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On Immigration and Identity: Becoming a Canadian Writer

The first thing that comes to mind when I think of immigration and identity is a Polish word: gone missing.

Emigration has never been far away from the Polish consciousness, either as an inevitable and tragic fall-out of the chequered Polish history, or as a coveted escape from the post-WWII communist prison. Emigration as political exile was part of our Polish fate; once outside, an emigrant could long for Poland and dream of return—in spirit, if everything else failed. When I was growing up, emigration in Polish conversations returned as a dream of escape from the daily humiliations of life in the People’s Republic, a dream that concluded with an act of leaving, “the happily ever after” of fairy tales. Beyond it, there was little else to talk about.

At the Canadian border, in August of 1981, my Polish passport was stamped with the seal of Canadian Immigration, and this is when it struck me how, in Poland, the word “immigration” was hardly ever used, and how the act of leaving was no longer the end of the story.

What was Canada, then, for me? A vaguely-realized land of peace and prosperity. A nebulous construct based on the lack of problems that defined my Polish existence. A jumble of incongruous associations. *Anne of Green Gables*, which every Polish girl I knew grew up loving. Leonard Cohen, with his throaty songs of romantic melancholy that spoke to the Polish soul. Grey Owl and his Beaver People. Arkady Fidler, who claimed that this is a country smelling of pine resin. There were also other, less benign associations. “Kanada” was the name of the Auschwitz barracks where the stolen property of the victims was stored. A land of plenty *a rebours*, even there. There was the flamboyant Prime Minister, Pierre Elliott Trudeau, and the Montreal Olympics of 1976. My parents, natural scientists both, gave me a crash course in geological and paleontological wonders. Newfoundland, I learnt, not only has some of the oldest rocks in the world, but the rocks that come in unusual sequences, the evidence of colliding continents and

disappearing oceans. The Burgess Shale fossils in the Rocky Mountains document an explosion of evolutionary experiments, unrealized possibilities, most of which became extinct. The graveyard of the unlucky in the evolutionary gamble.

My original one-year visiting scholar bursary allowed me a choice of any Canadian university and I remember deciding on McGill, because I thought that a gift of a year in Montreal would improve my French. My plan was to use this unexpected year in Canada to do research for a PhD thesis that I thought had little to do with Canada. I wanted to examine the stories of a Polish writer writing in English in London. No, not Joseph Conrad, but Stefan Themerson, the author of quirky philosophical tales and experimental films, a friend of Dadaists, of Kurt Schwitters, of Bertrand Russell, spinning his tales of detachment and logic, exulting the experience of exile as a catalyst for his meta-national point of view.

These first months in Canada were an onslaught of impressions, some of them surprising in their resonance. I remember my delight in a walk down Saint Laurent Boulevard in Montreal, which seemed to me just like the streets of the Poland my mother and grandmother talked about, the Poland I read in the stories of Isaac Bashevis Singer and Bruno Schulz: the world of Jewish shops on the edge of survival, the world where Yiddish mingled with Russian, Ukrainian, and Polish; not the Polish of the Poland I remembered, but the pre-war Polish of the borderlands that have disappeared, wiped out by the horrors of World War II. It was my first lesson of immigration, the unsuspected connection with something that should have been mine but no longer was. This then-rundown Montreal street put me in touch with the lost landscapes of pre-war Poland, became dear and mine for this very reason. It defied loss. It let me see, touch, and smell the texture of the past, so much more meaningful than the bleached-out and uniform vision of Poland I was fed when I was growing up. I had far more in common with Canada than I ever expected.

I returned from these walks to my small apartment on Saint-Dominique Street and plunged into my research. I was still determined to write my thesis on Stefan Themerson, but I was now being drawn not so much to his linguistic games and his avant-garde experiments but to his “philosophy of exile”, a chance to grow in ways impossible to imagine if we never leave home; drawn to the delight of being above national dreams, of looking at the forgotten missions, of refusal to be caught by the *couleur locale* of linguistic associations. “Strip it all down”. Themerson was saying from his international salon in Notting Hill, a gathering place for the artistic avant-garde, *refusniks* of all stripes. Look at your own culture from the universal point of view. See how much of it you can defend.

