

Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language Study Guide

Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language by Eva Hoffman

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Plot Summary

"Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language" by Eva Hoffman is a non-fiction work recounting the author's life from childhood through her mid-thirties.

Hoffman's love of language is evident in her riveting storytelling style. There are two main things of which the reader should be aware. The first is that the Polish language differs from most others in that a family's surname bears gender and is therefore changed dependent upon the sex of the family member. One example is a family close to the Wydras. The author's friend, Krysia, has the surname Orlovska. The a at the end denotes the feminine. The father, Dr. Orlovski, uses an "i" at the end to denote the masculine. There is one major inconsistency throughout the book. Eva's younger sister, who is named after an aunt killed in a concentration camp, is named Alinka or Alina, depending on the section of the book. The names are interchangeable and both are used throughout.

Throughout this telling autobiography, the author runs the gamut of emotions from adolescent hope to disillusionment to fear, rage, joy, wonder, love, denial, and acceptance.

Part I, Paradise, is structured around the author's early years in Poland. There are rich descriptions of the landscape and of the lives of those in and around the Wydra family. Although life is hard it is all the Polish people know and overall it is a happy life. Also included are the socio-economic conditions and how the society had been impacted by the war, which ended only two months before the author's birth.

Part II, Exile, details the Wydra family leaving Poland to immigrate to Canada. This section captures the bewilderment and confusion of a young girl in a foreign land and how the family must learn to adapt to a new country, its language and customs.

Exile, has tones of confusion, fear, and bewilderment. As the section recounts to the Wydras' move to Vancouver, it also includes the many the trials and tribulations faced by immigrants who are ill prepared to set foot in a world that could not be more foreign. Conquering the language and customs proves to be a daunting task yet there are many other things to be addresses, from the housing to the work ethic to the general behavior of the people, particularly females.

Part III, The New World, picks up when the author receives a scholarship to Rice University in Houston, Texas. It is in Texas where Hoffman will receive her first bit of "Americanization" and also meet her future husband. The tale tells of Eva's changes as she goes through college and eventually heads east to attend Harvard. There are reminiscences as well as new experiences to be examined. Although the author is highly accomplished, the struggle to define herself is never finished.

There is an overall excitement married with trepidation about venturing into the New World. There are many opportunities yet there is also remorse over the loss of the old

world and the inability to marry the two existences. A great deal of fear and rage also exists regarding immigrant status and the role in which Eva is forced to play. Eva fights against the system and eventually forges her own way. There also a sense of loss for the old, a feeling of acceptance for what is, and most importantly, a feeling of hope for the future.



Part 1, Paradise

Part 1, Paradise Summary and Analysis

Part One, Paradise, begins with the author standing on the upper deck of the Batory as the family prepares to depart from Gdynia. There is a great deal of excitement, yet 13-year-old Eva declares that there is a feeling of finality so deep that it could easily be the end of the world. Alinka, Eva's nine-year-old sister, barely knows what is happening; particularly as their parents are subjected to a body search as part of the typical Jewish harassment. The family is forbidden to take much of anything from Poland. However, the officials are not suspicious enough to search the children's clothing in which is hidden the family's silverware.

The only thing Eva can think about is leaving behind Kraków, the only place she has ever known. The new country, Canada, is a foreign entity of which Eva knows nothing. Canada was chosen because Eva's father had read a book called "Canada, Fragrant with Resin" during the period of time when he had to hide out from the Nazis. The book talked about the majestic wilderness of Canada, as well as its freely roaming wildlife. The book was the impetus for the plan to sail across the Atlantic rather than settle in Israel like many of the Wydras' friends and family.

Many years later, Eva finds a sympathizer in a woman she met at a party in New York. The girl had a privileged childhood and when the girl was removed from it at age 13, she said she felt as if she had lost paradise and had been looking for it ever since. Although Eva's life in Kraków was not nearly as idyllic, it was still her own version of Eden.

Eva flashes back to her early childhood in Kraków. The family always had a maid, despite the meager lifestyle. The story begins in 1949 when Eva is four years old. Eva was too young to understand that the country had recently been ravaged by war or that her father was struggling to make ends meet. In Eva's mind Kraków is the center of the universe. At this time the family lived on Kazimierza Wielkiego, a street filled with apartment buildings of similar families.

The author explains the fate of her Aunt Alinka, her mother's younger sister, who had been captured and executed by the Nazis. Eva dreams of Alinka as part of an amalgam of a woman who is half witch, half grandmother. The woman, known as Baba Yaga, is hunched and shriveled and stares at Eva with malicious eyes.

Eva's younger sister, Alinka, is named after the persecuted aunt.

Eva describes her father as being a short but powerfully built man who had the reputation as a youth of being as "strong as a bull." According to stories, the only time the man had ever been seen crying was the day Eva was born. Eva's birth was especially emotional, because it occurred two months after the end of the war. The



Wydras talk a little about their life before the war when they lived in Zalosce. It is almost as if the war had erased everything that came before it.

