too long. Socrates said that the soul lies at the centre of our self and moves us to speak and to act in life. What would Socrates have said about my plight then, of not being able to speak freely anymore? Living in another language, the old words, with which I used to express myself easily, became useless like an old telephone number that’s not in use anymore. Being speechless my self felt as remote as a memory.

No Map to Go by
The red-brick Volkswagen factory with its six towering chimneys dominated the landscape of Wolfsburg. It spread over an area of eight square kilometres along the Mittellandkanal. The centre of town, with the town hall and department stores, the theatre and library, were built on the other side of the Mittellandkanal, as if to geographically separate work at the factory from the rest of people’s lives. The suburbs, each with their own school and supermarket, spread outwards on both sides of the canal, alternating with forests and man-made lakes, and were interconnected by a network of roads and bicycle paths. You were bound to catch a glimpse of the six Volkswagen Factory chimneys just about anywhere you went in Wolfsburg. The town also teemed with Volkswagen cars. Most people owned Beetles when we lived there, but also Siroccos or Passats, and after 1974, Golfs. The presence of the Volkswagen was a constant reminder of why this city came into existence in the first place and why so many inhabitants had moved there, as we had done.

Finding accommodation was hard at the end of 1971. The city was booming and the available accommodation was outstripped by the rise in population. The flat Dad arranged for us to rent was still being built when we arrived. Dad had a room free of charge at the Volkswagen Hostel for men, which was located within walking distance of the factory, and he could get to work without a car. Mum, Andrej and I couldn’t stay with him and since we thought it was just for a couple of weeks we stayed at hotel above a pub, in the centre of town.
Our hotel room had twin beds side by side and a single cot the proprietress Frau Meyer had lent us. The furniture was mock-Biedermeier style in dark wood: bed-boards, side-tables with two drawers, a coffee table, and two upholstered chairs. Crocheted doilies were strategically placed on top of the side tables. I didn’t know what was more depressing: the décor or the view out the window onto a dark inner courtyard with equally grey clouds above.

There were other guests at the hotel besides us, mainly middle-aged men, who stayed for a few days on business that almost always involved the Volkswagen Factory. We’d sometimes cross paths with them, dressed in suits and ties, on the way to the communal shower, which lay at the end of our poorly lit hallway. But mostly we had the hotel to ourselves. We did our homework in the dining room in the afternoons and afterwards listened to the BBC children’s programme on the radio – *The Wind in the Willows* was one of my favourite shows.

Autumn had arrived by the time we were back at school in September. The leaves gradually turned red and then golden before they were shed in preparation for winter. Some mornings were misty and I could see my breath as Andrej and I walked to the bus stop with Mum. The German school board had no faith in American primary schools and made Andrej and me repeat our grades. I’m sure they thought that the American educationist John Dewey had it all wrong when he declared, in his pragmatic manner, that education was all about social development and that children would learn spontaneously without having to be taught.

“It’s like this,” Dad started to explain one evening at the hotel. “In life there are important and unimportant things. Most things are unimportant, but few people realise this. In America the important and unimportant get confused and it starts off in primary school,” and that was why, Dad concluded, it was to our benefit to repeat our grades in Germany. He promised we’d be put forward a grade again later, once we spoke German more fluently. I shrugged my shoulders and said I didn’t mind, but deep down I felt I was not up to scratch again. The grade I attended at school was irrelevant to me because I couldn’t speak. German words, that for others were familiar and effortless and that they spoke simply and without feeling burdened, to me felt agonizing. I kept
preparing the words that I wanted to speak silently inside my head, while fear gathered in me like a black cloud. When I finally did get up the courage and the words came from my mouth, hesitantly wavering, I found that I could not look others in the face for a long time afterwards because I felt so ashamed for not sounding right.

**Feeling Like a Stranger**

The first time Andrej and I went on the bus without Mum it was terribly overcrowded with older kids who were going further than us, all the way to the Gymnasium in the suburb called Kreuzheide. When we reached our stop we couldn’t get out in time. My heart pounded so hard I felt the blood rush through my veins. Andrej and I looked at each other, both of us mute, and I felt paralysed by panic. I worried that if I said something in my rusty German the older kids would not understand or, worse still, they’d laugh out loud at me. The bus drove on to the next stop where we managed to squeeze our way through, in between leather schoolbags and tightly pressed bodies, down two steps and out. We ran as fast as we could back along the glistening pavement, washed clean by rain, to our own school. Despite my fear that we’d get lost and never arrive, that we’d be late and I wouldn’t know how to excuse myself, we arrived just as the bell was ringing at 7:50 am in time for the first lesson.

Not knowing anyone in this new place, Andrej and I stuck together for company as much as possible. At home we always talked in Czech to each other, but in public we fell silent and observed. I felt the differences between them and us. How happy and easy-going others appeared and therefore, I concluded, how perfect their lives must be. The smallest details of others’ lives impressed me, and the moment I noticed them, they pulsed with significance: the off-hand way someone wore a rainbow coloured scarf around their neck; the casual gesture of a hand sweeping aside a wayward strand of hair; or the loudness of someone’s laugh. In that instant it seemed possible that simply possessing these details would be sufficient to transform me into one of them – a nice, confident, plain vanilla German - and would relieve me of the burdens that
being me, a foreigner in an unfamiliar place, entailed. I envied them their normal lives, the way nothing surprised them.

My third grade teacher at the Alt-Wolfsburg Grundschule was Frau Hartung. She had long black hair that fell down to the middle of her back and wore black-rimmed glasses whenever she read to us. She taught all our subjects: German, science, geography, sport, and English. We read out of hard-cover books, wrote in blue ink in lined notebooks, and were told about conflicting ideas and facts and not just things that would make us feel good. “That’s life,” Frau Hartung said. “Life isn’t always beautiful or full of harmony – for that we can read fairytales.”

I soon realised that in German schools more was expected of us than had been the case in America. We had homework every day, starting in primary school. A second language, English, was introduced the year we arrived in grade three, because research showed that the younger children were, the easier it was for them to learn a second language, especially if they were under the age of ten. For me this meant that there was at least one subject at which I could excel - and I did. Speaking English fluently and having lived in America also made me fascinating to some of my classmates. I felt a bit of a fraud, though, not being a real American, and did not always find joy in being admired for something I was not.

The strange thing was that ever since we had returned to Germany I longed to live back in America. From my new vantage point everything seemed better back there. I missed the sunshine and humidity, the easiness of life, the sixty different ice cream flavours, cartoons on Saturday morning, and the white sand at the beach. The past, of course, seems much more manageable when looked at in retrospect. How much more unsettling it is to live life forward. Even I knew that in reality, life in America had been far from perfect. For one thing, school in Florida had been boring. All we ever seemed to do was fill out multiple-choice questions in thin notebooks that had the answers in the back anyway. Most kids just copied the answers. Facts were prettied up, or not talked about, so as not to inhibit children’s innate creativity. Real life, where effort was required to get ahead, was postponed. Even as an eight year old I sensed that American teachers underestimated my desire to learn and to cope with
contradictory facts about the world. Much later, I wondered how many American children might have got the inadvertent message, through no fault of their own, that life was merely a game and that you could bluff your way along.

I for one did not want to play pretend-school – that was something I played that at home with my dolls. I wanted to know the facts, even if they were disconcerting and not under my control. Some things do exist and are true about the world irrespective of how we might feel about them – the sun rises and sets every day and evil is regularly perpetrated on innocent citizens, be it by a Hitler or a Stalin, regardless of how much we would like to believe that progress always leads to only goodness in the end.

Finding a Home

Three months after we’d first arrived, Mum, Andrej and I were still living at the hotel, as our flat was still being built. One Saturday in November my parents took us across town by bus to see how the builders had been getting on during the week. We drove across the bridge called Berliner Brücke, across the Mittellandkanal. Beneath us the water shone like steel, motionless.

“You can travel along a series of canals from the Rhein to Russia,” Dad said. He went on to explain how canals take boats uphill through locks, that are like elevators filled with water. It was because of the Mittellandkanal and the nearby Autobahn that Hitler chose the site in Wolfsburg to build the Volkswagen factory in the 1930s, “so that he could transport the car parts and the finished cars more easily all over Germany.”

I had heard about Hitler and the Second World War from my dad. He’d told me how Hitler invaded Czechoslovakia soon after the war started in 1938 and how the other European nations just looked on, hoping that would be the extent of Hitler’s desire to expand his Reich, but they were wrong, “as wrong as mistaking a lion for a vegetarian,” according to Dad. In Dad’s mind Hitler was at least as bad as the Communists who took over the ruination of our homeland from Hitler after the war.

The bus stopped on Schulenburgallee in the suburb of Alt-Wolfsburg. It was a short walk from there to Schloß Straße where our flat was being built. A couple
of blocks further down on the same road stood the original village and the Wolfsburg-castle, which was built in 1302.

Our flat was on the ground floor of a three-storey building. It was modern in design with a flat roof and with white and grey rendering on the outside. The first snow had fallen. It formed a white blanket over the dug up earth in front of the house and stuck dirty-white to the bottom of our boots. We found the builders working overtime and they let us have a look inside. The flat was all concrete still - floors, ceilings and walls – and it smelt new like freshly photocopied pages at school. Mum talked about the furniture she wanted to buy. “There won’t be any hand-me downs, this time, “ she said, “no self-made bookshelves, or donated kitchenware.” She’d seen pictures in a catalogue of the things she wanted to order after we moved in. We walked around, our footsteps echoing on the concrete floor, and imagined what the place would look like furnished. I looked out the window of what would be my room and saw a tumbledown pub across the street, its whitewash cracking and plenty of clientele even this early in the day. Next to it was an overgrown garden with bare trees and a sloping lawn blanketed in snow, where over the years that we lived here we would climb trees and play soccer with our friends. I breathed in the newness of the place and felt the thrill of possibilities that all new beginnings entail.

We finally moved into our flat just before Christmas in 1971. Mother selected the furniture, buying a dining table, beds, white shelves and a coffee table to go with rust-brown corduroy couches in the living room. She sewed matching curtains for all the windows. Mum liked mustard-yellow floor-tiles for the floors – a sensible colour that won’t date, she said. Dad painted the walls a neutral white – so we could see our pictures on the walls, Mum explained. I wanted a red room with red carpet and red walls, but Mum wouldn’t hear of it. She compensated for my disappointment by buying a desk and cabinet with red drawers, as well as sewing curtains for my room using material with red, brown, and cream swirls. Our living room opened out to a large deck that overlooked the small garden, which had a couple of flowerbeds, a small patch of lawn and one little tree in it. A road called Am Gutshof behind the flats separated our
lawn from the forest that extended northwards, linking the suburbs of Alt Wolfsburg, Käsdorf, Brackstedt, and Kreuzheide. I sensed I could like it here.

**Trying to Fit in**

Our next door neighbour was Frau Ingrid Schmidtke. She was a few years older than my parents and lived with her wheelchair-bound husband who had suffered a stroke when he was only in his forties. She took my mother under her wing without ever being bossy about it. Mum showed her how to make macramé wall hangings by knotting cord into interesting patterns, something she had learned in Florida at one of the craft classes she had attended in her spare time. She was good at macramé and had even made a lampshade using sisal, which now hung above our dining room table.

Dad said Frau Schmidtke was remarkable: she was utterly lacking in ordinary resentments, was clear about her responsibilities, knew her blessings, and managed to retain her humour. She certainly knew how to derive joy from ordinary things: her tulips and daisies that she grew in her little garden, a cup of strong coffee she shared with Mum. Her brown hair was pinned up in a bird’s-nest-bun with lose strands always falling around her face. She wore tie-dyed tunics in bright red over brown trousers, and liked to quote Rainer Maria Rilke: “in the difficult are the friendly forces, the hands that work on us”. We became good friends with her.

One Saturday morning Frau Schmidtke and Mum were in the laundry room, pinning up sopping wet socks and underwear on the communal line in the cellar. Narrow windows at head-height cast light onto the cold concrete floor. I was playing outside with Andrej and overheard Mum talking to Frau Schmidtke. She told her how the elderly couple two floors up had complained that Andrej and I played the piano too loud. “They said the children couldn’t practice after six pm, that it was the law.” Mum worried about what other people thought and hated being criticised. She assumed by some complicated logic of her own mind that, more often than not, it was others who were right about things rather than her.

Frau Schmidtke did not live by that same command. She rolled her eyes with mock-seriousness and said to my mother, “I bet if the law told them to cut
their right leg off they’d follow that too!” Then she sighed, “It’s these sort of people, with their pinched-lipped German respectability, that give us ordinary Germans such a bad name. They know the law better than any lawyers and think they have to police everyone else. While we can’t change them, we must not let them get under our skin!”

The following Monday, my mother went to the local post-office to post some letters to Czechoslovakia. The man behind the counter looked pinched-faced and bossy and wouldn’t serve her because she, with her olive complexion, dark hair, and accented German, looked to him like an Italian Gastarbeiter or guestworker. Wolfsburg had a colony of guest workers from Italy and Turkey who came on temporary visas to work at the Volkswagen Factory. Some of the locals were hostile towards them, full of self-serving prejudices, just like this postal worker. He told her to go and do her business at the migrant hostel, where they had a post office for people like her. In her broken German Mum felt unable to defend herself. She sensed the postal worker’s presumption that just because she spoke with an accent, she thought with an accent as well. Rage as dark as a storm clouded her mind and she was unable to speak or move. An elderly German man who stood behind her in line suddenly spoke up on her behalf. He told the postal bureaucrat not to be so harsh and to serve her at once. She did get served, although grudgingly. I know that to this day she has never forgotten the inhospitality she received because she didn’t speak fluently in German and looked different from the locals in Wolfsburg.

One Last Look Across the Iron Curtain

When we lived in Wolfsburg, Germany was still divided into the Communist East and the democratic West. One thing Dad liked to do once in a while was drive along the East German border. It was only about twenty kilometres away from Wolfsburg and made a good Sunday afternoon outing. We would always stop at a village called Zicherie that was split in half by the East German border. One half of the village was in West Germany and the other half in East Germany. The eastern part, with its pot-holed streets and crumbling buildings, was deserted because it lay in the no-man’s-zone filled with barbed wire and
landmines. The western part was thriving. Buildings were freshly painted and the streets were filled with tourists like us, who wanted a glimpse across the iron curtain.

We looked through binoculars that Dad brought along and saw East German soldiers armed with machine guns sitting in watchtowers. The soldiers spent most of the time looking away from us, to the East, making sure that no East Germans escaped to the West. I found the soldiers frightening with their real guns, army uniforms and Alsatian dogs. Dad shook his head: “They obviously don’t expect West Germans to ‘escape’ to their East German side even though that’s exactly what the Communists tell their citizens.”