There are consequences of this identity shift, this chance to look at one’s country of origin from afar. There are consequences of the willingness to look for similarities, however small, where for a long time differences loomed large. It is a fundamental shift, as important as seeing the earth from space was for the birth of the environmental movement. One of these consequences is the realization of the relativity of one’s history, the need to re-evaluate one’s national experience, to

put it in a wider context. In my case, the Polish memories of communist deprivations had to stand beside the news of famine in Ethiopia, in which millions were losing their lives, beside stories of rampant corruption and the demoralization of post-colonialism. From a distance, the language of communist propaganda began to sound suspiciously close to the language of marketing. Many previously-cherished truths began to crack and allowed questions I did not think of before. Were Polish women really enjoying as privileged a position in Polish society as I had thought? Were we as immune to propaganda as I believed? How just and honest were we in treating our own minorities? How attuned to the dangers of national sins?

The transformation from emigrant into immigrant does not come at once and does not start from such important issues. The beginnings are much more elementary. At first, prices in Canadian stores mean little until translated into zlotys; the attractiveness of shopping is measured by how useful or coveted a dress or a coat would have been in Poland. But as Canadian winter makes an immigrant appreciate the usefulness of a seemingly shapeless parka or clumsy waterproof boots that hold their own in the salty slush, one notices other shifts. This, of course, is not a specifically Polish trait. Jane Wong, a Canadian journalist of Chinese descent, describes how as soon as she lands in Beijing, she immediately assumes the shuffling step of a Chinese woman she would never have affected in Montreal or Toronto. Every immigrant recognizes these disguises: subtle changes in appearance, the way of walking, the use of makeup. Not giving up, entirely, the old ways, but toning them down, assuming the habits of the land, blending with a different crowd. Changes we no longer notice, until they strike us in the astonished eyes of those who remember us from “before”.

But immigration has more tricks up its sleeve. The shaky ground an immigrant stands on can offer surprising new possibilities. Once we leave one version of a self, many more beckon. Careers, roles, perceptions change creating openings where little change seemed possible. A doctor can turn into a librarian, an architect into a graphic designer. I’m not talking here of a doctor who is forced to renounce his beloved profession for lack of opportunities, a truly tragic and very real price of immigration. I am talking about acts of conscious choice, a surprising discovery of another aspect of oneself, inexpressible perhaps without the shift in optics, and without the help of another language.

In an episode of the CBC Ideas series, Paul Wilson, a Canadian translator of Czech writers into English, speaks of his astonishment at reading Kerouac in Prague.* In Czech, *On the Road* seemed to him far more emotional, softer than he recalled it in English, so he returned to the original convinced he would uncover the translator’s incompetence. To his astonishment, a close reading of Kerouac in English revealed that same softness, though toned down by the language itself, not as comfortable as Czech in expressing emotions. The result of this exercise made Paul Wilson admit the validity of the Czech reading of Kerouac, a reading that

* *In Other Words*, part one, broadcasted on April 2, 2007.

enriched his own, a reading he had missed in his native tongue. In an immigrant's life, I credit the same process of translation from one culture to another with the ability to notice the hidden aspects of one's personality, to claim a certain amount of overlooked freedom. A life in another language is a different life. But if one is to accept this change, one more thing is necessary: a permission to embrace this other self.

A positive attitude to change is one of essential Canadian values and, for an immigrant, it is infectious. Here, transformation is not a betrayal of a former self but a natural step in self-realization. The internal Canadian voice whispers: Go for it. Give it a try. See what happens. For a Polish immigrant, this encouragement, this nudge toward change and transformation offers a chance to escape from the internal Polish monologue of criticism, the voice that comments on every shortcoming and stresses all the moments in which we fall short of the ideal. This is the voice of the childhood and youth of my generation. The voice of parents, teachers, neighbours, and passers-by who could always be counted on to cut us down to size for our own good, to remind us that "bragging" is a sign of arrogance, that too much self-confidence is a sign of foolish naiveté, for we do not have control over our fate. Our faults were never overlooked. Criticism and public shame were freely used in order to bring about improvement. Many Polish immigrants I've talked to speak of hearing this voice of their past, the constant warnings of failure that preceded all plans and the deep suspicion of change, for change often brings with it the betrayal of what was once held true.