Eva's father was exceedingly happy to have a child although the author insists that he seemed to mistake her for her son. Eva was always encouraged to participate in any and every sport available. The two biggest hits with Eva were a Hula Hoop and the motorcycle that her father purchased when she was 11.

Eva describes the family's apartment in Kraków. Although it is small it is considered to be respectable by postwar standards, particularly since the family is not required to share it with anyone. The three-story building has an abundance of neighbors and children to occupy the family in their hours of leisure. The apartment building is located on the periphery of Kraków, where urban residences fade away to be replaced by small cottages and gardens. By all standards the Wydras are considered to be middle-class.

Although Eva's father has a day job at a store specializing in imports and exports, he also participates in "risky money-making schemes." Although the activities are often illegal, there is no way one can survive without making extra money on the side. In the end, it is the extra money that the father has secreted that allows the family to travel to Canada.

Eva's parents have given up a great deal of their past in order to embrace modernity. The author claims that they had little respect for politics, law, and ideology. The author refers to her parents as "unshockable" and claims they had lost innocence and had become divested of the trappings of their religious faith.

There are four families that regularly vacation together in the summer. There is a small village called Bialy Dunajec that rents peasant houses, where the families lived for a period of nine to ten weeks. It is a difficult trip because the village is in the remote part of the foothills of the Tatra Mountains and must be reached by train. Not only do the families have to take their clothing for the summer but must also pack all necessities and amenities used by civilized people.

The peasant houses are owned by mountain people, who exhibit fierce habits and speak a different dialect than the families. As a general rule, the families are left to enjoy their vacation without interruption or incident.

Hoffman introduces her best friend and love interest, Marek. Marek is the son of Pani Ruta, a close family friend. The children have known each other since babyhood and spend as much time as possible together.

At this point, Hoffman also introduces Ciocia Bronia, the Wydras' maid. Bronia lives with the family for a long time and is almost like a member of the family rather than a servant. The woman dotes on Eva and often refers to her as "my golden one." Eva's parents met Bronia when they were sequestered in a man's attic for a year as they hid from the Nazis. Although Bronia is also Jewish she looked enough like a Pole to get away with it and no one ever suspected that she was also a Jew. After the war ended, Eva's parents and Bronia clung together. Although Bronia eventually married and moved



away, Eva claims that the maids who succeeded her could not compare. Bronia eventually moved to Breslau but kept in touch through letters.

The author also speaks of her father's family and the fact that the Nazis could not seem to capture any of the young men. Eva's father was captured for a very short time, but managed to get away.

Every fortnight, Eva goes to the library with her mother to pick out books. It is a mysterious and magical place for Eva and she can barely wait to get home to devour the words.

Eva's penchant for reading, led to declare at an early age that she wanted to be a writer. Although the future author didn't really know what that meant, she longed to be transported into a place where everything made sense.

Eva was somewhat confused about her religion as many of her childhood friends were Christian. The family's maids also attempt to infuse Christianity into the small girl. Although the Wydras are Jewish, they do get a Christmas tree and also receive gifts on St. Nicholas Day so that the children won't feel left out. The only Jewish ritual observed at the Wydra house is Passover.

Hoffman discusses anti-Semitism, and how it is a barbaric behavior gleaned from stupidity. Hoffman describes the history and culture of Kraków, describing it as a place "not a mystery but of secrets." Although the city has a long and illustrious history, Eva tends to focus on the buildings and marketplace. One of Eva's favorite places is Planty Park, one of the oldest parks in the city, complete with a miniature bridge and goldfish pond. It is the perfect place for a sunny afternoon with the family.

The Wydras are very conscious of the types of people they wish to surround themselves with, including playmates for the children. To foster a better life, Eva is introduced to Krysia Orlovska, the daughter of an upper class family. The girls play well together and although the activities are carefully planned, Eva enjoys herself. One thing the reader will note while reading about Krysia's family is the different spellings of the last name. In Polish, the woman's last name ends in the letter a, while the man's last name ends in the letter "i." Therefore, Krysia's mother is Mrs. Orlovska while Krysia's father is Dr. Orlovski.

Mrs. Orlovska credits herself for discovering Eva's musical talent and often encourages the girl to perform in the salon. Krysia's older brother, Robert, is also studying to be a pianist and he often performs as well to give Eva a glimpse into the skills she may hope to develop.

Krysia is often referred to as the porcupine because she tends to withdraw from physical affection. Eva discovers later that Krysia had developed a great affection for her and wrote a poem about their friendship after Eva moved to Canada.

The author talks about Dr. Orlovski's domineering presence, critical attitude, and the fact that he has a permanent mistress which he keeps in a nearby apartment. Although this



behavior is common in upper class Polish families, Mrs. Orlovska is indignant about the fact and is resentful.

Hoffman talks about various activities and remedies that take place during illness. The author went through a period of severe malnourishment when she refused to eat at the age of four. It is common for children of the postwar era to restrict and refuse to eat. After a year of spending every day in bed and receiving vitamin B shots, Hoffman decided to eat again.