“Why would they say that?” I wanted to know.

“They tell the people the border protects East Germans from the West.” Dad explained. Further along the road we saw crosses with wreaths on them, marking the spots where East Germans, who tried to escape, had been shot.

“Look at that.” Dad sounded appalled. “What sort of country shoots its own citizens in the back? And all the while the Communists claim to be humanists!”

“Other countries have their own criminals who shoot people whenever they please in broad daylight on city streets!” Mum said with a wicked grin, baiting Dad.

“You’re such a pessimist!” Dad took the bite.

“So what if I have no faith in humankind? Men are worse than animals and that’s not a lie.”

My parents continued to bicker about human nature, men and women, communists and non-communists, as we drove south along a small section of the 138km long border. Dad suddenly smiled. He said how lucky we were to live in the West, where, irrespective of other flaws, at least the citizens counted and could have their say if they wanted to. “Any society,” he told us in his grave voice, “where mimicry and lies become ingrained and citizens are killed for speaking up, is not a modern society and I could never live in a place like that again.” Andrej and I sensed his words were important. Perhaps he worried we would forget, or even that we would never know, what life had been like in Czechoslovakia.
That evening, as I was getting ready for bed, Dad told me how lucky I was to have seen so much of the world already. “You’re into your fifth school, in the third country, on the second continent, and in your third language. And you’re only nine!” I nodded carefully, wondering whether Dad might be trying to put words into my mouth, trying to make me feel unjustifiably proud. He made life sound a bit like a lottery sometimes, as if the right numbers could make you an instant winner, but I couldn’t see what pride had to do with my life. My thoughts went dim every time I thought of our recent past and how we kept leaving parts of our life behind. “When I was your age,” Dad went on, “I only knew the village I grew up in and the strip of land along the train line where my father took me on one of his postal runs. And of course I only spoke one language until I learned German when I was in my thirties!” The Russian language my parents had to learn at school under Communism didn’t count because, like so many students at that time, they learned it reluctantly feeling it to be indoctrination.

**Riding Lessons**

For as long as I can remember, I had wanted to ride horses, but riding was not a sport my family knew anything about and no-one in our family had shown any desire to ride. Even my grandfather on my father’s side, who had to do a compulsory stint in the Czech cavalry between the two world wars, had counted down the days before he could be a pedestrian again. My mother also had her share of worries, which she’d trot out whenever I mentioned riding: how it was too expensive, snobby, dangerous, and that I wouldn’t stick with it anyway. Fortunately, I was living in the right place. In Germany horse riding was, alongside soccer, a national sport. During the nineteenth and early twentieth century the cavalry had made riding popular and affordable for ordinary men. By the time the cavalry was disbandoned around the middle of the twentieth century the popularity of riding had already spread to include women and children and the ancient cavalry facilities were turned into riding clubs. The method of riding instruction retained its military roots, in its carefully ordered training scale and the way some male instructors resembled short-tempered army
officers who barked orders at their students: to keep their head up and heels down. I was undaunted and decided I wanted to learn how to ride.

Wolfsburg, like practically every other German town, had a riding school that was partially subsidised by the government. Remarkably, the riding school stood right behind our house, less than a five-minute walk away. There was an indoor arena big enough to hold World Cup showjumping events, a couple of outdoor arenas, a cross-country course, paddocks and stables full of trained school-horses. You joined as a member each year for twenty Deutsch Mark, which entitled you to subsidised lessons and participation at the Christmas dressage competition. You were expected to help out with cleaning the saddle and bridle leather twice a year, and mucking out the arenas regularly. Lessons cost next to nothing and many of my friends at school rode. Of course owning a horse was an altogether different matter and no one I knew while we lived in Germany owned one.

Mum must have talked to Frau Schmidtke about my obsession with riding and my supposedly weak back, for when I came home from school one day, Frau Schmidtke handed me a cutting out of the Wolfsburger Allgemeine, our local newspaper. “Here’s something your parents might find interesting,” she said with a wink. It was an article about horse-riding being good for the spine. In it an orthopaedic surgeon said that horse-riding posture strengthens your abdominal and back muscles, promotes good posture, and thus is good for your back. Great, I thought, and rushed home to show the clipping to my mother.

Both my parents had been focused on my ‘back problem’ ever since a school medical examination showed a mild curvature of my spine, called scoliosis, which was invisible to the untrained eye. I had to have remedial massage for a while. Then my parents insisted that swimming would be a good way to strengthen my back and I was enrolled in the TV-Jahn swimming club, even though I hadn’t wanted to take up swimming competitively.

Mum read the newspaper article but didn’t look convinced. She frowned. “And anyway, you are irresponsible the way you always start new sports and then give them up. Why should it be any different with riding?”

“Because I want to ride but I don’t like to go swimming!” I felt defensive. I didn’t see myself as irresponsible and couldn’t see the connection
between not liking a sport and irresponsibility. But my mother was insistent. When Dad came home, I showed him the newspaper article on riding and explained to him how it would really be good for my back. He laughed at my perseverance and said why not. Mum was livid with Dad for undermining her authority. The line of Mum’s mouth went tight and thin and her voice took on a high-pitched tone as she reprimanded Dad for always indulging me. Dad just grinned and told her not to take everything so personally.

The following week I started riding at the Fritz-Tiedemann Reithalle. Like all children wanting to learn to ride, I had to take a set number of Voltigieren or vaulting lessons on a bareback horse before I could start riding lessons on a saddled horse. In Voltigieren the horse cantered round on a small, ten meter circle and riders took turns performing set gymnastic exercises on the horse’s bare back. Dad was incredulous when I first explained it to him. “You mean it’s like what they do at the circus?” he said. He put the newspaper aside and listened to me explain it further.

“Kind of. It’s supposed to teach you balance and also how to fall off without being tense.”

“You mean you’ll be falling off the horse?” Dad’s face looked incredulous and full of anxiety.

“Yes, of course. That’s normal. The instructor told my friend Heidrun that if you never fall off it means you’re not challenging yourself enough and you’ll never improve. So you have to take a fall once in a while if you want to get better.”

“Hmm. I’ll have to come and have a look – but after you’re done with falling off!”

Voltigieren is an age old sport - one of the oldest in the world, I learned in a riding book. Romans did it at the ancient Roman Games. In the middle ages young nobles did it in full armour, as part of their training for knighthood and war. Not until after the second world war did children start doing it all over Europe as a cheap way to get into riding.

After the compulsory number of Voltigieren lessons I started my proper riding. On the designated afternoon I arrived at the riding school far too early,
heart pounding, face flushed with excitement and nervousness. I was decked out in my red gum boots, which only came half way up my calf, and a pair of navy blue stretchy ski pants, that tapered down the leg and had an elastic that slipped under my foot. Other kids wore gumboots too. What mattered more than what you were wearing was how hard you tried and how quickly you developed a true feel for the horse - something no one could bluff or pretty up with fancy riding breeches. Dad recognized soon enough how much I loved riding. After a few months he bought me some black rubber riding-boots so that I felt more the part. We even stopped going to church on Sundays, something Mum and Andrej had given up long before us. Dad drove me out of town to another riding school where I rode every weekend in small groups on horses that loved to run through forests and over sandy heath land that went into purple bloom every August. Meanwhile Dad went for walks, marvelling at nature and composing poetry in his head.

**Hitler’s Model City**

By the time I was thirteen in 1975 I started grade seven at the Gymnasium - a high school stream that led to the Abitur exam by grade thirteen, and then hopefully on to university. To get into the Gymnasium you had to have good marks and a desire to go to university, preferably both. There were two other kinds of high school in Wolfsburg: the Realschule was less academically focused and went up to grade twelve, while the Volskschule went up to grade ten and was for those who wanted to do an apprenticeship in a particular trade. The states differed in their school systems but this was how Niedersachsen schools were set up in the 1970s when we lived there.

Fräulein Hartmeyer taught me German history at the Gymnasium. She looked studious with her mouse-brown hair swept up in a bun on top of her head and horn-rimmed glasses balanced on the tip of her nose. She wielded white chalk in her right hand stabbing the air to emphasise her statements as she marched back and forth in front of the blackboard. Karin popped gum in her mouth. Stefanie was writing notes to Elke in green ink on yellow paper. Hanno snickered under his breath at something Andreas was whispering to him, but Frau Hartmeyer,
who’d been pacing back and forth in front of the blackboard, heard nothing and simply went on with her lesson:

“German culture is one of the oldest in Europe but it wasn’t until 1871 that King Wilhelm I of Prussia united Germany, under the guidance of the Prussian chancellor, Otto von Bismarck. Wilhelm I became the Emperor of what was the strongest country in Europe then. After our defeat in 1918, it all went downhill from there. However there was a brief period of prosperity in the 1930s, which gave Hitler the opportunity to arm our country again and start the Second World War. Of course that ended up in defeat as we all know, and if it hadn’t been for the other Western nations, in particular for America and the Marshall Plan, Germany would not be the way it is today. And that, in conclusion, is how our enemies became our saviours!”

What we weren’t told in any of our lessons but I still managed to find out gradually over time, was how much of Wolfsburg’s history was entwined with the Nazis. The city of Wolfsburg didn’t exist, not even as an idea, before Hitler came to power in 1933. However, just as Mussolini had won favour with his citizens by making Italian trains run on time, Hitler endeared himself to his subjects by promising to provide average German workers with an affordable car. The site for the Volkswagen factory and the new city, that would become Wolfsburg after the war, was carefully chosen in what was the geographic centre of Germany, sparsely populated but connected to important industrial areas via waterways and the Autobahn. The Nazis forced the owners of the land, Herr von Mörse and Graf von Schulenburg, to sell their properties, as well as the castle called Wolfsburg. Hitler supervised the planning of the city as well as the design of the car that later came to be known on as the *Volkswagen* (literally ‘people’s car’). He wanted the city to be a model Nazi city, one that reflected the Nazi ideology in its neo-classic architecture and by the absence of churches. Plans were drawn up but aside from the factory and a few houses the city was not built during Hitler’s time. The production of Hitler’s *Volkswagen* was to start in September 1938 but that month he started the Second World War instead. During the war the factory was used to build *Kübelwagen*, the German version of the *Jeep*, and 2000 V1 Buzz bombs, using slave labourers and prisoners of war.
Consequently, none of the thousands of workers who’d saved up for their cars ever received them. After the war, they sued Volkswagen successfully and were compensated by receiving a discount on one of the new Volkswagens, which turned out to be much more expensive than Hitler had anticipated. It was the occupying British army who named the town Wolfsburg after the ancient castle standing on the banks of the Aller River not far from the factory. The British also named the cars, which they started producing in the bombed out factory from existing parts, Volkswagen.

Dad’s dislike of Nazism and anything connected with it was at least as strong as his disgust with the Communist regime, and here we were in Wolfsburg, thirty-three years after Hitler founded the town, living in Hitler’s city and driving Hitler’s car! By then the city had been built to new plans, which did include churches, modernist architecture and the latest in town planning modelled on a Scandinavian design. But for Dad it was terribly ironic that in our search for freedom we had managed to end up in what used to be the heartland of fascist fanaticism.

Dad used to recount the order of Czech history to us, how Czech democracy sprung up after the First World War, was overturned by Hitler in 1939, and then, three years after the end of the Second World War, how Communists took over the terror campaign where the Nazis had left off. For Dad, the best time in Czechoslovakia’s history was the time in between the two world wars, after the Czechoslovak citizens had been freed from Austro-Hungarian domination and for the first time experienced a democratic way of life. Dad said that we really would have to leave Wolfsburg eventually because of the city’s past. I didn’t get it then. I was happy with our German life. He just shrugged his shoulders. “The past often has a terrible hold on people, without them even knowing it,” he tried to explain. “Sometimes it’s best to leave one’s past behind and start over again.”

For a long time I didn’t take Dad seriously when he said we might move again – I couldn’t see a reason. But then, in 1975, Dad was offered a position as a senior lecturer in Mechanical Engineering at the Royal Institute of Technology in Melbourne. Being who he was, a forward looking man, Dad accepted the position without flying to Australia to see how we would like living there. He did go to London for an interview with the head of the Engineering department,
who was visiting England at the time. Back home he told us, “What have we got to lose? We can always come back if we don’t like it over there, but unless we take a look we’ll never know what sort of life we might have had in Australia!”

I don’t know what Mum really thought about moving again but Dad was convincing. Dad said Australia was like America, full of opportunities, but even better. He promised we would live in a house with a big garden and a swimming pool and when I turned sixteen I would get my own horse. He had a big untroubled grin on his face. Who could have refused him? What really won Mum over was the short time it would take - only three years - before we could become Australian citizens. In Germany, it took more than a decade for immigrants to be naturalized. Mum was troubled that we still had no passports or any official nationality, seven and a half years after we had defected from Czechoslovakia. Dad just kept smiling and I didn’t realize that sometimes people smile when they feel afraid.

My maths teacher in grade seven at the Gymnasium was Herr Stefan – a Teutonic-looking man with a serious face that masked his brazen sense of humour. He was perhaps the best maths teacher I have ever had but it wasn’t only his teaching that elevated him to the status of best teacher for most of us. The other reason was that he could tell a good story.

On a late afternoon in December 1975, after Herr Stefan found out that I would be moving to Australia, he started recounting his version of history in which he starred as Herr Stefan-Cook and discovered Australia. It was the end of our lesson and outside it was snow weather. The sky was steel grey and snowflakes fluttered like butterflies through the air. Herr Stefan launched into his story, complete with sound effects and dubious details. We found out how everything was upside-down in Australia and even utterly back to front. Christmas was in summer, the school year went from February to December, people drove their cars on the opposite side of the road, and said ‘goodbye’ when they meant ‘hello’. He even claimed that you could identify all true Australians by their marsupial pouches. We all wanted to know whether he’d really been to Australia or whether he was just making it all up. But he acted all mysterious, revealing only that “the real voyage of discovery, as Marcel Proust once said, consists not in seeing new landscapes but in having new eyes. Remember that.”
He wouldn’t say any more no matter how much we all pressured him and I had to wait until we moved to Australia before I could find out the truth for myself. By the time I was riding my bicycle home it was getting dark. Snow blanketed the footpaths and the hushed snowy landscape sparkled like a jewellery shop under the streetlights.
CHAPTER FIVE

Australia 1976-1980

“To know how to free oneself is nothing; the arduous thing is to know what to do with one’s freedom.”

