



## Lost in Translation

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Eva Hoffman was thirteen years old when, in 1949, she left Poland with her father, mother, and younger sister, traveling by ship to Canada, where the family settled in Vancouver, British Columbia. The Hoffmans had been among the small remnant of Jews in Poland after World War II, and they were never allowed to forget completely the irrational power of anti-Semitism. The family's early years in Canada were hard--they began by selling second-hand merchandise ("junk," Hoffman calls it) from a basement, later opening a store--but Eva excelled in high school and went on a scholarship to Rice University, where she majored in literature. She was an excellent pianist as well, and for a long time she considered a career in music, but ultimately, after receiving a doctorate in literature from Harvard University, she became a journalist, specializing in literary and cultural subjects; she is currently an editor at THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW.

Hoffman's story sounds like a typical tale of immigrant success. In the telling, however, it is richer and more ambiguous than a summary suggests. The first section of the narrative, "Paradise," centers on her childhood and adolescence in Cracow. "Exile" describes the voyage to Canada and her years in Vancouver, while "The New World" recounts the long process of her assimilation as an American and her discovery that she is finally at home in the English language. Even her childhood memories (the intensity of which is sharpened by exile) have been "infiltrated" by English: "I begin to trust English to speak my childhood self as well, to say what has so long been hidden.... Perhaps any language, if pursued far enough, leads to exactly the same place." Hoffman's title, then, is (perhaps intentionally) misleading, for in the end her book celebrates all that which is not lost in translation: the shared humanness that enables people to cross linguistic and cultural borders.

## Sources for Further Study

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