Although the Wydra family is middle class, Mrs. Wydra feels it is important to have a maid. While the most influential maid in the household was Bronia, the one that stayed with them the longest is Hanka. Hanka doted on the baby Alinka just as Bronia doted on Eva. Eva viewed Hanka as more of a friend than a maid or governess and was pleased by her cheerful demeanor.

Although the apartment is crowded, Eva never thinks of it as being overly crowded or that there may be a lack of privacy. After all, she says, the family has more space than most people. Oftentimes there are visitors who spend the night on the sofa in the first room. Most of them are Mr. Wydra's business associates, who are in town for a night or perhaps, a relative of a friend from before the war. There is also young Jewish boy who is a regular visitor at the apartment. The boy has been orphaned and as is Jewish custom, he is invited to participate in special meals and holidays.

Hoffman talks about the day when Joseph Stalin died. Eva doesn't quite understand the concept since Stalin seemed to be nothing more than a divine figurehead. The only difference is that he will now live in a mausoleum inside the Kremlin. Politics are a foreign matter to Eva. According to the author, "Poles don't need demystifying philosophies to doubt all sources of power and authority." In many ways politics are game, much like religion, and no one in the Wydras' immediate circle seems to take stock in either.

The author speaks of the dual political education she received as a child. It is compulsory to take Russian courses from fifth grade upward and the Communist political system seemed to be completely and directly opposed to the information received about a foreign place referred to as America. There are several messages being sent at the same time to Eva, what is learned from the text and history books which is overridden by the politics of parents and teachers.

At the age of eight Eva takes her first music lesson. The piano teacher hired to teach Eva and Marek, Pani Grodzinska, is an elderly woman that lives in a museum of an apartment. Something magical happens when Pani Grodzinska sits down at the piano. The homely woman is transformed as pure magic emanates from her fingers. It is important for the children to take a music lessons as it is a sign of being raised in a better family. On the first day, Marek and Eva are taken through a musical hearing test designed to test each child's musicality. The test requires each child to sing fragments of melodies, clap out rhythmic patterns and try to point out similarities between various



intervals. While Marek excels in this exercise, Eva does poorly. Eva does redeem herself in the next series of tests that gauges the quality of the inner ear.

Getting Eva to practice is a difficult task. As the author states, "of course, like any self-respecting child, I balk at practicing."

Eventually, Eva is turned over to Pani Witeszczak, a music teacher who has a reputation for being efficient and well-suited to children. Hoffman states that Pani Witeszczak is the first of her music teachers to give her a thorough and moral education. The author goes on to talk about various techniques and advancement in her music education.

Pani Konek, a teacher of literature at Cracow Music School, becomes Eva's favorite teacher. In 1956 Eva is enrolled in Cracow Music School, where she will receive training to become a professional pianist.

Eva becomes best friends with Basia, the daughter of one of the professors. Basia is a highly intelligent girl, and one to Eva considers the "acme of sophistication." The girls become inseparable and even after Eva moves to Canada they stay in touch.

Shortly before Eva's family is set to depart for Canada, she is scheduled to give a full recital. Eva is terrified but the practice pays off, and even Robert gives a good review. Shortly after Eva must say goodbye to Pani Witeszczak, Basia, Krysia, Robert, Cracow Music School, and everything she has known up to this point.

It was impossible to leave the country before 1957 due to a ban on emigration. After 1957 any Jew is automatically eligible to get permission to emigrate. Many people from Eva's childhood are leaving Poland. Marek is going to Israel and wants Eva to go with him. Marek makes this announcement to Eva's father and insists that Eva will become his wife. Eva is afraid that she will end up in Canada without Marek.

Eva does not go to Israel as it is the land of war and Eva's mother is afraid that danger and death will befall her daughters. It takes almost 2 years to get permission for the Wydras to leave the country for Canada.

Marek leaves for Israel and Eva is inconsolable. The author hints at a reunion sometime in the future although the reality is not anything like the fantasy she had created in her mind.

Part one ends with the brief explanation of the trip from Poland to Canada during which the author and her family meet new people and spend time studying the English language. Hoffman states that this is the end of the narrative of her childhood.



Part 2, Exile

Part 2, Exile Summary and Analysis

Part Two, Exile, begins with the family's arrival in Montréal. Eva catches her first glimpse of Canadian teenagers and is horrified by the high heels and makeup. The look is vulgar to the unadorned Polish girl and Eva thinks that the girls look like prostitutes. On the train people tend to avoid the family, because they have suitcases full of food including sausages, canned sardines and dried cake. The family does not know about the dining cars on the train and even if they did the food was much too expensive.

The train cuts through the wilderness and Eva's parents are thrilled by the brilliant landscape. Eva, on the other hand, is disconsolate and refuses to look. It is not until later when Eva takes a bus tour across Canada that she realizes what she had missed on that first trip.