(Andre Gide, in The Immoralist)

Journey to the Other Side of the World

We moved to Australia in January 1976. Dad’s new employer paid for our relocation, so we took just about everything with us: our corduroy sofa, white bookcase, walnut dining table with matching sideboard, television set, and even my rock collection. Our cat was the only thing we didn’t take - the quarantine for animals was too long in Australia. We gave her to our neighbour, Frau Schmidtke.

The morning we left I woke up early, before it got light. I looked out the window for the last time to see all the things that belonged to my life in Wolfsburg and that I may never see again. In the light of the moon I saw a fresh dusting of snow on the terracotta roofs and the path into town. There was a hushed silence. Everything in my immediate surroundings trickled as if through an hourglass. Time seemed to congeal, reality disintegrated and I looked at things as if they had already passed, as if I was already looking back and remembering them. The present was turning into history and homesickness descended over me like fog, even before we had left.

In leaving something always gets lost, but the leaving and losing didn’t get easier for me with practice. My biggest fear with all our repeated moving was forgetting. I was afraid that the present would get cleaved off from my past like an iceberg and I would forget all I had ever been. For others, the present moved forward gradually, at glacial speed, so that at least the surface of their lives remained unchanged. I didn’t want to forget my past; I wanted to hold on to it.
We left Wolfsburg on a dark winter day and landed thirty-six hours later in Melbourne on an optimistically beautiful day. I still remember the intensity of the heat despite the early hour, and how, even though I’d barely slept for almost two days, I felt acutely alive. Everything was dazzling: the sky was very blue, the heat very hot and the city very busy. The Hanzaleks, whom my parents had known in Czechoslovakia, picked us up at the airport. They too had defected from Czechoslovakia in 1968, but unlike us had migrated directly to Melbourne. Mr. Hanzalek drove us along the Tullamarine Freeway in his Holden, past single and two-storey yellow brick houses surrounded by scraggly gum trees that spread out over an undulating landscape that made up the suburbs of Essendon, Pascoe Vale and Moonee Ponds, which the Hanzaleks named for us. Life seemed calm and casual here, no one seemed to be in a rush.

I scrutinized what I saw along the way, compared it to what I’d expected. When I had thought of Australia before we left Germany, I didn’t have much to go on, except for the usual clichés of it being the other side of the world, where everything was upside-down and people hung on by virtue of gravity. I did know that Christmas was in summer, that school started in February and that people drove on the ‘wrong’ side of the road. I imagined Melbourne would be like an American town without any history. But Melbourne was different. It seemed more dignified and far less antiseptic.

The Hanzaleks lived in a leafy and orderly suburb called Mt. Waverley that lay east of the city centre. Their weatherboard house was set in a lush garden, with rhododendrons, bougainvillea and camellias behind a tall brick wall. They had an intercom at the front gate and large metal doors to drive their cars through. In the backyard Mr. Hanzalek had installed an above-ground swimming pool, which Andrej and I made good use of during the time we lived there. We slept on camp-beds in the Hanzaleks’ spare room. It was cramped in there with the four of us. Fluorescent tubes shed white light from the ceiling that made everyone look pale and tense. Our daily life as we had known it seemed as remote as a memory. Everything seemed unexpected. Dad found the newness exciting and eagerly described how he imagined our life would be here but my mother’s temper frayed. She spoke to us in a clipped manner, impatient with the way things were.

“Kamilko, life is ordered chaos,” Dad teased her.
For her there was no order in our chaotic life. It annoyed her to
distraction when even the smallest things didn’t turn out right. Whenever we
dropped our clothes on the floor or laughed too loudly, she’d angrily prophesising
how our unruly behaviour would cause our hosts to evict us and then where
would we go?

In retrospect, I realise that our migrating must have hit my mother the
hardest, since she didn’t go out to work or to school like Dad, Andrej and I did
and so she never got a break from all the tension and remembering that go hand
in hand with migration. Perhaps she was just expressing the dissatisfaction we all
must have felt at the time, but unlike us, she had almost reached the last knot in
her rope.

Australians
When we arrived in Australia, I found that people had no idea where I had come
from. Australia was a land of migrants and our plight was no different from
anyone else’s. One was just another ‘migrant’, a non-English one at that, and the
reason why we left interested no one. Australians seemed uninformed about
other places, except for England, which they saw as their lost home regardless of
whether they had ever lived there before. Few Australians had a clue about
where Czechoslovakia was, yet alone about the political situation we had escaped
from. My father kept running into lecturers at the university who admired
Marxism with a vehement zeal. While they agreed that my family’s bad
experience under Communism might have been unfortunate, they also believed
strongly that our experience had been just an historical anomaly. They seemed
unnaturally certain that, given time, Communism would work out. Dad shook his
head in disbelief and told us over dinner one night: “Australians are politically
illiterate! They don’t know that opinions are not certainties and that most
‘certainties’ are merely opinions!”

Dad had assumed that democracy automatically led to clear thinking
amongst the citizens and that people in the free world would know how unnatural
life was under a totalitarian regime. What he didn’t realize was that democracy
also gave people the freedom not to read or suffer or understand.
For Australians the English culture was the yardstick they measured everything by. This was news to me. I grew up with the strong impression that circulated liberally in Czechoslovakia as well as in Germany that although the English were great adventurers, wrote great stories and poetry, painted some marvellous pictures, they were also rather eccentric, stingy with their emotions, and somewhat uncivilised (they bathed only once a week, supposedly). Yet, most Australians openly and proudly imitated the British way of life, even those who had lived in Australia for generations. Owning a Victorian house in the right inner city suburb, filling the rooms with mahogany settees, walnut side-tables, wine-red oriental rugs, and Wedgwood china, meant that you had arrived, you had made it socially in Australia. I laughed at their ambitions and despised their pretensions. But I also envied them their normal lives – the way they took all the things that surprised me for granted.

Of course, the Australian founding narrative was about rejection, with the associated longing to return to the place one had been expelled from. This was unlike America’s, which was about aspiration. While the pilgrims arrived in America in pursuit of an ideal, the Australian convicts arrived against their will on the first fleet in 1788 in Sydney and had few hopes for their future in Australia. Maybe this explains, in part, why the Americans we met in Florida had few, if any, British aspirations and prided themselves on being self-made and free of their pasts. Of course in Florida the academics my parents mixed with had come from all over the world including Dad’s departmental head, who originally came from Czechoslovakia. In Melbourne the academics my parents met were predominantly Anglo-Saxon. It was a narrower circle in a way.

The Hanzaleks were optimistic about life in Australia despite some of the drawbacks that over time became evident. They explained how things would be different here but that didn’t mean they would be worse. As long as we didn’t expect everything to be the same as in Europe we would do fine. They listed all the opportunities that most Europeans only dreamt about achieving back home – freedom from traditions that yoked so much of life, owning a car and a house with a garden, eating as much meat as you wanted to, as well as getting a free university education.
Two weeks after we arrived in Melbourne Andrej and I started school. I was enrolled at Presbyterian Ladies’ College, a private school for girls, whilst Andrej went to the local primary school for the time being. My parents had never planned to send me to a private school. In Germany, only rich children with learning problems went to private schools and in Czechoslovakia, under Communism, there were no private schools at all. But, our new Czech and Australian acquaintances were unanimous: education, especially in the higher grades, was only good in private schools. Government schools were unreliably ordinary they said.

My parents believed that education mattered because they saw knowledge as an antidote to tyranny and fear. The problem with tyranny was that it masqueraded as conventional wisdom and people got sucked in by its promises. The good thing was that tyranny only came in a couple of forms, which tended to repeat themselves in embarrassingly similar variations time after time. Dad was therefore convinced that if you knew history and were able to think for yourself, you were less likely to be deceived by life. And that was why my parents insisted we get the best possible education in Australia.

Tongue–tied and Out of Place

Dad talked to the principal of Presbyterian Ladies’ College, Miss Montgomery, and somehow managed to convince her that it would be in the school’s best interest to have somebody as multicultural and multilingual as me as their student. And she agreed for some reason, letting me in ahead of others on the school waiting list. I cringed when Dad told us what he’d said and was worried sick all week before I started school. I was convinced that I’d be shunned once everyone at PLC discovered what a dull girl I really was. Dad also arranged for me to skip from grade seven to grade nine, as he had promised me I would, to make up for the year I had to repeat after we moved from Florida back to Germany.

PLC, as my school was called for short, was nothing like the other schools I had gone to in Europe or America. PLC was one of the oldest girls’ schools in Melbourne, founded in 1875 to provide academic education for girls that was
equal to the boys’ schools, at a time when girls did not study academic subjects in Australia nor went to university. Although the school buildings were set in sprawling grounds on top of a hill in Burwood, the school lacked the manicured pretentiousness of some of the other private schools in Melbourne. There was an outdoor pool for our swimming classes, several hockey ovals, netball and tennis courts, as well as a large theatre for morning assemblies and the occasional play. And then there were the strict rules as to what you could and couldn’t wear to school.

My PLC summer uniform consisted of a checked cotton dress in the school colours - royal blue, black and gold - that buttoned up at the front. In winter I wore a tartan skirt, lemon coloured shirt and a royal blue tie. A royal blue blazer with the school-crest embroidered on the chest pocket, a royal blue v-neck jumper, white socks, sensible brown lace-up shoes, and a shoulder bag for books completed my transformation into a PLC girl, at least outwardly. But the rules extended further still: we had to wear royal blue underwear and the dress and skirt had to be a certain length. The knee socks were not allowed to fall around our ankles and we couldn’t wear jewellery to school. Those with long hair could tie it back only with royal blue ribbons. And I haven’t even mentioned the sports uniform yet! Perhaps my parents’ view on education had rubbed off and that was why I complained to anyone who would listen how the quality of education seemed less important than the details of the clothes I wore to school.

On the first day the principal assigned two girls, Dianne and Sally, to show me around. They spoke slowly to me the way one speaks to a dull child. I wasn’t a good audience for them, since nothing they said evoked the right kind of response from me. Looking back I suspect that they had never dealt with someone who couldn’t speak English fluently. It was the first hint I had about how differently social relationships proceeded here.

My home room was 3R, up on the top floor of the main building facing the Dandenong hills. It had a linoleum floor with a black and white speckled pattern and fluorescent lights overhead. My attention frequently drifted through the long row of windows that were left open whenever there was a heatwave. PLC stood on a hill and I had a bird’s eye view of the surrounding suburbs from
my classroom. Burwood, Nunawading, Boronia and Ringwood sprawled outwards towards the horizon where the Dandenong Ranges started.

Miss Edwards, the English teacher, was pacing between the isles, reading to us from Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*. Her grey hair fell in waves around her face and her flared summer skirt swished in time with her steps. The other girls followed Shakespeare’s lines in their books but for me his words didn’t make any sense - Shakespeare might as well have been writing in Danish.

Looking out the classroom window I saw homes and people busy in them and smelt the fish and chips in the corner stores. The suburbs blended one into another and stretched out before me - neat rows of red-brick, yellow-brick and weatherboard houses, fenced-in yards, scraggly gum trees, and straight streets that in the midday sun were shiny like oil slicks. On the horizon Mt. Dandenong quivered like quicksilver in the heat and above it arched a deep blue sky, unmarred by shadow or cloud. Life was happening down there, to people who knew their way around: working in offices, shopping at corner shops, cutting their lawns, speaking in English to everyone.

I didn’t talk in class straight away, just as I hadn’t the other times we had moved. I just listened and observed, not so much the lessons, but how everyone else went about being an Australian. This was the groundwork I unknowingly had to get through before I could even contemplate opening my mouth. My teachers, all of them without exception, did not understand the method in my silence, nor did they understand how much of the daily life they took for granted, I lacked. Besides lacking English words, I fell short in their knowledge of the Australian culture, in the how and what you said or did in order not to look like an outsider. While I struggled against losing my small supply of confidence, they coerced me to speak, to discuss my ideas, to ask for explanations. In my head everything was churning, everything seemed equally confusing and significant. Inside me there was too much going on for which no words were adequate. I couldn’t figure out quickly enough what was essential and safe for me to talk about in front of everyone. I hated the sound of my voice in English and feared I would embarrass myself by asking something dumb that everyone else took for granted. And so I stayed quiet and watched.
Part of the problem was that there were no other non-English speaking girls in my year. Sure there were non-Australians enrolled in the school but they came from such places as India or Malaysia where they spoke English alongside their native language. Australia, too, was isolated and Australians had fewer opportunities to travel to places where another language was spoken and most Australians, if they did travel, just wanted to go to England anyway. In Europe, you barely had to take a step to find yourself in a foreign place where no one spoke your language making it easier than in Australia to know first hand what it is like not to be understood and not to understand. I couldn’t expect my Australian teachers to know what it would be like for a non-English student to learn to fit in. Nor would they have known, just like I didn’t know then, that when children are first immersed in a foreign language they usually experience a period of muteness before they try to speak. Emotions make enormous blinkers and will interfere with all kinds of learning.

My teachers’ intentions weren’t bad, just ignorant. They wanted me to develop my language by actively practicing it and did not realise I still lacked the confidence to make a spectacle of myself in their classroom. They believed in their ideas and pushed me but my experience felt bigger than their theories. Speaking in a foreign language is always a matter of deep personal conviction: knowing that you are safe and capable, in that order.

Life in the Suburbs

“Right,” Dad said one weekend, “lets find ourselves a house!” Jan from the Stockdale and Leggo Real Estate agency drove us around in her silver Ford Fairmont to look at houses that were for sale. She prattled on to Dad, who sat in the front seat, about the Australian real estate market and how it was bound to take off any day soon. The heat burned through the car windows; a light breeze struggled to keep the summer heat at bay. We drove through ordinary suburbs, Burwood, Chadstone and Forest Hill.

The first house Jan showed us was almost new. It was the usual Australian brick box, where the brick wasn’t solid all the way through, but was just applied to the outside walls. Jan rhapsodised about how clean the new place was. Sure the backyard was clean, Jan was right, but only because it was one big
concrete slab. The Hills Hoist clothes line stood proudly in the middle of the yard and was the closest thing there was to a tree. Dad got carried away by Jan’s enthusiasm and if Mum and I hadn’t frowned I bet he would have bought that house there and then. Even my brother, who was a reluctant participant in our real estate hunt, didn’t like that house.

“My wife’s the boss,” Dad said to Jan with mock-seriousness, clearly enjoying his act as the hen-pecked husband. “What she says goes, as you can see!”

Mum threw him her black look. “Joe, what are you talking about! I want to see other places before deciding anything!” Dad just winked at us in the back seat.