At first, emigration changed precious little in my professional life. I left the English Department in Wrocław, where I began working on my Ph.D., and became a Ph.D. student in the English Department in Montreal. But as I was fulfilling the requirements for my Canadian degree, I realized that the academic career I would have undoubtedly pursued in Wrocław was not what I really wanted.

The first sign was envy. As I pored over Themerson's philosophical tales, I became more and more envious of his courage to write in English, to find a literary expression for his thesis that being outside offers unique insights. But I was still determined to continue on my Polish path. Academic work was expected of me. It was a family tradition. I joked that the moment I was born, my mother must have whispered in my ear, "I'll not take you seriously until you have your Ph.D.". There were no writers amongst the academics I knew in Wrocław. Teaching at the post-secondary level demanded academic research.

Canada offered new models. My first thesis supervisor at McGill, Louis Dudek, was a poet. He was born in Montreal, a child of Polish immigrants, and he was a legend of Canadian literature, one of the founding fathers of Canadian poetry. Leonard Cohen called him his mentor. He was not the only one. Hugh MacLennan, the author of *Two Solitudes*, a novel that for years defined the Canadian cultural landscape, was yet another McGill professor. One could teach and write; not essays and research papers, but fiction and poetry. An opening, a crack

in the expected path had opened. And then I came across the then newly-published memoirs by Eva Hoffman. I remember reading *Lost in Translation; A Life in a New Language* breathlessly, unable to put it down. A wonderful, introspective analysis of immigration, the author's constant negotiation between her Polish and American selves. This journey into language, identity, and its transformations was, for me, a revelation, a gift. It articulated my own struggle for the meaning of immigration, although my story would have a slightly different title. *Found in Translation* would suit me better, for as soon as I put down Eva Hoffman's book, I began to write.

I started with my birthplace, Wrocław, the city of shifting borders, German ruins and Polish children who played in them. The city of post-German houses deprived of family stories, of places deprived of the past.

"Where do you come from?" was, and perhaps still is, a standard Wrocław question. "From here, from Wrocław", is not a sufficient answer and will inevitably bring a nudge: "Where are you *really* from?" There always has to be the memory of another place, that place from whence your parents or grandparents came from. Vilnius, Lviv, Warsaw? There always has to be a story of exodus first, the story of displacement, of loss. Only then can one begin to narrate the story of slow acceptance, of building and rebuilding, of putting down roots. The story of how one makes a land one's own, how one turns a place into a home. A story of what, in Canada, I would have recognized as a story of immigration.

"Where do you come from?" is also a quintessential Canadian question, a question not that easy to answer. Geography is helpful to a certain extent. One comes from Poland, Russia, Germany, India. But even that requires explanations, for the massive political migrations of the past century have assured that we have made a mess of simple belonging. You came from Sarajevo, but are you Serbian or Bosnian? Or from what was once the Soviet Union, but are you Russian, Ukrainian, Polish, or Jewish? What if you come from the part of Poland that is now Ukraine, or the part of Germany that is now Poland?

"Where are you from?" if it is to be answered truthfully, with self-reflection, demands that our origin story has to be modified, clarified, annotated with reservations, laced with caution. Memories of the past have to face the critical eye of scrutiny under a different cultural lens. For since the storyteller and the listener have no shared memories, little can be taken for granted.

When I was growing up in Wrocław, the ruins of Breslau were still around me, the silent background to the hushed, bitter stories of the last world war. I have an old photograph of myself as a young girl, a tiny figurine with a halo of curly hair. I am holding my mother's hand, and behind me are the ruins I remember so well. Huge piles of rubble spilling into the street, clusters of red bricks still glued together with mortar, a sea of ruins, surrounding small islands of surviving buildings. Some of the houses are cut in half, gutted, with discoloured patches on the walls where the balconies fell off. The streets lead to neighbourhoods that no longer

exist; smooth, steel tramway tracks cutting through them end in the piles of rubble, disappearing among the grass and weeds.