The Wydras are greeted by the family that has agreed to give them shelter. Mr. and Mrs. Rosenberg have a lovely house in Vancouver. The family stays for a few days with the Rosenbergs and is set up in a basement apartment. The house is spacious with a neat garden but Eva finds it too flat and square to hold much interest. The family is nice enough, but Mr. Rosenberg soon insists that the Wydras move out and find a place of their own. Mrs. Wydra trades lodging for housekeeping duties, and the family moves in with an elderly Jewish man.

Eva and Alinka are sent to a small school to learn how to speak English. The girls also receive Anglicized names. Eva's name does not change much from the Polish spelling of "Ewa," although Alinka is now referred to as "Elaine." The girls do not like their new names and feel as if they are more foreign than anything else so far encountered.

Eva begins to have panic attacks in the night, and although the attacks come and go, Eva refers to the worst of them as "The Big Fear."

Eva becomes acquainted with Rosa Steiner, a wealthy woman in her forties. Rosa is a vivacious woman, unapologetic and straightforward. Eva becomes close with Rosa and despite the age difference the pair becomes confidants and good friends. Mr. and Mrs. Steiner have two daughters, both older than Eva. The girls are polite but it is Rosa that keeps Eva coming to the salon day after day, spending hours talking, playing the piano, and solving all the world's problems. Even though Rosa does not always understand Eva's thoughts, the woman is patient and listens. Eva tries not to be embarrassed by the fact that the Steiners are very rich and the Wydras are very poor.

Eva begins to feel as if she is in exile. The girl, now fifteen, feels caught in between with no way to return to her old life and no map with which to venture forward. The people in the new world often tell Eva to leave the old ways and the old life behind, to trade it all in for the new but this bothers Eva as she longs to marry the past and the future.



Eva learns to speak English but still prefers the language in its proper form. This makes it difficult when spending time with peers who use slang, tell jokes, and adopt nuances that are beyond the Polish girl. Eva realizes later that she will always love the proper form of the language and that the bastardization of the English language will always grate on her nerves like fingernails on a chalkboard. It also becomes clear that much of Eva's early experience with English was gleaned from the "better" families that the Wydras were always in search of for molding their daughters. It becomes clear that language is a class signifier and this is another reason why Eva has a hard time fitting in with her peers, many of which do not practice the same language rules as the upper class.

Although Mr. Wydra has always been a resourceful man, the rules in Canada are much different from Poland and the man finds it nearly impossible to adapt. Work is hard to find as there is no government support at the time for immigrants. The family has purchased a small house which only adds to the father's anxiety and soon even the smallest decision seems to haunt the man. Mr. Wydra tells Mrs. Wydra that he wants his "peace of mind back."

Eva is invited to a girls' gathering and then a party. Thrilled to be included in the rituals, they are still foreign to Eva who does not own some of the garments like the other girls and oftentimes the situations are uncomfortable.

The topic of Communism comes up in school and Eva tries hard to explain that it is not as if there were Communists marching up and down the street all day. It is hard to explain something that one has always known.

Eva and Alinka discover shops and are in awe of the displays. Eva knows that many things cannot be had without money but decides instead to fill herself with "internal goods." Every day Eva intends to feed her body, mind and spirit. A big part of this is reading books and learning all she can about philosophy, religion, and literature.

Eva's friend, Penny, serves as the one with all the knowledge, who tries to teach Eva about all things, including dating.

The author writes about her first meeting with a new music teacher, Piotr Ostropov. Piotr Ostropov is a Russian gentleman of nearly seventy years. The author claims that the new teacher resembles an artist, a romantic, or at least the nineteenth century ideal of one. The man has a large bald spot with white bristly hair sticking straight up. Ostropov's eyes are bright and contain an impish glint. Meticulous in his work, Ostropov is not so meticulous when it comes to spilling tobacco all over from his every present pipe.

Hoffman describes Ostropov as a musician who is both "a wizard and a snake charmer about to make water spring from a tree branch and transfix his listeners with his power." Hoffman adds, "His eyes twinkle, and he looks up at me like a magician who has just accomplished the naughtiest, most amusing trick."



Eva and Ostropov share a pure love of music and soon begin a "tempestuous musical relationship."

Like the Steiners, Ostropov is a wealthy man who lives in a mansion and sends a limo to pick Eva up at the Wydra house when it is time to receive her lesson.

Ostropov does not believe in watching the clock and the man's enthusiasm often overtakes him as well as Eva. The author states that there is more passion than method to Ostropov's teaching and perhaps that is what makes the man so dynamic.

Ostropov landed in Vancouver after the Russian Revolution in 1905. After the war, Ostropov and his two brothers travel playing throughout the British Empire. The man has a tremendous number of stories to share and each enralls Eva. In addition to the stories are moral lessons, since morality and art are one in the same for Ostropov.

Part II ends with Eva leaving Vancouver for Rice University in Houston, Texas where she will study. The future still seems uncertain and the author continues to feel as if she is between the old world and the new, as is the fate of the immigrant.