I couldn’t figure out what made Dad so impulsive at times. Was it because he hated to disappoint enthusiastic people or was it others’ enthusiasm that sucked him in? I’d lost track of how often Dad had turned up with some second-rate or unnecessary item just because the guy at the store was positive we needed it. We had all kinds of motorized can openers, screw top openers, torches that attached to your key ring, but the weirdest thing that Dad had recently bought was a Tummisizer, a gadget that you strapped to your belly and passively exercised your stomach muscles with.

But I liked my father’s optimism and his willingness to try out new things even if his judgement wasn’t always right. At least he openly voiced what he was thinking. Mum rarely said what she really thought and you had to second-guess her a lot of the time. You sensed how beneath the surface of her silence the unspoken was seething. I thought Dad’s life must have been easier than Mum’s because he laughed more easily. I assumed that a joyful face must know only joy. I didn’t yet know that a smile can be borrowed and can hide as well as a frown can.

After seeing a dozen houses we found our house in Mount Waverley. It was a post-war yellow brick-veneer on Swayfield Road, with three bedrooms, one bathroom, and a sloping backyard. The carpet had a flower print on it in red and green and smelled musty. Dad brought home an old lab table that the University had abandoned following renovations. It could seat six easily and mother painted it white to match our kitchen cabinets. We ate our meals in the kitchen on this
table, except in winter when we ate at our formal dining table off the living room, because that was the only room that had a proper oil heater. My friends in Germany didn’t believe me when I wrote that I had never felt as cold in winter as I did in Australia. In their minds all of Australia was tropical.

We moved into our house just as winter started. The days had become short. Dampness and cold seeped in through the walls. Outside each new day was grey, rain fell in all its forms as drizzle or showers and sometimes early in the morning mist veiled the Damper Creek valley beneath our house. Inside I dawdled, in the hope of postponing the moment when I finally had to walk out the front door and go to school. But I had no choice. My mother woke us at seven thirty every morning and while she made us hot chocolate and spread our bread with plum jam, I dressed in my school uniform and worried about surviving another day at school. On really cold days, Dad turned on the oil heater in the living room and we’d eat our breakfast in there. After breakfast we’d go our separate ways. Dad walked through the Damper Creek Reserve to Mt. Waverley train station, Andrej walked to the Mt. Waverley primary school and I walked to the bus stop, yet I rarely took the bus. I preferred to walk the half hour to school and save my bus money to buy books with at the Mary Martin Bookshop in town.

The summer after we moved was one long heatwave. The sun beat down, scorched the lawn and turned our house into an oven. Our house, like most houses in Australia in the 1970s, was neither centrally heated nor air-conditioned. It also lacked insulation. Some nights, when the heat stayed in the high 30s and swelled the house, we’d grab our sheets and pillows and sleep outside under the stars.

Andrej and I loved the hot weather because then there was nothing left to do but go to the beach and catch the offshore breeze. Mum swore at the hot weather. Dad just laughed at her for thinking she could bully the weather to fit in with her wishes. Dad eventually did install pink insulation bats under the roof, which made a difference to the inside temperature. It was hard to believe that the previous owners survived twenty summers in an uninsulated house.

Dad bought an off-white second-hand Holden with the gear stick on the dashboard. On weekends we explored the beaches around Port Philip Bay, Portsea, and Torquay. One of our favourite places was Gunnamatta Beach on the
Mornington Peninsula along the Bass Straight. You had to walk down a sandy path that wound its way through scraggly tea trees down to the beach. There the surf was often big and beat in an endless rhythm against the beach, while the riptide pulled the other way, out to the open ocean. I learned to dive under the biggest waves so as not to get knocked over by them and swam with the smaller ones back to shore. Miles of sand and hot sun evoked a holiday atmosphere for us, having only lived inland before.

“Australians are drugged on the good life, like koalas,” Dad told us. We were stretched out on beach towels under our sun umbrella and Mum was pouring lemonade out of the thermos. Andrej and I giggled but Dad looked serious.

“For Australians life seems easy,” he went on, “because they live outside history. World events haven’t touched them directly so far because wars and political upheavals have been happening elsewhere.”

Dad worried that we’d get the wrong impression of what life was really like and that we might not get to learn the fact that life was always spelled ‘HASSLE’ eventually for all of us, in every place and every language. It was a great affliction for anyone to think they could escape the hassle of life.

Inky clouds sped across a turgid sky as a storm approached. The wind blew the water white and black, and wrinkled the sea. Sunshine came in little bursts through the black clouds. We packed up our towels with rainbow stripes printed on them, the ocean blue sun umbrella with the white tassels, and the empty cooler we brought our lunch in. I tucked my paperback, Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*, under my arm and sprinted across the sand in an attempt to outrun the storm.

### Making my Life More Habitable

Andrej and I started watching a lot of television in Australia: *Cartoon Corner, Gidget, The Monkees* and *Mr. Ed* after school. Then after dinner we’d watch more: *The Benny Hill Show, The Paul Hogan Show, The Six Million Dollar Man*. Sometimes I wondered what had gotten into my parents – in Germany they had been strongly opposed to popular television shows. Something had changed. I overheard my mother tell her Czech friend Mrs. Vrzak on the phone that letting
us watch television would help us learn English. Andrey and I thought it was
great, although I suspect interacting with English speaking friends would have
been far more useful. But none of the girls I knew at school lived nearby and I
hadn’t met anyone else to play with in our neighbourhood.

There were other things that had changed for us. One thing was money.
There never seemed to be enough of it after we had paid the mortgage and our
regular expenses. Dad had taken out a loan to pay off another loan, which was
paying off the monthly mortgage. Mum worried our money wouldn’t last and
was stressed about buying anything that wasn’t on sale. She had a fit the first
Christmas, when Dad secretly bought the most expensive artificial Christmas tree
he could find – a six foot blue fir that cost a hundred dollars. She said Dad had
no sense or discipline whatsoever. Dad just smiled but I noticed a flash of
sadness fill his eyes and knew he felt hurt. Mum did soften her opinion once
we’d set up the tree with Christmas lights and tied home-baked gingerbread to the
branches with red ribbons. And when the ants got into our gingerbread
decorations Mum just laughed and said, “Now I’ve really seen it all, including
Australian gingerbread-eating ants!”

In January, a month before we went back to school, my parents decided
that Mum would have to work as well, not just to ease the money pressure, but
also because Dad thought she needed to get out and meet people to improve her
English. Life in an Australian suburb was difficult. It was lonelier for Mum in
Melbourne, because here in the suburbs people lived in their own houses behind
fences and minded their own business: you rarely even knew your neighbours.

Dad went and asked my principal if she would be so kind as to give Mum
a job at PLC, because we couldn’t afford to pay my school fees anymore. I was
mortified by Dad’s frankness. “What if the principal doesn’t remember me or
worse still, if she doesn’t care that we can’t afford to keep me at her school?”

Mum also suspected Dad of overreaching, going too far and asking too
much this time. Dad just laughed at us. He was a man full of optimism who
didn’t believe in sitting back and waiting for fate to move him. “It doesn’t really
matter what she thinks,” he said and shrugged his shoulders. “Just asking
someone for a favour can’t hurt anyone. What’s the worst that can happen? She
might say no. But she also may not! Sometimes you have to make your luck.”
And that is how my mother became the first lab technician at PLC with a masters degree in Engineering. She enjoyed setting up physics and chemistry experiments and best of all she drove me to and from school every day.

On weekends I wrote letters to my friends in Germany. I sat at my white laminated desk with the four red drawers on one side and scribbled news about Australia on pages of flimsy airmail paper, that came in blue, green and white, and rustled when you handled it.

I wrote how strange Australia seemed: different in a noteworthy way. How the gum trees kept their leaves but shed their bark, the heat was dry and insistent like fire, you could buy only one type of yellow cheese and people ate steak for dinner almost every night. How the pies were filled with meat rather than with fruit, and for breakfast people spread salty vegemite - a soup stock - on their bread. How all children had to wear school uniforms to school, and grown men wore khaki shorts, knee-high socks and ties to work during the warmer months.

I wanted to paint my life in a positive light, as much for my friends in Germany as for myself. I thought that everyone expected our life in Australia to resemble an adventure and be an improvement on all that we’d left behind. That’s what I had expected before we had moved and so I tried to sound up-beat in my letters, as if moving was all fun, which of course it wasn’t most of the time. I didn’t think it important to write that I lacked the English words to manage smoothly. I skipped over the disturbing fact that my thoughts went dim whenever I was spoken to in English and when I tried to speak it felt like grinding air. I clearly forgot to mention how many of the concerns the girls at my school had seemed trivial and unrelated to me and that sometimes I was overcome by fear: that I might never fit into the Australian way of life. I looked up from my desk and saw our backyard, with the sloping lawn, brown from the summer heat, white roses along the fence, Dad’s compost heap, some gum trees, as well as the rectangular brick incinerator in the far corner where, as we learned soon enough, we were meant to burn our paper and cardboard on weekends.

After I finished writing my letters, I climbed my favourite tree. Sitting in the fading light I watched the evening spread out against the sky. The world around me, which I’d inhabited blindly all day, suddenly came alive. I saw the
details of things and became aware of being there to see them: the terracotta and corrugated iron roofs of the surrounding houses peeking out between the gum trees, the sky streaked orange by the setting sun, threads of smoke rising from the chimneys in straight lines. Old memories gathered and clouded my head. My future felt like a burden to me and I could not see the shape my life was supposed to take. As darkness fell, I looked for the Southern Cross. The city lights twinkled between the gum trees and the stars sparkled like jewels that had been spilled above my head. Looking up at the vastness of the universe I sensed the smallness and precariousness of human life – we believed that we chose our path in life, when really it was choice that grabbed hold of us and made it feel like fate.

My friend Steffie from Wolfsburg sent me the German translation of Anne Frank’s Diary for my fifteenth birthday. Reading it, I realized how rare it was to really know someone’s true self, the way they are on the inside. Everyone’s life is unconventional in its details, but the experience of loss follows universal patterns, which is why I could identify with Anne. Even though her tragic life did not resemble mine, I could identify with her losses. I too felt displaced by the twists of history to a foreign place and longed to regain my sense of home. That Anne did not survive the holocaust was devastating, but also eye-opening for me. Here I was living at a time and in a place where I was free to imagine my own life without the danger of persecution and I wasn’t doing it. Instead, I was still waiting for life to happen the way I assumed it happened for everyone else. I did not like what fate had given me – something too difficult and lonely to devote myself to. What I really wanted was to escape my individual fate. And so it often seemed easier to imitate others in the belief that to be ‘normal’ I had to be just like them, the people in the crowd.

Reading Anne Frank’s diary two realizations struck me with the force of a collision. I realized that a life lived by imitation will result in a static life devoid of individual details. I didn’t want life like that. I wanted to find myself and create my own life, the way Anne had tried. I realised too, how writing could compensate for absence and for loss: that writing about my everyday life could make living more bearable. I started to write a more serious journal and the tone
of my letters to my German friends changed. I wanted to reveal my deeper thoughts and feelings in a way I felt unable to do verbally.

In my journal I wrote how tiresome it must be to only ever speak in the same language all the time. With every word that passed your lips, you knew in advance how you would feel and you had to remain the same and could never be other than you had always been. To my friends I wrote how I felt smack in the middle of no place, in between everything, without a sense of future. I wrote that loss seemed like a weakness but that it could be animating, that it could reveal what I had left. And my friends also opened up. Two of my friends lost their fathers; one friend’s parents divorced. For them, life seemed just as confusing as it was for me.

Dad found a riding school for me in Narre Warren, a suburb on the outskirts of Melbourne. I rode every Sunday morning in a group with Rob as our instructor. Dad and I drove early enough so that I could brush and saddle the horse I was going to ride, the way I had done in Germany. But things were different here. The instructor didn’t follow any particular training theory and seemed to make things up as he went along. His focus was on the horse and how to control it, how to make it do what you wanted it to. He preferred to use force to collect his horses, which went against what I had learned. My previous German instructor had focused on training the rider first and foremost, saying “The horse already knows how to be a horse! It’s you who needs to learn to ride properly!” I learned to sit quietly and to follow the horse’s movements smoothly without hanging on, pulling at the reins or kicking the horse. To ride in a circle or change direction you just shifted your weight and applied the lower leg to the horse’s side at the appropriate footfall. Even to stop the horse you didn’t tug blindly at the reins, instead you squeezed your fist and sat deeply into the saddle until the horse came to a halt. Your timing had to be right and you had to develop feeling to know exactly which leg was moving without looking down. My Australian instructor didn’t know any of this. He wanted to overpower the horse, defeat it. In the process most of his horses lost their horsiness, their spirit, and while you rarely got bucked off at his riding school, the horses’ movements suffered and many of them looked terribly sad to me.
While I was riding Dad sat outside and wrote poetry. In the car on the way home he told me about writing. “Our history and circumstances are terribly fragile, and fleeting. Once lived, they are gone forever and won’t be recalled or recorded except as occasional reminiscences or remarks in a conversation. Poets write in order to remember life.” He explained that if you want to write well you have to dedicate yourself, practice every day, not only when you are in the mood. You practice by writing about anything that you come across in life, be it a sunset, a rock or a mood. For freedom comes only after you master yourself, it does not come through uninhibited self-expression - that only leads to a mess. You first have to master the craft - acquire the principles and hone the tools you have at your disposal – be it your body, your hands, your voice, or your mind. Only then will you have the means to freely express yourself, write the big poem, or live a tremendous life.

I don’t think Dad knew how much time I spent writing then - it wasn’t something I felt confident to talk to anyone about. I realized that my life became more habitable, even if not less confusing, when I wrote my experiences and feelings down.

**Striving**

The first thing I remember ever striving for was to cut bread into thin regular slices the way my mother did for us - to me that was a sign of being grown up. Then other ambitions presented themselves as markers towards maturity and at first they too mirrored my parents’ interests and achievements: tying my shoe laces in neat bows, reading books that had no pictures in them, skiing and ice skating as easily as I could walk. Some of my goals were more insistent, such as the desire to do well at school and go to university. Others, such as becoming a ballet dancer, were transient and more fanciful.

I had always done reasonably well at school before we migrated to Australia. Then I began to flounder. The problem was that I was terribly afraid all the time. From the moment I got up in the morning to when I went back to bed, I was filled with dread. I worried about going to school, about being at school, and then in the evening I’d worry about doing it all over again the next day. Thoughts raced through my mind and made it hard to concentrate on
anything else. I worried that I was too quiet, and when I pushed myself to speak I was mortified of having made a fool of myself. I was convinced that others judged me and wouldn’t have anything to do with someone as flawed as I was.