I ran with other children through these ruins, wielding stick guns, yelling at the top of my voice. How many German words I knew then, already! *Raus, Hände hoch, schneller schneller. Get out, hands up, faster, faster. Polnische Schweine. Deutschland Deutschland über Alles. Drang nach Osten. Lebensraum.*

Our parents tried to keep us away from the ruins. Warned, we walked alert, ready to run away at the slightest noise. Sniffing the moist, mouldy air of the bunkers, we searched for German *Schmeissers* or Russian *Kalashnikovs*, for steel bullets which could be polished until they shone. It was from these trips that we brought back handfuls of German coins, lapels with SS runes, blue, red, and purple stamps with swastikas or Hitler's moustached face, rusted helmets filled with slime and rotting leaves. In the evening dusk, we plunged the sharp steel tips in between the granite cubes paving the sidewalks and sent them rolling down the street. "The Wild West", our parents used to say, echoing one of the most persistent of the post-war myths, the call for Polish pioneers who would take over and civilize this land, making it their own.

*Come my tan-faced children,
Follow well in order, get your weapons ready,
Have you your pistols? Have you your sharp-edged axes?
Pioneers! Oh pioneers!*

"Pioneers! O Pioneers!" Walt Whitman's song to the builders of the American Wild West was often cited at that time, despite communism's in-born distrust of America. This poem was thought to be particularly meaningful for the Polish pioneers of the Regained Territories. I am not sure about the tanned faces, but the Polish pioneers did come with their axes and hammers to clear the rubble of the war. And they would agree that:

*All the past we leave behind,
We debouch upon a newer mightier world, varied world,
Fresh and strong the world we seize, world of labor and the march,
Pioneers! O pioneers!*

Yes, there was plenty of labour, plenty of marches, and plenty of forgetting, necessary to carry on living.

For the citizens of Wrocław, forgetting the trauma of the war meant denying the history of the city they came to in 1945. The "master race" had fled in disgrace and defeat. What else was there to say? The daily newspapers of the first post-war years triumphantly announced the openings of the first Wrocław hospital, the first school, the first concert hall, as if this city were carved from wilderness and had no other but the most immediate past. "The land of opportunity", the same papers declared. The place where opulent villas waited for the brave, villas abandoned by fleeing Germans, houses fully furnished, business waiting to be taken. These

were the just rewards for the hardships and bitter losses of the war. Go! The papers urged. Tomorrow might be too late.

My parents came to Wrocław as students in 1948. In their memories, Wrocław was yet another place, a nobody's land, a haven for marauders and looters, but also—as my mother stressed—for the politically suspect. “To Go West” meant a better chance of being forgotten, of forging a new present, hiding the now suspect and vilified past. The Wrocław of my parents' youth was also a dangerous place, for this is where German, Russian and Polish gangs fought out their national and economic differences. Each morning, the naked bodies of the victims, robbed of all possessions, lay among the ruins, mute evidence of the power of bloodlines and universal human greed.

By the time I went to school, the ruins were being cleared and empty spaces were filling up with new apartment blocks. *We haven't come here*, the slogans around us proclaimed in big red letters, *We Have Returned*. And yet, the word *Breslau* filled us, the children born in Wrocław, with uneasiness. There was something sinister about it, something forbidden, so we lowered our voices when we pronounced it. We lived in houses we called post-German, where water taps had the words *Kalt* and *Warm* on them, where I could spell the word *Briefe* on my letterbox. Where we were told of mysterious tunnels under the city, perhaps still filled with Nazi loot. Before the Nazis surrendered, we were reminded, they turned *Festung Breslau* into heaps of debris, the scorched earth that would yield nothing but ashes. The photographs of the smouldering ruins of 1945 were on display everywhere, documenting both that devastation and the effort that went into the restoration, especially of the city's historical core, the Town Hall, the Gothic churches of the Old Town and the Oder Island, undisputable proofs of the ancient Polish origin of this land. We were discouraged from asking what happened between this ancient Polish past and the rise of Hitler, or to notice how, for years, the fin-de-siècle Breslau with its surviving modernist buildings and the Jugendstil facades, was left to crumble.