Part 3, The New World

Part 3, The New World Summary and Analysis

Part III, The New World, begins in 1979 with the author in the living room of an apartment on the upper West side in New York City. There is a group of literary people discussing writers and critics. This is a scene that has become very familiar to Eva since she began to work at the New York Times. There are many friends and acquaintances at the party and the author mentions several of them. New York is the author's home now although she refers to America as "this goddamn place." The entire scene is strange, yet it seems to fit Eva. Although the author still has a slight Polish accent, her English is such that no one seems to notice anymore, and she is able to participate in even the most difficult conversations. In Eva's mind, New York is the only place to be.

The story reverts to Houston, with its humidity, and unrelenting heat. The people, the author meets in Houston are polite and friendly and curious about her background in life in Poland before moving to Canada. It is interesting to Hoffman to meet such a wide variety of people, particularly since there are fewer class distinctions almost as if everyone is on the same social footing.

There are many customs that Eva knows nothing about from hazing to initiation into various societies. The social eccentrics seem to gravitate toward Hoffman; most of them say that she is a good listener, although the author claims that it is not true, rather she is too busy observing what she refers to as "a puzzling species."

The reader is introduced to Eva's new friend Lizzy. Lizzy becomes Eva's confidant even though the two women often are at odds regarding politics.

Eva begins to date and the boys interested in the author mistake her innocence for sophistication.

The author finds that although she lacks in the area of language there are many areas in which she excels. Among these are geometry and abstract building blocks as well as vocabulary, literature, and philosophy. However, to study too hard, according to the author, would violate her Polish code of honor. Still, the academic game is one that Hoffman is able to play well.

Hoffman becomes an expert on symbolic patterns. The patterns come in many varieties - American literature, the frontier and individualism. Mainly, there is self versus society and society versus nature. Hoffman can easily relate to alienation and detachment.

The author talks about developing intellectual passion in the democratic educational system. It is amazing to Hoffman that she is being welcomed as an equal, despite her immigrant status. After a long while of studying literature Hoffman finds that she has lost the ability to translate backwards. At the end of Hoffman's freshman year, she returns to



Vancouver via the Greyhound bus. The trip takes 52 hours and is somewhat confusing to the author.

During the summer after Hoffman's freshman year, she receives a letter from one of her professors at Rice University urging her to venture forth in to literature. Hoffman takes the man's advice. It is not until Hoffman has finished graduate school that she begins to teach literature.

Hoffman talks about her first American love, an All-American Texas boy. Hoffman is in love with the boy who is terrified of hurting her and assuming responsibility. Nor does he want to sleep with Eva because he's afraid of violating her purity. It turns out that the boy's parents were not at all pleased that their son was involved with a foreigner, who also happens to be a Jew.

During Eva's junior year she receives word that Marek, who is still in Israel, got married. The sense of grief returns and the author realizes that she must let go of her childhood fantasy and embrace her new life in America.

The author talked briefly about the Kennedy assassination, the Rolling Stones, and the Beatles. The author tells stories about the dramatic changes that take place in some of her classmates.

The author speaks about the process of "Americanization" and how she feels fortunate to be in "the least snobbish of societies and the most fluid of generations." The situation "makes assimilation an almost outmoded idea."

There are drastic changes taking place at Rice University. The author talks about the surprising path taken by Lizzy and how the times certainly affected the girl's choices. The author questions how one should assimilate in a splintered society. Hoffman longs to live in Nabokovian world where one can observe freely and transcend one's circumstances.

Hoffman details conversations with herself regarding marriage. The American Eva wants to marry the Texan, Tom. The Polish Eva says she should not that her heart still belongs to Marek. The American Eva overrides the Polish Eva. The second conversation has to do with Eva's career decisions. The English Eva discards the dream of becoming a pianist, while the Polish Eva wants nothing more. The war is raging between Eva's two selves.

1969 is the author's first year at Harvard. Eva has spent time at Yale Music School, but pursues literature at Harvard where she will receive a doctorate. Hoffman's friends assure her that she has finally entered the "real" America, the "norm." Yet the friends continually eschew all of their parents' "normal" culture offerings which infuriates Hoffman. Hoffman is sick of being the immigrant and develops what she refers to as "immigrant rage." The author examines the rage in how it affects her ideas, opinions, and relationships.



During Hoffman's second year at Harvard, the author becomes even more obsessed with words. In every event from love to marriage, the author is seduced by language, particularly when it comes to Tom, the Texan who becomes her husband.

Eva receives a phone call from Marek, who is in New York for the first time. Eva agrees to meet Marek, although it is just before Eva is to receive her doctorate degree and on the same day that her parents are scheduled to arrive from Vancouver. Eva also has to consider Tom. In the end, nothing matters but Marek. It has been 17 years since Eva and Marek had seen each other. The reunion is full of memories, but not sentimental. Marek goes to Cambridge to see Eva receive her doctorate and also reunites with her family.

Eva and Marek spent a lot of time together while Marek is in Boston. Although there still a great deal of fondness and affection between the friends, it is clear that Eva no longer knows Marek. After Marek returns to Israel, the two communicate for a while. Marek says he will return someday but never does. Marek eventually commits suicide.