The other problem was that I felt bored by some of the classes, especially in science. The lessons felt dead. The science teachers memorized their course work and if you asked them anything that wasn’t on the syllabus they usually didn’t know the answers. I lost respect for them and for what they tried to teach us. My chemistry teacher, Miss Potter, was more concerned that our hands were neatly folded on top of our desks than with making her lessons interesting. She had no scientific curiosity and her teaching lacked imagination – her idea of science was the regurgitation of straight facts. I never learned anything that way. I wanted to understand what lay behind any assertion. Then Mr. Kent, a new chemistry teacher, arrived just as I was failing Miss Potter’s class. I asked my parents to let me move into Mr. Kent’s class. After I switched to his class we learned about the greenhouse effect and what chemicals in the pollution makes old buildings in Europe look stained. I finally understood that chemistry was not just about balancing out strange formulas, but that the principles applied to real life.

Maths had been my downfall at school, always. There was no magic in it for me, in large part because I had to mechanically memorize equations in order to pass the tests. What bothered me even more was the proposition that if a = b and b = c, then naturally and self-evidently a = c (even though by definition ‘a’ meant something other than ‘b’ or ‘c’). Now that to me seemed totally illogical. It was like arriving at the conclusion that cat = dog or spoon = tree. And so I wasn’t really surprised when I failed the big maths test in form four, the one that was going to separate those who could go on with maths in the last two years of school from those who could not.

The school counsellor arranged to meet with me and my parents in her office. My parents were already there, waiting with the maths teacher, when I arrived. The counsellor ushered us into her office. She had an efficient look about her, the way she wore her hair pinned back in a tight bun and her black rimmed glasses were attached to a gold-link chain that she wore around her neck. She sat down behind her desk, shuffled a pile of beige folders, put her glasses on and
began to talk. In her experience, she told my parents, I lacked the aptitude for mathematics and shouldn’t continue doing maths after form four. At the end of her speech she looked at us, one at a time, and seemed satisfied in a mean, pinched way.

I looked away in shame. This was it, rang through my head like a fire-alarm, finally someone has figured out how dumb I really am! Rejection may be something that people who are strong and have big egos bear well, but unfortunately I possessed neither. In the midst of this scalding humiliation I didn’t notice that Dad smile his dangerous smile at the counsellor. Nor was I aware of how the counsellor just kept on talking, oblivious of the fact that my parents might have their own opinion on what kind of education was best for me. Apparently my IQ test revealed that my intelligence was below average. The counsellor and the maths teacher believed that mathematics was simply beyond me, as were all sciences.

Dad stood up and stared down his long nose, first at the counsellor and then at the maths teacher: “Miss Slater, you are school counsellor and you Mrs. Johnson are a maths teacher.” They nodded absentmindedly and the counsellor gave Dad a condescending look that said she hoped he would hurry along with whatever he had to say, since she was a busy woman and had a million things to get through that day.

“As a counsellor you would of course be aware that IQ tests were introduced by Binet late last century to test mentally retarded children and Binet himself had not intended the tests to be used on ‘normal’ schoolchildren?”

Miss Slater’s face puckered up as if she’d just eaten something sour. I guess she did not expect parents to challenge her – they were meant to be grateful. What she did not know was that Dad liked to know about things for himself and he would not be intimidated by people, especially not those who took on an authoritarian air without really deserving it. Dad also hated fads, such as IQ testing which had taken the world of education by storm during the 1970s.

“Furthermore,” Dad went on and began to pace in front of her desk, “furthermore Miss Slater, IQ tests, as I’m sure someone with your training knows, are culturally specific.” Miss Slater’s look changed from self-righteous indignation to florid disbelief.
“English is my daughter’s third language and your Anglo-Saxon culture is foreign to her. Giving her one of your IQ tests therefore says little about her intelligence but a lot about your ignorance!”

I couldn’t believe Dad would speak to the counsellor in this way. I had expected that he would tell me off for my poor performance in the maths test once we got home.

“All the IQ score really tells us,” Dad went on, “is that Kathy isn’t yet sufficiently familiar with either the English language or the culture and therefore is unable to successfully compete with the English children on your IQ test.”

Dad sat down. His face looked serious as he added: “It doesn’t matter what your test says, by the way. I expect my daughter to get a full education at your school, and for me that includes mathematics and sciences.”

Miss Slater sat mutely at her desk and Mrs. Johnson the maths teacher shifted uneasily in her chair. I tried to contain my cancerous self-doubt and didn’t dare look anyone in the eye. They all came to an agreement eventually and the maths teacher decided I would get another chance. I had intensive after-school tutoring in maths and continued studying the sciences. In my final year High School Certificate I not only managed to pass all my subjects - chemistry, physics, maths, English and German – but did well enough to get into medicine at university.

I’m not sure what that says about IQ testing or about the professional judgement of school counsellors. It did teach me something though: not to put myself down just because someone, who claims to be in the know, discredits my ability. It also taught me about perseverance, how you can get ahead if you know what your really want, and that sometimes anger can be a powerful propellent in life. And believe me, I felt very angry beneath my feelings of dread and sorrow. Looking back, I recognize that my mother and I both had a kind of energy and stubbornness that was rooted in anger. This was one of the ways we both managed to stay afloat all those years and it was what made me want to strive so hard and gradually stand up for myself. My mother, much like me, was not made to fit seamlessly into the expected or ordinary. She wouldn't let herself be squeezed by her mother, who had tried to mould her life. My mother was not ordinary but somehow she kept forgetting that.
Homelessness

All families have problems. Some have worse problems than those I had growing up, others have lesser ones. I was lucky in many ways but kept forgetting the details of my luck. Life was rushing me along and I felt myself pushed against the grain. I was six and a half when my family started migrating and we didn’t stop until we came to Australia seven and a half years later. By the time we settled in Melbourne, Australia, it felt as if I had seen half the world, but I felt at home nowhere. I suffered from terrible homesickness, but not for a specific place. There was no single place I could call my home: Czechoslovakia wasn’t it, nor was it Germany, America, or Australia. I longed for a place where I would be amongst people who spoke and thought just as I did - like we all do deep down.

Both my parents had lived angrily for as long as I remembered. While my mother liked the all-out attack, my father preferred to camouflage his anger passive-aggressively with humour. Their disagreements seemed like mere ripples in the landscape of their relationship, faint echoes of vaster upheavals from their past. They both needed contrast and friction to feel alive and when life did not provide just the right amount of tension, they would create contrast and friction at home with us. Both of them seemed terribly vain at times. And while they did much to help us, they also inadvertently passed on a winter feeling of hopelessness and sadness to others at times.

There is nothing more frustrating in personal relationships than tepid harmony, brought about by withholding emotions, but even more unbearable are loud disagreements that remain unresolved. In retrospect, I can see what outrageous things I did at times to distract my parents from each other. I either played the clown, hoping that I would snap them out of their anger by making them laugh or, if that failed, I slipped easily into the role of the problem child and threw a temper tantrum or started a fight of my own with one of them. At least then they had a common focus other than themselves, something to unite them. I hoped that their concern about me would prove to them that they couldn’t leave the family, that I needed both of them to sort me out. What I didn’t realize then, was how often when any of us are overwhelmed by anger we are really just afraid.
When I think of my parents today and how they met in Czechoslovakia, it seems that they both were in a kind of exile from their past and that they were both trying to rise above their family backgrounds. They were seeking a home or a country in each other, something they lacked on their own.

Dad must have appealed to my mother, with his energy and imagination and the way he knew exactly where he was going in life. And my mother must have come across as the epitome of the modern woman: she knew how to dress in a feminine style, yet was career oriented, tough and independent. Each promised the other something. And for a while they must have been very happy together, before they realized how exiled they really were and what secret unattainable expectations they had placed on each other.

It must have been a terrible disappointment for my mother when it dawned on her how sensitive my father’s energy and imagination really were. And how crazy his itinerary was, the way he dragged her and us halfway around the world, unable to give us the sense of home and belonging he had promised us. And how disappointing for my father it would have been when he realized how brittle my mother’s independence really was: that he could never console her enough for what had happened to her in her early life and that despite moving thousands of kilometres away to the other side of the world much of the anger she expressed at the world was really misdirected anger towards what her own mother had done to her.

Maybe the problem was one of expectation; maybe my parents simply expected too much of the free democratic world. Their vision of what life in freedom would be like prevented them from accepting exile as our destiny, the way one might accept an incurable illness. For exile is difficult and has a dark side. My parents came from a place where they were not allowed to speak for fear of persecution. They came to a place where they were free to speak but no one would listen. Worse still, they lacked the words with which they could freely express themselves, and in their newfound freedom they felt even more mute than before. At first they were gagged and now they felt tongue-tied.

It took decades for me to realise that my mother took many things personally. Her seeing me as the cause of her unhappiness was nothing more and nothing less than her general attitude to life: she felt that everyone and everything
let her down, and if they hadn't yet, then sooner or later they were bound to disappoint her. Trying to change her mind was like trying to amputate her own shadow.

Sometimes I wondered how much both my parents really knew about the underlying nature of people, about the shadows and disguises, the needs and hopes that make all of us do what we do in life. Perhaps my parents didn’t realise the extent to which we are all just trying to survive and that no matter how much we change our life, we cannot change the world that surrounds us.

**Appearances**

By the time I was fifteen, I had reached an age when I quickly formed a judgement on everything. No event or person could escape my critical eye. And yet whenever people behaved or events occurred in ways that did not conform to my expectations, I became terribly anxious and was filled with visions of abandonment. I was appalled by how different things were in Australia. On the other hand, I was afraid I would never be accepted or feel that I belonged.

The following year I met Margareta. She was an exchange student from Sweden who studied at our school that year. She said, soon after I met her, “Australians are different. Sometimes their behaviour just makes no sense.” I knew exactly what she meant. The people I had met in Melbourne said and did things that confused me, but there was no one to talk to about my impressions until Margareta came along. I liked her. We became each other’s audience and compared notes on the vagaries of Australian life - good training for Margareta who later became an anthropologist.

I told Margareta how my Australian friends had all these rules regarding the proper way to behave in life, what you could and couldn’t do, and that they actually seemed to believe these to be absolute moral values. For me these were just their customs, the way they happened to be brought up. And since their customs differed from the German and Czech ones I had grown up with, I couldn’t take much of what went on in Australian homes seriously. Privately I was amused by the way they exerted themselves: using the salad servers in one hand to serve their salad, for instance, or balancing peas on the convex side of a fork, just because they’d been brought up to believe that this made them more
Margareta found the Australian obsession with politeness amusing. We both had met several Australian girls at PLC who gushed with endless and unwarranted compliments, reciting platitudes and extolling everyone’s virtues regardless of who they were actually talking to. At first I believed every word they said and felt flattered by their seeming kindness. I didn’t suspect them of being insincere, for I desperately wanted to make friends. How naïve and gullible or even unworldly I must have seemed - the way I thought they meant what they said, when in fact they were just making polite conversation. Margareta thought that Australian civility was measured by how polite and friendly you appeared and how well you maintained a semblance of harmony in spite of how you actually felt on the inside. I was used to people being more direct, saying what they really felt, without anyone having to second-guess their true intentions. Margareta laughed and pointed out that my expectations were European. She said that many English people were just as puzzled by the European way of relating and saw Europeans as aloof and their directness as rude because it seemed intrusive.

In the winter of 1978, Dad and I went to Melbourne University Open Day. We took the train to Flinders St. Station, and from there we took the tram to Carlton. It was a damp winter’s day, a grey sky hung above, and the tram was drafty. The seats were hard and wooden, like park benches. Rows of Victorian terrace houses, some painted in strange colours of purple and pink, whizzed by. Dad asked me whether I knew what I would like to study after I finished school.

“Most of all I would like to be a writer. What course do I do for that?”

“You can’t study writing at university,” Dad said.

And he was right as in those days there were no creative writing courses in Australian and most other universities. Dad explained how real writers have to live their life and observe the details of it, to gather material out of which they write. He said that they read a lot, but most of all they simply write.

The tram stopped outside Melbourne University and we got out. The wind had picked up and was blowing brown leaves and the crumpled pages of a newspaper along the footpath. Melbourne University was just what I imagined a
university to look like. Old buildings covered in ivy were set in carefully
groomed gardens. Oak trees spread their bare canopies above deserted lawns.

“Writing is first and foremost a craft that sometimes and in only some
people is transformed into art”, Dad went on, “but there are no guarantees. You
can study English or literature of course. Some writers do that. I think it would
be better to have another kind of work, something that really gets you in touch
with life.”

“Like what?”

“Well, Anton Chekov and William Carlos Williams were doctors. They
knew about life and death first hand. About suffering.”

“They knew about suffering?”

“Oh yes, to know suffering is very important. De Montaigne said it four
hundred years ago: ‘he who is afraid of suffering already suffers from his own
fears.’ Suffering is a big thing, it’s universal. But you cannot learn the big things
in life second-hand. You have got to live them.”

And that is when I felt a door open and let my future in. I realized I
wanted to learn about humans, how we differed and yet were also alike, so that I
could come to understand the nature of our common suffering. Maybe I could
even learn how to help others become less afraid of life, just as I hoped to
become less afraid myself. We visited the medical faculty and the psychology
department and I made up my mind there and then: I would study medicine
because it might help prepare me for life.

I got into medicine at Monash University in 1980, the same year my family and I
became Australian citizens. On the day of our naturalization I took time off from
my anatomy lecture and caught a train to the city centre to attend the ceremony
and receive my citizenship certificate. Dad received a framed photograph of
Queen Elizabeth from one of his English university colleagues. We were now
the Queen’s subjects and we had better take our role seriously, Dad told us with a
wicked grin. The photograph ended up in the back of the wardrobe, for Dad
didn’t want to hang it in his office and Mum wouldn’t let him hang it up at home,
which he only wanted to do in order to tease her. I didn’t expect to feel different
after I was handed my Australian passport, but I did. On the outside I still
appeared the same, but on the inside I felt altered and it seemed to me that my feelings of loneliness had been exchanged for an unexpected sense of freedom.
PART 2: EXEGESIS

Displaced Self: The Impact of Migration on Self-identity

Preface: Writing the Memoir

"It may be argued that the past is a country from which we have all emigrated, that its loss is part of our common humanity…"


The idea that Self-identity changes after language-migration has been extensively examined in memoirs written by language migrants, as well as in the academic literature. The underlying assumption is that changing our language will change our Self-identity because language is intimately tied up with who we are. The memoir traces my family’s migrations to new places and into foreign languages during my childhood, from the subjective perspective of the child I was then and of the self-reflective adult I am today looking back in time. In this exegesis I attempt to analyse what happens to our Self-identity following language migration and how the language-migrant’s experience compares to what anyone experiences by virtue of being human and living across time. In this preface I will briefly describe how I came to write my memoir The Strangeness of Freedom and why I became interested in the subject of Self-identity and migration.