This, I was beginning to realize in my first Canadian years, was the true beginning of my story. I was the child of immigrants to the Regained Territories, the land of silences and unease about place, memory, and inheritance. And then, in one of these poignant ironies of a migrant's life, I had found myself living across the street from Jutta, a Breslauer who, as a child, escaped the burning city my parents would come to a few months later.

In Jutta's stories, Breslau was a German city of beautiful boulevards and family memories. It was the city of her birth and her mother's youth. “We come from the same place”, Jutta kept telling me. “From the same *Heimat*”. These words surprised me at first, but soon I had to admit that she was right, that the Poland I left was far more complicated than I once thought. Stunned by the incredible coincidence of our common birthplace, we began sharing memories, cautious at first, intrigued by the past we uncovered, by the stories long denied on both sides.

In January 1945, Jutta told me, her mother wrapped up her baby sister in a goose down pillow and a woollen blanket. It was a cold winter, bitterly cold, and many a time she was to lift the top of the blanket to check if the child was still alive. Breslau was no longer the city her mother had once loved. Nazi ideology had made its impact on Silesians; many Breslauers had been seduced by the myth of German racial superiority, while many others relished the impression of order and the economic benefits of cheap labour. There were also those who opposed Nazism, but if they had the courage to pronounce their views, they were treated like the enemy. A suburb of Breslau—a kilometre away from the house I grew up in—had been the site of the first Nazi concentration camp.

Jutta was lucky to be alive, we both knew it. The refugees from Breslau did not fare well. When the commander of Breslau, Karl Hanke, finally permitted women and children to leave the city, crowds flooded the Breslau Central Station. Children were trampled to death, lost. There were not enough trains to take them all, and the refugees were told to walk on foot to Kanth, some thirty kilometres through snow, where they were promised they would be able to board the trains to the West. Many died of the cold. Many of those who survived what had become known as the “Kanth Death March” perished in the firestorms in Dresden, which engulfed the city on the nights of the 13–14 of February 1945 during the massive Allied bombings. Among them could have been the people in whose apartment I lived in my childhood.

Ten years after I left, Wrocław was looming large, beckoning me with stories I wanted to explore, with silences I wanted to fill. Return was impossible for a while, but then the impossible happened. Communism fell, the Cold War was officially over, the Berlin Wall was being chopped to pieces and sold as souvenirs. In 1991, I visited Poland for the first time since I had left, a significant moment in the life of any immigrant; no other visit will ever equal that first confrontation of memory and reality.

By then, the city that I once thought of as not quite Polish, not quite mine, became fascinating for this very reason. It was still a city of immigrants carrying the stories of a home that was elsewhere, memories of loss and transformations, but traces of German Breslau, once obscured and denied, were becoming more and more visible. Wrocław bookstores were selling books of Breslau photographs and pre-war German maps. Plaques on Wrocław buildings informed that Carl Maria Weber lived here, that this is the city where Louis Alzheimer diagnosed his first dementia patient.

I walked through Wrocław streets with the same wonder I once gave the streets of Montreal. I took notes, pictures. I asked myriads of questions about the past and the present. I returned to Canada with a suitcase full of books: memoirs of Polish pioneers, memoirs of Polish and German refugees, the former arriving, the latter leaving. A novel was already shaping up in my mind, a novel rooted in the story of Breslau/Wrocław, the Polish city and its German double. A Canadian novel which

would begin and end in Montreal, but which would play out between a Breslau Canadian and a newly-arrived Wrocław one. I began thinking of it as a story of lies, betrayals, evolving memories, a story of transformation, of being Polish and Canadian at the same time.

This is how *Necessary Lies* was born, and I was no longer an academic. I have become a writer.