Eva visits Kraków in 1977 and rekindles old relationships. Back in New York Eva continues to move forward with her career, including a stint at the New York Times. Alinka has also received her doctorate. The girls have grown and have taken the world by storm.

The heaviness of the concentration camps still weighs on the family as news of the Nuremberg trials emerges. The author talks about more Poles emigrating and the state of her native country.

Eva confides to her mother that she has begun to see a shrink, and her mother disapproves. Hoffman realizes that therapy has turned into translation therapy, a cure created for a second language.

The author realizes that she cannot close the gap created by the introduction of the New World into her life. Alina has decided to take back her Polish name.

In the end, the author reveals that although the New World has been a part of her for so many years, it is not her world. After meeting with an old friend Eva realizes that she has entered into yet another world where there is no separation after all.



Characters

Eva Wydra Hoffman

Eva Wydra Hoffman (1945 -) is a Polish author and academic. Hoffman was born in 1945 in Krakow, Poland to Jewish parents who had survived the horrors of the Holocaust. In 1959, the family left Poland and immigrated to Canada.

After high school, Eva studied English Literature at Texas' Rice University where she received a scholarship. After Rice University, Eva went on to study at the Yale School of Music and eventually Harvard, where she earned her PhD in American and English Literature. Additionally, Hoffman holds an honorary DLitt degree bestowed by the University of Warwick in 2008.

Hoffman, who now resides in London, has held positions as a professor and lecturer at some of the world's finest universities, including MIT, Columbia, and Tufts.

In addition to work in the academic world, Hoffman served as a writer and editor for the New York Times from 1979-1990, and also held a position for three years at the coveted New York Times Book Review.

Hoffman has made a name for herself in the non-fiction world with four highly successful books: "Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language," "Stetl: The Life and Death of a Small Town and the World of Polish Jews," "Exit into History," and "After Such Knowledge: Memory, History and the Legacy of the Holocaust."

Piotr Ostropov

The author writes about her first meeting with a new music teacher, Piotr Ostropov. Piotr Ostropov is a Russian gentleman of nearly seventy years. The author claims that the new teacher resembles an artist, a romantic, or at least the nineteenth century ideal of one. The man has a large bald spot with white bristly hair sticking straight up. Ostropov's eyes are bright and contain an impish glint. Meticulous in his work, Ostropov is not so meticulous when it comes to spilling tobacco all over from his every present pipe.

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Ciocia Bronia

The Wydras' maid who daunts on Eva.

Marek Ruta

Eva's childhood best friend and first love.

Baba Yaga

The amalgam of a wizened old woman and Mrs. Wydra's younger sister who died in a concentration camp.

Alinka

Eva's little sister who is four years younger.

Rosa

Eva's closest friend in Vancouver.

Krycia Orlovska

The daughter of a doctor and Eva's friend.

Basia

Eva's best friend at music school.

Rosenbergs

The family with which the Wydras live in Vancouver.



Objects/Places

Wydra Apartment in Krakow

The apartment in Krakow is located on Kazimierza Wielkiego and is considered to be quite respectable by post World War II standards, mainly because the family does not have to share it with anyone. The kitchen is the center of the dwelling with steamy pots of soup cooking on the wood stove or large vats of water being boiled for laundry to make sure it is as bright as can be.

There is one large room, known as the "first room." There is a blue porcelain tile stove that reaches from floor to ceiling, a mahogany chifforobe, a dining table, and a sofa bed for the parents. There is another room, the "second room," in which Eva and Alinka sleep. There is a bathroom with a gas stove that is difficult to use when it comes to heating water for bathing.

There is a small balcony that overlooks a paved courtyard and a garden. The courtyard is often filled with kids playing or neighbors chatting about the events of the day. In the garden grows violets, boysenberry bushes and an apple tree perfect for Eva to climb.

Eva hates the basement where she must go to fetch coal. The cellar is dark and damp and is full of terrible things in the mind of a little girl.

Kraków, Poland

Kraków, Poland is the main setting for Part I, Paradise, in Eva Hoffman's "Lost in Translation, A Life in the New Language." Almost all of Eva's childhood is spent in Kraków before the family emigrates in 1959.

The large city, often referred to as Cracow, is the former national capital of Poland and remains the center of culture, and many forms of government. Kraków is one of the cities that were hardest hit by World War II as there were many Jewish families in residence. While Eva's father and his brothers managed to elude the Nazis after the invasion, Mrs. Wydra's younger sister, Alinka, was forced to dig her own grave before being sent to the gas chamber in a concentration camp.

Although Poland was a communist country, Hoffman declares that there were no Communists marching up and down the street as some Americans might think. Hoffman refers to Kraków as a place of mystery and secrets. Hoffman states, "Kraków to me is the city of shimmering light and shadow, with the shadow only adding more brilliance to the patches of wind and sun." Hoffman adds, "Its narrow byways, its echoing courtyards, its jewellike interiors are there for my dilatation: they're there for me to get to know."



One of the locations often mentioned in the ancient city is Planty Park, a favorite place for Eva and her childhood friend Marek to walk and play.