Someone once said that if you want to write a memoir it helps if you either lived through unusual circumstances or had an unusual family. For me it was a bit of both, although until I started writing my memoir I didn’t fully appreciate how different my early life had been, or how atypical my parents were when they decided to escape from the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia and then kept moving in search of freedom.
For a long time I had mixed feelings about my family’s experience of migration. I believed that everyone else was glued together, while I was coming apart at the seams and was just an invisible outsider. I envied those who seemed to be unburdened by their life and would have agreed with Said’s observation that exiles resented non-exiles their ‘normality’ and wonder: “what is it like to be born in a place, to stay and live there, to know that you are of it, more or less, forever?” (2000:180-181). I developed both an excessive preoccupation with and a monstrous detachment from those others who grew up in cultures and languages that I found puzzling. In retrospect, I can see how the tension between standing apart and wanting to be involved provided me with the energy, as well as the distance and the solitude I needed in order to think more clearly about my life.

As we kept migrating, it became very important for me to keep clear memories of my life in Czechoslovakia. We spoke Czech at home and my parents talked about our life back in Czechoslovakia with Czech friends. I had many opportunities to form concrete images of my memories. But remembering wasn’t just about where I had come from but also about where I thought I was heading. I thought that eventually we would go back ‘home’ once the Soviet occupation ended. But it didn’t end and we couldn’t go home.

By the time my family moved to Australia I started to write these memories down and discovered that by writing a diary I could create a home for my Self on paper. Writing signaled, as Richard Freadman puts it, “the opening up of something like adult reflexive consciousness…and the discovery of a language of inwardness” (2001:151). It was as a teenager that I first had the idea of writing a story about my family’s migrations. However there was one thing that plagued me, which had to do with mastery of a foreign language: could anyone ever write well enough in a language that was not their own? To make matters worse, I was trying to write in my third language. The mocking voice inside me feigned disbelief: Who do you think you are? Language belonged to others and I only got to borrow it for a while. What I saw, heard or thought somehow didn’t seem valid and others’ ideas and thoughts seemed superior to mine.

Fortunately, I had other experiences in my life that countered my lapses in Self-confidence. I learned from my parents early in life that forgetting was one
of the symptoms of death and that if we lose our memory we lose ourselves. My parents had grown up in a culture of forgetting. All around them in Czechoslovakia the theft of memory was going on. Bureaucrats who wielded the greatest power within the Communist system ruthlessly censored Czechoslovakia’s past: its history, literature and art. My parents also taught me that books were special and meant much more than just the words printed on their pages. For intellectual dissidents books represented freedom of expression, creativity, free speech, free ideas - all those things that Communist ideology repressed in people. I like to think that books set my parents on a literary journey and prepared them for our subsequent geographical migrations by opening their eyes to new ideas and points of view. Perhaps learning about memory and the importance of the written word was what maintained my motivation to write my MA thesis, irrespective of how unqualified for the job I felt.

My aim in writing my memoir was to restore the past to myself, not in the form of snippets of memory, but as a whole story in full colour. I wanted to tell my own story. Not the story I thought I ought to tell, nor the one I imagined that others wanted to hear, nor the one my parents had told me, but my own truth as I experienced it, and as I now understand it. I didn’t want to write an autobiography, which retains an aura of exclusiveness: a domain exclusive to famous old white men, who give blow by blow accounts of their lives from birth to fame. The memoir seemed the most appropriate genre for my story, especially considering its long tradition as the favored style of writing for those whose lives and selves felt invisible – including women, ethnic minorities and immigrants (Rainer 1998:11). Memoir writers also use fictional techniques, such as scenes, dialogue and interior monologues in order to reach inner truths and not just report outer facts. I have done the same.

I discovered that no one had written a memoir, in either German or English or from the child’s perspective, about defecting from Czechoslovakia during the Prague Spring. While novels by Milan Kundera (such as The Unbearable Lightness of Being) or Josef Skvorecky (The Engineer of Human Souls) do give an account of defection from the oppressive regime in

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5 According to the Australian memoirist and migrant Jill Kerr Conway, during the twentieth century in America, only one autobiography was written by a woman for every eight written by men (quoted by Zinsser, 1998:21). Though this is not the case anymore.
Czechoslovakia following the Prague Spring, this is not the main theme of these books. Furthermore, the stories are from an adult’s perspective rather than from a child’s. I found these stories did not represent my own experiences, nor did they touch on what migration was like for a child. I had to look further afield and in the process discovered Eva Hoffman’s and Andrew Riemer’s language memoirs. Even though they migrated decades before we did and came from different European countries and spoke different languages, they had both been children when their families migrated. By reading these two writers I was finally able to discover how other children experienced moving to a new place and into a new language. This was eye opening for me. Hoffman and Riemer described feelings and fears that I had experienced myself as a child on the move.

I was reassured to read how other language-migrants like Hoffman and Riemer, but also Milosz and Said, describe how their ‘difference’ from the locals in effect made them feel dehumanised. Their uppermost desire after migration was to fit in – to be less different and therefore more human.

I agree with Raban (in Wachtel, 1993:116) that home – the past you have come from - can be the hardest place to get into sharp focus. Sometimes you have to leave the familiar behind in order to see where you have come from. In this respect migrants have an advantage – they are forced into the unfamiliar. Those who have grown up in one place and whose life forms a smooth line from past to present, may feel themselves submerged in too much familiarity. Having exhausted their home soil, their roots become tangled and they are unable to nourish themselves with fresh ideas.

Everyone eventually discovers that life is dislocation. Even those who never move, those who stay at home, will become dislocated over time from all they knew and thought to be permanent: people lose their youth, friends, family, their beliefs and certainties. In writing this memoir I gradually realized that our sense of Self is fundamentally incomplete rather than accidentally ruined. While we might occasionally get to see the set patterns that make up who we are, everyone, at some point, will experience the change and chaos that is also intrinsic to life. These realizations were reassuring to me. I came to regard my Self-identity in a new way: not as a problem but as a kind of gift.
CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

In an increasingly globalised world more and more people are becoming exiled, displaced or choose to voluntarily emigrate across countries, cultures and languages, but even those who never move describe feelings similar to those of migrants. For me this is an intriguing question, for I always thought that non-migrants would automatically feel at home, both in themselves and in the world they grew up in and have the fortune to still be living in. Certainly migration is inherently stressful because it is an extraordinary event in a person’s life, one that is different from ‘regular’ life by virtue of sudden and multiple losses: loss of a familiar place, culture, people and even language. Why then, do non-migrants suffer similar perturbations and express feelings of being fragmented and like strangers although they continue to live in a familiar place and language?

The aim of this part of the exegesis is to examine how language migrants, those migrants who have to learn a foreign language as part of their migration, experience and explain a change or ‘loss’ of their Self-identity following migration and whether their experiences reflect more strikingly general human tendencies that even non-migrants experience. First, I will review the complex nature of Self-identity and migration. Then I will look at how Andrew Riemer and Eva Hoffman, two writers and language migrants, describe how migrating into a new place and new language impacted on their sense of Self. Finally, I will look at why non-migrants might similarly experience a feeling of losing their Self, even though they never physically or linguistically migrate.

I base my analysis on written accounts that express the feelings of those who are language migrants, including myself. While migrants experience a heightened form of Self-transformation, I argue that the experience of losing a part of one’s Self-identity is ultimately experienced by everyone in the course of living their life, even those of us who never physically migrate into a new country, culture or language.
CHAPTER TWO

A Very Short History of the Self

Developing a separate sense of Self, distinct from that of others, is considered a cornerstone of human development by psychologists. As adults we instinctively presume to ‘know’ that we have a Self, because we experience things, are conscious, have an ‘inner life’, a point of view, and know where we end and others begin. The invention of referential forms, such as personal names and pronouns, support the idea that a separate Self exists. As Adams puts it, “I am I; you are you. Rarely do people mix this up”, even if they are uncertain about where their lives are going (1997:56). Yet it is difficult to describe what the Self is exactly and how it is possible for a person to both change continually - physically, emotionally, in their perceptions and intentions - and also remain the same so that they can identify and be identified by others as themselves and not as someone else.

While most writing about Self-transformation during migration focuses exclusively on the Self as if it was only a linguistic and cultural product, there are in fact many other theories that attempt to explain what the Self is and how it is formed. One can understand Self-formation in three broad ways: a whole Self that we are born with, a Self constructed through language, and a Self that is culturally and socially constructed. The traditional Western view of the Self is that of an inborn, unified and unique entity out of which our thinking and knowing originate. This notion of the Self dates back to Rene Descartes’ seventeenth century paradigm of the mind: because there is thinking there must be a thinking subject who thinks (Gunew, 1994:29; Schrag, 1997:25). The conception of the Self as unified and internal influenced many thinkers and psychologists, including Freud, Jung, Maslow and Rogers during the early part of the twentieth century. From this perspective, the Self is not influenced by culture or language per se, and is therefore unaffected by the personal and collective history in which we exist.

The Symbolic Interactionists Cooley (1902) and Meade (1934) placed more emphasis on how social interactions with others shapes our Self-identity
They proposed that the Self is socially constructed: by imitating the behaviour of others, changing our own behaviour to gain approval and adopting opinions in line with those of others. Cooley’s metaphor of the ‘looking glass self’ conveys the notion that others form a social mirror which reflects us back to ourselves, and what becomes our Self is what we imagine others think of us.

Postmodernists view the Self as a linguistic product shaped by social and historical forces. Simply put, it is hard to imagine ‘who we are’ without thinking those actual words. Our sense of Self must be, at least in part, constituted by language – by what we say, what we have said, and what we will say. This Self in literary theory signifies or points to something about our identity, rather than being identical to it. Postmodernists thus attempt to ‘decentre’ human identity, and debunk the notion, popular in Western philosophy, that our personal Self is merely equal to our awareness of who we are. They argue that the Self is not the centre of all our actions and thoughts, but is “… enmeshed in meaning, in language, and is thus more of a product or a destination…than an origin” (Freeman, 1993:12). Postmodern Self-identity thus exceeds our self-consciousness, while also encompassing it.

However, developmental research on how infants’ develop a sense of Self-identity does not support the idea that our Self is merely a linguistic or cultural product. This is because our ability to speak evolves over time. Developmental psychologists like Harter (1991) and Stern (1985) point out that infants develop a sense of Self long before they acquire language. There appear to be three earlier senses of Self that develop before language acquisition and are based on our physical, perceptual and affective memories, which give us the sense of our Self ‘going on being’ over time and space (Harter, 1999; Stern, 1985). Stern argues that once our verbal Self does develop by about fifteen months of age, it does not supersede or incorporate our pre-verbal Selves. He believes that our pre-verbal Selves persist throughout adulthood, alongside the verbal Self and affect how we see ourselves via our feelings and sensations, rather than in terms of mental concepts grounded in language. If this is true, it

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6 Stern distinguishes between infants having a ‘sense of’ Self rather than a ‘concept or knowledge of’ Self. The sense of self is the ongoing experiential awareness of who we are and this develops independently of language (Stern, 1985:71).
would be impossible to ever lose one’s Self completely after language migration and all that one can talk about is a change in one’s verbal Self.

For the purposes of this discussion, I will presuppose that to perceive one’s Self requires the ability to recollect the past, be aware of the present, and imagine the future. I will view the notion of Self as both socially and linguistically constructed: as something made rather than found, since it is not only where we have come from (our roots) that defines us, but also where we have moved (our routes) in life (Cunningham and Sinclair, 2000:9). I will also presume that our sense of Self is, at least in part, non-verbal and non-historical – that a preverbal Self persists from childhood into adulthood. It may be that this preverbal form of our Self emerges following migration when we become disconnected from our language and our history.

What is Migration?

To migrate means to move, yet migration is more than travel and must be distinguished from mere movement between points on the map. Travel involves movement between fixed positions - from a site of departure to a point of arrival with an eventual return to where one started from. The traveller has knowledge of an itinerary but, as Chambers puts it, “migrancy involves a movement in which neither the points of departure nor those of arrival are immutable or certain. It calls for a dwelling in language, in histories, in identities that are constantly subject to mutation. Always in transit, the promise of homecoming – completing the story, domesticating the detour – becomes an impossibility” (1994:6).

The traveller leaves and returns ‘home’, while the migrant embarks on a one-way trip, leaving ‘home’ behind. The implication for the migrant is that the old ‘home’ is no longer sufficient in some way, that it is not the kind of home the migrant can or wants to live in anymore. The reasons for migrating are varied: some choose to migrate because they strive for a higher standard of living, which is unattainable at home; some migrate as the result of changed personal circumstances following marriage, a job relocation or a family reunion; others are forced to leave because political or social oppression threatens the migrant’s physical, spiritual, or emotional life. Regardless of the specific reasons, every
migrant feels that he or she is leaving in order to find a better way of life. This is as true of the political refugee as it is for the voluntary migrant who moves for economic or personal reasons. In either case, home is no longer what it used to be or what we want it to be and we are willing to move to a foreign place and make our home there.

The effects of migration are difficult to predict, for migration brings with it realities as well as potentials. The idea that migration leads to severe and unique distress is not new. Hippocrates observed that “…movement to another country was always followed by terrible perturbation” (quoted by Rakoff, 1981:133) and Euripides described exile as “the worst fate imaginable “(quoted by Stroinska, 2003:96). Recent clinical studies support this view that some migrants suffer great stress when they relocate, which manifests in clinical depression, anxiety and sometimes psychosis (Bhuga, 2005; Kiropolous, 2004; Selton, 2001). There is however no specific psychopathology that is exclusive to migrants (Stoller, 1981:33). It also remains controversial whether migration causes schizophrenia or whether it precipitates it in genetically susceptible individuals.7

As to the potential benefits of migration, several come to mind. Brodsky (1994) suggests that migration brings you overnight to where it would normally take you a lifetime to go – it puts you in a place where you can gain a broader perspective on your Self and gives you the freedom to discover what is essential in your life and what you can live without. No one would doubt that migration is stressful but in this exegesis I am not trying to establish a hierarchy of the stresses that migrants as opposed to non-migrants experience. Instead, I want to examine the commonalities that underlie the experience of losing one’s sense of Self both in the course of migrating as well as in the course of living a ‘settled’ life.