By the time I am writing this, in 2022, I have lived longer in Canada than I ever lived in Poland. I am a Polish-born Canadian writer, the author of seven novels. After *Necessary Lies* (2000) came *Garden of Venus* (2005), *Dissonance* (2009), *The Winter Palace* (2012), *Empress of the Night* (2013), *The Chosen Maiden* (2017), and, most recently *The School of Mirrors* (2022). Each of these books is a milestone on my literary journey.

In my first years in Canada, I've often felt as if the lands east of the former Iron Curtain have barely registered in Canadian literary consciousness, together with the history that has defined them. Not entirely, of course, for occasional poems and stories on Polish themes did appear in Canadian literary magazines. But they were fleeting, and they left so much untouched. This absence became my inspiration. And since history is an integral part of my Polish identity, a conviction that to understand the present one must know the past, history is where I began to search for my literary material. Scavenging through the treasure trove of history, however, comes with a warning. Not just any history, not always the official one, not always the one I was brought up on. What I was looking for was a window opened wide, a slanted point of view.

My personal experience of emigration has also left its mark, drawing me towards immigrants, migrants, cultural transplants, and their shifting sense of identity. In my next novels, I turned to Polish history seen or experienced by outsiders. I focused on characters who had to adjust to another culture, another language, another set of perceptions. I weighed the costs and gains of losing the primary uni-lingual and uni-cultural perception of the world. I explored the resulting persistent lightness of being, to play on Kundera's expression, the feeling that once we leave our first home, all other homes seem temporary. Time after time, I turned to women's voices, rarer and thus untapped, perfect as inspiration and material for my writing.

And so, in *Garden of Venus*, Sophie Glavani, a Greek immigrant to 18th century Poland, discovers that her cultural and class ambiguity allows her to escape the social restrictions of her times. In *Dissonance*, Delfina Potocka, Zygmunt Krasiński and Eliza Krasińska live on the edges of The Great Emigration and grapple with the limits of their national identities and personal obligations. My two novels about Catherine the Great, *The Winter Palace* and *Empress of the Night*, take on the story of a minor Prussian princess who became the perfect embodiment of 18th century Russia. For *The Chosen Maiden*, I found inspiration in Bronislava Nijinska, Vasilav Nijinski's younger sister, born in Minsk, educated in Russia, who carved for

herself a spectacular career in the Ballets Russes and beyond. In my novel, Bronia Nijinska is a wanderer, a woman who does not fully embody any of her cultural or national identities. She, the owner of many passports, Nansen just one among them, is foremost an artist. Her true homeland is modern dance. Her inner strength comes from the eternal human desire to create. Exile, emigration, immigration are mere stages in her artistic journey, just like being a daughter, sister, mother, are the stages of being a woman.

My latest novel, *The School of Mirrors*, has opened up yet another vista. The Polish or Eastern European inspiration has run its course, becoming a passing reference. There may be a Polish queen at Versailles, but she has no power and little influence. Louis XV may take on a disguise of a Polish count, but only to cover up his sexual exploits. At its core, the novel features two French women, a fictional mother and daughter, both growing up on the margins of the 18th century society. Ethnicity plays no role in who they are, though their class does, and so does their dubious social position. The most powerful force that determines their lives is the turbulent history of the 18th century France, the excesses of royal privilege at Versailles and the ruthless political games of the French Revolution. How they survive and at what cost is what the novel is ultimately about. In *The School of Mirrors*, history is shaped by everyday decisions, actions, hopes and struggles; choices that can crush, but can also, sometimes, make escape from fate possible.

I want to close this essay with answers to a personal question: What in my identity has remained Polish and what has become Canadian?

Poland is the landscape of my childhood, the first impressions of what it is to be alive. Poland is memories of my parents, my grandmother and my brother, the warmth of my first family and their untold stories, of which I still know mere snatches. My mother's insistence on never closing the door to a room she was in, for she was a political prisoner once and could not stand closed rooms. My grandmother's fear of planes flying low, her pain when she spoke of the lost store, her hand holding mine as she taught me my prayers and told me of the miracles of faith.