The Varsovian

Polish café regularly frequented by Mr. Wydra.

America

The land of opportunity and new language for Eva Hoffman, who embraced the foreign culture while studying at various universities.

Rice University

University in Texas where Eva earned her bachelor's degree on a scholarship. Also the site at which Eva became "Americanized."

Texas

Location of Rice University, Eva Hoffman's alma mater.

Vancouver, Canada

Vancouver is the city to which the Wydra family immigrated in 1959.

Bialy Dunajec

The place where the Wydras and their friends vacation during the summer.

Kazimierza Wielkiego

The street on which the Wydras lived in Krakow.

Zalosce

The town in which the Wydras lived before moving to Krakow.

Themes

Anti-Semitism

Anti-Semitism is the practice of prejudice toward the Jewish people. It can take place in the many forms from ethnic slurs to personal attacks. The most famous incident involving anti-Semitism was the Holocaust in which Adolf Hitler that murdered millions of Jews claiming that they were inferior to the master race.

According to Eva Hoffman, "Anti-Semitism is a darkness of the mind, a prejudice-rather than a deviation from moral principles."

Hoffman also refers to anti-Semitism as barbaric stupidity, and asked that makes her feel superior. Even those who wouldn't consider themselves to be prejudice often have many false views of the Jews and ignorance of their culture angers the Wydras.

Kaufman learns early on that it is important to affirm her Jewishness with her head held high. To be a Jew means to defy barbaric and dark feelings. By defining the ceilings, a Jew is able to uphold a sense of human dignity.

On the other hand, anti-Semetics often make the Jewish people suspicious and angry so that it is easy to give in to thoughts of retaliation. There is one instance in which Eva's father gets into a fistfight on the street when a man commented, "The best thing Hitler did was to eliminate the Jews."

Immigrants

The members of the Wydra family were immigrants in the late-1950s when they left Poland and moved to Canada in search of a better life. Postwar Poland had not regained its former glory and stories of the New World were enticing and exciting enough to have Mr. and Mrs. Wydra dreaming of fortune unlike they had ever seen.

Stories of immigrants have been told for many centuries but rarely through the eyes of a teenage girl. Eva Wydra was 14 when her family left Poland and the author claims that leaving everything behind caused a deep pain and sadness within her so profound that she had to clutch herself in order to try and keep it inside.

Eva Wydra spent the rest of her youth in Canada and then the United States when she accepted a scholarship to Rice University in Texas. Although some people saw the immigrants as being a group to look down upon, Eva found that more often than not, she was the center of attention like some new and exotic creature. This was magnified by the fact that the Wydras were Jewish, something that had not been introduced into some of the areas in which the family lived.



Although the family embraced the new country in which they lived, it was extremely important for the Wydras to remember where they came from and to be proud of their heritage.

Language

The majority of people in Poland speak Polish, followed at a distance second by Yiddish. The Wydras spoke mainly Polish although the parents would revert to Yiddish when they wanted to have a private conversation, particularly in front of non-family members.

Although the Wydras were not wealthy, it was very important for each to be well read and to be able to express oneself through language. Living in Canada meant learning a new language and although Eva struggled with learning to read and write in English at first, the language soon took hold. This may have been more difficult considering the French influence in Canadian speech, particularly in Montreal, which is the largest French speaking city outside France. Poland is a Francophile country however and there may have been some advantage to that.

Hoffman states that while she was learning the new language, she became interested in etymology. While most people learning a new language would study the meaning and relation to other, similar words, the author found that it was more interesting to trace the origin of the root of the word. While this would be undoubtedly difficult for many, Hoffman embraced this way of learning and went on to become a master of the language as a result.

Literature played a very large part in Hoffman's education in the English language. The effect was so profound that the author's love of reading, fostered as a young child, grew exponentially and led her on the path of an academic and author.

Style

Perspective

Eva Wydra Hoffman is a Polish author and academic. Hoffman was born in 1945 in Krakow, Poland to Jewish parents who had survived the horrors of the Holocaust. In 1959, the family emigrated from Poland to Canada.

"Lost in Translation, A Life in a New Language" is the story of Hoffman's childhood in Poland and the changes that occurred after the family moved to Canada. Hoffman eventually moves to the U.S. and attends Rice University, Yale and Harvard before settling in New York. The experiences throughout the author's life offer an unbiased view into the life of an immigrant family and that of a girl who grows up in three separate countries, all the while learning a new language in every sense.

After high school, Eva studied English Literature at Texas' Rice University where she received a scholarship. After Rice University, Eva went on to study at the Yale School of Music and eventually Harvard, where she earned her PhD in American and English Literature. Additionally, Hoffman holds an honorary DLitt degree bestowed by the University of Warwick in 2008.

Hoffman, who now resides in London, has held positions as a professor and lecturer at some of the world's finest universities, including MIT, Columbia, and Tufts.

In addition to work in the academic world, Hoffman served as a writer and editor for the New York Times from 1979-1990, and also held a position for three years at the coveted New York Times Book Review.