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7 According to Odegaard’s selection hypothesis, those at risk of major psychiatric disorders selectively migrate from their home country to get away from the problems their psychotic episodes caused them back home (Aroian, 1990).
CHAPTER THREE

Migration to a New Location

To understand why migrants feel as if they have lost a part of their Self after they migrate, I will first look at how moving to a new location might impact on Self-identity. It seems plausible that it is moving to a new place that causes the sense of homelessness or the feeling of being out of place not just geographically but also inside one’s Self. Psychological studies confirm that migrants experience a sense of inner loss, displacement and homelessness, and that the feeling frequently persists long after they have moved and despite outwardly having adjusted to the new place by learning to speak their language fluently, by working productively and by having a circle of friends (Aroian, 1990; Garza-Guerrero, 1974; Igoa, 1995). I personally still feel just as displaced now, living in one place for over twenty years, as I did when my family lived on the move.

Similarly, Andrew Riemer describes in his memoir Inside Outside how he too continues to feel ‘displaced’ despite having spent the greater portion of his life in Australia. Riemer migrated as a child from Hungary to Australia during the late 1940s. He consciously assimilated into Australian society by learning English and adapting to Australian culture in order to fit in seamlessly. While on the surface he succeeded - he went to University and has worked as a lecturer in English Literature at Sydney University for most of his adult life - deep down he does not feel particularly at home anywhere. He writes, “I have spent more than three-quarters of my life in this country. My passport tells me that I am an Australian…Yet I cannot claim to belong here fully” (Riemer, 1992:1).

As I suggest in my memoir, The Strangeness of Freedom, for me it is not a fixed location that I remember as being my home, but the brief unchanging period of time when I was still a child and when my life still seemed stable. In retrospect, my childhood appears like a fixed moment in time that suffered no change; as if my childhood was a photograph, and although it is fading, this image of my childhood as the place where I felt most at home seems unchanged and permanent.
Traditionally home is regarded as a fixed place or as the stationary centre of our life, where we know ourselves best and where our Self-identity seems most grounded (Rapport & Dawson, 1998b:21). Yet, as Rapport argues, the strongest sense we have of our home is when we are away from it or lose it: “home ‘moves’ us most powerfully as absence or negation” (1998a:31-32). Being homeless evokes the idea of ‘home’, which is really a nostalgia for a mythic past, when one still felt at home in a society, in ourselves and with others. According to Bachelard (1969), homelessness is also a nostalgia for our childhood when our home still seemed like the centre of the universe and being at home therefore felt secure.

Our sense of home depends on our memory of it but our memory is unreliable because we remember events fixed in time, like snapshots taken by a camera. We believe that what we remember is how it really was, when in fact memory is always selective. Bachelard writes that “memory…does not record concrete duration…memories are motionless, and the more securely they are fixed in space, the sounder they are” (1969:9), because it is easier to recall unchanging images than changing ones. He continues: “at times we think we know ourselves in time, when all we know is a sequence of fixations in the spaces of the being’s stability – a being who…wants time to ‘suspend’ its flight” (1969:8). However, our life is never stationary and was in progress even in the past. We and everything around us are always changing, moving forward in time, towards a future; nothing was ever fixed and final the way we seem to remember it now.

In his book, The Hapsburg Café, Andrew Riemer, writes that he remembers facts about his early life in Hungary much more clearly than his cousin who lived there all her life. The reason why he remembers his early life so crisply is:

probably because those fragmented memories are part of a myth world, not of everyday reality, as they are for my cousin who has spent her life surrounded by these places and images. Precisely because these mundane things –addresses, dates, the relationship among long-dead people – have been fixed in the fluid but always consistent world of my mythology, they have stayed with me in a way that many details of my ‘real’ life in Australia… have been consigned to oblivion. (1993: 202)
In effect, Riemer remembers fixed snapshots of his past life, frozen in time, separated and untainted by his everyday life and for him they therefore remained unchanged.

Being removed from actually lived life in a given place will play tricks on our memory because we have little to help us update our facts. As the Czech exile Milan Kundera wrote, “Remembering is not the negative of forgetting. Remembering is a form of forgetting” (1995:128). Our environment contains memory prompts, including spoken language and the sensory and visual features of a place, which pull our past into the present by recollection and place our memories into the changing context. Those who continue to live in the same place will remember their past within the context of going-on-living in the present moment, incorporating the changes that are occurring around them into their memories. The memory of those who never move may therefore be more blurred and vague but it may also be more realistic, since ongoing change is the nature of life. However, the degree and rate of change assimilated by the non-migrant would generally be less than that experienced by the migrant.

Migrants who leave their home and move to a new location will lose the memory prompts that keep their past alive in the present and will therefore become disconnected from their lived past. Migrants remember their past as a series of moments fixed in time and therefore what they long to return to is a mythical space existing in their mind, rather than the actual physical space from which they came:

unable to see the new world because the old has placed a template over our eyes – we
perceive nothing except what those apertures allow us to see…. Our lives are dissipated in
longing and in the suffering of loss, even though what we have lost is only a country of
the mind, a memory, or even a pure invention. (Riemer, 1992:33)

The past always seems like a safe place because it is already experienced. The actual place the migrant came from, however, will continue to change in the migrant’s absence but the migrant will remember their past out of context, making the mistake of thinking that the past life remembered would be unchanged if they returned.

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1 I use the term generally here, as it is possible for those who never migrate to experience rapid and drastic change in the same locale, e.g. in war time or following natural disasters. Such massive change could be regarded as equivalent to that experienced by migrants.
This longing for our mythical past can make us feel worse off, or damaged in some way, compared to those who never had to migrate. The literary critic Edward Said, whose Palestinian family migrated to Egypt when he was a child, writes: “exiles look at non-exiles with resentment. They belong in their surroundings…whereas an exile is always out of place. What is it like to be born in a place, to stay and live there, to know that you are of it, more or less forever?” (Said, 2000:180-181).

Those who live in one place have a more immediate but also blurred sense of who they are, for their past is being gradually updated and therefore will lack the stationary crispness that it attains for those who are cut off from it in their life. At the same time, those who never move may get the false impression from their blurred memories that nothing much in themselves is changing. This is an illusion, however, since our Self is transient and we are in transit, moving towards the ultimate destination, which is death. There is no ‘home’ as such. There is nowhere fixed and unchanging for us to hide, no place inside or around us. The sense of ‘home’ felt by those who stay in the one place is in fact an illusion because of this constant change (recognized or not), just as the sense of loss of ‘home’ by the migrant is also an illusion because of the fixed nature of their memory.\(^9\)

St. Hugo, a twelfth century monk from Saxony, uses the metaphor of home in order to describe how those who become more enlightened come to recognize and accept the instability and strangeness that is inherent in life: “The man who finds his homeland sweet is still a tender beginner; he to whom every soil is as his native one is already strong; but he is perfect to whom the entire world is as a foreign land” (quoted in Said, 2000:185). St. Hugo went on to describe how this state of independence is achieved not by striving for non-attachment, which is still a form of attachment to an ideal, but by recognizing that it is the nature of life and ourselves to keep changing and that nothing can ever be permanently fixed and owned. The Self exists as “the tension between all my ‘versions’ [and] that tension too (perhaps that above all), is me” (Havel, 1983:155).

\(^9\) According to Aroian (1990), some migrants benefit from returning to their country of origin because it allows them to confront and give up nostalgic and inaccurate memories and grieve the losses they had left in their homeland.
There might be advantages to being ‘placeless’ - not tied to any one place in or around you - because then you are in less danger of becoming trapped by physical and emotional attachments to a place, a history, or a sense of who you were meant to be. What holds a tradition together, as Read (1996:36) points out, is people believing the same relative notion of what the truth is. When you move you become aware that other truths are possible and it is easier to remain unprejudiced in your perception because, as Simmel puts it, your actions are not tied down “…by habit, piety, and precedent” (1964:405).
Migration into a New Language

Migrating into a foreign language evokes a sense of linguistic ‘homelessness’, a feeling of being alienated from one’s familiar Self. I, for instance, perceive myself differently whenever I speak in a different language but in no language do I truly feel at home with my Self. The enduring sense of who I am seems to lie beyond any one language for me and yet encompasses them all. In her memoir *Lost in Translation* (1987), Eva Hoffman portrays this sense of alienation from her familiar Self after she migrated from Polish into English as a teenager. She discovered that speaking in a foreign language alienated her not only from the local people, but also from her ‘true’ Self. Her original Polish Self, which she had come to know in her first language, continued to feel like her true identity. Once she started to live in her second language, her thoughts and ideas no longer felt like her own and this weakened her sense of Self:

> the thought that there are parts of the language I’m missing can induce a small panic in me, as if such gaps were missing parts of the world of my mind – as if the totality of the world and mind were coeval with the totality of language. Or rather, as if language were an enormous, fine net in which reality is contained – and if there are holes in it, then a bit of reality can escape, cease to exist (Hoffman, 1987:217).

Psychological research supports the idea that the Self is, at least in part, constructed through language (Harter 1994, Stern, 1985). Linguists, psychologists and philosophers regard language to be so intimately entwined with our sense of Self that it feels at times inseparable from our Self-identity. It is as if language is the true home of our Self, regardless of whether the nature of the Self is seen as fixed or changeable. Our thinking is unspoken language, which coalesces into ideas and images of who we are. Descartes’ thesis, “I think therefore I am”, expresses this notion. To have a sense of Self thus “presupposes that our thinking and language are experienced as our thinking and our language” (Ofstad, 1981:66). If we change languages our thinking may not be experienced as our own, and Descartes’ thesis becomes “it is not I who think, therefore I am not”, or in Ofstad’s words, “the Greek is not himself in the same way when he speaks Swedish as when he speaks Greek” (1981:66).
Besemeres (2002:9) describes the loss of the native tongue as a passive loss and the loss of the migrant’s familiar self as an active loss, one that the migrant inadvertently takes part in. The loss of one’s native language puts increased demands on migrants to actively strive to re-create a sense of Self, out of which they can speak and function day to day. For language migrants “the old metaphors don’t quite capture the same experiences when they happen in the new setting…[and] everything must be renamed” (Robinson, 1994:xxi). However there is a difference between merely speaking in the new language, accurately and with a good vocabulary, and being able to inhabit it so that we appear to speak out of our very Selves. Faithfully translating ourselves word by word into the second language is not enough, according to Hoffman. For, as with music, merely knowing the notes and the sound of your instrument will not automatically enable you to create a song. Instead, Hoffman realises:

I have to make a shift in the innermost ways. I have to translate myself. But if I’m to achieve this without becoming assimilated – that is, absorbed – by my new world, the translation has to be careful, the turns of the psyche unforced. To mouth foreign terms without incorporating their meanings is to risk becoming bowdlerized. A true translation proceeds by the motions of understanding and sympathy; it happens by slow increments, sentence by sentence, phrase by phrase (1987:211).

10 Something personal has to enliven the new language so that one can express oneself in it rather than merely using it to speak in.

In my memoir, *The Strangeness of Freedom*, I describe how my family went about learning our second and third languages (German and English) and how my parents seemed to have more difficulty inhabiting the new languages. My parents tried to literally translate their way into each new language. They memorized vocabulary, learned the grammar, and practiced idiosyncratic expressions. Yet they never sounded like native speakers, neither in their accent nor in their sentence construction. Their second and third languages remained external and cerebral and did not become personal the way their first language had been. It was as if my parents were only able to change their language but could not undergo any change in themselves. It is well documented that adults rarely

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10 Bowdlerized means to remove material that is offensive or improper in the new culture or that has no words for it in the new language. This produces a weak or less effective ‘text’ of the Self.
achieve the same level of competence in their second language as they did in their first one, in large part because of their age and the associated decrease in brain plasticity (Ellis, 1994:353-354).\textsuperscript{11}

My brother and I went about learning our second and third languages differently. We did not try to translate ourselves word by word into the new language, the way our parents did. We remained silent observers, in part out of fear, but I believe also because it allowed us to observe another way of being and speaking in the world.\textsuperscript{12} Looking back, I recognize that my brother and I were using all our senses, not just our ears and minds, to apprehend the language and all that went with it as a whole, by sensing the rhythms and intonations, the gestures and interactions between native speakers. Our goal was not to find just the words for what we already knew and who we already were. Being young we did not have the same baggage of linguistic preconceptions that someone older might carry with them into a new language.

Adult language migrants, like my parents, seem to approach second language learning more as a purely verbal exercise, as if to become fluent and to feel at home in the second language was just a matter of learning the right words to express themselves. Admittedly adults do not have the same opportunity to be silent observers in life, since the survival needs of their families force them into speaking straight away in the second language in order to find a home, make friends, work, do the shopping. It may not be just a matter of convenience, however, but also because adults tend to experience the world verbally. The reason adults do not feel at home in the new language is because within our Western culture to think and to verbalize our thoughts fluently is regarded as the hallmark of adulthood. Perhaps in our culture only poets dare to fall back into sensations and feelings, those first means we have as children to apprehend the world in real time, through our eyes, skin, and ears, rather than always relying on the presumptive mind to tell us what is real or who we really are.

\textsuperscript{11} Selinker described the psychological phenomenon of ‘fossilization’ in 1972. It is more often seen in adult second language learners and results from the retention of certain linguistic rules and patterns from their first language, which they keep applying in the second language. Thus they may delete ‘be’ or use simple past (‘I go) instead of simple present (‘I am going’) (Ellis, 1994:353).

\textsuperscript{12} The educational psychologist Igoa (1995:38) regards the silent phase as one feature that all immigrant children share, regardless of their nationality, economic status or family stability.
It might appear that because children learn foreign languages more easily and because they appear to inhabit the new language more fully, they would not experience the same degree of homelessness that adults continue to feel in the new language. Yet the subjective experiences of child migrants like Riemer, Hoffman and myself suggest that even children feel a sense of alienation and lack of Self long after they translate themselves into a new language. Hoffman, for instance, learned to speak fluent English and appeared outwardly assimilated into the new culture – she completed a PhD in literature at Harvard University and worked for the *New York Times* – yet she describes still feeling ‘lost in translation’ and experiencing an ongoing sense of “residual nostalgia…for the more stable, less strenuous conditions of anchoring, of home” (1987:197).

What distressed Hoffman the most was her inability to recreate her ‘whole’ Self in the second language. There were aspects of her Self that could not be translated and some aspects, she sensed, would never be accepted by the locals: “I suspect that the consensus is trying to colonize me and rob me of my distinctive shape and flavor…[and] it is my fear that I have to yield too much of my own ground that fills me with such passionate energy of rage” (Hoffman, 1987: 205). What Hoffman discovered, in fact, was that translation can rarely reproduce an authentic copy, and that something always gets lost in translation because the ‘new’ words are never sufficient to capture the whole essence of the original.