Poland is the tastes of pierogi, of milk with skin on it, of tea with lemon made with the "essence" brewed on a steaming kettle and diluted with boiling water. Poland is the memories of post-war Wrocław, where, for years, my family did not think we fully belonged.

Poland is the Polish language and culture which I have never left and the Polish history, not the official one I grew up on, but the multitude of histories that I have uncovered since. Poland is my point of reference, my Greenwich point, the first experience by which all else is measured. A stark life in a totalitarian state, the lessons of growing up amidst shortages, with fear of annihilation have made me sceptical about assurances of abundance, aware how precarious peace is, how easily destroyed. The Polish voice in me tells me to be suspicious of human motivation, but also to trust my strength to survive and cope. It makes me look for the

permanence of deep friendships, to seek those who will not turn away from me in the time of need.

This Polish voice insists on the existence of pure evil, backed up by the stories of crippling loss. It tells me not to overestimate the importance of the individual for when the worst comes, nobody survives alone. I do not always listen to my Polish voice. It annoys and angers me at times, but it is always there.

As a Canadian, I define myself in relation to our powerful neighbour to the south and to Europe on the other side of the ocean, and I see myself somewhere in between the two. I support a more generous social safety net and have far more tolerance than Americans for government control, but at the same time, I trust the power of the individual far more than is the European norm.

As a Canadian, I do not define myself against the backdrop of World War II and the ruins. In English, the word “war” has to be qualified, for there have been so many of them in my lifetime here, though none were fought on Canadian soil, and each produced a new wave of refugees, many of whom have found themselves in Canada.

As a Canadian, I relate myself more to the present and future. My past is not from here, at least not that most recent past, although more and more I too remember how things used to be. I may not recall Quebec martial law, but I do remember watching the results of the referendum of 1995, when a mere one percent saved Canada from splitting up. I do not have childhood memories from here, but I have the memories of my son’s childhood, successive waves of toys, and his passion for hockey and baseball.

I see my Canadian identity in the belief in self-reliance that makes over sixty percent Canadians and Americans answer NO when we are polled on the question: “Do you think that success in life is determined by forces beyond our control?”. To me, this energy, this sense of personal optimism has always been palpable in Canada. It energized me; it gave me courage to make choices perhaps not possible in Europe. I credit this force with my becoming a writer. This optimism makes me say YES when I ask myself, do you have anything of value to say, is your experience unique enough, different enough to be recorded, to be of interest to others?

I see my Canadian identity in the need for diversity around me. I cherish the sight of seeing children of many races playing together, a Japanese chef in an Italian restaurant, a traditionally-dressed Sikh wearing Nike sneakers. I feel the tug of recognition when I notice new waves of immigrants exploring the streets they will soon call theirs, with bewilderment and joy. I also see it in my anger when this welcoming of diversity is betrayed, when I encounter intolerance or outright racism; when present or past injustices are brazenly denied or minimized, or when a brutal act of terror shakes this North American optimism I hold so dear.

I have grown my Canadian roots by now. I have sorted through my feelings on essential Canadian questions. I can hold my own in the discussions whether Quebec should or should not be allowed to separate from Canada, are provinces

too powerful or not powerful enough, are the Western provinces justified in feeling isolated and used by the Federal government, should Canada be less or more allied with the United States? I have lived through the deep divisions caused by anti-Covid restrictions, by the surge of extreme views I did not suspect to be so persistent and destructive. As I have been suspicious of forced totalitarian socialism, now I have strong doubts about capitalist excesses, unchecked materialism, the influence of big business, and social inadequacies.

Canada is here, it is home. I am a Polish-born Canadian writer, an emigrant and an immigrant. I think of the past as my cradle, not my prison; I explore it to understand the present, extract from it what is worth preserving and passing on. Like the characters in my novels, I am no stranger to contradictions of identity and history. This is why I will close with a sentence borrowed from the heroine of *The Chosen Maiden*: “Mine, I will defend myself, is not a simple story”.