Hoffman has made a name for herself in the non-fiction world with four highly successful books: "Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language," "Stetl: The Life and Death of a Small Town and the World of Polish Jews," "Exit into History," and "After Such Knowledge: Memory, History and the Legacy of the Holocaust."

Tone

The tone in "Lost in Translation" is varied widely from part to part. The author runs the gamut of emotions from adolescent hope to disillusionment to fear, rage, joy, wonder, love, denial, and acceptance.

In part one, Paradise, the author expresses childish wonder as she details her life in Kraków. Although life is hard it is all the Polish people know and overall it is a happy life. Living in the capital city gives the Wydras access to culture including music and literature. It is this access that paves the way for the author's future.



There are tales of the Polish way of life from both objective and partisan views. Special attention is paid to the relationships formed with friends and family, particularly Marek, Bronia, and Pani Witeszczak. The thought of leaving it all behind is incomprehensible.

Part two, Exile, has tones of confusion, fear, and bewilderment. This section refers to the Wydras' move to Vancouver and the trials and tribulations faced by immigrants who are ill prepared to set foot in a world that could not be more foreign. Conquering the language and customs proves to be a daunting task.

The tone in part three, The New World, varies widely. There is excitement about venturing into the New World. There is also remorse over the loss of the old world and the inability to marry the two existences. A great deal of fear and rage also exists regarding immigrant status and the role in which Eva is forced to play. Eva fights against the system and eventually forges her own way. There also a sense of loss for the old, a feeling of acceptance for what is, and most importantly, a feeling of hope for the future.

Structure

"Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language" by Eva Hoffman is a non-fiction work comprised of 280 pages, broken down into three parts. Part I, Paradise, consists of 90 pages. Part II, Exile, consists of 74 pages. Part III, The New World, consists of 116 pages. The average length of the parts is 93 pages in length.

There are no chapters noted inside each section.

Part I, Paradise, is structured around the author's early years in Poland. There are rich descriptions of the landscape and of the lives of those in and around the Wydra family. Also included are the socio-economic conditions and how the society had been impacted by the war, which ended only two months before the author's birth.

Part II, Exile, details the Wydra family leaving Poland to immigrate to Canada. This section captures the bewilderment and confusion of a young girl in a foreign land and how the family must learn to adapt to a new country, its language and customs.

Part III, The New World, picks up when the author receives a scholarship to Rice University in Houston, Texas. It is in Texas where Hoffman will receive her first bit of "Americanization" and also meet her future husband. The tale tells of Eva's changes as she goes through college and eventually heads east to attend Harvard. There are reminiscences as well as new experiences to be examined. Although the author is highly accomplished, the struggle to define herself is never finished.



Quotes

"When the brass band on the shore strikes up the jaunty mazurka rhythms of the Polish anthem, I am pierced by a youthful sorrow so powerful that I suddenly stop crying and try to hold still against the pain."

Page 4

"No matter how many accoutrements of middle-class life they'll later acquire, my parents never quite buy into the work ethic."

Page 15

"My father almost never mentions the war; dignity for him is silence, sometimes too much silence."

Page 23

"Like so many children who read a lot, I begin to declare rather early that I want to be a writer."

Page 28

"I gradually come to understand that it is a matter of honor to affirm my Jewishness and to do so with my head held high."

Page 33

"It never occurs to my parents, or to us, that our apartment may be too crowded or that we may be suffering from invasion of privacy."

Page 55

"In the newspapers and magazines, the Soviet Union is portrayed as a sort of parent country, the center toward which the whole world leans."

Page 59

"It turns out that for us, the winds of change are real enough for they sweep in the policies that will carry us, like acorns picked up in great numbers by a large breeze, across the ocean."

Page 66

"No, I'm not a patriot, nor was I ever allowed to be."

Page 74



"Nostalgia is a source of poetry, and a form of fidelity. It is also a species of melancholia, which used to be thought of as an illness."

Page 115

"Because I'm not heard, I feel I'm not seen. My words often baffle others."

Page 147

"Studying too systematically or too hard would violate my Polish code of honor - that one should, in any system, whatsoever, break as many rules as one can - and would take the flash and flair out of the grand game of getting away with it."

Page 181

"When I begin my Americanization, I find myself in the least snobbish of societies and the most fluid of generations."

Page 195



Topics for Discussion

How might Eva's career as a writer have changed if the Wydras had stayed in Poland?

Do you think that Eva made a wise choice choosing literature over music as a career path?

Why do you think Alinka took Hebrew studies more seriously than Eva?

Explain how you would feel, as a teenager, on the first day of school in a foreign country.

What would be the most difficult thing about moving to a new country: leaving familiar surroundings, having to learn a new language, embracing a new culture, having no friends?

If you were to recommend a piece of American literature to a foreigner, what book would best sum up the American experience? Why?

How effective was it for Eva's parents to arrange her friendships? What are the pros and cons of this plan?

How could Eva's "Americanization" affect her feelings toward her Polish heritage?