The developmental psychiatrist Stern (1985) believes that our sense of Self is more than just our verbal Self and that language deprives us of some of the preverbal way of knowing and experiencing.\(^\text{13}\) He describes language as a double-edged sword, for while language enables us to share parts of ourselves with others, “it also makes parts of our experience less shareable with ourselves and with others. It drives a wedge between two simultaneous forms of interpersonal experience: as it is lived and as it is verbally presented” (Stern 1985:162).

When we try to put our original global experience into words it becomes transformed for two reasons, according to Stern (1985:175). First, meanings are

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\(^{13}\) Stern studied the formation of the sense of Self as it is subjectively experienced by the infant from birth to first language acquisition. I am extrapolating his findings to second language acquisition.
shared between us and others (instead of waiting, already formed outside of us, for us to apprehend them) and therefore we can’t control how others interpret our words. Second, the nature of words is such that they always convey only a piece of the whole conglomerate of non-verbal experience (of who I am, what I feel, see, believe etc). Even in our first language words do not allow us to fully articulate the whole of our experiences, because while words work well categorically (that’s a ‘dog’, ‘I am happy’), they are not so good at conveying affective experiences, which have dimensional or gradient features (a ‘little happy’ or ‘very happy’). Interpersonal communication consists of such ‘dimensional’ or gradient information, rather than purely categorical information. Something, therefore, always gets left out or cannot be articulated when we use words to communicate personal meanings, be it to ourselves or to others, in our first or in our subsequent languages.

While the ‘categorical’ or naming aspect of a second language is easily learned, allowing migrants to translate themselves word by word into the new language, it is much more difficult for migrants to master the ‘dimensional’ aspect of a second language since it requires considerable and nuanced cultural knowledge. Consequently merely describing one’s self in a second language would be less taxing than attempting to communicate more intimately about one’s experiences and feelings with others. Perhaps this explains why even those migrants who learn to speak fluently in their second language may still not be able to communicate well interpersonally.

Language migrants experience first hand the universal nature of the meanings being shared and of words not being able to convey our total experience. They experience a disillusionment about the certainty of knowing and speaking, for “all immigrants and exiles know the peculiar restlessness of an imagination that can never again have faith in its own absoluteness” (Hoffman, 1987:275). They discover that their second language lacks actual words for certain things that existed in their first language. They also discover that the invisible common agreements, which underlie and shape all interactions and influence what meanings can be shared in the new culture, seem like absolutes to the natives. Yet migrants may keep stumbling over this ‘mass of shared conviction’, sometimes for years after they learn to speak fluently, never quite feeling at home in the new language.
What the language migrant may also realise, by virtue of having had to change languages, is that there is no pre-existing and more genuine Self in any language. Perhaps the sense of Self we long to recreate in our second language is based on our memory of who we once were, on the illusion that there is an absolute Self that would last forever in the same way in us. As Hoffman writes towards the end of her memoir:

there’s no returning to the point of origin, no regaining of childhood unity…The wholeness of childhood truths is intermingled with the divisiveness of adult doubt. When I speak Polish now, it is infiltrated, permeated, and inflected by the English in my head. Each language modifies the other, crossbreeds with it, fertilizes it. Each language makes the other relative. Like everybody, I am the sum of my languages – the language of my family and childhood, and education and friendship, and love, and the larger, changing world – though perhaps I tend to be more aware than most of the fractures between them, and of the building blocks. The fissures sometimes cause me pain, but in a way, they’re how I know that I’m alive (1987:273).

Why does this sense of loss of Self and homelessness persist for language migrants who seem acculturated? The linguistic difficulties in mastering the second language may in part explain why language migrants continue to feel as if they had lost their ‘old’ sense of Self. Yet, it cannot be the sole reason, since the inability of words to convey our total experiences is universal to all languages, even in our first language. Is it because they are in a foreign place? Or is this an experience that is not unique to those who migrate? It might be that this experience of homelessness and the sense of having lost one’s ‘old’ Self is a ubiquitous component of all our lives and is really a nostalgia for our past.
CHAPTER FIVE

‘Loss’ of Self in the Non-migrant

The Indian expatriate and writer Salman Rushdie writes in his book *Imaginary Homelands*: “it may be that the past is a country from which we have all emigrated, that its loss is part of our common humanity” (1991:12). He alludes to the idea that what distresses most humans, is the fact that change and impermanence are features of every life, regardless of whether one physically moves or not. Many writers and poets have taken up the idea that life is like a migration.14 The Spanish philosopher and migrant George Santayana writes: “what is life but a form of motion and a journey through a foreign world?” (1994:41). The Mexican poet Octavio Paz, who lived for many years in India, sees life as a migration from youth to the present moment, along a path that “distances itself from the point of departure…there is no turning back but there is no point of arrival. We are in transit” (Paz, 1999:5). According to writer and non-migrant William Gass, “life is itself exile, and its inevitability does not lessen our grief or alter the fact. It is a blow from which only death will recover us”(1994:211–212).

It appears that not only migrants experience a sense of displacement and loss of a familiar Self but also those who never migrate and never lose their native language, for one can live in the same place and speak the same language and still feel that one’s sense of Self has altered over time. It is as if “to live is to be separated from what we were in order to approach what we are going to be in the mysterious future” (Paz, 1961:196).

One period of life that is typically regarded as stressful due to the demands of a changing and evolving Self, is adolescence. Marianne Hirsch, a language migrant from Rumania, describes in her essay *Pictures of a Displaced Childhood* how for girls “to move into adolescence feels like emigrating to a foreign culture and learning the new language of femininity”, and that “most girls

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14 Cunningham & Sinclair (2000:13-14) and Stroinska (2001:5) point out relativistic perspectives such as Postmodernism have been favoured since the 1980s in migration research. The focus shifted away from searching out the universal basis in human experiences toward looking at underlying differences. There are inherent dangers in both approaches. Either perspective can become a mere cliché and either gloss over important differences or important similarities.
[and boys] leave their home when they move into adolescence” (Hirsch, 1994:75). Similarly, in old age many of us may also experience a disruption in the familiar context of our life – our family and friends die, the city around us is rebuilt, even our bodies may not feel familiar after a while. Increasingly as we get older we may come to view our childhood and youth with nostalgia, the way migrants long for a ‘lost home’. In retrospect, our past life seems to have been complete. Perhaps what we are really longing for is the certainty and stability of our past, not because our life was in reality necessarily more stable then, but because it now appears to have been so, due to the unreliability of memory (alluded to previously in the ‘Migration Into a New Location’) and because of the single fact that we have already lived it and know the outcome.

A sense of homelessness and the loss of a sense of Self has been described by postmodernists as a product of the very nature of contemporary Western societies (Chambers, 1994; Gergen, 2000). Increasingly more people describe feeling as if they have recently migrated: feeling displaced, uncertain, alienated, and lacking in Self-identity. Hoffman describes how her American friends, for instance, appear to have everything and yet they still do not feel at home in themselves:

they often feel worthless, or they don’t know how they feel. Identity is the number-one national problem here. There seems to be a shortage of it in the land, a dearth of selfhood amidst other plenty…. [M]aybe it’s because everyone is always on the move and undergoing enormous changes, so they lose track of who they’ve been and have to keep tabs on who they’re becoming all the time” (1987:262-263).

Hoffmann’s immigrant friends could not understand how those who were fortunate enough to be living in their homeland and who seemed to posses the very things that migrants long for - the certainty and stability of living in a familiar place and language - could feel dispossessed in themselves.

In the Western world more and more people either live in large, constantly changing urban centres or else move away from where they were born. The historian Michael Ignatieff writes:

We think of belonging as permanence, yet all our homes are transient. Who still lives in the house of their childhood? Who still lives in the neighbourhood where they grew up? Home is the place we have to leave in order to grow up, to become ourselves. We think of belonging as rootedness in a small familiar place, yet home for most of us is the convulsive arteries of a great city. Our belonging is no longer to something fixed, known and familiar, but to an electric and heartless creature eternally in motion…Perhaps above all we think of belonging as the end of yearning
itself, as a state of rest and reconciliation with ourselves beyond need itself. Yet modernity and insatiability are inseparable (2001:141).

Gergen (2000) relates this instability to globalisation, the economical, political and technological interconnectedness of the world, which increasingly exposes us to many different points of view and many different values. Life in the postmodern period appears to be accelerating and is characterised by an information explosion, so that we are increasingly bombarded with information, although in the same language, and must adapt to it by evolving and changing ourselves constantly. The accelerated way of life, with air travel, email, fax machines and mobile phones, leads to increasing albeit often more superficial interconnectedness between people. Consequently, most of our encounters during daily life are with ‘strangers’.

It is as if we live in a world where many societies coexist in the one place. We are forced to constantly revise who we are and who others expect us to be and become. This leads to a sense of fragmentation and dispersion, feelings that are common to migrants. Gergen (2000) talks about the formation of ‘saturated’ and ‘multiple’ Selves that span across an increasing number of different social and cultural contexts without ever unifying into a single whole. The Jamaican migrant and sociologist Stuart Hall (1987:44) goes so far as to say that now in the postmodern age it is he, the migrant, who feels centred, while those who have never moved are the ones who feel dispersed and fragmented.

Compounding all this is the problem of the potential futures, or vast opportunities, that have become available to us in the postmodern world. In addition to figuring out who we are now, we are also faced with the choice of who we might, or wish, to become. Even the most benign choices in life can distress us, especially if we are faced with them suddenly. In The Strangeness of Freedom I describe how, after my family defected to West Germany, even the smallest choices, such as selecting a pair of shoes, overwhelmed us, since choice was virtually unknown under Communism in Czechoslovakia. The wealth of bigger choices available to us in the postmodern period can therefore be even more overwhelming. The responsibility of choosing our future life comes to feel like a burden because the freedom to choose involves uncertainty. Milan Kundera, the Czech exile and novelist, describes in his novel The Unbearable Lightness of Being (1984) how when we are faced with the freedom to choose our
future we can experience a form of existential vertigo or dizziness, which he refers to as the ‘unbearable lightness of being’. Existentialists argue that we are all born into a world in which we are completely free and our destiny is open - as Sartre said, “man is condemned to be free” (quoted by Paz, 1999:60). Sometimes it may seem easier, even for non-migrants, to stay still in life and thus avoid the anxiety that is the result of change.

Riemer also believes that “this sense of displacement, of not belonging, even of having been uprooted, is shared by many people whose lives have not been so obviously displaced or uprooted…” (1993:2). Over time, Riemer realised that ordinary Australians, who had never migrated themselves, felt the same sense of confusion and alienation as he himself experienced and attributed to being a migrant. He writes that to his surprise native-born Australians “proved to be as confused and ambivalent about their cultural allegiances as I, the product of an immigrant culture, felt myself uniquely to be… Many had to discover their own identity, and in some cases, as in mine, achieve an understanding of what it is to be Australian…” (Riemer, 1992:162-163). He believes that the difference between himself and the native-born Australians was “only of key and register” (Riemer, 1992:163). In one way Riemer felt that migrants were at an advantage, since their distress and sense of alienation at least had tangible causes. Their distress “was merely an individual response to circumstances to which ‘real’ Australians…were responding with a deep though unrecognised sense of emptiness and spiritual loss” (ibid).

Towards the end of Hoffman’s memoir, she realizes that it is experience that changes us, regardless of whether we migrate or not. To be cut off from one’s past is not only the price of migration, but of any sudden discontinuity in our life; for in all of us “the wholeness of childhood truths is intermingled with the divisiveness of adult doubt” (1987:274). Perhaps loss and sadness are universal feelings that reveal our shared humanity:

> it is possible that when we travel deep enough, we always encounter an element of sadness, for full awareness of ourselves always includes the knowledge of our own ephemerality and the passage of time. But it is only in that knowledge -- not in its denial -- that things gain their true dimensions, and we begin to feel the simplicity of being alive. It is only that knowledge that is large enough to cradle a tenderness for everything that is always to be lost… (1987:274).

Life is change and loss, and for some this realization comes through the experience of migration.
Although changing languages or places intensifies our disconnection from our past sense of Self, those who never move or change languages, experience a similar disconnection simply by living across time. It is therefore plausible to claim that it may not be language or displacement per se that leads to the loss of a sense of Self after migration, but that it is the rate and intensity of change experienced over time. To realize that the sense of homelessness, which migrants so commonly experience, parallels the non-migrant’s life, may be reassuring to some migrants, while non-migrants may derive compassion for themselves and for the migrants’ plight as well. Furthermore, the loss and suffering associated with migration may, in the long run, become a positive experience the way it did for Hoffman: “the gap can also become a chink, a window through which I can observe the diversity of the world. The apertures of perception have widened because they were once pried apart” (1987:274).
CHAPTER SIX

Conclusion

The experience of my family’s multiple displacements helped me to recognize that Self-identity is fractured and often contradictory. While my nationality, race, ethnicity, language, and personal history will define me for others and differentiate me from others in a short-hand way, my experience of who I am cannot be contained by specific categories alone. I have a Self that extends beyond words, beyond categorical definitions of who I am. As Milosz wrote: “There are things whose name is neither sound nor silence” (quoted by Bachalard, 1988:253). Words cannot encompass all I am, since they name only a small part of my experience at any given moment in time. Beneath words I am a living human being, who goes on being, regardless of where I move to or what language I speak. It is at that deeper level that I can begin to comprehend other human beings and understand their experiences of loss as something human.

Hoffman’s and Riemer’s memoirs describe their migration into a second language and reveal how they experienced a sense of losing their Self and even a feeling of being non-existent. They grieved rather than celebrated this fragmentation in their Self and continued to hope that by learning to speak fluently in their second language and to fit seamlessly into the new culture, they would be able to recreate themselves whole again and regain their ‘old’ certainties about themselves and about others. Their hoped for wholeness did not return, however, and both describe how they still continue to feel out of place and homeless despite appearing well acculturated.

Considering how the non-migrant’s sense of Self is experienced, both across their life-span and in the course of living in an increasingly unstable post-modern world, I discovered that even those who do not migrate can experience alienation, homelessness, and feeling like a stranger amongst other people. The Czech migrant and psychiatrist Paul Valent specializes in adults living with childhood trauma. He writes that “sometimes it is worth observing in depth a period of history or a group of people because they reflect more starkly than usual general human tendencies [and] alert us to our own broader humanity as
well. For who has not suffered trauma in childhood, even if on a smaller scale?” (Valent, 1993:7).

Migrants experience a universally known loss in a more intensified form. Migration is an extreme example of the impermanence and change that characterises everyone’s life and that all of us will experience eventually, regardless of whether we physically migrate or not. By understanding the difficulties migrants experience, one can come to understand the common difficulties we all face in life.
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